

## Ethel Armstrong MBE

It is a great honour to be asked to deliver this tribute to a truly remarkable person.

The facts are well known to you all, however, they bear repetition.

Ethel Garthwaite was born on the 4<sup>th</sup> of August 1930 in Stanley, only 5 miles from where we are this morning. The person who knew her longest is her brother John who, with his wife Muriel, and nephew Peter, cared devotedly for Ethel. Our hearts go out to them today.

Ethel went to the Grammar School in Tanfield. When she was playing table tennis one day at the age of 15, Ethel met Harry Armstrong. Ethel and Harry married when Ethel was 19 and were devoted to each other. Ethel called Harry “her True North”. His chair was pointed out to me when I visited Ethel at home many years after his death, and it was a great privilege to be allowed to sit in it! Ethel nursed Harry through his own illness, aware of the diagnosis but shielding him from it until near the end. Harry’s love was always with Ethel. As J.K Rowling reminds us “to have been loved so deeply, even though the person is gone, will give us some protection for ever”.

Ethel was highly intelligent and could have achieved the highest academic standards. However, those opportunities were not available to her and at the age of 17 Ethel became a cadet at St Nicholas’s Hospital in Gosforth gaining experience in several departments. My office is in the building that Ethel worked in and, when Ethel visited us to deliver an inspirational talk at our Annual Members Meeting, it was a great joy to be with her as she relived her introduction to her beloved NHS.

Ethel’s early start in healthcare meant that she was working in the NHS when it was established on the 5<sup>th</sup> of July 1948. Ethel was justly

proud that she remained actively involved in the NHS until shortly before her death. As Ethel said “The NHS is part of who I am, and I have been proud and lucky enough to have been there at the start of this wonderful institution. The NHS has changed a great deal since Nye Bevan launched it, but one thing has stayed the same: the dedication, skill and compassion of those who work in it and support it in other ways.”

Ethel trained as a Radiographer, and later as a Therapeutic Radiographer, at The Royal Victoria Infirmary in Newcastle, one of Britain’s best hospitals. Later in life Ethel returned to the RVI as a popular and influential member of the Council of Governors.

Harry’s work, as a Director of Hawker Siddeley, took the couple all over the UK and they had 16 homes including in Tredegar with its powerful associations with Nye Bevan and the foundation of the NHS. Ethel worked in many places and knew the NHS very well. Ethel made a distinguished contribution to the NHS most notably as one of the pioneers in breast cancer screening which has saved so many lives.

On her retirement in 1989 Ethel returned to her beloved County Durham and, in addition to her work for the NHS Retirement Fellowship, Ethel was proud to serve as a Governor of the Council of Governors of the County Durham and Darlington Hospitals.

Ethel joined the Retirement Fellowship early in her retirement and became its best known and best loved member. Ethel served at every level of the Fellowship, as Chairman of the Durham Branch from 1994 until 2016, Regional Representative on the National Council from 2005, Vice Chairman in 2009, Chairman in 2011 and President in 2013. In 2015 Ethel’s outstanding contribution to the

Fellowship was recognised when she was elected as Life Patron of the Fellowship, the only member to be awarded the honour.

The 70th birthday of the NHS in 2018 brought Ethel to national prominence and the richly deserved award of the MBE. Anthony Tierney, who was the national organiser of the 70<sup>th</sup> celebrations, on hearing of Ethel's death, sent me the following comments.

“I had the absolute pleasure of working with Ethel during the NHS's 70th birthday. I led the celebrations for NHS England and Ethel was the greatest figurehead we could have asked to have support us. We spent so much time together and had such a laugh. Despite being 87, she did everything we asked her to do, always with such passion and commitment. I was so delighted when she received her honour and we kept in touch over the years. She was a true legend.”

Sir Simon Stevens, Chief Executive of NHS England, who began his career at Shotley Bridge Hospital which is six and a half miles from this church, sent the following tribute to Ethel.

““As the NHS celebrated its 70<sup>th</sup> year, it was a pleasure to meet and get to know Ethel. She became a public face for the anniversary, representing the best of the NHS adapting to change but always putting her sharp mind and caring heart to the task in hand. Whether that was changing attitudes towards mental health as a nurse cadet, helping to pioneer the breast screening service as a radiographer or ensuring latterly that volunteering in the NHS had a strong advocate. She could hold a room with her stories, and she will be greatly missed.”

There are so many wonderful memories of Ethel and I want to share some of them with you.

Lucia Hiden told me that one of her favourite memories of Ethel is from the NHS England regional meeting in Durham in the middle of NHS70. Ethel was doing the closing speech amongst a hoard of experienced and probably quite world-weary managers. She came on to the stage on the arm of man chairing the event, flirting away, gazing at the audience. She flirted her way through the interview with him and the audience was mesmerised and captivated – I had never seen anything like it.”

Our colleagues from Scotland have shared their tributes – Ethel “was a remarkable woman who leaves behind a great legacy and a huge hole at the heart of the Fellowship. My hope is that there is a true understanding of her dedication and intense love, of her willingness to meet all that was asked from her by her members. Ethel will be remembered by many members of the NHSRF for her many kindnesses and her devotion to the work and continuance of the Fellowship. I met her at my first conference in England when she crossed the dining room with her breakfast and sat down at our table and started chatting as if she had known us for the past 20 years. Totally spontaneous in her friendship and delight in talking to everyone. A sad loss indeed but a well lived life. Ethel was a larger than life person who worked tirelessly on behalf of the Fellowship and always enjoyed talking to members, supporting branches, the trustees, and staff. She also insisted on making and decorating a wedding cake for me She made me feel so welcome when I first met her when I became a Regional Rep and was always so lively at conference, taking time to speak to everyone. When I first met Ethel at Conference, I was new to the post of Development Officer for Scotland and she sat me down and very gently interrogated me to find out what my plans were and what my approach to the role would be. She was genuinely interested and keen to help me in any

way she could. I was struck by her vibrancy, her sense of style and her love of colour but the lasting memory will be her interest in and great affection for people. That and the dancing. “

Dr Cynthia Matthews, a Trustee of the Fellowship and past Chairman, said that “Ethel was indeed a remarkable woman and the Fellowship will miss her tremendously. She worked "her socks off" as she would say, to bring people together for the common good. One of her many skills was cake making and decorating. Many branches and individuals were given the most beautiful cakes to celebrate anniversaries and other events. For myself and my husband, she was kind, generous and full of fun. There is one event that always amused Ethel. She was coming to stay with us, and the train arrived a little earlier than scheduled so I was not on the platform to meet her. She was pleased that a British Rail man jumped down from the train, carried her bag and helped her up the stairs and over the bridge towards the exit. She turned to him and thanked him and said, "Now, young man, you must hurry back otherwise you will miss your train". He replied, "Oh no, I'm the driver”.

Not many people would have the Train Driver carry their bags up the stairs and over the bridge. Ethel could charm the birds from the trees and the drivers from their cabs! Ethel was special.

Ethel was a pioneer for women in the first days of the NHS. Strong minded, fiercely independent with a great ability to charm and engage with NHS staff at all levels, Ethel will not be forgotten.

As John Rostill, Chief Executive of the Retirement Fellowship, said, “this remarkable lady has worked tirelessly for the benefit of our members and has travelled thousands of miles by train each year to enthuse members with her passion, enthusiasm and commitment.”

Knowing Ethel, and working with her for the NHS Retirement Fellowship, was one of the greatest privileges of my life, and it is Ethel the person who will always live with me. Ethel was generous, warm, and good fun, the first, and often the last, on the dance floor. Ethel was one of the very few people who genuinely lit up the room, a shining star who could fill the room with her diminutive presence. In a crowded room you could always find Ethel because she created a circle of warmth, laughter, and joy around her. Thank you, Ethel for all you did for the NHS Retirement Fellowship and for enriching my life.

So, Ethel, we send you on your way with our love and we hold you in the light.