

Memories of Frances Priestnall

Frances recently passed away aged 100 and her grand-daughter, Alison, wrote the following about her for her funeral on 1st May 2015



Frances with her husband, William outside her home in Clopton

Frances Lillian Leeks was born in Ipswich on 1st June 1914, just a few weeks before the outbreak of the first world war. She was the eldest of 4 children – Phyllis, Fred and her youngest brother Russell who sadly died aged just 13. Her father Fred was a Teller at Ipswich Docks and her mother Rosetta ran a corner shop in the town and from a young age all the children had to help their mother in the shop.

Frances was brought up in a Christian household and all the family attended St Margaret's Church. She loved hymns and, up until the last few weeks of her life, she was still entertaining everyone at Foxgrove by bursting into a hymn selection on a regular basis!

Aged 11 she won a scholarship to the Central School in Ipswich. She always said that she really enjoyed school and greatly admired her teachers. She also joined the Girl Guides before going on to be a Ranger, and continued to help and go on camps until Roseanne was born. When we were sorting through her belongings at Foxgrove we found her Girl Guide uniform complete with leather

belt and all her badges, still carefully folded up and cherished some 75 years after she last wore it. With amusement we noticed one of the badges was for housework....not one of her favourite chores when she could be outside in the garden, and I'd say mum and I have definitely inherited that from her!

After leaving school aged 16 she trained in book keeping and accounts and went to work in the Eastern Counties Omnibus Office. A few years later aged 19 she obviously decided a career change was called for and answered an advert for a Dental Nurse. Her application was successful and she went to work for the dentist Mr William Priestnall at his practises in Felixstowe and Ipswich. They always said that 'loved blossomed over the spittoon' (!) and in January 1936 aged 21 she married her beloved 'Billy'. His first wife had sadly passed away when his daughter Peggy was very young therefore upon marrying him Frances also acquired a step daughter who was by then aged 14 – just 7 years younger than herself. Luckily they were all very happy together.

In 1939, with war imminent and Frances by then expecting Rosanne they decided to move from Ipswich to their weekend cottage which they had in Clopton. This turned out not to be quite as safe as expected when in 1942 the Americans arrived and built the huge Debach airfield which completely surrounded the little cluster of houses where they lived. By 1944, nearly 3,000 American Personnel and 50 Bomber planes were based here and life was anything but peaceful. Frances always remembered D Day very clearly when she said she would never forget the constant sound of every aircraft on the base taking off to head to France.

After the war the air base was used to house 'displaced persons'. Frances and Billy made friends with many of the people living there and also treated them in the dental surgery – in return they were invited to various social gatherings at the camp and kept in touch with some of the people they had met for many years afterwards.

In 1955 they decided the time had come to look for a larger house in the village to move to. Roseanne was now at the Convent School in Ipswich and on the bus home one day she overheard someone talking about a house that was going up for sale. Billy investigated this and soon the family had moved in to Church Leas - minus Peggy who by now had married and emigrated to South Africa. The dental practices in the towns were sold and they then worked from their new house where they also ran evening surgeries so that local farm workers could come for treatment after their shifts. In

their spare time Frances and Billy spent many years working together to develop a beautiful garden which became their joy.

Aged just 46, Frances was diagnosed with breast cancer. Following major surgery she resolved to get herself back to full fitness as soon as possible - which of course she managed to do in record time. She supported many people who suffered from the same illness throughout the rest of her life.

In 1964 she was delighted at the arrival of her first grandchild Andrew.

Sadly, though just two years later, when she was just 52 her beloved Billy passed away suddenly. Frances with her usual grit and strong will decided she wanted to continue to live at the house on her own and achieved this over the next 20 years with the help of a gardener and her family – believe me, we were all given a long list of tasks when we used to go and visit her at weekends! I knew when she presented me with a ladder, a bucket, a pair of rubber gloves and a big smile, I was going to be on gutter cleaning duty!

During this time she also experienced her first flight when she went to visit her step daughter Peggy in South Africa. She loved it and returned there many times over the following years particularly enjoying safaris and seeing all the exotic animals.

When her gardener retired she realised it was time to move closer to Roseanne. One of the Levington Almshouses had become available and this became her home for the next 25 years. During this time she made many new friends and was also thrilled to become a great grandmother. She adored her little garden here and, being a sun lover, she used to relish sitting outside whenever possible, tanning her legs and doing the Daily Telegraph crossword! Frances was also a member of the Mothers Union (which she belonged to for 60 years) and also hosted regular bible study classes at her home. She enjoyed attending Levington Church and started the 'penny fund' to raise money for repairs to the roof. She always got dressed up to go to church and ALWAYS wore one of her famous hats!

Aged 97 she finally and somewhat reluctantly agreed to move to Foxgrove residential home in Felixstowe. She was lovingly cared for there by the staff and I'm sure without their care she wouldn't have reached her goal of making it to 100 last year! She received a telegram from the Queen and the home gave her a party which she greatly enjoyed – especially the singing! Someone up there also made sure she had a lovely sunny day too!

When you asked Frances how she was feeling, she used to reply 'not bad for an old crock'. Well the old crock was a great character, an amazing lady, with a core of steel and a heart of gold. Stubborn and determined she might have been but she was also kind and loving – a dear mother, grandmother and great grandmother and a friend to many. We will all miss her and her radiant smile.