

Rolf John Harding (19.7.1922 – 15.2.2017)

On behalf of the family, thank you for being here today to mark and celebrate the life of my Dad. Thank you also for remembering Mum/Elizabeth and the family in your thoughts and prayers.

We also wish to thank the many kind and amazing people who have been looking after Dad - friends, neighbours, part-time carers, and the carers from Featherbed. Likewise we are most grateful to the staff of the Peggy Dodd Centre and Cleeve Court Care Home for the loving care they gave him.

When someone has lived such a fulfilling, remarkable and full life as my Dad, one can only give a snapshot of that life in a short tribute like this.

The prolonged illness that finally took his life was as nothing compared to the impressive life that he lived.

During his long ministry as a vicar and hospital chaplain that continued well into his official retirement, Dad preached some powerful and thought-provoking sermons.

However I think many would agree that his personal approach and the giving of so much of his time to others through counselling, encouragement, support, and advice has been his greatest gift and a rich blessing to countless people.

It is his humility and kindness together with his caring and compassionate nature that has made the biggest impression on me and everyone who knew him. His love and devotion to Mum stood the test of time in a marriage lasting over 65 years. He loved his family and we all loved him.

Dad was born with the name Rolf Heudenfeld in Hamburg in 1922. His parents, Henry and Luise, separated when he was just 3 and divorced by the time he was 8 in 1930. He was then raised in Hamburg by his much adored maternal grandparents Karl and Lina Brinkmann whilst his mother raised his younger sister Luise.

The impact on him from his childhood persecution in Nazi Germany and his escape on the Kindertransport was probably greater than we can ever fully understand; but it strengthened not weakened his Christian faith that began in Hamburg whilst attending the Jerusalem-Kirche. The main mission of the Jerusalem-Kirche was converting Jews to the Christian faith and they held their youth meetings in secret to avoid the Gestapo that had banned their gatherings.

It was then that he experienced his own personal calling to serve in the Ministry and to do so in England, a country he much admired. He would secretly listen to radio broadcasts from England that were banned in pre-war Nazi Germany.

His childhood experiences, escape from the holocaust at age 16 and what happened to him when he got to England form a compelling story. The service card gives the website address where you can find a detailed account of his early life and where you will also find photographs and information on Coopersale Vicarage, Mum and Dad's family home for 30 years.

Dad's high intellect didn't detract him from his main interest in life. That was a genuine interest in knowing and helping others together with his strong Christian faith. It was his unshakeable faith and his very real and personal experience of Jesus in his life that helped and guided him in all he did from his teenage years. His faith was steadfast right to the end.

Dad's desire to bring others to know, accept and experience the love and saving grace of Jesus was the hallmark of his life.

But, Rolf Harding was NOT a conventional vicar; far from it.

On the one hand he liked to use modern visual aids to bring his preaching alive, and in preference to black he wore coloured clerical shirts so expertly made for him by Mum. He saw that his role as a vicar helping his parishioners and preaching gospel truths should be positive, full of colour, contemporary and relevant, not dull or stuck in the past.

The depth and breadth of his life and his many interests paint a different picture than that of a traditional 20th Century vicar.

For example, whilst living at Coopersale Vicarage with its 5 acres of land to manage, Dad owned a 12-bore shotgun!

Dad first learned to shoot with a rifle during his school days in Germany. This was whilst attending a school summer camp where he won a rifle shooting competition. Dad's prize was a food hamper. However, with his competitive streak I think the real prize was his satisfaction that he, the son of a Jewish businessman, and using a rifle for the first time, could shoot with greater accuracy than the other main contestants, members of the Hitler Youth.

This ability to shoot and hit the target served him well at Coopersale Vicarage with his shotgun. It meant that when local game birds bred by the gamekeeper on the adjacent estate ventured onto our land they were at risk of ending up on our dinner table. All part of rural life in the 1960s and 70s.

Dad's interests are too numerous to fully list or describe. To name several of them, his interests have included:-

Sport, especially football, cricket and boxing which he also taught as a young school teacher before he entered the Ministry - he must have been the only Church of England vicar who owned a pair of boxing gloves AND a 12-bore shotgun; camping; caravanning; sailing; music – he had a strong singing voice whilst Mozart was his favourite classical composer; laughing at Laurel and Hardy; keeping dogs, chickens, ducks and of course horses - including

especially his black Irish Hunter “Midnight” that he loved to ride; travel; walking; gardening; growing vegetables and soft fruit – and generously sharing his produce with others – his tomatoes tasted so much better than supermarket varieties; coin and stamp collecting; antique dealing; current affairs; and the natural environment.

With regard to his caravanning and equestrian interests, Dad could expertly tow a large caravan or horse box; his ability to reverse these into difficult spaces was impressive. As a fast and skilful car driver, his driving was seemingly dangerous at times but he was remarkably accident free – let’s put that down to a mix of skill and divine protection!

Despite Mum and Dad’s extensive travel throughout Britain and worldwide with destinations including America, Australia, several European countries and of course Israel, Porthcothan Bay on the North Cornish coast deserves a special mention. It featured in many family holidays and, as an unspoilt part of Cornwall, it continues to be enjoyed by his grandchildren today.

Reflecting on his true character, I know you will all agree with me that one of Dad’s greatest natural gifts was the way he greeted people. His warm welcome and the way his face would light up as he recognised or acknowledged someone of whatever age was lovely to see and to experience.

Dad was a cheerful person to meet and he smiled a lot. We can all picture him with a kind smile on his face. That smile, his sense of fun and infectious laugh was all part of his natural demeanour.

He particularly loved the company of children and young people. His joy in having grandchildren and more recently great grandchildren was obvious whenever he was with them.

Always polite, humble, and a real gentleman. What a truly wonderful and loving man my Dad has been serving God and selflessly serving others.

We all have our own fond memories of him and what he meant to us and how he helped and brought comfort to so many people.

I am so proud to call him my father. I see some of his great qualities in each of his grandchildren. Many people have said such lovely things about how he made them feel, the help he gave them, the admiration they had for his integrity, or the inspiration they got from the strength and conviction of his faith.

What a huge privilege we have all had to know Rolf Harding in our lives and to be inspired by his exceptional example.

Thank you. Thank you Dad for being a wonderful father.

Phil Harding, 2017

“Escaping the holocaust” can be found on www.philharding.net