

Lilian Lawson

A Life of Love, Creativity and Care

Following the death of long-term Cottingham resident and active member of the village community, Lilian Lawson, in January of this year, Lilian's family have compiled some memories of her life.



Lilian Lawson, 2011

Lilian was born Lilian Annie Tyler on the 21st December 1932, at the family home, 43 Edred Road in Dover. She was the eldest daughter of Ron and Doris Tyler.

During the war years, Lilian's family travelled around the country. Her father, Ron, had a series of war jobs as a coastal search light operator so he, Doris, Lilian and her younger brother, also called Ron, moved from Dover to other seaside locations including Saltdean and Newhaven in East Sussex, Pucklechurch near Bristol and Scarborough in North Yorkshire. Lilian and young Ronnie were about to be evacuated and separated from their parents but Ron and Doris were determined to keep their family together. Ron received his next wartime posting in the nick of time to halt the evacuation process.

Lilian had many wartime memories of watching fighter planes overhead, both British and German and of the sight and sound of sprays of bullets raining down from enemy aircraft. It is perhaps for this reason, as well as the insecurity of moving from place to place, that Lilian would often say she didn't like the seaside. She wrote about these memories in a family book entitled 'Wartime Lily'.

The Tyler family finally settled about as far from the sea as possible when they moved to the village of Lubenham, just outside Market Harborough and for many years the family home was in Paget Road. Over time, this was where Lilian and her brother, Ron, were joined by the arrival of their younger brothers and sister. Although, by the time her youngest brother arrived, Lilian was already married, living in Cottingham and had started a family of her own.

As a teenager, Lilian was a keen singer. She entered competitions in the May Festivals in Market Harborough for both singing and elocution. Often, she would win first prize or be highly commended. Her nomadic childhood had given her a clear, well spoken voice without a strong regional accent which gave her an advantage over her competitors.

Being highly creative and artistic, like both of her parents, Lilian's dream was to go to college to study art. However, as the family had little money, when Lilian left school she went to work as a secretary in the offices of the engineering firm where her father worked. She also had a Saturday job in a shoe shop in Market Harborough.

Lilian continued her love of music and singing with the Top Chapel Choir in Market Harborough, the Star Singers and as a member of the Market Harborough Amateur Operatic Society, where she sometimes took leading roles such as Little Buttercup in H.M.S. Pinafore. It was through the Market Harborough Operatic Society that Lilian met and fell in love with Eric Lawson. They got engaged when she was twenty one and they married in September 1954 when she was twenty two. They enjoyed a long married life together until Eric's death in 2012.

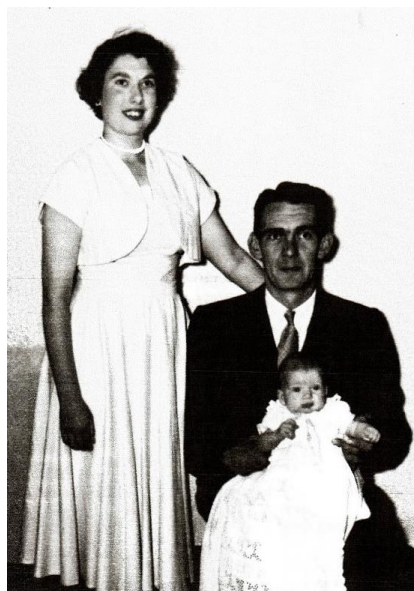


Originally, Lilian and Eric had planned to set up home in Stoke Albany, as an Aunt of Eric's had promised to leave them her house when she died. However, as Eric's Aunt didn't make a proper will, this gift fell through and they had to rapidly make other plans. They moved into the house in Church Street, Cottingham which Eric had purchased for himself and his parents a few years earlier.

Lilian would often recall how she left her parents' modern council house, with a proper bathroom, for a half renovated stone country cottage, living with her parents-in-law. If she wanted a bath then it involved putting a metal bathtub in the middle of the living room floor and filling it with water heated over a stove. Her Mother-in-Law would often offer to scrub her back. This was not what Lilian was used to! Lilian lived in this house throughout her married life and beyond, right up to her death in January.

Lilian would recall that in her early days in Cottingham, she would feel as if she had stepped back in time, living in an area of ironstone country cottages and with much of the local economy being traditionally agricultural. There was one moment when, having walked up to the entrance of Church Street, standing on the corner by the Spread Eagle pub and looking down the hill, she felt as if she had been transported back a hundred years or more. The Spread Eagle at the time was housed in its original, stone built cottage and its old pub sign was creaking in the breeze while the only vehicle in sight was a horse and cart plodding steadily past.

During their early married life, Eric decided to raise some pigs, following rural tradition to provide a source of meat for his family. When Eric was taken ill, Lilian stoically took over the feeding of the pigs, carrying heavy buckets of food up the street to where the pigs were housed. So that she could carry more than one bucket at the same time, she used an old wooden yoke, probably a milk maid's yoke, worn around her neck and shoulders. She struggled with this for a few days before their neighbour and local farmer, Reg Claypole, saw her and intervened with the words, 'You don't want to be doing that girl, give it here!'. Reg promptly relieved her of the buckets and proceeded to look after the pigs until Eric was fully recovered.



Lilian and Eric with Celia, 1957

In 1957, Celia was born, followed three years later by William and then David, four years after that. Lilian had always wanted to be a hands on Mum and while she worked in the family business she shared with Eric, she worked mainly from home so that she could always be there to teach, encourage, provide food, nurse at times of illness, mop brows and wipe away tears. She taught her children to be creative. If you need something then you draw it, make it, build it or cook it! All three children attended Cottingham primary school in its previous home in School Lane, although David was amongst the first group of village children to move to the new school building in its current location on Berryfield Road.

Lilian was a woman of many talents. She tried her hand at oil painting, watercolour painting, pottery, spinning wool, sewing, knitting, poetry and being a local organiser. She was cultural secretary of the Wesleyan Guild at Cottingham Chapel, a member of the W.R.V.S. and the source of many discussion ideas at local women's groups such as the Women's Institute and especially with her great friends at the Minerva group. Like her Dad before her, Lilian would state that she was, "A jack of all trades, master of none.". However, she became highly skilled at most things she turned her hand to.

One local project that Lilian helped to instigate and contribute to was the Women's Institute's Cottingham Cum Middleton scrapbook in 1965, which was an account of life in the two villages. This was part of a national initiative to commemorate the Golden Jubilee year of the National Federation of Women's Institutes. Later, she joined her husband as a member of the Cottingham Parish Council for a while and her involvement with Cottingham Methodist Chapel, which started shortly after she moved to the village, continued into her later years. Lilian and Eric donated the Easter flowers for the Chapel over a number of years too.

Many members of the Chapel community became Lilian's close friends, too numerous to mention all by name but she, Anne Stretton, Joan Jarman, Phyllis Collins, Arthur Bell and others worked together to create regular events such as the Chapel Christmas bazaar, jumble sales and the annual flower festivals. Lilian also enjoyed a long, dedicated friendship with the family she described as the four pillars of the Chapel; the two brothers and two sisters of the Licquorish family, Cyril Licquorish, Alf Licquorish, Grace Claypole and Elsie Beadsworth, who was generally known as Little Elsie. In their later years, when they become housebound, Lilian and Cyril Licquorish would correspond with each other. Often they exchanged letters on a weekly basis.

For many years, Lilian was Cottingham's village florist as well as contributing her floristry skills to the family business, Eric's Pet and Garden Store in Corby Old Village. A whole generation of brides carried a floral bouquet made by Lilian as they prepared to take their wedding vows, against a backdrop of buttonholes and flower arrangements she also created. Lilian's flowers were always fresh as she would work through the night before a wedding to deliver everything in pristine condition. Lilian's flowers adorned many of the village weddings conducted in either the Church or the Chapel.

Although their shop was in Corby Old Village, Lilian and Eric based all their warehousing in Church Street, Cottingham and they served the villages by hand delivering animal feeds and garden supplies as well as wedding flowers, funeral flowers and Christmas wreaths to many members of the community. This was their second local business that served the villages, as previously they had a greengrocery round, driving from street to street in a grocery van to supply fruit and vegetables to village residents.

The tradition of serving the villages with a family business has continued with Lilian's son, William, and her granddaughter, Emma, who run Lawson's of Corby, minibus and coach hire. They and their team of drivers have been frontline workers during the Covid pandemic, taking the children of key workers to school and providing rail replacement buses. In normal times, they provide private hire transport to community groups within the villages too.



More than anything, Lilian was a natural carer with innate counselling skills. She was a great friend and listener to many people within her local community. Even complete strangers would instinctively feel her compassion and bare their souls to her. This would happen everywhere, from waiting at a bus stop to queueing to pay for shopping at a checkout. Lilian nursed many throughout her life, from supporting her own parents in their later years to taking care of people as they were dying, including, as a young married woman, her parents-in-law and various elderly relatives of her husband, Eric. She was also a home help and friend to a number of elderly neighbours in Cottingham. Although she was on a tight budget, with a family to feed and clothe, Lilian would regularly buy small Christmas gifts for elderly people locally, some of whom lived alone.

Lilian often said that her greatest achievements were being a Mum and a Grandma and she was thrilled to welcome not only her grandchildren into the world but also her great grandchildren and to the end, she remained the devoted Grandma. Lilian was pictured holding her youngest great granddaughter, baby Maeva, just a few months ago.

During her final years, Lilian was looked after at home by a dedicated team of carers, many becoming great friends to her and the family. Despite becoming quite restricted through the physical disabilities she developed towards the end of her life, Lilian remained cheerful and stoic throughout.

Lilian enjoyed village life to the full and she loved the many friends she made in Cottingham, Middleton, East Carlton and Rockingham. To give Lilian the last word, she would want to say to you now, "Life is what you make it.", "People are more important than possessions." and "I love you all!". She was also fond of saying, during her final years, "I wake up every morning and I am still here!". Usually, she was checking herself with her hands as she said this.

Lilian, you are still here with us and you always will be!

Memories compiled by the Lawson family and written by David Lawson in February, 2021.