

OBITUARY: Rosemary Chirgwin

By Richard Baker

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Rosemary died on Sunday, September 5th, 2004, at the age of 94. She was School Secretary from about 1930 to 1973, but the part she played in school life far exceeded her official status. She was guide, philosopher and friend to generations of Kilburn schoolboys, of whom I was one. Like many others, I have the happiest memories of the influence she exerted on us at an impressionable time of life.

She was born Rosemary Willis above her father's grocery shop in the Harrow Road on August 26th, 1910. She would have been about twenty when she began work at KGS. A few years later, a special relationship fuelled by a mutual interest in music grew between her and a sixth-former, an outstanding athlete by the name of **Eddie Chirgwin**. They married in 1940 when Eddie was already serving in the RAMC. I happened to be staying with them shortly afterwards and, perhaps because I might have vaguely wondered why they shared a bedroom when he was on leave, Rosemary told me about the wedding.

Rosemary remained with the school through many, mostly sad, changes until her retirement, and others will I hope contribute memories of those later years.

What I remembered from my early days at the school in the late thirties was being made up by Rosemary for school plays. She took a tremendous interest in drama and music and was a great source of encouragement (and sometimes well-judged criticism) to people like me, who shared those interests. She had accompanied the school on the "*Hamlet*" tour of Belgium and Germany organised by **Peter Wright** in 1957 and she did the make-up for it. This brought together two of her abiding interests, the theatre and foreign travel. But it was not touristy foreign travel. She was a member of the International Friendship League which aimed to bring together young people from different countries for holidays they could afford.

Just after the second world war, I was in an IFL party she led at a chalet in the mountains at Les Diablerets in Switzerland run by an idealistic couple from Belgium, who were known as Tio and Tia, uncle and aunty.

We spent two days climbing the 10,000 foot Diablerets peak and I can still see Rosemary cheerfully swinging along the mountain paths with a rucksack in her back. It was a favourite occupation of hers, on many a mountain holiday. When funds wouldn't run to anything so ambitious, there was a modest IFL retreat in part of Surrey which was at least hilly, and they had friends who owned a cottage at Chinnor in Oxfordshire which also provided them with a country bolt-hole. But the pair of them spent a good deal of their spare time helping others. They took a Social Studies diploma at Westminster College of Commerce and later became involved in work for the King George V Trust in Islington and in Child Care projects in Notting Hill.

Rosemary was good at helping us all to grow up in more ways than one. She won a Gold Star as an amateur ballroom dancer and did her best to teach a succession of sixth-formers to glide round the floor with some conviction. I remember this talent being brought into play during the school's wartime evacuation to Northampton when the social club organised by **Don Woodman** (Youth House) introduced us to girls' and Saturday night dances at the Roadmender Club. Rosemary was also a great fan of the wonderful local repertory theatre and she joined in the party booking which a crowd of us made each week.

There were wartime interludes in London especially after a section of the school re-opened in Salusbury Road and Rosemary returned to look after it. I remember the pleasure she took in sharing her collection of classical 78's on Sunday afternoons at her flat near Hampstead Heath. I also remember queuing with her on the pavement outside the New Theatre in St Martin's Lane where the Saddler's Wells Ballet with Margot Fonteyn and Robert Helpmann appeared on alternate evenings with the Old Vic Theatre Company starring Laurence Olivier and Ralph Richardson.

These are golden memories and for me they happily overshadow my last meetings with Rosemary in a nursing home. But she was not alone because Eddie was at her side for hours every day, ready to respond to her smallest need. He was always a bit of a hero to me, and still is. As for Rosemary well, without her, KGS would simply not have been the school it once was, and we would all have missed the chance to make a very special friend.



