

Bridget Gosling



Nurse, Wife, Mother, Playgroup Supervisor

"A tonic to work with."

I first came into contact with Bridget Gosling thanks to the good offices of Robin Biddle, who told me about a scrapbook dating back to 1966 containing photos of the Village Playgroup. He thought I might be interested in seeing this record of village children dating back at least fifty years or more. After some thought and not a little hesitation, I acted on his suggestion. As a result, I discovered far more than I expected as one very spirited woman, Bridget Gosling, came to explain the origins of The Memorial Hall Play Group. Some people have a "can-do" attitude to life and when you meet them it is immediately apparent they will always be the best person to be with in an emergency. And this was a characteristic which sprang to the fore when I met Bridget; she radiated positivity and organisation. Everything was in place to describe and illustrate her experiences and with minimal delay we cracked on as I listened to Bridget telling me about her life and times. My focus is on her but I do not in any way dismiss the life of her husband, who complements her strengths and who has his own story to tell.

Bridget has lived in several different places but for more than fifty years Trimley St. Martin has been her home. Life started in 1934 when she was born in the City of Westminster. Her mother, Eva Brinkley, was a Suffolk girl from Harkstead who moved to London for work and there she met her future husband and father of her children. He was in the Irish Guards and at one time his responsibilities included guarding Buckingham Palace. Life was hard for families growing up in the 1930s during the Depression but perhaps the greatest hardship in Bridget's young life came in 1939 when she and her little three year old brother were evacuated. In company with many others, they were taken to a railway station with labels attached to their persons, Gas Masks in their hands and oranges for the journey. They also travelled with absolutely no knowledge of where they were going. Bridget, at the grand age of 5, was in charge of her little brother and when he lost his orange, she went without and gave him hers.

"Someone once asked me why we had oranges for the journey, because after all, they were rationed during the War. But when I thought hard, it was because we were evacuated just before the War began and oranges were still available."

After a lengthy journey their destination turned out to be a Village Hall somewhere in Wales. The children were lined up and it was up to the local people to choose the children they were prepared to look after.

"Eventually, a lady took the two of us. She wanted a boy and my brother was lovely, with round cheeks. But she didn't really want me because I wasn't so pretty. It wasn't a very happy time for me. My parents came to visit and my father said to my mother he didn't think I looked very well. That was when they decided to move me – us - and took me to back with them to Suffolk. I went to live in Stutton with my Grandmother. We were there for a while and then my youngest brother, Bart joined us."

During the 1940s Bridget's father was invalided out of the Irish Guards with T.B. from which he later died; her mother was left with four children to look after. They all moved into a capacious, well-built Council house in Holbrook. If you know Holbrook you will immediately recognise the house, as it is next to The Cut which runs from the main road to the Primary School. Bridget was due to leave school when her mother was approached by Mr. Mason who lived in the large house on the other side of The Cut and in time, her mother came to officially work for the Masons, looking after their child. For Bridget the contact was to result in commencing work at Mason's Fashion Store in Ipswich, which used to stand on the corner of Tower Street and Tavern Street in Ipswich, next door to The Ipswich Institute.

"One of my tasks was to measure up women for their corsets, "Bridget grimaced a little at this point, "but I'd always wanted to be a Nurse. I applied to the hospital at Paddington Green and that's where I started my training. but I could still go back home sometimes."

Paddington Green had started life as a Victorian Children's Hospital. Like most hospitals it joined the N.H.S. in 1948 when it became affiliated to St. Mary's in Praed Street, now associated with Imperial College, London. I think all of Bridget's practical aptitude and good humour had led her to this point and enabled her to become a skilful and competent Nurse. She visited home at weekends which meant she could live and maintain contact with her mother. Most importantly, when she was home Bridget knew how to have a good time. It's just a five minute walk down The Cut to the Village Hall and this is where she would head for on a Saturday night.

"The best dances for miles around were in Holbrook Village Hall. Everyone used to head out there. I used to go with a friend whose father would always arrive at 10.00 o'clock to take us home. We used to hide from him because at 10.00 all the boys from The Swan would come out and that's when there

would be fun! I met Peter (her husband) at one of the dances. On one occasion at the Hospital, Matron called me in because she had written home to my mother asking, 'Did she know I had a young man?' Fortunately, Mother did know! Matrons had plenty of authority in those days and knew everything about you."

Bridget didn't stay in London but eventually returned home for good having found a job in Felixstowe Hospital. It was an important Cottage Hospital then and Bridget lived in the Nurse's Home directly opposite the Hospital. On the night of 31st January/1st February 1953 Bridget was on duty; this was the night of the 1953 Flood which laid waste to the coastal areas of Lincolnshire, Norfolk, Suffolk, Essex and the Thames Estuary. Three hundred and seven people up and down the coast were killed in as a result of the Floods and during the course of the long, long night, people were brought to Felixstowe Hospital suffering shock, exposure and distress. Bridget remembered:

"Some had been hanging on to roof tops throughout the Great Gale and storm surge...people from the Langer Road area, where the sea broke through. When they were brought in to the hospital their bodies and faces didn't change expression. Their faces were frozen into one position. We put mattresses down on the Ward floors and had to put some people up in the Nurses Quarters because there were so many of them. I particularly remember one woman who had been rescued because she was heavily pregnant. She lost her little girl during the night of the Flood. Her baby was born very shortly afterwards."

The terrible night lives on in her memory, as it does with so many others who experienced the fearful storm. But if 1953 began with such a shocking experience, by the end of the year, it came to hold happy memories for Bridget. In November 1953, Bridget married her 'young man', Peter Gosling, in the Catholic Church of The Holy Family in Brantham.

Like many other young people, they began married life in a small flat located in Felixstowe's Sea Road, not far from Peter's sister. Their first child Jane was born at the end of the following year and by 1955 Bridget was expecting her second child, Robert. Although they had somewhere to live, it wasn't large enough for a growing family; they were already on the waiting list for a Council House. Every week they would wait to hear if they were successful and every week they were disappointed. As her desperation increased, Bridget decided to go to the Council Offices to try and plead her case. She described what happened:

"I went to the Council Offices because the flat was too small for more than one child. I spoke to the Housing Officer who was responsible for allocating the houses and suppose I was quite emotional as I explained our case to him. At the end he turned to his Secretary and said, 'I suppose you'd better give her the letter you're typing.' and with that, she whipped the letter out of the typewriter and gave it to him. He filled it in, signed it and said, 'There you are!' We'd been given a Council House in Vicarage Road and I started crying with happiness."

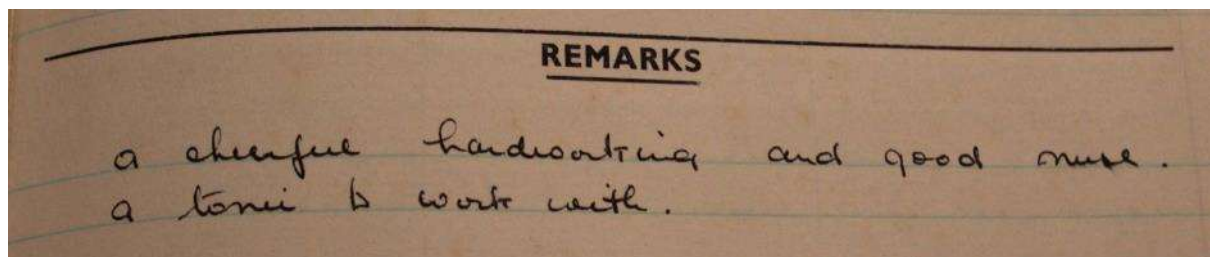
Bridget's positive action in talking to the Housing Officer resulted in the removal to a house suitable for three people and Baby Robert, who was born in 1955. But this was not to be their permanent home because as mentioned earlier, they have lived in Trimley for more than fifty years. Why did they make the move from Felixstowe to St. Martin's? Bridget continued to explain.

"Peter used to go to Trimley to see his Aunt who lived near Gun Lane. On one occasion she informed him there was a small orchard in Gun Lane, which was being sold and she had the opportunity to buy it although she didn't want it. Peter came back, told me about it and asked if he should purchase it. What did I think? He said he would sell his motorbike and as it turned out, we were able to borrow some money from my Step-father and Peter from elsewhere. We were living on £7 a week at the time and decided to chance it. The sale went ahead and although we purchased the land we continued to live in the Council House. Peter would visit the site and after perhaps six months decided he would put some footings in for a bungalow. He then spent about eighteen months digging everything out and putting the build together. Peter's brother was a Brickie and helped with the self-build. It was done in stages; first you dug to the height of the windows, waited for it to be passed and then carried on up to roof height. When it was finished we moved in. It took about two years until we occupied our new home. I had so many visitors who wanted to see my home because it was modern and different from the other houses in Trimley."

During this period Matron Shawcroft at Felixstowe Hospital approached Bridget to ask her if she would be interested in working a night a week at the Hospital. Peter offered to look after the baby because,

"I know you love your job."

and with that, Bridget gradually started back at work and was able to contribute to the building costs. Many years later, after her nursing career finished, Bridget was given an insight into why Matron want to re-employ her. A register of all the nurses had been maintained containing personal details and brief comments about the character of each nurse. At the end of her working life, Matron wanted to throw the Register away but Bridget asked if she could have it and has kept it ever since. The entry concerning Nurse Gosling says, 'A cheerful, hardworking and good nurse. A tonic to work with.'



Over the years a working pattern was established and her rota consisted of Sunday and Wednesday Nights on one week and Wednesday and Thursday nights the following week. This was to be

repeated for about thirty years. Someone else approached Bridget to look after an elderly person overnight adding to her responsibilities and helping to finance their self-build home. In addition to running a household, looking after children and working, Bridget managed to learn to drive, thereby enabling her journey to and from the hospital. Reflecting on the purposeful focus Bridget and Peter gave to becoming home owners, I saw yet more evidence their determination to “get on with it and get it done”. Their natural desire for a good standard of living was achieved by hard work and shrewd management. You may think this is within everyone’s grasp and I suppose theoretically it is but the truth is it takes a certain degree of level headedness, forward planning and financial intelligence to achieve the actuality of owning your home, especially when all this was delivered from the ground upwards.

As Bridget described her nursing responsibilities she slipped another one into the conversation. When talking about her children, she mentioned she ran a Baby Clinic during her nursing career, although had never been a Midwife. She also mentioned she had been the person in the village who was responsible for Laying out Bodies. Bridget revealed this had been something she was asked to undertake and indeed, something she had agreed to do. I found myself moved by her absorption of this historic role and considered whether she may have been the last person in the village to have carried out these compassionate duties. Births and deaths can be times of high emotion and the presence of someone as grounded and kind as Bridget can only be a source of sensitive reassurance to other members of the family. She continued with this work for several years and only stopped when she was pregnant and encountered difficulties with one Body who proved too substantial for her to handle. The decision was made to finish but not before she passed on her skills to others.

The baby with whom she was pregnant was her third child, Julia, born in 1965. Bridget realised there was an absence of playmates for her new baby and in a pragmatic manner set about solving the problem. If there were no children nearby to visit, then she, Bridge, would create a Playgroup where all the children could all meet. This simple, common sense approach resulted in the creation of The Memorial Hall Playgroup in 1966, the first in the area. Bridget belonged to the ‘Trimley Young Wives’ Group and knew many of the young mothers in the Village, including Kitty Smith. This was a useful asset as she could gauge the interest of others before establishing the Playgroup. Garnering equipment and planning activities were something Bridget took in her stride with ease. Receiving permission to operate the Group was trickier. The first inspection didn’t go very well as the official, a *‘horrible woman’* who came to inspect the premises, was sniffy about the condition of the floor in the Memorial Hall and the splinters which had developed over the forty odd years since it opened. Was Bridget downhearted? Of course not. Peter’s sanding skills were deployed in the first instance and use of a hired machine resulted in a smooth, glossy surface. Bridget moved on to Part Two of her plan to gain permission by visiting the Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Grey, whom she happened to know as he lived in Holbrook and employed her mother. After explaining the situation to him, he ordered Bridget to, ‘Go ahead!’. The ‘Horrible Woman’ returned and this time took a whole hearted approach to the project by granting unqualified permission for the Playgroup to open.

Twenty years of work with the under-fives was the net result, in addition to her Nursing. There were more children than spaces as the top limit was thirty children and requests easily exceed the permitted quota. There would be one specific activity a session such as Painting, Play Doh, Gluing or Sand Play as well as to general play and socialising. The children had access to the Hall gardens and the neighbouring field; their play was open and free. Inside, the Memorial Hall has always been a shared space and everything had to be taken out and put away on a daily basis with the Hall left in a clean and tidy state afterwards. Anyone who has ever worked with children will appreciate the organisation required. Twice a year, the Playgroup would appear to the public either in the Trimley Carnival or by producing a Nativity Play in the appropriate season. Every event was photographed for Bridget's Scrapbook. The images of the Play Group Carnival float evidence Bridget's lively presentation of the children to the village. Starting off with the Prize winning, "Chickens in a Basket" and moving through the years to the final entry of the 'Turkish Delight' float, many children look out of the pages, captured in time as their younger selves. But Bridget's guiding maxim for the duration of her life with the Playgroup was her stated intention that:

"I would finish when the first child of one of the Children brought their child to me."

Consequently, twenty years after founding the Group the time came for it her to leave and at the point of departure in December 1986, Reg Dixon, the former Head of Trimley St. Mary school wrote a letter stating:

"I ... thank... you on behalf of all the children who have been through your hands over the years and have moved on to us happier and more confident and readier for school because of you work, for all the care and love you have shown them."

This testimonial was endorsed with a spontaneous tribute some years later when Bridget was shopping. When she turned to pay, the Shop Assistant informed her it had been paid already by a young man. He was a former 'student' who said he had been a little difficult when he was with her Group but she had always had time for him and only ever been kind, then and when he was older and maybe even more difficult. Her kindness created a lasting legacy.

Bridget had talked about what she described as her 'small stories' until she reached the year of 1988 and by then, it was time to depart. Walking home, I found myself thinking these are not 'small stories' at all. Working hard as a professional nurse, wife, mother and Playgroup Leader, her life in the second half of the Twentieth Century demonstrates the emergence of energetic, capable and intelligent women who helped to lead the way for their daughters and granddaughters to discover rich and fulfilling lives for themselves. Bridget and Peter's very long marriage, composed at it is of love and pride signifies how much can be achieved through these supportive qualities when combined with good humour, cheerfulness and optimism in what it is possible to achieve.

There is nothing small about these expansive qualities at all, rather a largesse of heart and spirit.

Pictures for The Memorial Hall Scrapbook



Bridget's little girl - 'Baby' Julie Gosling at the Play Group, 1966 –



A Play Group session in full swing, with Kitty Moss standing next to the wall on the left. c.1966



Trimley Carnival Entry 1969 'Chickens in a basket' – First Prize



Children outside the Memorial Hall.

If you have any comments or would like to be part of this Trimley St. Martin project, please contact me at:

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