

## MAY CLARKE

'Feisty' is not a word normally used about women in their nineties - and it probably isn't a word May Clarke herself ever used. But feisty is what May was: a small, curly-haired woman in a perky beret, single, active, adventurous, sociable, full of enthusiasms, with an infectious grin and more than a touch of mischief. When at 93 she broke her hip, it happened at Wetherspoon's in Lee Green, surrounded by people a quarter, or even a fifth, of her age. 'But I only had two', she said rather plaintively, explaining that she had merely slipped on a wet patch.

May was indeed always eager to try new things and youthful things, and she was full of surprises. She was already 80 when her mother died, a fortnight short of 100; and then, on her own at last, she turned her little flat into a shrine for the epic German opera composer Richard Wagner. Over the living room fireplace was a fine pencil portrait of the great man; over the low bookcase on the left was another portrait of Wagner, this time a shining silver profile against a dark wood panel; and below that was a watercolour painting of the Bayreuth Opera House.



May in fact had the highest quality of music around her all her life, brought up as she was a few yards from Canterbury Cathedral. She was born on 20 November 1913 in the flat above her grandfather's gramophone and cycle shop, which was at 28 Burgate Street, the thoroughfare that runs along the southern wall of the Cathedral Close. May's mother's father, Archie George was a prominent and respectable citizen in Canterbury's business community; among May's possessions was a fine picture of him on the river, clad in yachting gear: navy blazer, white trousers, peaked cap. But as so often, the veneer of respectability hid some awkward facts of life: May's mother Edith was only 19 at the time of her birth; her father, a grocer's delivery boy who must have had his cycle repaired once too often at the shop, was only 18; and the young couple's wedding had taken place exactly fourteen days before May was born. And then the young parents split up, with Edith and May remaining for many years with the grandparents at

Burgate Street. May was told only that her father had been killed in the First World War; although it turns out that in fact he died of natural causes in 1916, aged 21, while serving as a private in the 36<sup>th</sup> Canadian Infantry as part of the support staff of their big camp outside Folkestone. May's uncle was killed in the war; and then, to make matters worse, the gramophone and cycle business declined in the face of competition from the big stores, with grandfather George eventually retiring to an almshouse, along with his other daughter who never married.

All this explains why May in the end had no living family at all - there were no relatives on her mother's side and she knew of no surviving relatives of her father. But she and her mother had great determination to make a life for themselves. We know nothing of her schooling or of the timing of their move to London, said to be first to Brockley before settling down in Lee Green. We do know that May did clerical work in the Thirties and also probably during the war; she

found it boring. What transformed her life was that after the war she joined the Women's Royal Army Corps in Germany as part of the British Army on the Rhine. She obviously had a wonderful time there and fell in love with Germany: most of the photographs among her papers are of German friends and their families. And of course she fell in love with the thunderous music of Richard Wagner, whose great opera house at Bayreuth was not far away, in the northernmost part of Bavaria.

When May eventually returned to London to look after her mother, she was able to develop a social and cultural life which built on this surprisingly European outlook. There were continual forays into the world of music. She became a member of the Wagner Society, she frequently attended the English National Opera, and she sang in a number of choirs, amongst them the Lewisham Choral Society, the Southwark Singers, conducted by Denis Coleman, and the Good Friday Choir at Eltham, conducted by Francis Eastwood. And it was through music she first came to attend St Paul's Deptford around 1970-71, when Father Diamond recruited Denis Coleman to bring his Singers to augment the High Mass on special occasions such as the Deptford Festival in June. What then happened was that Denis and a small group of the Southwark Singers, including May, became the resident choir at the Mass each Sunday. When this arrangement came to an end around 1980, May stayed on at St Paul's as a member of the church; like so many, she had been captivated by David Diamond's generous, tolerant and festive personality. She was soon one of the central figures in the new ladies' choir formed in the late 1980s under Peter Appleby - and this continued when Fr Peter Fellows became rector and then, with some additional male voices, when John Warrell joined us as organist. May has always been much-loved in the choir, by young and new as well as by old and long-serving; she has always been cheerful and involved, and, as she eventually became frail, she had the grace to give back in friendship what she received in care. Her tiny frame and (after the broken hip) her unsteady gait were belied by the light in her eyes and the charm of her personality. She also gave and received great friendship and kindness from her minicab drivers at J & D, who took to and from St Paul's.

The rest of her life was centred in Lee Green. She and her mother had a ground floor flat in a beautiful Victorian house with a high French roof, owned by Lewisham Council; it was part of the first group of houses in Lee Green to be declared a Conservation Area, and May was a keen member of the Lee Manor Society, established to preserve a beautiful residential environment. She was also a faithful member of the local Labour Party. Her favourite pub was the Lord Northbrook on the corner of Southbrook Road - the road where Max Wall lived. Last but not least was May's long membership of a Wine Tasting class, which she attended for years at Lewisham Community Education in Brockley Rise and later at the home in Sydenham of their teacher, Will Parker. She kept vivid photographs of their joyous celebration of her 90<sup>th</sup> birthday.

So this was a life which started under great difficulty and continued in hardship but came to fulfilment after many, many years of love, joy and good fellowship. May was never put down, never discouraged. In no way was she the sour spinster with pursed lips portrayed in fiction; on the contrary she was a free spirit who lived a rich and happy life. And this church, with its operatic architecture and the joyful spirit of Father Diamond, was for her a crucial part of it all - something to look forward to every week.

Nicholas Taylor 19.02.2010