

Evelyn Edith Hills: Tribute

Eve was born Eve Morgan in Dulwich on the 13th May 1916 – her father, Percy, was a civil servant who held the senior position of Head of Customs and Excise at Southend; her mother, Ida, was a homemaker, who also worked in an umbrella shop in the Strand, a family enterprise that lasted a great many years. Eve had a younger sister, Joyce, who was born in 1920. Joyce very sadly died in 2001.

She attended James Allens Girls School until the age of 16 – where Eve made a great many friends; not just school friends but the kind of friends with whom she kept in touch throughout her life.

In 1934 the family moved to Southend - when her father was transferred there because, due to ill health, he needed the benefit of the sea air. Eve enrolled on a secretarial course at Clarks College in Victoria Avenue, and two years later she went to work for the Westminster Bank, forerunner of the National Westminster Bank, in the City of London.

It was here that Eve met her future husband, Eric Hills. Romance and love blossomed and the couple became engaged that same year – 1936. Eve was working at the Portobello Road Branch of the bank, and living in a local YWCA and the young couple thoroughly enjoyed their engagement.

A real highlight for Eve was travelling throughout the UK in Eric's car: a beautiful Frazer Nash, and a famous British sports model that had raced at the Brooklands circuit in Surrey . And being a proper sports car, getting in and out of it was not easily accomplished with elegance; so Eve usually wore a trouser suit, often a green corduroy one I'm told, for these journeys - which wasn't a common choice of clothing in those days, but one I can imagine Eve carrying off with some style.

The couple had some great trips – especially to Devon and Cornwall, where we can perhaps visualise Eve having the time of her life roaring around such a beautiful part of the country in such a beautiful car, with her beloved Eric beside her.

The couple married on the 13th April 1939 at the Guildhall in the City of London, a quite wonderful venue; and as Eve was a life long humanist, it was in a non-religious civil ceremony.

There followed the Second World War, during which Eric was a member of the London Fire Brigade, and Eve – as well as continuing to work at the bank – was an active fire watcher. When the sirens went off and most people ran for the air raid shelters Eve would be found running to the rooftop of the bank to watch out for incendiary bombs and stand ready to help douse the flames.

Apparently, Eve could handle the threat of the bombers just fine, but she was frightened by the doodlebugs – the unmanned rocket bombs that were launched at London during 1944. They made a dreadful kind of whistling noise as they flew overhead, and when that noise stopped it meant they had run out of fuel and would drop to the ground and explode. No wonder they scared her.

Eve gave up work at the bank in 1945 – in those days a husband and wife were not allowed to be employed by the same institution. That same year, she and Eric bought a house in Prittlewell Chase, Rochford, which remained Eve's home until 2003. They were blessed with the birth of their daughter, Tricia in 1946.

After Eric retired in 1970 the couple were able to spend much time together enjoying shared hobbies and interests, enjoying their family...and simply enjoying life and being with one and other.

Their grandchildren – David and Chris - arrived in 1976 and 1978 respectively. They knew Eve as “grandmum” - and she and Eric were incredibly supportive grandparents, and they were especially good baby sitters! This support endured as the boys grew up – they helped them both through university, including a trip to Oxford with Chris in his final year.

Eric died in 2001, which must have been a devastating loss for Eve. But when we reflect on her life, it’s important to celebrate the fact that she and Eric enjoyed a long and happy retirement together, and a long and happy marriage – 62 years no less. This is a remarkable achievement – something to remember with a sense of joy and gladness.

We’ve heard something of Eve’s younger days, and we’ve marked some of the main events during her long and full life. The chronology of a life is important – it gives us a sense of a person’s journey, and the milestones along the way. But equally, if not more, important are the things that go to make up that life. So let’s now take a few moments to think about what sort of woman Eve was, and all the things that brought her happiness.

Gardening was an immense, and lifelong, source of pleasure for Eve – and for Eric too; they were somewhat of a “gardening double act”. Right from 1945 when they bought their first home they were fanatical about it – having an allotment where I think they grew almost every flower, fruit, berry and vegetable known to man.

This passion endured. And in retirement, Eve and Eric were always there on hand to help Tricia and Roger as they moved to various homes around the country – and many gardens benefitted from Eve’s green fingers as a result; from Chalkwell to Leicester, and Birmingham to Dublin. In short, she could make anything grow, anywhere.

After Eric died, for many years Eve visited the Hampton Court Flower show with Tricia and Roger – and she left the two of them exhausted in her trail! Such was her energy and enthusiasm that they could barely keep up with her, and she’d return with numerous purchases.

And even when, in 2003 aged 87, Eve moved to St Edith’s Court care home it was only on condition that she could take her gardening tools with her – which she duly did, and she carried on working in the garden there for as long as she could.

William Kent, an 18th century landscape gardener, said: “Garden as though you will live forever”. It seems to me that Eve did just that – and perhaps her longevity and her love of the outside went hand in hand.

Eve’s other huge interest was in history and archeology, which began around the mid 1950s with the Southend Historical Society. She was involved in various digs at Shoebury, Rayleigh Mount and Hadleigh Castle – which was I understand notable due to the only find being a massive number of oyster shells.

After retirement, Eve became even more involved in archeology, with a highlight being her participation in a five year dig at Southchurch Hall – an Elizabethan building complete with a moat. This endeavor was far more fruitful - unearthing cutlery, leather goods, footwear and best of all the remains of a boat. The findings were displayed at Prittlewell Priory Museum, which I imagine must have been hugely satisfying for Eve.

She and Eric went on to write a book about the dig, which now resides under the curatorship of the British Museum. This abiding interest continued for many years, with Eve undertaking more digs and remaining a member of the Southend Historical Society, and organising several local exhibitions.

As well as all this Eve was an accomplished knitter – I believe both David and Chris were the recipients of rather splendid cable stitch jumpers. And she was a dab hand at decorating, again giving much help to Tricia and Roger over the years.

Eve had kept in touch, too, with some of those school friends and over the years would meet up with them perhaps in London.

She also travelled extensively throughout Europe, including seeing the sights in Russia, Spain, Portugal, France, Turkey and Greece – a favourite destination being Tolon, a small coastal village, where Eve enjoyed many family holidays with her children and grandchildren. And she enjoyed many lovely trips in the UK too – not least to Roger's birthplace in Wales, where with Tricia and Roger, she visited the Gower Peninsula and Merthyr Tydfil.

In terms of her character, Eve was a wonderful and lovely woman. She was hard working; strong and independent; selfless; thoughtful; interested in the world around her; and she took all that life had to offer and she lived it to the full.

Perhaps her real hallmark, though, was her love and devotion to her family – which was unconditional and everlasting. I know that this is something that meant so much to Tricia and Roger over the years; and without doubt Eve knew, too, how much she was appreciated and loved by those closest to her. She was, quite simply, the best mum, grandmum and great grandmum that you could ever wish for.

We are here celebrating Eve's life – so it is well worth remembering some of the celebrations that she enjoyed during her life. Well, to begin with she received no less than three messages from the Queen – on the occasions of her Golden Wedding anniversary, her Diamond Wedding anniversary and her 100th birthday.

For her Diamond Wedding anniversary in April 1999, she and Eric celebrated with a trip to Windsor – which was where they first went courting in that Frazer Nash sports car some 60 years earlier. And then extending the celebration into the summer, they visited Monet's Garden in Giverny. Both of these trips were with Tricia and Roger - which I'm sure must have meant the world to Eve.

There were many other family celebrations – the weddings of David and Emma, and Chris and Kate in 2007; and the birth of Eve’s great grandchildren James, Charlotte, Huw and Poppy. She was, without doubt, very proud to become a great grandmum.

And then, just last year, Eve celebrated her 100th birthday with a fine party at St Edith’s Court. It was a most special occasion. The chef laid on a fantastic meal; there was a birthday cake covered with smarties for the children; but best of all, Eve was surrounded by her family.

The care that Eve received during her 14 years at St Edith’s was outstanding – and it’s good to know that she was so well looked after during this time of her life. Eve’s family wish to thank everybody at St Edith’s for their professionalism, thoughtfulness and kindness – especially during the last period of Eve’s life.

But we shall not dwell on that last two or three years – when Eve’s health declined. They are only two or three years out of a full and active life that spanned some 101 years – and we should remember Eve for the way that she was for the vast majority of that time.

However it should be said that during the latter years of Eve's life, which were undoubtedly challenging, Tricia played a such major part in her care in so many practical, tangible ways as well as emotionally. As an only child this was quite a responsibility to bear – but it was one borne with love and devotion.

And I know, Tricia, that Eve would want to thank you so much for all that you did. Both you and Roger were such an important part of Eve's life right up until the very end – and that, along with so much else in Eve's life, is a cause for gladness.

Eve died peacefully in her sleep on the 18th November. She made her mark on this world, and was very much loved – and will be very much missed.

