



### **Ethel Armstrong MBE**

It is with the deepest regret and real sadness that the NHS Retirement Fellowship announces the death of our patron and great friend Mrs Ethel Armstrong MBE who passed away on 6<sup>th</sup> August 2020 at home in County Durham.

Ethel Garthwaite was born on 4 August 1930 in Durham. Her father Kenneth was a lifetime miner and she was an older sister to John. She attended Tanfield Grammar School until she was 17 when her headmaster recommended that she get a job rather than continue into the sixth form. She was unable to attend university as there were no grants for women to study medicine or dentistry at that time.

She started her long career at St Nicholas Hospital, a mental health hospital, in Newcastle upon Tyne as a cadet nurse where she experienced a variety of different departments. Once she was 18, she joined the school of radio diagnosis on the same day as the birth of the NHS – 5 July 1948 – a fact she was always extremely proud of.

She primarily worked in the developing fields of radiography and radiotherapy. Following her marriage to Harry Armstrong in 1949 she worked in many different NHS organisations around the country as her husband was a director with the manufacturing company Hawker Siddeley meaning that Ethel moved house 16 times before she retired.

She worked with the pioneering orthopaedic surgeon John Charnley on his work to introduce hip replacement surgery and then as tutor and adviser to the Liverpool Breast Screening Service whilst it developed its approach as an experimental unit. The service was so successful it was later adopted by the NHS in the 1980s and is responsible for detecting breast cancer as early as possible saving the lives of hundreds of thousands of women. She remained with the service in Liverpool until her retirement in 1989.

It was at this point that she returned to her beloved County Durham and launched herself into a number of voluntary roles with the same passion and dedication she brought to her NHS career. She continued to be involved heavily with the service through her work with the Durham branch of the NHS Retirement Fellowship. She served as chairman from 1994 until it sadly closed in March 2018. By this time, Ethel had become part of the charity's

National Council in 2005 and was elected vice chairman in 2009, chairman in 2011 and president in 2013. She worked tirelessly on behalf of the organisation she loved, clocking up thousands of miles annually with very long days to visit branches of retired NHS staff around the country and visiting NHS organisations and dignitaries. The Fellowship formally recognised her years of dedication and service to retired NHS staff by electing her life patron in 2015.

Margaret Moffatt, chairman of the NHS Retirement Fellowship, said: "Within the Fellowship Ethel was "Ethel", she didn't need a surname, such was her profile. Like the Queen Mum, whose birthday she was always so proud to share, she was known by all for her enthusiasm, friendliness and continued energy, travelling miles and miles to visit all who invited her.

"She was our patron but she also looked on us as her family, with her as our kindly great aunt, always watchful, sometimes critical but also encouraging, offering advice when she thought that we needed it, but always ready with a helping hand."

She also continued to serve local NHS trusts in the North East by taking on governor roles in Newcastle and County Durham and Darlington) where she would share her beliefs in the benefit of the NHS and her years of experience.

Ken Jarrold, her fellow patron of the charity and former chief executive in the NHS in the North East, said: "Knowing Ethel Armstrong, and working with Ethel for the NHS Retirement Fellowship, was one of the greatest privileges of my life. Ethel was a very able woman with a distinguished career in the NHS and an outstanding record of service to the Fellowship. However, it is Ethel the person who will always live with me. Ethel was generous, warm, good fun, the first, and often, the last on the dance floor! Ethel was one of the very few people who lit up the room. That phrase has been overused and is used to describe people who do not deserve the description. In Ethel's case it was true. In a crowded room you could always find Ethel because she created a circle of warmth, laughter and joy around her. As a Christian Agnostic, I do not know if there is a heaven. However, if there is, we can be sure that St Peter will rapidly promote Ethel and that circles of warmth, laughter and joy will soon be seen. Thank you Ethel for all you did for the Fellowship and for enriching my life."

Her services to the NHS in her career and in retirement were recognised in 2018 when she was awarded the MBE for her seven decades of service. It was a moment of which she was incredibly proud. Later that year, she played a significant part in the NHS's 70<sup>th</sup> birthday celebrations, giving media interviews to share her story of her long career and inspiring current generations of NHS managers and clinicians with her experiences, advice and thoughts. She dedicated her MBE to the thousands of staff she had worked with and engaged with throughout her long years of service and said:

***"The NHS is part of who I am, and I have been proud and lucky enough to have been there at the start of this wonderful institution. It's a***

***particular honour to receive this in the year that the NHS turns 70 and I see this as a nod to all the special people I've had the privilege of working for over the decades."***

Her love of the NHS and its staff and all it stood for was the central theme of her life and shaped her retirement with passion, dedication and service. Her wit, humour and dedication will be remembered fondly by the NHS Retirement Fellowship and the many NHS trusts in the North East with which she was associated.

Ethel was a pioneer for women in the first days of the NHS with her high intelligence and firm belief in the roots of the NHS. Strong minded, fiercely independent with a great ability to charm and engage with NHS current, managers and leaders and retired NHS staff from across a number of disciplines, Ethel will not be forgotten.

She is survived by her devoted brother John.