

A Celebration of the life of

Sheila Winifred Williams

23 March 1944 – 21 April 2024

28 May 2024, Park Wood Crematorium, Elland
Celebrant: Hannah McKerchar



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Born in Halifax on 23 March 1944, Sheila was the first child of Kenneth and Teresa Critchley, followed by her brother Peter, and sister Wendy. As a small child, Sheila lived in Chester Cottage, which was still equipped with gas lights and an old black leaded cooking range, and then in Furness Drive. Sheila was very close to her grandparents on her father's side, even more so after her father sadly died just before her 6th birthday. She called them her 'Mum and Dad in Warrington' and spent many happy summers with them and her beloved aunt Marion.

Teresa remarried, to Horace Cairns, and the family grew to include David, Keith, Paul and Susan. With so many younger ones to look after, Sheila did her fair share of babysitting, but she also found time for her great love of horse-riding by helping out at the local stables near Queensbury. From starting school in 1949 at Raw Lane Infants, Sheila went to Whitehill Junior and J H Whitley. She enjoyed English, but wasn't a fan of maths, or history as she could never remember the dates!

As a young woman, Sheila enjoyed going to local dances with her friends, and ten-pin bowling. On leaving school, she had various jobs including at Woolworth's, Temples the tailors and as a bookkeeper in Fred Moore's electrical shop. It was at the tailor's where she met Alan Gee. They courted, and married in 1965, getting a flat in Gibbet Street which Sheila always swore blind was haunted! They became proud parents to Marcus, who has fond memories of his mum baking, a lot, helping at his school, and also teaching him to draw trees.

Living close to her mother and stepfather Horace, Sheila enjoyed joining her siblings at the big family get-togethers that Teresa liked to throw. This continued after Sheila had married Glyn, giving Marcus an opportunity to play with his uncles, aunts and cousins.

Sheila was aunt to Victoria, Oliver, Francesca, Elizabeth, Nicola, Darryn, Gemma, Gavin, Jason, James, Adam, Donna and Claire, as well as a great-aunt in turn, and she loved them all. She and Glyn sometimes looked after Jason and James when they were small, enjoying trips to a favourite destination, Chester Zoo.

Family was always very important to Sheila, and she really enjoyed the chance to get together with relatives, be it for a Christmas meal, or lunches with Peter, Wendy and Susan. Having learnt how to use her Kindle, she spent many happy hours flicking through photographs of the family uploaded by Marcus.

It was in her early years of motherhood that Sheila got to know her good friend Beatrice; they were next-door neighbours, and stayed in touch even when Beatrice moved back up to Scotland. Beatrice with her husband Alastair would make a point of visiting Sheila whenever they came back down to West Yorkshire, and in turn, Sheila and Glyn enjoyed travelling up to Scotland to stay with them.

Other than holidays visiting Beatrice in Tyndrum, Sheila and Glyn would take Marcus to Skegness and Great Yarmouth, often car-camping when he was younger. Sheila also loved visiting Llandudno; she had often gone there as a girl, with her 'Mum and Dad from Warrington', and was always very fond of the seaside resort, enjoying walks on the sea front, and perhaps picking up a little bit of Welsh gold for her collection. She was very fond of Wales in general, and was mortified when Marks & Spencer stopped selling crisps using Anglesey sea-salt!

Sheila only went abroad twice. The first was to Germany, at the invitation of Sheila's brother David, who was stationed there with the army; Marcus and Sheila stayed with David and his family (Glyn was working away), and they even nipped across to Holland for a day trip. The second was to Gibraltar, where Glyn had lived as a child.

Mostly, though Sheila and Glyn were homebodies, not ones for big trips. When Marcus went to Coventry Polytechnic they would drive him down, and maybe visit a castle or a stately home. In the summer they took day trips to Scarborough, or back to north Wales, bringing picnics with them.

Sheila had a creative side, and made her own jewellery, even selling some pieces. Other crafting included card-making, tapestry and knitting – Marcus and Glyn had home-made jumpers coming out of their ears!

Sheila was so proud to see Marcus progress in life, and happy to see him settle into married life with Avril. Though Sheila and Avril's first meeting wasn't perhaps what they both would have chosen; just after Marcus and Avril had met, by coincidence Avril had come to work in Halifax, Marcus still being based in Guildford. When Avril found herself in a strange town with extremely painful toothache, it was Sheila who leapt to her aid – not with a pair of pliers, but, after much ringing around, with an emergency dentist's appointment, and Glyn very kindly took her there, much to Avril's relief!

Sheila was very much a people person, which came to the fore in her early years as a young mother, when she helped run the Post Office in Mixenden. She also volunteered with Help The Aged, and helped prepare the floats in the local Mixenden gala. Even while busy looking after Marcus, Sheila became involved in the community which became such an important part of her life.

Through various instances of involvement in the local community, Sheila developed a wide understanding of, and empathy for, people's different experiences, especially those with disabilities or from different cultures.

Two of her colleagues – Jenny Lynn, a local councillor, and Rob Clegg – wrote this tribute to Sheila and the incredible contribution she made to others:

Throughout the 1990s, Sheila and her husband lived in the Crossley Stansfield flats in the heart of Park ward, and she became a very active member of the committee of the Crossley Standard Residents' Association.

In 1994 Calderdale submitted a successful bid for £15.9 million from the government's new Single Regeneration Budget (SRB) programme. With a third of this funding committed to the upgrading and renewal of her estate, it was only natural that Sheila was invited to join the Board of the West Central Halifax Partnership, which was set up to run the new programme. Not only was she active in developing the design and implementation of the Crossley Stansfield housing estate, she was also engaged with other projects in the area including the restoration of People's Park and the Renewal programme for improvements to the terraced housing in the Gibbet Street area. Sheila was not the most vocal person on the various committees and working groups but when she did speak people listened and took on board her thoughts, opinions and ideas. On one memorable occasion her contribution was absolutely critical. We were looking at the designs for the new metal fencing to be erected around the estate, everyone agreeing that they looked very smart, until Sheila pointed out that the panels of horizontal bars which were to be inserted at intervals along the vertical fencing would be a perfect ladder for any ne'er-do-wells who wanted to climb over the fence and into the estate! Her common-sense, down-to-earth approach was greatly appreciated, as was her kindness and gentle good humour.

Eventually Sheila and her husband left the estate to move across Halifax to Boothtown, and thanks to her experience on the West Central Halifax Board, she was soon invited to serve on the Board of another SRB programme, called Action Halifax, which was to carry out a series of initiatives in the central area of town.

In 2002 she became involved in setting up the Boothtown Partnership with Vicky Robertshaw, helping to develop new facilities on the playing field at Rawson Street, supporting the annual Boothtown carnival, and many other community initiatives. The Partnership was chosen to be part of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation's Neighbourhoods Programme, and over the next five years Sheila would take part in several JRF conferences, networking different neighbourhood initiatives across the country, all showing how ordinary people could make a difference to the lives of their own communities.

A decade later, she would be one of the people honoured by being given the Freedom of the Borough of Calderdale, a very well-deserved recognition of her longstanding work for her community.

Sheila was justifiably proud of that honour, and the work that led to it, and she was widely respected by those who worked alongside her. Her prominence brought a few perks, too, like the time she was invited to accompany police officers in their van, looking on as they blue-lighted their way between emergencies, and of course she attended many civic events. Sheila also worked with Calderdale Council through the Halifax Disability Partnership, and later returned to volunteering at the local school, going in to help students with their reading, or running craft activities. She never lost her love of crafting and knitting, in recent years meticulously colouring intricate designs, and continued as long as her arthritis would allow.

Sheila cared for Glyn when his health deteriorated, until he died in 2011, and she found it hard after he had gone. To help her get out a bit, Sheila's brother Peter would take her for mini-trips away, sometimes with their sister Susan, to Llandudno or Southport, and on one occasion even venturing 'down south' to Bournemouth! Sheila always looked forward to Marcus and Avril visiting ... and taking her out shopping! As Sheila needed someone to take her out in her wheelchair, she did not very often get out of her flat. During the pandemic she had to grow out her long-standing perm, but she had great fun experimenting with some very bold pink, blue and purple highlights in her straight, pretty silver hair.

Following Glyn's death, Sheila's friendship with her neighbour Janice had grown even closer, with Janice's family 'adopting' Sheila. She was very appreciative of their generosity with their time and care, which allowed Sheila to stay living at home to the end. Marcus and Avril, too, were grateful that Sheila had someone keeping an eye on her, making sure she had help when she needed it as well as giving her companionship.

Janice wanted to say a few words about her dear friend Sheila, which I will now share with you.

Sheila and I met many years ago through Glyn, when I did the paper round each morning, me being blamed by Glyn for bringing any bad weather! Sheila and I realised we went back many years and knew so many people from around Halifax, though for many different reasons. Sheila was a font of knowledge, always ready to help in any way she could. If she did not know the answer to a problem she would find you someone who did.

My grandchildren were very fond of Sheila, as were all my family. She loved that she could show Daniel in particular the new library, explaining the layout and many more things. She loved that he showed interest in the things she told him. She loved knowing about all my grandchildren and my great-grandchildren.

Sheila, you are missed so much.