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Time to remember

Couple offers a glimpse of a different world

It was 62 years ago that Graeme and Trish Browne said "I do." Now they look back on decades of their life together in a very different Grahamstown. **Bridgette Hall and Sim Kyazze** heard their story.



TIME FOR TEA... In the world of Trish and Graeme Browne, there's time for tea and talking, as they look back on 62 years of marriage. Photos: Bridgette Hall



FOR BETTER AND BETTER... Graeme and Trish Browne on their wedding day, 24 March, 1951.

THAT'S HIM... Trish Browne points to husband Graeme in a photograph of his class at King Edward Preparatory School in Johannesburg. His family moved to Grahamstown, where he attended Kingswood and St Andrew's.



A peek into the world of Graeme and Trish Browne is like listening to a story your mother told your younger self: the kind that allows your imagination to travel to a time you didn't think existed – one filled with such richness it leaves you feeling warm, calm and full at the end.

This is that kind of story. Graeme and Trish are from a time without Pick n Pay, Shoprite or Checkers; instead grocers took phone orders and did home rounds.

Theirs was a time when the milkman made fresh deliveries at every door; a time when most of the city's roads were untarred.

They are from a time when Fitzroy Street was little more than a kraal for a big-time cattle farmer.

They are indeed of a time when all Rhodes University students wore gowns and the women donned stockings before they stepped off campus.

Graeme and Trish met in 1946 at her sister's 21st in Johannesburg.

Unusually for the times, it took them five years to tie the knot. On 24 March 1951, they quietly celebrated their 62nd wedding anniversary, which gives them arguably the longest surviving marital union in our little neck of the woods.

The couple are also an embodiment of a smaller, more genteel – if quite segregated – Grahamstown that has long disappeared.

"You just have to learn to be obedient!" Graeme deadpans about the secret to marital success.

And Trish? "I wonder about that myself," she says. "But we had our interests. Graeme worked long hours, while I played my tennis and looked after our children."

Plus Graeme was very patient, she adds; and they both benefited from close family support.

Trish (nee Biggs), is a relative of the famous Guy Butler (after whom the main theatre in the 1820 Settlers' Monument is named), while Graeme's father was already retired when he moved the family here from Johannesburg.

They are both frail now – her once brunette locks white now, as is his once boyish mop. Their once straight frames are a little bent, too. Age has also made Graeme partially blind and hard of hearing, while Trish shuffles and speaks a little hesitantly.

But, boy are they sharp mentally! She still drives, potters around in her garden, knits, and loves hosting guests (these reporters

"the only way I will leave is if they carry me out feet first!"

had three servings of tea with biscuits).

Graeme gave up driving – "which I miss very much" – because of his failing sight, but still practices his golf swing. "plays" around in his metal workshop, watches television and listens to audio books, courtesy of the Library for the Blind, in the evenings.

"We're still alive because my wife has fed us so well," Graeme says, to mild protestation from Trish.

They have lived in their family home near Kingswood College since 1952, when Trish's father helped them buy it for 1 000 Pound Sterling (around R14 000). It was just a stable then, which they converted into a little two-bedroom house.

They love the property – with two modern houses, a large garden and the original 'stable' at the back – so much now that Graeme reckons "the only way I will leave is if they carry me out feet first!"

Trish adds, "We want to stay here as long as possible. We have said (however), that we shall not be a burden to our family."

Trish was born in 1926 on a farm near Graaff-Reinet and studied nursing in Cape Town and Johannesburg. He, too, was born in 1926, in Johannesburg and started school there before attending Kingswood and then St Andrew's, via a singing scholarship.

He joined the army and served in the Engineering Corps in Italy during World War 2.

But Graeme had a date with destiny when he met Trish at that party in 1946.

They had three children, Robin, Annette and Michael, who was tragically killed in a car accident just after his matric exams in 1973.

The girls, however, went on to have children, who've also gone on to have children of their own – making the Brownes great-grandparents in a lifetime well-lived. Family is obviously important to them. They even bought a small holiday cottage on an

island in Knysna, which has been a centre of many family gatherings. And although the couple don't use it as much any more, Trish and Graeme's cottage continues to create memories for their family.

The rest of their adult lives have mostly been in Grahamstown, of course, although the city is unrecognisable to the 26-year-old couple from 1951. Graeme started a steel-fabricating business at 16 High Street (next to the Department of Labour) and "worked long hours", according to his wife, making seats for many Rhodes lecture theatres.

He was also an expert in refrigeration, air-conditioning and made the framework for Rhodes' first computer (apparently it was as big as a truck).

Trish decided to give up nursing to raise her young family.

"I am old fashioned," she said. "I think it gives the kids security."

So she raised the family, played tennis and tended her beloved garden.

Graeme joined the Round Table and the Grahamstown Club and together, the couple devoted many years to Hospice (he as a fundraiser and she as an Everywoman).

And after hours? Well, Rhodes students and their Rat and Parrot have not always been the centre of social life in Grahamstown. Back in the day, Trish and Graeme did the Waltz and the Foxtrot at The Revellers and the 49 Club.

And Grahamstonians entertained a lot more at home back then.

"Things are very different now," Trish says. "For one thing, there were not too many people. You could push a [baby] pram in our road. Grahamstown was a much [friendlier] town really, without all these walls and electric fences."

Because there were no computers or Facebook – obviously – their children played outdoors more, and fell sick a lot less.

"Our daughter Annette took antibiotics for the first time when she went to college," Trish says with a small laugh. Neither are they that fond of cellphones. Having acquired one, they forgot to charge it for three months. "The cellphone is still in the bottom of the drawer where I left it a year ago," Trish laughs.

Unlike many of their peers, they have decided not to leave Grahamstown.

"People retire from Grahamstown," Graeme says. "One gets left behind. But we're okay."

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