

Katharine Lesley Thorlby (1917-2016)

I started life with 8 aunts. Lesley was the youngest.

When I was a child Lesley was my favourite. I was fond of the others but they were older and more serious. Lesley was fun. She would burst into our house bringing sweets and presents, join in our games and encourage us in new activities, like sliding down the stairs on trays, which were not wholly approved of. This enthusiasm and zest were characteristics she retained throughout her life.

She was born in Stirling in 1917, the last of six sisters. The family moved to Glasgow when she was two. I'm sure she was never overawed by her more academic sisters. All her sisters lived to be at least 90 but she liked to say that the two longest lived were the two non-graduates, herself and Anne.

After leaving school she started to train as a teacher but she didn't like it and she decided to become a physiotherapist.

By the time she had completed her training the war had started and she joined up. These were exciting times and she would often talk about them, particularly her antics in Piccadilly Circus sitting on the lions on VE day. She made several lasting friendships which she kept up after the war until, eventually, she was the last survivor.

In 1952 she married Cyril Thorlby always known on our side of the family as Bill. They lived much of their married life in Cranleigh where she continued her physiotherapy. Sadly Bill died in 1972 leaving Lesley a widow at the age of 55.

Lesley moved to Wheatley in 1976 to be near 3 of her sisters who were then living in and around Oxford. There she soon joined the church and, with her friends Ivy Morgan and Helen Street, started the Wheatley Bridge Club. The church and bridge were central to her life from then on.

We moved down from Edinburgh to Abingdon in 1984. My favourite aunt became our sons' favourite great aunt and she was a significant part of their lives.

Despite living in England from her early 20s she remained fiercely Scottish and retained strong traces of her Scottish accent. She used to return almost every year with some of her sisters, taking a cottage and enjoying the countryside that she had known as a child, particularly Speyside. When she and my mother could no longer drive themselves, Linda and I took them to stay in Aviemore and they delighted in pointing out all the cottages and farmhouses they had stayed in as children. And for several years after my mother died we used to drive her up to Scotland in the summer so she could spend a week with two of her nieces, Liz and Kay, in Dunbar and Lochcarron.

She also had exciting trips abroad to Canada and New York with her nieces which she loved talking about. And no less memorable were her trips in the UK with Pat and Steve. If some

disaster occurred, and it often did, which required the attention of a doctor or a paramedic or, even on one occasion, a hospital stay, this did not daunt her and only added spice to the retelling.

Gradually she aged and became more frail. First she had a pendant to help in an emergency. More than once I arrived at her flat to find her chatting animatedly to a policeman or a paramedic who had been summoned on some pretext. She would engage with anyone, finding out about their families, where they were born, particularly if she detected any trace of a Scottish accent. When she could no longer move about freely, carers came in to cook her meals and get her in and out of bed. In a very short time she would treat the ones she liked as old friends.

Eventually it became obvious to us and her friends, though not to Lesley, that living in her flat on her own had become impossible. She moved, with extreme reluctance, to the Triangle. There followed a fraught few weeks where she complained bitterly. There were three things that calmed her down. Firstly, the care and patience of the Triangle staff. Secondly, her loyal friends who continued to visit, taking her to church, playing bridge, giving her trips outside so that barely a day passed without a visitor. And thirdly, Sky TV. She had always been passionately interested in sport, particularly rugby, tennis and football and rejoiced in any Scottish triumph either on the rugby field or with Andy Murray. She supported Man United, perhaps because she liked Alex Ferguson, for when he retired her interest in Man U seemed to wane. For me, sport was always a safe topic of conversation when I visited her and she always asked how Oxford United, my team, had done that week.

She kept her spirit and her mind right to the end though she was, as she frequently repeated, weary of life. The day before she died, she had an unexpected visit from her niece Mary whom she hadn't seen for over a year. She recognized her immediately and enquired about her children and grandchildren. My very last conversation with her was: Did Oxford win on Saturday,? Yes, I replied, we've been promoted. That's good, she said. She died in the early hours next morning.

Aunt Lesley could be demanding and sometimes approached matters like a bull in a china shop. But she always inspired affection. As I have spoken to people about her in the past few days, her step daughter Susan, her other relatives, her Wheatley friends from church and bridge, Neil and Annette in the post office from whom she used to collect her pension every week with much banter, the landlady and locals in the Kings Arms to which Pat pushed her for her lunch time lager on Tuesdays and Thursdays, the staff at the Triangle Nursing Home, they, almost without exception, used the same phrase to describe her. Lesley was a character.

She certainly was.

John Hardie