We would like to thank of you all for being here today and for your kind thoughts, prayers and words over the past weeks. We have received so many heartfelt messages, describing Denise as kindness itself, as someone who looked after everyone else and a real ‘lady’.

Creating a eulogy for our much-loved mum has been a challenge – the first draft was full of wonderful memories that made us laugh and cry, but when Heather had finished timing it, she said, “Well we could go with that, and there’ll be a whole 9 minutes left for the rest of the service! You’ll be glad to know we went back to the drawing board!

Our darling mum, daughter of Eileen and Cecil Thacker, was born on 29th July 1942, in Blackpool, where her mother had been evacuated to have her baby due to the second world war. Denise Ann was named after her grandparents, Dennis and Hannah. She grew up in Eccles, Greater Manchester with her parents and dear younger sister Maureen. Their first house in Peel Green was opposite a factory and had a back yard and outdoor privy. When Denise was 6, they moved to Lambton Street, Winton where Denise and Maureen could play skipping, whip and top and marbles in the street, drink Vimto and listen to the Ovaltinies on the radio. The two girls didn’t have a lot of material possessions, sharing everything between them, but counted themselves lucky. They loved going to church, singing in the choir and joining in the Whit Walks. Their mother, being Irish, would take the girls to spend long summer holidays on the family farms in Ireland with their cousins Christine, Mary and Teresa. Denise described these stays as ‘bliss’. The five cousins kept in regular contact and we are very happy that Teresa and her son Kieran are here. We are so touched to see other friends and relatives who have travelled to be with us today, especially Mum’s dear cousin Alan and his wife Pauline, Keith’s brother Neil and his wife Kareen, our cousin Arran and his son Max.

Recently, we discovered a handwritten account Mum had made of her early life, entitled, ‘It’s Only Me’. In this, Mum recalls childhood Christmases as really happy times, when they would receive a parcel from Ireland, from her Auntie Mary. This contained a goose, packed with bacon and freshly churned butter, all wrapped in hessian and remarkably fresh. Mum would tell us how they used to place candles on their Christmas tree – and light them too - until one year when the candles set fire to the tree and their dear dad went charging out into the front garden with it blazing before him!

Denise described herself as a sickly child. This was due to a condition that would not be recognised for another 10 years, as coeliac disease. She was relieved to leave some harsh school days behind her and embark on the world of work.

Our mum would have loved to train as a florist and have her own flower shop. To this end, her first position was with Kendal Milne (the Harrods of Manchester) with the promise of training in floral arrangement, only to find that they put her on ‘Handerkerchiefs.’ A Manchester florist advertised for a trainee, but she had to forego this opportunity as it would have meant taking a very early bus alone to the flower market each morning and her dad was not keen on this idea. So she went to night school to learn shorthand and typing and took a job at Lankro Chemicals. She soon moved from office Junior to working for the boss, right up until she left to be married. Later on, Denise loved working with children at Sunnyside preschool in Stapleford and for 11 happy years as a classroom assistant at The Icknield Primary School in Sawston. Later still, she became a partner and administrator in our dad’s printing business.

We could say that on both sides of our family, printing ink rather than blood runs in our veins: Denise’s dad was a printer working on the Manchester Guardian and Evening News. One day, his young apprentice offered to drop off a heavy fan at his house, on his motorbike. The rest, as they say is history - one month after Denise’s 20th birthday, she was married to Keith, a clean-living young preacher.

Yes, I did say a ‘preacher’. Beverley notes that at the time of their wedding, Keith was a lay-preacher in the unorthodox Unitarian church - a non-conformist faith that includes key differences to Denise’s as a member of the Church of England. Their early married life was a great example of marital compromise: they agreed to marry in Mum’s church, known affectionately as ‘Mary Mags’ and to have their first child Christened in Dad’s. Keith and Denise shared a deep, mutual love but represented differing viewpoints on many things, faith being one – so they really did pretty well, in 2022, to celebrate 60 years of marriage! Their differences acted as an interesting backdrop to our childhoods; Beverley particularly remembers complaining to her dad that she was being shoved around in the playground at school and Keith telling her to ‘shove ‘em back harder’ only to have Denise counter with, ‘No, you have to turn the other cheek and walk away’!

Keith and Denise’s first daughter, Beverley Ann was born in 1964. Mum met her good friend Beryl whilst expecting Bev in Stepping Hill Hospital – when Mum’s waters broke, they decided to finish the episode of ‘Ironside’ that they were watching before calling for the nurse! By this time, Denise and Keith were living in their first home in Disley, Cheshire – on a 1 in 7 hill which Denise described as like the top of the world. She used to tie her wrists to the handles of Beverley’s pram so that if the pram went, particularly in snow, she went too – and she did, ending up under the shopping tray. I, Claire Louise, made a fairly unforgettable entrance two years later, when the family had moved to Harrietsham in Kent, weighing in at 10lb, 10oz and being declared the largest baby to be born in Maidstone Hospital in the whole of 1966! Denise’s back never recovered from this experience! In 1968, we moved into Greenfield Close, Stapleford, and 3 years later, Heather Jane was born in Mill Road Hospital, the first of our family to be born in Cambridge.

Mum loved our early life in this village. The cul-de-sac was a community in itself. Her life revolved around family, the school and this church; we were quite blissfully happy, making lasting memories and life-long friends. Mum loved being a mother, providing for our every need and encouraging us in all of the performing arts, including singing in the church choir (we have our mum to thank for our singing voices). She always encouraged but never pushed, congratulated but never boasted, commiserated and comforted, was slow to chide and swift to bless. Growing up, she did so much – probably far too much - for us, but she was our role model, our guide by example on how to behave with mindful respect and consideration of others. She was our best friend and confidante whenever we needed one, our safety net and source of unconditional love.

Bev recalls there was not much in the way of rebellion from the three of us, but that is not to say Mum was never on our case – and that included Dad! We all remember her habit of calling ‘Keith!’ or any of us for that matter, from wherever she was in the house, to check on our whereabouts and that we were doing something useful. She could be really going for it, keeping us in order, until we were saved by the bell – should a visitor arrive, she could instantly revert to her usual gentle demeanour with a smile and warm greeting! Mum was an incredibly light sleeper – a great comfort when she appeared at our side if ill in the night, but not so great when we were tiptoeing into the house later than agreed! Mum, being a protector, rather than a risk-taker, would worry about us. Somehow, I got to go out with a 20-year-old sailor at the tender age of 15. Not quite so easy for the baby of the family – when she was 19, Heather would often be going out on a date. Mum, observing her low cut tops, would always shout, ‘Cover your chest!’

Heather reflects… ‘Mum, out of your three daughters, I am most certainly the one who gave you the most sleepless nights! I may be an actress but I could never fool you! You were an exceptional judge of character and your Mancunian strength and perception could see through pretence and insincerity straightaway. You were always accepting of our decisions - never discriminating, always inclusive. Thank you, Mum for your unwavering support. I will look for signs of you in my garden which you loved and if I'm ever in trouble I will remember you saying "Don't worry Pet, it will all come out in the wash".’

Flowers continued to be a passion throughout Denise’s life – she loved to spend time arranging flowers, attending flower clubs and entering arrangements for the village flower show, for which she won many a cup. She also spent many an hour making her garden look beautiful and loved our family cats. Mum’s creativity was quiet and understated. She was a skilful baker except for one mishap, when she and friend Jean Ruse decorated Christmas cakes at an evening class - and Dad had to take a hammer and chisel to the icing! She was resourceful and an accomplished knitter and seamstress, making many of our clothes when we were young. Denise was always well dressed and enjoyed dressing up for a special occasion. When off to many a PTA dance with friends, June and Tony, she would kiss us goodnight smelling of Estee Lauder Youth Dew and wearing a maxi dress. We loved nothing more than trying out her ‘70s blue eye shadow and lipsticks or metallic, heeled sandals with matching evening bags! Mum loved dance, music and entertainment - from Andy Williams to church choral works, West End theatre, film (especially ‘Sense and Sensibility’) and the ballet. Never one for surprises or too much spontaneity, Mum was a planner. She was distinctly on edge when, keeping our destination a secret, the 3 of us took her to see one of her favourite singers of the time, Barry Manilow, live in concert. Don’t knock Barry - we all had a great night! Denise had a good sense of humour but was quite out of character if someone happened to trip up. She would laugh at their expense, exclaiming, “Ooh he’s just gone arse over tip!” We were shocked, thinking she had said ‘arse over tit’ which would be even more rude for our mum! Whilst always a little apprehensive about going away, Mum enjoyed holidays to visit Maureen in Jersey and later California and returned often to Ireland in later years, writing, ‘If I ever disappear, you will find me in the lakes of Killarney.’ She took Dad’s lead to experience ambitious European holidays and never forgot sharing a business trip of a lifetime, hosted by The Times of India.

Mum loved planning our weddings with us. She was a humble person, shown when we were shopping for her first mother-of-the-bride outfit: We were walking along Kensington High Street when she was drawn to an ordinary store, saying “Ooh look, Richards has got a sale on!”. I had to forcibly steer her away and persuade her into her Frank Usher outfit from Harrods! She looked stunning at all of our weddings but was maybe not prepared for the new challenge they presented – sons-in-law! Her three sons-in-law, John, Mark and Brendan were much-loved by Mum but not quite as biddable as her daughters! Still, she found them jobs to do whenever they were around and discovered they could be rather useful – able to put up a shelf that was actually straight, unlike Keith, and occasionally provided good advice or a listening ear when she preferred to keep her worries from her girls. Mum had a strong sense of duty and a reverence for those who had served in the world wars, remembering her own dad as an air raid warden. She was quietly proud to see Mark take part in the Remembrance Sunday service, which she always attended, and she found Elgar’s Nimrod particularly moving. We will listen to an extract from this at the end on this tribute.

Denise delighted in being a grandma to Grace, Dan, Emmet and Pierce, participating in her grandchildren’s lives and upbringing. Watching their continuing development was an abiding joy for her. She supported their endeavours, encouraged when things did not go as planned, praised their efforts and took pride in their achievements. Mum and Dad moved within the village in retirement and Denise took great pleasure in watching the neighbours’ children grow – named by one as the grandmother of Cherry Tree Avenue!

Probably Mum’s greatest accomplishment was being a loving, supportive and generous neighbour, friend, daughter, sister, wife and mother. In the days when women started carving out careers for themselves, our mum prided herself on the time and energy she poured into being an exceptional housewife, bringing up her daughters and being a superlative home-maker. She was a brilliant hostess, who loved to produce mouthwatering dinners for her family and friends and always saw the job through to the bitter end, insisting that she washed up and put away the very last pot and pan before retiring to bed. Her friends seemed to share the same fixation and would fight over the sink and tea towels whenever they had a party. Mum was always on the go, forever hanging the washing out and dodging the showers to bring it back in again. She was super organised and had everything in its place! Some lasting memories will be of Mum in her pinny, which she would never be without in the kitchen and her ironing everything in sight – even our knickers!

After a couple of years spent in Darlington, our family returned to this special village to live in Church Street, just around the corner. She loved this place and her church family – and worshipped regularly here for the best part of 56 years. She loved being part of St Andrew’s handbell-ringing and flower-arranging teams and over the years, took on pretty well every role you can think of from church cleaner to Sunday School teacher, member and secretary of the PCC and Friends of St Andrew’s committee, secretary and chair of the MU, which was dear to her heart, and intercessor, reader, sides-person, server and chalice assistant during Sunday services.

Denise had a deep faith. Whenever life got tough, she would use the mantra of her good friend Joan King, ‘Let go, Let God’. Mum was often in some discomfort or facing unpleasant hospital procedures relating to coeliac disease, osteoporosis or skin cancer, but you would not have known. She was always kind and steadfast. Drawn to warm, caring and hardworking people like herself, she put others first whilst keeping her own needs private. She would visit elderly people whose family did not live nearby and go to friends in hospital or nursing homes. Mum had a tendency to worry over things - even those she couldn’t control - but she just wanted to make things better for those dear to her. Really, her whole life was about supporting others, through good times and bad.

It is for this reason that her last illness was particularly devastating – as it became increasingly difficult to hide and impeded her ability to help those around her. At least 4 years ago, we knew things were not as they should be and understandably, Denise batted off her diagnosis for as long as she possibly could. Some dark times followed as her cruel illness took hold. In the end, we had to accept that Mum needed to be in a care home on a permanent basis. Never one to sit around, her determination to get up and going led to many falls - and fractures that could not be healed. Yet one day, not long ago, when a couple of residents (who we came to know and love) were having particularly loud outbursts, Mum chuckled saying, “They’re off again. I don’t know. And here’s me trying to have some decorum!” Mum managed to retain her lovely smile, her sense of humour and her constant concern that Dad was alright. She still had a twinkle in her beautiful blue eyes and would share a chuckle with us. She even joined in singing ‘Guide Me Oh Thou Great Redeemer’ when visited by Romie about 10 days before passing. We are extremely grateful to all those who cared for Mum over her final months. Also to friends, Chris and Mary Barber and John Pinder who she always loved to see. We were fortunate to be with our mum in her last days. Despite her frailty, she showed great fortitude until the end, which, thanks be to God, was merciful and peaceful when it came – and befitting of such a lady, who we are proud to call our mum.

Keith would like to say, ‘I have known Denise for over 60 years, during which time she has always been the generous, loving, caring, kindly person you all knew. She will live long in our memories, and I will find it hard to cope without her. As a Unitarian, I do not believe in the afterlife, but truly hope that I will be proved wrong, so that I might just meet her again. I love her deeply; she has borne me three wonderful daughters (and a baby lost in pregnancy). Our family have been wonderful, and are a very real comfort to me at this very sad time. I just want to say, “Rest in peace, my darling, and thank you for everything.”’

I would like to finish by saying… When in church with you Mum, as things got tough, the words of a particular hymn were poignant and I used to turn my head, singing them directly to you: ‘I will hold the Christ-light for you in the night-time of your fear, I will hold my hand out to you, Speak the peace you long to hear. I will weep when you are weeping; When you laugh, I'll laugh with you. I will share your joy and sorrow 'Til we've seen this journey through.’ I hope that we managed to do this for you, darling Mum, and I pray you will forgive us for asking the Lord to take you when we couldn’t bear to watch you suffer any longer. We know, by faith, that God has you in the palm of his hand, that heaven has a new, beautiful angel and we all have been blessed by your life. In our hearts, we will miss you all the days of our lives and love you forever.

*Play Nimrod*