The pain of realising that you left it too late to ask your father his life story

by Mandy Appleyard

Bittersweet: Mandy and her father John before he fell ill

THREE SUMMERS ago, my father and I undertook a 175km hike together which I will always look back on as one of the most rewarding experiences in my whole life.

As we trudged along the coast, we fell into a happy rhythm, our days a sunny blur of banter, map reading and comfortable silence (especially on steep climbs) as we absorbed the spectacular scenery around us.

I have always been particularly close to my mother, who is a loving and open woman. By contrast my father is reserved, diffident and more difficult to know, so our long-distance walks together — we did three over three summers — were rare moments of bonding and togetherness, during which I learned a little more about the man who made me.

Today my father, who is 78, can just about walk 6metres from the reclining chair where he spends most of his day, to the bathroom in the house where he and Mum live.

His steps are cautious and unsteady, like those of a baby learning to walk. He has lost nearly 4st since our hike in the summer of 2010: gone is his once-prodigious strength, as are many of his mental faculties.

In the last three years, Dad, who was once a medal-winning long-distance cyclist and hiker, a man who has never smoked or been overweight and lived a healthy life in every way — has been diagnosed with aggressive prostate cancer, vascular dementia and a nasty cluster of aneurysms that have put his legs and also his life at perpetual risk.

My father's sudden decline, hastened by a four-week stay in hospital this summer, after one of the aneurysms in his legs thrombosed, has forced my mother, my sister and I to wonder how a man once so hale and hearty could become, in what seems like the blink of an eye, a frail shadow of his former self.

WE ARE also, in our own ways and with inestimable sadness, preparing ourselves for the day, likely not too distant, when he will be gone.

My father, John Appleyard, taught me many things: how to cross the road, how to change a tyre, a great appreciation of the natural world, and how taking the quiet road in life isn't necessarily a bad thing.

When I was young, I thought he had the answer to everything — from why birds fly south in winter, to how to use a slide rule.

There was, however, one interest of my father's which I never quite managed to share: indeed, it always bored me to tears. He was fascinated by military history, and eminently proud of his father's role as a 27-year-old corporal fighting in the trenches in WWI.

My sister and I used to groan when Dad started talking about the war: we'd throw our eyes to the ceiling and change the subject — a fact of which I am now ashamed.

But something has shifted. Forthcoming events to mark the centenary of the Great War next year have stirred my interest in it — perhaps because my father's illness has made me sympathetic to the things he was passionate about when he was well, perhaps because a sense of my own mortality in the face of his decline has strengthened my curiosity about my own past.

It is ironic that, at the point in my life where I am most interested in filling in the gaps in my own family history, my father is too ill to provide them. I realise, with terrible regret, that I have left it too late.

These thoughts flooded my mind last weekend, when I stood in the flat, arable fields outside the Belgian town of Ypres, close to where trenches once scarred this landscape and where my grandfather played his small part in the Great War as a member of the East Yorkshire Regiment.

I thought of what an adventure it must have been for a young, working-class man, the son of a dock worker, to arrive in Flanders fields — and also what a trauma it was to find himself, all of a sudden, in what the war poet Siegfried Sassoon called the 'pangs of hell'.

Harold Appleyard returned home to his terraced home after the war.

At the time, he was suffering the ill-effects of mustard gas, and spent much of the next 38 years dying slowly of respiratory failure caused by the gas attack.

For much of that time, he was confined to a bed in the front room downstairs, too ill to climb the stairs to the bedroom. My grandfather died at the age of 69, three years before I was born, a notoriously taciturn man who had fathered two sons and worked as a shipwright at the local dockyard despite his poor health.

Until he became too ill to actually remember details, my father's eyes would well up with tears as he told the story of cycling half a kilometre home with his father every night from the shipyard where they both worked (my father was a mechanical fitter there).

'I had to pull my father along on his bicycle beside me, because he couldn't get the breath to cycle under his own steam,' Dad would explain to us.

My grandfather was, by all accounts, a stern and unforthcoming man. Like many of the soldiers who survived the war, I suspect he was loathe to share the terrible details of what he had witnessed in the trenches with his family back home.

Traumatised by what he had seen and been part of, I think he most probably locked the experience away inside him. I stood in those Flanders fields last weekend, realising that as my father's days draw to a close, I find myself increasingly drawn to his past, to what made him the man he is. But now his illness means his stories are largely lost or muddled, and his father and mother long gone, so there are no longer any reliable witnesses to our history.

I showed Dad my photographs of Flanders when I got home, but I'm not sure he even understood what they were.

He knew only very scant details of his own father's war record. About 15 years ago he decided to try to find out more, but discovered that some vital military documents had been lost in a records office fire and so sadly the trail went cold.

Standing on those battlefields, moved beyond words by my personal connection, through my grandfather, to that terrible war, I wished I could turn back the clock.

It was then I realised then I actually knew virtually nothing about my paternal grandfather.

How long was he out here? Did he volunteer or was he enlisted? What happened to the letters he wrote home to his family? What was his own experience of the war? How I wish I could have known more of the grandfather I never met. Even more, I wish I could have known more of my father, whose reserved and private nature made it difficult to get close to him — a fact I resented when I was younger, and which has become an enduring sadness later in my life.

It is too late now to learn more about my father's past, too late to know him better. Time is slipping through our fingers, and with it the chance I had to understand more fully who and where I came from.

That is why those three walks I did with my father occupy such an enormous place in my heart.

We didn't trade heartfelt secrets: that has never been the nature of our relationship. Instead, we watched three startled red deer run across a corn field in front of us, an otter with its young swimming in the shallows of the nearby river, a barn owl dive for its prey in a ditch not 3 metres from where we were walking at dusk to our B&B.

These were moments which my father relished, and which I felt honoured to be able to share with him. They were quiet moments with a quiet, gentle man.

OVER a bottle of white wine at the end of a long day spent walking in heavy rain, Dad reminisced about his days at sea in the Merchant Navy — about eating egg and chips five times over in a London café after a very long voyage back from Australia during which he was so sea sick he couldn't eat.

Dementia means his memory is now very poor, though there are moments of clarity. Just last week, for example, I asked my father to tell me about meeting my mother for the first time.

He told me: 'It was her smile. I noticed her smile at the fun fair one night and asked her out the following week. I don't think I ate for the next seven days.'

They married shortly afterwards, 58 years ago, for better, for worse, in health and, now, in sickness. At 76, my strong, proud, independent mother has become my father's full-time carer.

She spends her days cleaning, cooking and aiding Dad, who is now just about helpless on every front, with everything from ablutions to eating to getting into and out of bed.

'We take each day at a time — what else can we do?' my mother says when people ask how they're coping with the extreme changes in their circumstances.

My heart is filled with love for my parents and with sorrow for what they are going through. I wasn't lucky enough to have children.

Had I been, I would have urged them not to leave it too late to learn about their family.

When my father and I eventually finished our hike, we celebrated with the biggest ice-cream cornets that we could find and a paddle in the North Sea. We did so in happy ignorance of what lay ahead.

We didn't realise at the time, but it was our last long walk together, as it turned out.

For Dad

Halsey Taylor invented the drinking fountain as a tribute to his father, who caught typhoid from a contaminated water supply in 1896

Fashion maths

Frill shirt, €40, **mango.com**

Blue trousers, €165, **jaeger.co.uk**

Carvela pointed court, €120, **johnlewis.com**

Black bag, €90, **oasis-stores.com**

Stone ring, €12, **topshop.com**

Shoes, €425, **jimmychoo.com**

Styling: AMY KESTER