

Betty Jane Wallace

1925 - 1995

Betty was born on the 28th July 1925, in Southend-on-Sea, in Essex. She was the third daughter of John and Ellen Ball and had two sisters – Ruby and Dora, who were 12 and 3 years older than her.

John Ball was a postman. He courted Ellen over the garden gate of the house where she was in service working as a maid. He fought in the first world war, as a soldier in the trenches, which may account for the large gap in age between Ruby and her two younger siblings.

The family lived in a small, semi-detached house in Wentworth Road, which they rented from the Council. By today's standards the house would seem quite primitive. There was no running water upstairs and no central heating. The toilet was in a shed in the garden and the family slept on high wooden beds with chamber pots tucked underneath. The bath was in the scullery, with a lid that folded down to cover it when it was not in use. Betty's mum, Ellen, did her washing in an old-fashioned copper and cooked on a coal-fired range.

There was a long narrow garden where John grew vegetables and fruit and kept chickens. He was particularly proud of the wonderful spread of lily-of-the-valley that grew under the apple trees. Every year, right up until his death, Betty would receive a parcel from her father in the spring. Wrapped in brown paper would be a cardboard box, lined with polythene and a layer of damp cotton wool. It would be filled with sprays of lily-of-the-valley which, she said, always reminded her of home.

Betty attended school until she was fourteen years old. The school was two miles away and she came home for lunch, which meant that she walked 8 miles every school day. When war began, in 1939, she was evacuated from danger to the Peak District but she was unhappy and glad to return to Southend when the anticipated invasion didn't materialise. After leaving school she went to secretarial college and, at 16, began work as a short-hand typist, earning just £3 a week. Although she had expected to be called up for military service the war ended when she was 20 and so she continued to live at home, working at the ECCO lightbulb company as a secretary, where she made a number of close friends including Midge and Sheila, who she stayed in touch with for the rest of her life.

Clothes were expensive (a suit cost more than a month's wages) so Betty and her sisters made all their own clothes, saving their money for shoes and winter coats. After the war Betty learnt to sail and through this she met a man with whom she fell in love. It was a doomed relationship – the man was totally opposed to the idea of settling down and having a family so, after a lot of heartache, Betty decided to stop seeing him. Shortly afterwards he married a widow with several children. Betty felt that she needed to get away. Her sister Dora had married an engineer and moved to West Africa, so Betty applied for a job at the British High Commission in Lagos and set out on an adventure that was to transform her life.

In Lagos she joined the local sailing club, which is where she met Ian Wallace – a pilot working with West African Airways. She always said that she and Ian met

"under a boat", which was true in a way – Ian was in a workshop painting the boat's hull, and Betty was asked if she would take him a beer, to keep him cool whilst he worked. Whatever the circumstances of their meeting romance blossomed and within weeks Ian was writing to his parents, telling them that he had met the "most wonderful girl". They returned to England for their marriage – on Boxing Day in 1951 - and spent their honeymoon in Switzerland, where Ian tried to teach Betty to ski. It can't have been a success as she never went near a ski slope again. On their return they moved into a flat near London and then bought a house in Lymington in Hampshire. They joined the sailing club, buying a sailing dinghy, which they named Potter Wasp, and got a black poodle, called Suki, who they loved to exercise on walks in the New Forest.

Ian had taken a job with BOAC on their return to England and was a pilot on the first jet airliners, the Comets, doing long haul trips to the Far East and Australia. He could be away for weeks at a time and Betty was very lonely during these periods. After their daughter Patsy was born, in 1955, Ian got a job with Jersey Airlines which meant that he could spend more regular time with his family. They moved to the Channel Islands and bought a house in St Brelades where they spent four very happy years.

Ian joined forces with two friends that he had met in Jersey, to set up their own airline – Mercury Airlines - at Ringway Airport, on the edge of Manchester. It was the very beginning of the charter holiday boom and the friends felt that they could capitalise on this and offer cheap flights to the Mediterranean from the north of England. So, in 1960 the family left Jersey and moved to Cheshire, first to Alderley Edge and then to Prestbury where they bought a new house on the edge of the village. Alasdair was born in Alderley Edge, in 1961. Betty, who had had some qualms about moving to the North of England, soon made friends, joined the local Women's Institute and enjoyed exploring the nearby Pennines on family walks.

One of Betty's favourite outings was to the Goyt Valley where they would take a picnic and either walk down to the suspension bridge at the head of the reservoir or climb up a steep valley to a ruined house. Rhododendrons and azaleas from the gardens had run wild and in spring the valley was full of colour and scent.

Her sister Dora had also moved to Cheshire and Betty saw her frequently and was very fond of her three nephews – Richard, Peter and Michael. She took Patsy and Alasdair on visits to her parents and sister Ruby in Southend and the family made regular visits to the Isle of Wight, where Ian's father lived. They often shared these holidays with Ian's brother and cousin and their families and Betty developed close relationships with her sister- and cousin-in-law – Nonie and Margot. Later Ian's father moved back to the family home in Castle Douglas, near Dumfries, and Betty, Ian and the children spent many happy times visiting him and his sisters – who were always known collectively as "the aunts".

Betty loved to travel and there were trips abroad, made possible by Ian's job. The family visited Ibiza and Portugal in the early sixties, at a time when foreign travel was still a relatively rare experience. Later they had a wonderful holiday in Bermuda, although they were shocked by how expensive everything was – Betty remembered being horrified at being asked to pay seven and six (that's 37½p) for one portion of fish and chips.

In 1964 Mercury Airlines folded and Ian moved to British Midland as a senior pilot. He lived in digs for a while, driving home across the Pennines as often as

he could, whilst Betty packed up the house in Prestbury, ready to move south. When Patsy finished at junior school the family moved to Loughborough. They lived in a rented house to begin with, and then, in 1967, moved to a new house in Outwoods Road. This was to be Betty's home for the next 17 years.

Shortly after the move to Loughborough Betty's sister Dora died, very suddenly. Betty made a home for Dora's youngest son, Michael – he lived with the family for 6 months until his father remarried.

In Outwoods Road Betty became close friends with another Betty – her neighbour Betty England. The two women volunteered with the Women's Royal Voluntary Service and had a regular run on Friday morning delivering meals on wheels to elderly people living alone. Later Betty volunteered for the Citizen's Advice Bureau and enjoyed dealing with the varied queries that she received, including one woman who rang up in a panic because her jam wouldn't set.

One evening, in March 1969 Betty received a phone call from British Midland to tell her that her husband Ian had been killed in a plane crash. Inevitably this was high profile news and she not only had to deal with her own shock and grief and that of her children, but also with newspaper reporters ringing at the door and trying to get an interview. She and Ian were atheists but she was persuaded that a church funeral was the most appropriate option – the experience left her feeling alienated and affected her view of religion for the rest of her life.

More tragedy followed when Betty's mother suffered a severe stroke, which left her badly paralysed and unable to speak. Ellen and Ruby moved to Loughborough so that Betty could help care for her mother during her last days. After Ellen died Ruby settled permanently with Betty, helping with the house and garden, sharing the bills and providing great support during Patsy and Alasdair's teenage years.

Betty went back to work, retraining to update her secretarial skills and then taking a job at the University. In her spare time she played bowls and learnt to play bridge. She took the family on holidays – trying pony trekking and embarking on an adventurous camping trip through France to Northern Spain - and stayed in touch with Ian's family, with regular visits to Castle Douglas and "the aunts" in the school holidays. In her fifties she learnt to glide and took up bird watching, having a number of holidays with the RSPB, including a memorable trip to Turkey where she watched countless birds migrating across the Bosphorus.

Betty had always loved the sea. When Patsy started university in Exeter Betty would visit and enjoyed getting to know South Devon and exploring the coast. After Alasdair left home, and when Ruby returned to Southend to get married, she decided to sell up and move to the seaside. She bought a flat in Exmouth and made new friends through bridge and bowls. She had intended to take up sailing again, but somehow life became so busy that she never found the time. She was an active member of the National Trust and was involved at A La Ronde, helping to get it ready for public opening. She was treasurer of the Exmouth Club for the Blind, a member of the Devon Wild Life Trust and enjoyed walking with friends – either on the coast or on Dartmoor. One of her favourite walks was along the River Otter to Otterton Mill; her children intend to plant a tree there in her memory.

As well as all of her outside activities Betty was a great cook, and homemaker. She did all the decorating in the various houses in which she'd lived – putting up

wallpaper, installing coving and making curtains and cushions. She continued to make her own clothes throughout her life, believing that the quality of shop bought clothes rarely matched up to her own creations. She was always smart and well turned out, but never wore makeup other than a dash of lipstick.

Although Betty had many friends she was a private person, not given to idle chat. She loved visits from Patsy and Alasdair and, although she was deeply disappointed that she never became a grandmother, she enjoyed hearing about her children's lives and loved to keep up with the lives of their friends. She was a great reader and liked to understand how things worked and what made people tick. She would frequently be found reading the encyclopaedia and described her mind as a rag bag full of useless but interesting facts. She was interested in psychology and spirituality and went on courses to explore these areas. She claimed to be able to see people's auras and believed that places held the echoes of past events. All this made her fascinating company, she always seemed much more adventurous and independent thinking than other people's mums.

A year ago Betty was diagnosed with bowel cancer. She had surgery and was impatient and frustrated during her convalescence. But eventually she recovered and celebrated by going on a bird watching holiday to India. It was the trip of a lifetime and she rode on elephants, travelled into the Himalayas and stayed in a maharaja's palace. She was planning a trip to Antarctica when her symptoms returned. Faced with more ill health and more unpleasant treatment, and dreading becoming dependent, she decided that enough was enough and took an overdose on her 70th birthday.

Seneca, the great Roman thinker and writer, also committed suicide. He wrote these words:

If I can choose between a death of torture or one that is simple and easy, why should I not select the latter? As I choose the ship in which I sail and the house which I inhabit, so will I choose the death by which I leave life."

Betty was a free spirit. She would probably not have called herself a feminist but she had all the qualities and was quick to discern male chauvinism. She was a loving and supportive mum, encouraging her children to try new things and setting them an example by facing setbacks with courage and pragmatism. "Life", she said, in the note she left behind "did not turn out as I expected it to." But she made the most of the hand that was dealt her and was greatly admired by all those who knew her.