

Mary Matson – Eulogy

To try and sum up Mary's long life in only 5 minutes is an impossible task for she lived life to the full, was hugely influential in the lives of her family and in the lives of so many friends and pupils at the schools John taught at that I will simply attempt to provide a framework for you to hang your own memories on of a very remarkable lady.

In 1928, Mary's parents – Captain Colin West and his new wife, Elizabeth – known to the family as Cha - sailed for Rhodesia to farm near Bulawayo. Mary's brother Tom was born in 1930 and two years later, on the 23rd of April, Mary arrived. In their early years, they had an enjoyable childhood surrounded by the sights and smells of Africa – Mary had a pet Donkey and so was always delighted to see Donkeys throughout her life.

In 1937 when she was 5, the family returned to Kent. They bought a small mixed farm in Headcorn, Kent and both Mary and Tom were sent off to boarding school. It is fair to say that Mary enjoyed Lacrosse and the less academic aspects of life at Benenden but hated exams with a passion. While at prep school, her brother Tom was a friend of Mary's future husband John and she first met him at a school cricket match nearly 83 years ago.

On leaving Benenden and at the time with no clear decision made on a career she went to Saint Martin's art college in London which she funded herself by taking on cleaning jobs. Mary excelled in wood carving as well as water colour and pencil sketching – a hobby she took up again in her very late 80's just when many people would be laying down their brushes and pencils. Recently she was recalling . living in London through the great Smog of 1952 and was glad her lungs were functioning better in her twenties.

After a long wait while John did his National Service as a Submariner and completing Fighter Pilot training in the Navy, they married in Kent in 1957.

Their three children were born between 1959 and 1963 and, after John left the Navy in 1960, they moved into a tiny flat at Eagle House Prep School where Mary started her career supporting John looking after the welfare of boys at the school frequently being a “stand in Matron”, making costumes

for school plays, assisting with the art work on the scenery for countless productions as well as comforting and mentoring pupils.

In 1969 John was appointed as Junior House Master at Lord Wandsworth College in Hampshire, the Headmaster, clearly unaware that he had got himself a “Buy One, Get One Free”! John and Mary were a true team working successfully to change school culture from the old fagging system to a modern caring community.

Mary became in effect a surrogate mother to desperately homesick boys – so many of whom have left heartfelt tributes to her over the past few weeks talking of the impact the time they spent at Junior House as 11 and 12 year olds had on their lives – here are a few of their memories:

“We saw your mum as “our” mum during term time and she looked after us like her extended family. She would run weekly errands for us into Farnham for anything from ink cartridges to blue-tack. She once also had a new watch strap fitted on my watch. A very kind lady”.

“Very many memories. Especially around fish finger sandwiches.”

“To me she was a force of nature - someone who under no circumstances whatsoever would you argue with. She was Junior House’s security guarantee”.

“Mary was a person you never wanted to disappoint. She always expected the best from you and knew what you were capable of. Perhaps it is now safe for me to put my hands in my pockets without the fear of having them sewn up”.

“I am massively in your parents’ debt for the support they gave me at, what I realise now, was a deeply traumatic stage of my life. Your parents and the college were almost literally live savers for me, and what I’ve gone on to do and see in my life has grown from the kindness they showed to me”.

“Remarkably, I remember her briefing me before heading to London for an interview I had for Uni (she was absolutely on point, too). I know I am not the only one to think that we were all very lucky, even blessed, to have had her in our lives at such a formative stage”.

In 1984, Mary and John moved to High Park Road in Farnham where they were hugely involved with Halloween, Street Parties and festive events and Mary anonymously (although everyone knew it was her) left sweets and

little gifts on the doorsteps of all the houses where children lived at Easter and Christmas. The bunting Mary made for the whole street out of rags and apparently John's underwear remains in use and despite moving to a flat in Farnham in 2020, they remain very fondly remembered.

For Mary, John was undoubtedly the love of her life having waited so long for him when he was called up for National Service. She was a tremendous support for him with her involvement in so many aspects of school life. She even overcame stage fright and took to the stage in "Arsenic and Old Lace" a Staff Play. They were a formidable force for good wherever they went.

After John retired from Lord Wandsworth College in the mid 1990'

s, Mary put her fear of seasickness and sailing to one side to accompany John on trips all over the Solent, happily tolerated his love of bonfires and the resulting smoky clothes and incinerated sausages, tolerated his disorganised shed, enjoyed holidays in Spain, Pompeii and Corsica and shared with him a passion for gardening creating with him the amazing beds, arches, water features and paths we all remember at No 23.

First and foremost, Mary was "Mother", "Grandma" and "Great Grandma" and with John a dominant force in the family. She was not always easy to please and most of us are actually walking stone statues having been fixed with her disapproving eye on more than one occasion but, like John, she was massively proud of everyone's successes, big and small and even when very poorly in hospital recently, all conversation was around what her family were doing.

Over many decades, Mary developed a keen interest in raising money for, and giving to, number of charities - St Christopher's Hospice in London, Phyllis Tuckwell Hospice in Farnham, RNLI, WaterAid, Crisis and many, many more, all benefited from Mary's fund raising efforts and generosity.

Mary has been influential in all our lives and the lives of the hundreds of pupils she interacted with. I am sure that she would all like to think that she has made a difference in her lifetime through raising a family, work and playing a part in a community – our memories of Mary will confirm that she has achieved all of this.

Mary was a woman who has had a huge impact on so many people in so many different ways that perhaps we should all simply remember her for

the way her life uniquely touched our lives for she will of course be remembered differently by us all.