

Biddie Shearwood, wife of former Master, Ken Shearwood (November 2016)

We were greatly saddened to hear of the passing of Biddie Shearwood, wife of former Master, Ken Shearwood, who died on 27 November 2016, aged 96.

We are grateful to their son, Paul Shearwood, for sharing the address he gave at his mother's funeral.

Mum was born in an old farmhouse in the Vale of Evesham in 1920. The farmhouse was called Oxtalls. It had no electricity and lighting was by gas. The farm grew fruit and vegetables. There's a picture of Mum at the age of about two, tiny, dressed in white, in an orchard with all the trees covered in blossom. Knowing Mum, a lover of flowers and Nature, she would have loved being there.

Her father, Bob Rowland, had been adventurous in his early years, going to sea at the age of 16 and serving before the mast in the great sailing ships of the late 19th Century. After five years of this he returned, raised some money and bought the farm. I heard from Mum he was nicknamed the Sprout King of Evesham.

He had met Mum's mother when she was a land girl on the farm in the first world war. Granny was the daughter of a gold miner in Madagascar and was actually born in Madagascar.

It was a happy childhood for Mum. There was swimming in the river Avon which ran through the land. Her brother Robert was born, also in Oxtalls farmhouse. In front of me is sitting my cousin Bob who lives in Oxtalls these days with his wife Rose.

Mum went to a local school until around the age of 10 and then was sent away to school. We know she was homesick because of a poem she later wrote about the experience. She was good at art and English and swimming, being made captain of the school swimming team.

After school, with the war looming, Mum began training as a physiotherapist in Birmingham. She had a lucky escape once, when the bombs had started to fall. A friend living in the same hostel had invited her to her room to play cards. While they were playing a bomb struck, destroying Mum's room.

She qualified and went to work in London and later in Southampton. On D Day, when she was in Southampton, she and the other physiotherapists and most of the nurses were summoned by Matron who said simply: "well, here we go." This was the cue for them all to go down to the docks and meet the injured coming back from the landings and go with them by ambulance to the hospital.

The experience of war helped make Mum a heartfelt pacifist. It was not only the sight of the wounds and the suffering but she was also shocked to see the hatred displayed between injured German and British soldiers when they were brought in together. She came to passionately and unwaveringly believe that all war was wrong. And she would say so if ever war came up in conversation. She wouldn't allow anyone to trivialise it or discuss it lightly.

Mum had met Dad in 1942 in Derby. Dad was brought up in Derby and one of Mum's physiotherapist pals was from Derby and was sister to a friend of Dad's.

For the rest of the war they wrote to each other and this culminated in Marriage in 1946.

Then, with the war over, it was a question of what to do. A chance encounter in a Dartmouth pub where Dad was being demobbed, led to the arguably rash decision to buy a boat in Mevagissey and learn to fish. So Mum became an inshore fisherman's wife for two years, sometimes joining Dad and crew on the boat.

They didn't have much money- some of the furniture consisted of upturned boxes- but they'd survived the war, they had each other as well as a large black labrador named Kim, the fishermen were kind and friendly, friends would come and stay and life was fun on the whole.

But then Dad landed a place in Oxford and they were on the move again, settling in Woodstock for three years where Dad played a lot of Football and did some intense studying in the six months leading up to his degree, Mum taking all this change in her stride, including having me.

Lancing of course came next. We moved into a school house in Hoe Court and spent 7 years there before Dad became a housemaster.

In Hoe Court, Mum lived the life of an ordinary housewife but being a housemaster's wife was a bit different. Dad ran an open door policy so anyone wanting to see him could come and visit at any time. There was of course much less privacy but Mum adjusted and gave Dad much support, even employing her physiotherapy skills with injured first 11 football players. She would also provide kindness and comfort to anyone in need, suffering, say, from homesickness.

One of the old boys wrote the following to us:

"For all of us, Biddie has been a bit of reference and her indomitable spirit of goodness will certainly remain fast with those of us lucky enough to have known her. The love and warmth that she radiated was palpable- a fleeting glance was all it would take. Of course I have special memories: in my early days up at the college when feeling bleak, only Biddie's cups of tea and hot buttered toast, gentle smiles and comforting words would allay my troubled mind. Even now, I can relive those sensations quite vividly. Biddie always spoke clearly and quietly, but unwavering in her belief in what was right and fair."

I can recognise that description of Mum. She was like that.

She wrote quite a lot of poems at the college which were eventually published. She was also creative in the visual arts. She had a box camera from childhood and used to photograph the gipsy families picking fruit on the farm. She continued using a camera until she was no longer able to. She had a keen eye for colour and composition and her drawings, particularly of Dad, were quite unique and would reduce all of us, including Mum, to tears of laughter.

She hardly ever went to Church but she was deeply spiritual in the Christian tradition.

For most of her last four years she was in bed and cared for with great kindness and skill by careworkers, who came three times a day in pairs. Their support was wonderful and invaluable, as was the support of the N.H.S., allowing mum to remain at home as we all wanted. And Mum,

through the whole period, never really changed in her essence. That is to say she remained loving and kind throughout, which of course made caring for her so much easier. She would often tell people she loved them and I think that probably cheered up the carers sometimes, at the start of the day with a long day of work ahead of them.

And she enjoyed life despite being immobile. You'd go in in the morning with something for her to drink and she'd be bright eyed, looking around with interest and anticipation and she might say how beautiful it was there, in the room she was in, the greenery outside.

Towards the end of her life, she was sleeping most of the time and was hardly talking at all, but she did say something on Wednesday, four days before she died. What she said turned out to be the last words we heard her say. At Dad's suggestion, on Tuesday evening Vanessa had taken up the small Christmas tree we've used for years and put it in her bedroom. In the morning the carers turned Mum so she was facing in the tree's direction and then they heard her say: *"it's Christmas."*