

**SHELAGH GASKILL 1946 – 2006**  
**A PERSONAL MEMORY**



I first met Shelagh when she bounced into my room at Dibb Lupton in Leeds where, as a commercial property specialist, I must have been labouring over some property deal. The year was 1985, and as a mature articled clerk Shelagh wanted to know everything and talk to everyone. I remember quantities of curly hair confined into long plaits, still brown at the ends. Among other things we had in common, our respective parents lived in the same obscure part of West Wales. Once, I drove her and husband Philip down there and she said afterwards that I drove (my modest old Ford Escort) like Stirling Moss. This was before the days of her top-of-the-range Saab from which she dispensed top-of-the-range data protection advice at high speeds on the A1. And before she went blonde and into sharp suits.

Although she was by then working with Simon Charlton on a new subject that no one else knew anything about ('data protection', apparently) she was very interested in, and an authority on, the reformed building society law following the 1986 Act. This involved not only writing the constitutions of new societies, but also acting for societies who were now free to buy estate agencies, which was all the rage in the late eighties before the property market collapsed. Deals led by Shelagh had to be worth at least 1 million pounds (which was a lot in those days), and if there was a cattle market or two or some offices, I got dragged down, usually to the South West, for the property aspects. Shelagh had made an early discovery of mobile phones, and I recall an unscheduled stop by Tintern Abbey in search of a signal; Shelagh was not consoled by the reflections of Wordsworth when she couldn't get one.

Shelagh encouraged me to write and to teach, both of which I started to do a little of when, as a property support lawyer, I returned in the early nineties to Dibbs, where she was now a partner. She was always demanding that I join in the interpretation of new data protection law and cases and I think at that early stage she had decided that I should become a data protection lawyer, on the basis that it would not only be good for me but that we could then work together. I resisted for ten years.

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It was during the mid-nineties, at a time when we were not currently colleagues, that Philip died, and some time after the funeral I decided to cheer her up by signing both of us onto a night flight from Leeds Bradford airport to look at the aurora borealis. With a science writer friend from whom I had heard about the trip, we waited in the bar for the plane to turn up and by the time it did we had difficulty climbing up the steps to get on it. "Did you know, did you know...?". Shelagh kept spluttering incoherently, "that it's against the law to board an aircraft when you're pissed?" In the days before plane rage, not many people, even lawyers, knew that. Wine, food and legal arguments always kept us in touch whether we were working together or not. One event was opera at Fountains Abbey with an elaborate picnic at which I was to bring the wine (it had to be Alsace, afterwards her favourite), and she would bring quantities of delicious food, for the party. We consumed champagne when she finally left Dibbs to found the Masons Leeds office, and her tour of the new premises typically included "...and this is the cupboard where the articulated clerks go to cry".

She finally got me in 2001, by which time I was thoroughly bored with writing commercial property precedents, and was touring New Zealand. Negotiations, conducted through a Hotmail account, when I wasn't trekking in the bush, included an instruction to visit the New Zealand Privacy Commissioner whom she had just met at an international conference. I duly went to Auckland to meet him, but not knowing anything about data protection at the time, had little to say.

Shelagh was brilliant at praising people and saying how wonderful she thought you were, although she wouldn't hesitate to tell you if she thought you were mistaken: "That's wrong" "That's b\*\*\*ocks", and "Tough t\*\*tie" were typical responses and "cool" if she was happy with it. While strict in her assessments relating to the law and legal competence, she was extravagant in her descriptions of those she liked. I learnt late on that she often told people that I had climbed Everest (well, I did do a lot of climbing, and certainly friends of mine had climbed Everest...).

For the five years that she was based in London, I regularly stayed at her flat where she would cook dinner for us, or sometimes we would go down the West End to have a (very upmarket) Chinese meal and see a blockbuster movie (Star Wars or Harry Potter). We might argue points of data protection law during courses, or possibly discuss the finer points of the wine or of people we knew. I don't recall ever having had a dull time with

Shelagh, even when she was ill. It fell to me to talk to her about putting her name on what is now the Shelagh Gaskill Scholarship in Information Law, at a time when we had only just started to realise how serious her condition had become. After initial resistance she warmed to the idea ("Barbara Welbury only got an essay"), and she concluded triumphantly: "and if I die before the launch, you can always call it the Shelagh Gaskill Memorial Scholarship!"

Life will not be the same without her.

**Sue Cullen.**