

The Women

I am an old woman now. In my time I have and experienced “women’s liberation”, seen or heard of women in slavery, trafficked, abused; I have met women fulfilled and women angry and excluded...women in many different situations, good and bad, in many places and in many cultures. A long life grants you this opportunity to observe and experience.

My own life? well, it was formed by The Women. First, of course, my mother. Kind & supportive but distant. She never played with us but did read to us...I remember “Livingstone the Pathfinder” being one of her favourites. Perhaps she was unhappy that her own education and career were curtailed by economic family reasons and then by marriage (in the 1940/50’s women gave up working when they married). She always impressed upon me and my sister the need for education and making your own life.

But the real inspiration in my early years was my paternal grandmother. She treated me as an equal, she taught me to think and express my views. We talked such a lot. Mostly about plants and animals in the wild, about our village and its inhabitants (often scandalous stories!) or a visit to our local town or somewhere, anywhere, different to the village. She took me walking and cycling through the Chilterns and the Aylesbury plain. We went for miles through the countryside, stopping to look at the Grand Junction canal and its reservoirs, the fields in their seasonal liveries, old buildings and most of all, wild flowers. She gave me a lifelong love of the countryside and all that it entails. I knew every path and track in the woods & fields near us, where the deer were, where the orchids grew and where to find white & pink bells among the blue in the spring. My Nana had been separated early from her husband and had lived her own life for years before my birth. She had an integrity that comes of having just yourself to rely upon. We used to sit in companionable silence, she sewing (she was a dress maker) and I reading or arranging her vast collection of buttons or perhaps both of us cleaning her large collection of brass ornaments whilst we listened to “The Archers “after supper. Her house smelt of Woodbine cigarettes, fabric and TCP. I can still recall that now.

Then there were the Women in the courtyard. Married or single, women of our class at that time stayed at home and performed the domestic chores. Our house was part of a Tudor farm, making the top of a “T” to a row of Victorian artisans’ cottages. The cottages were small and in 2 of them lived the “old ladies”, women of the 1st world war generation who had not married because the men died in battle. As a young child, I watched them at their daily work and “helped” them with laundry on Monday, wringing out sheets by hand after a full boiling in a wood fired copper with water hauled up from the communal well (no mains water then). They were older and less stressed with having small children around them than the younger housewives. We hung the laundry on lines round the courtyard (which was really a collection of small garden plots thrown down haphazardly, with paths between so each cottage had a bit of land here and a bit there). Auntie Lizzie used to chat whilst doing the laundry or making her lunch, (invariably smoked haddock and poached egg). I will always remember her saying “I’ve lived through 3 wars, and I don’t want to live through another”. I didn’t know what the 3rd war was (1st & 2nd world wars were obvious to even a small child). I asked. It was the Boer War - she lost family in that conflict too. She was granted her wish, dying in the 1960’s when village life still resembled what she had grown up with. Before the influx of outsiders came from London because they could get to work there to work in 45 minutes on the local train within a mile of our village and who have now completely taken over my beautiful, and picturesque early home. Before that, when I was young, most folk came from one of 2 major family clans in the village, and outsiders were rare. Auntie Lizzie Watts was an example of Edwardian self-reliance and industriousness looking after her home, planting her garden and working in the village for the

community. A devout chapel goer and a wise woman, who had only once left the village any distance to visit “they houses of parliament” in the 30’s.

Thank you, Mum, Nana & Auntie Lizzie for feeding my curiosity, grounding me in real common sense and giving me an early sense of identity.

My original curiosity and thirst to know things increased when I went to school. It was a village Church of England school with about 60 local children from 4 ½ years to 12. It was the original building from the Victorian Education Acts, with big black coke fired stoves to keep us warm in winter, high diamond paned windows, so that we concentrated on lessons not the view and a field and playground to use in our breaks and for PE. We were taught by 3 Edwardian ladies whose knowledge and love of teaching provided a varied curriculum far in excess of today’s constantly changing systems. We made butter, we learned to sew seams, we made wool rugs, we created small mud (and plasticine) Celtic round houses and dioramas of various sorts to support our history and geography lessons. We had our times tables off pat by age 6 and most of us could read by fluently by then too. If you wanted to learn there was a lot on offer. Our teachers, the Women, were egalitarian, kind, a little strict perhaps, but hugely understanding of the children in their care. We were all treated the same and we learned to treat each other with respect and compassion. I learned to love the written word, poetry, stories, writing, painting, gardening and crafts (although I never have been very good with the latter, despite my huge enjoyment). I was not enamoured of figures. But when the time came, with some care but little fuss, I passed the 11 plus exams.

I still remember my first ever day at school, sitting on a raffia mat waiting for a desk in my new yellow frock with red ribbons in my hair.

Thank you, Miss Dyker, Mrs Eustace and Mrs Harris for giving me a love of learning and a moral compass.

Grammar school and “growing up” was influenced by The Women of my own age group....my friends and my foes, those with the same interests, those with different ones. We learned from each other argued, bounced around ideas about culture, about life, about love. We gossiped, chatted, laughed and cried in real time only as these were the days before the media revolution- my family did not even have a phone. This was how we obtained a rounded education, besides the academic content of our lessons. It was one of these friends who turned me to think of University...by just saying, “why haven’t you applied yet? you’d get in “. So, I did apply and I did get in the first village child ever to do so. We had crushes and we agonised over boys – it was a mixed sex grammar school. My friends and I gave up Saturdays to make up tea & cakes for the soccer season, and full afternoon teas for the cricket season.... we got to meet more boys that way!! We learned to dance for formal and informal dances ...this was the time of “swinging 60’s”. We went abroad on school trips. My parents never had been out of England, so I wrote each day to tell them of the things we saw which included mountains (and I hadn’t seen mountains before) around S. Germany/Austria with their wonderful flora, the Bodensee, waterfalls, beautiful Salzburg and the Rhein and later, abandoned roman ruins in Yugoslavia (as it was then) standing under cypress & olive trees on hillsides shimmering with heat. My friends and I absorbed it all as we talked and walked deep into those warm continental nights.

Dear school friends.....thank you for helping me to define the woman I have become.

I consider myself fortunate in my early years. Both for the time and place where I grew up and for all that I was able to learn from The Women. And so, I hope that in my life I have been and continue to be one of The Women and helped and encouraged others. I would like to be remembered as such.