

Peggy (Margaret) Newman

15th July 1923 - 10th April 2019

The Tribute

Peggy was an indomitable character. After a rather unhappy childhood she really 'came into her own' as a Land Girl. Volunteering at the beginning of World War II, she was able to put into practice her lifelong interest and commitment to growing things and looking after animals.

Peggy was a family person, she and her husband Les, who she had met early in the war, were together for 70 years and they always remained close to their son Paul. Paul was in the Royal Air Force for 23 years but when he left the RAF and was flying out of Stansted as a Loadmaster with a Cargo Airline, Peggy and Les moved south to Stilton in Cambridgeshire.

Peggy was devoted to her granddaughter Stacy and she was absolutely delighted to meet her great grandson Oliver last year and was always asking after him.

Paul has written about his mother's life.

Born 15 July 1923 in Whitechapel, London, 'Peggy' was named Margaret Clarke. She always said she was a true cockney as she was born within earshot of Bow Bells.

For some reason, she said she was "given away", not formally adopted, to friends of her parents.

She was brought up by this other family and actually knew her mother as Aunt Emm. It wasn't till later in life that she found out. In her words she was "not treated very well" by her substitute parents.

They moved to Hertfordshire when she was 7 or 8 and then to the West Midlands when she was 12.

Peggy worked in a cake factory at 15 and the chance to get away from home came with the Second World War. She enlisted in the Land Army at 17, where her passion for animals, flora and fauna was put to good use. The Government finally acknowledged the work of The Land Army in 2008 by commissioning a veterans badge and plaque which she received.

It was about this time that she met Les who was to become her lifelong partner. He had enlisted in the RAF as an aircraft mechanic and was sent to Africa where young pilots were trained.

Peggy and Les spent the war corresponding by letters and photos. On one of the farms where Peggy was living and working were a few Italian prisoners of war. Everyone got on together, the Italians happy to be away from any fighting, the farmer and land army girls happy to have extra help. It was a matter of great speculation with the Italians that Les was many miles away in Africa and would probably return to England with more than one wife and lots of African children. It was a chance not to be missed when Les sent a photo of him and his comrades with local children. Peggy told the POW,s they had been right and this was Les's new family.

Peggy learnt to drive tractors on the fields and drove a horse and cart to other smallholdings, milking the cows and delivering milk elsewhere. One of the landowners was a lady called Mrs Dean. She and her husband had decided to move to Kent after the war. Peggy was invited to move with them to "help out in the house"and so Peggy became "head cook and bottlewasher" at Bursted Manor near Canterbury, looking after horses, cows, chickens, children and adults.

Part of the move entailed accompanying the Deans 2 horses and 2 cows by rail from the Midlands to Canterbury. Peggy had to milk the cows on the long journey, this being no mean feat in a dark old steam carriage.

Peggy finally married Les in 1947 and they settled in Canterbury, with the help of Mr Dean who was a town councillor.

Paul was born in 1955 in a nursing home in Tankerton and brought up and schooled in Canterbury.

Peggy would take Paul to the bus stop in town each morning and spent some weeks watching the bus before returning home. This was because on the first morning of school Paul had got on the bus and then decided to get off at the next stop.

Peggy had always loved gardening and when the family moved to the bungalow in Barham in 1966 both she and Les created a lovely country garden. These were the times of going to the coast, camping and sea fishing. On any trips to the seaside the obligatory bucket and spade were put in the car boot, and always put to good use. Not for sand castles but for when a horse and rider were spotted. Les was instructed to travel at a respectful distance behind and wait for the inevitable. The offering was duly scooped into the bucket, for the good of the garden on returning home.

Les was working nights in Rochester and Peggy worked for the local farmer, with her beloved pigs in the farmyard across the road.

The bungalow was a place where relatives from the Midlands would visit and spend a few nights holiday. It was also a place where any stray animals that Paul would "find" would be well looked after and nursed back to health if required, after the inevitable "what have you got this time". These included a ferret found on a railway embankment and a magpie, both of which terrorised the stone deaf, white cat.

After Paul had departed to join the RAF Peggy and Les decided it was time to move back to the Midlands to be nearer to relatives. In 1972 they settled in Bewdley, where once again the garden, backing on to the West Midlands Safari Park, was beautifully tended. This was mostly a peaceful time, broken by the occasion when they were woken early one morning by, in Peggy's words, "someone being murdered" in the back garden. The sounds were then seen to be emanating from a large sea lion that had made its way to the park fence. There was also the time that 40 baboons escaped to terrorise the cub scouts in the local woods.

These were the years that Peg and Les regularly met up with Les's brothers and sister, Bill, Harold and Vi along with their wives and husband, Dot, Joyce and Bill. Indeed a lot of holidaying was enjoyed to warmer climes. They normally went on package holidays when Les could find a good deal.

Peggy took up work as a waitress in the Gainsborough House Hotel in Kidderminster where she travelled to and from home on her moped, proud to be looking like a Hells Granny in her crash helmet.

While at the hotel she won a raffle, with the first prize being a Russian built Lada car. The Lada served them well, other than the occasion when the front brackets of Les's seat gave way, toppling him back. Luckily he managed to hold on and pull himself up.

After the birth of their granddaughter Stacy in 1986, Peggy and Les used to travel frequently back and forth to Swindon. They both adored Stacy and spent as much time as possible with her, either taking her to Butlins or home to Bewdley for a few days.

In 1999 they were on the move again, this time to Stilton in Cambridgeshire. A smaller garden this time but still well looked after. Peg and Les both became members of the local bowls club and won a few awards between them.

On the occasion of their 60th diamond wedding anniversary, in 2007, they decided to holiday in Hawaii. Paul made all the arrangements online and off they went. Paul had ordered a surprise trip by seaplane around Honolulu which they both enjoyed immensely.

While away, on the actual day of the anniversary, Paul retrieved the card and message sent by the Queen. It was duly faxed to their hotel with the message "Elizabeth and Philip raise a glass to you and insist you have a gin and tonic on them". The hotel staff were very impressed and lined up a few free meals and drinks for the happy couple.

In 2008 they decided that warden controlled accommodation would be better for their advanced ages, even though Les was still driving and both were fully mobile. They moved to a bungalow at Upwell Park in March, Cambridgeshire. A very small garden this time so along with her own patch Peggy looked after some of the other tenants', sometimes whether they wanted her to or not. She continued to feed any animal or bird that passed by, including foxes, rabbits, squirrels pheasants and mice.

On 5th March 2010 Peggy sadly lost Les, her best friend of 70, and husband of 63 years.

Peggy continued to garden and play indoor bowls, she also made good use of her bus pass often travelling to Kings Lynn or Wisbech, where she and Les had used to go.

On her 90th and 91st birthdays Peggy ventured into the air again, this time at Paul's gliding club. She enjoyed the views both times and had just recently decided she would like to fly again to mark her 96th.

She still always fed the animals and birds, which eventually got her into trouble when the management decided that it might attract vermin. A swift "bugger off" told them what she thought of that idea.

Last year she suffered a bad chest infection, but refused to go into hospital. This knocked her for six and Paul arranged some care and even though she got back on her feet and was rushing round the complex with her trusty walker it was decided to move her to Newmarket. Her last abode has been at Kingfisher House Care Home where she made lovely friends and had remained active until a couple of months ago. She had great interaction with the excellent staff there and kept her wicked sense of humour till the end.

Paul has collected together a set of photographs to share today, that cover many of the happy moments of Peggy's life that he has written about in his tribute. From her baby photo, through her childhood to her time as a Land Girl. The famous photo Les sent from Africa and many family photographs, from their wedding in 1947 and the seaside holidays with Paul, family get togethers and on to Austria, Tunisia and Honolulu. Her birthday gliding trips and Peggy with her beloved granddaughter Stacy and then her delight in meeting her great grandson Oliver.

These photographs will be shown and then repeated during a time for private reflection.

During the reflection we will hear Yours, sung by Vera Lynn. For Peggy and Les, this was 'their song'.