

Friendship  
Diligence  
Integrity  
Ipswich Town Football Club  
Reliability  
Sensitivity  
Caring  
Guinness  
Dire straits  
Flying  
Adventure  
Vulnerability  
... and curry

I think these are all words that most of us can relate to Jim, or is it James. He was both of those people. There was certainly a lot to him.

James was born in the RAF Hospital Wegberg Germany 40 years and 4 days ago whilst his father John was serving in the RAF. I'm sure James regretted telling his university friends about his birth place as he was regularly accused of being German. A claim he would then deny with the characteristic backward step, a skyward roll of the eyes, a wagging finger and a strong delivery of choice language aimed at the unfortunate accuser who would be informed in no uncertain terms that overseas MOD property is, officially, the UK.

At the end of 1969, when James was one, the family moved to Wotton in Bedfordshire. Here he met James O'Donnell, a lifelong friend who is here today with his wife Charlene and young son Dylan.

Such long terms friendships emerge as a recurring feature in James's life. People tended to want to carry on being his friend.

In 1977 the family moved to Nigeria. After a year's schooling there it was decided that James should board at the Ipswich School near to his grandparents. This decision was to lead to the creation of one of James's great passions in life – Ipswich Town Football Club. His grandfather used to take him along to Portman road and he joined in the celebrations at Ipswich town hall when the team won the FA Cup

in 1978. True to his characteristic longstanding loyalty he was a fan and supporter ever since –writing over a number of years under the pseudonym “Binfield Blue” in the ITFC Fanzine ‘Those Were The Days’.

Although James lived in a number of places, and travelled a lot. There was always a constant. Summers were always spent in the Isle of Man on family holidays at the home of his Grandmother. We all know how proud he was of his Manx roots. He was equally proud of his Irish descendancy through his Great-grandfather and his Grandfather , both from Cork City.

After a brief spell in Cambridge, the family moved to Torquay. James excelled in the Air Training Corps there where he met fellow flying junkie Max Woods, another lifelong friend, who is also here today. James also became an excellent swimmer and represented the squadron in Butterfly and freestyle.

Academically, James was shaping up well too. He was most definitely a mathematician and a scientist. At "A" level two of his four subjects were mathematics. And he decided to study electronic engineering.

Primary university selection factors, from James’s point of view, were a university air squadron, academic standing and a bar.

It was therefore that in September 1989 I found myself in the small basement bar of an imperial college student Hall in Evelyn Gardens in South Kensington, standing next to a Guinness sipping James O’Keeffe. Despite the fact that I distinctly recall him wearing a horribly loud Hawaiian shirt, together with shorts, socks and grey leather slippers, we became and remained close friends but from that day onwards, to me, and to a lot of others here today, he was simply Jim.

I think it is fair to say that Jim embraced the factors of university life in inverse proportion to the original order of relative importance which were considered at the time of application (a typically

overcomplicated expression that Jim would have appreciated and rivalled on many occasions). In other words he spent a lot of time in the bar. In fact he got a job there.

Despite enjoying a fulfilling social life at Imperial Jim did however knuckle down. He became a member of ULAS, the University of London Air Squadron. I know that joining the squadron was an intensely important goal for Jim and he showed amazing commitment and resolve by fasting from alcohol for 6 months in order to lose weight so that he could meet the criteria for flying training. This was particularly laudable given the intense peer pressure from less disciplined characters such as me and a number of others who are here today. He successfully gained entrance into the squadron and undertook his flying training, learning to fly before he could drive, culminating in being taken for a flight in a Hawk fast jet trainer. A once in a lifetime experience of which I recall being particularly envious.

Jim and I set up home with two other friends in the infamous 14 Hazeldene Road in Chiswick West London. I think that once his father John may have made it as far as the hallway in that house but his mother Elizabeth wisely stayed firmly outside, which was probably a very good thing. John, I know you and Elizabeth might not have approved of the posters (or sometimes his friends for that matter), and I do remember your reaction to Jim's unannounced skinhead haircut when he opened the door to you that day

.....("that's bloody ridiculous James").....

but be very assured that your son spent some very very happy years as a student, particularly in Chiswick. I will always feel close to Jim in the nearby Bedlington café, where we discovered the delights of Thai food, and the city barge pub where we spent many carefree hours sitting by the Thames drinking and talking rubbish.

The Yorkshire dales became a particularly important place to Jim at this time. He spent many happy times with university friends at Mick and Gill Fells farm. His friendship with Mick and Gill continued, and I know that Jim valued their special relationship and support over the years.

With our degree courses drawing to a close Jim and I headed off on a typically student backpacking tour of Europe. We spent a month touring and experienced a variety of accommodation ranging from beaches to train carriages and road side foliage.

But we had to move into the real world eventually.

Sadly a military flying career was not the way ahead for Jim and he was bitterly disappointed. However, as was his way, he simply put this behind him and got on with things. Jim went on to pursue his profession firstly at British Aerospace in Brough near Hull. After two years, Jim decided that he didn't want to be what he described to me as a 'Brough Lifer'. I remember having great respect for this decision, wanting to do something different and better led him to uproot the comfortable and secure life at British Aerospace. He escaped to York University where he added to his qualifications by spending a year doing a masters degree

Jim's companionship, and his sense of adventure and of humour made him the main choice for holidays and trips. Personally, I enjoyed many of them with him. In our twenties, Jim and I embarked on a lavish tour of Asia – taking in Thailand Singapore and Hong Kong. The last time I saw Jim before he died, we talked about the night we spent sitting at a pavement bar on Koh San Road in Bangkok in the warm rain, talking, drinking and plotting the rest of our trip. Happy memories.

Always up for an adventure Jim also enjoyed a trip to Svalbard, a remote island in the Arctic Ocean near the North Pole. This was a great trip – watching the northern lights, snow scootering, climbing frozen mountains, watching out for polar bears. We took it in turns to prepare the evening meal. Jim's offering was just so Jim. Whale Curry.

Having escaped being a Brough lifer at British aerospace Jim moved down south and bought a flat firstly in Warfield green and then a house just round the corner in Stephenson Drive, Binfield.

It was whilst Jim was living in Binfield that his sister Christine introduced him to Alison. Things blossomed and it was lovely to see him in a relationship where they cared so much about each other. And I know they shared some very happy times. I don't think that the path of romance was straightforward, when is it ??? but they remained good friends and I'm glad to see that Alison and her parents are here today.

Always full of surprises Jim, unbeknown to me until a couple of days ago was actually one of 11 parish councillors for Binfield. Whilst he was capable of having a good moan about things that annoyed him he would also make a real effort to do something about it and his giving time to the council was typical of this. Jim was a popular council member and his colleagues described him as a lively participant. I can imagine.

Jim also made many friends in and around Binfield.

He was very supportive of his friends, and even amidst his own personal crisis in recent years I know he was willing and ready to offer invaluable comfort and support to two friends in particular during their own period of grief last year, at the loss of their own child.

Jim did not have any children, but he doted on his sister Christine and her young family in Australia and was a popular 'uncle' to a number of his friends children including my son Tommy - although he did try and convert him to support Ipswich town with a succession of blue and white Ipswich town football club tractors which mysteriously found their way into Tommy's toy box.

This diligence also saw Jim entrusted in other ways as he carried out his work with a number of other high profile defence engineering companies. Racal, Thales, Harris, and General Dynamics. He was entrusted with restricted information relating to military and defence projects. He was popular with his colleagues, they have described him to me as warm and friendly, diligent, although sometimes touchy - he liked to get things right! His approach to his profession was recognised last year as he was granted the title of chartered engineer – a goal that he had been working to for the last few years. His

achievement was reported in the Times just a short time after his death.

Some of Jim's travels took him to some pretty odd places, geographically and, as we were later to learn, mentally too.

For reasons that I think most of us will find difficult to fathom Jim became troubled by what he experienced in his life, maybe the travelling he did, a lot of time spent on his own, thinking. Or maybe it was something else. I don't know.

So, Jim, you have departed this world for another one. It's just so difficult to understand depression, and what you went through over the past five years. Its so difficult to understand why a person like you, so popular, disliked by no-one, who never harmed a soul, should have endured such a hard time. You were a caring person and you became troubled by what you saw around you.

But throughout those difficult years you fought against your illness and your difficulties and you fought hard. You kept working, you held down your career, you added to your qualifications, you worked out to improve your physical health and you helped and supported a lot of people and you began to win the battle to emerge from that difficult place where you had been. Which is why it is just so tragic that you were take away from all of us so suddenly last year by some terrible .... Mishap. However. You squeezed a lot of life into your 40 years on this earth.

Jim may not have been the snappiest dresser, but James/Jim was always caring, always warm, kind and never standing in judgement, a true true friend, son, brother and uncle. And John, Elizabeth, Christine, we can only begin to imagine how deeply you are feeling his loss. After all the support you gave him, and just when you might have thought he was emerging from the fog.

We will all miss those individual qualities, but more than that we will miss the sum of them all that was the unique persona that was James Robert O'Keeffe. Jim.