

Elizabeth Ruth Harding (née Ashton) (27.7.1929 – 27.8.2017)

On behalf of the family, thank you for being here today to mark and celebrate the life of my mother. Thank you also for remembering the family in your thoughts and prayers.

We also wish to thank the many kind and amazing people who have been looking after Mum, and of course Dad who passed away in February - friends, neighbours, part-time carers, and the carers from Featherbed. Likewise we are most grateful to staff of the Whitchurch Care Home but especially to the staff from Oakfield Care Home for the loving care they gave her.

Mum was loved and held in high regard by many. It is abundantly clear to me, and I am sure to you too, that Mum made a positive impact on many people's lives.

When I see the kind and caring qualities of my sisters Vicki and Catherine, as well as their impressive array of talents and "can do" attitude, just like Mum's, I can see what an influential and impressive lady Mum was.

Mum was not the sort of person who would readily tell you that she loved you or shower you with lots of physical affection. But action speaks louder than words. What she has done for her family and for so many people throughout her life has shown a very genuine and practical love. Love that is useful, love that cares, and love that gets things done.

The overwhelming desire of Mum throughout her life has been to help and guide others, driven by a compassionate nature and generous spirit as well as by her remarkable and strong faith in Jesus Christ that she shared with her husband of over 65 years, my father Rolf. Her wish and determination to share and spread the gospel was as strong as anyone you will ever meet.

She had a disabling illness in her mid-20s whilst pregnant and expecting my middle sister Catherine that nearly took her life then. When it returned later in life eventually confining her to a wheelchair for more years than we can accurately recall it strengthened, not weakened, that life-changing faith she experienced. As she told my wife Pam a couple of years ago when they were discussing suffering in general, we don't know why there is suffering but one day we will know the reason why.

Born on the 27th of July 1929, the first of three children for Horace and Jessie Ashton, Elizabeth was the big sister to John and Mary. The war years including evacuation to Dorset and her education at a boarding school meant that she did not spend as much time with her siblings as children of other generations have done.

However I know she was very fond of them both. They all kept in touch despite them not living nearby; contact with Mary who had emigrated to Australia was maintained mainly by telephone. Mum was always there to try and help family members in any way she could when they faced troubled times.

The wider family was very important to Mum. She and Dad held huge family gatherings at Coopersale Vicarage, their home for 30 years from 1961 to 1991 and also in Weston. She was the driving force that kept the Pilbrow and Ashton family in touch with each other.

No-one could know Mum without knowing her fantastic and creative cooking skills; her recipes have been copied by many. Her catering abilities included the production of impressive quantities of appetising food for church Harvest Suppers etc.

On the subject of food I must thank Mum for not only her interest in natural remedies for ailments but the great value she put on healthy, natural foods; especially vegetables, salads, fruit, nuts and seeds – long before healthy eating was in vogue. That must be why Vicki, Catherine and I don't look quite as old as we are!

There is an amusing anecdote concerning Mum and Dad's love of what they would call "real" coffee. I was a young boy at the time and we were camping in a frame-tent on a campsite by a field in France. In those days Mum and Dad put Carnation Evaporated Milk in their coffee. I know that sounds distasteful by today's tastes but that's what they liked and they had it with them in their food provisions for the holiday.

Carnation Evaporated Milk came in sealed tins, just like tinned soup, and you would pierce the lid with a large hole on one side for pouring out this thick substance and make a smaller hole on the opposite side to let in the air so that it would pour out smoothly. Over a few days the creamy milk started to change to an increasingly grey colour as they added it to their coffee. When Mum opened up the can she was horrified to discover that a large slug had got into the can, through the larger pouring hole, and drowned in the now even more disgusting liquid. Carnation Evaporated Milk had become Carnation Evaporated Goo! It still puzzles me that this didn't end their taste for Carnation Evaporated Milk in their coffee.

Mum and Dad's long marriage was an undoubted success. They grew in mutual love and respect for each other very much in the second half of their 65 years of marriage; probably because their three children had by then left home!

When Dad died on the 15th of February earlier this year, Mum was devastated and heart-broken. However she was relieved that she had outlived Dad. Mum had promised and reassured Dad that she would look after him until he died as his own illness started to take over and then finally ended his long life of 94 years. It took enormous reserves of strength and courage to look after Dad from her wheelchair as Alzheimer's slowly changed and ended his life.

When they first met in the mid-1940s, he was at the time known as Rolf Heudenfeld, a German born holocaust refugee from Hamburg. He was a dashing young Master at St Michaels school in Limpsfield, Surrey, teaching the boys and she was an attractive blue-eyed blonde pupil, a Prefect, 7 years his junior. I know that doesn't sound very "proper" but that's how they met!

Dad returned to his theological training, it having been interrupted by the war, and they got married in 1951. Dad entered full time ministry in the Church of England. Mum had trained as a State Registered Nurse, specialising in babies. She was also at one time an au pair girl looking after young children for a family in Sweden; she enjoyed that experience.

But Mum was now a vicar's wife, a role that suited her admirably. She used and shared her many practical skills to host and cater for parish church events, and to teach Young Wives and other groups flower arranging, dressmaking, cooking, crafts etc.

Mum and Dad were very welcoming to anyone who visited their home or were new to the parish. Their door was always open. She was natural as the hostess, and he in the dual role as host and butler. It sometimes felt like living in a hotel as people often came to stay at Coopersale Vicarage.

It was in 1961 that Mum and Dad moved from Harold Hill in Romford to Coopersale Vicarage near Epping in Essex. This large Victorian vicarage was in a poor state of repair. The previous vicar had been keen but not skilled at DIY. Dangerous with exposed live power cables, riddled with woodworm the vicarage also had dry rot. There was a walk-in cupboard next to the kitchen that we called the "woodworm cupboard"; it had circular ventilation holes in the door. We kept our hats and coats in there but it was also a safe refuge for our Irish Red Setters, Shanta and then Sasha, during thunderstorms.

The vicarage had five acres of grounds. With their three children, the task they took on was enormous. But they rose to the challenge of turning a shabby old building with several out buildings that had fallen into disrepair into a fine family home.

They put the land to good use keeping and rearing a wide range of animals (dogs, horses, chickens and ducks) and growing huge quantities of fruit and vegetables. To my regular disappointment Dad was very good at growing broad beans; luckily Mum didn't cook them in Carnation Evaporated Milk – or if she did, she never told me.

Their sheer hard work and determination was remarkable. My sisters and I were very privileged to live in such a wonderful country home in lovely surroundings, despite the broad beans that grew all too well in the vegetable garden. But not content with looking after a huge Victorian vicarage they also purchased, restored and rented out two properties to help finance their future retirement.

Christmas at Coopersale Vicarage was a traditional affair and very special. Mum would decorate the house with holly, ivy, yew and other greenery which she picked from the neighbouring churchyard. As Dad was the vicar we can assume she had permission to do this. But it was her cooking of all the Christmas fayre including homemade fudge, roasted chestnuts, Christmas puddings with sixpences hidden within and all the trimmings that accompany the roast bird. Those are very nostalgic and happy memories for me of my childhood.

Mum's ability to turn her hand to anything was a gift she did not waste. Of Mum's many talents, her dressmaking skills were formidable. As well as making outfits for the Ann Ladbury BBC TV show and fashion shows around the country, she made most of her own clothes and many for Dad, her children and for close friends and relatives. Her own label was "Liz Ashton". Maybe one day we'll find one of her labelled dresses in a charity shop.

She could see a dress or outfit in a shop window and recreate the pattern and produce the same for herself or others. During her life she made 12 wedding dresses for friends and family; all unique and very beautiful. The 1970s was a great decade for fashion and new fabrics both of which Mum would embrace either as commissions from Ann Ladbury or to develop herself using her own creative skills.

In the 1960s I can recall her telling me about the recent invention "Velcro" that would start to replace zips and other fasteners in clothing. This would give fashion designers, including Mum who was very inventive, a new approach to detailing on clothes. She was using it as soon as it became available from the fabric shop "Harlequin" in nearby Epping.

Mum would be working long past midnight cutting out fabrics that she spread out on the landing floor – the only area large enough - and Dad would still be up working on a sermon or the next edition of the Parish Magazine, or he would be out counselling the bereaved or others in need. They were a very hard working couple and an inspiring example to others.

Mum and Dad developed an interest in buying, restoring and selling antiques. Mum was the gifted one in the partnership undertaking most of the restoration work whereas Dad would do the bidding at auctions. I was often asked to help lug large items of heavy antique furniture up the vicarage front or rear staircases to be stored or used in one of the many first floor bedrooms. The film where Laurel and Hardy make several attempts to deliver a music box piano up a long flight of steps comes to mind.

When things broke or went wrong Mum would say "Worse things happen at sea!" Maybe that's why I never contemplated joining the Royal Navy. Other sayings she frequently used were "Nothing ventured, nothing gained" and "What the eye doesn't see, the heart doesn't grieve over".

Her German mother-in-law, Luise Schulz, could speak English little better than I could speak German, in other words her English was "nicht so gut". But they got on famously whenever she came over to stay from Hamburg. They would spend most of the time when together laughing at their constant misunderstandings or amusement at English or German words and terminology. Smiling and humour was certainly the international language that worked for that mother-in-law and daughter relationship.

Family holidays started as camping in a large frame tent and progressed to caravanning. Mum used her woodworking and fabric skills to fit or repair storage shelves, tables, drawers, curtains and bedding in the second hand caravans that they purchased.

Once their children left home international travel featured much more in their holidays including to Israel, the USA, the European mainland and Australia to see Mum's sister Mary and her family. Return trips with a caravan to their much favoured Cornish destination, Porthcothan Bay, continued for many years into their retirement.

Mum was very fond of her nephews Trevor and Andrew who now live in Sydney, Australia. Anyone who has met Trevor and Andrew and their children will recognise the Pilbrow - Ashton gift of kindness so prevalent in the family that Mum had in spades. When she married Dad she probably married one of the kindest men you could ever hope to meet, and that made them such a supportive couple who put others first.

Mum loved and adored her four grandchildren Sarah, James, Sam and George; she often spoke to me in glowing and admiring ways about each one of them. They carry her genes so they have inherited some of her talents. These talents may also appear in future generations to come; I have no doubt that they will.

The circumstances of Mum and Dad's passing away in a period spanning just six months have been far from easy. But Mum's life story does have a very happy ending just 8 days before she died.

As well as her grandchildren, she also loved to see her great grandchildren. A truly wonderful family event happened whilst Mum was on her deathbed and this was the birth on the 2nd of August of my third grandchild, and Mum's fourth great grandchild, Harriet.

This was to my son James and his wife Paula. I shared a gin and tonic with Mum that day when I visited her at Oakfield Care Home where we all knew she was getting close to the end of her life. That visit was to tell Mum the happy news of the arrival of Harriet but what was to follow 17 days later, just eight days before she passed away, I will never forget.

Mum was not receiving visits from family members other than from my two sisters and me; she was too ill and didn't want her grandchildren to remember her the way she had become at the end of her life. No amount of money could buy the gift we gave Mum on Saturday the 19th of August.

On that day James and Paula generously asked me if I would like to show Harriet to her Great Grannie. I didn't need asking twice as I knew Mum had lost any hope of seeing Harriet, only the photographs of her that I took during my visits to see her.

We arrived at Oakfield Care Home in Weston, Bath and made our way up the main staircase. Leaving James and Paula out of sight on the landing I carried tiny 17-day old baby Harriet into my mother's room. I woke Mum from her sleep and said "*Look who's come to see you, it's your new great granddaughter Harriet!*" Mum was very drowsy but her eyes lit up. She could not talk by now, only whisper, and she whispered "*thank you*". She asked if she could hold Harriet but was by this stage of her decline far too weak to do so. I placed Harriet onto my mother's front so that she could feel her.

Harriet didn't cry once and, unable to focus at such a young age, simply stared with her eyes wide open out into my Mum's face. "*Isn't she a treasure?*" Mum whispered. We spent a few minutes together, said our goodbyes, Mum whispered "*Thank you*" again and I quietly left with Harriet, James and Paula. Mum later that day told the care staff how beautiful her new granddaughter was and said the same to me when I visited the next day.

One day Harriet will be told that she made her dying great grandmother very happy. It certainly made me, James and Paula happy, and emotional, that we could do this last very important thing for Mum, a lady who simply adored babies since her nursing days and was so interested and caring towards her family, especially the very youngest members.

(CLOSING REMARKS)

We all have our own memories of Elizabeth, my wonderful, brave, talented mother and what she meant to each of us.

I know that in her final weeks she spent much of the time praying when she was not asleep. Her family and friends need to know that those times of prayer included many prayers that were for us, and for our future.

Acting on her concern for others, generous with her time, generous with her money, her love and her many creative talents, a committed Christian, hospitable to anyone who came to her door, what a lovely and inspiring lady she was. It is fair to say that she was like a mother to many, not just her own children.

One 80th birthday tribute to Mum described her as "*the pastoral mother shepherd we all need in our lives*".

Thank you Mum, Elizabeth, Grannie, Great Grannie, and Auntie for your love and all you meant to me, your family, your friends who you treated like family, and to so many people.

Phil Harding, 2017

Photographs of Rolf and Elizabeth Harding can be found on the "Publications" page of <http://philharding.net> (on the page about Coopersale Vicarage) where you can also find this tribute, one for Rolf Harding and also an account of Rolf Harding's traumatic childhood and escape from Nazi Germany on the Kindertransport.

"Beneficentia est sapientia" Kindness is wisdom (Harding family motto)