



A celebration of the life of
Ruth Barbara Handley
“Barbara”

1930 – 2018



Enfield Crematorium
Friday 7th September 2018

Ceremony conducted by Accredited Humanist UK Celebrant

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Humanist
Ceremonies

♪ ♪ ♪ The Lark Ascending – Vaughan Williams

I met Barbara and Graham in June of this year and I had the privilege to learn a little of their lives together. After spending just an hour in Barbara's company I experienced her kindness and recognised her keen intelligence; no doubt she was apprehensive about our visit together, but she greeted our time together with great dignity. I visited again in late July to find the garden in full bloom and Barbara sitting in an armchair at the window. Despite her laboured breathing, Barbara found the energy to engage with me and I felt gratitude to once again experience the generosity extended to me by both her and Graham and to also observe the incredible composure with which Barbara held herself under those difficult circumstances.

Barbara was diagnosed with metastatic breast cancer in 2015; the disease had been in remission for many years. Though the diagnosis was frightening for her, Barbara carried on with her life as normal until quite recently. She received care from the team at Princess Alexandra Hospital and the Isabel Hospice and with their help and the loving support of her family, she was able to remain at home until her death on the 20th August.

Remembering Barbara

Having spent some time with the family, I realise that one cannot talk about Barbara without also talking about Graham. Since Barbara was born in 1930 and she met Graham in 1949, it is apparent that Barbara's story is entwined with that of her lifetime companion. Most of you know Graham as Tod, a name lovingly coined for him by his parents, initially a shortening of the word Toddler!

But let's start with a bit of background and find out something of Barbara's life prior to meeting him:



Ruth Barbara Tunnicliffe was born on the 19th March 1930 in Oadby, Leicester, to parents Reginald and Edith Tunnicliffe. She already had a close cousin Ruth, so inevitably she came to be called Barbara. She had an older brother, Reg, with whom she grew up. Sadly, he died some 30 years ago.

Near the beginning of World War two, Edith and the two children moved to Blackpool. Barbara's father remained in the Midlands, was conscripted into a munitions factory and endured the Coventry Blitz in November, 1941. Sadly, too, he died in 1946. Barbara attended Blackpool Collegiate Grammar School where she excelled at English, French, Latin and Religious Education and, remarkably for the time, she went on to read English and French at Sheffield University, one of the two percent of women who gained university entrance at this time.

There she met Graham in November 1949 at a football match in Leeds, who were playing Sheffield Wednesday. She had been taken by a friend, but she and Graham were soon in love, constantly reading and discussing their literature courses and developing that mutuality of interest in books and book collecting which would characterise their lives. They were married in September 1951 as Graham began work on his MA, afterwards moving to

Enfield (Graham's home) where Barbara took a job in the office of a local company, the Ruberoid paper mills. There she worked for six years and, following this she spent about a year at St Michaels Primary School as a trainee teacher.

Their son Roland was born in 1958, and a year later in 1959, they bought, with the help of Graham's parents, who shared the house with them, a 400-year-old listed building - Glasgow Stud Farmhouse, with more than an acre of land, in Crews Hill. This was to be the family home until 1997.

Since 1957 Graham had been Head of English at Borehamwood Grammar school. Barbara was busy being a full-time mum and running the household and, in 1960, Rosamond was born but just after her third birthday, in 1963, Rosamond was diagnosed with incurable cancer. Barbara became her devoted nurse and was allowed to stay with her in a special screened off bed at the end of a ward in North Middlesex Hospital. Rosamond died in September 1963 on the 12th anniversary of her parents' marriage. The death of a child is unimaginable for most of us; somehow Barbara and Graham recovered, making Roland the centre of their lives but, at the same time, becoming temporary foster parents to children in need. Two of these were West Indian, and Barbara felt the disapproval of neighbours and even friends for, remember, in 1963, there was plenty of racial prejudice. Graham and Barbara did what was right, and perhaps this was the springboard for their outgoing humanism. In 1965 Elaine was born and their family was complete.

The Farmhouse at Crews Hill was an amazing place and throughout their years there Roland and Elaine enjoyed the way of life with animals, wine-making, growing vegetables and fruit, Barbara having bought two tunnel greenhouses which were flimsy but productive. Over time the family had domestic dogs and cats, but also goats for a few years and then two ponies and a donkey, and the feral cats, many of which were spayed and homed through the help of a good friend and vet, Esther, who also helped the grandparents with their Newfoundland dogs. Barbara helped to show these Newfoundland dogs at the big venues like Crufts.

Of course, Roland and Elaine felt this way of life was so different from the lives of their school friends: they registered the eccentricity of their parents, and sometimes dreamed of living in a normal street. Throughout the 1980s Barbara and Graham were regulars at Theobalds College, Graham as lecturer, sometimes in charge of the place and Barbara as student; she was once the star of a murder-mystery weekend there.

In 1997 Barbara and Graham moved to Cheshunt with their three dogs and two cats. While Graham continued lecturing and writing, Barbara occupied her time by cultivating the garden, swimming and doing Pilates classes, watching sport on television, deepening her knowledge of music and sharpening her interest in words through doing constant crosswords. Her lifetime addiction to the latter meant that she won more than 15 Oxford English dictionaries over the years. Both she and Graham shared a common interest in reading and discussion of what they read throughout their lives, and in the last ten years they developed an exhaustive interest in crime fiction.

Barbara always had an abiding interest in people and she had a gift for engaging them in conversation. She had a kind of social fearlessness born of a desire to make contact with humanity. After a chance encounter in Tesco, she was chatting to one of the staff about

pets, and the woman started crying because her two dogs didn't get along and were fighting. Sadly, the woman knew that she had to get rid of one of her dogs and there was Barbara, ready to adopt Dougal, a Westie, which she did.

Barbara was energetic and coped with the endless comings and goings at the Farmhouse with good humour, forbearance and for the most part genuine enjoyment. Friends sometimes stayed over, and Graham's close friend Don spent many a weekend with them throughout the 1970s and 80s. It was a social hub and visitors to the Farmhouse would enjoy Barbara's vegetarian cooking while having animated discussions about books or sport or television or drama or a mix of these. She encouraged the children to develop their own vocabularies by word testing. Elaine clearly remembers a word which is lodged forever in her mind – defenestration, not only a word but a history lesson!

Barbara's ability to care for others seemed like second nature as has already been mentioned. She helped to look after Graham's parents and also cared for her own mother Edith, who lived nearby and who died in 1993. But rather than exhausting her, being in a caring role appeared to enliven Barbara, who embraced life and all living things around her. People from all backgrounds and all walks of life were welcomed and embraced by these true humanists who, perhaps ahead of their time, greeted diversity with open arms and genuine interest. Graham and Barbara had the ability to accept difference in others at a time when perhaps "otherness" was frightening or offensive to some. This was especially true of Barbara, who was an exceptionally kind person; she believed kindness breeds kindness, a sort of Karma, if you like: you reap what you sow. "We are the children of remarkable parents" Elaine and Roland told me; "They chose always to help when help was needed. They were completely reliable and always there." In this regard Barbara was a selfless and generous person and together she and Graham acted as role models for their children. Roland says: "If you wanted to choose people to be like, it would be them."

At the Farmhouse the winemaking and jam making projects thrived. Each year Barbara would make in excess of 100 jars of strawberry, gooseberry or blackcurrant jams and marmalades which she would give to friends and family. Of the wines there was elderberry, elderflower, rosehip, parsnip and dandelion as well as sloe gin. Root vegetable wines were notable for their strength, and there was the lethal cider which reduced Roland and a friend to quivering wrecks, so much so that Barbara had to check to make sure they were still alive. In the era of *The Good Life* on television Tod and Barbara had their own equivalent in Crews Hill; it was a struggle not an idyll, but Barbara's energy and optimism made it a small triumph.

Barbara enjoyed company and had a good and sometimes unpredictable sense of humour – sometimes a bit scatty. She often saw the funny side of a situation, and giggled even when the joke was not fully appreciated. Nonetheless, there was always laughter in the family and laughter with friends and neighbours; she enjoyed sending people up, not least Graham when he was a shade too pompous. At Graham's PHD ceremony at the Albert Hall. Barbara arrived slightly late for the presentation and shouted to him, with clenched fists above her head, 'I passed'. Indeed, she had but it was her driving test that morning, which was of greater consequence than an academic occasion. (Graham secretly admitted that he was frightened that she might add a Churchillian v-sign)

Throughout her life, Barbara was very close to her cousin Ruth. They were more than cousins, they were friends who supported each other as their separate lives unfolded. They spoke on the phone every Sunday, sharing news about all the relations they had in common and the things they were up to. Ruth's death just four years ago came as a great blow to Barbara. She was also close to her other cousin, Mary, who often visited her both at Crews Hill and Cheshunt for weekly stays but who never managed to get Barbara and Graham to stay with her in Fareham, although Barbara had been sorely tempted. Barbara became great friends with Pat Askew, who had been a student of Graham's at Theobalds and afterwards organised his literary group in Enfield. Pat and her husband Mike were a great support to her in the last three years. Barbara and Graham had transatlantic friends over the years: one, Perry Birnbaum, who died a few years ago, was devoted to Barbara. In the last 20 years they were also close friends with Nancy Henry and Janna Henrichsen, both of whom visited and who were unfailing in their generosity and support.

In the last years Tessa O'Brien's constant help and dedication brought great comfort. Barbara had long been friends with Tessa's mother Vi, visiting her while she was in care. Vi greatly appreciated the loving friendship which Barbara gave her. Through Vi Graham and Barbara came to know Tessa, who was a regular visitor and, after Vi's death, moved to Gloucestershire. Tessa has stayed for days at a time with Barbara and Graham over the last 3 years, organizing and maintaining the garden and, just as important or perhaps even more so, giving practical support to both of them in their struggle. She greatly appreciated what Barbara had done for Vi in the past.

For some years the family had four season tickets to Spurs and Barbara went regularly; they also enjoyed visits to London's West End to see shows, but the essence of their lives together was that of their rather cocooned life at the Farmhouse, with friends coming to them rather than them going to friends. And even in their time at Cheshunt they somehow managed to recreate the atmosphere of welcome and relaxation which so many experienced in their company.

How does one quantify such a happy marriage that spanned 67 years? Perhaps it is the little things; the domestic rituals of reading and discussion, viewing and evaluating, interests in things both cultural and commonplace, care for one's pets and for each other and perhaps above all, keeping active mentally and looking outside the world of self to the world of others – family, friends, neighbours, and always still enjoying the wonders of discovery.

For those of you who know Graham and Barbara well, you will be accustomed to Graham's occasional tendency towards high handedness although, despite his years of academic achievement, Barbara says she has always thought of him as still being 23. There has not been a power struggle in their marriage but Barbara always succeeded in having her own quiet, independent and fulfilling way of life. She more than matched her husband in intellect but perhaps she also influenced him in establishing their responsible and responsive way of life.

The quality of Barbara's humanism was apparent to me in a conversation we had before her death, she said, and I quote: "It's very simple really: there are very many serious problems in the world: wars, starvation, human rights atrocities and apart from sending donations to all sorts of charities we can do very little about it; so, my idea is that we do the very best for the people that we are in contact with: your close circle spreading out as far as

you are able. I found that if you smile at someone just waiting at the bus stop - someone who looks thoroughly miserable, with a bit of luck they'll perk up and start to speak and you hope that they'll go on and smile at somebody else; but you do your best."

Barbara exemplified this in her generosity – the many jars of homemade marmalade she gave friends over the years already referred to, plus the hundreds of plants raised and similarly given, both being, small gestures of her inclusiveness.

When I met Barbara, shortly before her death, she was intent on paying tribute to many of the people she had known in her life and in particular, she wanted to thank those who had helped her during her illness. The following is in Barbara's own words:

"When my illness began I imagined that my world would get smaller and more isolated as I became increasingly immobile. Far from it; cards, messages and flowers from old friends, local friends and neighbours, along with offers of practical help have kept the doors wide open to the real world. Pat's cakes were delicious, and the "getting better" food treats from Joanne were a delightful surprise. And there was a certain bottle of Scotland's finest - cheers Ben and Sophie.

"Over the last few months I have met many people involved in healthcare in various capacities from the High Street Surgery, Home First and transport; in particular, Dr Chowdury – my consultant; all the nurses at the Williams Day Centre at the Princess Alexandra Hospital and the drivers Sue, John, Steve and Dave who took me there so often; and, particularly of late, Christine Macdonald at the Isabel Hospice and the Hospice nurses, carers and the District nurses and carers from Adico. Without exception their professionalism has been matched by kindness and consideration. Never has the atmosphere been one of doom and gloom. It is good to know that such kind and dedicated people are out there. I cannot name everybody, but I must especially mention the dedication and kindness of Dr Misra over a long period.

'When we first met Tessa, it was obvious from the start that she was "one of us". We shared a sense of humour a love of football and gardening and have for many years shared life's ups and downs. If you want to know what a real friend looks like then look no further than our much-loved Tessa. Immediate family have given me love and care. Ro, supported by his partner, Kaz; Guidey, with loving visits with her partner, dear Alex, always dependable, generous with his practical help and expertise and very much a part of our family. Be happy, my dear Alex, for you certainly deserve to be. Many years ago, confronted by a rebellious ten-year-old and a moody teenager I would never have guessed that Ro and Guidey would grow into the most thoughtful caring children anyone could wish to have. They have been unstinting in their care and attention and for them it has been the "norm" to go the extra mile. I have been so proud of you and give you my loving best wishes for your happiness.

"Tod and I have been together for a very long time and have been happy with each other and fortunate with our friends over the years. During these last months I have been well cared for at home. "In Sickness and in Health" has become an important factor of our marriage vows and has been lovingly kept. There are not enough words in my vocabulary to say all I would like to say but there is a poem we both love - very simple - but it says it all."

The Sunlight on the Garden - Louis Macneice

*The sunlight on the garden
Hardens and grows cold,
We cannot cage the minute
Within its nets of gold;
When all is told
We cannot beg for pardon.*

*Our freedom as free lances
Advances towards its end;
The earth compels, upon it
Sonnets and birds descend;
And soon, my friend,*

*We shall have no time for dances.
And not expecting pardon,
Hardened in heart anew,
But glad to have sat under
Thunder and rain with you,
And grateful too
For sunlight on the garden.*



♪ ♪ ♪ Hallelujah – Rufus Wainwright

♪ ♪ ♪ Imagine – John Lennon

♪ ♪ ♪ Going Home – Voices of the Valley

