

# Eulogy for Elise Hobbs

6<sup>th</sup> February 2023

Mummy, Mum, Grandma, Grandmalise, Mama, Elise. We all knew you by different names but in each and every case you were unique to us all. And, whilst you have gone onto a better place, you leave holes of different depths and size in every one of our lives.

It is my privilege to speak about our wonderful mother on behalf of the whole family; my 5 brothers, our wives and her 24 grandchildren. Sadly she took on the role of grandmother alone as it is almost 30 years to the day since we also gathered in this same church to bid farewell to Richard, our father and her so dearly loved husband. Whilst this obviously feels like a truly sad day we can take heart in her personal faith that she has joined him once more.

I should really start by saying, Mummy, as I always called her, said she wasn't afraid of dying but she wasn't really looking forward to the process itself!

She also told me she felt her life was divided into 3 distinct phases: life until she got married, her marriage, and life after Richard. There was a certain symmetry that each was almost equal in length.

Elise Katherine was born on 27<sup>th</sup> May 1934 in Rouen, France. Her occasional reversion to French during conversations in her final days perhaps betrayed that this was her first tongue, yet she was always adamant she was English, just born in France!

Many will know she, along with her parents Erik and Elsa Douglas-Dufresne and her brother, Alan, escaped from France in 1939; the family arriving in England on the last boat to make it safely to UK from Bordeaux. The crossing was not without drama: a crew mutiny and fire on board meant they nearly didn't make it, and she arrived in Plymouth with nothing more than a suitcase and the one toy allowed for each child; her precious doll Ronald.

Erik was able to use his farming qualifications to start a new life, first on the Waldegrave Estate, near Downside Abbey, and latterly on the Stirling Estate, Kier, in Scotland. Both provided deep roots for the rest of Mummy's life. The first established an unbroken link to Benedictine communities and the latter, a love of Scotland which passes through the generations.

She was sent to school at St Mary's Ascot; she told me she nearly didn't go because her parent's visit was going badly until the nuns provided an excellent lunch in the guest dining room with a bottle of wine. It proved an inspired choice as she thrived;

she was head girl and made lifelong friends, many of whom I know she was in touch with until only a few weeks ago, and some of whom I know are watching today. She then went to Ascot's finishing school, Errolston; for the younger amongst us, 6<sup>th</sup> form.

Following school, like many of her generation, she did secretarial training. Subsequently, she worked at Glyndebourne Opera House for a season, for Sir Timothy Eden, British Ambassador in Brussels and the airline, Al Italia. That connection to Italy allowed her natural love and talents for both music and languages to blossom. She was fluent in French and Italian and, in later life, learnt and spoke good Swahili.

Our mother and father met while Richard was up at Cambridge, with her brother Alan. They married in 1958 and set up home in a tiny, isolated house called Proverbs Green, near Dunmow in Essex. It had no running water or mains electricity; yet there, with Richard working for Shell and commuting to London, they started our family.

A hard but very happy 10 years in Essex, with his brother Michael visiting often, was followed by a brief 18 month overseas posting for Richard to New York. We travelled on the maiden Atlantic passage of the QE2 and I vividly remember Father Aldhelm, another Benedictine monk, waving a white blanket from the tower of Quarr Abbey as we sailed out of Southampton past the Isle of Wight.

From the early 70's onwards Elise became an increasingly frequent visitor to Worth Abbey where we boys had all been christened and subsequently put down for the school. A posting to Kenya in the mid 1970s meant Worth, and her mother's house in Mayfield, were her most frequent destinations when in England.

With Richard heading up Shell Chemicals' operations in East Africa, our house in Nairobi had a permanent stream of visitors, and Elise became an accomplished hostess for a diverse set of both local and international friends.

One amusing incident involved our great dane, Nero, who happily mixed in with the rough and tumble of 6 boys and other equally energetic teenagers. One party trick was to 'shake hands' but if you didn't let go, this normally indicated a further invitation to put both paws on your shoulders. At one, where I'm sure my father was seeking to impress, I recall the US ambassador's wife holding on just a little too long and ending up prostrate on the sofa with a very large dog on top of her.

With Alan, her brother, farming in the Kenyan highlands we all formed a bond with Africa which lasts to this day; Tim's farm in Nanyuki has become an unofficial place of pilgrimage visited by cousins after GCSEs, 'A' levels or other significant breaks in education or employment.

It was in Kenya that Elise nurtured her long standing musical talent, and all of us children were persuaded to play different musical instruments; even Richard, without any musical heritage, started to learn the recorder. This really was an act of true love.

As always Elise continued to lead musical worship in whichever church we were going to, and there were frequent collections of odd instruments all playing what they could. Her mantra was simple: the notes didn't matter as long as we kept to time!

There were also many happy musical soiree evenings at home at which assorted musicians would contribute, often supported by the very patient and professional David and Heather Macdonald, on cello and flute respectively. Elise, for her part, was involved in the local choir scene singing significant pieces such as St Matthew's Passion; a particular highlight was her singing a solo recital. The musical legacy has now passed on to the next generation with her passion and enthusiasm for regular disciplined practice, which some grandchildren will know about more than others.

In 1978 the family moved back and settled in Alton to make Richard's commute to the Shell Centre at Waterloo more manageable. It is at this point that they both experienced a life-changing encounter with the Holy Spirit. They became active members of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal and founding members of the Alton Day of Renewal which continues to meet monthly to this day.

With the majority of us children post school age, Elise and Richard also embraced the opportunity to work together at the Centre for International Briefing at Farnham Castle and, for the first time in over 30 years, there seemed to be a bit of space for them to do things together. It was therefore a huge shock and sadness for her and all of us when, months from retirement, Daddy died suddenly in early 1993.

Despite this huge loss, Mummy moved seamlessly into the third phase of her life as we children began to have children of our own with a frequency that may have alarmed some, and she became a full-time grandmother. She would delight in having them to stay, however young and in whatever combinations.

Her experience of coping with the challenges of bringing up six children meant she had often worked out what she thought was the quickest and most efficient way to complete almost every household chore. Her frugality was also legendary, both in terms of the kitchen and repurposing anything that had not completely disintegrated. Her visits with her trusty sewing kit is something we'll all miss but, at least, we'll all remember the best way to iron a shirt.

Mummy's life revolved around her family. She was never happier than at a full family gathering; the arrival of every new grandchild and step-grandchild compounding her joy. She was so proud of you all, and she has so much to be proud of!

She was also fiercely protective of us boys and each of our individual families; for Elise, her daughters-in-law were the daughters she never had. Caroline's death nearly 20 years ago hit both her and us all hard and she was so pleased when Peter found happiness again with Sarah.

For us all Elise was a one off. Brought up in the certainties of a less complex era, she could be disarmingly honest. She would always give a straight answer to a direct question, even if a slightly more equivocal response might have been more diplomatic; for her there was a right way of thinking and doing things - you just had to find it. Occasionally her sons could get away with saying "Mummy, you just can't say that" but few others could.

Her daily prayer life including Mass and the Rosary, where possible, amplified by various prayer groups had an intensity which was infectious for many. She was always a first port of call if one wanted Divine intervention at short notice. The immediate response was to light a candle and get on her knees.

And then, full circle. Andrew's move to Downside school provided an opportunity for Mummy to reconnect with her Benedictine roots, becoming a regular visitor up until the day she fell at home and had her stroke 18 months ago.

With extraordinary willpower many will know she fought back to live at Windmill House with full time care. Led by Sena and supported by Rachel and others for over a year, she remained central to the family, receiving huge numbers of visitors, including her weekly Mother's Prayers group. She even attended the last two annual family cricket matches in Chawton.

It was only in the last few weeks that she declined quite fast and it was a blessing that she died as she wanted, with dignity at home and with her sons at her bedside; she really was ready to join the Lord.

Before I finish and let Alice, her eldest grandchild, add a perspective from her grandchildren. I'd like to thank Abbot Stephen and all those who have helped with this service today. The Benedictine thread really has run all the way through her life.

In conclusion, as a child, I remember Mummy regularly saying that her beloved father, Erik, would often quote the following; and I paraphrase:

"I shall pass this way but once; any good that I can do, let me do it now. Let me not defer nor neglect it, for I shall not pass this way again."

Elise has passed this way and she has done extraordinary good along the way. The fact so many of us have joined today to share in this ceremony is a testament to our love for her. I know she would be humbled seeing us all here; but I think she can, and I'm sure we'll meet again one day.