

Tribute to Rowena Vining. St Mary's Greywell, 25 April 2013

The end of the First World War saw the formation of the British Army of Occupation on the Rhine. In 1920, General Sir Thomas Morland was appointed as the Army's Commander-in-Chief, and relocated his wife and daughters, Phyllis and Marjorie, to Cologne.

Captain Percival Vining was the General's Aide-de-Camp, caught Phyllis's eye, and married her in 1920 - in what the Cologne Post called 'the most important social event of the year'.

Twins Christopher and Rowena were born in 1921, followed, in 1924, by a second daughter June. Another war, and a dashing young New Zealand naval officer, saw sisters Rowena and June leading much of their lives, quite literally, a world apart, but saw Rowena having, in a very real sense, a New Zealand family.

Rowena was very much a part of our lives from the beginning. Among my earliest memories is of mum grabbing any moment to scrawl one of the blue air letters that, for decades, she exchanged with Rowena on a weekly basis. Birthday letters and Christmas cards were dependable, and anxiously awaited – not only for the cheques they contained and which were revealed to be all the more generous when the exciting process of currency exchange was undertaken.

Over the years, we from down-under have become ever closer and closer to Rowena - with her many visits to New Zealand, and our even more numerous pilgrimages to Greywell where we have always been made to feel welcome, and of which we in a small way have come to feel ourselves part.

New Zealand memories go back too to Rowena's much loved aunt, our great aunt Marjorie, who lived next door to Rowena in what were then Holly and Dorchester Cottages. Before leaving for NZ we will see Rowena's ashes placed in the churchyard with Aunt Margie's, and Rowena's name added, as she planned, to the stone which she herself arranged for her aunt in 1989.

Part of the difficulty in trying to tell Rowena's story is that while she loved to talk, she was always reluctant to put herself in the centre of any story. That doubtless came, in part, from the disciplines of her-war time and diplomatic careers. But there was, too, so much modesty and self-deprecation; any story that Rowena did tell about herself always took a wry angle of some failure or near embarrassment on her part. When she did concede having had a role in some successful venture, you could be sure that her part was always presented as providence, and somewhat of a surprise.

I have only got us to Rowena's birth in Cologne after the First War. Then followed the peripatetic childhood of an army daughter. At first there were governesses. The Vining girls were undoubtedly a handful; June: slightly wicked one but adept at landing blame on Rowena; Rowena: more earnest one and keenly interested in learning, but a challenge simply through being a great deal cleverer than the assortment of young women engaged by her parents to take responsibility for her education. After 13 such appointees, the Vining parents settled on the idea of Boarding School.

That took the rather eccentric form of Chiddingstone Castle. Riding, ballroom dancing and a certain amount of literature, mostly French. No Hockey - for fear of damage to the legs, or ballet - damage to the feet. All-in-all preparation for young ladies of fashion; our grandmother it seems did not believe in education for women.

But Rowena's fierce intelligence was not to be suppressed. She fought to become the first and only girl at the school to take and pass the public matriculation examination. University was a possibility, but a family move to Malta saw Rowena in the hands of governesses again - foreign ones this time, (at least one of whom, Rowena was sure, was a spy). A happy outcome was Rowena becoming fluent in a number of European languages.

On the outbreak of war, Rowena's facility with languages saw her recruited to the Political Warfare Executive, and having what she would admit was a "rather interesting" war. She started out at Woburn Abbey, an only slightly less secretive institution than Bletchley Park (which had been another possibility). Soon she was posted to Algiers, and then Naples – doing mysterious things about which we could never persuade her to give us much clarity. By D-Day Rowena was in Rome, then, on short notice, she was flown to Mountbatten's headquarters in what was then Ceylon, and after the bombing of Hiroshima, to Singapore.

Back in England in 1946, Rowena was contemplating a career in, perhaps, a body like the United Nations when she received a call from the Foreign Office. As she put it, some man had suddenly turned out to be a fascist or a communist ("anyway, he defected" she said) and she found herself in Carlton House Terrace and beginning of what was to be an illustrious diplomatic career.

As well as significant time in London, she was posted far and wide. Karachi, Canberra, Vienna, Dhaka, Strasbourg and Florence where she was Consul General. She worked with the Commonwealth Office, the Atomic Energy Commission and the Council of Europe. She worked at high levels of policy, and assisted countless Britons abroad. Drafting announcements on the opening up of relationships with China she encountered surprising views on the subject in a colleague called Guy Burgess. Later, to the delight of Margaret Thatcher, who was happy for Britain to be out of step, Rowena was required to stand in the dock as its proxy and receive formal sentence from the Court of Human Rights over European policy.

These tiny snippets are intended just to hint of the flavour of a career that was all the more impressive when it is realised how so few women progressed through the Foreign Office at the time, and how much harder progress was without a University degree. Rowena's talents for diplomacy were clearly widely recognised, and were used to great effect for the benefit of small and great. Rowena gained the loyalty and friendship of numerous people with whom she worked; I risk mentioning, Carol, Sarah, Caroline, Claire and Jean and in doing so give thanks for the friendship which they, and others, shared with Rowena in her retirement years.

Again at risk of mentioning individuals from among so many, I must refer to Rowena's long-standing friendship with Anita McFarlane – dating back to wartime flats and continuing through to Anita's sad death a few years ago. The friendship of Anita and family meant an enormous amount to Rowena, and all our family, and memories of Sunday lunch at Clythers, where food, wine and conversation conspired to keep one at the table until well past time for tea, are enduring.

Those who have only known Rowena since her career will not be surprised at the success she made of it. For in all things, Rowena showed her extraordinary intelligence, superb analysis and strategic ability but above all her understanding of human interactions and her enormous capacity for tolerance, forgiveness and understanding. Those skills she carried over in her retirement to the smaller, but no less demanding, stage of local body and church life, including as churchwarden in this parish. One suspects she dealt a few surprises to functionaries of local bodies and diocese as she worked to get done those things she believed in; those who proceeded on the assumption that Rowena was a little old lady from the village did

so at their own cost.

But everything Rowena did was done with kindness. Rowena could fret at great length about whether she had done the right thing, or been helpful enough. But it is beyond question that quietly, and often invisibly, Rowena did an enormous amount to care for and do things for others. No one received more help and kindness from her than her NZ family. From times spent by Felicity and Val working (that was the official description at least) as au pair for her in Vienna, to support she provided me when I was here studying in the 1980s and to Daniel and Katy in this millennium, to her generosity to mum as regular long-term visitor and to us all who have used Dorchester cottage as a base on countless trips to this country.

Rowena maintained her acute mind to the end. She was a voracious reader of papers, and could put almost any news story into a century or more of detailed political history. That became particularly helpful when she was so key in Daniel's life - Daniel's girlfriends being something of a succession, and something of a United Nations. Of one, a delightful Russian, Daniel reports Rowena responded to his complaint about her lack of logic: Rational? How can you expect her to be rational - have you not read any Russian literature?

The strength of Rowena's mind could be seen in her capacity to deal with technological change. Aged 82, and long before I had ever done anything of the kind, Rowena booked flights, transfers, airport parking and accommodation on line for a holiday mum, Felicity and I took with her in Barcelona. (Before we left she and mum both repeatedly said how nice it would be to have me and Felicity and me to do all the worrying for them leaving them to sit back and relax. You'd be bold to assume that either would live up to that; in fact a fond memory Felicity and I have was the continuous battling between the sisters about the direction to take, the best place for lunch or how to calculate the exchange rate).

As recently as this past Christmas, Michael and I were bidden to help her choose a smart TV - she had in fact already done her research and chosen the appropriate one of course. We put the TV in place and plugged it in, but from there all Rowena needed was the remote control and she was away into the obscure menus, and making the most of functionality that I am sure few owners ever master.

In due course, Rowena's voracious consumption of newspapers was transferred to her Kindle. This was something of a relief as Rowena's cottage, never the beneficiary of effective domestic attention from Rowena herself, came close to being entirely overwhelmed by discarded papers. On my visits I would often begin by being so bold as to clear old papers away - at the same time disappearing into storage little tables that appeared to breed in sitting room - Rowena's inclination when she found she had nowhere to put things down was to buy a new surface rather than clear an old one.

Mention must be made of the joy Rowena took in animals, her garden and the countryside in general - Penelope and Pandora were the last in a succession of much loved dogs birds, with whom Rowena entered into complex power sharing arrangements at Dorchester Cottage. Among thousands of Rowena delightful dry observations was "The people who say that Tony Blair is George Bush's poodle have clearly never owned a poodle."

The feeding of the birds was attended to with dedication, and no small expense. The finely balanced issues of the countryside were agonized over, and we rather suspect that a commitment to humane traps saw mice and rats caught at Dorchester cottage treating the trip to the field as a short vacation before taking up residence again. I was delighted to hear at Rowena's 90 birthday that a visit by Lord Malmesbury after his bees took up residence at the cottage resulted not in a Rowena firmly requesting

their removal but Rowena commissioning a small wooden bridge so that the bees could go about their business without risk of disturbance by the opening and closing of the back door.

I do need to mention those people who have assisted Rowena in her cottage over the years - and in doing very much became Rowena's friends. Christine, Audrey, Emma, Ted, Jonathan. They did so much to keep Rowena's life in order, and we were so grateful knowing that they have been there for her.

And the friendship and love shown to Rowena, and to us, by Judy James has been beyond compare, and beyond importance. Having her next door, and so willing to keep a quiet eye on Rowena, has been a great comfort to us half the world away, and made a world of difference to Rowena.

Although she had had a range of health issues, Rowena had a determination to live on and enjoy life, and it was only for a short time that her life became significantly constrained. Even then, she continued until very close to the end to take a lively interest in goings on. When getting to Book Club was finally impossible, she was still delighted to contribute her written thoughts on *Copenhagen* - a work that resonated with her career.

As a family we have been particularly grateful to Val who came at short notice to be with Rowena a couple of months ago, and to Felicity who joined her and has been able to stay with Rowena as her confident determination to last some while yet sadly ebbed away. Sadly, Justin and Andy have not been able to make it here today, but along with wider family back in New Zealand and elsewhere in the world are with us in spirit at this service. We thank Jane for the service, and all she has meant to Rowena.

Before closing, I want to thank, in advance, Martin Snell who will shortly sing for us – or more appropriately sing for Rowena, for it is at her specific wish that he is here. Martin is another kiwi - albeit one who has been singing professionally in Europe for two decades or more – and is another of Rowena's wide group of friends. Mum and Rowena not too many years ago made a pilgrimage to Aix en Provence especially to hear Martin sing the role of Prince Gremin in Eugene Onegin in an open air performance. Those familiar with the opera will know that the Prince doesn't appear until his grand entrance in Act three. Sadly at the second interval the heavens opened and rest of the performance was cancelled. Many of the cast and orchestra sought sanctuary in a nearby cafe; on learning of mum and Rowena's disappointment they gathered around and hummed their parts as the Prince delivered them a personal serenade.

And so it is I picture Rowena now, surrounded by music and a happy and glorious company, a wry smile on her face and making a quiet, and mildly surprised, toast to the fact that all has worked out so very well in the end.

We loved her dearly, and will miss her dreadfully. We can only give thanks for having been so fortunate to have had her in our lives.

Rowena's Funeral Address - Rupert

Part of today is a farewell for a loved Aunt, and to the life she led for 61 years in Greywell.

For me this day is about an enduring friendship with my Aunt that will continue.

Rowena's life spanned a rapidly changing world. The last vestiges of Edwardian days after WW1, a fading Empire soon to be swallowed by WW2. How times changed. The frustrations of a bright child who was brought up for the life of a genteel housewife, but who instead developed a successful career as a diplomat.

Although I saw Rowena throughout my childhood and teens I came to know Rowena best after the death of my father Christopher, Rowena's twin brother in 1989.

The period after my father's death saw our friendship strengthen.

By that time I was in my late twenties and Rowena approaching 70.

Rowena rightly said her approach in life was that she was interested in people. I have spent countless hours talking to her over the events of my day. I would run my cases by her, and with her interest in criminology she always had an observation on my cases. When working abroad the dialogue continued, and I would find myself calling from Tbilisi on a Sunday evening.

I saw quiet, understated, courage always tempered by self deprecation. When 21 Rowena had to break the hardest news to young soldier in Northern Ireland who had lost three generations of his family on the night of a heavy German Air raid.

When 80 Rowena stepped outside in a dressing gown and nightdress to try to help when a nearby domestic argument seemed to be spiralling out of control. Rowena noted wryly that both sides shouted at her.

Rowena exemplified strong discipline, born partly of her upbringing. Rowena would say a "soldier's daughter never cries". This discipline was a quality she admired in my father. Yet through this she was always aware of her own shortcomings, and slow to judge. Humourously she would decide that in her earlier working years in Florence in the mid 70's as Consul General and the round of social duties a cold would justify her absence from work, but the odd hangover would not. It could be worth timing our evening calls to coincide with the evening sundowner.

I saw this toughness in her later years. In 2004 when Rowena had her first major health difficulties following the journey to New Zealand, she willed herself back to her cottage, Justin, my cousin escorting her back and caring for her on her return.

Part of this was discipline about public duty. From her earliest years Rowena was a genuine believer in what we now call the big society from her early interest in the 1930s in a European Union that would help stave off war, to her strong belief in social justice.

I carry memories of Rowena's experiences; from the young woman at Woburn who simply reading Italian newspapers spotted the coming split between Italy and Germany, in Algiers her team managing to play Eisenhower's recording of the successful invasion of Sicily backwards (making him sound like Donald Duck), being

transported in the bomb bay of a Wellington over Italy, on approaching Rome , (declared an open city) contrasting the destruction and bodies surrounding Rome, with a flower seller in the streets.

Rowena's war work acted as a stepping stone to her later career as a diplomat, that took her from Pakistan to Australia, Vienna, Italy, Strasbourg and finally the UK.

In 1952 Rowena bought the cottage you have seen her in all these years, having received a firm letter from Aunt Marjorie, (whose name Rowena will join on the adjacent headstone).

During her career Val Diccon and Felicity would visit her in Vienna and Florence, and I would visit her in Strasbourg, where Rowena had her final posting.

Rowena retired in 1981 and lived in the village with Aunt Marjorie looking after her in her declining years.

Rowena always remained in close touch with her younger sister June, and they would travel together, and in later years time respective visits to each others Summers here and in New Zealand. The pair mastering email in their 80's and corresponding daily. June died in 2010.

If life had turned that way, we all agree that Rowena would have made an excellent mother. In an interview for a forthcoming book about women diplomats in the Foreign Office, Rowena noted as a young girl an elderly Aunt saying " A pity that girls got brains , you know she'll never marry". As it was Rowena provided endless counsel to me. We would have a cycle of advice, apologies for giving advice, promises of no further advice, followed by advice. All of it was welcome.

My life would change radically in 2004 as I began my work abroad, and met my future wife Julia in 2005. In 2009 we were married , and Rowena and the village rallied to provide a wonderful day. We were married by Jane Leese in this church decked with flowers prepared by Jen Somerville and Judy James with our reception in the village hall, later our first daughter Kitty would be christened in this church by Jane. Rowena would meet our second daughter Christina, born in 2012. I could have hoped that my daughters would know more of Rowena.

Today we return here , Jane taking the service and this church that has seen so much of our lives decked with flowers provided by Jen and Judy

Though frail and declining Rowena's mind remained sharp to the last. I had hoped that this gentle decline would take a little longer, but her last few weeks were difficult, and her decline was rapid. First Val and then Felicity flew from New Zealand and unhesitatingly stayed with Rowena. I know this made a world of difference to Rowena, who with excellent medical care was able to remain in her beloved cottage.

Rowena loved life, was grateful for it, and consciously took time to stand back and see the good moments, from her garden , to her dogs, her friends and her family. At moments my wife and I see little characteristics of Rowena in Kitty, a certain quickness of expression and focus in her eyes as she thinks of something.

When we heard Rowena had died , Julia wrote to me and said "We should learn her lessons , to be generous with people to enjoy nice things, to blow soap bubbles at 90 and have fun".

I know today is about a parting. But Rowena is such a part of my life that we will journey on together.