

Penny (Pam) MacConnoran

02/08/1949 – 21/07/2010



Ode to Penny

1. Opening song: 'The Day Before You Came' Abba

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1HnOFwqpLRQ>

We are here today to celebrate the life and times of Penelope Mary Dervla MacConnoran who quite simply was one of the most beautiful, caring and most straightforward women to walk on this earth. The opening song was chosen because it seemed to encapsulate how ones life's can appear routine and even mundane before someone special enters them and changes them forever - that person is Penny whose presence has enriched all of our lives no matter how fleeting those points of contact may have been. What follows is intentionally light-hearted and hopefully humorous as this is the sort of person that Penny was and I have no doubt that this is exactly what she would have wanted for those who loved her to remember her for - hard though it is to bear the pain of her passing.

Penelope, Penny, Pen, Pamela or Pam as she was known - depending of course on which side of the Irish sea you lived on was born in Dunleer, County Louth sometime in the last century - which is a great way of making someone sound positively Prehistoric. In truth, Penny was never one to talk about Birthdays especially the later ones although she would undoubtedly forgive me now for mentioning that on the morning after her last Birthday (which just happened to end in a zero) that she had hot-footed it down to the local Post Office in Stoke Newington to pick up her Freedom Pass - which allowed her unlimited free travel on public transport in and around London (and my God how she caned that travel pass in the following months!). The chronological narrative that is to follow hopefully won't prove to be too much of a Frankenstein's monster - although it has been stitched together and added to by a non-seamstress (unlike Penny) from a number of sources who are gathered here today (and you know who you are) and collectively have had the incredible good fortune to have shared in her life for upwards of 50 years.

But back to the beginning: Penelope (as she was Christened but later to be dubbed Pamela or Pam by her family) was, unusually for an Irish family which generally ranged in size from between 15-36 children, one of only 2 children - the other being her older brother Ken who was to later emigrate and make a life in America. Whilst only a young girl of 15 she had to deal with the loss of her beloved Mother - a tragedy that could not fail to catapult her from childhood into adulthood in an instant but undoubtedly helped to shape the incredibly strong, determined and compassionate woman that she was later to become.

Kathleen & Liz are two of Pam's oldest friends (by this I mean of long-standing rather than longevity - before they get the hump) who first met her when they all started secondary school together in Drogheda at the age of 13 in 1961. Since that time they knew her as a loyal, caring, trustworthy and generous friend and whilst always being a very private person one that also had a great sense of humour and mischief and was always there to share in the ups and downs of their lives. She was always her own person following her own style and convictions and had great drive and determination - which can be clearly shown by the effort it took for her to complete her studies at college.

Her academic life began in September 1967 when she started an Arts degree at University College in Dublin but with no funding she had to take on 2 part-time jobs to enable her to fund her studies, buy her books and pay for her share of a flat that she now shared with Kathleen & Liz. The inevitable pressure of all of this meant that a year into her studies she was forced to take a year out from college and work in Austria to save further funds - which enabled her to move to Galway University to resume her studies the following year.

Aidan and Annemarie who were at University with Penny wrote that she blew into Galway as a student of archaeology in 1970 and seemed to us immature students to be the essence of poise. She dressed and moved in a distinctive feminine way that marked her out from the usual scruffy students of the late sixties. We all felt that Penny was a woman who had already seen the world and had now come late to college. Such was the air of mystery that she unselfconsciously exuded. And she had a twinkle that added to her allure. Men fell for her all the time and if a male archaeology colleague was seen by others to know Penny, he was invariably asked who she was and, more pointedly, how did YOU get to know HER?

She was a great socialiser and she set up flat with others in Upper Dominick Street which she shared, amongst others, with actor Mick Lally now nationally famous. It was a lively place and after student theatre performances, we all repaired to the Crane Bar across the road for traditional Irish sessions and then to the flat – happy times.

Penny took an active part in weekend archaeology outings to Kerry and to the Boyne Valley, to name but two. With her she took an extensive makeup bag, or so it seemed to the men at any rate. Long and many were the queues outside the few or even the sole bathroom as Penny applied the make-up and we all waited to brush our teeth and get to the bus before it left for the day's visits. When she emerged, eventually, she always looked stunning, ready and willing to throw herself again into the day's activities.

Penny remained loyal to her friends, long after college and she had a gift for friendship. Even if in later years the meetings were few and far between, you picked up as easily as if you had met the previous week. In so many ways she seemed ageless, breezing into a 25th wedding anniversary party as easily as she had breezed into the wedding a quarter of a century earlier, having flown in from London and then hitched through back roads of Meath to make her distinctive late and dramatic arrival, windblown and smiling from ear to ear.

During her time studying she went abroad every summer to wherever the exchange rate was best at the time so as to have enough to live on for the next year of college. This rings a chord that reminds me how throughout her life Pen habitually scoured charity shops and stores in search of a bargain and would inevitably find one - coming home with a designer label or two or simply a bag of assorted groceries carefully gathered from a variety of sources. Her task of training her partner Packy (or Pac as she affectionately called him) who had never been trained in the art of fiscal prudence - was somewhat harder to achieve, but the sight of them trudging from shop to shop along Stoke Newington high street in more recent times suggests that this mission had against the odds possibly borne some fruit.

On graduating from Galway Penny's first paid job in archaeology was working on the important excavation at Wood Quay in the centre of Viking Dublin - where the Jury's Inn Hotel is now situated. As there were few jobs or indeed sites for archaeologists in Ireland at that time she was soon looking towards London and the newly formed Department of Urban Archaeology for work. John Schofield recalls working with Penny soon after she arrived in 1974 on the waterfront site at Seal House in the City of London. He has a memory of her excavating a medieval shoe at this site, and would like to think this assisted her interest and expertise in medieval and subsequently Roman leatherwork. The absence of safety helmets in those early carefree days of Urban Archaeology meant that Penny's distinctive flowing hair was always very much in evidence. After working on a number of archaeological sites around the City, Penny moved from the field section into finds where she became the head of finds processing.

Lynne Keys a former member of Penny's team says that the comment most people who worked with her have made is that she is the best boss they've ever had - and that she was the best because she led from the front. When it came to a particularly dirty or heavy job that she was asking you to do she'd always help out - putting her utmost into getting as much of it done as she could in the time she was there. She expected full effort from her staff because that was the way she worked herself; she didn't expect you to do something she wasn't prepared to do. She was fair with all of us and pushed us to expand our experience; she was never jealous of her staff or of them being promoted to positions equal to or above her - and if you were to move on she was always interested to know how you were getting on in the new job.

The countless finds' displays that were laid on for the developers over the years also demonstrated Penny's consummate organisation and problem solving skills. Her displays were works of art. The labels had to be perfect (no smudging); the print on them exactly centred on the perfectly cut board pieces. No marking on the finds to be visible - yet you knew exactly which small find went back in which bag at the end of it. The way she organised things meant you could set up quickly and then take the whole thing down within minutes ... and all would end up where it should be for storage.

Penny, despite her tough work ethic and robust attitude to life, was always a lady, a woman who had delicacy when it came to dealing with the feelings of both men and women. She preferred gentle cajolery or a quiet: "Really?" to having to say: "You're talking utter rubbish" or "Don't you think you've got a big head?" She is the only woman I know who could be a mean arm-wrestler (who always won) with the (male) archaeologists in the pub and still retain their affection and respect afterward. How did such a graceful, feminine woman have such strength, you might wonder? Well, all those years of lifting and shifting those heavy finds' boxes and crates of building material, and her regular visits to the gym.

Jackie Keily worked with Penny from late 1980s until absconding to the MOL in 2005 said: I don't know where to begin. I truly thought that Penny would be around forever. She was the person who trained me when I joined the DUA in 1987 and who also spread to me her love of archaeological leather. Penny was a fantastic person to work for. I remember being rather intimidated by her when I started volunteering for her in 1986. This very quickly changed to admiration and friendship. She was a warm, funny lady with dry good humour, a formidable intellect and great attention to detail. She also had great generosity and kindness.

Also, as mentioned above, she was a very glamorous lady and another abiding memory shared by me and many others is waiting for her in a pub or restaurant. No matter what time we arranged to meet, Penny would always be last to arrive as firstly she always worked late and secondly she always had to spend some time in the loos, checking her hair and make-up before going out. To show the true nature of her, we all used to rib her un-mercilessly about it and she would just shrug off our comments.

Penny was a fantastic archaeologist and this should never be forgotten. She founded the bedrock upon which all the finds recording systems that we use in London today were based. She was at the forefront of leather studies in London - both Roman and early medieval. Because of the nature of both Penny and her role it was easy to underestimate her influence. She never blew her own trumpet and so it is left to us to do it for her. We all know that the Museum of London's finds recording systems were largely developed by Penny - as was the rigor with which they were enforced. I well remember a very cold morning some years ago in Lever Street - there was frost everywhere and ice on the tops of the (outdoor) washing tanks. Lynne Keys rang Penny saying it was quite cold and what should Jackie do about washing the finds.

Penny's answer was - she should wear two pairs of gloves!

But enough of Penny's incredible drive and work ethic what of the well known mischievous side to her character which is undoubtedly well known to the majority of you sitting here today?.

Jackie Keily remembers the practical jokes from the days in the old finds room in the basement of the Museum. I think still to this day there is a 1p coin glued to the floor there and I think it was Jo Groves who put it there, so that Penny would try to pick it up - and I think she did try! The stories about the spoof memos (and there were many - all pre- email days) show how she was willing and enjoyed being taken in as much as tricking others, although the latter was always a more enjoyable challenge.

One of the most related tales concerns Ian Riddler – who was the butt of her best and most complex joke. Ian who himself was nicknamed 'The Joker' on account of himself being a bit of a wind-up merchant – but always in a pleasant way. On this occasion he'd substituted a photo of Penny's head (photocopied from her staff pass which she had left on her desk) for the one in a photograph of the City rat catcher. The doctored photo was displayed (and moved about) in various places in the Finds' room where Penny might notice it and he (and we) could witness her reaction.

Somehow, she didn't notice what had been done: she was just so busy doing things she kept walking past the photo or not looking closely at it. Someone over on Ian's side of the room finally drew her attention to it during a lunch hour when Ian was out. Penny was in stitches, her laughter ringing out for a long time that joyous rippling laugh she had. She asked us, however, not to let on to Ian that she'd seen the photo and as reward she'd show us something worth waiting for.

Shortly after this, possibly a day or two later, Diana Twells who was Brian Hobley's secretary (he was the head of the DUA; Diana was friendly with Penny) came down to our room and put something on Ian's desk. Most of us took no notice until we saw Ian's face and shaking hands. He had received a letter from Hobley saying Penny had come to his office the day before in some distress. She had been going about her work when she saw her head substituted for that of the City rat catcher and she had been very upset by this. She'd told Hobley there was a culture of endless joke- playing in the Finds' department and she was fed up and distressed by it. She wondered what could be done. The letter asked Ian to come to Hobley's office at 4.15pm to discuss this issue and his involvement.

At a couple of minutes before the allotted time, Ian got up from his desk with a sigh and headed for the door. As he passed Penny's desk he stopped and said to Penny: "Penny, I wanted to say how very sorry I am for what I did. I'm not saying this because I want to avoid trouble - I'm going up to see Hobley now - but if I'd known doctoring that photo would cause you distress I would never have done it." He then continued to go out the door. Penny raised her voice and called after him: "And if I'd known how hard it was to forge a letter carrying Brian Hobley's signature, I would never have done that either!" The whole room exploded with laughter and then - as he started to say "You ...b" (he never managed the whole word) - Ian too was laughing. We all, including Penny, had tears rolling down our cheeks. One of Ian's catch phrases from that time on is: "Whatever you do, remember: 'Never play jokes on Penny MacConnoran'"; whenever that joke was mentioned in years to come Penny would laugh loudly.

About 10 years ago a group from MoLAS (as we were then known) went for management training. One session involved role playing where we were paired off and one person had to be the client and the other the project manager of an archaeology unit who needed to put their case for the client to fund the archaeology. Penny was paired with John Giorgi with Penny being the client and John being the pm. So John and Penny sit down to negotiate with the rest of us viewing the proceedings.

John opens with a spirited argument about how important the site is and why we should be doing the archaeology. Penny sits listening and waiting for John to finish.

Then with a completely straight face she says that she represents a charity who owns the land and the charity is forsick hedgehogs and all the money they own has to go to making the hedgehogs better and getting them back on their paws.

John is floored as he (and the rest of us) has not seen this one coming. John gamely tries to recover the situation but each time he makes a point re why money needs to be spent on the excavation Penny calmly rebuts with a plea for injured and bewildered hedgehogs. John's plight is not helped by the rest of trying not to laugh out loud while Penny keeps her composure throughout.

It would be all too simple given Penny's lifetime contribution to London's archaeology to overlook the other side of her life outside of work. Dedicated though Penny was, she had a rare and enviable ability in being able to completely switch off from her demanding job the instant she left the building and was never one to sit pontificating about work - which is generally a trait of archaeologists when they are allowed to congregate together especially if they have a drink in their hands (which is invariably the case!).

Dana Goodburn-Brown remembers Penny as a fabulous former work colleague and also a great friend in the years leading up to her becoming a mom and has very fond fun memories of a trip to the California Sierras where Penny joined Damian (her husband) and family to bring in the New Year c. 1991. She definitely lives on in my family's cabin photo album - being silly with feathery party masks and picnicking by a lake during cross country skiing.

While I introduced Penny to a bit of my America... she introduced me to music clubs in London! I particularly remember a great night in a club together (quite possibly at the Weavers in Newington Green) when I was c.8 months pregnant - we commented that the loud music would be very good for my baby and that perhaps it would make him/her a musician... Now, 17 years later, as I enjoy Japhet's improvised saxophone playing in his band Virgin Murphy - I will raise a glass to Penny and smile at this strand of the lasting legacy from her friendship and love of live music.

Penny was quite simply adept at anything she chose to put her hand to regardless of whether it was single-handedly decorating the entire house, gardening, or effortlessly cooking for 20 people - she was a superb hostess and entertainer. She was also the truest and most precious friend that you could ever wish for and personally has been a constant part of my life for over 32 years and I like so many people loved her dearly - and cannot begin to imagine a life without her. That being said, we will always feel blessed that we have had such a long association with Penny and that I was able to be with her and Pac (who has been a rock and never left her side these past 4 months) when she finally slipped quietly away from the bonds of the illness that had temporarily constrained her - but never extinguished her indomitable spirit. When we close our eyes, we will always see Penny when she was at her happiest - dancing without constraint and free of all earthly cares to the music that is to follow - sleep tight Penny we all love you so very, very much...

Closing songs:

2. 'Dancing Queen' Abba

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xFrGuyw1V8s>

3. 'Turn to Stone' ELO

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BDhJU_cNCZE

4. 'End of the Line' Travelling Wilburys

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UMVjToYOjbM>

Lyn Blackmore's poem dedicated to Penny: which she read out during the service

Dear Pen, you were our storage
queen,
a veritable search engine... though
you walked the aisles oft unseen,
and many didn't stop to think, that
in your role, you all did link.

Boxes, shelves and labelling, maintaining
order was your thing.
For pallet or trolley you had no disdain
Whatever came, you wouldn't complain.
Even with your dodgy hip, arthritis
giving you plenty gyp,
the heavy jobs you would not shirk... you
just got on and did the work.

Tireless, fair, with judgement sound, all
missing objects could be found.
Sitecodes, contexts, numbers all,
Without fail you could recall... no
problem was too big or small.
A specialist too, in your own right, on
all things leather you could write

Unassuming in your way,
yet quietly you'd have your say.
And when it came to a display, you
always came up with a way to get it
right and save the day.

By example you did lead
Writing guidelines, manuals, all we need.
A tutor to those who volunteer - And if
muddles were made, you did them
clear
Ever protective of your crew
Someone we all could turn to

So that's a view from the shop floor But as
we all know, there was so much more
When the day's work was all done You'd
be out to have some fun Especially if the
sound was Cajun! And if you did ever get
the chance, you'd be on the floor to have
a dance!

You loved your house and garden too...
never lacking ideas new... painting a
floor, or sanding a door,
scouring the markets for something more.
And then the many happy hours planning
and planting garden flowers

And you also liked to dine...
Though steak and chips would do you
fine...
with, of course, a little wine! All
local places you did know,
and could recommend just where to go.
Guests came often for a day...
and somehow, they just had to stay!

Yes Pen, you were, as all will tell - a
manager respected well.
A splendid colleague,
dearest friend, dedicated
to the end. Steadfast,
true,
our common glue...
Penny, we really do miss you... And
so I blow a kiss to you...

The spoof 'Rat-catcher' letter from Penny that had Ian Riddler heading off to Brian Hobley's office: tail firmly between his legs.

The Museum of London

LONDON WALL LONDON EC2Y 5HN 01 600 3699

BH/DJT

16th March, 1989

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN IN THE FINDS SECTION

Penny McConnoran came to see me at lunchtime today in an extremely distressed state. She had been the victim of a malicious practical joke perpetrated by her colleagues.

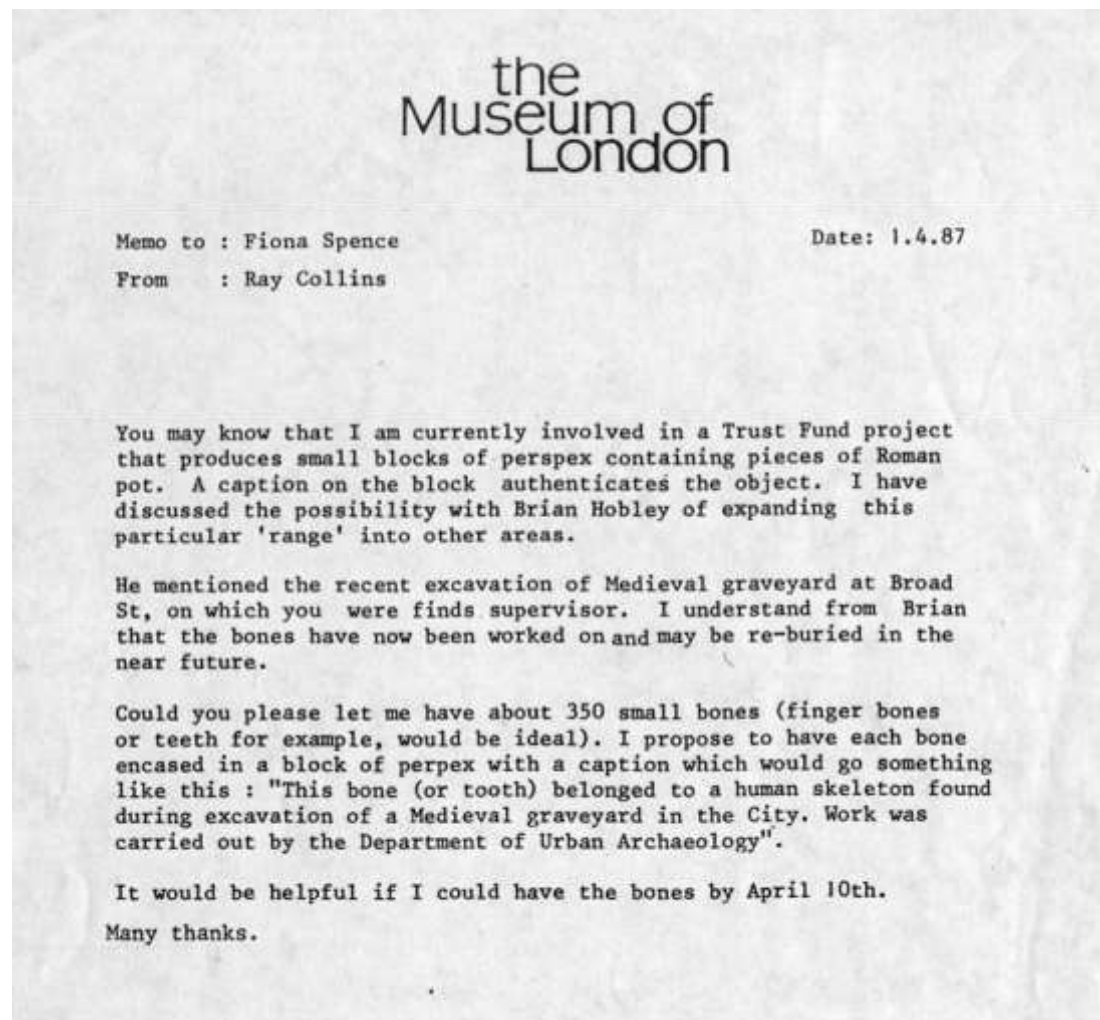
This is inappropriate treatment of a senior staff member and disciplinary action could result (although Penny has generously requested that no such action be taken).

I wish to see those responsible in my office today at 4.15 p.m.

Brian Hobley

Brian Hobley,
Chief Urban Archaeologist

An earlier spoof memo from Penny: this time on the subject of setting small human bones & teeth into Perspex to go on public sale in the Museum shop to raise funds for an archaeological Trust Fund. The duped recipient was Fiona (Jackie Keily's sister & DUA finds supervisor)



A genuine in-house memo from Mike Rhodes (DUA Finds Manager) - but equally funny and illustrative of the DUA days. The bit about 'scoffing chocolate **moose** cake' has to be one of the best typos ever!

MUSEUM OF LONDON
DEPARTMENT OF URBAN ARCHAEOLOGY

June 12, 1990

TO: All Members of the Finds Section
FROM: Mike Rhodes

Parties

As much as I enjoy scoffing chocolate moose cake, I am afraid that I must draw the line at the number and frequency of birthday parties held in "firm's time". It would almost appear that certain persons have more than one birthday per annum!!

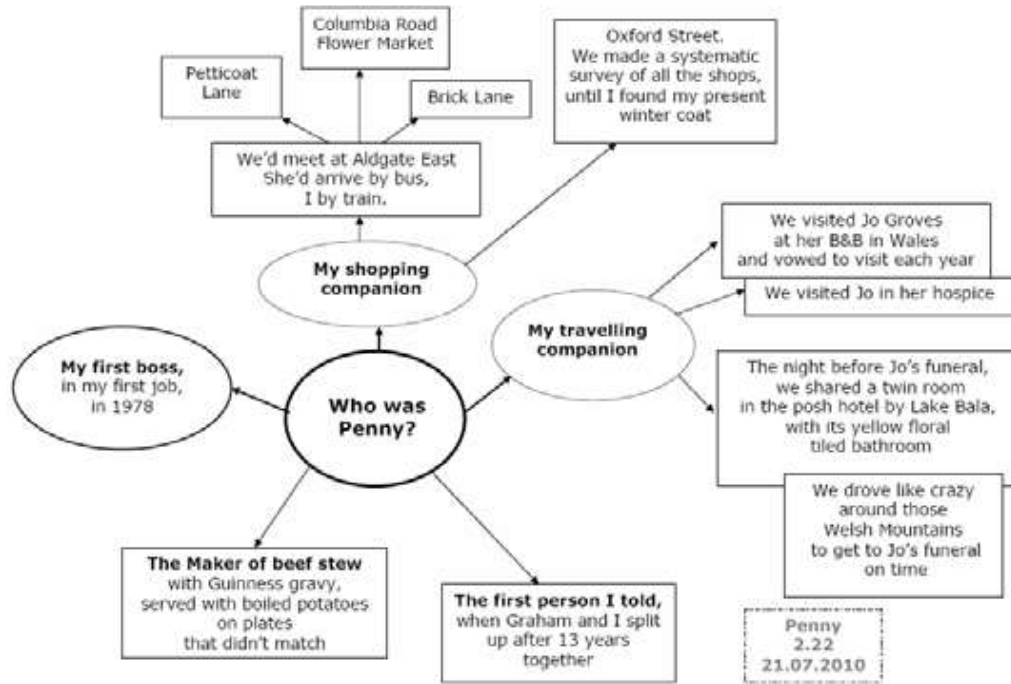
Seriously, now that the Finds Section has 50 members of staff, it is obvious that if everyone were to have a birthday party, the overall cost to the Museum in terms of lost output would be enormous. In future I must insist that ordinary birthday parties are held after 4.45.

An earlier start is acceptable for 21st birthday parties and other "life event" celebrations, such as engagements, babies, leaving parties, etc. Nevertheless, these should be timed to minimise loss of output. Friday afternoon, after the week's work has been wound up, is a far more suitable time for parties than mid-week, when they are likely to disrupt the flow of work.

If you want to hold a party in the Finds Section's offices (whether in or out of "firm's time"), please would you first, as a matter of courtesy, discuss the arrangements and timing with the Deputy Finds Officer in charge of your section.

Mike

Natalie Tobert's graphical take on her relationship with Penny





Penny (Pam) and her 2 longest-standing friends from school Kathleen and Liz, at the marriage of Kathleen's son Derek in 2001