

# Shirley Germond - Reflection and Tribute

Part one: Reflection

*Read by Lucy Symons (Celebrant)*

Part two: Tribute

*Read by Peter and Richard Germond*

## Reflection

*Read by Lucy Symons (Celebrant)*

It's been a delight to get to know Shirley in such a brief time, and I really feel I have got to know her, having been given the opportunity to read about her life from her own personal recollections. Over the last year of her life Shirley hand-wrote her life story, to ensure she left her family her own personal recollections, and to give those to follow to have something to get to know her by.

Shirley was born at home in a small council house in Barnet in 1934, a younger sister for Jean who was then nearly five. With their age difference as children they didn't have too much in common but later in life became great pals

The family lived half-way down the hill that ran between Barnet General Hospital at the top and the primary school at the bottom. Well Road was the very edge of the current development at that time, so the back garden led on to the cornfields where many happy days were spent playing amongst the corn stalks with the other local children when they weren't making a go-cart out of pram parts or pushing their fixed wheel bike up the hill to freewheel down, their feet far from the pedals which sped so fast as to make it impossible to keep up, or stop. Scary, and exhilarating for a small person who wasn't even five yet, nearly as exciting as the penny a jar the girls received for capturing the caterpillars from the garden cabbages.

When their mother left the house, Shirley and Jean's dad would create a swing from the sewing machine box or arrange the furniture in the sitting room and challenge them with the task of clambering from one side to the other without touching the floor culminating in a whizz down the ironing board which doubled as a slide. As soon as mum came home – everything was back where it should have been.

The war broke out when Shirley was five and she started school at Underhill Primary. It was a long walk downhill all the way to be terrified at the hands of her strict teachers and then a tiring plod back up again to home. Grandma Fitch, her paternal grandmother was staying with the family, and became the self-appointed Minister of

security, insisting the entire family take to the Anderson shelter as soon as war was declared and then every time there was a whiff of a bomb. Shirley hated it down there – in the dark and damp – the only redeeming feature was the emergency rations she was bribed with, which included a delicious Horlicks tablet which took the edge off the whole experience.

In 1939 Shirley's dad was moved from working in the canteen of the local police station in Barnet to a new job as manager of an off-licence in Chiswick – the family made the move with him, with Shirley, Jean and her mum all travelling to the new house wrapped in blankets seated on their settee, strapped to the back of the removals lorry. A passer-by, assuming they had been bombed out waved a Christmas turkey at them as he returned home from the butcher and wished them well.

Wartime meant a huge number of the brewery personnel were called up, so the whole family were in turn enlisted to assist with deliveries – hefting up crates of beer to deliver them on the trade bike.

However, the new house was large and without furniture in several rooms, and Shirley missed the cosy house on Wall Road, as she sat marvelling from her bedroom window at the night-time skies over London, lit up red from the frequent blazing fires

The family were allocated space in the brewery during air raids, and spent many nights perched on the slatted wooden shelves beside huge vats halfway up the domed cellar wall. Men, women and children all slept together hoping the brewery avoided a direct hit as death by drowning in beer would have been impossible to avoid.

There was a direct hit diagonally across from the family home, resulting in windows and plaster being blown out – there was no possibility for serious repairs (beyond replacing the windows) during the war, so the family made the most of it, living with exposed walls.

Infant and junior school under her belt, Shirley left school at 15 ½ not really sure what she wanted to do but determined not to work in an office. Her mother arranged a successful interview for her as a lab technician at UCL's physiology department. Not even sure what she had let herself in for before she started the job, she clearly thrived and stayed for the next 14 years rising to the vaulted heights of Senior Technician. Whilst officially employed in the labs, Shirley and her compatriots were sent on day release to learn various auxiliary skills including workshop practice in various materials, glass blowing and electronics which gave her the basic skills to develop and make equipment imperative for her research projects.

Whilst she loved being in the workshop, at the ripe old age of 29 (and, as she put it, considered well past it) Shirley decided she should probably look for a more worthwhile career and so decided to train as a speech therapist. She won a place on a three-year training programme and a grant as a mature student. She started seeing patients in various London hospitals and qualified in July 1967 and then promptly got engaged to JP, a Civil Engineer from South Africa, and they swiftly married in early September of the same year.

About to embark on her first “proper job” in the school health system in Ealing, Shirley had to rethink her plans when she realised she was pregnant with David and so took a “sitting down” job in a local Kew Gardens taxi office. Four babies in six years, meant that Shirley had to put her burgeoning career hopes on the back burner, but as soon as Peter turned 8, she was encouraged to apply for a job by her sister Jean in the Great Ormond Street hospital assisting a consultant, John Pritchard, in charting the treatment of various cancer patients – pre-computers this involved plotting, by hand, all the variables (blood test results and chemo treatments) for the clinics. (this was still hand drawn until the 1980s)

Shirley was also seconded to become the administrative leader for the European Clinical Trial for neuroblastoma (a particularly pernicious children’s cancer) and was asked to present her data to the semi-annual meetings of the European Neuroblastoma Group. This involved international travel to Paris, Amsterdam, Rome, Brussels, Oslo and Dublin, and each trip had sightseeing time built in for Shirley to make the most of this opportunity. Although on the very first trip, though they managed to miss the plane back and had to sleep at the airport overnight!

JP sadly died on 18th February 1986, soon after, when Shirley was due back at work, Jean suggested she take a bit of time off. She simply said “no, life must go on.” Shirley continued to work for the GOSH for the following three years – computerisation was now becoming part of the clinical world so her charting days were coming to a close.

Her mother came to live with the family after managing on her own for several years after the death of her husband, Shirley and Jean’s dad in 1984. Needing a bit of extra care, she moved in to 7 Twyford Avenue in Acton taking up JP’s former office. Shirley initially worked three days a week and eventually felt the need to leave to care for her mother full-time.

Realising the need to supplement her pension and showing great foresight she took the decision to sell the family home and rent a property Teddington to ride out the mad property market prevailing at the time and when she was ready to purchase, found a 3

bed Edwardian semi on St Winifred's Road where she moved with her mother and younger children.

Once again, she picked up her satchel and headed back to school part-time as a mature student – this time to train to teach students with dyslexia. She gained a distinction (one of only two awarded) which at the age of 59 says a great deal about her characteristic tenacity and determination. Shirley joined a team at a training centre near Farnham and began helping students at Newland House prep and Surbiton High Junior School – and had a side-line in home tuition for several more students through word of mouth. This she juggled whilst caring for her mother – ensuring she had only scheduled work sporadically throughout the day to fit in around the meals she needed to be on-hand to provide.

Within three years, Shirley had been recruited to do some assessments for teachers for the pupils they were hoping to help which was gratifying but time consuming– mostly for Becky who became her mother's typist. It was through these assessments that Shirley collected a gaggle of delightful quirky, often naughty kids, sadly mostly very bright but hugely challenged by their learning difficulties – she marvelled at their ability to think outside the box and how they managed to design their own strategies to cope with the challenges of a classroom scenario and appreciated their consequent work ethic. Shirley followed a number of them through their schooling to university and marvelled at their creative and amazing study skills vital for their success – the whole world of teaching kids with learning difficulties has moved on in leaps and bounds as the use of technology to help has increased their ability to better learn in a mainstream environment.

Jean and Shirley's own mother finally died in hospital aged 96 after a fall resulted in a broken hip. Shirley moved to a flat in Teddington for several years before aged 76 making another move to Epsom. There she continued to assist three pupils, and had a few terms of teaching with a friend's home school set up but finally dusted the chalk off her hands in her early 80s."

Several of her former pupils and their families are still in touch and have sent condolences at hearing of her passing.

Shirley had a long and fulfilling life. It has been wonderful to share her story based on her own words. In the tribute later we will hear about the positive impact of her life on so many people.

## Tribute to Shirley

### Part 1 (Read by Peter Germond)

When we sat down (virtually), as Shirley's children, to plan for today we were blessed with two things. First, ever practical, Mum had already given us a list of what she wanted! And second, we received a great many amazing messages from friends and family giving tribute to how much Mum meant to them and the impact she had on their lives.

We thought we would start with two of these messages - which beautifully give a measure of who Mum was and speak to her many wonderful qualities. The first is from her great friend Verity:

*"Shirley was a seeker of wisdom. Though she was shy to speak - often a silent member of a gathering, when she did her words were always full of insight, knowledge, integrity and a depth of understanding.*

*On our travels, we were known as OATS - old age travellers. Shirley was the practical one. Before the Sat-Nav days she would precisely map out our route with bullet points and clear directions. If anything went wrong in cottage or car it was Shirley who would mend it.*

*Shirley did not like driving down hills and I did not like driving up hills so there was quite a lot of driving exchange on our trips. On arrival at our cottages it was Shirley who always set up the bar!*

*A wonderful teacher with instinctive knowledge of how to help those with difficulties and set them on the path to success - I have seen letters of gratitude from many.*

*Always searching for understanding of life, Shirley faced her physical difficulties with enormous courage and fortitude.*

*I will miss her comfort, guidance and friendship enormously."*

The second is from Dad's sister Maddy:

*"The first time I met Shirley, my sister-in-law, was in 1979 when Dave, Andrew, Kim and I visited her, my brother JP (who I hadn't seen for 20 years) and her children David, Richard, Becky and Peter.*

*How well I remember the warm welcome we received when our boisterous family descended on their quiet, well behaved household (not quite sure who she is describing there!) and shattered the peace with shrieks of laughter and lots of hugs! Shirley bless her, took it all in her stride with a big smile and twinkles in her eyes. We all fell in love with her and I have always thought of Shirley as the sister I never had.*

*Two years ago I had a rush of blood to my head and decided to renew my passport for no particular reason. But suddenly one day I thought I would love to visit Shirley as I also had not seen her for 20 years. The time we spent together was filled with laughter - and the memories of that happy time will always be close to my heart. I am so very grateful that we had that special time together."*

These two wonderful messages sum up so much of who Mum was. Through these and all the other messages the same words come up again and again when describing her:

*Intelligent, strong and resilient, warm and caring, generous, graceful, patient and positive, with a sunny disposition and a great sense of humour.*

We would like to share with you some reflections on some of Mum's characteristics; Mum was inquisitive, Mum was artistic and creative, Mum was wise, and Mum was caring.

**Mum was always inquisitive; curious about faith, about nature and about the world.** She had an enquiring mind and was a seeker of knowledge and learning throughout her life.

Her curiosity about life and its purpose led her on different journeys of faith. She shared this outlook with Dad. They both joined and for a time followed the teachings of the School of Economic Science. Whilst Mum left the School, she retained a strong faith and philosophy in which she found meaning. It is a mark of who she was that she understood that we must all travel our own journey – she knew what was right and of value to her but never sought to impose her views on us, her children, or on others.

In later years she took great inspiration, comfort and companionship from her regular bible study group as she explored her faith.

Mum's spiritual inquisitiveness was matched by her desire to explore and appreciate nature. She found enjoyment and happiness through her appreciation of the natural world. She loved nature and spent many happy times looking out over her friends Heather and Trevor's beautiful garden.

As part of her love of nature she loved gardening: she loved visiting Wisely and Kew Gardens for horticultural inspiration – as much as the local garden centre, navigating the aisles in a wheelchair pushed at speed by her grandson Daniel.

Mum was also an explorer and adventurer who appreciated the world through her travels. She shared with us many a story of adventures during her early life and we certainly had some adventures with her. With the passage of time and retelling, some details may have become a bit hazy, but many adventures seemed to revolve around her love of unusual motor vehicles and love of the open road.

Her nephew Jon described his earliest memory of being the:

*“sheer excitement her visits created, arriving from London to Kent in various dodgy cars, and once I think, on a shiny Lambretta scooter.”*

Mum shared a wonderful description of driving (in her early twenties) all the way to Italy in an open top sports car. The previous owner, having been a Spitfire pilot, had installed an impressive collection of dials and displays more often found in a WW2 fighter plane. She loved it! It was perfectly suited to mum's appreciation of the unusual, and her love of engineering and tinkering with all things mechanical. We were always struck by how out of the ordinary undertaking trips like that must have been back in the 1950s, and how fearless and adventurous she was.

Her favourite vehicle seems to have been an old Triumph which she owned with a friend. They decided that a convertible would be much more fun and so, ever practical, Mum cut the roof off herself. This wasn't a complete success, as the sides tended to bow and doors swing open when cornering – something that was not entirely solved by tying the whole thing together with a rope and having to climb over the sides to get in!

Mum's approach to Health and Safety was in keeping with the times, trips to school included travelling with the tail gate down on our old Austin Cambridge; with on one occasion a child rolling out the car whilst going along the A4; and seeing just how many children could fit in the car on school runs with a couple in the passenger footwell and one getting stuck under the break pedal.

Our family holidays as children were also always a source of adventure – often unintentionally!

We were often to be found on a windswept beach; a campsite swarming with wasps and on one memorable occasion camping on a clifftop in a howling gale. On another trip etched in our memory we ended up completely lost, and unable to find a campsite, the six of us spent an uncomfortable night squeezed together in the little VW camper. We woke, disappointed to discover my birthday cake - completely squashed by Richard's feet which had been in the food cupboard for the duration of the night.

Once her children had flown the nest, mum continued to travel, and as Verity said shared many wonderful adventures as the OATs. She liked nothing more than a game of scrabble, relaxing on the beach and climbing the odd fence as well as the more cultural elements of travel.

Beyond her vehicular adventures mum also loved the sea - in fact she said she always wanted to be a sailor and so loved that her middle name was Marina. It seems fitting that Mums last outing with her children and grandsons was a lovely summers boat trip up the Thames – needless to say we broke down on the water and were towed home.

Section 2 (*Read by Richard Germond*)

**Mum had a wonderful combination of being creative being practical.**

Mum loved and appreciated art which was often a focus on her travels. She was an artist herself, she particularly loved painting and drawing and took classes to develop her skills.

She appreciated the artistic talents in others – talents which clearly run in the Fitch family. She always encouraged us in our artistic endeavours. She loved that Joseph took GCSE art last year and spent many an hour looking through his sketchbook and sharing superlatives! He particularly remembers her message to him through these conversations of how important it is to have an artistic view and to keep looking at the world around you and finding joy in nature.

Whilst we've heard about Mums inventive but cavalier approach to modifying cars, she was also creative in many other ways. She made her own clothes (and ours!), she

took an upholstery course and reupholstered our aging chairs. In our household she was as much the one with the toolkit as Dad.

Throughout her life, whilst traditional in some ways, Mum was always open to new ideas and particularly embraced new technology. We helped set her up with her first computer and introduced her to the internet, only to discover on the next visit she had brought a new car online without any discussion with any of us.

Mobile technology was a boon to her and us. She would happily text away on a tiny press button phone and there was no stopping her once she had been introduced to an iPhone and iPad. Our family WhatsApp group became a great way to keep in touch particularly in this last year. It really was a two-way street with Mum demanding ever more photos and updates from us all, but once she had discovered animated Gifs or 'Grifs' as she liked to call them, there really was no stopping her.

### **Mum was thoughtful, considered and wise.**

She was a source of guidance and wisdom for many.

As her children we have all benefitted from Mums wise counsel throughout our lives. And as if four children were not enough Mum then fully embraced her role as 'the wise one' with the next generation with her four grandchildren. A careful listener, never judgemental and always deeply loving.

These same qualities we know were appreciated by her many friends who valued her insight and integrity.

Mum was a passionate teacher. She particularly loved supporting children with dyslexia, many during her time at New Land House School.

As Verity described so beautifully she had an "instinctive knowledge of how to help those with difficulties and set them on the path to success". Verity is right, Mum was a natural teacher. She made learning fun, and was extraordinarily creative in her teaching. Not only did her students love being taught by her but they knew she loved teaching them.

Mum stayed in touch with many of her students and their parents over the years and continued to follow their lives and share in their achievements. . It has been so lovely to receive words of appreciation from some of the now adult children she taught and their parents.

Lucy, a parent Mum stayed in touch with, wrote

“Dear Mrs G, our Shirl! She was a legend and changed our eldest son George’s life forever ... she gave him so much time and care, and gave him the belief in himself. She genuinely loved and cared for George, and untrapped his potential when he was young and battling. He is now 30 and getting married in July. Mrs G would be proud of him! She was amazing”

So a wonderful part of Mums legacy lives on in all the lives she touched with her wisdom, guidance and through her teaching.

**Mum was always caring: a home maker, a devoted sister, often a surrogate mother, and a deeply valued friend to many**

A homemaker in every sense of the word, Mum created a safe harbour for her children to return to throughout her life. She extended this to all: family and friends alike. She also lovingly cared for her own mother for the last decade of her life.

When Mum and Dad had a very young family they shared a house with the McGuinness – the growing Germond family upstairs and the McGuinness’s downstairs. Her friendship with Jane survived three of us being in the bath together and flooding their kitchen! Mum and Jane went on to have a long, deep and enduring friendship and Mum cared deeply for her children Jon, Sarah and Andrew, viewing them as her own.

During our childhood friends would often come to stay, and for some of mine the fear of having to join me in sharing a room with David and Richard was more than made up for by Mum with her care, compassion and sunny disposition.

If we are honest her approach to cooking cuisine was heavily influenced by her experience of wartime rationing which meant a fair bit of boiling, a lot of salting and a love of rich puddings. But all prepared with love.

Her resilience was brought to the fore and truly tested when Dad died in 1986 leaving Mum with four kids under 18. She seemingly effortlessly managed this burden, working full time, making wise financial decisions and planning for all our futures. Whilst at the same time creating a loving home for us all, always putting our interests ahead of her own.

Whilst her heart was full of love for all her children, it seemed to burst even more when her adored grandsons, Josh, James, Joseph and Daniel arrived. Her face would literally light up when they arrived, arms thrown open wide. Her children were then definitely relegated from then on!!

In Becci's house 'nana spreads' were legendary. She could lay on a party tea effortlessly and the kids would love coming home from school knowing nana was over and all the extra treats they'd be getting. She was also a great support to Josh and James as they grew, offering her guidance and wisdom in many a lengthy email!

Mum was a surrogate mother to many. Our cousin Kim, reflecting on how Mum supported her when she moved from South Africa to London, said:

"Shirley became our London Mum - hence the name Mum shirl. Mum shirl Always offered a yummy meal, a warm hug, big smiles and sharp sense of humour. Always the same - her arms wide open. Mum shirl thank you for being a beautiful surrogate Mum, friend and human being."

Mum was also a devoted sister. She loved her sister Jean dearly and valued their companionship. She always looked forward to visiting Jean and they took many holidays together. The beautiful beaches of Dorset were one of their favourite places, and held many memories of trips with her mum too that always ended with a 'nice cream tea'.

She also had a great love for her nephews Nick and John and John's wife and their three children. As Jon recalled:

"When I first moved to work in London, a little lost, Shirley was, as ever, very kind. She always had time to chat things over. Immensely kind, patient and brave in her own life, she had a verve and vitality which never seemed to dim."

The friendships Mum made in her life were profoundly important to her, once made, many sustained to the end of her life. Her friendships helped her cope with raising a young family alone after Dad's untimely death and supported her in times of need throughout her life.

As Mum's life progressed she continued to make friends through work, socially and as she moved home. When Mum finally moved to Epsom she made friends with all her neighbours and in particular formed a lovely friendship with Jane and Claire which she valued so much.

We know that mum was hugely comforted and took great strength from the support she received from friends as she faced increasing ill-health. At this stage she also needed in home care, these carers provided wonderful care for Mum and many become firm friends in a very short space of time.

All of her friends were very much in her mind as she prepared for the end.

We are so pleased some of you have been able to join us today. We would like to thank you all not only for your comfort and support at the end of her life but for the joy, happiness and love you brought throughout Mum's life.

Mum had a twinkle in her eye and a real sense of mischief. She kept this right to the end of her life, while the last years were particularly challenging, she remained resilient and kept her sense of humour. We only realised after the event that had engineered her own escape from the care home that she called 'Stalag Beaumont', contravening her own signed medical wishes, and after a brief hospital stay spent her last month at home with her family, which we will always be grateful for.

She was our rock, the glue which held our family together. She was humble and loyal, always putting others before herself. She was much loved and full of love for friends and family.

We will miss her, but above all we will remember her love and her beautiful smile.

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