

A celebration of life

Olive Catharine Settle

29th July 1928 – 4th February 2020

28th February 2020, 11.30am, Kent and Sussex Crematorium

a personal goodbye

Humanist
Ceremonies

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The Tribute

Olive was a complicated person, and often, sadly, a lonely one. This probably stemmed from her childhood. She was born in 1928, the only child of Elizabeth and James Thomas, who had moved down south from the Midlands, and came from a quiet, reserved, Methodist tradition. They did well in their careers – she rose to become matron of Friern Barnet Hospital, and he was head gardener at Alexandra Palace. Olive's childhood was spent in the head gardener's house in Friary Park, giving her an interest in nature and birds which continued all her life, but essentially it was a very lonely existence.

Her liberation from this quiet existence, and a period of her life which she loved to talk about, was when she joined up under age in the Women's Land Army. Dorm living and the communal activity necessary in the Land Army must have been a revelation after her quiet childhood, and she loved it. She told tales of tractor driving, and of shinning up drainpipes to get back into the dorm after curfew, and she was known as "Trixie" because she was always getting up to tricks.

One of the social events she really enjoyed in later life was when there was a special reception at Detling to give medals to the Land Army girls – she couldn't wait to get there, had a great day, and talked about it constantly afterwards.

She met Charles Settle at Bembridge Holiday Camp on the Isle of Wight. He swept her off her feet with his great dancing, and they married in March 1949. She loved to dance and her favourite music of the time was from the "Rat Pack", hence the choice of Dean Martin for us to come in to, and you'll hear Sinatra on the way out. Charles was a lifelong railway man, who rose by the end of his career to be Passenger Systems Manager for the Midlands Region of British Rail. She worked in the rag trade in London until Paul was born in 1951, and they moved to Wilmington in 1955, just before Yvonne was born. She went back to work, at Scott's Estate Agent, when Yvonne went to school. After many years with Scotts in Swanley she completed her working life as a Personal Assistant with Harper's Building Services in Sidcup.

Charles was not only busy with his railway career, but was an active reservist in the Army Emergency Reserve, and then later, when Paul joined the Scouts, became a very active administrator and Assistant District Commissioner for Leader Training. His regular absences reinforced Olive's habit of solitude. She continued to work, and she took various art classes, but she shied away from involvement in the dinner dances and the like which were part of Charles' life – even though she usually enjoyed social events if she could be persuaded to go to one. She was not good at making friends, and avoided the kind of small talk which might have developed those friendships, because she always worried about being nosy and interfering.

Olive and Charles divorced in 1977, and Olive stayed in the family home in Wilmington – she was there for 62 years in total. Her mother, who was now retired, moved in with her, and they continued to lead a quiet life until Elizabeth's death in the early 80s. However, once she retired, Olive branched out and joined the Wilmington Active Retirement Group, the only group activity (apart from the Land Army) which she had ever opted into and enjoyed, perhaps because it gave her access to the natural world she loved. Through the ARA she also got involved in Thai Chi, lunch groups, talks and other events.

She would also get on the bus and go to Bluewater, to have a coffee and cake, and watch the world go by, rather than to shop. Not that she was into self-denial when it came to material things – the Methodist ethic hadn't penetrated quite that far. She loved handbags, the kind of frocks which she might have worn to social events if she had gone to them, and owned a huge canteen of cutlery and set of fancy glass and crockery for the entertaining she scarcely ever did. As I said, a complicated person, but a stylish one.

And though she rarely ventured out in reality, she explored the world in her imagination through her avid reading of action adventures and Reader's Digest compendiums. And of course she loved her birds – a bird book or a feeder was always a welcome present, and the Wetlands Centre was another of her occasional destinations.

Yvonne will now talk to us about her Mum

Mum was always very independent. She was fine with her own company a lot of the time and didn't easily make friends, she wasn't a good communicator. There were a lot of examples of this. I think Paul and I, for instance, can count in single figures the amount of times she telephoned us.

She never really told people what she felt or shared very much or asked questions – she thought it was interfering. It's probably one of the reasons why she hated writing letters so much and avoided it at all costs. Even when Paul bought her first computer and spent hours teaching her how to use it and how to write emails – much faster and a lot more simple - fewer words than a letter - but no, it didn't work. Nor did texting by the way.

Because of this lack of communication, I'm not sure that people really knew that she appreciated them. Paul used to spend a night or two a week at Mum's when he was on duty in London – she loved him staying with her, but I don't know that she ever told him that – she told me. I used to take her out grocery shopping every week once she'd stopped running a car, I know she enjoyed the company and was grateful for the help, but she didn't really say it to me.

I also know that her friendship with Barbara and Michael who she lived next door to in Wilmington for many years was very dear to her and I can't imagine she ever really told them how much they meant to her. They, and Harry were good neighbours to her and looked out for her and she really did appreciate them.

Then there are all the friends of ours while mum has been here at Down House – so many have taken time out to spend time with mum and to invite her to join in events and parties. People have been very kind and thoughtful and mum loved it and was truly appreciative of being included so thank you from us and from mum, if she didn't manage to say it at the time.

Last but not least -The friends and professional care teams that helped to look after mum this last couple of years made all the difference to our

lives but really transformed mum's life. At a time when she had become too frail to look after herself, she had also become too frightened to be

alone. Spending time with the dogs, being taken out for tea and cakes, sitting watching the birds and squirrels, doing jigsaw puzzles, scrabble, crosswords, sharing her history and memories, these were really happy times for her. Apart from short periods when she was most unwell, being quietly in trusted, patient company she was really content overall, I think, knowing she was safe. So, I know she would want to say you've all been very lovely and kind, thank you very very much.

Thank you, Yvonne.

Although Paul would spend a couple of nights a week in Wilmington, Olive's habit of not getting in touch, even when things went wrong, became increasingly worrying, and in September 2017, when she was dropped back at home from a hospital stay without a care package in place, things had to change. Tori went round and found her frightened and upset, and said "Do you want to move in with us?", and finally, she said yes.

And so her time at Down House began. She was safe, she was well looked after, and in the warm weather she was able to be out all day, watching the birds. Yvonne would say "I've set up the outdoor seat", and Olive would be up, on the Zimmer, and hurtling out. And she was included in the social events which happened at Down House, including a big wedding party where she seemed all set to join in the Greek dancing. She attended many events there, especially in the early days. She'd say she'd come and say hello for half an hour, and stay for the whole event. She got invited out to parties of friends too - she even travelled up to Epping for a birthday tea party one sunny Sunday afternoon and had a lovely afternoon with everyone.

Eventually, though, all her different illnesses caught up with her, and one morning she refused to get up, and then quietly slipped away. 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, turning out the light, and settling us into a last sleep, free from pain and weariness.

I hope it was so for Olive.

Now, there's been quite a lot of sadness in this story, so to raise spirits a little I'm going to end with this poem written by Land Girl No 36110, A Hewlett, in East Sussex, with apologies to Rudyard Kipling, which was published in the December 1942 edition of *The Land Girl*, and evokes Olive's "finest hour".

*If you can keep your feet when snow still lingers
And paths are skating-rinks of solid rain
If you can pick wet sprouts with frozen fingers
And fill two trugs, unheeding of the pain.
If you can force each tired and aching sinew
To lift you from your warm and downy bed
And sally forth without a morsel in you
To misty mangle-field or gloomy shed:
If, with a cheerful face and lips unpouting
You can dig artichokes from ice-cold mud,
If you can call until you're hoarse from shouting
For cows you thought were calmly chewing cud
And track them down at last in someone's garden,
Employed in crushing beetroots in the ground,
Then humbly beg the hostile owner's pardon
And drive them home without an angry sound;
If when you're scything grass, you find there lying
Sickles and shears and other worn out tools,
Things that will chip your scythe and send you flying,
Left there by knaves to make a trap for fools,
Yet never lose your patience for a minute,
Although your sunbaked head is in a whirl,
Yours is the earth (and all the insects in it)
And – which is more – you'll be a saint, my girl!*