**Remembering Joan 01 May 2021 Mike Chambers and Miggs Clark**

We have the pandemic to thank for Joan. In 1919 after **a** tough war as an army padre the reverend Robert Walter Thornhill sadly lost his fiancée to the influenza pandemic. Subsequently working in Lancashire he met and married Mona Peart Kemp, who herself had lost her fiancé in the war. Previously she had lost both parents, her priest father contracting tuberculosis from his parish rounds in Newcastle, and she had been **brought** up by another priest Richard Lavers-Kemp in Lytham St. Annes. Robert and Mona’s first **child** Joan was born in West Didsbury 17th August 1923, soon to be followed by Monica and Philip. Joan’s early life was lived as a child of the vicarage, with two grandfathers and three uncles in holy orders. They moved to Bournville in Birmingham (good chocolate perks, no **doubt**) via **Erith** near Gravesend to finally settle in Tunbridge Wells, where Bob was for 25 years the much loved vicar of King Charles the Martyr, at the head of the Pantiles. This was a quintessentially a late Edwardian existence, with three servants (alas Chris, time have changed), and a growing extended **family** including **grandparent** Lavers and **his** rather formidable wife (and back-seat driver: the poor man known for evermore as ‘Toot Dick’), and uncle Brian who was a little the worse for wear. Brother Philip had complex disabilities, and Joan remembered long train trips taking him to the Rudolf Steiner school **in** Aberdeen.

You have heard some of **Joan’s** own words about her upbringing. At school she learned the organ, played tennis to a high standard – she formed a **keen** doubles partnership with her father, was head girl, and developed a **life-long** interest in history, which took her to university in London and Cambridge. She played tennis underneath the Battle of Britain, and later on at Wimbledon - although if pressed she would admit it was for the ‘Wrens’, not the championship tournament. She ‘**might** have’ seen Bradman play his last innings at the Oval, where she was taken frequently by her father, perhaps to his chagrin at her lack of detailed interest. As you may know, her historical expertise focused on the descendants of Queen Victoria. Coupled with Graham’s experience working as **naval** secretary for Lord Louis Mountbatten, this might have fuelled an excellent conversation with His Royal Highness Prince Philip at the pearly gates, no doubt **over** a celestial sherry or G&T.

Leaving behind what seemed (to us) an interminable string of suitors at Cambridge, Joan enjoyed a number of years in the Women’s Royal Naval Service (the ‘Wrens’), before returning home to help support the extended family, as her mother became unwell. A life of service to others was firmly implanted in her genetic code (as indeed was the female indomitability gene, which I think came from Grandmother Ellen Buckingham – relevant family members take note). She did tell me in one of her last conversations how the early 1950s had been such a taxing time, when she had wondered if she would ever be able to spread her wings and fly the nest. This she was finally able to do in 1954 when she jumped at the opportunity of working for the Red Cross in Sarawak, Borneo. We are not quite sure what she actually did out there, but it was no doubt an exciting and formative period in her life: learning Malay, visiting the Iban longhouses where she met with headhunters (not the recruitment agency variety) and avoiding more suitors.

**Prior** to leaving for the Far East she had met Graham at an alliterative bus stop in Bergen, and this survived the separation and the rest, as they say, is history. A marriage in Tunbridge Wells was followed by early life in London, where Graham did not so much sail a ship as drive a desk, chiefly for Lord Louis Mountbatten. Joan and Edwina got on rather well, as you may expect: Joan used to tell the story of Edwina Mountbatten borrowing her specs, to give her at least a fighting chance of recognising some of her party guests.

A posting to Yeovilton brought them down to Somerset, where after the sad loss in London of David, their first child, two more children arrived relatively OK, or so we are told. Graham was away sailing the high seas for the best part of two years, which with some help from sister Monica, Joan survived as a single parent. Graham returned to drive another, larger, desk in London, and the family grew up in the prime commuter territory of Farnham in Surrey, where the success of the day was measured by whether you can complete the Telegraph crossword by Surbiton. As well as propelling her offspring hither and thither while Graham over-worked in London, Joan had a succession of significant roles as a social worker, firstly for children with learning disabilities and latterly doing battles with the medical consultants about discharging elderly people from hospital - which she no doubt reflected on wryly as she was organising her own return from Yeovil before Easter. Life was full of music, with Joan and Graham furiously playing piano duets, their favourite being the **Queen** of Sheba who arrived regularly, and two services each Sunday at Frensham church.

A **real** highlight for Joan and for us as a family was a 2 year **spell** in Singapore and Malaysia, both just beginning to embark on their post-colonial journeys. Almost uniquely for a forces wife, Joan’s mastery of Malay and her strong instinct **to** be **useful** found her doing social work alongside an Malay princess, and as children (also uniquely) we stayed at the kampong - Malay village - home on stilts of the Malay servant Zainab, when Joan joined Graham sailing up the Malacca strait. We remember butterfly hunting in the Malaysian highlands, church services on board ship where ‘Eternal Father’ was regularly played by Graham on the ship’s little organ, and rapid exits from the swimming pool at the ‘Club’ when like clockwork the monsoon rains descended and lightning crashed about us.

Last September Joan was absolutely delighted tohost the wedding of Michael and Alicja, and indeed this was the last booking she took for the Village Hall. To this was added the joy, when recently in hospital, of seeing the scan of their baby, her first great-grandchild. In her final days this brought back memories for her of her mother Mona sadly nearing her premature death from cancer, but just hanging on long enough to hold Monica’s daughter Judith, her first grandchild, in her arms.

Now, nearly 70 years on, Judith would like to say these words about her aunt:

*(audio from Judith Mann)*

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Thank you, Judith.

So, now we want to let you into a little secret! Joan and Graham long enjoyed a little game in Church, called The Boring Sermon Game (no offence, Chris!). The trick was to listen out for the letters of the alphabet in order! So far Mike has got us all up to the letter ‘U’ in what, today, we are calling the Boring Eulogy Game. I will pick up where he has left off:

After their move to Dinder, in the 90s, Joan became an assessor for the Family Fund. Graham was the driver and navigator, and routes always included a country church or two and a **village** pub. They roamed the county from **Weston** to Watchet, Wellington to Wincanton. Hmmm… ‘X’ almost always proves to be an impenetrable barrier in the game. We will have to help you out by going back to the 40s, remembering the famous Bragg father and son, who Joan lived with in Cambridge. They were the founders of **X-ray** crystallography. Hooray! What a relief! And now we can return to Graham and Joan in their inevitably fog-bound car motoring on through **Yeovil** to wind up in **Zeals** for lunch. Bingo!

Somehow, amidst all their activities, Joan and Graham made some wonderful holiday trips, including the twinning visits to Germany where they met our dear friend Father Bernd Höckelsberger and his family. Years later Jonathan started to accompany Joan on her adventures - it is not in every family that the son-in-law chooses to go on three European river cruises as chaperone for his mother-in-law! This was a very fun way to work out that they could get on well and bode well for all living together in Dinder in the future!

Bernd has recorded a tribute, which we will share now.

*(audio from Fr. Bernd Höckelsberger)*

Yes, it was over 40 years ago that Joan and Graham moved to Sharcombe Grange and then Sharcombe Farm in Dinder, as he had been appointed Bursar of Wells Cathedral School. Together, and then through her long widowhood, they became great friends to the local community and church. We have received lovely tributes about her many Dinder years – more sounds for you to spot – so here is Joan in YOUR own words.

What a busy time Joan had! She was truly a “pillar of village life” and “one of its wonderful keystones”. She and Graham gave a huge amount to the community they loved. Looking after our grandmother for her final years, Cathedral guide, U3A, WI, Afternoon Group, Voluntary Choir, NADFAS, Friends of Wells Cathedral School and Music, Village Hall bookings, fetes and functions, Friday coffee mornings, the bar, the church, flower arranging and organ playing, café church, open gardens, Easter egg hunts, Chernobyl Children, quiz nights, Somerset Historic Churches and National Trust, the Rowntree Trust Family Fund and Independent Living Fund, Meals on Wheels, Save the Children… doesn’t it make your head spin?

I think Mum’s greatest talent was being good at not retiring – a full life lived to the full! As she said when leaving her last paid job, “I got away with it, but when I reached 75 they caught up with me.”

It was her duty and delight to encourage community life and to welcome and involve people. She was “always the welcoming face by the entrance to any village gathering.” “If there was something happening in the village, you could bet that Joan would be in the thick of it.”

Oh, didn’t she LOVE a chat?! “I will always remember stopping by - the sunlight pouring in through the kitchen window, the cats being fed, and having a nice chat over a cup of tea.” “I well remember a sherry (or two) and a challenge to see which one of us could out-talk the other.”.

“We loved hearing stories of her rich and varied life” “(we never minded the ‘repeats’!)” “Mostly we chatted about ‘the small change of life’ but occasionally a window would open on her past which made me realise what broad experience she had.”

For many years, Joan combined her loves of other people, church, beauty and history by volunteering as a guide in Wells Cathedral. She also thoroughly enjoyed her charity work. In more recent years, “the Save the Children coffee mornings (which we didn’t dare miss) at Sharcombe Farm were legendary!! Joan at the helm, seated in pride of place, greeting everyone who came with interest, whether young or old.”

However, being only human, she did have some vices…

“I always got sound advice and love… and treasured memories of a quick cigarette in the kitchen, with the window open – ‘Don’t tell anyone!’” “She would often hastily put out a fag and wave the smoke away.”

“The first time I met your mum, she told me that she had once been ‘a page 3 girl’ - more accurately, her picture had appeared in page 3 of the local newspaper!”

“One summer Joan noticed a new plant growing. It was a tall, robust brute. ‘What on earth is it?’ Joan mused, ‘I don’t remember planting it!’ Joan had accidentally grown a prize specimen of cannabis. Now Joan, being a fine, upstanding citizen, just roared with laughter.”

On the more ‘virtuous’ front, Joan “immersed herself” in the life of the church and “her wonderful organ playing with such vigour and joy brought the Church alive!”

“Her home was thrown open” to Lent courses, “warm and cosy PCC meetings”, prayer meetings and studies.

Many of you have said very kind things about Mum’s character, which we will treasure. Thank you. Here are some snapshots:

“It’s impossible to picture Joan without smiling! I can see her big widening grin, and a G & T not far away – maybe the ghost of a sly fag somewhere? –delighting in her self, her stories and her whole-hearted enjoyment of life and everyone else’s doings, progress and welfare. An absolute radiator of warmth.”

“She had that talent of always making you feel better for having seen her that day.”

“She had a wonderful sense of humour and of mischief”; “intelligent”, “strong”, “positive”, “so interested and interesting”. “She was enthusiastic” and “full of life with a capital L”. “She was most thoughtful, and made you feel you were important to her.” “Always wise and warm and very kind.”

“Joan was a force of nature.” “Her mission in life is accomplished, her legacy is profound” – “a role model for us all.”

“Joan always so enjoyed her family and she loved hearing about everything all the generations were doing.” These daffodils were a gift to her, representing her four grandchildren, that through her welcome have become six. I would like to share what each of them has said about Granny:

**Debbie** Granny Joan was absolutely vivid and true to herself. A bastion of strength and warmth and light, she was fiercely protective of all that that she loved, yet still willing to adapt and try to understand. Lovingly proud of her family, generous and giving beyond words, she invested her seemingly boundless love in our well-being and in everything we were and chose and cared about. I hope and pray she knew how deeply she was loved in return.  
  
**Michael** I have very fond memories of being shown round the Cathedral when she was a Cathedral Guide, and of being involved in the church services and Dinder Carol Service, playing the organ. Granny always had a variety of people visiting her house – family, friends, and all sorts of people from the village and from other countries. All felt welcomed. I was always very touched by how much family and community meant to Granny.

**Matthew** Granny was the rock of the family - an admirable blend of care with an easy-going, laissez faire nature that welcomed and gave to all. I will remember her for her remarkable ability to share warmth, conversation, time and enjoyment with all who stepped through her door, irrespective of the circumstances of life. And of course for stories, chocolates and ‘handshakes’ in abundance. *(Hold up £20 note – this is a handshake)*  
  
**Jonathan** Granny was a person of immense strength and warmth for all those around her; a constant throughout the ups and downs of life that you could always depend on.  
  
**John** A life as long as hers sees enough of history for the world to change almost beyond recognition. Yet she never became hostile to it, nor stopped inviting new people into her life - myself included. She also added wonderful new rings to the family tree, including the person I love most in the world.   
  
**Alicja** Warm and welcoming, Granny made me feel like a true family member from the very start.

Marvellous, Magnificent Mum, we are so thankful for you and so proud of you.

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That Joan was able to play such a full part in the life of the community so far into old age was in no small way down to you – all of you – her friends and colleagues at church, hall, cathedral and further afield, and of course her local support network over so many years of Lesley, Den, Clare and Alec, Alan and Dee, Hayley and Alan. As Graham and Joan did previously for Graham’s mother and as Joan did when Graham was poorly, Miggs and Jonathan selflessly and indefatigably provided Joan with an increasing level of support, with the not insubstantial fringe benefit of inheriting a fully-baked community of friends in Dinder and Wells. They, and all of you inside the church and outside, deserve a virtual pat on the back.

Joan, Mum, Granny, Godmother, Aunt, colleague, friend, counsellor and Great-Granny in waiting, it is a time of sadness for us to be here with you as you take your last journey, but it is also a time when we, inside and outside of this church, and many others further afield, can join in the celebration of a long life, well lived. Your passing is the end of an era for our family, but also for Dinder: ‘They don’t make them like that any more’.