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Farewell, Queen Mum

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Farewell, Queen Mum



On Saturday afternoon, March 30, while I was watching BBC-America, a news flash announced the death of Queen Elizabeth, the Queen Mother — at the age of 101! The familiar strains of “God Save the Queen” followed instantly, along with a photograph of the Queen Mum and her personal Standard. I burst into tears.

But I knew there was no time for meticulous planning. We had to act quickly. By Thursday we were in London.

Our first stop was the Mall, where we scouted out a place to watch the processional on Friday, when her coffin would be taken from St. James Palace to lie in state in 1,000-year-old Westminster Hall. A television interviewer thought it exceptional that we had come for the event and asked the inevitable: Why?

That was easy. All my life I’ve followed the lives of the British “royals” as if they were family. My shelves are packed with books about them, and my collection of royal memorabilia keeps growing.

Our trips to London date back to 1960, and during our visits I was able to talk to the Queen Mother twice. She came to London’s Birkbeck College in 1969, when my husband, Ed, directed Furman’s first program there. We were presented to her at a reception.

In 1996, I was able to chat with her at Westminster Abbey. As others who have met her have often said, “I really felt like she was my friend.”

On Friday, April 5, we took our place along the Mall. The crowd was 20 rows deep behind us. The slow march began at 11:30 a.m., with 1,700 of Her Majesty’s finest providing an escort a half-mile long. The Queen Mum’s personal Standard covered the casket. Her crown, glittering with 2,800 diamonds, including the fabled Koh-i-Noor, adorned the top, along with a bouquet from the Queen, signed “In Loving Memory, Lilibet.” Behind marched Prince Philip, her grandchildren (Charles, Anne, Andrew and Edward), and her great-grandchildren and close relatives. The crowd was silent.

The casket lay in state for three days and nights as thousands passed her bier in Westminster

Hall, orderly and respectfully, in the best British tradition. We filed through Monday morning.

Westminster Abbey was filled for the funeral on Tuesday. Thousands camped out around Parliament Square the night before to see the transfer to the Abbey and to be near for the funeral. Sound was piped outside, and the throngs joined in the singing. Inside, resplendent clergy presided, and British and European royalty added to the magnitude of the moment. Millions watched on television, as we did.

The mood was one of solemnity and loving remembrance. Apart from the television audience, police estimated that more than 2.3 million in London alone — a third of them young people — turned out in quiet commemoration. In London and across the country, businesses closed, crowds observed moments of silence, services were held, and flowers were strewn in an outpouring of affection commensurate with her long life. It was a pageant recalling the ages, and people sensed that none might ever see its like again.

To me the opportunity to experience the people, the sincerity of their grief and the sense of the enormity of the occasion was one of the most meaningful of my life. Around London, everyone seemed to have a story about the Queen Mum.

This is mine.

— Beth Evans Lindsay Jones



Beth Evans Jones enjoyed a special moment with the Queen Mum in 1996.

The author graduated from Furman in 1948 with a B.S. degree in biology. She and her husband, Edward B. Jones '54, professor emeritus of history, returned to England in late spring for Her Majesty the Queen's Golden Jubilee celebration. This article first appeared in Inside Furman, the university's internal newsletter.