

## **HELEN RICHARDSON (1926-2017)**

In the summer of 1994 a group of Crockham Hill villagers enjoyed a week's holiday in the French Pyrenees. Each day was spent walking in the mountains, returning to the hotel late in the day to pass the evenings talking, laughing and reminiscing. On one particular walk we visited the famous Cirque de Gavarnie, with its immense walls of rock and ice down which feathery cascades drained summit snows, after which we returned to the mountain village by a different route. The path cut across the mountainside and was rather narrow in places, with a big drop to one side.

It soon became apparent that Helen was uncomfortable with the exposure, so I took her by the hand and led her across the difficult places, and whenever I looked over my shoulder to check that she was alright, my eyes were met by That Smile, the smile that was her signature. She may have been nervous, apprehensive, perhaps a little afraid; but Helen's smile never once slipped.

It was the smile that announced her presence. It was a warm, embracing smile that spoke volumes – serene is the best way to describe it. You'd walk into a room and it was what you noticed first of all; a smile full of welcome that made you feel special. That was one of Helen's gifts. When you were in her presence you were made to feel special.

Helen Margaret Richardson was born in Bagshot, Surrey, in 1926, but was largely brought up in Hayes. The only child of Harry and Winifred Louch, she met her future husband at nursery school. Perhaps it was not the most auspicious of meetings, though, for she described David rather dismissively as a scruffy boy in a raincoat! Her father died when she was just ten years old, and after war was declared the Baston School she was attending in Bromley was evacuated to Devon.

Leaving school she trained as a physiotherapist at St Thomas's Hospital before going to Stoke Mandeville, the hospital renowned at the time for the treatment and rehabilitation of spinal injuries under the leadership of Sir Ludwig Guttmann. Later, she worked as a private physio.

In 1948 Helen married David Richardson (no longer a scruffy boy in a raincoat) and moved to Worcestershire where they spent four happy years living on a hop farm with few mod cons, and it was there that Jayne and Malcolm were born. But when David was offered a partnership in the long-established family business: Wigan and Richardson Hop Merchants, based in Southwark, they returned to the south in 1952, and moved into Rusholme Court.

Crockham Hill soon felt like home, so they planted their roots in the village and shortly after added a second son, Keith to their family. With three young children, life was busy and never dull, and as the children grew, so did Helen's active involvement in village life. Having trained as a tennis coach, she encouraged and coached youngsters of all ages; at first on the grass court at Lewins, then on the hard courts at the War Memorial Playing Field where she and David became founder members of the Crockham Hill Tennis Club, along with the Rev Nesbitt Tredennick, under whom she also served as PCC Secretary.

Helen's artistic flair was expressed in flower arranging, not only at Holy Trinity, but also at Southwark Cathedral. She was actively involved in organizing flower festivals, and was responsible for starting the now-annual pre-fete plant sales which were then held in the Village Garden. As if her life was not busy enough, after inviting a 12-year old Polish refugee to stay at Rusholme Court during the school holidays, she became a member of the Pestalozzi Children's Committee, and also served as a Governor at St Olave's Grammar School in Orpington.

With long-time family friends, the Kings and Nobles, holidays were spent camping at first, then for six consecutive summers they rented a large villa overlooking Italy's beautiful Lago Maggiore at the foot of the Alps where they enjoyed water skiing. Later, they took adventure holidays – canoeing up the Amazon, and white-water rafting on the Trisuli River in Nepal. They went on safari in Kenya, India, Brazil and South Africa, filling their lives with excitement and adventure, adding one memorable experience after another.

After David died in 1992, with son-in-law Arthur's help Helen opened Rusholme Court as a B&B. When two of my mountain friends from Austria stayed there, they naturally spoke in glowing terms of the warmth of the welcome received, the amazing views, and the splendid breakfasts.

In later years Helen downsized to Oakdale Lane where she played Scrabble and took up art, having lessons with several other friends who together formed a lively coterie that became a social highlight for all of them. In her company there could be no dull moments, for fun and laughter were guaranteed. Helen radiated love and goodness, and attracted the same in return, for she shone a light wherever she went with her generosity of spirit and the serenity of her smile.

The world could do with more like Helen.

Kev Reynolds, with thanks to Jayne Schlereth