

As we all know, in the last years of her life a dreadful shadow passed over Aunt Eleanor – and it is only right to begin by paying huge tribute, on behalf of all of us, to the extraordinary care and devotion Aunt Rosemary and Cousin Robin in particular gave to watching over her through all that time.

But today we roll those shadows away, to remember Eleanor as she was – with love, admiration and gratitude for all she gave to each one of us here.

Indeed today we are marking a mighty watershed in our family history, because Eleanor was the youngest and last to go of all those five children of Grandfather and Granny Booker. As we look back on them all today – Mary, John, Peggy, Michael and Eleanor – we can see just how completely individual each of them was, and how much in their different ways they gave to the world.

John, Peggy and Michael each had children of their own, most of whom are here today. Mary had children in a different way, as she is remembered with affection by hundreds of those who passed through her schools. Eleanor's 'children', of course, were above all her twelve nephews and nieces, and their children – along also with her godchildren. Although she achieved much else in her more public life, it is we who particularly remember her today as a wonderful aunt, unfailingly interested in each one of us, as we made our way through the world.

She was born at the house in Hindhead, Surrey, where her parents spent their holidays from Eton, on 28 June 1918 - just when the newspapers were full of the climactic battles of the First World War. One of her earliest memories was of the day at Elmbridge in 1922 when word was sent back to the Manor House that her father, R.P.L. Booker, had collapsed up at Elmbridge church at the age of only 57. Eleanor recalled many years later how, as a very small girl, she ran alongside the garden cart which had been summoned to bring her father's body back to the house.

So it was that she recalled how, in the years of her childhood that followed, she was brought up by Granny at Elmbridge and in Malvern, particularly with Peg and Michael, but also very much with her beloved cousins Richard and Peter Mackarness, whose parents were 5,000 miles away in India.

After Lawnside in Malvern, she went on to St Mary's Calne, where she particularly shone at lacrosse, being picked to play for the West of England. From there, as war broke out, she went up to university in London, and then, in the sunset of British rule in India, joined the India Office as a junior information officer.

It was this which in 1946 gave her a ringside seat to history, when she accompanied the Cripps Mission to India to negotiate the arrangements for India's independence. Amazingly, no fewer than three British Cabinet Ministers were out there for three months, and when they all went up to the hill town of Simla, Eleanor had a ground floor room on the main street, the Mall: so that, as

she recalled a few years ago, she could regularly look out of her window to see, only a few yards away, the imposing figure of Mr Nehru riding past on a magnificent horse, followed some time later by Mr Gandhi dressed in his dhoti, surrounded by a gaggle of acolytes.

When India became independent in August 1947 and the India Office vanished into the Commonwealth Office, it was from there in the 1950s she was sent out for two enjoyable years to work for our High Commission in Ceylon, as she called it: the newly independent Sri Lanka.

She had already, at a remarkably young age, been belatedly honoured in 1951 with the MBE for her work on the Cripps Mission to India, and by now she was winning ever more respect from her civil service colleagues, as an increasingly senior press officer.

One episode which particularly had its effect on her came when, in 1961, we first applied to join the Common Market. Her then-minister Duncan Sandys was sent off round the Commonwealth – the countries to which we were in so many ways closely related, and which had given us such unstinting support on the Second World War - to tell all its leaders how one condition of the deal we were hoping to strike with Europe was that we should turn our backs on them, not least as our main trading partners, because we were joining a customs union which would compel us to switch our attention and most of our trade to Europe. For the high-handed way in which this was done, Eleanor privately found having to report this to

journalists the most distressing episode of her professional career.

In 1965 she again had a ring-side seat in a great political drama when she was chosen to accompany prime minister Harold Wilson to what were known as the Tiger talks – after the cruiser on which, off Gibraltar, Wilson made his vain last-ditch bid to prevent Rhodesia’s prime minister Ian Smith from unilaterally declaring his colony’s independence. When the Commonwealth Office merged with the Foreign Office in 1968, Eleanor was the first woman to rise to become deputy head of its press office – where she was not only greatly respected by all her colleagues but also won much admiration from members of the press. I remember meeting prominent journalists who would ask me whether I had any connection with Eleanor Booker, and how warmly they would then speak of her as a quite exceptional press officer: unfailingly helpful, absolutely straight, always prepared to tell them as much as she knew but only what she knew to be true.

In 1974 she was honoured with the OBE, before her retirement four years later – and I have described her professional career at some length because not everyone here may know of all this, and how superbly in that role she performed.

But all this time, of course, there was that other, private side of her life, with which we are all more familiar, as a tirelessly devoted member of our own extensive family. She was a wonderful repository of family history. She knew exactly how they all fitted in, the Bookers, the Mackarnesses, the

Milfords, the Coleridges, the Sumners, the Lees, the Penrices who had built Elmbridge in 1768. And she kept in touch with their descendants in all directions.

But it was when she had to retire at 60, with still nearly 40 years of her life left to go, that she was able to devote even more time than before to all of us here. She did live for a while in south Wales on a gardening course, before moving to her cottage in Cold Ashton. But I was amazed to hear from various members of the family just how many times she shared holidays with us all – not to mention her yearly visits to the carol service at Etonwhere Nigel was a housemaster. With Michael and Rosemary and their growing family, she went among other places to Holland, France and Italy. And two of the most memorable holidays my own family enjoyed, when Nick and Alex were small, were spent with her up at Coed-y-Lechau, where one of her keen interests was very much on show, as we checked the multitudinous nest boxes for pied flycatchers and tits, and listened to the sound of wood warblers and redstarts. She was very good on her birds. She knew the difference between the songs of a lesser whitethroat and a garden warbler.

(Personal footnote: whenever I hear the cooing of a wood pigeon I always think of Aunt Eleanor because it was she who first identified it to me when we heard it calling in the wood next to Elmbridge in 1943 when I was five).

Of all those I have spoken to about her in recent days, two particularly remarked on her gentle smile, and how she cocked her head on one side as she asked questions about their family and their views on issues of the day.

She was certainly very interested in the political scene, with which of course she was so involved in her working life. Although she had her views, she was always discreet about revealing them. But I do remember how gleefully she once passed on a caustic comment by the doorkeeper at the Commonwealth Office, when her old boss Alec Douglas-Home, who she much liked, was succeeded by the very different Duncan Sandys. “Lord ’ome used to drive ‘imself to the office every day in his little Mini”, the doorkeeper observed “but this Duncan Sandys, ‘is ‘ead’s much too big to fit in one of them”.

She was interested in but quite perplexed about religious matters and the ongoing state of the church. As with other things, she preferred to ask questions of others rather than pressing opinions of her own – quite a rare gift these days. But nothing lit up her face more than to catch up with the doings of her family – and one of the real joys of her last years was the return into the family of Elmbridge, of which she had so many fond childhood memories.

The day in 1948 when Elmbridge was sold had been extremely painful to her. On the day after the sale she was being driven by Granny down the drive when they met the scoundrelly new owner Mr Oliver coming the other way. Granny politely made to pull over on the grass to let him through. But Eleanor very firmly insisted “no, mother, it is still yours. It is for him to give way”. And Oliver’s first act when he took ownership of Embridge, of course, was to cut down most of the old oak trees in the parkland in

front of the house – an action reminiscent of the ending of Chekhov’s play The Cherry Orchard.

(further footnote: it might be remembered that Oliver, an illiterate self-made man, had declared it as his ambition to own a stretch of land all the way from his home to the river Severn. The Elmbridge estate was the last piece needed to complete his jigsaw. He signed the contract to buy Elmbridge with an X, alongside which was written “Mr Oliver, his mark”).

So when the house was bought back and wonderfully restored by Rupert, it was the miraculous undoing of a grief which had weighed on her for 60 years.

The best thing about her final decade, here in St Monica’s, was that she was still so near to some of us: Rosemary, Robin and Helen in particular. Many of us remember that sunlit family gathering eight years ago to celebrate her 90th birthday. But all of us have so many other happy and loving memories of her, as someone who was so selflessly part of all our lives - and of whose part played in the outside world, our family can be justly proud.

How pleased she would be if she could see all of us here today! May she rest in peace.