



A celebration of the life of

Frances Girbow Winch

2nd June 1931 – 31st March 2019

17th April 2019, 12.30pm

Hastings Crematorium and Woodland Burial Ground

Celebrant: Felicity Harvest, accredited by



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The Tribute

I hope you will feel able to smile today as you remember the good times you had with Frances, even as you mourn her loss. I certainly smiled when I talked to Dinah and Jill at Frances's house in Fairlight, a house which has provided shelter and pleasure to four generations, first Frances's parents, and then Frances and her girls, and finally to her grandchildren. The whole place was a treasure trove of memories and of beautiful things, all of them reflecting the lives that have been lived there.

I am about to tell an extraordinary story, of a woman who led a busy and independent life at a time when that was not the norm. A woman who must have had a huge influence on the girls and young women who she taught, on three continents. A brave woman, right to the end, who endured serious illness and major upheavals in her life. And yet she was modest, not interested in being the centre of attention, and never wanting to make "a fuss". And her experience, and her adventures, never led her to ignore how others felt, or make assumptions. Mary has written movingly about "that special way she had of really listening, and being insightful".

Frances was born in Coventry in 1931, the only daughter of Dinah and Arthur Girbow. Arthur had come from a very poor background, but he studied chemistry by correspondence course, doing his experiments precariously on the sideboard, and worked his way up to a good job at Courtaulds, one of the team developing viscose. From him, Frances inherited her determination. From Dinah, who she remained very close to, she inherited her artistic streak & her sensitivity. And from both of them she inherited her socialism, her love of the outdoors, her belief in learning, and enjoyment of good beer.

The family stayed in Coventry throughout the war, because Arthur as a chemist was in a reserved occupation. She was evacuated for some of the time to her Auntie Rita in Meriden, seven miles away, and Dinah used to cycle back and forth to see her. On the night of the great air raid which destroyed much of the city centre, Dinah had gone out to Meriden, and they watched in horror as the night sky turned red. Arthur was an air raid warden, and they were convinced he would be killed, but when Dinah returned the next morning, all was well with him.

Frances was a bright girl, and went to grammar school. One of her first school prizes was a book of wild flowers, which sparked a passion which lasted all her life. She took it with her on family cycle rides out of the city at weekends and

on holiday trips to the Lake District – a picture of Striding Edge still hangs in her living room. Once she was 18, weekend trips to the country included having a half pint in country pubs, Frances and her mother drinking with the men in a way which was quite unusual in the 40's.

And then in 1949 she headed off to London, to study History at Bedford College. Her working life for the next few decades is mapped out in a document she created when she was applying for her job at Helenswood here in Hastings, and it makes fascinating reading. Following her degree, she went on to the Institute of Education to do a PGCE, qualifying in 1953 to teach 11-18 year olds.

Her first teaching job was at Thistley Hough School in Stoke on Trent where she worked from 1953 to 1959 – she got the job even though she did not wear a hat to the interview – an unheard of act of rebellion in those days. The school's motto was based on a verse by Tennyson which seems particularly appropriate to Frances:

*“Her open eyes desire the truth.
The wisdom of a thousand years
Is in them. May perpetual youth
Keep dry their light from tears;”*

There she made a dear friend, Jill, the art teacher, and acquired another lifelong passion, this time for ceramics. She took pottery courses while she was there, and became an accomplished potter. She also collected ceramics on her later travels. She went rock climbing and walking in Derbyshire, and was thinking of buying herself a motorbike when she saw a job advertised in Tanganyika, which she successfully applied for. She wanted to see more of the world than the industrial towns of the Midlands, and she certainly managed that. Leaving her mum Dinah behind was the hardest part, but they wrote to each other all the time.

Of course, the way to get to East Africa was by boat, so off she went to Liverpool. There, she stayed in a cheap boarding house for the night – a boarding house so rough that even the intrepid Frances found it necessary to pile the furniture against the door to keep her fellow-boarders out.

After her first term in Tanganyika as a class teacher, she was transferred to the only girls' secondary school in the country. Her work included building up a new Sixth Form, teaching history to the first girls in the country to take the

Higher School Certificate – for which they rather bizarrely had to study the Tudors and Stewarts!

She loved the country itself, travelling into the bush with another woman teacher, hitchhiking to Rhodesia, and climbing Kilimanjaro, where she collected wildflowers to send back dried to Dinah. Amazingly, after over 50 years, they are still in the house and still keep their colour. And she was there at a fascinating time, as the country gained independence. She used to go to Nyerere's freedom rallies, where she must have been an unusual sight.

Here is an extract from Frances's description of travelling with a friend overland from Tanganyika to get a flight home:

We took the bus to the border with Northern Rhodesia where we met our first major problem: the immigration officer would not let us into his country as we had no definite plan and no definite route. We said we were quite happy to hitchhike to Salisbury in Southern Rhodesia, or even to Cape Town so we could catch a plane to England. He said he wouldn't even let his sister do that - beware when an official starts talking about his sister and what she should or shouldn't be allowed to do....we were very fortunate. A young South African geologist was travelling south in a pickup truck and he would have room for us....He said he would be very glad of our company, as he had been in the bush on his own for several weeks...We had a very interesting few days.... I remember him very fondly & I wonder if he remembers us.

Then in 1962 she moved on to a girls' boarding school in Kano in Nigeria, first as Head of History, but becoming Principal in 1963. Here she was a major figure in the city, hobnobbing with the great and the good, including the Emir of Kano. And it was also here that she met Fred, an American economics student, who was there volunteering with the Peace Corps.

She and Fred married on the 4th of July in Battle in 1966 – by now Arthur had retired, and he and Dinah had moved to the house in Fairlight. They then headed off to the States for Fred to complete his Masters at Burlington Vermont.

Being a wife and mother had not been high on Frances's list of priorities but when she and Fred first went to the States, she met Seth, Fred's brother who was only six, and Elsa, just a few years older. Perhaps meeting them convinced her she was as good with small children as she was with teenagers. When he

heard of her death, Seth, who adored her, wrote that she “was one of the most extraordinary people I have known”.

Once settled in Vermont she continued teaching, though the US was a bit of a culture shock after living in England through war and austerity, and then for seven years in Africa. A humble diner seemed so elegant to her that she asked for a knife and fork, unable to believe that she was expected to eat with her hands in such a posh place. They moved on to Michigan State for Fred to start his Doctorate, and it was there that both daughters Dinah & Jill were born.

They moved to Ghana, where she and Fred grew their own food and raised turkeys and chickens, and had three ducks, called Freeman, Hardy and Willis. Then they were off back to Michigan for Fred to finish his Doctorate, then returning to Nigeria where he got a job. Frances taught in junior schools there, as she said, “to improve opportunities for my own children where schooling was difficult”. At the second of these, she once again became Principal.

Back in England, Arthur had died, and the elder Dinah was living on her own in Fairlight. So there was space to spare, which was fortuitous as Frances and the girls, returning initially for a holiday, ended up staying with her for the rest of her life. Frances got the job at Helenswood where she stayed till the late 80s. Her friend Val, who taught with her, and later lived near her, said “Her knowledge of history was immense, she ...was inspirational in her method of teaching it to even the most recalcitrant of pupils.”

The girls were sent to boarding school, to give them some stability after a few years of constantly changing schools. No-one was wildly keen on this arrangement, but it worked. When each of them started at the school, they were given seven letters – one a night for the first week. They remember how smart and perceptive these letters were – it felt as if she knew what they had been going through that day, and what advice to give them.

She adored her grandchildren May and Ellis. Having been a fantastic mother, she became a fantastic grandmother. She would struggle on and off the roller coaster on the seafront with May and Ellis, and paddle in the sea with her stick in hand. She walked with them along the cliffs, sent them lovely cards and presents, and listened to them on the phone. She even dug up part of her garden so May could garden in safety.

In retirement she took up botanical recording, following up on the passion for wild flowers she developed as a child. Sally Watson remembers : “Frances once identified about seventy-two varieties of wild flowers in the wild

flower section on the verge in the Broadway. Frances also had a wild-flower part of her own garden which was always lovely and admired." She did the Tern watch at Rye Harbour, and she ran half-marathons – very slowly. She went on holiday regularly with her friend Maureen, walking in the Lake District and in Scotland, with Maureen constantly on the look out for interesting geological features, and Frances for wild flowers. She was Chair of the local branch of Amnesty for many years and involved in conservation work at Powdermill Wood in Battle. She loved being a member of the book club in the village. One of her Fairlight friends has written "I loved Frances, so many memories, especially Fairlight Cove, clambering down to the beach.....I can hear her warmth and laughter now." And of course, her little dog Luke was for years her companion as she scrambled down to the Cove.

A lifelong Labour voter, in 1992 she joined the Labour Party, devastated by the Tory victory, and was active for many years. And was described by one of her friends as "a stalwart of the local branch" until recently.

She really enjoyed having grown up daughters, sharing their achievements, and just being with them. She loved ballet, an enthusiasm she had developed all those years ago when a student in London, and the visual arts. She always wanted to share those passions with those close to her, including her daughters. Her love of Alan Alda and M*A*S*H was so great that both Jill and Dinah had a box set at their houses so they could watch it together when she visited them

The Parkinsons Disease which she suffered from towards the end slowed her down a little, but she delighted in her many friendships, and she remained engaged, active – and well, thoroughly Frances.

I'll end this section with the words of her friend Wendy: "Frances was the very best of Mothers, the dearest of friends, the most intelligent of women."

Plus, an extract from a message sent by Elsa, read by Jane at the graveside

Frances, had an indelible influence on me—mostly as a youngster but also in my adult life. In many of her visits to Newfield, she would initiate walks, after a meal, almost always for the reason that it was "a lovely day, isn't it?"—your Mum loved to walk, and that was so great— I loved to wander the back acres of Pop's and Mom's acreage alone, but with Frances (and Fred) it felt like an act of sharing, a certain intimacy.

She had a innate ability to articulate what I was thinking in those days— this was when I was a kid— I often remember being astounded that there was an adult who had the same thoughts as I did, but what always strummed a chord was that she would articulate them. Something I never did (and I will admit, I still do). One incident in particular stands out. We were walking the back lane (the dirt road where you had to walk to reach the chicken coop where Fred posed with the rooster, Harry Truman), and we stopped to visit the pony and horse I had at the time. She talked about how nice it is to see horses and cows in a pasture. She paused, took in a sip of a breath, and turned to Fred and said, “But you would have two cows, wouldn’t you? A single cow would be lonely, don’t you think?” Wow, I thought, I thought adults didn’t talk about these things—an adult cares about the same thing as I do. There are so many reasons this memory could be impactful, but for me, it brought out what I loved about Frances. She articulated feelings-and understood the importance of empathy, or maybe the value of empathy. She was so kind to me, and Seth. I think she saw that we were the children of parents who wished they were finished with child-raising, and would give us what a parent would give.

And this, from May: *“When I was little Granny used to run around the garden with us. I always enjoyed going on the rides at the seaside with Granny and paddling in the sea. She was joyful and loving.”*