

A celebration of life

Rita Joyce Lucas

4 September 1926 – 26 March 2019

11:30am – 12:15pm, 15 April 2019, Cheltenham Crematorium



a personal goodbye

Humanist
Ceremonies

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Rita the youngest of three, was born to Evalina and James, Eva and Jim Williams, in Portsmouth. Throughout their lives she was close to her brother Norman the eldest, and her sister Marion, although the two sisters often irritated each other, even in their later years! As a young child growing up in pre-war Portsmouth, Rita's home life focussed around family and other relatives who lived close by.

Rita recalled that there was only one grandparent alive when she was born, her maternal grandmother Helena. After Helena had a stroke and was less mobile, Rita's mother Eva often asked Rita to take a hot meal round to her grandmother. She was fortunate that her father had a car, so Rita would sit holding the plate with the hot dinner perched on her lap, covered by another plate and topped by a tea-towel, trying not to spill the gravy onto her dress. Of course, cling film and microwaves were not available at the time!

On 1st September 1939 Portsmouth decided to close all the schools and informed parents that children would be evacuated. Rita and Marion were on holiday in Surrey staying with Ted and Amy, friends of their father's. The next day Jim brought the two girls back to Portsmouth and the Second World War was declared by Neville Chamberlain on the 3rd September. Rita was most put out that the next day she had her thirteenth birthday, but no-one remembered, so she didn't receive any birthday presents or cards until a few days later!

After a couple of days Rita and Marion re-joined their school which had relocated to Winchester. The Winchester schoolchildren used the facilities in the morning and the evacuees, in the afternoon. Rita and Marion had to stay in lodgings but after an unpleasant first billet, the girls were split up and Rita was posted to live with Miss Clarkson, a spinster. Miss Clarkson treated Rita and her new friend Jeanne very well, but strictly! She was not used to having young people around and she did not like any noise or disruption to her routine. The girls had more freedom when Miss Clarkson went out as the maid was more relaxed about what the girls could get up to! Rita became fond of Miss Clarkson and stayed in touch with her for many years after the War until Miss Clarkson's death.

In 1940 Rita's parents had relocated to Shinfield near Reading as Rita's father had secured a job at the Army Technical School in Arborfield. Because Shinfield was considered safe from the bombing, Rita was allowed to join her parents in their new home. So, Rita left her school friends in Winchester but did not go back to school even though she was only fourteen.

During the war years Rita worked in the War Office in Reading, a long bus ride from Shinfield. The cost of her fare and contribution to her parents' household bills, meant that she did not have much money left for treats. Having been a shy young woman, Rita did not go out much and was happy to spend time locally in Shinfield and sometimes cycling into Reading to go to the pictures or a dance hall.

It was not at a dance where Rita met Harold, her future husband, but he caught her eye when she was a spectator at a Shinfield Football team game. He was an excellent goalkeeper and Captain of the team, but the initial impressions of his football prowess quickly turned into interest in his impish sense of humour, his warmth and sense of loyalty. After three years of courting, Rita and Harold were married at St Mary's Church, Shinfield on 3rd June 1950. Marion was Rita's bridesmaid and Alan Carter, Harold's best man. The picture on the back page of the Order of Ceremony leaflet shows Rita and Harold looking very happy, about to drive away to Cornwall for their honeymoon.

Rita's married life focussed on helping in her mother-in-law Winnie's shop and setting up home four doors away, in the house that Winnie had bought Harold and Rita in Whitley Wood, South Reading. In 1953 Derek was Rita's first born then three years later Avril was born, completing Rita and Harold's family. Rita was a full-time mother, homemaker and sold eggs from her home, the eggs being fresh from her father-in-law Bertie Lucas's poultry farm.

Rita was keen to keep herself busy and went to cookery classes where she learnt the finer techniques of home cooking and baking. Her cooking skills were much appreciated by everyone who was offered one of her dishes and she was particularly renowned for her excellent sponge cakes and shortbread.

Through her children, Rita made friends with other mothers, and we welcome Joan Bryant here today. Rita encouraged Derek and Avril to do well at school and always took an active interest in other activities in which they were involved, their piano playing, Derek's bus and train spotting and Avril's playing the 'cello in the Reading Youth Orchestra.

Although the family had limited money and time to have holidays due to Harold's involvement in his father's poultry business, Rita made the most of seeing her relatives and friends from before the War, taking the family for a short break in Portsmouth whenever they could. One holiday, adventuring further afield to Llandudno was not so successful. Rita had bought some meat pies in tins to heat up for a meal and one of them gave her an upset tummy, which laid her low for a couple of days. Then, on a trip up the Great Orme in a steam train, flakes of ash came in through the window of the carriage and made holes in Harold's new shirt. Rita's sense of 'righteousness' came to the fore and she relentlessly pursued compensation from both companies involved!

This was a trait that Rita relished from time-to-time. She wrote to the Daily Mail, on more than one occasion, of her indignation at some misuse of a word or poor grammar used by a journalist. In the early 1970's as the country lane where they lived, Whitley Wood Road, had become dangerous to walk along due to the increase in traffic, Rita campaigned for it to be improved. She organised a traffic census, helped by many friends and neighbours and wrote to the Council and local papers, raising awareness of the dangerous road. Within a couple of years, the M4 was completed and Whitley Wood Road was made into a link road, perhaps not quite what Rita had been campaigning for!

Rita was well known for keeping her mind active and over the years she liked to enter competitions. She particularly liked competitions where she had to create a caption to complete a phrase such as 'I like such-and-such soap powder or chocolate bar, because'. She would have pen and paper next to her as she ironed and would write down phrases as they came to her. She was very successful in winning competitions and sometimes collected her prize from a celebrity, including Ernie Wise, Michael Aspel and Cliff Michelmore. Her prizes included holidays to Malta and Austria, and a completely new dining room from products all made in Scotland, which included furniture, tableware, linen, cutlery and beautiful glassware.

Harold, an ex-RAF aircraft engine technician, had always loved aeroplanes and living near Heathrow's flightpath he was always thrilled seeing Concorde fly over Reading. He had often said that he would love to fly on Concorde, never expecting his wish to come true. In 1990 Rita was one of five competitors to win a trip in Concorde.

Rita and Harold were both 'over the moon' to get this news and with all expenses paid, they duly arrived at Heathrow on 2nd March 1991 to join an anniversary flight to commemorate Concorde's Maiden Flight. Rita and Harold were allowed to visit the cockpit and they came away with various mementos. Although it was only a short trip and unfortunately a bit cloudy, this was one of Rita and Harold's most memorable occasions.

Rita and Harold continued to live in Whitley Wood until a turn of events meant they decided to move and live somewhere completely different. They had no idea where to move to and were living temporarily with Marion in Portsmouth. One year on their way to visit Norman and Dorothy in Cheshire, they were fortunate to stay in a B&B in Apperley run by Ann and Neville Sabin. Through one of life's chance moments, there was a house for sale in Chester Close and Ann suggested they take a look at it. They viewed the house, liked it and decided they would buy it. They were eternally grateful to Ann and Neville who became close friends.

For over twenty years Rita and Harold enjoyed living in Apperley and made many friends, among whom were Joan and Harold Mayo, Flo and her daughter Sheila, Dee, Peter and Sue Woodthorpe. They also loved Rita's family coming to stay, Marion, Norman and Dorothy, their son Richard and his wife Moira and in later years with their daughter Fay, cousin Doris, her son Peter and Pauline Gomer-Smith and cousin Margorie Campbell.

For a short while, whilst Derek and his wife Ann were looking for a house to buy near Gloucester, they lived with Rita and Harold, along with their son Leo, Rita's only grandchild. Rita and Harold's friends were always made welcome, Rita and Wally, Di and Ken, Alan and Elsie, Hilda and Bernard, to name a few. They all were treated to Harold's tours of the beautiful Gloucestershire countryside and Rita's home cooking, and of course her cakes!

As Harold's mobility became more difficult Rita and Harold decided to move from Apperley and buy a flat in Marina Court, in Tewkesbury. Once again they were very fortunate in that Marina Court was new and they were able to have the pick of the flats and bungalows that were available. They chose a lovely two-bedroomed flat overlooking the Marina and River Avon and the fields beyond. It was a surprise to Rita and Harold that Marion announced she was also going to buy a flat in Marina Court and she moved in a couple of months before them. Rita had some mixed feelings about this, but the two sisters managed to rub alongside each other most of the time with Harold keeping quiet if they did end up irritating each other!

Once again Rita and Harold made many new friends and enjoyed the activities and entertainment arranged by Joan and Lesley and others in the team at Marina Court. Rita was very happy at Marina Court and last year celebrated her tenth year as one of the original residents.

Within a couple of years of moving to Marina Court Rita became Harold's full-time carer. To help give Rita a little rest she and Harold enjoyed staying at Flowerdown House, the RAF Association's Care Home. After sixty years of happy marriage Harold died in 2011. For many years Rita visited Flowerdown House by herself. She thoroughly enjoyed making new friends and being well looked after by the caring staff. In June 2016 Rita was thrilled to be invited to go to a Garden Party at Buckingham Palace as a guest on behalf of Flowerdown House, with another lady, Celia. Although Rita did not see the Queen, she had a wonderful time on a warm and sunny day, eating cucumber sandwiches (no crusts!) and Victoria sponge cake. Rita commented that the sponge was not as good as hers!

Rita very much appreciated the manager and staff at Flowerdown House giving her this wonderful opportunity and for looking after her so well over many years. It is comforting to know that Rita enjoyed the last three weeks of her life staying at Flowerdown House, being well cared for and taking trips out, before she returned home and suddenly became seriously ill.

Rita will be missed for many things, her views on how to 'right the world', her attitude to her own life, based on the values of the Second World War – not to 'give in', and to face difficulties with strength, her abiding ability to keep in touch with people, her kindness, and of course her cakes. Her long-lasting legacy will be her poetry books, which, no doubt, will give pleasure to many for years to come.