

NORRISSE MARY WHITEHEAD  
3<sup>rd</sup> October 1921 – 16 October 2014  
St Bartholomew's Church, Haslemere  
Monday 27<sup>th</sup> October 2014 at 2.30pm

**EULOGY** given by Sue

Thank you all for coming today, we do so appreciate your support. May I just ask you, if you did not do so on arrival, to write your name on one of the sheets near the door – it would be so nice to know who has been with us today.

I am very grateful to Mother's two godsons for travelling down here, but especially to her sister-in-law Jean Whitehead and my cousin Tim who have kindly driven over from Canterbury – Jean is our last remaining relative of Ma's generation.

This occasion may be sad because it is final, but I see it as a good release for Mother, as the last 4 years of her life were pretty miserable. And these last 6 months have been barely an existence, however well she was cared for.

Today I want us to remember Norriss, the grandma, the sister-in-law, the aunt, the godmother, and friend who enjoyed life to the full. She was always busy, sociable, enterprising and interested in the world around her. One of her godsons said to me last week, "I was so fond of Norriss, she was a wonderful godmother and a great letter-writer. She was always cheerful, dutiful and she had firm views. And she was like the Queen, she's been there all my life!" Other comments from her nieces were that she was kind and fun when they stayed with her as children, so hospitable, the perfect hostess and very elegant".

Norriss was born in Leicestershire in 1921, but never liked her age mentioned! It's amazing to think that she was born several years before even the first radio signal was sent round the world to New Zealand! And through her life she would have seen the greatest changes ever in our civilisation. Her parents moved to Cambridge and when her twin sisters Joan and Helen were born, Norriss was packed off to a little boarding prep school at Clifton, aged only 6. The family moved again, this time to Kent and Norriss returned home to attend a local school with Joan, whose twin Helen had died aged only 7. Norriss was soon sent to Cheltenham Ladies College for the remainder of her school life - and she loved it. There she continued violin lessons, sang in the College Choir, loved lacrosse and her favourite subject was geography.

She went straight into the Wrens when the War started, going through Weymouth, to Greenwich for officer training, and on to Belfast. She often said that it was a "good war" for her and what fun she had had – she kept in touch with the many friends she made, two of whom became my godmothers. Norriss was a good-looking lady, even in old age – although she could be surprisingly modest and lacking in self-confidence. None of us will remember her without that striking head of white hair – I certainly don't. Born dark, by 21 Norriss had a white streak and was totally white by the age of 25. She had many suitors but the one who won the chase was Lieutenant Commander Richard Whitehead RN, or Dick, as he was known to family and friends.

Following the ultimate romance when she was stationed in Belfast, they were married in January 1944 at St Mark's, North Audley Street in London. At the reception afterwards, Dick was told that life would never be dull with Norrisse, and how true this prediction would turn out to be! They honeymooned in Dublin, and then Dick returned to his ship HMS Glory, in which he was the Engineer Officer. Norrisse returned to Belfast, having been promoted to Second Officer, and continuing in the Cipher Division. Once I was on the way, she returned to live with her parents, who were by then by living at Sheets Heath in Brookwood. I was born at the end of the War whilst Dick was transporting Japanese Prisoners of War across to Australia. Her son Robert came along in 1947 to make a 'full house'.

When Dick came home from the War, the family moved up to Handsworth and he returned to his post as Water Engineer in Birmingham. Norrisse started married life totally undomesticated - the first thing she had bought for her bottom drawer being a pair of silver grape scissors! And her new husband even had to teach how to boil an egg! However, not to be beaten when they moved to Sutton Coldfield in Warwickshire, she joined cookery classes and there was no turning back. Norrisse became an excellent cook and loved entertaining. Furthermore she took up the violin again, playing in the local orchestra, and she was a member at what is now the Birmingham Symphony Hall, attending most of their concerts throughout the season.

They eventually moved to a larger house, chosen because of its position and view over Sutton's beautiful natural park. In the 1970s, they bought Moorings on the Salcombe estuary, where they sailed and entertained another circle of friends, and where I and the grandchildren spent all our summer holidays.

When Dick retired, he accepted several consultancy posts in the Bahamas, and Norrisse joined him for 6 months in Antigua, which of course she absolutely loved. They had already decided to move to Haslemere, keeping Moorings for many extended holidays. They so enjoyed having their grandchildren nearby and being involved in their growing up - it has been a very special relationship and David, Amanda and Olivia have benefitted greatly.

Sadly Norrisse lost her beloved husband in 1990 but had wonderful support from their many friends. She stoically faced life alone for the first time in her life. Never to be beaten, she took up Bridge - it was a brave undertaking at quite a late stage in her life, but she loved it. She made more new friends and Fours mushroomed as her diary became booked 6 months in advance. She had been a Crusader as a child and her local church was always an important part of her life, in Sutton, Devon and her last 40 years in Haslemere - being on the flower rota of course, along with various other duties.

All her married life she was a member of The Fine Arts Society and The Flower Club, but music was her great love. Here in Haslemere, as well as going to concerts and opera in the area, she subscribed to the Hindhead School of Music, the Opera Goers and Recorded Music Societies. She joined the Milford Walking Group, Haslemere Museum - you name it, she belonged. And she continued entertaining, always in style.

Norrise's travel bug had started even before Dick died - he was not so keen, having travelled so much during his time in the Navy. Although over the years they had some lovely holidays in Switzerland and Brittany, he was content for Norrise to take off with her Wren friend Barbara, to explore famous cities – Florence, Rome, Paris, Amsterdam, Istanbul. When her grandchildren passed their A'levels there was another excuse to travel and reward them, so Amanda chose Venice, Olivia Prague. She holidayed all over the UK with the National Trust, and the Three Counties Association. She went on river cruises, musical cruises, she visited Morocco, Turkey Hong Kong several times, Australia and New Zealand, Aquaba, Cyprus, Bali, Symi Island, Sarawak, Borocay, Russia. There was no stopping her.

Then on a Cricketers Holiday in Zimbabwe she made a new gentleman friend, John. I remember shortly after her return, she coyly showed me a Valentine's card, in which John said that he had thought his life was organised until she rocked his canoe! That romance led to travels in Vietnam, Kuala Lumpa and Madeira, as well as frequent visits between Haslemere and Shropshire - neither of them wanting to move away from their families. Then very sadly John died suddenly in the middle of their planning to visit South Africa. But, as the song goes, Norrise "picked herself up, dusted herself off" and enjoyed the attention of two more gentlemen friends, who 'wined and dined' her well into her 80s! Norrise certainly did not let the grass grow under her feet!

Dementia doesn't *take* your life, as cancer took Dick's, dementia *removes* it and leaves you in a fog of confusion. I have been so grateful for the support of our local branch of the Alzheimer's Society. For over three years, Norrise spent two days each week in the company of their expert staff and volunteers, entertained and cared for with great patience, understanding and above all, kindness. There will be a retiring collection for our local Alzheimer's Society Day Centre but, if you prefer to enhance a gift through the Gift Aid scheme, send it to the address on the back of the Order of Service and include your own postcode. Please please do support this local branch of the Alzheimer's Society in memory of Norrise.

Lastly, Norrise's sister Joan said to me some years before her death, that if she died the following day, she had had a really wonderful life. I am sure that if Norrise had been *compos mentis* during the last few years of her life, she would have said the same. She certainly had a pretty good innings, a good life and is leaving us all with wonderful memories.

