

Lilian (Anne) Pidgeon 8th February 1925 – 1st April 2019

Thoughts of Anne

Lilian (later known as Anne) Cottee was a proud yet fiercely independent woman. She overcame a challenging, tumultuous childhood, with a strict disciplinarian for a father and an infirm mother, and forged her own path to become the loving and kind individual you all knew and loved.

Her early years were what some may call “character building”. The family moved several times and Anne developed a stoic attitude to her constantly changing life. She always felt that she had been sidelined somewhat by the birth of her younger brother – he was the child who could do no wrong, whereas she became the one who was expected to care for the house and her parents, but this only served to foster a resilience in her, which made her into the person you all knew.

The breakup of their parents’ marriage was hard, but Anne managed to pull her socks up and get on with things, the way she always did. Any challenge she saw as an opportunity rather than a disappointment, and she would generally grab that challenge with both hands.

This is evidenced by the way she adjusted to her evacuation to Mansfield with her school, and used it to her best advantage by going off to study nursing in Sheffield – a place she would likely never have gone to had she not already been evacuated to the north. You can see it again when her mother called her home from nursing school because she had become unwell. When Anne returned, she realised that her mother was perfectly fine, so set off once again to forge her own path, joining the Armament Research Department.

She broke the proverbial glass ceiling long before it was fashionable to do so. Originally having wanted to be a doctor, but deciding against it, she then instead struck out in the predominantly male dominated industry of military science! Nothing would hold her back when she put her mind to it.

She stood her ground and rather than be sidelined into a “girlie” job doing not very much-- she fought continuously to develop her career and move in a new direction.

She also learned to push back against her somewhat weak, but at times manipulative mother. When Anne met Denis, it was clear to Anne that her mother was not happy that she wasn’t going to have her daughter all to herself for much longer, but Anne, rather than cede to her mother’s demands, took charge of matters herself, and married Denis – again against her mother’s wishes!

Clearly her extended family shaped the views and opportunities Anne had throughout her life. From her grandmother’s relatives who taught her to knit, a skill she was to develop throughout her life, to the grandparents who built their children their own homes, to her own large family, Anne loved to be surrounded by those she felt closest to.

Times were definitely tight after she and Denis decided to have their family, but Anne always rose to the challenge and found a way to make everything work, even when there

was precious little to go around. She was always battling to make things better for her growing family.

Her pride and her devotion to her children, grandchildren and great grandchildren was always obvious, and her life and love was truly devoted to them all.

I'd like to close this section of the ceremony with this poem by Christina Rossetti:

When I come to the end of the road
And the sun has set for me
I want no rites in a gloom filled room
Why cry for a soul set free?

Miss me a little, but not for long
And not with your head bowed low
Remember the love that once we shared
Miss me, but let me go.

For this is a journey we all must take
And each must go alone.
It's all part of the master plan
A step on the road to home.

When you are lonely and sick at heart
Go to the friends we know.
Laugh at all the things we used to do
Miss me, but let me go.

Anne's Story

Lilian (Anne) Cottee was born on the 8th of February 1925, in Clapton Mothers Hospital, Hackney, London. She was the oldest child of Alfred and Ethel. Being born in Hackney made her an official "cockney". In 1928, her baby brother, Ernest (or Alan as he came to be known), joined Anne to complete the family.

When she was about six years old, Anne and her family moved to Southend on Sea (or Southend on Mud as it was affectionately known in the family), to live in the appropriately named Ethel Villa, built by her grandfather, Henry Roach, one of 6 Villas all named after his surviving daughters.

Anne was a studious girl and enjoyed her time at Hamstel Road Primary School, and, when her family moved back to London, at South Norwood School. She once entered a Jubilee essay competition and was chosen as one of the winners, receiving a certificate from the Duchess of Gloucester. Anne, however, was more perturbed that because her presentation was on bonfire night, it meant she missed the fireworks!

Sadly, Anne's parents' relationship broke down, and Anne, her brother Alan and her mother moved back once more to Southend to be nearer to her family. Anne moved schools again, to Southend High School for Girls.

The outbreak of World War Two meant that Anne and the rest of her classmates were evacuated to Mansfield Woodhouse in Nottinghamshire, where they were boarded with local families.

Anne left school at 17 and went to Sheffield to train as a Nurse, but returned to Southend after 2 years to support her mother. Apparently undaunted by this turn of events, she was recruited by the Armament Research Department to work at their outstation on Havengore Island.

As part of her training, Anne was sent back to London, just 5 miles from her Hackney birthplace, to Walthamstow. There she stayed with the beloved "Auntie Barr", who, even though she wasn't a relative, played such an important part in Anne's life that she became a close family friend and was conferred the title of honorary Auntie.

On her return, Anne was asked if she was interested in training as a photographer. She jumped at the chance, and after a bit more training, she became proficient in shooting high speed photographs for bomb research. She even took some photos of the bouncing bomb tests that happened at Foulness.

Although she was highly proficient at her photography, she always had to fight against the establishment – after all, girls can't do science, can they?

Life carried on on Foulness Island (where the Research Department had now moved to) and Anne discovered a love of nature, birdwatching in particular. The marshes and heaths of the island made a particularly good habitat for the local wildlife, and in her downtime, Anne could be found birdwatching, swimming in the nearby creek or otherwise enjoying nature.

In 1950, Anne was joined in the photographic department by a new “boffin”, a man by the name of Denis Pidgeon. Anne and he met when they were both signing up for an evening class in Astronomy. Clearly, they hit it off from the first instance, because they were married on the 26th May, 1951, in a no fuss service at Cambridge Shire Hall.

Over the next 13 years, Denis and Anne produced 6 children, Colleen, Karen, Hilary, Alastair, Stuart and Sean, who in turn have gone on to provide a grand total of 15 grandchildren and 11 (and two halves) great grandchildren!

After she left the MOD, Anne retrained as a teacher and spent many happy years as an infant school teacher in Crowthorne, Berkshire. She had a particular passion for helping with the school plays, driving the sewing machine to make costumes, and getting out her paints to help with the backdrops. It was a job she kept until an accident in her late 50's led to her early retirement.

Anne and Denis settled in Wenhaston in 1983, moving into a purpose built bungalow with stunning views over the nearby countryside.

This allowed Anne to further develop her love of gardening, going from a bare plot of builder's land, to the flourishing green space, that can be seen there today.

Sadly, Denis died in 2005; however Anne continued to live in their country bungalow, supported by her children, until she died there, surrounded by them, on the 1st April, 2019 at the age of 94.

So that was the story of Anne's life, but what more can we say about her?

She was a prolific artist, with a particular love of handcrafts like needlework, pottery and knitting. When I visited her home, it was clear that she was passionate about producing and displaying her work.

Anne could certainly work a sewing machine, and used to produce clothes, such as school uniforms, for her children, but also taught her girls how to make their own clothes from an early age, firstly by producing little outfits for their dolls, and then by scaling up to make things to fit them instead. It was a skill that came in incredibly handy, as there were times when, with 6 children, money was tight, so the ability to craft her own outfits for them meant she was able to save a bit of money here and there.

We have already mentioned her love of birdwatching, but that extended to a love of Natural History in general – but birds were always her first love, even towards the end she could be found, sitting in her armchair, watching all the different birds in her garden.

Moreover, she was someone who was heavily involved in village and parish life. When she moved to Wenhaston, she jumped in with both feet, joining the Women's Institute, helping Denis with his work on the Village Hall committee, being an active member of the Commons committee and helping to develop the amazing Wenhaston Millennium Map – on which she and Denis are depicted and which can be seen here today.

She was a voracious reader, always with a book or magazine on the go, and Sean told me that he and his brothers and sisters credit his mum with instilling a love of reading in them from an early age.

And then there were the family camping holidays, Anne, Dennis and various children squeezed into a ridge tent in the mud. They weren't daunted however, Denis would cobble together some kind of Heath Robinson tent extension, while Anne would use her stitching skills to piece it all together. It was a very odd structure, but Anne's crafting skill made it all work and helped make those holidays truly memorable.

She was a much loved mother, grandmother, great grandmother and friend, and she will be very sadly missed.