

MOLLY GROSE (1911-2004)

Molly Grose was a Crockham Hill institution, the doyen of the community. Determined, resourceful, attentive to the needs of others, for almost 40 years she was at the heart of practically everything that was going on in the village; if not instigating it, she'd be taking part, making sure that whatever the function or project, it would run smoothly. A decade after her passing, her legacy lives on.

Born in September 1911 in Knowsley, Lancashire, Phyllis Margaret - to give her proper name - was the first of the three daughters of Alfred and Phyllis Horsfall. Apparently she was a spirited child with a 'naughty' sense of humour, a razor-sharp brain and remarkable vitality it was claimed she'd inherited from her maternal grandfather, the formidable Sir Frederick Morton Radcliffe, one-time Mayor of Liverpool and Treasurer of the Church Commissioners.

Sadly, Molly's father was one of the many casualties of Flanders fields, and in common with thousands of other First World War children, she was left to be raised by her mother in a stifling all-female household. After studying at Wickham Abbey, she and her sisters finished their education by travelling to Europe with a governess. Having spent a lot of time in Paris they continued to Italy where, it is said, the girls behaved so badly that their governess had a nervous breakdown and they had to return home.

In the early winter of 1932, when just 21 years old, Molly met Brooke Tindall, a Major home on leave from the Indian Army. A whirlwind romance led to marriage, a move to India and the beginnings of her love for the country in which she was to spend the next fifteen years, a period broken by a visit to the London Clinic to give birth to Michael, the first of her two children. When Brooke was killed in action in Afghanistan, Molly found herself a widow in a foreign land, albeit one she loved and in which she learned to speak Urdu, became involved with the work of the Red Cross, and developed at the same time a love of gardening which remained for the rest of her days.

While still in India she married for a second time. Gerald Condon was a doctor from the west coast of Ireland, attached to the 7th Gurkhas, and when their daughter Shelagh was born, the family settled in the Nilgiri Hills before returning to England when India gained independence.

After her second husband died Molly was introduced to Dan Grose, a retired Colonel in the Royal Engineers who had served in Hong Kong, been captured by the Japanese in Singapore and had spent several years as a prisoner of war. He was 18 years older than she, a widower living in Spout Lane, and after their marriage at Godalming - Molly's son Michael gave the bride away - Dan

brought the new Mrs Grose to Crockham Hill. It was 1960 and the beginning of a new era for both Molly and the village.

A tragic theme runs through Molly Grose's life. Her father had been killed at Flanders; she outlived two army-based husbands in India, and not long after her marriage to Dan – another former military man – he contracted cancer. Molly nursed him throughout his illness, and when he eventually succumbed, she was physically and emotionally wrung out. But she was tough, and almost immediately threw herself into village life. And for the next forty-odd years she was the beating heart of the community, giving her time, skills and energy to making Crockham Hill the place it is today. If Molly perceived that something needed doing, she'd do it – or would make sure someone else was getting it done. No-one was immune from her knock at the door!

During her time in Crockham Hill she was an active member of the W.I., a member of the PCC, acted as Sacristan at Holy Trinity where she worshipped every Sunday without fail, served as Chairman to the local Conservative Association, twice masterminded the Church Fete (breaking with tradition and moving the site from the Playing Fields to the grounds of The Red House), ran The Friday Club for retired villagers long after she'd passed the age of retirement herself, and represented Crockham Hill on Westerham Parish Council (as it was then) for no less than 22 years – eight of them in the Chair.

When she eventually retired from the Parish Council at the age of 83, instead of taking things easy or concentrating on her love of bridge, Molly believed in the adage that you don't stop doing things because you're growing old, but you grow old because you stop doing things. So she enrolled in the Sixth Form at Eden Valley School, studied alongside sceptical teenagers who soon came to treat her not just with respect, but as an equal, and immersed herself in English Literature, History, and Ethics and Philosophy, subsequently winning her first 'A Levels'.

The school was under threat of closure, for it had an undeservedly poor reputation, but Molly's presence was almost ambassadorial. One day she became infuriated by a letter in The Times bemoaning the lot of Pensioners, that there was nothing for them to do in retirement. Molly was indignant and thundered a response, citing her own Sixth Form example. This was taken up by other sections of the press, and by the BBC who sent a reporter to Eden Valley School to find out about their octogenarian student. Naturally Molly gave a good account of herself, backed up by the testimonials of teaching staff and fellow pupils, most of whom were at least 65 years her junior!

To mark her 90th birthday in 2001, a group of friends bought a tree to plant in her honour at the Playing Field. Molly herself took an active part in the planting, no doubt giving advice on how deep the roots should be. By then her own roots were firmly embedded in Crockham Hill. And that is where they remain to this day.

Kev Reynolds
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