

Sheila Shilling



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I was born Sheila Topping in Shooters Hill, south-east London, on 14 July 1931 (Bastille Day in France). My parents divorced when I was only two or three, and as my mother had to carry on working, my grandmother and grandfather brought me up. My mother had a hard life. My grandparents moved frequently and at different times we lived in Lewisham, Blackheath, Greenwich, Lee Green, Chislehurst and Sydenham. I remember that our house in Sydenham was right next to Penge East railway station, and we would watch the Golden Arrow thunder past the end of our garden. My grandparents rented a house in Chislehurst just before the War. They wanted to buy it, but as war was breaking out the landlord decided not to sell it until the War was over, so we had to move. I never saw the famous Chislehurst caves.

Some of my earliest memories include visiting one of Grandma's friends and sitting with a dog beneath the chenille cover over a piano; having

singing lessons when I must have been about five, and every time I went high, the dog howled; and then when I was even younger, my Grandma put me in my doll's pram and pushed me all the way from Blackheath to New Cross to go to the Magistrates Court to see if my father had paid in some maintenance money.

I spent a year in hospital and a convalescent home when I was about 6½ years old. I was admitted to have my tonsils out, but while recovering from the operation my appendix perforated and then I developed peritonitis. There was a further problem when I suffered foot drop through being in bed for so long, and I had to be taught to walk again. The nurses made me walk alongside a table concentrating on putting my foot down properly. When I myself trained to be a nurse, we were taught all about 'hospital corners' when making beds – making a special pleat in the middle to stop the bedding from pressing down on the feet and causing foot drop. My problems did not end there. There were outbreaks of dysentery and diphtheria at the hospital, and I contracted dysentery and was

transferred to the Hospital for Infectious Diseases at Shooters Hill. Finally, I was sent to a convalescent home on Hayling Island run by nuns. The only school lessons I had during all this time were when I transferred to the convalescent home.

My family subscribed to the Hospital Savings Association, which meant that three-quarters of the cost of my care in hospital was covered. I wonder how people managed without that kind of financial support in those days before the National Health Service was founded in 1948. The HSA still exists but is now called Simply Health. I wonder what would have happened if my family had not been members of the HSA.

Then war was declared. We were living in Lee Green at the time, and we were bombed out. I was evacuated to Northampton when I was 10 years old. All the children were given a gas mask and a label with their name, and we each had a suitcase. When we got off the train, there was a bus waiting to take us to New Duston. There was a lady on the platform with a clipboard. She said

to one of the women waiting, 'You said you would take two children – here you are', pointing randomly at me and another. We lived near an airfield in New Duston, and the local children laughed at us when a plane went overhead and we Londoners dropped flat on the ground. It was frightening when we were living there to hear the drone of the planes at night and see them coming low across the sky on their way to bomb Coventry. One of my memories of that time is of picking up grain and heads of corn left on the ground after the harvest. This reminds me of Millet's famous painting, 'The Gleaners', which shows poor people who were not allowed to take from the harvested stooks of corn but could collect what had fallen on the ground. I gave the grain to someone who kept chickens, who gave me some eggs in return. When I returned to Lee Green, the Germans were dropping buzz bombs, so I was evacuated again to York, where I lived with an Anglo-Indian family. We lived just outside the city walls. There were some Italian prisoners of war held on Knavesmire, a former racing circuit, and they used to watch us as we played netball and hockey. I was

still in York on VE Day, 8 May 1945, and I remember going to the cinema in York at about that time and seeing a newsreel about the Nazi concentration camps. I don't think those films were allowed to be shown to people as young as me.

I have lots of other war-time memories. There was the time I had to go to the off licence in the dark with a big jug to be filled with beer. That reminds me that the milkman used to fill a jug, too. Every afternoon after lunch, we used to go straight out into the Anderson shelter. The entrance was only just big enough to let you go down the step inside, and then you came face to face with a corrugated iron screen propped up by sandbags so that nothing could be blown into the shelter. One day Grandma put a teapot down between the screen and the door, and some shrapnel blew in and shattered everything. It was so frightening; we were clinging to one another. The firemen came calling, and we then discovered that we could not go back into our house as all the windows had been blown out. And I remember seeing the sky at

night lit up by the fires around the docks in London. My mother was working as a telephonist at the Waldorf Hotel off The Strand and had to do fire warden duties. She virtually lived there. One day she took me to the cinema in Woolwich, close to Woolwich Arsenal. There was an air raid on as we came out. Guns were going off and shrapnel was coming down like rain. What I mostly remember about the war is being hungry and terrified. I felt an awful twist in my stomach whenever the sirens went off. There were two different sounds, one warning of an air raid, the other sounding the all clear. The sirens went off one day when I was walking to a new school. We all dived into the nearest shelter, and when the all clear sounded I carried on to school. But there was no-one else there, so I went home again. There were months when I didn't go to school; schools were bombed but finding a new one was not a priority.

My Mum remarried when I was about 10. My stepfather was in the fire service and then went into the Royal Navy during the war and served as a

Lieutenant on an Arctic minesweeper. He also served as a gunnery instructor on Whale Island in Portsmouth Harbour. This is the Navy's oldest shore-based training establishment. I still have my stepfather's war-time service medals. He was awarded the 1939-45 Star, the France and Germany Star, the Defence Medal and the War Medal 1939-45. As a survivor of the food convoys, he was invited by the Russians to one of their ports on the North Sea for celebrations after the War.



My stepfather's war-time medals – (from left to right) The War Medal 1939-1945, The 1939-1945 Star, The Defence Medal, The France and Germany Star.



My stepfather as a Royal Navy officer

My stepfather was away so much that he and my Mum lived separate lives. My Grandma carried on bringing me up, because she felt that my stepfather was not responsible for my upkeep and she kept us apart. Mum never told me anything about my father. My Grandma told me some things, that he had had an affair, that he had behaved traitorously and was ashamed of doing so. He left and Mum never saw him again. Grandma used to take me to see him, but she never told Mum that she was doing so – it was a time of secrets. I adored my mother but found her difficult sometimes. She was very strict and sent me to a boarding school very briefly during the war, in Forest Row in East Sussex, near where my sister-in-law now lives. I was very unhappy. It was a 2-mile walk to the railway station to the school. I remember one day falling into a whole bed of stinging nettles. Mum died very suddenly from a heart attack when she was 58. That was a great shock.

Altogether I went to 11 different schools. Nothing was the same in any school. Every time I moved, I found that the school I had left was at a different stage in the curriculum from the school I had joined. I don't think I learnt any science. (Perhaps that's not quite true: I do remember being taught once to make soap. My mother had to provide the lard for that lesson. She was furious!) On my first day at school in Blackheath, aged 5, I got the cane for talking! In those days, we still got the one-third of a pint bottles of milk, which in winter we had to put on the radiators to warm the milk up. A school I went to in York was opposite Terry's Chocolate factory, and in those days the expectation was that when they left school, the girls would either work at Terry's or go into domestic service. I remember going to All Saints Primary School in Blackheath which was hidden in a cleft on the heath itself, completely hidden from view. That must have been 1944, because I remember that the Battle of Arnhem was fought while I was there. It must have been at this time, when I was about 14, that I remember finding my Grandma crying one morning. My Grandpa had felt unwell and had

slept on the couch in the dining room but had died during the night. Not many people had phones in those days, so I had to run about three quarters of a mile to my aunt's house to ask her to come around and take charge. My Grandpa left some money in his Will which was used to give me singing lessons at the Blackheath Conservatoire. I got my first certificate there. My last school was the Central School in Greenwich. It was not a grammar school, and I learnt commercial subjects. It's now a community hub. Wherever we lived, I always had to walk to school – we didn't have a car. Changing school so often meant that I didn't have many good friends; I was always afraid of having them taken away. Childhood is like that – it does mould you.

I had to take sandwiches to school every day until I went to the secondary school. The food there was awful. We used to be given 'fisheyes in glue and red lead', which is what we called tapioca pudding and jam. The teachers told us not to complain, starving children in Europe would welcome that. We all had cravings for fruit cake, something sweet. I remember that, when I was at the school

in Greenwich, a local wholesaler had a bumper crop of grapes, and we all swarmed round to get some. Then there was the joy of eating carrots again, they were so sweet tasting. I even tried to eat raw potatoes, but that wasn't good. Rationing of sweets went on long after the war was over, and there seemed to be a greater shortage of food after the war than during it. But I think we were all getting the basic nutrients. I still have a craving for sweet things today – chocolate biscuits and fruit cake.

When I was at secondary school in Greenwich, I met a girl who had my surname, Topping. It turned out that she was my father's second family. She took me home to meet him, but I never told my mother or grandmother that I had seen him.

I had to go into hospital again when I was 16 to have my tonsils out for a second time. When I was a child, they used to guillotine the tonsils, but the tonsils sometimes grew again and then had to be dissected out. It was a very painful procedure; the bones of a young adult are not as pliable as those

of a child, and the surgeon had to dislocate my jaw in order to dissect the tonsils. Today's practice is quite different – tonsils are seen as a reservoir for infection and are now seldom removed. Nurses thought that the two most painful conditions were tonsils and haemorrhoids – they both interfere with the essentials of living!

I left school at 16½. I had had a very irregular education, having been to so many different schools. I was not academic and wanted to work with animals, and I got a job with Burroughs Wellcome which had a big place outside Beckenham, and which of course used animals in laboratory experiments. I was there from the age of 16½ to 19½.

Other girls were leaving to train as nurses, and I applied to St Bartholomew's Hospital, but they had a waiting list for applicants, as did all the London teaching hospitals. But in 1950 I joined King's College Hospital, Denmark Hill, which at that time was taking on four sets of student nurses a year. We spent the first three months in the Preliminary

Training School, a large old house in Farnborough, Kent, where we learnt some of the basics – bed-making, how to use the telephone, some basic theory and practice so that we would not be completely useless on going onto the wards. We were given a little box containing cleaning materials and had to polish the desks and do some dusting in the classroom. The tutor told us that we should know how the people under us did their jobs.

Nurse training was a four-year course, three years to qualify as a State Registered Nurse and then a final year to get our hospital certificates. We took part in competitions between the London Hospitals – for example, we competed for the bed-making shield. I remember going to concerts given by the London Hospitals Choir conducted by Sir Malcolm Sargent. The nurses from each hospital wore their own distinctive uniforms. St Thomas's with their black dresses and polka dots, Great Ormond Street with red and white checks, all with their different crimped and pleated hats. Nurses and all other hospital staff wear much more practical uniforms these days. When I was training, the student nurses were given a different type of cap

each year, each new cap being more difficult than the previous one to cope with.



Sheila (standing) with Margaret Caudeary in Camberwell at the start of her training as a student nurse at King's College Hospital.

Another practice which is very different today was what happened at mealtimes. They were sacred when I was training: the trolley was wheeled in, the doors shut, the curtains pulled, and no-one, not even the consultants, was allowed to come into the ward.

Christmases at King's College Hospital were memorable: on Christmas Eve some of the nurses and medical students used to go to Covent Garden Market very early in the morning to pick up bargains of fruit, vegetables and flowers. If you had to work at Christmas, with shifts from 7.30am to 4.30pm, 3pm to 11pm and 10pm to 8am, you grabbed whatever time you could get off for yourself. The consultants always came in to the carve the turkey.



Sheila (3rd from left, in front) stirring the Christmas pudding at King's College Hospital.

The other thing I remember about Christmas was that those patients who well enough were discharged, and the remaining small number of patients were all brought together at the bottom end of the old, open, Nightingale wards, around the nurses' station. The empty part of the ward was then screened off and the local down-and-outs were brought in off the street for an MOT – a

wash, some good food and a decent bed for a few days.

Two other thoughts about my time in training as a nurse: bed blocking, which you hear quite a lot about today, was a problem already in the 1950s. And the staff who had to try to sort out the problems bed blocking caused were called lady almoners. They were real ladies, too; a job usually given to girls of good family and education.

During my training at King's College Hospital, we had to get experience in other areas, and I went to the King Edward VII Hospital in Midhurst, Surrey, a TB sanatorium. While I was there, I met Queen Mary's personal maid, a sweet Scottish girl, and Leonard Cheshire. I was only allowed to work there because I had previously had the BCG vaccination. There was an Australian consultant who had some new ideas about the treatment of TB. Some of them seemed bizarre to me.

Patients had to lie perfectly still, doing as little as possible (they couldn't even clean their own teeth). One of the procedures involved taking the ribs out

on one side and putting in little plastic balls to stop the collapsed lung from re-inflating, allowing it to rest completely. A nurse accompanied the patient to the operating theatre. She had to hold the patient's hand after the local anaesthetic had been administered, and also hold a towel in place so that the patient could not see what was going on. There was a mop and bucket beside the nurse – for her to use if she was sick!



Sheila
after
passing
her 4th
year
exams at
King's
College
Hospital

While I was at Midhurst, some of the patients were soldiers, and we had to get wise to their tricks. When the nurse put a thermometer in their mouths, they would smoke a cigarette to make their temperature go up. Often patients would say, 'I'll take my pills in a minute, nurse', and then put them in the flowerpots when the nurse had gone. The standard of our training however was very good: 'No you won't. You must take them while I am here.' In later years, I worked at a nursing home in Beaconsfield. When I tried to give an elderly lady her pills, she said, 'Bless you, nurse, you can put them with the others', and she opened a drawer where there were dozens more.

THE GENERAL NURSING COUNCIL
— FOR —
ENGLAND AND WALES

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23 PORTLAND PLACE,
LONDON, W.1.

REGISTERED
MISS M. HENRY, S.R.N.
To whom all communications
should be addressed

23 JUL 1954

Dear Madam,

I have much pleasure in informing you that you have been successful in passing the Final State Examination for the General part of the Register held in June 1954.

You are now eligible to apply for admission to this part of the Register on payment of a registration fee of £3 3s. 0d.* When your application for registration has been accepted, you will be entitled to call yourself a Registered Nurse and your name will be retained on the Register without payment of any further fee. A nurse's name will only be removed from the Register on notification to the Council of the death of the nurse or as a result of disciplinary action taken by the Council against the nurse.

It is most strongly emphasised that until you have applied for registration and have been admitted to the Register you are not entitled to call yourself a Registered Nurse (unless, of course, your name already appears on any other Part of the Register of this Council). As you may already know, the Nurses Regulations 1945, made by the Minister of Health in accordance with Section 6(1)(b) of the Nurses' Act 1943, restrict the use of the title "Nurse" to persons whose names appear on the Register of Nurses, the List of Nurses, the Roll of Assistant Nurses, and to certain other categories specifically named in the Regulations: if, therefore, it is your intention to continue to undertake nursing duties it will be in your own interests to apply without delay for admission to the Register of Nurses. On admission to the Register a nurse receives from the Council a Certificate of Registration, a State Registered Badge, and a permit for the State Registered Uniform.

Application for registration should be made on the enclosed form which should be completed in full and returned, together with the required fee, and a self-addressed envelope, in the envelope provided.

Yours faithfully,

M. Henry
Registrar.

* If your name appears on the Roll of Assistant Nurses maintained by the General Nursing Council for England and Wales, and your enrolment is in order at the present time, the fee for admission to the Register is one guinea instead of three guineas, provided you apply for the deletion of your name from the Roll of Assistant Nurses on admission to the Register.

Miss D. Topping

My certificate on passing the examination to become a
State Registered Nurse.

Midhurst is well known as the home of the Cowdray family and the Cowdray Park polo ground. The family sponsored a lot of what went on at the hospital. I got to know a lovely pub in the town, the Angel (the Angel Hotel is still there), where they hung Christmas puddings going back to the year dot in basins from the ceiling. I was there when the landlord opened one of them, and it was just dust.



My King's College Hospital badge

Having qualified as an SRN in 1954 and worked for a year as a junior Staff Nurse at King's College

Hospital, I went to the British Hospital for Mothers and Babies in Woolwich to do my Part I Midwifery Training. I had been earning £25 a month at King's College Hospital, but my salary dropped to £10 a month while I was training to be a midwife. In order to complete the Part I training, I had to have delivered 10 babies with an experienced midwife supervising me. This was a more thorough training than the average trainee obstetrician received: the doctors' practice was based on, 'Watch one, deliver one, teach one'. My training included instructing on breast-feeding, washing the baby and giving injections. I remember one occasion when I was helping at a delivery. The labour ward bed was fairly high. It was a difficult birth and the midwife asked me to stand on a wooden stall so that I could hold the baby's head and rotate it. I began to topple back, and the midwife shouted at me, 'Hold on to the baby, I'll hold you!' I remember, too, the 6th baby I delivered. The mother had already had a number of other babies. This one suddenly popped out like a pea from a pod – and I caught it, a heavy one weighing 9 or 10 lbs. During my training, I

watched a breach delivery, but the doctors usually handled those. Sir John Peel, at that time the Queen's Obstetrician and Gynaecologist, worked at the British Hospital for Mothers and Babies. I thought he was a horrible man. I watched him carry out a Caesarean Section. After making the incision, he put a huge retractor into the base of the womb, chucked the tape tied to it over his shoulder and told his medical student to pull. Sometimes surgery seems sheer butchery.

While there I met my future husband, Harold Shilling (but always known as Bob). I had to ask Matron for permission to become engaged. She gave permission but I had to go on night duty. I finished by Part I Midwifery Training, and then left to get married. Our wedding was on 29 March 1956. It was a simple wedding by today's standards – a service at All Saints' Church in Penge, the reception in Beckenham and then off overland by train to Spain for our honeymoon. When you go abroad these days, you find that almost everyone speaks English, but it was not like that then. When we went shopping, one of the

shop assistants had to phone our hotel to ask the receptionist to interpret for us each time!

When I met him, Bob was an apprentice in the retail trade, working for Debenhams, and we had to move around quite a lot in the Midlands. During this time, I worked as a nurse at Stoke-on-Trent Hospital and Tamworth Hospital. I moved on to work in the Occupational Health Department at the Royal Doulton Pottery. One day a man was brought to me gasping for breath and I sent urgently for the company doctor. He was suffering from silicosis, a common disease among pottery staff who daily inhaled dangerous dust particles. Health and safety at work didn't seem to be so important in those days – in all the potteries, staff were ankle-deep in water. The staff were allowed to buy seconds with little pin pricks in the glaze. It was all beautifully patterned, but today people just want plain white china to go in the dishwasher.

The Potteries were a rough place to live, what with the potteries themselves and the coal mines. All around were pyramids of slag heaps. The miners

looked as if they had Kohl eye liner make up on, tattooed into the base of their eye lids. One day the pavement opened up in front of someone and he disappeared. His funeral service took place over the hole.

One of my memories of our time in the Potteries is of the difficulty I had in finding a dentist to fill a tooth. It was the custom at that time for a girl's father to pay for a full set of dentures for his daughter before she got married. Dentists did not want to do fillings; they all expected to do a full extraction. Indeed, the only tooth I have ever lost was in the Potteries because I couldn't find a dentist to save it.

I also worked at British Thomas-Houston, a large engineering company in Leicester. A big occupational health issue there was cyanide poisoning.

It was while we were living in the Midlands that we bought a Heinkel Bubble Car. It was terrifying driving alongside a big vehicle like a bus. Driving in

the Heinkel gave me my first migraine! Our first car, however, was a Morris 8. We had a series of old bangers in those days, and we had to lift our feet up in the front of the Morris when we drove through a puddle because the water came in. I had driving lessons but did not manage to pass the test. Bob was a bit uncooperative: we only had one car, and I think he was afraid that I would crash while practising in it. Women did not get much support from their husbands in those days when it came to driving. Many more women drive today. I had trouble reversing round corners, and hill starts in Downley were horrendous. The hills were so steep that sometimes when looking behind all you could see was sky. I do remember my first lesson, when the instructor said to me, 'At least you can drive in a straight line, more than most youngsters can'.

We also had a caravan which we towed around the country and lived in until we bought our first house in Sunbury on Thames. We used to find local farmers who would let us pitch on their land – first in Hanley, Stoke on Trent, then outside Leicester,

and finally in Tamworth, South Staffordshire. There was no running water or electricity. We stored water in a 12-gallon tank, and it froze solid in winter. Even the gas in the cylinders froze. But we also had a coal stove. Most towns had public baths, and we used to go there for a good wash. It was a to-do to empty the privy. I had to sit in the back seat of the car, holding the privy on the front seat, while we drove to the public lavatories. On one occasion, when we were staying on a farm in Tamworth, our Border Collie, Butch, ran around and upset a sow with her piglets. The sow chased Butch with her piglets racing after her, and Butch hid under our caravan. The pig rubbed herself against the caravan, and the whole thing shook.



Our bubble car and caravan – on a farm in Tamworth,
South Staffs

Bob and I moved from the Midlands to Sunbury on Thames, where we called our house 'The Florin'. (You need to be a certain age to know that in old currency, before metrication, a coin called a florin was worth two shillings). I worked in the local cottage hospital until our first child arrived. From there we moved to Gloucester, and then 54 years ago to Holmer Green, where I have lived ever since. After moving here, I worked for spells at Amersham Hospital and Wycombe Hospital. I remember being at Amersham Hospital one day as an agency nurse working an afternoon shift in the Geriatric block. A nursing assistant suddenly said

to me, 'I think old Ted's gone down with the 'visitors'. I rushed to the lift and put my foot in the door, and there was Ted with his stick and his cap on. Someone said to me, 'Don't worry, staff nurse – last time he got to the bus stop!' The Geriatrician wanted the block to be like a beehive, with the very sick being nursed on the top floor, and then moving down as they got better. On the bottom floor was a flat, where patients would spend time with an Occupational Therapist brushing up on all the practical things they would need to do when they were discharged back home. It was so good. In other ways, the block was badly designed. It was a square block, and from the nurses' station you could only see two rooms in front and one bay on the left.

After these hospital posts, I returned to occupational health nursing at Bowyers, the meat and pie manufacturers whose factory in Old Amersham was on the site now occupied by Tesco. It was like having your own village to look after: when it came to occupational health matters, the buck stopped with me. We employed

lots of students during the summer holidays – medical students and students from the Royal College of Music who livened up the place; you would hear the RCM students singing in the corridors. Part of my role was to carry out hygiene checks, and we had to put up notices in Urdu, Hindi, Italian, Polish and Chinese, ‘Please do not spit’. A large number of Asians were bussed in from Southall, and I needed an interpreter to help me in my work. There was an occasion when local British staff complained to me that the Asian staff reeked of garlic and curry and that they should make an effort with their hygiene. I felt I had to deal with the complaint, but it’s not something that you can hint at when talking to any staff, you have to be plain-speaking, you can’t go around the mulberry bush.

I then worked at Harrison and Sons print factory on the Hughenden Road, High Wycombe. Part of my introductory spiel to new staff was that they would be working in hot conditions, so make sure you use a deodorant!

I mentioned much earlier in this story that I had worked at a nursing home in Beaconsfield. This was one of my few jobs after our children were born. The home was run by Dr Kipping, a local GP and a member of the Plymouth Brethren, who used to recruit retired nurses to work for him. One night when I was on duty, there were two deaths. When I phoned the undertaker after the second death, he said, 'Bless you, Sister, it's not cheaper by the dozen'.

I have already referred to the fact that girls growing up in York were expected either to work for Terry's Chocolate factory or go into domestic service. That reminds me that when we moved to Holmer Green, there was a plot of land attached to the secondary school where girls were trained in the domestic sciences. There was a larger plot of land in front of the school with chickens and ducks, and vegetable gardens for the boys. It was assumed that the girls would go into domestic service and that the boys would work on the land.

Bob continued to work for Debenhams until we moved to Holmer Green, ending his career there as Head Buyer in the company's Head Office in London. He then joined Murrays department store in High Wycombe in their buying department. Finally, he moved to work for The Chartered Institute of Marketing at Moor Hall, Cookham, arranging training seminars in London for members of the Institute. On his retirement, Bob, who was keen on painting, joined the U3A and its Art Group. I have got one of his paintings – of the Market Hall in Old Amersham – hanging in my living room now. We both belonged to U3A and went on a number of wonderful excursions with fellow members to such places as the Orkneys, the Shetlands, Skye, the Outer Hebrides and Ireland. On a trip to Strasbourg we met Caroline Lucas, at that time our MEP, and now an MP in the British parliament and leader of the Green Party. There was another time when we all visited a famous pie shop near the Dreadnought Seamen's Hospital in Greenwich. The shop had been in the same family for hundreds of years. Neither the pie shop nor the hospital is there today. Sadly, Bob died on Boxing

Day 2016 in Lewisham Hospital, south London, where I had worked as a nurse many years before. I continue with U3A's MOTO group (Members on Their Own), and still go on trips that are organised to such places as Hever Castle in Kent and Cambridge.





I am so pleased to know that you are celebrating your Diamond Wedding anniversary on 29th March, 2016. I send my congratulations and best wishes to you on such a special occasion.

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Elizabeth II", with a horizontal line underneath.

Mr. and Mrs. Harold Shilling

A message from the Queen on our Diamond Wedding Anniversary

I have mentioned that our first child was born after we had moved to Sunbury on Thames. That was Chris, born in 1961 in King's College Hospital (where of course I had trained as a nurse), and then we had David, after we had moved to Holmer Green, and he was born in Amersham Hospital in 1965. I know that they were both born on a Sunday, one in the morning and one in the afternoon, but I cannot remember which way round. Both boys went to the infant and junior schools in Holmer Green. They were great friends with two boys of our neighbours, and our two families went on holidays together. Chris and David are still in touch with them from time to time. I remember there was an outbreak of measles in the village, and all the Mums wanted their children to catch it and encouraged them all to play together. That little plan worked with one of our boys, but the other only caught measles when he started school.

Chris went on to Dr Challoner's Grammar School in Amersham, and then to Sussex University. He did not invite Bob and me to his graduation: he was

one of the country's leading Marxists at the time and did not approve of the ceremony. Chris now lives in Canterbury where he is a Research Fellow and Professor of Sociology at the University of Kent. His journey to Kent took him via academic posts at Oxford Brookes, Southampton and Portsmouth Universities. Chris has mellowed since his Southampton days, and did invite us to hear his inaugural lecture as a Professor at Portsmouth University. I have got all the books he has written. He married Debbie when he was living in Southampton, and they have a son, Max, and a daughter, Kate.

David went to the secondary school in Holmer Green. When he was 17, he was taken as a junior mechanic on the famous Lombard RAC Rally. He now works for Dekra Automotive, a company specialising in offering business solutions to companies in the motor industry. David works all over the country, setting up training systems for sales forces. He is married to Lorraine, and they have a daughter, Eleanor, a 'gym freak'. They got married in Kensington Registry Office with just a

best man and a best woman present. They live in Blackheath, another bit of my past. Eleanor has had music lessons at the Blackheath Conservatoire, which takes me back to when I went there all those years ago. Chris's children, Max and Kate, play the trumpet and cornet, and both have passed all their grade exams with the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music.

I have said quite a lot about my very disrupted education and, with no real teaching of science or maths behind me, I was no help to my children. After moving to Holmer Green I tried to make up for what I had missed. I have always had a love of words (I remember browsing through the dictionary in my early teens), so I joined the English Language and English Literature GCSE courses being run at the WEA centre at the secondary school there, and then did a sociology GCSE. I can remember another young student in the English Language class who was having to re-sit his GCSE. He had been given a job at an estate agent on condition that he passed that exam. Looking back, it seems to me that the exam questions were easier in those

days. Have you seen the sorts of questions in exam papers today? They would make me curl up and die.

While Chris was waiting to go to university, he got a cleaning job at the secondary school in the village, and that was when I started playing badminton. And I am still playing now, 40 years later! It's a rather gentle sort of badminton, but it gets me bending and reaching, and we sit and chat, which I particularly value now that I am on my own. We go once a week to the Wycombe Badminton Centre. When I first went there, it had a sprung floor, but now it has a solid composition one. I don't think this is so good, because your feet don't slide on the solid floor and there is a tendency to trip.

So here I am, 88 years old, still playing badminton, going out for regular Sunday lunches and trips further afield with my MOTO group friends, visiting Chris and David and their families in Canterbury and Blackheath and my sister-in-law in Forest Row, still regularly using local buses to get around,

looking after my neighbours' dogs while they are away and taking one of them for a daily walk – but still aware of the shadow of isolation and loneliness facing many elderly people. Sometimes, if I am feeling a little unwell or a bit sad, I know it would be easy to become a prisoner in my own home if I did not make an effort to go out. And it is an effort. I don't drive and the bus stop is half an hour's walk away, and there is not very much to do locally in Holmer Green. The Holmer Green Society is hoping to arrange for the elderly to meet in each other's homes for afternoon tea, and there are lunches twice a month in the Church hall, but there does not seem to be a lot else going on. Chris and David tell me that I shouldn't think of moving from Holmer Green and leaving behind all the support that I do enjoy. I wish there was more I could do to help other isolated and lonely people, but transport is a limiting factor. So, to end what I hope is a positive story of my life, a plea that more can be done to help relieve the problems of loneliness facing so many elderly people as perhaps they are widowed or become physically or mentally infirm.