

Stories from our community

Reading a Blog about Spitalfields, “the gentle author, Spitalfields life”, got me thinking about how we in Holy Trinity & St Mary’s parish could become even more connected by knowing a little more about each other. I went on the Gentle Author’s blog course and have begun interviewing people in the parish so their stories could be heard. ‘Tricia McIntosh

Interview with Audrey Alder

‘I only did it for fun!’, Audrey chuckles, referring to the Myers–Briggs course that Hilary Cotton ran in October. ‘You’d think at 89 I’d know myself quite well already!’ It is this humour and interest that shines out when you talk to Audrey.

Audrey, born in Highgate in north London in December 1929, says the Second World War changed her childhood significantly. She distinctly remembers her mother and aunt crying when War was announced and, aged only 10, not fully understanding why. She and her sister were evacuated from London, not once but to four different households, some not always hospitable, in Ewhurst, Guildford, Worplesdon and Suffolk, changing school 13 times over five years. ‘You see, not everyone wanted extra children.’

The whole experience of being evacuated appears harrowing. ‘I had to grow up quickly, as I had my little sister to look after. We weren’t told where we were going, we just boarded a train with a load of other children and when we were told to get off, the Women’s Volunteer Service would line us all up and march us to the Village Hall. We were told to sit around the edge of the hall, then ladies would come and choose us. The ones with poor clothing and runny noses would be left ‘till last and were often trailed through the village at the end to find a placement, as no one wanted them.’

By the last evacuation Audrey knew the system and asked her mother for some parachute silk and bits of lace. With these she made two petticoats, one for herself and one for her sister. In Branderston village hall, Suffolk, when the posh lady in the big hat came into the hall, Audrey told her sister to show her silk and lace petticoat just a little – and the posh lady chose them to take home.

Audrey spoke warmly of this final placement, 15 miles from Ipswich. ‘Eight months of bliss, in a posh house in the village, a lovely old farmhouse with a bread oven where we were given golden syrup on top of peanut butter on toast. I loved it and still do! I learned to milk cows by hand. I did the “stripping”, making sure that all the milk had been drained from the cows’ udders. The churn would be put by the gate and housewives would come and take what they needed.’

‘We had to cycle 4 miles to school and 4 miles back every day. The daughter of the house, Pamela, who was in the Land Army, put on plays in the garden that had a natural stage. I was cast as “Alice” in the Mad Hatter’s Tea Party and “Buttons” in Cinderella.’ Audrey still has the letter from Dr Barnardo’s thanking them for the £25 they raised for putting on a show.

On Audrey’s return home her headmistress recommended her for nursing. Against her mother’s wishes Audrey became a nurse, selling her violin to pay for nursing books while her father bought her the necessary fob watch. Audrey first came to Guildford to study midwifery and nursed at the Royal Surrey Farnham Road Hospital, where she met her husband. ‘Patient marries his Nurse!’, declared the local newspaper. Audrey had nursed Tony through a bout of pneumonia. Tony had contracted polio, aged 5, after falling into a pond, so only had one functioning lung, though it didn’t prevent him playing cricket, his passion, or swimming. ‘He never had another bout as I looked after him’, Audrey stated. They went on to have four children, two girls and two boys, some of whom followed Audrey into the medical profession.

What keeps Audrey young? ‘Keeping interested and being lucky with my genes. I cannot see myself as being old.’ Referring to Myers–Briggs she says, ‘Ridiculous at my age, finding out about myself. It said I am warm-hearted and positive and some less good things but none of us are perfect, but I loved it ... and finding out about others.’

‘Tricia McIntosh, October 2019