

## Sheila Mary Burn, 28.6.1923 – 16.3.2020



Sheila was born in Pudsey, on the outskirts of Bradford, in June 1923. Her parents, Hubert and Annie Waterhouse, had both trained as teachers before the First World War, and after the war her father became head of a deprived inner-city primary school in Bradford. Although Hubert's mental and physical health were both damaged by his wartime experiences, Sheila's childhood was generally a happy one. In addition to her parents, she enjoyed the attention of her grandparents

and numerous aunts, real and honorary, who between them taught her to play the piano, to identify wild flowers, to draw and above all to sew and embroider to an incredibly high standard. Sheila's happiest childhood memories were of family holidays in Heysham, near Morecambe, where she and her younger sister Brenda would play on the beach for days on end – we have some lovely period photos of them in their droopy, home knitted bathing suits.

In due course both Sheila and Brenda attended Bradford Girls' Grammar School, where Sheila excelled at English and Art. In 1941, the second year of World War 2, she won a place at Newnham College, Cambridge, to study English, and in those days before grants or student loans her family just managed to scrape together enough money to send her there. After the darkness and grime of industrial Leeds and Bradford, and her sometimes difficult relationship with her father, Cambridge, even in wartime, came as a revelation and a great escape. In her first term Sheila was completely intoxicated by her first experience of independence; she fell in love with the beauty of Cambridge, its buildings, gardens and willow-hung river; and she also fell in love with Mac, a fellow - and we understand rather more hard-working - English student from Berwick upon Tweed.

At the end of his first year at Cambridge, Mac was called up into the army: for the rest of the war they corresponded regularly, meeting whenever he came back on leave. When the war ended, Sheila was teaching at Harrogate College: Mac's first action on returning to England was to get himself up to Yorkshire and propose. Sheila retained affectionate memories of Newnham all her life and she was delighted when Kate and Lucilla followed her there. The



University of Cambridge did not give women degrees until 1948, but in 1998 we all three returned to Cambridge when the achievements of Sheila and her contemporaries were belatedly recognised in a moving ceremony in the Senate House.

Sheila and Mac were married in August 1948 and enjoyed a truly happy marriage. She often said he was her rock: she was perhaps more lively, certainly more volatile and excitable than he, but while he brought calm and stability to the partnership, it was she who infused their lives with colour and beauty. Together they created happy, loving and attractive family homes, in Norfolk, where Kate was born, in Southampton, where Lucilla put in an appearance, and then in Newcastle upon Tyne. Kate and Lucilla retain happy memories of our childhood. There were the pretty summer dresses she made for us each year (though sometimes we rather ungratefully felt we would have preferred the shop-bought versions worn by our friends). We remember peeping through the bannisters in our Newcastle house when she and Mac entertained their friends to lively evening parties – half hoping we might be seen and offered a sausage or a cube of cheese and pickled onion on a stick or one of the other 1960s delicacies with which the supper table was loaded.

And then there were the long summer holidays at the cottage we rented at Dent in the Yorkshire Dales, where, with our beloved cocker spaniel, Daniel, we climbed the hills, pic-nicked or paddled in the streams – it was there that Sheila taught us how to whip egg whites on a plate with a fork, till they were stiff enough to stay on the plate while you held it upside down over your head – except on one memorable occasion when she confidently did it and the sticky, slimy mess slithered over her hair... In due course she was incredibly kind and patient with her small grandchildren, though neither of us lived close enough for them to develop really intimate relationships: she would play the most tedious games with them for hours on end, or, as with 2-year old Eleanor, practise keep fit moves on the carpet – we have some great pictures of the pair of them waving their legs in the air! Just three weeks ago she was clearly thrilled to meet her 3-year old great-grandson Alexander, with whom she enjoyed a lengthy conversation.

When Mac retired from teaching in 1983 they moved here to Rothbury, and for the next 20 years at least were blissfully happy, working together to create their ideal house and hillside garden at Shalamar, and getting involved in community affairs, from the W.I to the local History Society and the book club, where, with her expertise in English literature, Sheila had an unfortunate tendency to lecture...

Another major project for her was researching and writing the history of the Rothbury Cottage, now Community, Hospital; she also investigated and wrote up histories of her own and Mac's families. Freed from the responsibilities of parenthood and her part-time teaching job, she finally had time to give free rein to her creative talents. She took up silver-smithing, hammering out fine pieces of jewellery along with beautiful silver matchboxes and spoons.

She continued to sew and created numerous textile hangings, some inspired by favourite works of literature, others evoking the Northumbrian coast and countryside. When her eyesight failed she turned to writing poetry.

Several of her poems express her appreciation of her garden and its encompassing hills: one starts 'This garden has a beauty of its own. /We gave it snowdrops, banks of daffodils: / It took them to its heart where they have grown, /And spread to flower wherever the garden wills...'



As Mac became increasingly incapacitated with Parkinson's Sheila nursed him devotedly; he died at the end of 2007 and she recently said that not a day had gone past when she didn't miss him. In the years after Mac's death, as her sight, hearing and mobility gradually deserted her, Shalamar became her refuge, or as she put it, the shell that protected her against the world. She became increasingly reliant on so many good friends in the Rothbury community: her long-suffering neighbours Linda and Barry, Bob and Ann, looked out for her in power-cuts, made sure her curtains were drawn each morning and were ever ready to respond to requests to change a battery or a light-bulb; Brendan and Chrissie shopped for her each week and supported her in many other ways; Sue and Richard in Tully's, along with the rest of their staff, were endlessly kind and patient, receiving and delivering her small weekly order of groceries. Peter Scott knew he had to respond with alacrity to any plumbing problems; Glenn, who kept the garden immaculate, and his wife Tracy were true friends and helpers.

Claire and Wags dog Ruby gave Sheila a great deal of pleasure with their visits on Monday mornings. Ian Stoker from Age UK, and his battalion of cheerful, kindly care workers ensured Sheila was set up for each day and in her final weeks at Shalamar these were joined by Angela, whose loving kindness did so much to make Sheila's life happier, more comfortable and orderly. And finally there were the friends of her own generation, Nora, Keith and above all Florence, who were everlastingly kind and did their very best to cheer her later years and months. Although it did not prove possible for Sheila to die, as she had hoped, in her beloved Shalamar, she was truly fortunate that so many people enabled her to stay there as long as she did; and we, her family, are grateful to them all.

