

Jenny Biggins 2010
nee Pulley

1947 to 1954

VOYAGE TO ENGLAND & LIVING ON FITZHARRY'S ESTATE.

1947 was an exciting year for an 11 year old Aussie. What an adventure it was to travel by boat from Sydney to England, a country that my mother had told me so much about, and to my father's new job at A.E.R.E. Harwell. Because it was so soon after the war, most ocean liners were still fitted out as troop ships and this was the case with the "Asturius" which we boarded in July, after visiting our relatives to say goodbye. I can remember my grandmother singing some of the Maori Farewell "Now is the hour when we must say goodbye, soon you'll be sailing far across the sea. While you are gone, oh! please remember me. When you return, you'll find me waiting here." We children were not disappointed in the somewhat spartan facilities on the ship and were looking forward to the month-long voyage. Our trunks had been labelled either Not Wanted on Voyage or Wanted on Voyage, & the latter meant we could go to a special hold and get items out of them, especially as the weather grew warmer in the tropics and we needed different clothes. We also had plenty of new toys and books. Many of the passengers were returning refugees. We found a group of friends and I think some parents tried to organise a few lessons, but mostly we played ping pong and shuffleboard and marvellous games of the new "Monopoly" that lasted several days. There were "guess the miles travelled each day" competitions, quiz contests and a fancy dress party where my treasured "Les Sylphides" ballet outfit was worn.

We went ashore at Melbourne and again at Fremantle, where friends picked us up and took us to Perth for a few hours. As we steamed across the Indian Ocean, we children heard a lot about the Crossing the Line Ceremony (for those who had never crossed the equator before) and we were looking forward to it with some trepidation. King Neptune set himself up on a cargo hatch and his helpers soon threw flour on us all and hosed us off; then we could consider ourselves Citizens of the Deep. I really wanted to spend a night sleeping on deck, but my parents weren't too keen. However, eventually they gave in and we all spent a rather uncomfortable night under a beautiful black sky with bright stars.

I think everyone was glad to get the opportunity to go ashore at Aden. We took a little taxi ride but I don't think it was too scenic and I remember it as very dry and barren. I recollect that one of the natives on the small boat that took us to the dock had an enormous deformed leg, most probably due to parasitic elephantitis. It was interesting to go through the Suez Canal and see the statue of Ferdinand DeLessups, but disappointing not to be allowed ashore at Port Said, due to some disturbances. Natives came in small boats to sell different souvenirs and I still have the small leather handbag that we bought. After that, there was a brief stop without shore leave at Gibraltar before we reached England. We sailed up Southampton Water and I saw that all Mum had told me about the green fields of England was true. We docked in Southampton, where we were met by

family and travelled to London on the boat train. It must have been wonderful for my mother to see her sisters, Helen and Jean, again after thirteen years, although I know she was disappointed that Auntie Brenda had sailed for South Africa only a week or two before. In spite of the rationing still in place in England, our relatives gave us a lovely welcome party with a cake magnificently decorated with a map of the world showing our route.

Our house on the new Fitzharry's Estate in Abingdon was not ready, so we had to stay in a guest house called Rose Lodge (also known as 1066) on the Drayton-Sutton Courtenay road, on the corner of the turn off to Milton. It was not very easy for a family of young children and we often did not like the food. Because of the rationing, it was not very inspiring, but you couldn't leave anything without getting dirty looks from the landlady. Luckily, she had a couple of dogs wandering around and they received many treats under the table. Dad was busy getting settled in at Harwell, but it happened to be a gorgeous summer and we were able to enjoy the countryside, which was all so new and different. Strangely enough, I saw my first wild snake on the road near Rose Lodge: I'd always been afraid of them, probably because Australia has so many deadly poisonous ones. By September it was time to start school, Ken at Drayton Infants and me at St. Helen and St. Katherine. I remember going for the interview and the Sister Superior, Sister Erica, looking over my report from Summer Hill. She seemed pleased that I had good marks in Maths. which I later learned was her subject.

We were able to move into our house at 8 Kingston Close at the beginning of December. As new arrivals, the rationing laws gave our family a certain number of coupons to get basic Utility Grade furniture for the house. It was really this restriction that led my parents to frequent local auctions for extra furniture and household items and they purchased some lovely pieces. We were looking forward to celebrating a real English Christmas with all our English relatives: Auntie Helen, Uncle Kit, Auntie Jean and cousins Betty, Michael and Alan. Everyone had arrived by Christmas Eve except Alan who was in the Navy. There were only a few houses finished on the Estate at that time, the rest was mud and construction. It was after midnight when Alan arrived in Abingdon carrying a very precious turkey and found his way to Fitzharry's where he could only see one light in the pitch darkness. This was in the Allen's Bath Street house and he knocked on the door for directions. They said it was far too late to disturb the Pulleys, so why didn't he sleep on the couch until morning and maybe they could put the turkey in a cool place for him. However, Alan was not to be parted from this hard-to-obtain item and insisted on sleeping with it. Both the Allen and Pulley families got a laugh out of this over the years. Needless to say, the turkey was soon in the oven at Kingston Close and enjoyed by all. A later Christmas turkey did not fare so well after Dad put the carcass in the workshop at the rear of the garage and inadvertently shut Inky, the cat, in with it. That was a Boxing Day with no leftovers.

Our years in Kingston Close were very happy ones. Fitzharry's was a wonderful place for children: there were so many families, all new to the area and involved with A.E.R.E. How lucky we were to be able to run free within the walls of the Estate and know nearly everybody there. At first we could explore the uncompleted houses and play on the brick and sand piles. We must have come home filthy every day and our mothers must have been very patient. The little River Stert ran along one side of Fitzharry's and gave us endless pleasure sailing boats and making dams. On the other side were some woods for further exploration and even a "rival" gang from the houses beyond. Next to Kingston Close was The Motte, an ancient mound surrounded by a shallow moat and, best of all, was the old manor house, abandoned and boarded up. Although it was strictly forbidden, we occasionally found our way inside to look around, scared and excited at the same time. The Manor sat on the edge of a large Green with a very large and ancient yew tree, some said 500 years old. This, as well as the equally magnificent copper beech, was an excellent climbing tree.

I remember fondly the first Kingston Close families : Busbridge, Thewlis, Seligmann, Harrison, Anderson, Lister and Fry. We had so much fun together, adults and children. Wendy Thewlis, Jean, Elizabeth and Ursula Anderson and myself were fans of Arthur Ransome's books and formed our own club "The Arrows". We made an official flag , gave ourselves names like Captain John Platypus and used the garage as a clubhouse. An initiation ceremony was needed when Mary Chapman joined the ranks. After this, Ken and Malcom Anderson asked what they would have to do to join so we made up a sandwich of sowbugs and said they had to eat it. When Malcom agreed, we had to back off quickly and say it was an all-girls club.

We organised many special activities like carol singing at Christmas when we went round collecting for charity. One May Day we rigged up a Maypole, got dressed up and made Cherry Busbridge May Queen and my brother Dicky, May King. Sometimes we put on theatrical performances in the living room, one of which included Tony Gardner jumping out of the curtains with red painted eyes and frightening the little ones (they still remembered years later). Maybe that was the start of his acting career.

In retrospect, probably the funniest incident of all was the Midnight Feast Caper. Mary Chapman (from Aston Close) was staying overnight and we cooked up a plan for a Midnight Feast with Tony Gardner and Jean Anderson. Jean and I were each to tie a string to our toe and hang it out our bedroom window. Tony would come by just before midnight and pull the string to wake us, then we would creep out and have a picnic. All started well at the Pulley house and I was duly woken. Mary and I dressed and crept to the bathroom to climb out onto the flat garage roof and then to the ground. As it happened, Auntie Helen was staying in the bedroom overlooking the roof and, because she had been very sick and bedridden, Dad had rigged up a mirror so she could see over the garage and up the road. Naturally, she was not sleeping very well and was disturbed by our giggling. Tony had decided to climb up the drainpipe to see where we were and she

woke to see his head reflected in the mirror. She got quite a shock, but our giggling had got louder, so she called to us and Tony beat a hasty retreat. We were very contrite and she was a good sport about the whole affair. Mum might never have known except that Jean's mother found her string and came round next morning to say that Jean was very upset and why was Jenny allowed to do such a thing when she wasn't.

Another good memory is of the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth. Our Close had a co-ordinated decoration scheme with flood lighting on the lawn, fairy lights on the trees & flags across the road. There was a children's party and one for the adults at night. Expenses and work were shared & everyone enjoyed themselves so much that they had more like it later. The festivities finished with an evening serenade concert arranged by the Busbridges. The ensemble played under a standard lamp in the street with everyone sitting in deck chairs on the lawns.

I think the invasion of so many scientists & their families was a little puzzling to many of the long-time Abingdon residents & we were often viewed with suspicion. An amusing anecdote concerns the term they applied to us. There was a well established heirachy for decorating the windows of St. Helen's Church for major holidays with the altar & screen being the most important. Mrs. Busbridge was a member of the choir & when it was observed that the person who did the screen would be away for Easter, she suggested that my mother could be the substitute, knowing that our garden had an abundance of daffodils that could be cut. We took armfuls of flowers to the church & had a wonderful time arranging them on & around the screen. As we sat in the pew on Easter Sunday waiting for the service to begin, we heard the screen being discussed behind us: "Well, who did the screen, then?" "Oh! One of them Atomics". Needless to say, we had to stifle our giggles.

As time went on some families moved elsewhere. The Listers returned to Canada & were replaced by the Patchings & the Bowkers replaced the Thewlis family who moved to Sutton Courtenay. It was such a friendly community & so supportive when my mother was away from home with TB for ten months. When I was accepted to St. Hugh's College, Oxford, they all celebrated with me & I was given two sets of sherry glasses to send me on my way, one of which Mrs. Bowker had used herself at Cambridge. Soon after this my father took up a liason position at Australia House in London & the family moved to Lower Shiplake near Henley-on-Thames. He served for a time as the first Australian Governor on the International Atomic Energy Commission in Vienna before returning to Lucas Heights in Sydney. By then I was a wife & mother & soon to sail for Canada with my Abingdon husband, Colin Wiggins.