

A Tribute To

Ivy Blofield

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a personal goodbye

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A Tribute To Ivy Blofield

Ivy Blofield was born in the small village of Stoke Poges in Buckinghamshire on 1st December 1919, to parents Bert and Alice Gale. The fifth of seven children, Ivy enjoyed a busy, happy and active childhood in her rural surroundings. Her father was a keen gardener, sharing his skills and knowledge with Ivy, which she would later put to very good use indeed. She adored reading and reciting poetry, and would learn a great many poems by rote. A bright student, she passed the eleven plus exam, but the cost of the uniform prevented her from attending grammar school. She played for her school netball team, and was a keen cyclist; an interest which she carried into her adult life.

Ivy left school when she about fourteen, and started her first job, working in the post office in nearby Slough, where she arranged the newspapers ready for delivery, and dealt with the paper rounds' finances.

In her late teens, Ivy relocated to London, where she lived with a group of other youngsters. She kept active with plenty of scouting activities and cycling. She took on the role of telephonist, working at "Trunks", the telephone exchange near St. Paul's cathedral. Winston Churchill had sometimes sheltered beneath the Trunks exchange, and Ivy would tell of leaving work one day, during the Blitz, to find the jewellers opposite had been completely demolished in a bombing raid.

During the war, Ivy took on, and tended, her own allotment on what was originally a polo field, growing her own fresh vegetables. She was a member of the Clarion Cycling Club; an active group for socialist cyclists; where she first met George Blofield. George enlisted, and Ivy went to live with George's aunt Mil while he was away. Ivy and George married on 30th January 1942, and their first daughter Gill arrived the following year.

With George away, Ivy and Gill moved to a shared house in Putney; they lived on the upper floor of the house, while the Radcliff family inhabited the lower part. The Radcliffs introduced Ivy to the joys of watching the Oxford and Cambridge boat race on the Thames. She continued to attend the boat race regularly with George, and they would often visit George's sister Vera in Chartham. The Kent countryside with its rural lifestyle was calling them, and in 1948 they moved to Chartham. George started working on a farm, despite having spent several years in apprenticeship as a heating engineer.

George's farm job enabled the couple to take on a council house, where they remained, even after he had left the farm. Ivy continued farm work through the seasons, hop-picking, as well as harvesting cherries, apples, pears, plums and other fruit. She joined the Chartham Women's Institute, thoroughly immersing herself in their activities. George became a psychiatric and general nurse, and the family moved into a hospital house in Chartham. Their second daughter Jane was born in 1957.

George and Ivy, as well being keen cyclists, were both great walkers, sharing many a ramble together. Ivy became a very avid protector of footpaths and rights of way. She loved trees and would often visit Pennypot Wood to see all the ancient specimens there. Ivy never drove. She did have a moped for a while, but on one occasion she was a little shaken after coming off it, and consequently didn't ride it much after that. Their passion for walking extended far beyond the local woodlands and lanes; by the nineteen sixties they were living in The Crescent, in Chartham, and enjoying some wonderful family camping and walking holidays all over the UK, climbing Scottish mountains, trekking in Harlech, Wales, and camping in Switzerland, stopping off in France and Luxembourg on the way. They took dancing lessons together; Ivy said that although she was never particularly good at the dancing itself, she thoroughly enjoyed the classes and the company of the people there.

In 1970 the family moved to Old Wives Lees and Ivy joined the local Women's Institute, again immersing herself in the trips and activities they had to offer, including arts courses, dress-making, basket-weaving and her own field of expertise, gardening. Ivy was always involved in gardening clubs, and she won the Old Wives Lees gardening trophy a couple of times. She spent the seventies bringing up Jane, while also working as a cleaner at St. Augustines, the same hospital in which George worked as a nurse. On moving to Waltham, near Petham, Ivy discovered the village did not have a Women's Institute, so she joined the Hastinglea Women's Institute nearby. The Blofields continued to travel, enjoying family holidays in the UK, as well as trips to France. Their immaculate garden always took priority, dictating when they could travel, so their trips to visit Gill's family in Norfolk were generally in the autumn months.

Ivy took retirement at the age of 58; and George at the age of 62; and they certainly made the most of their retired years. They took Spanish lessons together, and would stay in Spain or Portugal for three months each year. In addition to their European jaunts, they also visited Egypt and Kenya. They were members of Barham Bowling Club, participating in league matches all over Kent, and sometimes bowling holidays in Sussex, and Ivy watched the bowling championships on TV every January. She was a fan of crosswords, and an avid reader; she always had a few library books on loan. Although not a particularly good cook when it came to savoury dishes, Ivy was an expert baker, and would make perfect mouth-watering cakes and apple pies.

Ivy lost George in 2001. After growing up in such a large family, Ivy never liked being on her own. She continued to be an active WI member, enjoying the company and the activities. Ivy visited her sister Grace's extensive family in New Zealand, travelling with Gill and her husband John. Ivy commented that she would have loved to live there, and they travelled all over the country, even taking in a helicopter ride. Gill also took her mum to Tenerife a couple of times after their New Zealand adventures.

Ivy gradually began to lose mobility, and her hearing deteriorated. She embarked on lip-reading classes, which she really enjoyed attending. Just like the dancing, she said she was never any good at it, but she embraced the social side of it, and loved the people there, just as they loved her. Ivy liked to take days out, visiting places where she had once lived. She enrolled in Age UK sessions, for the exercise activities, the entertainments and the company. She took delight in talking with the other folk there, and learning about their lives.

We heard earlier, how Ivy's love of poetry started when she was very young. Her daughter Jane would like to share two particularly special, slightly edited, poems with us now.

As Peter has said, my mum learned long reams of poetry at school and loved to quote them. Here are a few first verses of two of those poems. The first one is Gray's Elegy. It had a lot of meaning for her as it's a poem about a churchyard in the village she grew up in.

Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard (Thomas Gray)

The curfew tolls the knell of the parting day

The lowing herd winds slowly o'er the lea

The ploughman homeward plods his weary way

And leaves the world to darkness and to me

She always felt the ploughman in the poem was her distant relative.

The second poem is "Sea Fever" by John Masefield. I see it as being about a journey, but I'm just reading the first and last verses.

Sea Fever (John Masefield)

I must go down to the sea again

To the lonely sea and the sky

And all I ask is a tall ship and a star to steer her by

And the wheel's kick and the wind's song and the white sail's shaking

And a grey mist on the sea's face and a grey dawn breaking...

And all I ask is a merry yarn from a laughing fellow rover

And quiet sleep and a sweet dream when the long trip is over

Mum certainly wanted a quiet sleep at the end, and her journey is now over.

In keeping with the themes of poetry and the celebration of life, Ivy's granddaughter Jackie will close this morning's tribute with the Amelia Josephine Burr poem "A Song of Living".

A Song of Living (Amelia Josephine Burr)

Because I have loved life, I shall have no sorrow to die

I have sent up my gladness on wings, to be lost in the blue of the sky

I have run and leaped with the rain

I have taken the wind to my breast

My cheek like a drowsy child to the face of the earth I have pressed

Because I have loved life, I shall have no sorrow to die