

Change of career was all down to a little faith

Hugh Milsom, 59, established himself as an independent funeral celebrant last November, and tailors ceremonies to the beliefs and wishes of the deceased and their loved ones. He lives in Blunsdon St Andrew with wife Erica. The couple have two daughters.

I HAD to do some work in Milan one day. The company helicopter came and picked me up from the Blunsdon House Hotel and flew me to Biggin Hill, where the company jet was waiting for me.

"I was the only passenger. It took me to Milan and the jet stayed on the airfield while I went to town.

"I did my work, the two pilots took me back to Biggin Hill and from there the helicopter took me back to the Blunsdon House Hotel."

Some people would tell such a story boastfully, but Hugh Milsom merely laughs self-deprecatingly at the memory of scenes from an earlier life. Skills he nurtured during years as – literally – a corporate high-flyer still serve him in his new role.

Hugh was born in Bristol to an engineer father and a housewife mother who later worked in management at an overall factory. He has an older brother, retired after a career in insurance.

A bright boy, he attended grammar school and went on to study communications engineering at Plymouth Polytechnic. His degree course involved work experience and included a stint at an explosives factory in Bridgwater. He graduated in 1976 and attended job interviews, including one for aviation firm BAC, which had many defence contracts.

Newly married, he moved to Swindon when his wife found a teaching job here, and worked for South Marston Radiation Dynamics. His duties included pioneering work on the development and installation of radiography equipment in hospitals. In 1982 he moved to broadcast systems manufacturer Quantel Ltd, where he would stay, apart from a brief stint with a friend's PR firm, until 2008. He later worked for Swindon Council in various community engagement roles.

During his years with Quantel, he made a name for himself as a public speaker at company presentations.

"I discovered that standing in front of a few hundred or a few thousand people didn't faze me very much. I would think out what I was going to say – the bullet points – and if you think carefully you can think of other things around them."

The early 1980s saw another, more crucial event: the birth of his first child and the resurgence of the Christian faith

Hugh's website is at swindonfuneralcelebrant.co.uk

he first found in childhood and which remains with him today.

"For some people prayer is putting a wishlist together, whereas I believe prayer is something to change me, not to change the world. When I pray for world peace, I do not expect God to send a thunderbolt to Kim Jong-un; what I hope it will do is enable me and other people in some way to collectively change the world."

Hugh became a lay reader with the Church of England. His duties included conducting funerals, but he realised he wanted to conduct more personalised services.

The transition to his current role was aided by a specialist training organisation called Green Fuse.

He has so far conducted 22 funerals, spending time beforehand with loved ones and having them share their memories of the deceased.

"In my funerals the physical space is a safe space. If people want to wail and cry – or they don't – that's fine. It is not a place for a stiff upper lip unless it is what you want."

– BARRIE HUDSON

