

Friends, colleagues and former pupils will be sad to learn that Mr Blake (who taught French at the school from the mid 50's until the mid 60's) passed away suddenly at home in Bristol on 3rd June 2011 aged 83. The following tribute was written on behalf of the family by Eleanour Blake and is to be read at his funeral at St Mary Redcliffe Church, Bristol on 23rd June 2011:

"I recently came across a quote by Rudyard Kipling which I thought was very apt for dad.

I don't know if he knew this particular quote - he certainly liked to collect them - but he definitely lived by this one:-

Kipling said, "Live as if you are going to die tomorrow, garden as if you going to live forever".

And so how to sum up the very full life of my dad, Bill Blake, in just a few short minutes?

Perhaps I should begin at the beginning. He was born in Devizes, Wilts in 1928, the younger son of a farming couple from Tilshead - who could trace their roots back to the 16th century. Many of you will have seen him in his Moonraker tie.

The story of the Moonrakers is a Wiltshire in-joke. Legend has it that a customs officer came by some locals, apparently raking frantically at a reflection of the moon in the big pond in Devizes called the Cramer. Rather amused, he challenged them as to what they thought they were doing. They promptly replied, "Getting hold of this gurt big cheese we can see yer". So, the customs officer rode on his way, musing on the locals apparent stupidity and leaving them to quietly rake in the barrels of contraband brandy they had hidden in the pond.

Dad and older brother Tom went to Devizes Secondary School. Dad went on to Bristol University and, despite barely having left Wiltshire at that point, went on to study French and Latin. He spent a year in the Sorbonne University, lodging with a landlady on one of the grandest boulevards in Paris.

For National Service, he became an Educational Sergeant, starting out in Bodmin, Cornwall and eventually being transferred to Germany (although he had hoped for a more exotic posting!). Once he gained their confidence, he sometimes helped the troops write letters home as many of them were illiterate. And helping people I think you will agree is something of a theme for dad. He went on from there to teach in Llanidloes, Wales - a lucky break in many senses, when good teaching jobs were hard to come by. For there he met our mum, Rita and perhaps rather aptly one of their earliest dates was to see the film Moonraker with Sylvia Sims and George Baker.

They married in mum's home town of New Quay, Wales in 1960 but despite my dad's undoubted linguistic skills he never attempted to master Welsh! They moved onto Portsmouth where he taught at Southern Grammar School for Boys [where he was affectionately known as "Bertie"] and he developed a life long taste for curry - apparently part of the speech day ritual.

And so finally he came back to Bristol where he remained for the rest of his life and where my sister Margaret and I were born. He taught French at Kingsfield School - where for reasons lost in the mists of time he was known affectionately as "Budgie" (a change from the previous "Bertie") and was a House Master of Haskins House. Former pupils were forever saying hello to him in the street - a testament to how well liked and respected he was as a teacher there.

I think Bristol must have suited him, as historically both Bristol time and Blake time have always been behind the more conventional GMT. I am sure many of you will recall him bustling into church, blaming an excess of traffic or traffic lights for the hold up!

But he was also generous with time. Many of his former pupils and colleagues recall his warmth and kindness particularly at dark or difficult moments in their lives. Pupils from his first class of 1953 said he was firm but fair at a time when the teacher's word was law and the cane was never very far away.

I can vouch for his patience in my own life, in particular with his two grandchildren Tommy (11) and Emily (3). Reading with them, discussing football league tables and gardening with Tommy; putting up with dirt flying everywhere in Tommy's quest to find worms and bugs! Indeed there is still a patch of ground at home called the potato patch and only a year or so ago he was buying seed potatoes to put in it - a reflection of his farming roots.

Roots and history were an important part of his life. He was a member of the Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Society, Kingswood History Society and the National Trust - many of whose members are here today. He would often go on tours with Canon John Rogan to sites of biblical interest and with St Mary Redcliffe on trips organised by Mary and John Brewer. These were some of the highlights of his year and continued his taste for travel which started just after the war with his university friend Tis; they travelled around France on their motorcycles, which was quite adventurous for the times.

With a name like William Blake (though no relation) it is perhaps inevitable he was into literature of all kinds. One of his early loves was Thomas Hardy, also a West Country man with an interest in the lives and customs of country folk. But more recently he discovered Jane Austen and perhaps more surprisingly, I wonder if the boy wizard Harry Potter knew he had an 83 year old fan in dad, someone who was almost as old as Dumbledore himself? He would have loved to see the last instalment in the Harry Potter films.

He was also a keen theatregoer. When I went back to his house I found tickets for theatre shows for most of the coming weeks. One was for Hamlet - which I went along to on his behalf. In retrospect it was a difficult choice, dealing as it does with the death of one's father but I enjoyed seeing the play through his eyes - knowing he would have appreciated the lovely surroundings and congenial company at the Theatre Royal Bath.

And so to sport. As you may have noticed, we have, rather daringly, for this part of Bristol, chosen blue and white flowers to reflect his support of Bristol Rovers and also Pompey Football Clubs. He was also a fan of Manchester City from a young age - despite being hundreds of miles away - apparently having taken a shine to their giant goalkeeper Frank Swift, who sadly died in the Munich air disaster. F A cup day was taken very seriously in our house - with at least two radios on, the television, the newspaper and his own notes so that he could make an informed analysis of the action. But he also loved tennis and in 1997 saw the thrilling final with Martina Hingis and Jana Novotna at Wimbledon. Dad was pleased to see that Novotna who had been the distraught loser that year won in 1998. In cricket, he followed England's fortunes chasing those elusive Ashes and kept in contact with a former teacher who moved to NZ, keeping him abreast of sport from their perspective.

One of dad's sporting heroes was Eric Liddle whose story formed the backbone of the film Chariots of Fire, one of his favourite films. He combined tremendous sporting ability with strong Christian principles - refusing to run in a heat for his best event, the 100m, as it took place on the Sabbath.

Music was also another love which we have tried to reflect in today's service. I am pleased that he was able to make it to London earlier this year to see one of his favourite operas - Mozart's Magic Flute at the Royal Opera House. Every Christmas he went to Bath Abbey to hear Handel's Messiah and never ceased to be thrilled by the stirring Hallelujah chorus. And he also admired women sopranos like Kathleen Ferrier, songs from whose repertoire we include today.

But above all he loved meeting and mixing with people - as those of you who were at his 80th will remember. He would be so thrilled to see so many of you gathered here today - reflecting his many interests or people he simply met in the course of his life and with whom he continued to keep in touch. And for this reason, his Christmas Card list was legendarily long.

He also brought out the best of people. I never worried when he visited me in London and would decide to go off on an adventure on his own. If he ever got lost or stuck even in that big city his genuine warmth of personality meant people were always there to help and guide him, much as he had helped and guided people in his own life. A true gentleman as many of you have told me.

He found his spiritual home here at Redcliffe, joining the congregation in the late 1980's shortly after our mum had died. Margaret and I attended the school and church here and I think he liked that thread of continuity. He went on to weave himself into the very fabric of this church acting over the years as Reader, Sidesman, Adminstrant and Guide.

We admired the way he coped after the tragically early death of mum from cancer- learning quite late in life to keep house and cook. Only a few weeks ago I was giving him a master class in making mashed potato, a dish he was particularly partial to.

Mum was buried in Wales, her home country, and dad has asked to be buried there in the family plot, a wish we will be respecting tomorrow.

And as part of his wish to gather people together for one last time in his memory, please do join us in the Undercroft after the service - to share your memories of him with us and each other.

And so I will finish with part of a poem by Minnie Haskins, quoted by George VI in his 1939 Christmas Broadcast and which dad was very fond of. Haskins composed "God Knows" in a house not very far from where dad lived, and his school house was named in her honour.

'And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year: "Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown"

And he replied "Go out into the darkness and put your hand into the Hand of God. That shall be to you better than light and safer than any known way".

So I went forth and finding the Hand of God, trod gladly into the night. And he led me towards the hills and the breaking of the day'.