

Eulogy for Evelyn Harding, previously Edwards, born Allen, by her son Bernard

As the storm clouds of war gathered over Europe in 1914, three days after the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria and a little over one month before Britain declared war against Germany, a baby girl was born to Fred and Arabella Allen in the City of Lincoln, UK.

This was Evelyn Allen, the couple's fifth and youngest daughter, the seventh of nine children in total and eventually, my mother. With her passing from this world on 2 July 2015, peacefully during the night following her 101st birthday, she became the last and longest lived of her nuclear birth family.

Evelyn's lifetime encompassed a period of development and discovery unprecedented in all of human history such that the world we know today bears little resemblance or conformity to the range of things she experienced in the world of her childhood. While we struggle to keep up with changes, both scientific and social, today, it is difficult to imagine how someone born into a world before urban electrification had brought usable power and lighting into a majority of homes in even the most developed of nations could hope to engage with the likes of today's computers and mobile phones. It is inspiring and eye-opening to think that there are still some around who have experienced that whirlwind of change which has brought us to the world we know today.

I know very little about my mother's childhood or her growth to womanhood. I do know that at the

stage of her life during the period of World War 2, Lincoln was a busy place with its engineering works operating at full capacity, like in so many other industrial cities. Mum often talked about being thrown into her role as a cook during that period, without formal qualifications for the job, preparing meals for the large number of people toiling in one of those engineering works. She was always, to me at least, as an ever hungry child, a good cook. Not fancy cooking, but I don't ever remember turning any of her meals down and I remember as a child never having to go out to school on a cold winter's day without a good lining of porridge in my stomach.

It was while working as a cook that she met my father Frank Edwards. They married and produced two boys, myself and my late brother Richard John. For various reasons, one of which was that it was uncommon at the time for wives to work outside of the home, we never had much money as a family. That didn't seem to matter much, we were reasonably happy and were well looked after. My father died shortly after I finished school and Mum then had to take on some work to keep the family going. That must have been a very difficult period for her. I am sure, though I didn't think about it at the time, there must have been occasions when Mum went without to ensure that her growing boys were well fed, even if for seconds it sometimes got down to only 'bread and dripping' at times. She was a good mum, and I will always remember her as such.

Mum, though only receiving the basic education that children of working families could expect, was always an outspoken person, letting everyone know her views on things important to her. As a teenager I remember

how embarrassing it was to have to sit next to her on public transport, continually talking about things cringeworthy to one of my generation, for whom having at least the appearance of being 'cool' began to assume an importance that it probably didn't merit. I don't think she ever meant any harm by the things she would say, it was how she saw the world. She had her viewpoint and wasn't afraid to express it.

There was a period when I didn't see much of Mum for a long time, I married and also served for nine years in the RAF and eventually moved to Australia. During that time she remarried to John 'Jack' Harding who she cared for until his passing in 1975. Mum remained living by herself in the same house for the remainder of her life. This was actually the dwelling that we moved to as a family after my father's death. She always adamantly asserted her independence and lack of any need or reason to subject herself to a more supported lifestyle in an aged care facility.

After living in Australia for a while I remarried and we decided to take a working honeymoon in England staying with Mum for several weeks while travelling around and waiting for a job to come up. It turned out to be an eight month honeymoon during Autumn-Spring '87/'88. We visited with Mum quite often during that time, before returning to Australia to start a family. We fairly quickly provided Mum with three new grandchildren.

I think something of our travel bug must have rubbed off on Mum as afterwards, while the children were still quite young, she actually made three trips downunder to visit us. Each time for a month or two.

She was still quite sprightly for most of that period and enjoyed a number of guided tours by herself to distant places around Australia. I think those three long distance trips were the only times she ever left the UK in her life.

At some stage, in between these visits across the world, and Mum was by this time into her 80s, I remember not being able to believe my ears when she told me that she intended taking driving lessons with a view to buying a little motor car so that she could be more mobile and not rely on others to take her places she needed to go. I was horror-stricken at the thought of my mum let loose on the crowded roads of Lincoln and did my best to persuade her not to do it. She, being who she was of course, went ahead and actually took quite a large number of driving lessons, enjoying the experience immensely. I wish I could imagine the poor instructor sharing the same feelings.

Thankfully she never got as far as taking a driving test and eventually settled for one of those battery powered mobility scooters. She was enough of a danger to herself on that, tipping it over more than once and having to be helped to get back home.

In 2004, by which time Mum had pretty much lost her mobility, but still retained her independence with a little help, I made the trip to the UK again to celebrate her 90th birthday with my brother and also a number of her friends and family members. My last visit with her was in 2011, by which time I had retired from work myself. I stayed with her for a week, taking my youngest child, her granddaughter

Naomi with me. I resolved at that time that I would never again make that trip. Just the thought of battling the UK traffic and enduring the stress of long distance travelling was too much for me to take on again. I didn't however, tell Mum of my decision until a few months ago when I realised that she was growing weaker.

My mother was always a fervent evangelical Christian lady, though I didn't realise that until I was perhaps 10 years old when we started to go to church with her. Whether she kept that hidden while we were growing up I don't know, although she did make us go to Sunday School from our early years. The thing I remember most about my Mum, Evelyn, was that she was always singing, at home. Always. While she was cooking, washing, ironing, anything.

As far as I know, she maintained her Christian faith throughout her life right up until the day she passed. I was fortunate to be able to talk with her for a while by telephone on her 101st birthday, not very long before she passed over.

I will always retain the fond memories that I have of Evelyn, my Mum. May she Rest in Peace.