

A celebration of life
Bridget Kitley

14 October 1931–14 September 2018

11am–12pm, 26 September 2018, Greenacres Woodland Burial Ground

a personal goodbye

Humanist
Ceremonies

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Bridget was born on 14th October 1931 to Montagu and Enid Slater, in Hampstead, which was full of writers and artists, many of whom, like her father, were Communists. A poet, writer and critic, he edited the *Left Review* and Bridget, with her elder sister Anna and younger sister Carol, rubbed shoulders with the likes of W H Auden, Benjamin Britten and Giles, the *Daily Express* cartoonist. It was a heady atmosphere to grow up in, and she liked the feeling of mixing with the literary icons of the day.

Her father wrote the libretto for Peter Grimes, so the opera – and Britten and Peter Pears – were very much part of her early life. Britten sometimes stayed at the house when she was young, and Bridget claimed to be the only female to have ever slept with him – having crept into his bed by mistake one night when returning from the toilet. Poetry, theatre, painting, drawing, and music remained extremely important to Bridget all through her adulthood, and she wrote some good poetry and short stories of her own. She had clear ideas about what music was worth listening to and what not. She wasn't interested in other views – it was an absolute as far as she was concerned!

She had a somewhat turbulent childhood, and was sent to various boarding schools, one of which had imaginatively cruel punishments – such as being sent out to pick bunches of nettles, which grew so high they even stung your eyeballs. Being a naughty girl, Bridget must have suffered this a lot, as well as the dark cupboard treatment. But later she went to Monkton Wyld School in Dorset, with a kinder regime, and there her love for the local countryside was kindled. A big treat was to cycle off to Lyme Regis at the weekend. She used to talk about the long steep hill they had to cycle back up to the school on the return journey.

Bridget was a very beautiful woman – she was often compared to Honor Blackman – or even Bridget Bardot. This meant she stood out from the crowd and, not surprisingly, had many suitors. Fortunately, she always enjoyed being the centre of attention. Given her attraction to handsome men, it soon led, when she was still very young, to marriage and motherhood. She met her first husband, Julian Rea, at a Young Communist camp in East Berlin when she was only about 19. Julian was studying Anthropology at Cambridge, where Judy was born, followed four years later

by Steve. Julian then became a school inspector and took the family off, while the children were still very young, to Ghana where he had taken a job. Bridget hated the ex-pat community there – she couldn't get on with it at all, although she did at one point work with a diamond dealer. But to escape it meant coming back with her two children to late 50s Britain with nothing – she had by this time parted from her husband.

It was a hard time. She had to graft – taking jobs wherever she could, including cleaning jobs, although she later managed to get script-reading work. At one point she and the children shared a flat with her friend Moira and her children in Crouch End. One afternoon the fan-heated clothes drier caught fire. The flat was soon ablaze, but Bridget rushed back in to rescue the scripts – desperate not to leave them to the flames as some were the only copy, produced by new playwrights such as Joe Orton.

In the sixties she hung out with a bohemian crowd. She was in tune with the zeitgeist but had responsibilities in the form of two young children at home, so she always felt a bit on the outside. It didn't stop her going out and having a good time though, and having many friends, including boyfriends – artists, actors and musicians, some involved in the TV and film industry. The walls of her home are covered with paintings and drawings done by people she knew. She also loved reading and admired many writers including Doris Lessing – *The Golden Notebook* became a favourite of hers. Jimmy's in Frith Street was a popular haunt, not just for the cheap and plentiful food: it was a bit of a beatnik hangout, and everyone went there, including Pete Kitley, whom she married in 1964. Together they had Bridget's third child, Jess. Pete was another handsome man, though perhaps not ready for marriage and fatherhood. Even though the relationship foundered after some years, life in Cromwell Avenue in Highgate, where the family moved, was more settled than it had been.

Bridget was not the easiest person to have as a mother – as Jess says, they had to 'jump through the right hoops, in the right order, *and* high enough.' There were certain things you didn't discuss with her, because she had a view which was not to be challenged. Sometimes it was a bit like living on quicksand. Yet in other respects

Bridget was very open, particularly when it came to discussing her love affairs – Jess refers to her as having ‘faulty filters’ when talking to children and teenagers!

There were some hair-raising incidents when the children were small. Judy almost drowned and Steve was lucky to survive a spitting cobra. Jess fell out of a barn and landed on her head. On another occasion she was found to have eaten laburnum seeds – other stories you might hear in more detail later – but there was still a strong tie of love between Bridget and her children, and in her way, she felt very protective towards them. She was also blessed with wonderful grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Her family – in all its generations – became very important to her, and certainly kept her going as she became frailer.

And being a naughty girl herself meant she had a fellow feeling for grandchildren going through their own naughty or troubled phases. This may be why she made such a good teacher. She came to it very late, finally getting her B. Ed degree when she was 48 (graduating at the same time as Steve). It was a high point in her life. She had long had a passion for English literature of all types, and so it was natural to specialise in it. But, once qualified, Bridget chose to teach some of the most difficult children in Hackney – those with special needs of many different kinds and from many different backgrounds. She loved to take them out of their manor to introduce them to new places and experiences, even driving them to the seaside in her own car.

Whilst working, she also made some good friends, one of whom was Richard. They met when they were both at Edith Cavell School in the late seventies and soon started going out with each other. She joked that he was her toy boy, being eight years younger, and told him to read Collette’s *Chéri*. The relationship was not, as you might expect, always smooth, but it did not end like the one in the novel, and there was an enduring love there which brought them back together even after a serious rift. When Richard asked to be allowed back she was heard to comment: ‘he’s sitting there in an un-ironed shirt and I can’t bear it!’ They made a life with each other in Orchard Road, where Bridget created a comfortable home, full of colour, applying her creative skills equally to the delightful garden and tiny conservatory.

A change in their relationship came when she became severely ill with pneumonia in 2006. Allowing herself to be looked after by Richard somehow made it easier to own that closeness and interdependence, without the need for barriers or defences. He was very happy to look after her and later on she appreciated what he did very much.

Bridget and Richard shared many things together, including a love of Dorset. They never married; instead they bought a cottage at Cattistock as a sign of their commitment to each other. It was in reach of many of the loveliest coastal spots and landscapes in the country – Durdle Door, Lulworth Cove, Thomas Hardy country – and walking there was a great joy. The cottage holds many lovely memories for Richard, but also for many of you, as one of Bridget's abiding pleasures was offering hospitality to her friends.

Judy's further recollections:

Bridget had a quick intelligence, sometimes a sharp tongue, tempered with a keen interest and empathetic outlook toward those she liked or those she considered underprivileged.

Certain things she just loved – children, theatre, photography, gardening to which she devoted hours of her time. Our girls remember magical overnight stays at which they would wake up in the early morning to a surreptitiously placed tray of sweets, biscuits and comics (not fruit in those days!) designed of course to keep them in their room for the maximum time!

She loved the theatre and had a knack of spotting aspiring actors. I remember her once taking us to a production of Peter Pan at the RSC in the early eighties where she was transfixed by the young Peter Pan – breathlessly agile on the high wire. Some young actor called Mark Rylance it was.

Bridget herself was a great dramatist and like her mother she was a master of embellishment – if it was a good story or if someone had done something she didn't like, one could add a little to it – no problem! Not funny if you were on the receiving end.

Her definite feelings about the way people should behave would sometimes result in a withering glance or her trademark sniff!

Always with a camera in her hand, she would slyly snap brilliant photos when we were unaware and built up a huge collection of family photos – finding photos of Bridget for this event was quite a challenge since she was always the one behind the lens!

Bridge was an instinctive green fingered gardener. Anything she touched grew. She understood colour and structure – evident in the beautiful borders in her gardens in London and Dorset. But woe betide anyone who forgot to plant out, water, prune or dead head! Plants were like children to her, needing to be well tended, loved and nurtured, and on many occasions she gave unforgettable practical and emotional help to friends and family in serious need as you will see.

Here are some more personal recollections from close friends:

Sebastian Garman:

I am 71 years old and quite simply, I have known Bridget all my life. That might imply more than some of you might realise. My mother was a single parent who had a painful and difficult birth which made her ill. Moreover, she had to earn a living in the difficult period after the war. And so from early on in my first year of life I was sent to live with Bridget, Anna and Carol. When I was two Montague and Enid started adoption proceedings. Which panicked my mother into drastic action. According to Enid, she stole me back whilst I was sleeping in my pram in the front garden of Kent terrace, where they lived. When I was 3 my mother started a nursery cum boarding school with a friend. Bridget came to help. Fast forward to my fifth year and by now I was living with both my parents in a gypsy caravan on the Arne peninsula in Poole harbour. Bridget arrived to stay bringing with her a glamorous young man with a sports car, just down from Oxford. They took me for an exhilarating ride on the switchback that is the Arne peninsula road. me on Bridget's knee. In a sudden stop I cracked the windscreen with my forehead. I was always proud of that achievement. At night we went rabbit shooting across the heathlands in the back of my father's 2 stroke lorry, using the headlights to locate them and daze them. This young man was boisterous, giddy and fun and at that time he wanted to be a potter. We liked him a lot. Bridget decided to marry him.

I tell you this to show you the intimate interlinking of our lives. I think it is no exaggeration to say that the only year in 71 that I have not regularly and frequently shared experiences with Bridget was when I fled for 18 months to India to work with VSO to escape some disasters in my own family. Although even then, when my father was diagnosed with terminal illness, she instructed the British Council to summon me back. I was given 4 days' notice and arrived on a cold December evening at Heathrow. Bridget was waiting in the terminal. Deeply and irrevocably shaped by my mother and her father, each of us always knew what the other was thinking. She was totally loyal, a true friend, and an entertaining companion who had a dangerous wit that she shared with my mother. She cannot be replaced.

Alison Bernal: Bridget Kitley

Hello, my name is Alison and I met Bridget 40 years ago when I started my first job.

She and Richard ran the Special Needs unit on rather anarchic lines from a sort of hut in the playground. From the start she was entrancing: I was a young woman and impressed by her quality of ease, her engagement with life.

She quickly placed me: telling me that she had fallen for my father (or his brother!) whilst watching the teenagers play tennis. This was the first of an unending stream of entertaining, unverifiable and sometimes scurrilous tales. My father, of course, had no recollection of what must have been a startling beautiful child mooning after him.

I envied her ability to do so many things well, making entertaining look easy, making a house into a home and knowing how to be with children. I hope I learnt some things too: about gardening and cooking and music and being a friend and how to talk to children. She was modest about her professional achievements and it was some time before I realised how important literature and writing was to her.

She was a steadfast and un-judgemental friend and one of a small band that supported me unstintingly during a difficult time, performing for me without fuss and with skill and grace the service I am now doing for her.

The last time I saw her, Richard, Cliff and I were drinking wine and gossiping in her garden on one of this summer's beautiful days. Bridge will leave an unfillable gap in my life as I am sure she does for all of you.

Thank you, Bridget.

Jenny Devereaux: Thoughts of Bridge

I have many many memories of Bridge, but I would just like to share two very significant events that greatly affected my life.

Firstly, as many of you will know, it is because of Bridge that I Charles and I met and married 39 years ago. It started at one of her legendary parties in Cromwell Avenue and after several theatre trips, and one New Year's Day sledging expedition, her match making was successfully expediated!

The second event however was even more momentous. It was a cold wintry day in the late seventies. I went around to her house and she told Jess and I that she was taking us somewhere very special. We hopped into her tiny Fiat and were taken to an amazing place, McDonald's which had just opened in the Holloway Rd! With what joy did we all devour our first ever McDonald's hamburger.

That was the legacy she gave to me. To have fun... days on the beach at Burton Bradstock, the best picnics ever, blackberry picking ... But most importantly of all ... that love and kindness is what truly matters most in life.

