

NO QUESTION, Eileen Halliday is the nation's favourite old lady, the living, breathing, talking symbol of all the solitary individuals who stand up against the juggernaut of big business.

When she took on Sainsbury's, defeating their attempts to demolish her cottage for the car park at their new Stroud superstore while simultaneously entrancing their managers and builders, we gave a collective cheer.

There were appearances on ITV news and BBC Radio 4's Midweek and on Wednesday Sainsbury's made the graceful gesture of inviting Miss Halliday to open the store and take away a trolleyload of goods.

'But I took along my Tesco bag', she says 'as I didn't want them to think they'd bought me.' Heaven forbid such a thought!

Ask what gave her the strength to stand up to predatory developers and corporate giants alike and she responds: 'My passionate love of my little corner - my little Eden.'

To talk to Eileen is to step back into a time when confidence came from moral absolutes, your parents' word was law, you grew most of your food and entertainment came from the surrounding woods, fields and people jobs were for life - and if possible, so too were homes.

Eileen was born in one of the two small bedrooms of her home, Riverside Cottage where her parents lived until their deaths 20 years ago. Next door, semi-detached, is an identical two up two-down empty dwelling, formerly her grandparents' home.

We talk in her tiny front room, where a toasting fork hangs beside the fireplace and flames from the log fire gleam comfortingly on polished brass firedogs, fender, kettle and water jug. On the wall hangs a carved wood and brass clock given to Eileen's father as a wedding present in 1915 and a plant in a china pot stands by the window. The only sign that the even course of life has been disturbed is a table piled high with fan letters.

MY DAD was brought to the cottage next door by his parents in 1894 when he was two,' she says. 'They went on living there and when he joined the Naval Air Service, in the 1914 war, this house fell vacant, so my mother moved here to keep them company. A few months later I was born, in June 1917. I've been here ever since.

'When I was born, the road outside was just a lane, running to that meadow, where a causeway ran across the water meadows to the mills. Stroud was far smaller then, and you knew most of the people.

'We used to have a lot of fun. We would attend the miniature rifle range in the valley - my grandfather was a great poacher, so we've always had guns. We'd go in a boat that one of our neighbours built. Father played the E flat cornet, the banjo and the violin.

'Ours was the only building here and our garden stretched right round and down, over where the motorway is now. There were rabbits everywhere, otters, voles and every bird you can imagine, kingfishers, dippers. And weasels - the prettiest sight you can imagine is to see a mother weasel coming down the garden path, followed by her five little kits.'

A stone-flagged path runs between neat pruned roses in the front garden. On the slope down to the river, leeks and cabbages grow in well-weeded beds. Like her parents, Eileen grows most of her food. 'I've got rid of the raspberries and loganberries but still bottle hundredweights of plums every year and I've only just finished last year's potatoes - I'll be planting again at Easter.'

She was, she says in her soft Gloucestershire burr, engaged once. 'Archie, his name was - Archie Sears. He wouldn't come home from South America to collect me, because he was afraid of being drawn into the war, so I said "You're not my sort of man", and that was it.

'I'd met him on holiday when I was 19, on a boat trip up the Tamar, and we got engaged when I was just turned 20. He was working for a jute importer in Central London and soon after we were engaged he told me he was applying for a job as a cable clerk in a Bolivian company.

'Although I'd have waited for him, I can't have been desperately in love with him. And just imagine, a loveless marriage in an arid land.

'After him I met far more interesting men. But you see; no man is ever good enough for another man's daughter. Father would put me off any young man I really liked. He would say "No, I'm not really very fond of him", and I'd drop him.

'There was one man, Cliff, I'd say was the absolute peak of my affection. I've always loved Westerns, and Cliff reminded me of John Wayne. He was Australian, big and burly, and he was respectful to women.

'He couldn't understand why I held back. He thought I let my parents dictate to me. "We're old enough," he'd say "we're independent - why can't we slip away and get married on our own?"

'And I said: "No, that's not me. If I can't go with their blessing, I don't want to go at all."

'My father didn't really want me to marry. I shouldn't say it about dear old Dad, because I did love him desperately, but it was a bit mean, wasn't it? Mother used to tell him: "You mustn't monopolise her, Gilbert, it's wrong."

'But I listened to Dad - I was too obedient, you see, brought up with too strict a rein. There were my parents and grandmother -when she fell ill with Spanish flu at the end of the 1914-18 war, my mother brought her up here in a ponytrap. It was meant to be for a few weeks but she stayed ten years, she and I in the one bedroom, my parents in the other.

SHE was a real Victorian disciplinarian - she believed that for a healthy life you had a good hot bath and hot hair shampoo on Friday nights, followed by a dose of Senna tea. I used to rebel at the Senna but Mum would say: "Oh go on, it'll make her happy."

At 14, Eileen left school and went to work in the photographic department of Boots 'Torches and batteries in the winter, cameras and films in the summer. It was at one end of the chemist's counter with the dispensary at the other.

'I loved the dispensary and when I was 17 the manager arranged for me to take the articulated apprenticeship, which meant going to night school every night and Thursday afternoons, my half-day - oh, I was very keen.

'After my apprenticeship I was transferred to Bath and then Bristol. I worked for Boots for the rest of my life - 48 years. In those days it was like a club, open until seven. It had a library and interesting people would come in.

'When the war came I was moved all round the country, releasing men to go to the forward hospitals. I'd have given my ears to go into the Wrens - my father having been in the Naval Air Service - but Boots wouldn't release me and it was a reserved occupation.'

Her life today is packed, she says beaming. First there is attending to the house - the morning she broadcast on Midweek she was up at 4am to get the housework done before her taxi came at 6am.

'Then as soon as possible I'm out in the garden - pruning planting digging, weeding - or round in my workshop if it's wet. I clear the gutters, repaint, mend things. I like to go walking and I like reading, but I can't spare the time.'

Three years ago this ordered world was threatened when the county council tried to knock the cottage down in order to switch the course of new road. Then a developer told Eileen she might as well leave as the cottage was about to be pulled down anyway. 'He'd found out I was elderly, female, unmarried and alone.'

Neither an offer of £250,000 nor a warning could daunt her. 'You see that gate you came through?' Eileen said to him. 'I strongly advise you to retrace your steps and go and tell your friends you're talking a lot of rubbish.' Now she says 'As you get older you don't want change. I want to stay here quietly, minding my own business and doing what I enjoy doing.'

When she was 40 she began to travel, trips financed by judicious investments of her savings, first to Paris, then to Mongolia, Egypt, back and forth to the Americas, nine times to Russia and around the North African coast.

'But I always came back here. I used to dream about it. Even now when I go away I feel homesick after a few days.'

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