

Sylvia Evelyn Dormer, 16th October 1928 – 2nd September 2014
St Faith's Crematorium, Friday 12th September 2014 at 11.45am

Sylvia Evelyn Abbs was born in Norwich on the 16th of October 1928 to mother and father Violet and Albert. Violet was a city girl – from Norwich that is – who did cleaning and waitressing work, while Albert was a country boy from Great Ryburgh, who did milk deliveries before becoming a policeman.

Sylvia was an only child until she was 10 years old, when there was a surprise arrival in the shape of a baby sister, Myra, born in 1938. Sylvia was a young teenager during the Second World War – an event which she always said had thoroughly disrupted her education. She looked after her little sister a lot, talking her down to the spidery and dark Anderson shelter when the air raids started because Violet refused to go in there, preferring to stay under the kitchen table!

Sylvia left the Stuart School for Girls aged 14 and went to work at the GPO as a trainee telegraphist – enjoying being a little bit different was a lifelong trait and no other girls had chosen this! The telegraphists were located in a dark basement and had to wear green overalls that came down to their ankles. Some of the girls shortened theirs but Sylvia didn't dare – the supervisor was very strict.

It wasn't that long before Sylvia got a bit fed up with the job and decided to improve her chances by going to night school to learn shorthand and typing – though she didn't actually take her final exams as she thought she was going to

fail. Sylvia may have put up a good front but self-esteem was often a bit of a problem – she usually felt much less confident inside.

Her lack of qualifications didn't stop her however – she talked her way in various secretarial jobs, including at the Eastern Daily Press and becoming secretary to the manager at Marks and Spencer, where she stayed for quite a while. In addition to her secretarial duties Sylvia also organised the entertainment at the M&S staff Christmas 'do' every year at the Norwood Rooms, cajoling colleagues into singing, dancing and performing sketches, many written by her.

Sylvia was involved in amateur dramatics on an off from a young age – it was a good outlet for her enjoyment of dressing up. She always wanted to be on the stage rather than behind it: one memorable role was Madame Arcati in *Blithe Spirit* with the Rackheath Players and there were also various parts in the annual Potter Heigham pantomime.

Dressing up and nice clothes were also part of Sylvia's working life, when she managed to bluff her way into modelling part time for a Norwich Agency in the 1950s, somehow convincing them that she had previous modelling experience. The evidence is there in glossy black and white photos of Sylvia on the catwalk in outfits from tweed suits to ball gowns. A rather different activity was the time she spent in the Women's Auxiliary Air Force, where she learned to be a fighter plotter.

Sylvia's working life continued well beyond most people's retirement age. She had a long stint as medical secretary and dispenser at the GP practice in Coltishall: alternating between doing secretarial work and dispensing prescriptions suited Sylvia very well – she loved talking to people and was good at listening to their problems.

Then when Sylvia was around 60 she decided that a change of career was in order. She settled on chiropody, training by correspondence course followed by a two-week intensive practical course at college in Maidenhead. She qualified in 1990 and was a chiropodist for about 10 years, travelling round in her car and enjoying her independence. She didn't make a lot of money from her new profession as she spent too long chatting with her clients about their aches and pains and general goings on. Sticking to the expected 15-minute appointment just wasn't possible! She used to call it Sylvie's social service.

She would have carried on for longer but when Sylvia was 70 her thumb joint gave up. An operation to remove a piece of bone cured the pain but she couldn't grip properly, so chiropody was no longer an option.

But I've jumped ahead here, as clearly there was much more to Sylvia's life than her work.

In 1951 Sylvia had married William Bowers. The family grew with the arrival of two children: Ruth in 1952 – as Sylvia gleefully like to tell Ruth in later years, 'a product of too much whisky and ginger' – and Mark in 1956. They were a fairly typical young family until 1965 when things changed dramatically with

William's tragic death in a road accident. Overnight Sylvia was left a widow and single mother, with very little money, living in a council house in Nasmith Road. There were some tough times, but being the sort of character Sylvia was, she pulled herself together and got on with things as best she could.

Before too long life would take a more positive turn for Sylvia – and I'm going to continue the story in Ian's words, that he's asked me to read on his behalf.

IAN'S THOUGHTS

Sorry not to tell you this myself, but I'll only keep choking up and we'll run out of time and get thrown out.

There I was, mid sixties, with 'the lads' from RAF Marham, Thursday 'Over 21s' dance night at the Samson and Hercules. 'Come on' said Dixie Dean to me, 'we'll dance with those two'. So we did – little did I know where this was going to lead! I got a phone number and when I rang and said 'it's Ian', she said 'who?' After a reminder, I was remembered and several dates turned into 48 years together.

With confidence in our relationship came the admission that I'd fallen in love with a widow, with two children, who was 11 years older than me. Didn't seem to be a problem to us, so on we went. It wasn't until the decision to marry was taken, to allow us to get a mortgage, that the age difference was admitted to be 17 years. So what I thought; I'm not losing this attractive, exciting woman who wants to be with me. She always seemed so much younger, so we stopped caring about numbers.

The mortgage didn't materialise (they were hard to get in 1967) and the phone call said 'they won't give us the mortgage, shall we still get married?' 'Might as well' I said, as we were staying together anyway and the forces paid a marriage allowance then.

Things were fine (apart from commuting from Norwich!) until the RAF sent me to Libya, just in time for Gaddafi's revolution to stop families travelling and keeping us apart for almost a year. Very hard.

Next a posting to Suffolk, just after we finally bought a house in Norfolk, meant 18 months of weekly commuting. Sylvia was a committed Norfolk product and was not leaving. This was too much – we're supposed to be together, so the NHS gained my services from the RAF.

Now all seemed good until constant back pain led to an operation to remove her 'tail'. This was to be the first of many medical problems that she always bore with fortitude. There were to be few periods when she didn't suffer pain, but that didn't stop her getting on and doing what she was capable of. 'It's not going to beat me!' Those who knew her will know about getting things done – her way!

A growing interest in antiques and gardening led to a move to something more in keeping with the collection and a bigger garden. Draw rings round Norwich and see where we can afford. It turned out to be Potter. Happy times interspersed with the frustration of weeds and crumbling plaster for 36 years.

A growing interest in wine and food led to a first holiday in France, followed by 25 more – had to be a different bit every time. We started with a trailer tent and then got a small inheritance and a caravan. Not so good for the driver but great for a clothes fanatic, who gets a wardrobe and cupboards. Camping is no excuse to not look good.

Her two passions (after me!) were cooking and painting. Experience and a huge cookery library led to only being able to go to expensive restaurants because everything else could be done better at home. The ‘sit at the dining table’ evening meal (later to often include wine) was an integral part of our life. It was also often her education session in subjects as varied as physics and neuroscience. From an ex-lecturer’s point of view she was brilliant at asking the right question – just what you wish for.

Some courses and practice led to pictures to enter into most of the local art exhibitions. She was always pleased to think that people had her pictures on their walls and hopefully still got pleasure from them: I will always treasure my collection. She was also proud that the Potter Heigham Easter exhibition, that we were involved in running for 20 years, was often said to be the best in the area.

Like all strong characters, she could be argumentative and annoying at times, but it was always worth it for the love and life.

As you can tell from the ceremony, we don't believe in an afterlife, but she will live on in the things she created and in people's memories of her.

She would say she is going to be a little spark floating in the universe. Sounds good to me.

REMEMBERING SYLVIA *(cont)*

As Ian said, Sylvia was a strong character. She wasn't always easy to live with, but on the other hand there was never a dull moment! Ian's more precise and technical approach meant he and the more volatile Sylvia would often spar – and she'd accuse him of being a pedantic old man!

Sylvia hated injustice of any kind and couldn't bear any sort of cruelty, especially to animals – hence the succession of rescue dogs – and was a hugely caring person. She became very aware of green issues and had strong opinions on everything – she could more than hold her own on any subject! A huge fan of Radio 4, she was often to be found arguing with whoever was talking on the radio.

Sylvia brought Mark and Ruth up in the same mould – to be strong, speak their minds and always do what they thought was right, something that Ruth very much appreciated. Ruth said that her mum really was a best friend, always there to give her advice. Having a very similar character to her mum, Ruth said this meant they could clash too, and that her mum could be extremely annoying, though she loved her to bits and will miss the two-hour long chats they had on the phone every Sunday morning.

So I'm going to end this remembrance and hand over to Ruth to read the poem she's chosen for her mum, *Warning* by Jenny Joseph.