

## INQUESTS ARISING FROM THE DEATHS IN THE FORBURY GARDENS TERROR ATTACK OF 20 JUNE 2020

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### Pen Portrait of James Furlong

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James was born in Mill Road Hospital at 12.40 am on Friday 15<sup>th</sup> July. After his mum, Jan, had been in labour for 26 hours, James was delivered by caesarean section. James spent the first week of life in an incubator after the stress of birth, even though James weighed 8lb 10oz.

James would later send a Mother's Day card to his mum saying, "Sorry that I had such a big head, Mum", when being delivered.

James always sent humorous cards for birthdays, Mother's Day and Father's Day. I received my last Father's Day card from James on the day of his death which, with a broken heart, I opened the following day. True to form, the card made a joke about the size of my stomach.



James was a quiet, happy little boy who spent many hours playing with his wrestling figures with his younger brother, Gary, who he was very close to. They collected wrestling cards and would watch the WWF on TV.

James loved Batman and would relish getting his Christmas presents, asking for his superhero figures, the Bat Cave and Bat mobile. He also loved animals and like most children had a fixation with Dinosaurs.

We also bought James a bike one Christmas, which he hated learning to ride. We planned to go the park with it one day, only to find he had a flat tyre. This happened on numerous occasions. In later years he confessed to sticking a needle in the tyres, which we laughed about.

James started at the local school at St Michaels where he made friends and was well known for wearing his coat via the hood. He would swing it round by his head in a 360-degree circle, finishing back in the same place.

James was a well-behaved child in school and parents day was always a pleasure for us, as he always received good reports from the teachers throughout his time at St Michaels. James however could daydream at times, but this was the beginning of James being able to express his imagination in the world of Star Trek, Star Wars and, in later years, Harry Potter. James would queue at midnight for any new book release with his friends. He would then race to read the whole book first before his friends and then read it again in case he had missed something.

In later years, James would purchase and read the whole Terry Pratchett collection of books. His mum tried to read one to understand his fascination of the books, however she could not make head or tail of it.

When James got to the age of 9, we passed a shop in the Liverpool Town centre called the Games Workshop. He asked to go in, and this was where he found a passion for fantasy war games. He would painstakingly spend hours painting model figures, which he still collected throughout his adult life.

James would attend the Games Workshop to participate in war games and this passion continued as he got older. He later joined the Liverpool War Games Association, spending all day Saturday and sometimes Sundays participating in these games. The Association now holds a tournament every year in his honour, where the members compete for the James Furlong shield. They follow this with a charity event raising money for Switchboard, our nominated charity which is a hotline for the LGBT plus community.

James left St Michaels and attained a place at St Francis Xavier's College. He would go on to get 11 GSCEs and 3 A Levels. It was a very sought-after school and we lived 3 miles outside the catchment area, so the competition for remaining places was very high. James was in a select group that managed to pass interviews to be accepted, with only 1 in 4 gaining a place.

The early years in senior school had their trials for James. He was quiet, not sporty in any way and was dealing with his sexuality, which meant the first 5 years where not his happiest and there was an element of bullying. However, this built his character, strength and determination, which he later used to help, guide and advise his friends and pupils through their own difficult times.

James enjoyed our family holidays and loved to swim. However, he would always hide in the shade as he burnt very easily. It was one of these holidays in Gran Canaria when he was 16 that James came out as being gay to his mum – but his mum always knew. It was a further year before he told me, however I already knew and I hugged him.

James's life took an amazing turn for the better when, on his first day in sixth form in the commons room, he was approached by a student who said "*Hey mate, come and sit with us?*". This was Richie, and they became best friends. James went on to support and help Richie in his path to coming out as being gay himself. James would later have the honour of being Richie's best man at his wedding to Matt, who James had also become friends with while working his weekend job at Barclay card.



Richie and Matt organised a charity night in their local pub raising £11,000 in James's honour. This again was donated to Switchboard, along with £3,500 pounds raised from a Go Fund Me page.

From this point, James' social life grew and this really brought James out of his shell. James would go out with his new school friends spending happy times in the Half Way House and then onto the Birch House Social Club, where they all felt safe. Richie would sometimes play the piano and when there was music, James would dance the night away. His love for dancing continued throughout his life.

James made lots of friends in both Liverpool and Reading and would always arrange social gatherings when returning home to Liverpool.



James was very independent and moved out of home into a house with his school friends at age 19.

James attended Liverpool University studying his love for History. He also joined the university's LGBT + committee organising events, and was fundamental in helping LGBT + students settle into university life. As for many students they were a long way from home and family, and this type of support he continued in the Holt School.

James completed university attaining a 2:1 degree and decided to go into teaching as he wanted to carry on and teach his passion and vocation in life: History.

James had taught in various schools in Liverpool as an agency teacher. He spent two years at King David School where the children loved him. James has a time capsule with his name buried there, which will be opened in a 100 years' time. The students also went on to show their love and respect by lining up outside the school during James' funeral procession.

James moved to Reading with his partner but would come home for birthdays, holidays and Christmas. James would spend precious family time with his younger brother, Gary, whom he had a close relationship with; Laura, his sister-in-law, who James said was the nicest girl he had ever met; and his nieces, Emily and Orla. James was often photographed with Daisy and Pippa, our Pugs, and they loved to lie across his lap when he was reading. Daisy is lying on his lap now in Heaven.





James acquired a teaching Job at the Holt School in Berkshire, and he later became head of History and Politics. He was so happy; it gave him the forum to express his love for History. He made the subject fun and the pupils quickly became engaged in the subject. James inspired many students to go on to study History and attain degrees at university.

James brought his humour and passion to work each day. He organised jousting contests on space hoppers and could be seen marching the pupils across the field wearing his World War I Prussian helmet, which he would also wear while marking work in the staff room.

The pupils loved him and he was very close to his work colleagues whom he became close friends with. It was a very happy and special time for James.



James' partner at the time moved to the USA but James chose to stay in Reading, turning down the chance to move. He was so happy where he was, his strength of character allowed him to start again. James made new friends and he bought his own flat. He went on to meet Tony, his new partner, and they had started to make plans for the future together.

When Covid lockdown came, James hated not being with his pupils and work colleagues. He continued to teach classes online but he could not wait to get back in to school life.

James and his mum, Jan, would go for their daily walk during lockdown and would spend that five mile walk talking to each other on the phone. Also, every Sunday, they

would talk after the Andrew Marr Show and debate the topics of the day raised by the different politicians.

James cherished the time with his mum. They had a very tight bond and she would call him when she was feeling down; he was a very good listener a very considerate boy.



James loved teaching at the Holt School. It gave him purpose; it is his legacy. We have hundreds of letters that the students sent to us in honour of James, the teacher they loved. You never forget an amazing teacher! We still receive letters saying how James has made a positive impact and influence on their lives today.

Jan, James' mum, would like to read a very special letter that was sent by one of James' students, on behalf of the Holt School community.

## *Honouring Mr Furlong*

*Mr Furlong touched the lives of all who knew him, and was truly an outstanding individual. It wasn't just his passion for his subject which was inspiring, but the way he also stood up for what he believed in, and spoke his mind. As a history teacher, one of the key points Mr Furlong always emphasised was, that while you cannot change the past, and it is fixed, you are able to learn from it, and make better choices in order to shape the future. It wasn't just learning **about** something, it was the lesson you took from it. While there is an overwhelming sense of loss, as a school we think the best way to honour his memory is to take on the lessons he taught us: to enable his legacy to live on.*

*The first lesson Mr Furlong advocated, in his enthusiastic and slightly eccentric manner, was always having the courage to stand up for what you believe in. Differences were embraced, and he brought many students out of their shell, giving them the confidence to voice their viewpoints. He taught us that being passionate about your own thoughts and opinions, and having that independent thought is not just vital for leaning, but for staying true to who you are. He wasn't afraid to share his opinions, sometimes verging on mildly offensive but always well meant, with comments about our eyebrows looking like slugs! He taught us that with a good sense of humour, you have a better sense of life.*

*However, his strong opinions and passions went beyond banter or discussions in the classroom. Mr Furlong made sure his passion was known to the world, by always doing assemblies on issues which were important and meaningful to him. It was truly moving how he made sure to do an assembly every Pride month, and how proud he was of the LGBTQ+ community and his role within it. His assemblies were awe inspiring, making sure that people knew and respected the history of the community; their struggles, and why we should learn from this today. There was an element of beauty in doing such personal assemblies, and that by standing up for yourself, others are able to stand with you, which everyone in the Holt Community will take on in life. People may dislike you for being different, having different opinions, and not living up to society's standards, but deep down they wish they could have the ultimate courage to do the same. He encouraged us to be accepting of others, tolerant of differing opinions, and proud of who we are. Similarly, his annual Remembrance services always provoked a deeper thought and understanding, from students and teachers alike. He stood for understanding the past, and honouring the memory of the fallen, so that they were not forgotten. All of those who knew and loved him, will stand together and honour the memory of a man, who was genuine, unique and fearlessly himself.*

*Mr Furlong's emphasis in his history lessons, was not to dwell on the mistakes of the past, but to understand them, in order to flourish. So while we are united by our sorrow, we would like to shine a light on how his death is more than just a loss of precious life – it is a symbol. This sudden situation really has made us realise the fragility of life. Mr Furlong was a character who spoke his mind, and made his gratitude known. He always made tremendous effort with students and staff, complimenting when deserved and constructively critiquing in order to help us improve, challenging us to be the best versions of ourselves. His integrity was to be*



*admired, and his kind comments or words of wisdom would have not gone unnoticed by staff and students. However, we may not have always made our gratitude known directly to him. When something like this happens so unexpectedly, we all regret what we didn't say, often wishing we could have made it known how unbelievably important Mr Furlong had been in our lives. So many things in life go unsaid and unheard, and often we don't say thank you enough, or let people know how grateful we are for them and how they have helped us.*

*Life is too short and too precious to leave these things unspoken, so we should all make every effort we can in order to let others know how loved they are, and always make our appreciation known to that person. Mr Furlong's kindness and outspoken nature left you in no doubt what he thought. We must learn to let people know how much we love them, and to value everything they do. It puts our problems into perspective; at the end of the day, the legacy that you leave behind is the impact you have had on others.*

*One of the most memorable attributes of Mr Furlong, were his unforgettable catchphrases. The most poignant one being said at the end of every lesson: "Don't do anything I wouldn't do". Although this was said with a tinge of sarcasm and humour there could be something to learn, by thinking, what Mr Furlong **would** do. The most remarked upon characteristic of Mr Furlong was his kindness, and encouragement to all whom he met.*

*Whether it was to do with school related issues, or general life, Mr Furlong taught us that we are able to rise ourselves by lifting others. His positive outlook on life and gentle encouragement in the face of adversity, is something we are all able to take on in our everyday lives. By showing acts of kindness to everyone, he demonstrated that kindness was a gift everyone can afford to give.*

*Mr Furlong's legacy and the values that he taught can be kept alive by all of us, by following his example. This is having the courage:*

- *To stand up for what we believe in;*
- *To vocalise our view points in society;*
  - *To stay true to ourselves;*
- *To always appreciate other people and show gratitude;*
  - *To see the humorous side of life;*
- *And most importantly, to be kind to one another.*

*While he may be gone, Mr Furlong's legacy is woven into the lives of the entire Holt School Community and his love, thoughtfulness and kindness will live forever.*

The students and his work colleagues are James' true legacy. They chose James' special attributes exactly right in the design of the mosaic they dedicated to him, which includes gargoyles on each point to ward off evil spirits, and the Tudor Rose for his love of History. The students, teachers and Wokingham community raised £13,000 to place it as a permanent memorial on the history building at the Holt School. It is truly impressive to see.



- PASSION - the love of his history and life.
- COURAGE - he was strong in his beliefs and in the face of adversity.
- DEDICATION - to his family, friends, pupils and colleagues.
- KINDNESS - his love of animals, which he donated money to every month along with a children's charity; he had true compassion for all human beings.
- INTEGRITY - he was always true to himself and others.
- HUMOUR - James loved to laugh at life and experiences and was witty with the one liners.

We are forever grateful for the amazing 36 years we had James in our lives. He achieved more than most people achieve in a long lifetime.

We must celebrate and remember how James lived, the qualities he lived by, and not how he died. In James' memory, if we all improve these qualities in our own lives, then his legacy will live on in all of us.

But most importantly, as James would famously tell the pupils at the end of the school day: *"Be safe, be careful, and don't do anything I wouldn't do"*.



*Gary Furlong (Snr), on behalf of the Furlong family*