

Gillian Christina Bollard

3rd February 1932 – 23rd December 2017

The Tribute

Gill was the only child of Claud Askwith and his wife Phyllis, an artist from whom Gill learned her love of colour and her creativity. She was born in Ramsgate, Kent on 3rd February 1932. Her father worked in the oil fields of Persia and Phyllis and Gill joined him there. Her early memories include travelling on the Orient Express, sitting on her pot during an earthquake, Claud driving his car into a river, and travelling back to the UK on an oil tanker – perhaps why in later life she would never go on a cruise.

When war started, she was sent back home to a boarding school, at the age of 7, with her cousins Peter and Rosemary, first in St Leonards, then later evacuated to the West County.

When her father returned from Persia in 1941, they started up a market garden at Beals Barn, near Wadhurst, and Gill returned home to live. She said they had the best ever crop of cherries during the war because the doodlebugs frightened off the birds. Later she went to Wadhurst College, cycling the 4 miles to school every day, even in the bad winter of 1947. There she became lifelong friends with Margit and Loveday. As teenagers the three of them went to the local village dances in Wadhurst, and this is where Gill met David, who had been brought up there. Their first date was in Hastings, and Gill always loved to go there and get a portion of fish & chips, usually from the Blue Dolphin.

After finishing at school, Gill was enrolled at Swanley Horticultural College, with a view to her joining the family business. But Gill and David got married in August 1952, and moved to Wood Street, near Guildford, so though Claud gained a son in law, he lost his cheap labour!

Diana and Sheila were born while they were at Wood Street, and this was also where Nellie the plump Siamese became part of the family – the first and perhaps the favourite of Gill's many cats, who had to put up with Diana pushing her around in a doll's pram. They were also adopted by a stray black cat imaginatively named Kitten Cat, who had several litters of kittens. She and her son, Pinkle Purr, joined Nellie as full members of the family.

During their time in Wood Street Gill's love of gardening blossomed. They became active in the local horticultural society, regularly winning the Royal Horticultural Society Banksian medal. They also raised chickens and geese; they were almost entirely self-sufficient many years before it became fashionable. They plucked turkeys at Christmas for pin money.

They then moved to the village of Denmead, soon settling at Fieldway, probably Gill's favourite home. Nellie and Kitten Cat fell victim to cat flu but then another stray cat, Thomas, joined the family. Gill developed a beautiful garden there, and was heartbroken when David's job moved them to Essex, and they had to leave their house and garden behind.

In Essex, they bought the derelict Bridge Cottage. There was no inside toilet and the garden was a jungle. David enjoyed all sorts of DIY projects, including laying new solid floors and building a cesspit. Gill was roped in to help dig out the massive pit, and then create a rockery over it.

In 1967 Alan was born. And of course there was a houseful of cats – Sweetie and Cherie the lynx point Siamese, plus two kittens each, and old Thomas.

By now the family were regular caravanners, though Diana managed to persuade them to let her stay at home to look after the cats. They travelled to various gardens and National Trust properties that Gill wanted to visit, with the odd castle thrown in to keep Alan happy. Later on, when David took up gliding, the proximity of a gliding field was another reason for choosing a campsite. They had their strict routines in

the caravan and Gill's frugal ways came into their own with unused boiling water being put in thermos flasks and kept for later use, a habit she retained right to the end of her life at home.

When Alan was just four the family moved once again, to Five Ashes, with a car full of cats, a trailer full of plants and a sick child, as well as a third removal van as the rockery, some trees and the cement mixer came too. Again David took on various DIY projects, and Gill created the beautiful garden which is still there, of course with a lot of hard work from David.

For a while they even had some livestock in their field, deciding to buy 6 young steers to fatten one up for the freezer and sell the rest. Whilst it must have seemed like a good idea at the time, Gill no doubt felt they had taken on more than they really wanted, as she had to chase all six of them back down to the field when they decided to pay a visit to the house – David's fencing skills left a lot to be desired.

Over the years the garden became more complex with many exotic and rare plants, she would exchange plants with many of her 'plant' friends, and she would delight in going round with them digging out bits of her plants to share. She was a huge admirer of Gertrude Jekyll, and this quote from Jekyll's "On Gardening" seems to describe particularly well Gill's approach to gardening: *"The possession of a quantity of plants, however good the plants may be themselves and however ample their number, does not make a garden; it only makes a collection. Having got the plants, the great thing is to use them with careful selection and definite intention."*

Diana wrote this tribute to Gill, the gardener:

"We would go to the back door and find it locked; she would be in the garden.

We would find her bent over with her hoe rootling away in the soil. In cold weather she would be dressed in her 'garden' coat and trousers, purchased from a charity shop, with her gardening belt

fastened around her waist containing her secateurs, headscarf tied under her chin. She didn't use gardening gloves but much preferred the bright orange rubber chemical gloves like heavy duty marigolds. In summer she had a selection of flowery skirts and cotton tops, still the gardening belt, gloves and sometimes a sunhat. We teased her about being a 'bag lady' as she was often carrying things around in old buckets and carrier bags.

She would notice you after a few minutes and stop her gardening to offer a cup of tea. She could tell you the Latin names of most of her plants as easily as the more common names. She knew where they came from and would know how much she paid for them. Many she had been given and they were her memory of past and present friends. She would stop to snip at an unwanted bramble or pull out a piece of goose grass.

She had alpine gardens, rock gardens, wild flower gardens, formal and informal gardens, vegetable gardens, annuals, perennials, shrubs, trees, hardy plants and, her favourite, the water garden. She grew some of her plants from seeds or very small pots purchased from her favourite nurseries. Many an experienced gardener would come around to pick her brains and go home with new knowledge, a bagful of cuttings, seeds and plants dug up as they walked around her garden.

Her borders were a mix of common plants mixed with her special or favourite ones. She wasn't a plant snob, she loved countless varieties of wild and cultivated plants even convolvulus and nettles, in their right places, but did not have a good word for ground elder, goose grass or skunk cabbage.

The water garden was a series of shallow ponds made from the spring which is one of the sources of the river Rother. She would paddle in her wellies for hours, tidying and cutting back the very large plants that thrived under her care, including the gunnera which is the largest of all. It still surprises us that we didn't find her there, stuck in the mud.

She was a country woman, rising at dawn and going to bed at dusk. She had been known to be in her garden before 6 am, still in her dressing gown. She would be in the garden all day, every day and was far fitter than many people half her age.

She recycled everything she could. Organic waste went to the compost heap, covered in old carpets to rot down. Margarine tubs and yogurt pots were used for seeds or cut up for plant labels, old envelopes were for storing harvested seeds or shopping lists, plastic bags were kept to put in the plants and fruit she gave away. We are not sure why she kept the wine bottle corks, old sponges, kitchen scourers and old tools. Whenever cutlery went missing we would put it down to being thrown into the compost heap and not to worry because it would be uncovered a year or two later when the mature compost was used on the flowerbeds.

She looked forward to the spring flowers. She cut the hellebore leaves back around Christmas to better enjoy the flowers; we looked around the garden and woods for the signs of the first snowdrops, early daffodils and wild orchids. She delighted in the flowering of the Thomas Aquinas crocuses outside her kitchen door, the white flowers of the Cornish Snow camellia and the scent of the azaleas that she grew from seed many years ago.

Summer brought her herbaceous border into life with the perennials providing a magnificent display including the large number of fuchsias. The acers and azaleas changing colour in the autumn along with the unforgettable smell of the Katsura or 'Toffee Apple' Tree as its leaves turned yellow.

The field and wood provided memories of David with the trees he planted, the willow oak which kept to a completely different seasonal pattern to all the trees around it, the orchids in the woods which moved about each year, the bluebells so vibrant each spring, the Davidia or Pocket Handkerchief tree which flowered in the month of his death.

Our memories of mum will always be linked to our memories of her gardens. When we were young there were always fresh vegetables and fruit, although we were not so keen on being experimented on with the more unusual offerings or the livestock which was sometimes missed in the washing process. When we were making our own homes and gardens there were always plants freely offered although we were expected to be able to nurture them ourselves. Now she is gone we all have our own gardens to remind us of her."

When Sheila got married she held her reception against the wonderful backdrop of the garden, and over the years Gill was persuaded to open it to various gardening groups that she belonged to.

Gill and David took up the hobby of pottery together, going to evening classes and then buying themselves a wheel and kiln, even trying to use the local clay from the garden, strained through an old pair of tights. Unsuccessful pots were used as hard core for the paths.

When the grandchildren arrived, Gill enjoyed going to the charity shops in Heathfield to pick up toys for them. The four eldest grandchildren, Hayley, Michael, Helen and Katie, spent happy summer holidays staying at Lyonesse, and remember feeding the fishes, going to Hastings for day trips and eating fish and chips. They played croquet on the lawn, and had their own table in the kitchen while the grown ups sat around the dining table in the living room. Later, Hannah and Rachel loved to visit "Granny with the big garden", and when her great grandchild Henry arrived, he too loved going over to visit and played with the toys that granny had acquired over the years, as well as walks down to the wood. To Henry she was "gran-gran", as "great granny" was a phrase that he couldn't quite grasp when he was tiny. And, of course, they all enjoyed her wonderful red jelly.

For a few years Gill and David moved down to a small village near Bridport in Dorset, Gill once again creating a wonderful garden, and making more gardening friends. Their cat Tina travelled backwards and forwards between Dorset and Sussex looking out of the car window

while sitting on Gill's lap, and seemed quite happy living in two locations. However, after a few years they decided they were too far away from the family, and they came back to Lyonesse.

The family will always remember Gill feeding the birds, the ducks, pheasants and the crows that regularly came to be fed, along with the badgers, tortoises, hedgehogs, squirrels, deer and much more wildlife. She also gave a home to several more stray cats that came into her life over the years, although none took the place of her first cat Nellie.

As HE Bates wrote: *"My garden, in fact was I: it wasn't professionally designed by one of those firms of landscape gardeners whose work you see every year at Chelsea. It was conceived in love, was loved and gave the feeling of being loved."*

That, in fact, is what true gardens are made of. Not wholly of professional skills or tomes of encyclopaedic knowledge or even of green fingers: but love."

Sadly David died of cancer in 2001 at the age of 72 and Gill nursed him at home with the help of son-in-law Tony right until a few days before the end. They both loved the garden, field and woods at Lyonesse and wished their ashes to be scattered there. Gill scattered David's ashes and the children will do the same for her.

Even towards the end she was still mowing the lawn on her ride-on mower, and keeping the garden neat and tidy, but she found keeping Lyonesse going on her own very stressful, and she was always very grateful that Diana and her husband Tony were on hand to help her out in various ways, as they spent time every week helping to look after the garden, and other things that needed to be done. Once she stopped driving, Diana also took her to do her food shopping every week.

She was particular about what she ate. Her meals were always freshly made, with home grown vegetables. She would only eat Coop brand Nice biscuits and chocolate. The health food shop was the only place she

would buy dates and nuts. She was partial to a glass of red wine, but she did like to add a drop of Ribena to it.

A Persian fortune teller had told her she would live to 100, but it was not to be. She fell as she was feeding her crows, and ended up in hospital. Although her broken hip mended well, she was left weakened and the blood disorder she had been fighting for a couple of years finally took its toll. She made the painful decision to move to a local nursing home, Temple Grove Care Home, where her last few months were comfortable, and she was looked after with great kindness and compassion. Her daughters and older grandchildren were able to visit her on her last day, when she was still able to laugh and have a joke, even though she was very weak.

We often think of death as a cruel enemy, taking away those we love, but for those who are suffering or who have reached the end of their endurance, it can come as a quiet friend, closing the curtains, blowing out the light, and settling us into a last sleep, free from pain and weariness. I hope it was so for Gill.