Sheila, Dennis and Tim: the crash of about 1973

Told by Elizabeth Hancock on 9 September 2026, at The Old Coach House, Henfield, in the fourth recorded interview. Written up 23 September 2026 from the recording (part 17, 00:01:39–00:08:15). Her words are in italics.

The question that prompted it was wrong, and she corrected it before anything else. The family story had it that she and Tony were godparents to a boy whose parents were killed in a plane crash. *"No, we weren't godparents. No — Dad was the executor of Dennis's will."* Tony had signed the will years before and had forgotten doing it.

Sheila Ryland had been her flatmate in the Eagle years, when they were both flying out of Blackbushe and sharing the house on Churchill Crescent in Camberley. They stayed friends. Sheila took up with **Dennis**, a pilot: *"Dennis was a pilot with Eagle, I think, at that time. He went through several airlines."* They never married; she thinks he was married to somebody else. *"He was a drinker."*

He lost his driving licence in a way she still tells with some relish: *"he actually, rather unfortunately, drove his car into a police station in Yateley on Christmas Day."* Without a licence, and flying out of Gatwick from a house in Yateley, *"he bought an aeroplane so that he could fly to work."*

"He and Sheila went across to France to pick up alcohol, because they both used it quite heavily, and on the way back, somewhere in — I think in East Sussex — there was a failure of the aeroplane and they crashed." She does not think the investigators found a fault with the aircraft itself: *"it wasn't an aeroplane thing."* Dennis and Sheila were both killed. **Their son Tim, eight or nine years old, survived with hardly an injury**, and was found by a walker.

"I can't remember how he got to us, but the reason that the police presumably brought him to us was because Tony had signed a will." Tony had not remembered it. *"He was quite shocked to find that he was the only executor."* So the boy came to Fenton, the house at Camberley, and *"he stayed with us for about six weeks, I think."*

Dennis had left enough money for a boarding school. *"It was decided in the end — he'd left sufficient money for Tim to go to a private boarding school. He went to Lord Wandsworth College, I think."* Sheila and Dennis had lived in Dennis's own house, Bracknell perhaps, and had let rooms there to a couple who were both cabin crew, a man and a woman whose names she cannot now remember. *"In the end they adopted Tim and took him up north."* Yorkshire, she thinks.

She had no direct contact with him afterwards, but for a while she heard of him. *"There was one person who was in touch with both of us, and the couple who took him ... I knew what happened to him and how he'd done at school. But I don't remember even the name of the contact."*

One thing from the aeroplane is still in the house. Will asked about the white leather mini-briefcase, and whether it came from the crash. *"It did, yeah. The belongings were all brought to us and I just kept them."*

"This is such a complicated story," she said, halfway through telling it. And then, at the end: *"Absolutely tragic. What a horrendous thing for him, at the age of eight, to go through. He probably remembers it still."*

Dating and what is not known. She placed it by her daughter's age: *"I think Caroline was about nine, so it's a long time. Oh, '72 or something like that."* That puts it at about 1973, in the years after Tony lost his own licence to fly and the family was at Fenton. Dennis's surname is not on the recording, nor the make of the aircraft, nor the exact place it came down. Sheila's father is mentioned only as a *"CEO"*. An accident with two dead and a child survivor in East Sussex in the early 1970s will be in the Air Accidents Investigation Branch record and the local press, and has not yet been looked for.

The same story is carried, more briefly, in her biography at section XI, in the year it belongs to.