

Part 2

What came next...



Rosemary Gitsham on her wedding day in 1959

When I first interviewed Rosemary in June, it had been my intention to gradually spread out her story as opposed to delivering it in one substantial serving. This was partly because she is a delightful conversationalist and partly because in the manner of a good lollipop, I wanted to make her last a long time. Rather like Scheherazade, I had been given a tantalizingly unfinished story when I left her standing on Prospect Point in Canada. Would another part of her story, hard on the heels of the first, be less than engaging to the Blog readers? You will have to humour me because I simply wanted to know just what happened next and consequently, last week saw me walking down our Lane to find out more. I had scarcely taken my notebook out of my bag or settled in my seat, when Rosemary spilled the beans about her new undertaking.

*"I'm going to buy a Harmonium", she announced, "I've wanted one for the last seventy years and now I'm going to have one."*

As ambitions go, I was impressed and distracted by the longevity of her wish and completely understood the excitement of bringing home the material manifestation of her desire. I found myself reflecting on the retro pleasures of the Harmonium. Perhaps the time is coming when a revival of community singing around this breathy instrument could replace the crasser Karaoke players of contemporary life. Naturally, 'Do you play the piano?' was my first question. Her declaration and explanation proved to be the perfect opening gambit for the next stage in the story of her early life.

After the Second World War had finished, Rosemary's mother announced her daughter could use her carefully hoarded and precious pocket money as a contribution towards buying a piano. Rosemary was slightly aggrieved at the time as she had plans for her nest egg and they didn't include a piano; Rosemary wanted to purchase a dinghy instead. But no. The piano and the parents trumped the dinghy and before you could say C major, the instrument arrived at her house, a teacher was found and 17 Grimston Lane began to resound with the sound of scales and the tonic sol fa. If it had been a Harmonium, which Rosemary yearned for, then doubtless she would have felt more inspired but it

wasn't and she didn't. Although she didn't take exams, she dutifully worked at her musical ability by serving her time on the ivory keyboard at Sunday School until the time came to leave home.

*"But I always wanted a harmonium" she reiterated, reflectively.*

Mainstream schooling reached completion as well as the piano lessons in 1953. Rosemary disclosed to me she was not considered clever enough for University. Despite this surprising rebuff she wasn't one to repine and, in what I am coming to recognise as an exuberant characteristic, she cheerfully signed up to the Queen's Secretarial College in South Kensington. The college was founded in 1924 with the aim of providing training for young women "...excited by the opportunity of a career..." and needless to say, Rosemary was excited.

*"When my parents dropped me at the door of the hostel, I didn't feel homesick in the slightest. Inside I was shouting, 'Wheeee! Here I come.'"*

Rosemary was ready for action. The Hostel was situated above the District and Circle Lines and the young stenographical students could hear the Underground as it rattled and screeched beneath them. Residency at the hostel was £1/18/- a week, approximately £50 in 2018 terms, and the Guests had the additional requirement of helping with the washing up. Most of the young women studying Secretarial skills were Debs on the lookout for an eligible husband but Rosemary made ordinary, straightforward friends who proved to have lasted a lifetime; Pauline, Sheila and Hilary. For an annual fee of 150 guineas, their main objective was to learn shorthand and typing during the course of the year and Rosemary applied herself assiduously. When she passed her final exams, she received a Diploma stating she had achieved a typing speed of 55 words a minute and a shorthand speed of 130 words a minute, which I consider thrilling. I am inclined to think Rosemary's listening ability has always stood her in good stead.

Of course, it wasn't all work. Rosemary was up for a good time as well and she gave me a nod in the right direction, when she told me you could always get a partner at the Hammersmith Palais but not at Kensington Town Hall. I wish I had known this when it was my turn to be a student. Shopping was another destination sport and after the rather reserved 1950s Suffolk shops, the London Emporiums must have seemed irresistible. In Kensington High Street, department stores such as Barker's, Derry's and Ponting's, where the lifts were hoisted by hand, all provided a far greater range of goods than might have been found within the radius of Trimley.

At the end of the year, with all the necessary qualifications and requirements, Rosemary elected to remain in London to seek work and maybe excitement. Her first post was in the "Overseas Service" Charity where the salary was 4 Guineas a week or about £112 in 2018 money. The object of the Charity was to run courses for people about to go abroad, rather like an induction course, although Rosemary was not involved in this part of the charity.

*"I was only a Secretary and a dogsbody."* Rosemary told me.

But we all have to start somewhere and after a year she changed jobs and moved to B.E.A. Not alas, to her first choice of British European Airways jobs, which would have been as an Air Steward. Because there were various 'regulations' concerning the wearing of glasses at the time, Rosemary was not accepted. Undiminished by this set back, Rosemary did the next best thing and became a secretary in B.E.A. Dorland House in Regent Street. This stately listed building has changed identities several times since 1954 but then it must have represented everything B.E.A. wanted to present to their passengers; style, gravitas and an excellent address. Rosemary's new role emphasised these qualities. Air travel and tourism was just opening up after the War and advertisements of the time offer customers a flying time of just 1 hour 40 minutes from Northolt to Paris. Customs Free Drinks were on offer in the stylish bar of the luxurious B.E.A. Viking. New air routes were opening up all the time This was a cool and glamorous place to work in the days before Cool was invented. Rosemary's responsibilities revolved around ensuring customers received all the flight and journey information they needed before they became airborne. There were thirty other secretaries in the office, each required to complete fifteen letters a day to passengers. A rough estimation indicates there were a minimum of at least 2, 250 travellers being processed in a week. Modest figures by today's terms. Although Dorland House was a suitably imposing building, practical requirements led B.E.A. to develop the West London Air Terminal at the Cromwell Curve on the Cromwell Road. This was closer to Heathrow, although still not ideal for passengers as heavy traffic might result in delays reaching the airport and lead to flight delays. In about 1957, Rosemary was moved from Dorland House and into the fourth floor of the new building.

Other changes to her life were to follow shortly. Soaking up all the facilities London had to offer, Rosemary and her hostel friends one day found themselves heading out to Queens Ice Rink, now the only permanent ice rink in London. There they bumped into a group of young men and fell into conversation with them. One of them, a certain Eric, told Rosemary she was, "doing it all wrong..." and offered to show her how to do it correctly. As Eric had appeared in an Ice Show in Paris, it was and is reasonable to suppose he knew what he was talking about. The entry in Rosemary's diary records the meeting with the men,

*'They were all very nice," wrote Rosemary, "but I like Eric best."*

In fact, she liked him so much that she went on to marry him in 1959. Not only did he have charm, he also had a car. Rosemary's mother baked the Wedding Cake and Rosemary went to evening classes to learn how to do cake decorating. True to the spirit of the times, unless you happened to be a Deb, Rosemary made her own wedding dress. It was pale pink and finished with a matching bouquet of flowers and a chic little veil. The journey back to their flat in the Fulham Road, after the wedding, took them across Putney Bridge. They were being driven in by a friend in his two-seater MG with Rosemary perched on Eric's knee all the while. Stopping at some red traffic lights, a Policeman strolled up and sternly addressed Rosemary, asking if she knew it was an offence to sit on someone's knee in a car. Rosemary chirpily told the officer it was her wedding day and doubtless overcome with the romance of the moment, he let them off.

The whole celebration cost about £20 or, in today's money, an astonishingly modest £442. But it was not the cost which mattered; it was the delight and happiness of the two young people who were to remain married for over 50 years. Looking at the wedding photograph, I am struck not only by Rosemary's happy expression but also by a face which has "Fun" written all over it. It is impossible to imagine you would have a dull time with Rosemary. And I think they did have fun. Housework was not high on the list of necessary tasks. The flat they moved into was above Claude Rey's' Motorcycle shop, then just about the largest and most famous bike shop in London. They were living dangerously. Petrol and bikes were stored on the ground floor and any major fire would have seen everything rocketed sky high without the benefit of a safety net. But mainly, the young couple didn't live a fiery lifestyle. Cooking was on Rosemary's list of skills she wished to acquire but at that stage of their lives, it was not a necessity. A Café on the other side of the street offered a cost-effective menu: Spaghetti Bolognese was just 1/9d. According to Rosemary, the flat was in a terrible condition although as you might expect, this was spoken of in a sanguine manner.

*"Eric's mother came to say and I spent two days cleaning the flat. When she arrived, she looked around the flat and said, 'I'll give you a hand'."*

A hand was not required. Rosemary has always been a woman of an independent nature.

You will not be surprised to hear that one of the early undertakings of married life included the purchase of a Lifeboat from the Queen Mary. The lifeboat eventually needed repairs and it was "Rosemary the Welder" rather than "Rosie the Riveter" who removed the leaky plates. Twenty-four of them in one sitting. You can probably see by now that Rosemary always strives to achieve her ambitions and this brings me back to the Harmonium. I contacted Rosemary earlier this week and the conversation started with her reference to a visit to see the object of desire. The instrument is in good condition, having been lovingly refurbished by its current owners. Rosemary checked out the keyboard, bellows and sound by playing what must surely have been a spirited rendition of "Now Thank We all our God". This delectable instrument will shortly be with her and I for one, wish her endless hours of pleasure. I will look out a copy of 'Francis & Day's Popular and Community Song Book for all occasions 1937' and if invited, join her in singing the hours away. And maybe, if I make a good fist of it, I will find out more about Rosemary's rich and varied life.



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