

Elizabeth Oliver - A School Friend

If lucky, school friendships last into older age. It was a privilege for me to have Liz as a friend from 1948 until now. Friendships often begin with shared interests or circumstances. Some develop because personalities are compatible and each can give something to the other. The two of us had no common interests or skills at school. We shared similar circumstances, and, I believe, found mutual benefit in our companionship at Russell Hill School. This was most apparent from September 1953 - July 1954 when Liz was Head Girl and we were in the Prefects' Room together. My closest friends having left in July, Liz became my 'best friend' that year, when I felt vulnerable.

Liz was kind, accepting and affirming. With a good sense of humour, there was always a twinkle in her eye! Back at school after the holidays, Liz gave a warm, re-assuring welcome. I felt comfortable and relaxed in her company because she never tried to change me to suit herself, or expected more. She was never critical. I found her even-tempered and reliable - someone who respected confidence. On Saturday visiting days that year, Liz came out with my mother and me when we went to tea with my Aunts in Beckenham. Always the polite guest, one could tell she appreciated these outings. Liz impressed my family! It was a pleasure for me to include Liz, and later, to stay with her in the holidays.

Although Liz was in Hollenden House and I was in Hartington House, the historical rivalry between the two houses never spoiled our friendship - we laughed about it! Liz, ten months older, was an academic year ahead. That was no barrier either; an advantage for me - giving me a preview of curriculum and responsibilities.

I have two striking images of Liz at school. The first is when she played the role of Angel Gabriel in the nativity play. Raised centrally above the tableau, she stood with arms outstretched, saying at intervals through background music: "Mary, the night wears on!" What a challenge, to maintain such a posture!

The second is Liz as Head Girl, reading the Lesson at the service in St Martin's-in-the-Fields in 1954, to commemorate the centenary of the School's Foundation. Dressed in school winter uniform, she walked from her seat in the choir, across the chancel to the lectern. Typically, she read with confidence and composure. She represented the school with dignity and intelligence, and as usual, was a good example and influence. In many aspects of school life, Liz showed maturity and perception beyond her years.

On leaving boarding school, friends are separated by distance. We both led busy teaching lives, but corresponded, and met for lunch sometimes in Henley-on-Thames. Before Christmas, we had a long telephone chat. I am so glad!

Like us all, Liz probably had shortcomings. Whatever they were, her qualities outweighed them. Perhaps not a great risk taker, Liz was one of those rare people who give genuine friendship unconditionally, remaining loyal. "Non sibi sed omnibus" the school motto, sums up the way Liz lived her life. I feel very sad to lose a friend like Liz,

and there will be a gap in the lives of many others who knew her. I will certainly remember her with love and thankfulness in my prayers, as I trust she now rests in peace.

Monica :Lawrence (nee Willson), 1948-1955.
York, February 2009.