

# AGNES BENHAM'S 100<sup>TH</sup> BIRTHDAY



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Wednesday 11 August 1999 was a very special day. For many millions of people, it was an occasion of wonderment and awe as they watched the eclipse of the sun from the various vantage points along the line of totality, from the Scilly Isles to India. But here in Southampton, it was a day that eclipsed that other world event. Agnes Benham was celebrating her one hundredth birthday.

The day began early for the centenarian, as she went to the hairdressers first thing. Then the piles of cards and telegrams arrived, and flowers were delivered. The lounge at Fairhavens Christian Residential and Nursing Home looked - and smelled - just like a florists. Amidst it all sat Agnes, known also as Auntie Agnes or Benny or Mrs Benham to her family and friends. She was in good spirits, perhaps convinced once she had received that very special telegram with its royal photograph that she really was a hundred!

As the day went on, visitors began gathering for her teatime celebration. They came from far and near, by train, by taxi, by car. They came from Selston in Nottinghamshire, from Bungay in Suffolk, from New Milton in Hampshire and from Buckland Newton in Dorset. They came with gifts, with flowers, and with love. Some of them had known Agnes for a very long time;

Merly Ross can claim a friendship of seventy years. For a short time, Fairhavens' lounge became a crowd of memories, of laughter at remembered moments, all centring on this remarkable lady.

Just before the cake was cut, and teas were handed round, we all listened as Alan made a short speech, highlighting some of the main details of Agnes' life. He spoke of her childhood, as the eldest of eleven children. He spoke of the years she spent as a resident maid at Crimea Farm, a time of much happiness. And he spoke of her married life, as the wife of a gamekeeper, Bill, and their happiness together on the various country estates where they lived and worked.

Finally, he spoke of her time in Damerham, where she spent such a large part of her life latterly. Her skill with the needle and crochet hook, her enjoyment and participation in village events, her involvement with the church, her love of gardening; all these have contributed to the long life that we were celebrating. Finally, as he spoke of her increasing disability and the resultant move into care, first in Bickerley Green and then in Fairhavens, we could appreciate the frustration that she feels at times when she acknowledges that she can no longer do so many of the things she did before. He concluded with a prayer of thanksgiving for all the varied aspects of her life.

The candles were blown out on the splendidly decorated cake provided by Fairhavens, and we all sang "Happy Birthday". The photographer from the local paper, who had arrived right on cue, took a few pictures, and then we could

enjoy our tea, and more conversations, before the visitors began to take their leave and set off for home.

It was a splendid day. So many thanks are due to the staff at Fairhavens, for all their kindness and their care over the arrangements for this once-in-a-lifetime happening. And thanks are due too to all those who remembered the day and sent greetings, flowers, and gifts, or who came to help Agnes celebrate her very special birthday. She has always treasured the love and friendship of all who have known her.

Although she felt a little "down" as the last visitors prepared to go, and wondered how she would spend the evening, this occasion will undoubtedly go down as one of the highspots in a very long life.