

PETER SKELTON

“The good guys in this world are far too few, but Skelly was definitely one of them.”

A personal tribute to one of Britain's finest and kindest steam photographers.

By **DAVID WILCOCK**

The UK's extended family of steam cameramen was stunned in mid-June to learn of the sudden death of Peter Skelton, one of the finest and most highly regarded photographers of the post-BR steam era.

Peter and his wife Danuta had been out walking on Saturday June 13 at Haresfield Beacon, a beauty spot close to the Gloucestershire village where he was born and raised, when he complained of 'bad indigestion' – and went to sit down. In fact, it was the onset of what turned out to be a fatal heart attack.

First aid-trained Danuta tried for half an hour to save him through CPR (Cardio Pulmonary Resuscitation) before paramedics arrived to take over, but he could not be revived. The shock of 'Skelly's' passing has been heightened by the fact that he was still fit and active, in seemingly good health, and successfully giving the ageing process a hard old time of it. He would have celebrated his 72nd birthday just 16 days later, on June 29.

The waves of tributes which poured into Skelly's home in Matson, Gloucester, in the days following, are testimony to the fact that here was a man who wasn't just a master craftsman in the art of railway photography, but also a man of outstandingly warm and genial character.

Peter was all the things that most of us aspire to be – he was kind, sincere, warm-hearted, good-humoured, loyal, selfless, and only too happy to help others, whether that was offering technical advice on matters photographic to friends, or diving underneath the bonnet to fix the car of someone he didn't even know. As much as anyone else I've ever known, he was the very definition of 'a gentleman'.

Covid-19 distancing restrictions meant that only 20 people – immediate family and close friends – could attend his funeral service in the chapel at Gloucester Crematorium on Friday July 3, and although the service was live-streamed, a further 40 friends and well-wishers also travelled to the crematorium just to receive the hearse, and to pay their respects.

Friends will seek to fulfil Peter's wish for his ashes to be placed in the firebox of a steam locomotive – possibly at the Dean Forest Railway, in May next year.

PIN-SHARP PETE

Skelly had family ties with Hartlepool, in the north east, but it was at Haresfield, on the Bristol & Gloucester main line, that he was born and grew up, the youngest of three brothers.

His lifelong love affair with steam and the railway was cemented in short-



trouser days by regular visits to Haresfield signal box and level crossing where his grandfather was a signalman, and by the daily 'races' between trains on the six-mile parallel stretch of the Great Western and Midland Railway routes between Gloucester and Standish Junction.

The specialness of Haresfield was encapsulated by Peter himself who, in a remarkable piece of writing, remembered his visits to the signal box as a seven-year-old, thus: "The smell of the oil lamps and polished brass, the crackle of a roaring fire situated in the corner, the creaking of the floorboards, the tinkling of bells, the tap-tap-tap of the train instrument followed by the clanking of the levers – and then, after a minute's silence, the thunderous roar and vibration of a speeding LMS 'Jubilee' – it was

inevitable that I would get interested in the railways."

Drawn compulsively into trainspotting, the young Skelly spent untold hours by the lineside at Haresfield, on the well-trodden path to the north end of Gloucester Eastgate's island platform (which looked into 85B Horton Road engine shed), and in the shed itself.

His very first camera – as basic as basic itself – was a Kodak Brownie 127 which he christened at King's Cross in 1959 with an image of 'A4' No. 60015 *Quicksilver*, and, as coincidence would have it, his very last railway photograph, taken on February 22 this year before the coronavirus lockdown, was also an 'A4' – No. 60009 *Union of South Africa*, at Stroud, though the picture was bombed by another enthusiast unwittingly stepping into his shot to give a thumbs up to the crew.

More or less from those early days, Skelly took a camera with him whenever he went out for steam, though he would forever regret leaving the camera at home on July 9 1960 – the day that Carlisle-based BR Class 6 'Pacific' No. 72005 *Clan Macgregor* was the unlikely visitor to Gloucester. That his friend (and later Dean Forest Railway activist) Trevor Radway got the shot, haunted him forever. At least that's what he said!

Steam photography became the all-consuming passion that, ultimately, would take Peter to the furthest reaches of the globe – to China, Africa, Canada, India, Pakistan, Romania, Poland, and widely elsewhere in Europe.

Illness prevented him from sitting the 11-plus exam, and by default he went to Linden Road secondary school, Gloucester, leaving at the age of 15 to begin an apprenticeship as an industrial photographer with the engineering company Fielding & Platt, based at Gloucester Docks.

Here, using monorail-mounted half-plate cameras, he helped make films and photographs for a company which set great store on archiving and recording its business progress.

In 1975, he left to join Gloucestershire



A Skelly masterstroke: 'Black Five' No. 5305 is brushed by soft winter light as it hurries past Bell Busk, between Hellifield and Skipton, with a special from Hull to Sellafield on December 29 1979.

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County Council's Photographic Department, running the Plan Print section which specialised in the printing of town and country maps for a variety of applications, including police work.

It was the perfect job for him, for after hours, Skelly would often stay on in the darkroom to process and print his own black and white railway images, progressively building a wealth of subject knowledge, and perfecting his darkroom technique. With good reason, friends coined a nickname for him: 'Pin-sharp Pete.'

It came as a shock to Peter to learn in 1993, after 18 years, that amid a wave of local authority budget cuts, he was to be made redundant, and his department closed, but he accepted an offer of redeployment with the county council's highways department, and for the next 21 years he worked in both the public and private sectors of the road-building industry, retiring as an inspector in 2014 at the age of 65.

MAN OF THE PEOPLE

Following the demise of BR steam in 1968, Peter unexpectedly found himself in demand – as a wedding photographer. It wasn't something he ever planned, but rather fell into; the exceptional quality of his work and fastidious attention to detail spawning numerous word-of-mouth recommendations, and as steam on more distant horizons now beckoned,

his earnings from wedding photography helped to fund his many overseas steam trips.

It was while covering a friend's wedding that Peter found himself gazing upon an attractive young bridesmaid, and realised that throughout the day, she was stealing purposeful glances back at him too. The magnetism between Peter and Danuta was sealed by their marriage in 1972 and endured for almost 50 years. The couple raised three daughters – Kalina, Kirsty and Kelly – but when he talked of "my girls", Peter always included Danuta – and counted four. They were the apple of his eye, and his credentials as a caring, loving, family man, were never in question. His commitment to his daughters when their time for marriage arrived, was unsparing, and he was moved to sell his highly prized and treasured 'Britannia' nameplate from No. 70019 *Lightning* to help pay for one of the weddings.

Peter was the author of two steam albums – *British Steam Revival*, with Nils Huxtable (Janes Publishing, 1982) and *Main Line Steam in the 1980s* (Janes, 1984) – but he could – and probably should – have produced many more, such was the depth and quality of his steam photography. It had been an ambition to "do another book, of my own work".

Peter's photographs – and those he

printed for his friend, Somerset & Dorset Railway champion Ivo Peters, began appearing in *Steam Railway* soon after the magazine's 1979

launch, and the big-screen slide shows, which he went on to give from the 1980s right up until his death, were ever in high demand, his powerful images frequently drawing expressions of disbelief from charmed audiences. And typically of Peter, if there were prospective members of his audience who had no transport, he would go and pick them up in his car and take them home himself.

SAT ON A SECRET

When in 1984 *Steam Railway* and the Severn Valley Railway collaborated in an audacious spoof (for April Fool's Day in 1985) to repaint the GWR icon *City of Truro* in lined BR black, the success of the jape depended upon absolute secrecy.

The engine was painted on the driver's (right-hand) side only before its dismantling for overhaul at Bridgnorth – but then in April 1985, the apparently BR-liveried No. 3717 was spuriously presented to readers as the finished product, on the basis that the SVR's 'Livery Policy Committee' (a fictitious invention) "felt it right to outshop the engine as it might have looked, if it had been taken into BR stock in 1948."

As *Steam Railway's* then editor, I asked Skelly to take the photographs of the 'bastardised' GWR 4-4-0 – not just because I knew he'd do a thoroughly professional job for us on what turned out to be a damp, dank day – but also because I trusted him to keep our little secret throughout the year-long overhaul period.

He did, of course, and I know he shared in the fun when GWR diehards, apoplectic at such apparent disfigurement of their standard-bearer engine, bombarded the magazine with outrage and protest. We came clean in the following issue, having used only initials, not names, on their published letters.

Probably only Peter would know the full tally of his overseas trips to photograph steam, but he was certainly on board South Africa's first-ever touring train for

Snow was something of a Skelly specialism, as seen on the previous spread and on the Tail Lamp page of SR508. Ivatt 'Moguls' Nos. 43106 and 46521 are made ready for the first trains of a gloriously clear, still and crisp December 12 1981 at Bewdley on the Severn Valley Railway.

cameramen – the 'Cape Mountaineer' in 1990 – a defining landmark in steam charter train excellence, and on that same trip, he used his 6ft 2in frame to good effect in our glorious 2-1 victory over the train staff, in a football match played on a rugby pitch, in between runpasts. That we had 13 players on the field, was but a detail. Victory is everything.

China, and the spectacular performances of the mighty 'QJ' 2-10-2s in the snowy wastes of Jing Peng Pass, was at the core of Skelly's overseas steam interest. He first went to China in 1993, returned in 1995 and was present on all ten of the China trips organised by Gloucestershire compatriot and fellow steam disciple Mike Tyack, as well as making four visits to Eritrea and three to Romania, while still indulging in main line steam and a host of steam photo charter events at home in the UK.

Mike – one of the many dozens of steam people who have paid fulsome tribute to Skelly following his passing – reflects on a man who he held as "the sort of person

you always wanted around. He was always supportive, was never a back-biter when things didn't go quite to plan, and he was loyal to a fault. The good guys in this world are far too few, but Skelly was definitely one of them."

OVER HIS HEAD

On at least two occasions during his steam-motivated globetrotting, Skelly found himself in life-threatening situations.

During the 'Cape Mountaineer' trip to South Africa in 1990, his hair was very nearly parted by a flying coupling rod that 'pinged' from the driving wheel crankpins of SAR 'Class 24' 2-8-4 No. 3693, while the engine was being repaired at the trackside en route to Knysna.

Peter had been watching the attempt by a fitter to replace the coupling rod which had literally snapped in half, and he remembered at that time: "There was a sudden, explosive wheelslip, sparks shot out from under the wheels, and as people dived for cover I saw a 'strobe' image of



Leeds Holbeck roundhouse is host to resident 'Jubilee' No. 45562 *Alberta*, surrounded by a 'Black Five', Fairburn tank and 'Britannia' No. 70016 *Ariel*. Though the mid-Sixties scene is sadly undated, Peter would not have even been 20 when he captured this magical moment.

Ironically, some of Peter's most famous photographs were his least artistic, but in capturing *City of Truro* in spurious BR black, he helped contribute towards pulling off the most memorable prank in preservation history!



what I thought was a severed arm flash in front of my face, followed moments later by a thud.

"When someone shouted 'Where's it gone?', I realised that the 'severed arm' which had whooshed past me, was the coupling rod being catapulted from the crankpins.

"It was found at the bottom of the embankment, bent like a piece of wire. Miraculously, no-one was injured, but I was in shock at what had been a very close encounter."

On an earlier occasion, in Turkey in 1982, Skelly and travelling companion Stuart Blencowe were held at gunpoint, after chasing a 'Skyliner' ('Class 56301') 2-10-0 in their hire car. Local villagers thought they were trying to sabotage the train – and called out the military!

Several years ago, Peter was diagnosed with glaucoma – a disease of the optic nerve – in his left eye. The infection could have put the lid on his photography

for good, but using diopters (to focus his vision through the viewfinder) and then undergoing an eye operation some four years ago, helped to minimise the restriction to his vision.

Peter, a proud president of Tewkesbury Railway Society, used some of the best cameras ever produced, including, in film days, medium format Hasselblads and 35mm Leicas, although for many years, a pair of Pentax 6 x 7s mounted in a frame was his staple railway set-up. Disposing of his obsolete cameras didn't come easily though, and thus by default, he built up quite a museum of photographic hardware, though he kept right up-to-date with digital camera technology, his final camera being a mirrorless Sony A7.

The Covid-19 lockdown of March 2020 led to Peter and Danuta taking regular countryside walks as their permitted daily exercise, and although there was no steam, Peter still took his camera, his very last image being of three Marbled White butterflies on a leaf, just minutes before his death.

Many of us will truly miss you Skelly, for you were special – and a delight and a privilege to know.

Steam Railway is grateful for the input to this tribute by Peter's family and friends, and in particular Danuta and Kalina, Mike Wathen, John Dagley-Morris, Mike Tyack and Pete Berry.