

Queen's oldest surviving cousin recalls happy childhood days Everlasting memories of my dear friend Lilibet

SHORTLY before 11 o'clock this morning, two elderly cousins will meet to worship at the Royal Chapel of All Saints in Windsor Great Park.

One will be the Honourable Margaret Rhodes, who lives in a cottage less than a mile away.

The other will be Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II who lives at the other end of the park in the largest inhabited castle in Europe.

Mrs Rhodes was born Margaret Elphinstone. Her mother Mary was the Queen Mother's eldest sister and her father was the 16th Baron Elphinstone, a former governor of the Bank of Scotland.

Home was Carberry Tower, a three-storey baronial mansion near Musselburgh, which was gifted to the Church of Scotland after Lady Elphinstone's death in 1961 to be used as a youth and conference centre.

Insight

The Queen will celebrate her 83rd birthday on Tuesday and earlier this week I met up with Mrs Rhodes to gain an insight into her special relationship with the woman she knows simply as "Lilibet".

My arrival was heralded by a West Highland Terrier with a bark louder than a pack of corgis and a worrying habit of diving at car wheels. (Squashing the family pooch would not have been a good start to the interview.)

Thankfully we both made it inside and into an elegant drawing room where a clutch of signed and framed royal portraits give a hint that the owner might just be very well-connected.

Mrs Rhodes is more or less the same height as the Queen and shares her perfect manners, her direct, steady gaze and — I soon discover — her deadpan sense of humour.

She also has a similar cut-glass accent, though my musically untrained ears would guess hers is probably an octave or so lower.

Annoying

Only 10 months older than her cousin, the young Margaret was an obvious childhood playmate for the future Queen and I begin by asking whether they often talk of those times.

"Oh yes." I'm told exuberantly. "The other cousins have all departed this life. I'm the only one who can remember her then."

They even had the same nanny. Known to her charges as "Allah", Clara Knight was employed to look after the Elphinstone babies.

Then when the princess arrived, "Allah was whisked away, which was frightfully annoying," jokes my host.

By Ian Lloyd royal writer

"She was obviously destined for higher things."

Margaret clearly didn't hold it against her cousin, as they soon began playing together very happily.

"Being circus horses was always a favourite. All of us taking turns to be the horse, though Princess Elizabeth was always the ringmaster."

"When you compare what children do now we were so gloriously straightforward. We played at catching 'happy days'. Do you know what they were? They were catching leaves falling from the trees. We could do it for hours."

There were occasional family get-togethers at Glamis Castle organised by their maternal grandparents, the 14th Earl and Countess of Strathmore.

"Granny Strathmore wore these long black dresses with lace around the neck. Grandpa had an enormous bushy moustache. He smoked untipped cigarettes and we were always longing for it to catch fire!"

In December 1936, the abdication of Elizabeth's uncle, King Edward VIII, meant the accession of her parents as King George VI and Queen Elizabeth, while she herself became heiress presumptive.

In private, the family tried to carry on as normal. "One could not help but notice the changes," recalls Mrs Rhodes, "but we still played together as equals."

"One wasn't going to start curtsying the age of 11. Though we did have to alter how we addressed Uncle Bertie (the King). He was now 'Sir,' just like one's elders."

Meeting Elizabeth's formidable grandmother was a different kettle of fish and Mrs Rhodes must be one of the few people in the world who can claim to have head-butted Queen Mary.



■ Mrs Rhodes with her faithful Westie, Guelder. (Left) A previously unpublished photo taken at Carberry Towers in Musselburgh with Princesses Elizabeth and Margaret.

way up hit her hard under the chin with my head. Thankfully she took it well."

Princess Elizabeth's education was in the hands of Marion Crawford, who joined the family when she was just 22.

Many biographers have criticised the future Queen's academic training as "undemanding" and even "lamentable".

Crawfie herself later recalled that she was surprised the royal parents left her to her own devices so much.

Mrs Rhodes has a different take on it.

"She was not going to have an education to be a mechanic. She didn't need technical education, or science. Just a good

knowledge of literature, French, and so on — a sensible, general education. I had the same. We were never expected to pass exams and my parents would never have courted the idea of our going to university.

"It was the great, great desire of the King and Queen to give her an ordinary and normal, everyday life — or as much as possible given the circumstances. They were very close. The King referred to them as 'us four' and the Queen was always organising fun things for the girls, little dances."

The two cousins were together on VE Day.

"After shouting 'We want the King' at the front of Buckingham Palace we linked

arms and went through the streets, eventually doing a conga through The Ritz!"

In those post-war days the eyes of the world were on the princess and her younger sister.

"She and Princess Margaret were the celebrities of the 1930s and '40s. There were no other varieties in their day. Now there's Posh and Becks and Amy Winehouse. The world has changed."

Bridesmaid

Two years after the end of the war, Margaret was one of Princess Elizabeth's eight bridesmaids at her wedding to the Duke of Edinburgh. She recalls that "like any parents the King and Queen had doubts he was the right person". He was a bit of a new broom. Slightly mocking of tradition — he is so much mellow in his old age!

The Queen will spend her birthday quietly at Windsor and if the weather is fine she will take her daily ride through the Home Park.

"The Queen is happiest as a country landowner. She's mad about her horses and her dogs. One thing that fascinates me is how multi-faceted her brain is."

"On the one hand she has affairs of state and her red boxes to deal with."

"On the other she can worry that the under-gardener has no room to live in or the groom's child is not at school in the right place. This is the role she loves best. At Balmoral or Sandringham she has these good, sanity-inducing holidays, away from it all."

Picnics

As I'm about to leave, Mrs Rhodes recalls an anecdote that sums up the Queen's real, down-to-earth nature.

"The Queen is a very humble person. In her public life she can't be of course but in herself she is. She is not extravagant and the stories of her going around turning off all the lights are true."

"At Balmoral we have lovely evening picnics in the little houses and log cabins that they often use. The Duke is a damned good cook and the Queen helps, preparing the salad and laying the table."

"On the last day at Balmoral, the Queen always cleans her favourite cottage herself. She gets bowls of hot water and scrubs the floors, cleans the windows, cleans the kettles and the candlesticks."

When I ask Mrs Rhodes to sum up her feelings for the Queen she says simply, "I'm very happy and very lucky that we have remained great friends. She's lovely."

It's a sentiment that her cousin will almost certainly return.