

# Our Mary

The Eulogy given by Tom Kelly on the occasion of the Requiem Mass for Mary Kelly on 19 February 2026 at the Church of Our Lady and the Angels in Nuneaton.

Thank you for coming today to celebrate the life and pray for the soul of our Mary. She would have marvelled at the number of you who have come.

Her story in her own words for the family history - with additions for more recent times - will be handed out in this leaflet as you leave the Church. And there will also be a slideshow of photos over the years on display at the reception after the service at the Mary Forryan Centre, St Peters Church, Hinckley.

Mary Rachel Kelly - our Mary - was the 4th child and second daughter of Bill and Rachel Kelly. Born in Loughborough but raised in Hinckley where Bill was transferred and remained as police Superintendent until his retirement.

She had a very full life and travelled far, but lived most of her life in a small area of Hinckley - as a child in the police house at Upper Bond Street, as a teenager and young adult in Hollycroft, and then on her own for the past 30 years in Gopsall Road.

Mary always stood out in a crowd. Tall and broad shouldered, with distinctive good looks and a head of initially fair, but later grey hair she was hard not to notice. She had her own sense of dress when in civvies and not in nurses' uniform. You almost certainly remember those very long scarves - twice round the neck and nearly touching the ground - and her many long woollen cardigans and jackets.

Can you hear her voice in your mind's ear? Definitely a Kelly accent. Easily mistaken for one of her sisters particularly on the phone but lots of Hinckleyisms such as "Allo me dook". Although I now refer to her as Our Mary, she attracted nicknames. For some years she was known to her Nursing colleagues and Herefordshire family and other friends simply as KELLY - rather confusing when she was only one of eight Kelly children. Her brothers knew her as MAZZA. Her many friends and acquaintance from the Ivory Coast refer to her as MARY MUM.

At school she was more athletic than academic, winning lots of prizes for swimming and on sports days. She was a formidable centre half at hockey. On one occasion the captain of a visiting team spotted her limbering up and yelled to her team-mates "oh no not her!". We can only guess what caused that outburst.

She kept up swimming until her very last years with the resistance to cold water shared with many of the family. She did not take part in team sports as an adult. It's a shame that women's rugby was not available when she was young as she would've made a formidable rugby forward in the Kelly family tradition.

Trained as a nurse at Guy hospital in London and then as a midwife, Mary not only practised her skills but did so to the highest standards. She hated sloppy attention to the treatment, care and hygiene of patients and was incensed by any attitudes of could not care less. There is a special camaraderie among nurses and carers. She had many reunions and staycations with her year group that I nicknamed the Guys gals.

If the family thought Mary was going to settle to a quiet and domestic career in midwifery they were quite wrong. She went to Ghana with VS0 (Voluntary Service Overseas) and for nearly two years was in charge two new medical stations. But she had to return home early because of an attack of jaundice.

Having resumed midwifery in posts over most of southern England, she then succumbed again to the urge to travel and went to North America to explore both east and west USA.

She returned a hippie and with a husband to be - Al Vandenberg. They settled rather precariously in Herefordshire where her son Thomas and daughter Tess were born. But she then suffered a profound

and prolonged breakdown which led first to separation, then divorce and enforced estrangement from the children.

After her move back to Hinckley, and gradual, sometimes fitful recovery, Mary had a varied career of work. Quite apart from all her part time work as a carer, she was also a fully trained bus driver for Arriva and then for Leicestershire social services. and was always active in the voluntary sector either employed part-time or simply as a volunteer.

She was always ready to roll up her sleeves and lend a hand even in menial work. She was a cleaner for this church, as Father Jimmy has told us, and provided warm showers in her own home for some of Hinckley's homeless.

There are so many people I could mention whom she helped and comforted. Special mention is due for Geoffrey Hughes whom she continued to support despite his frequent manic and drunken episodes and when others had given up on him.

Many of you have reminded me of the many favours and support she gave to friends, neighbours and even first acquaintances. She was fortunate to live in Gopsall Road which is a beacon of generous neighbourliness. Helping and looking out for one another is the pattern of what I call the Gopsall gang. Mary contributed so much herself but she also benefited particularly when she was ill.

She was obsessively caring. She devoted months and months of her time as carer to our mum and dad and later our deceased brother Hugh a distance away in Skelmersdale. Her relationships as a family carer were always warm but it must be admitted heated from time to time.

Instinctively, she would light up a room and make bright people's day. She kept up friendships and reunions with friends from earliest days at school and the Guy's gals and was a regular in informal get togethers in Hinckley.

She would want to thank everyone who helped, visited and prayed for her particularly, her dear friends Laura Bell and Rosy Curtis and the Gopsall gang. On the occasion of one of my visits to her in hospital, she suddenly looked up and said "I did not know I had so many friends."

Her gift for instant friendship was never better demonstrated than at an investiture Ceremony at Buckingham Palace. On arrival, award recipients and their families gathered in an entry hall. Inevitably, eyes were cast right and left to pick out any celebrities or heroes who might be getting awards.

Mary spotted at the other end of the room a Bishop clearly identifiable as such by the purple vest and dog collar. "Oh, that's the new Roman Catholic Archbishop of Westminster" she said. Before others of us could say. "Are you sure?" she strode through the throng like a snow plough. We could not hear what was said because she was facing away from us. But we could see the bishop's expression go from startled to puzzled and then to a very broad smile. It turned out that he was the retired Protestant Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury as we had worked out by the time Mary rejoined our group. "What a nice man." was all she said and then unabashed managed to latch on to his party and take our party alongside him into the VIP seats for the ceremony.

Mary was steadfastly Roman Catholic in the faith of her parents throughout her whole life. Not just attending Mass on Sundays but frequently also during the week. She was both quietly devout and eager to contribute to the work of the Church particularly its outreach to the disadvantaged and distressed in the community and to the Third World.

This church and its priests and vibrant congregation were the centre of her spiritual life in recent years. She sang in the church choir with great enthusiasm and loved the warmth and devotion of Father Jimmy and his colleagues.

In recent years she formed a very special bond and spiritual comradeship with Father Joseph Kakou Aka now Bishop of Yamoussoukrou in the Ivory Coast. He had got to know Mary when he visited Hinckley and she was convalescing from her first bout of breast cancer but helped him sort out his visa and other paperwork. This broadened out to bringing to Hinckley the Ivorian Choir from London -

some of whom are here today. Ever adventurous, Mary paid no less than 4 visits to the Ivory Coast - the last in 2023 with her friend Laura. She seems to have been treated like minor royalty with generous hospitality by the townsfolk of Assinie in Bishop Joseph's hometown who were celebrating his elevation.

Bishop Joseph has sent very warm condolences to us saying how much he admired her silent courage, her unshakable faith, her generosity, and her high sense of friendship, and that her memory will live on in his heart.

Quiet, self-indulgent retirement was not for Mary. With amazing persistence and determination she took on part time study while still working, and eventually gained an honours degree in English and Cultural studies from Warwick University. She took up singing with the church choir here and was encouraged to join Hinckley Choral Union for which she practised hard and sang Verdi's massive and difficult Requiem in the Really Big Choir at the Royal Albert Hall in London when aged 73.

She especially loved photography, flowers, trees, and gardening. Her philosophy for photography was simple – shoot, print, share, and move on. Which was a pity because, sadly, she did not date or label or organise her many prints and left a legion of images whose subjects are unknown. But she did make greetings cards of her own photos of flowers, and I am sure many of you received these.

You may have been surprised, or disappointed, by the request for no flowers today. This was Mary's specific wish because she did not want many fine flowers to “go to waste”, as she put it, when she would never see them herself.

There are many trees she planted on her own or with others around Hinckley. In the churchyard at St Peters there is a tree and a stone plaque she organised as a memorial for our mother and father.

Mary had many afflictions to bear in her life, as many of you will know. The estrangement from her children, which she so wanted to end, was a lasting hurt. She showed great stoicism to cope with late diagnosed breast cancer and a crushed knee from a motorcycle accident (which was entirely someone else's fault). She was still prone to bouts of depression which could be deep and prolonged. But she always fought back and gradually coped better with the help of improved medication and support of sympathetic GPs and friends.

Over the past three years she developed a heart condition with complications. Through months of relapses and shortening periods of revival she seemed to do a Cooks tour of the cardiology and acute care facilities in Leicester hospitals. This put on hold treatment for a second bout of breast cancer. She remained determined to ‘get better’ but had to be discouraged from getting out of bed too soon. Mary kept an eagle eye on the nursing activity but always gave a ‘thank you’ and appreciation for the care she received.

When the end came, as come it must, she felt comforted by palliative care of the kindly and attentive staff of Ward 44 in Leicester Royal Infirmary and by having Laura Bell at her side at the very end. Mary was no longer in pain or anxiety, had the Last Rites, and heard Mass from this church by video cast.

In the prayer of Bishop Joseph. “May the Righteousness of Mary go ahead of her and may the divine light accompany her in the certainty that her good works have preceded her before the Supreme Judge”.

OUR MARY. Though now we are parted, still her light shines on us.