

Gladys Lucy Langham “Chum” 1st Sept 1915 – 6th Dec 2005

Some 20 years ago we were scratching around for a present to give my mum for her birthday, and as with many 70 year olds, it was difficult to think of any item she needed, or would really take great pleasure in. We then hit on the idea of taking her to Stratford to see a play. I knew that back in my childhood in Leicester, that sort of trip was her one extravagance for the year. She would go with a friend, stay in a hotel, take in two or three plays, and come back re-invigorated.

20 yrs ago it was one of the best choices we made, and it became a regular family event. Winston was happy to look after the boys, taking them to White Horse Hill and recounting stories of dragons. Mum Faith and I would enjoy a leisurely drive through the Cotswolds, lunch by the Avon, an afternoon performance, and home again. Whenever the new brochure came out for the next season, and I would ring up to ask for her choice, there was a noticeable change in her voice. It suddenly exuded energy and enthusiasm, and the rest of the conversation skipped along in anticipation. As Joe pointed out “As You Like It” was always a favourite

Sitting next to her in a performance, you would often be aware that there was someone else besides the actor who knew the words; a gift, which dated back to her school days when she first gained her love of literature and the theatre in particular. She became an avid reader of the classics, especially Dickens, of who-dunnits and biographies

At 90 she had been privileged to pass through all Jaques 7 ages of life; a life of rich variety and age-related experiences, which in her latter years became the source of fond memories, which sustained her. As Simon pointed out in the poem he read, she had discovered early on that as gardens depend on the gardeners and their labour, so you get out of life what you put in. It's up to us how we use the talents God gives us, and what we make of life in his world.

So what were the talents and experiences, which made my mum, Gladys? Chum to her family and selected friends. She never really liked ‘Gladys’ although, only the week before she died she had admitted that she had at last grown to like it.

She was born into a loving and close, Primitive Methodist family in Faringdon on 1st Sept 1915. Her father, Fred Carter, was a well-liked pillar of the local community, her mum had suffered from polio as a child. Her childhood was happy and close relationships built with Bill her brother and other family members. There was an active church life with other young people in the town. Her schooling was successful, becoming head girl of the Elms County Grammar School. She turned down a place at University (a rarity for women in the early 30's) in order to care for her mother (an invalid for most of her life)... although I've heard it said that it was possible that she wanted to stay in Faringdon to keep an eye on Winston, lest he be tempted elsewhere. She herself was not without suitors, but to many local people, there was an inevitability about their marriage in 1940 in this church. Winston by then was already ordained into the ministry and so started an adventure for both of them, being directed to live in different parts of the country and taking on the role of minister's wife. She never asked to see the manse in advance and never asked for alterations. In Ormskirk some extra heating only arrived because the stewards insisted.

Over the years her mother's health meant that her concerns were never far from her family. Most of my school holidays as a child were spent here in Faringdon, with her as she took over the burden of care from her sister-in-law Margaret. And she successfully combined this with her commitment to the church, a life in politics, and mother and wife.

Going through old papers I discovered this article from the Methodist Recorder dated March 1965, which seems to me to sum up a very active and public period in her life.

EXTRACT from Meth. Recorder article:

Retirement after a short spell in Banbury brought her and Winston back to Faringdon, to the house where she had spent virtually all of her life. There was a sense of ‘coming home’, but it was hardly retirement. There was the Advice Bureau, which needed staffing and running, and the church here which needed a steward or a key holder (caretaker really) with hosts of tables and chairs to move around. Her visit on a Wednesday to the Women's meeting was a must. Her loyalty was apparent in all that she took on, and it was never stronger than when she was with her family. Living as we do in Winchester, she took great pleasure in the times when we could get together. She was never happier than when she was learning about her grandsons Simon and Joe, their progress in life, their education and their adventures, she was greatly fond of Faith, my wife and appreciative of all she did for her, and I suspect that with me she was rather too indulgent!

I think my mum was a difficult person for some people to get to know. She was very private and kept much to herself. Often (unusually for a woman) she did not express her feelings in any forthright way, she was very tolerant of other people's views even if they were opposed to her own. Sometimes you didn't know what she thought. A friend from Labour Party days recalled a description of her by some comrades at Kirkby "*The lady who can tell people off without even speaking to them*" and "*Ask the lady from Ormskirk to stop coming - we can't express ourselves in our usual way*" She kept her own counsel; she could be very stubborn and this frustrated those of us who knew her well and tried to help her in later years. However it is clear that over the years she made a real and lasting impression on many people. Her skills and talents did not go to waste, or get lost in the mists of time, they had a lasting impact. She kept in touch with many people from the different churches where she and Winston had served and collectively they all recognise the same personality.

Sylvia Jacquest, a friend from Ormskirk writes: "What a strong, loving, caring, brave and committed lady she was. A person of integrity who it would not be possible to forget. She was a good influence on many people's lives, including mine. I imagine she didn't realise how important, since she never had as high opinion of herself as she ought. But that was part of who she was":

Paul her nephew writes: "I have in my possession many pages of Chum's handwriting in which she copied out my first efforts at writing poetry. Who else would have thought it worthwhile to do this? Chum did: both self-effacing and faithful to her visions, both practical and poetic in her sensibilities, my aunt created a uniquely civil place in all our lives, one of unconditional love, boundless serenity and Christian conversation. My family and I join you in offering thanks for the gift of her life to us. She is in our hearts as in yours."

As reading became impossible and movement more and more difficult. Chum relied on her memories. Here is poem I discovered which she wrote, which seems a good way of drawing her life to a close:

COLLECTORS ALL
G.L.Langham

Marbles, a butterfly, birds eggs, a stone,
Special things that a child calls his own,
Mantel-shelves lined with old bric-a-brac
Bringing memories scurrying back;
Baby bottles, old letters and snaps,
Georgian spoons and old country maps;
Fine Dresden figurines, salt cellars rare,
Wedgewood vases and blue Delft ware.
These are the things we can handle and see.
There are other treasures for you and me.
The heart has its treasures both rich and rare
Which never can tarnish, or fade or wear,
Collected each day as we journey along,
A face, a scene, a scent or a song –
Memories that brighten the darkest days
As we re-live the past and recall the ways
We have trodden and friends we have made –
Time has flown but remembrance has stayed.
Treasures of spirit are richest of all,
Collected in faith as we hear God's call
To seek those things that are good and true,
Loving and sharing our whole lives through.

Nicholas Langham
December 2005