

Rose May Birch 3rd December 1926 to 9th January 2021

Anyone who knew Mum, particularly of late, would know that the last few years have not been the easiest of times. I'm sure that if you look through the rose-tinted glasses of a grandchild, the "Queen" could do no wrong, but the reality is that a lot of the challenges were not helped by her un-swaying independent nature and her insistence that things had to be done the way she had always done them.

This is not a criticism, just a statement of fact. However, if you dig a bit deeper, and learn about her life, you will understand why she was this way, how important it was in keeping the family together and what a remarkable person she was.

She was born in December 1926 in Woolwich Military Hospital, to Harrold & Doris Denton. Tragically in October 1929, before she was 3, her Mum died in childbirth and by the time she was 4, when the great depression started to really bite, Dad, Harrold, could no longer cope and took the difficult decision to place Mum and her older brother, Harry, in the care of the Catholic Church.

When World War 2 broke out, she was evacuated to Bedford, to the Convent in Bromham Road. As soon as she old enough she left the Convent and headed to West London to live with Aunt Maud & Uncle Clifford. London life didn't suit her, so again, as soon as she was old enough, she headed back to Bedfordshire and joined the Women's Land Army, and lived with "Mum" Norman in Great Barford.

I think she really enjoyed the freedom of early post war life, being part of a family, living & working in the countryside, socialising, dancing, and no doubt romancing. In the late 1940's she met James, or Jamie as she preferred to call him and they were married in 1951. Their first home was in a rented caravan that was situated just across the way near Church Farm. When Ann came on the horizon, they rented some rooms from friends in Bedford. After Ann was born in 1955, Mum gave up work, as was the way at that time and they subsequently moved to Cople. I came along in 1958, and in 1959, they moved back to Clapham and into 19 Green Lane.

Mums happiness at that time was short lived, as soon after the move, Dad became ill and in August 1961 he died. No doubt the

following years were tough, but Mum employed her exceptional resilience and determination, kept us clothed, fed and most importantly, together.

After a number of years Mum met Arnie. They married in 1968 and Arnie moved in with us at number 19 and our brother Jon came along in 1970. From 1980 onwards grandchildren appeared on the scene and all was well until the late 90's when Arnie became ill. Mum then nursed and cared for him until he passed away in 2001. Further tragedy struck in 2013 when Jon's life was cut short, passing away suddenly after a short illness.

So here we are, nearly eight years on, and Mum is finally at peace.

On the face of it, the series of events I have just detailed are probably not that unusual. Many, or perhaps most, people's lives are littered with tough times just like Mums but the real difference is in how she dealt with them.

As I have said her formative years were spent in a home, she and her brother were separated and sent to single sex care homes. I use the word care loosely. Mum didn't talk much about those years. She always said she wasn't treated badly, but equally she never said she was well treated.

There were a couple of things about those times that she did share with us. She always smiled about Harry, her older brother, regularly running away from the boys' home to find her and check that she was ok. She also spoke of the delight & pleasure associated with occasionally being given a single sweet to enjoy.

On the other hand, she did talk of a lack of feeling loved or cared about and I'm sure that it was during those times that her remarkable resilience was nurtured. No doubt there were some harsh periods but Mum would not let them bring her down. The final thing that she shared with us about her time in care related to a penny that she had found. Not being allowed to go to a shop herself, she persuaded one of the day girls to get her a selection of sweets to share. Apparently when the Nuns got to know about this, she was punished, goodness knows what for!

Part of that punishment was to be locked in a windowless cellar to contemplate her actions, which no doubt she did, but having not done anything wrong, rather than show the expected remorse, she

chose to sit at the top of the cellar stairs and sang her heart out until the Nuns got fed up with the noise and let her out.

Of course, we should not forget that Mums resilience was related directly to her faith. The seeds of which would have been planted whilst she was in the Convent.

On leaving the Convent, and escaping the control of the Nuns who looked after her, she took a firm grip on her own destiny, a grip that was seldom relaxed.

She loved her time in the land-army, working long hours in the countryside, looking after the animals, helping with the harvest, experiencing a proper family life with the Normans and adapting to a freedom that, I imagine, must have been very strange at first.

Having got married, had two children and moved to Green Lane, the loss of Dad must have been devastating. I was too young to really know what was going on, but I know Ann has a different understanding.

Mum dug deep, took control of the situation and despite unwelcome input from Dads wider family in London and having literally nothing apart from the house, she put her trust in God, and got on with it.

She ensured that we stayed together and also that we stayed here, in Clapham. We had nothing, but we wanted for nothing. She didn't take a job, so to ensure that she could be there to see us into school each day and be there when we came home each evening.

At home she worked morning, noon and night to make sure we were provided for. Primarily this was working and tending the enormous kitchen garden, growing food year-round, baking cakes, making pickles & preserves, knitting jumpers and the making good of tired clothes.

The small income received from the widows' pension & child benefit was barely enough to cover the bills and buy a few basic goods to supplement the vegetables & home baking, so she had to be even more resourceful to look after our other needs.

On reflection, Mum must have been one of the original eco-warriors. There was little or no waste generated at number 19. Everything was either recycled, repurposed or kept for future use. The washing line was always populated with plastic bags that had been washed ready to reuse. Reminders & shopping lists were written on various bits of cereal box or scrap paper and the tissue paper that Stapleton's bread came wrapped in was carefully torn into perfect squares and placed, ready for use, in the smallest room.

Nice quality woollen goods acquired at jumble sales were meticulously dismantled, the wool washed and sometimes dyed and miraculously turned into a new school jumper or similar.

A lot of our other clothes were hand me downs. This did on occasion give me issues, mainly because I only had an older sister. You may be familiar with the modern invention of men's flyless underpants; I think they are called slips. Let me tell you, there is nothing modern there, I was wearing them in 1963.

Despite the demands of being our sole provider, Mum always made time for some quality family activity. We would go on long walks in the countryside, which usually included foraging for nuts, berries or mushrooms to fill those recycled bags. Other times it was collecting dandelions and elderberries to make wine with. All the time sharing her knowledge and engendering our appreciation of the countryside.

She hand built a "Wendy House" for us in the garden out of old wooden crates she had acquired. In the summer our swimming pool was just down the road at the Ford, where we used a tractor tyre innertube to play on. While we were playing, Mum would be gathering reeds. We all carried an armful home to be dried in the back garden and eventually woven into table mats or baskets.

She also ensured our spiritual needs were met, by sending us to catechism classes on a Saturday morning and making sure we attended Church with her, twice, each Sunday.

Occasionally, if money allowed, we would skip Sunday afternoon Benediction and have a walk into Bedford for an Ice-cream from the parlour in Tavistock Street and then go window shopping in the town centre before walking home.

Meeting & marrying Arnie, brought some stability to the situation, but even this wasn't without its issues. There was a school of

thought in his wider family, that Mum would be selling up when they got married and we would all move into the large family home in Richmond, London. As you might imagine, Mum was having none of that and I am sure all involved in the conversations quickly realised who wore the trousers in that relationship, and where we would be stopping.

Jon came along in 1970 and as you would expect Mum dedicated her time to ensure that we, and our little brother were blessed with the benefit of all the things that Mum had been denied in her childhood.

To her grandchildren Mum was the gift that just kept on giving.

She always made their time with her special. She loved to play games with them, Connect 4 & Scrabble were favourites and all were introduced to the joys of gambling when learning to play Newmarket. Of course, this was only with old pennies, never real money.

They would always be treated to Russian & Lemonade with a cherry, on special occasions, and you could rely on Topsy Roll, her party piece, being available at every Birthday. At Christmas it was nuts. She always had a selection nuts in shells ready to challenge their cracking skills sometimes using a hammer & stone, just to be different & of course there were chestnuts to roast on the fire.

There would be cooking & baking lessons. Biscuits, Scones, Apple Pasties & Fairy cakes would all be produced in record time during any visit from the grandchildren.

Mum loved her garden, and in many ways, it got far better tended than the house. With Mum, if she had to chose between material and natural things, there was only ever going to be one winner.

And of course, there were always animals around. Mostly domestic pets but also some interesting additions that she cared for with a passion. There were a few dogs along the way and I have lost count of how many stray cats Mum coaxed in to become a permanent fixture. Having someone or something to care for was an essential component of her life.

For reasons I no longer recall, she sacrificed a considerable amount of time looking after and rearing some baby goats that were kept in an old stable just off Carriage Drive. Of course, she would draw the whole family, particularly the grandchildren and their friends, into this somewhat different existence, ensuring that we all shared in her love of the natural world

There were numerous baby birds rescued, young crows and club foot pigeons protected and fed. She made sure all wild birds were personally catered for by being very particular about the seed that we got for her to put out and I am sure that this care and respect was returned by the loan Robin that stood guard, in the front garden, for the whole of the day on which she passed away.

Just like Ann, Jon & I, as the grandchildren grew, practical training was also introduced. Grinding eggshells in the pestle & mortar to use to keep snails & slugs away from tender plants was generally the starting point. They then graduated from riding around the garden in the wheelbarrow and started putting it to its proper use. Cutting the lawn soon followed. This had to be done to her exact liking and if you didn't make the grade you would be educated. I don't think there has been anyone who she thought competent to stack grass cuttings properly on the compost heap. When it came to the garden, there only two rules. Rule 1. Mum was always right. Rule 2. If you thought she was wrong you should refer to Rule 1.

She was very protective of all aspects of her independence, insisting that she always paid her way and a bit more, and would get quite concerned if she thought there was a debt outstanding or she was being subsidised in any way. On the other hand, Mum was always very generous to everyone, not just those who helped or provided for her, but also to friends' and neighbours, the paperboys, salesmen and of course good causes. She loved to send people away with something, a bundle of rhubarb, bag of apples or plums, perhaps a bottle of wine and she would always support charitable appeals.

Her generosity sometimes seemed disproportionate, and it occurred to me while I was writing this, that she didn't make her measure by what people did for her, but by what she needed to keep for herself. I have already established that Mums material desires were minimal but she got great pleasure from sharing the surplus around. I think we could all learn something from that.

The loss of Arnie in 2001 and our Jon 12 years later were further big blows to Mum, but again on each occasion, she dug deep, exercised that exceptional resilience and kept going. As difficult as these situations were, Mum always maintained great dignity. She dealt with her grief in private, only sharing it with her ever-present friend. Just like she had done as a child she trusted in God to get her through.

In conclusion, it is clear that the un-swaying independent nature and insistence about how things were done, mentioned earlier, were products of Mums very challenging start in life.

She never forgot the daily control that she was subjected to, the isolation and feeling of being unloved or the lack of being supported by someone who she could really trust.

But instead of being damaged by these issues, she used them as tools to build her remarkable resilient and independent nature and ensure that we were never exposed to the type of sadness that she had experienced.

Mum made enormous sacrifices and was uncompromising in her actions to ensure that we were always well provided for, that we shared her love of all Gods creations and also that Green Lane was consolidated as a hub for all generations of her family to gravitate to. For all those things, Mum, we thank you.

Of course, It would be wrong to suggest that Mum did all this in isolation. She would often consult us and other people about an issue, but we were never party to her decision. That privilege was reserved for her constant friend, God, in whom she trusted implicitly.

Paul Smith. 27th January 2021