Denis Smith (1930 - 2017)  
- celebrating a creative life!  
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St James the Less Penicuik  
A Scottish Episcopal Church

http://stjamesthelesspenicuik.org/

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Denis Smith
- celebrating a creative life!

Many people from St James the Less congregation and from the wider community attended the funeral of Denis Smith at the end of last year (2017). In Penicuik, we knew him as a lovely man suffering from Alzheimer's disease. During the funeral, we heard something about Denis’ life before Alzheimer’s disease took its toll, and we were amazed. His wife, Lynda, is a loyal member of St James the Less congregation. As well as caring for Denis for many years before he died, Lynda has always been quietly supportive and active in the community. She is also musically gifted but skilled at hiding her light under a bushel! Lynda kindly agreed to share some memories of their lives before and after she and Denis met and were married. It’s a fascinating story!

Engineering history and folk music were twin passions for Denis throughout his life. He was astonishingly gifted and creative in both fields.

Denis was born in 1930, in Forest Gate, East London, the second oldest of six children. When the second world war came, he was evacuated first to Ipswich and then to South Wales. However, he could tell his family little about the experience, possibly because it was not a very happy one. In 1944, aged 14, he became seriously ill with acute nephritis and was hospitalised for a year. He never returned to school.

As he recovered from his illness, Denis was already fascinated by the achievements of engineering, and seems to have determined to become an engineer himself. The war had recently ended and opportunities for higher education were limited. Denis was working for Plessey in Ilford, but nothing daunted, he enrolled for evening classes in 1950 and began the long process of part time study. In 1955 he proudly qualified as a chartered Mechanical Engineer. Lynda still has some of his exercise books from this time, containing painstakingly neat answers and beautifully drawn diagrams.

During the same period, he joined the Anglican Young People's Association (AYPA) at his church (Holy Trinity Barkingside, London). Here, he made several good friends, one of whom became a lecturing colleague and eventually was Best Man at Denis and Lynda’s wedding. When Denis’ death was announced, a couple who knew him from AYPA days got in touch with Lynda. They remembered Denis being responsible for the production of a full length Passion Play in 1962. Lynda remembers that she had just met Denis at that time and was in the audience.

As well as all this, he was finding time for music. He had an exceptional musical ear, and as a child had impressed his family enough for them to afford him some piano lessons from a local lady in Hainault. Once he was earning enough money, he bought himself a piano and installed it in the front room of his long-suffering family. He joined a dance band called “The Charlton Sextet” and because the band felt that their rendition of the Tango would be improved by the addition of an accordion, Denis bought one and taught himself to play it. Soon after this came his first encounter with English Folk Music - a weekend course on Folk Music at Clarance House, Thaxted, which was then an education centre. One of the men, learning that Denis was an accordionist, asked him “Do you play for Morris?”, Denis replied “Who's Maurice?!”...! In fact, he joined the Westminster Morris men just after their inception in 1954, and for the next fifty years remained one of the most highly regarded Morris musicians in the country.

He very soon started to play for folk dancing, and was in increasing demand as a dance musician on piano or accordion. He was booked not only for most Saturday nights to play for dances at Cecil Sharp House (Headquarters of the English Folk Dance and Song Society), and at clubs elsewhere, but also as musician for Easter and summer dance courses all over the country.

It was at an Easter course in the New Forest in 1962 that Denis and Lynda first met. At that time, Lynda was teaching in a Girls’ Grammar School in Bermondsey, and she also played the piano and accordion. They married in late July 1963, and as they had both been booked to play for the Sidmouth Folk Festival in early August, it seemed natural that the Folk Festival should become their Honeymoon!
By this time, Denis had become a lecturer in engineering at West Ham College of Technology, and they had bought a house in Woodford Green, Essex. It was also in 1963 that Denis joined the Newcomen Society, an international learned society that promotes the history of engineering and technology. It was probably in the autumn of the same year that Denis was first booked to run a course on Industrial Archaeology for the Workers Educational Association (WEA) in nearby Walthamstow. When his death was announced, one of his ex-students wrote this moving tribute for the Newcomen magazine:

“In the 1960s I signed up to attend a weeknight evening class on the subject of the then very misunderstood oxymoron - Industrial Archaeology (IA)! Week by week I went to “The Settlement” in Greenleaf Road, Walthamstow, East London to be tutored by Denis Smith. Together with the other students, we found Denis’ lectures held our total interest for the whole two hours. Relevant 35mm slides from his extensive collection would clatter through his Kodak Carrousel projector to doubly enhance the evenings.

Not only were we enlightened each week, but often on a Saturday too. Denis would take us in his converted VW van to the notable and not so well known IA sites in Greater London. I doubt he was paid for the time he spent on these outings. His enthusiasm was infectious, such that some of us became involved in GLIAS, of which Denis was a founder member (see later). Our paths continued to cross over the years, as our respective daughters attended the same school and he may have been playing his fiddle at the occasional local barn dance I went to. His quiet, gentle influence and humour has remained a memory with me over these past years and I owe him my continued involvement in things IA.”
Throughout their married life, Denis taught two, and sometimes three, evening classes a week at venues such as Goldsmiths College, Morley College and Birkbeck College. He also taught various WEA classes around London.

In 1968, their son Matthew was born, and in 1969, their daughter Jenny arrived. Just after Matthew’s birth, Denis and two friends formed the Greater London Industrial Archaeology Society (GLIAS). This has been very successful attracting a large London membership and is still thriving.

Denis became a respected author in the History of Engineering, eventually presenting a PhD thesis in 1976 at Imperial College entitled “The role of Structural Models in British Bridge Design, 1800-1870”. Denis also wrote two chapters in the book “Houses of Parliament” edited by Michael H Port in 1976. Refurbishment work is currently being carried out on the Houses of Parliament, and Denis’ chapters are providing a useful reference for the works. His other publications include chapters in various engineering books, and a book entitled “London and the Thames Valley” edited and largely written by him in 2001. He also contributed seven papers to the Newcomen Society, which are published in their Transactions.

Denis appeared in several TV documentaries relating to engineering issues. He also appears in the 1966 film “the Great St Trinians Train Robbery”, playing his accordion for the Westminster Morris Men. He and the team were entertained by Frankkie Howerd in his Dressing Room during the making of this film!

In the 1980s, Denis took the chance of early retirement from his day job at NE London Polytechnic and became a freelance lecturer. This was just as their two children went to university.

Denis became president of the Newcomen Society at the end of the 1990s (1997 - 1999). This was a huge honour and achievement. His duties included giving the presidential lecture around the country (Bristol, Newcastle, Manchester, Edinburgh, Birmingham and London).

Meanwhile, Denis’ folk music had always remained a passion and he was as busy as ever. In 2001, he was awarded the prestigious Gold Badge for Lifelong Achievement by the English Folk Dance and Song Society (EFDSS).

From the early 2000s, the family detected small signs of decline in Denis’ health, but Alzheimers was not diagnosed until 2009. Denis and Lynda remained in Woodford Green in London until 2007. They moved to Huntingdon in 2007, and then to Penicuik in 2011, where Denis and Lynda were near to their family.

The Denis that we met and knew in Penicuik was already struggling with Alzheimer’s disease. Both Roger Kelly and Roger Hipkin in our community are interested in Industrial Archaeology, and knew that he was an expert, but Denis was already too ill to be able to engage in conversation with them.
Denis became increasingly unable to answer the phone, and had to stop driving. Lynda often brought Denis to Penicuik Folk Club, which they both enjoyed. His fame had gone before him - Alan Murray, who runs Penicuik Folk Club, already knew that Denis had the EFDSS Gold Badge. Lynda also brought Denis along to choir practices at St James the Less church, where he would sit with the men and join in where he could. He also enjoyed going to the Taize group with Lynda on a Sunday afternoon, where he hummed quite lustily! Denis continued to play the piano until quite near the end of his life, when he lost the ability to know what and where he was going to play.

Lynda has often remarked that Penicuik people coped very well indeed with Denis’ illness. He was never a withdrawn person and enjoyed continued social interaction until very near the end of his life.

The musical talent and tradition has passed down to Denis and Lynda’s children and grandchildren. Their family is steeped in the Scottish folk music scene. Their son Matthew and their daughter Jenny performed at Penicuik folk club even before Lynda and Denis moved here.

Jenny is a local GP, and a talented fiddler. She plays with the well-known band Corran Raa who perform locally and further afield in Scotland. Matthew teaches at Penicuik High School, and is a guitarist. He has taught guitar at the Scottish Music Group (SMG) classes and plays in a duo with Sarah Northcott, another well-known local folk musician. Matthew is also a member of the “Little Biggar Band”.

Of their grandchildren, grandson Callum sings in several choirs, plays pipes to a high standard and also plays piano. Their granddaughter Kirsten is studying psychology and art at Reading University. She plays the fiddle and cello, and sings for recreation.

The Smith family is blessed with much talent, especially musical talent. The family are also “givers”, serving their community in many quiet ways. They also demonstrated enormous courage and strength in the way in which they dealt with long periods of difficult circumstances. Thank you, Smith family, for your story, and your inspiration.