

VALERIE ALICIA ROBBINS (nee THOMAS)

MY STORY



I was a war baby, born on 1st June 1942, so I do not really have memories of the War. Although I do have a lucky bullet. In September 1942 my parents were watching a dog fight between the RAF and a German aircraft, while standing in our back garden in 15 Wyatt Close, Hayes Middlesex, which was near Northolt Aerodrome. I was in my mother's arms, when the planes turned towards us my father suddenly pushed us in doors, several civilians were killed in Hayes. One bullet was lodged in brickwork and Dad dug it out, he then gave it to me when I was 6 years old. It was a German bullet and I still have it today.



In WWII my Dad volunteered for the forces but as he was 36 he was deployed to work on the National Fire Service, based in Hayes but he spent a lot of time in London fighting fires during the Blitz.

My Family

But before I move onto my memories of life after the war, I want to give some space to my grandparents and parents. My mother was called Violet and was born on 3 June 1906. Her parents were Alice Sarah

Plunkett (nee Cherrill) and William James Plunkett. Violet Annie Louise Plunkett was one of eight children. Her siblings were: Alice, William, Lily, Albert who was always known as Vad, Frederick, Ruby and Sylvia. Unfortunately, Lilly, Ruby and Sylvia all died whilst they were young. Most of my mother's childhood was spent in Maida Vale.

Although my Granddad Plunkett was 39 years of age at the outbreak of World War 1, he volunteered. He joined the Pioneer Corps and was sent out to Greece, but he contracted Malaria in 1917 and was sent back home on a boat. The boat stopped at Valetta en route, and William was deemed to be so ill that it was thought he would not survive the remainder of the journey, so he was taken off the boat. This would prove a life saver for him, as the boat was subsequently torpedoed and all lives onboard were lost. William did survive Malaria, although it would plague him for the rest of his life. However, my poor Grandmother Alice, received a telegram to tell her that her husband had died as it was thought that William was still onboard the ship when it sunk. So, when he turned up on the doorstep some months later, she got a bit of a shock, she had even been given a war widows pension. But she had always maintained that she did not really feel like a widow!

Following the end of the war, William thought that the returned soldiers who came back with various injuries, both physically and mentally were not treated well. He would see soldiers on the streets and was particularly affected by the men who had lost their sight, lots of them due to the mustard gas they had been exposed to when at the front. He was part of a campaign to get State Aid for the Blind, he would collect signatures for a petition by going into public houses. William would sometimes take Violet with him when he did this, as Violet got more signatures than he did. Grandmother Alice was also a campaigner, she was a Suffragette. William agreed to her campaigning if she did not get herself arrested. So, she went on marches and gave out leaflets and attended meetings. I remember when my own daughter turned 18 and could vote for the first time, my Mum Violet, her sister Alice and I accompanied her as a tribute to my grandmother Alice and what she had helped to achieve for women. My mother said it was the proudest moment of her life.

When my Mum was growing up they had to move several times as the size of the family increased, which was not always easy. She went to Ambley Road School in Paddington, although she had to leave when she was 14 and go to work. Her first job was at the department store, Whiteleys in Bayswater where she worked in the Still Room, which was attached to the Restaurant. Her claim to fame was that she made an afternoon tea for Queen Mary when she shopped at the store. She was not allowed to serve the tea but she did brew it!

My Mum told me a story of how on her way home from work with her colleagues she would often see a nicely dressed lady walking her dogs, who would nod hello to them and enquired how they were. She noticed that there was always a man behind her who looked like he was following the lady. Mum mentioned this to her colleagues, they told her the lady was the Duchess of York, future Queen Elizabeth (wife of George VI), the man was a plain clothes policeman protecting her!

My Parents

It was at Whiteleys that my Mum met Dad as he also worked there as a French polisher. Dad was called James William Thomas and was born on 28 January 1908. He was born in Paddington and he was the eldest of seven children, his siblings were: Margaret, Alfred, Stanley, Diana, Joan and Betty, who is still alive. I do not think my Dad had a happy childhood. His father, James Sydney Thomas, had served in the Middlesex Regiment during World War One and came back a damaged man after serving on the Somme, of course this was never talked about then and so I have no details of what this meant. Apparently my Granddad Thomas used to hit his sons and for this my father, James, did not forgive him. Consequently, I can only recall seeing him once.

I did see more of my Grandmother, Alice Maude Thomas (nee Mitchell) and I have happy memories of going to meet her at the bus stop when she would come and visit.



This picture is of me and my Granny Thomas when I was about 7, notice the corrugated iron used as a fence between the houses. This was from the Anderson shelter, things were hard to get in 1949 so everything was recycled.

My Dad suffered with asthma and of course in those days there was no NHS and so his doctor advised him to join the Army, The Royal Berkshire Regiment, as this way he was more likely to receive better care as it was all paid for. So, he joined up and was sent over to Germany, to the mountains and it did indeed help his asthma. My parents maintained their relationship whilst he was away and on one of his leaves, they got married in a church in Paddington on the 15 October 1927.

I am not sure when he left the Army, but eventually my Mum had saved up enough money to buy him out. By 1933 they were living in Shepherds Bush and it was here that my brother Royston was born. He was not keen on his name and so we always called him Roy.

Dad was no longer a French Polisher as he could earn more money driving a coach. His route was from London to Windsor, and he had the opportunity to see different places along the way and one of these was Harlington, Middlesex. Harlington was where he took his break and he found a nice flat above a shop, he said this would be a nicer place to live than Shepherds Bush and my mother had an Aunt living in Hayes. Not long after the move, her parents decided to live near them and rented a cottage nearby with their son Frederick. In 1936 he noticed new houses were being built in Hayes which is on the outskirts of London and James found one that he liked. He took my Mum out to see it, they travelled there on his motorbike and side car. They would end up buying their first house for £350 on 12 Balmoral Drive in Hayes. The style of house was quite modern for the day and for this reason they were not selling very well. My Dad spoke to the Developer and they came to an agreement about Dad helping to sell the houses. He would get paid £25 for each house that he helped to sell. He ended up selling five of them. These were to my Mum's brothers, numbers 20 and 22 Balmoral Drive, one to her sister in a nearby road. Two more in the next road were sold to Mum's Aunt and cousin. So, it became quite a collection of our relatives. My Mum had been hesitant at first as she had said "We are not the sort of people who buy houses!"

In 1938 my parents were asked if they would like to take over a Café in Bermondsey and run this. There was a flat above the café and so they moved there as the commute would have been too much. Mum did not want to give up her house though, she had moved thirteen times between 1927 and 1936 and wanted "to put down some roots". So, her parents moved in to look after it with one of her brothers, and because there were three bedrooms, it meant they could go and stay at weekends.

World War 2

It was all working out well but then the war started in 1939 and things changed again. With the fear of bombs in London all children were evacuated, Roy was sent to live in Hayes with his grandparents, but eventually my Mum became fearful of the continued threat of the constant bombing and many people they knew had been killed, so they

decided to give up the café and return to Hayes. They made the right decision as the café took a direct hit a month later. But Violets sister had now moved into 12 Balmoral Drive as her husband had died, this meant there was no room for Mum, Dad and Roy, so instead they rented a house around the corner. The address was 15 Wyatt Close and this was where I was born on 1 June 1942 at 06.20.



This is the only photo of me as a baby which was taken at a Studio, ordinary people could not get film to take photos during the war

Like all families we had to learn to live with the threat of bombings and my Dad built an Anderson Shelter in the garden of 12 Balmoral Drive, but they had a Morrison Shelter inside the house in Wyatt Close. Because my Dad was a Fireman, he would often not be there during the raids, and so it was up to my Mum to ensure we got to the shelters. One story that was often told, was of Mum rushing to the indoor shelter and she managed to hit my head on the metal frame when they were getting into the Morrison Shelter. I was only 6 weeks old at the time, so she was quite upset and started to pray that she had not hurt me. She asked my brother for the torch to check on me, to which Roy (who was 9) commented that "it is no good praying to God, he would not listen as you have just called Hitler a lot of swear words".

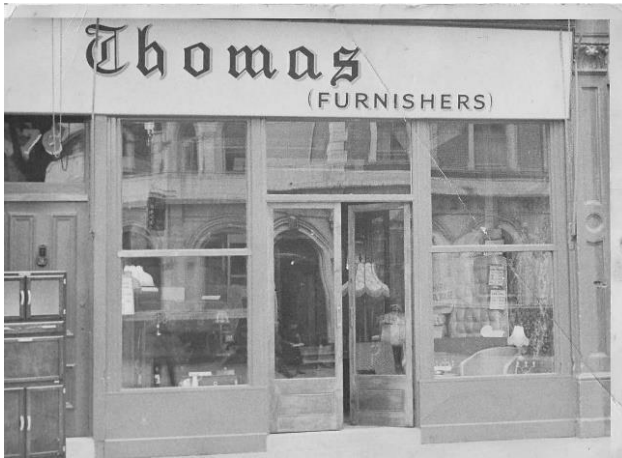
We had to learn to make do because of rationing and so my Granddad Plunkett used to grow vegetables in the garden as well as breeding rabbits, which were meant to be used to feed us. However, the grandchildren became attached to the rabbits and started to name them, so instead of feeding us, they became pets! Granddad grew so many vegetables he used to supply many of the neighbours too.

Growing up post war

After the war my parents again moved back to Bermondsey. But this time they set up their own café and we all lived above the café in the flat there. There had been a lot of bombing in this part of London, but there was also a lot of rebuilding going on too, so it was a good place to be and the business was successful. Although this time they had to manage a toddler as well, which they had not really considered. Apparently, I wanted to help a lot and insisted on having my own apron which had a big pocket for the float money, just like my Dad, and I would end up getting into all sorts of mischief, including swapping floats and upsetting a tin of paint so that the lino was spoilt! I also escaped taking my doll in her pram to the park one day, crossing a busy road and I was only 3, although I did ask a policeman for help. Something had to be done.

Luckily for me there was a nice couple next door, Doll and Charlie, who owned a sweet shop, and an arrangement was made for them to look after me. I loved this and recall sitting behind the counter. By all accounts I was a bit bossy, I remember insisting that a customer in a bowler hat do a dance before he could buy his cigarettes! Most items were rationed and Charlie would keep items for regular customers 'under the counter'. Unfortunately, if I was present and a customer came in who was not a regular Charlie would tell him we were out of stock, I said we had them under the counter, but he was not allowed as he was not a regular!! I do remember playing with what I thought were dolls clothes, but turned out to be baby clothes, as Doll had had a baby which had died. They did go on to have three children, so that was good.

However, we did not stay long in Bermondsey and late 1946 saw us returning to our own home in Balmoral Drive. Both of my grandparents had passed away within 6 weeks of each other in 1945 and so Mum and Dad gave up the café.



My Dad now had the finances to realise his ambition by opening a furniture store in 76 Shepherds Bush Road called Thomas Furnishers. This had been a dream of his for a long time.

We settled into life back in Balmoral Drive, there were lots of family around who we would play with.



The only school photo I have, first year in the Junior School aged 7.

At this time my brother Roy, found his first and last girlfriend, which I found out about when I was aged 6. Mum had to go into hospital for a hysterectomy and I was looked after by a neighbour called Mrs Bradshaw, who lived in 17 Balmoral Drive. She had a daughter called Bunt, her real name was Vera, but we never called her this. She was like a big sister to me and we got on very well, she indulged me and played the piano with me providing the vocals, despite me not really being able to sing! A favourite of mine was "How much was that doggie in the window". She would also allow me to dress up in her clothes and I would entertain her parents all dressed up. Another reason I liked going there was because they had a dog.



Bunt and I on one of our trips to Hayling Island, I was 7 and she was 17.

I was a fussy eater and one day Mrs Bradshaw gave me a rabbit stew, I pronounced I would not eat it as it was a bunny. Mrs Bradshaw looked at me and asked if I ate chickens, to which I replied yes. "So", she said "well this is a Chicken-rabbit" So, after that chicken-rabbit stew became a firm favourite of mine!

My Dad was always one to like getting the latest inventions as they came out, so we were one of the first in the area to get a television set, which he sold in his shop. I recall the day he came home with a TV set; it was in 1947, I was already in bed, but he got me up to show me this wonderful new box that he had bought. I remember watching a comedy mystery on it, about a man who kept killing his wives, but they came back as ghosts. I suppose I remember this as it was such an amazing thing, to watch people acting on a small screen in your own home, the memory has stayed with me. When the coronation happened in 1953, lots of people came round to watch it on our TV set, as there were not many around, even then.

Despite having a TV, we did not spend a lot of time watching it as children. For a start there was not a lot of choice and it was only on at certain times. I do recall Muffin the Mule was a favourite of mine. Like a lot of children of the era we used to go out and play for the day and only come back for tea, it was a safe area. There were not a lot of children in the area, but enough of us to have fun. We would go off and create dens in the nearby fields, play pooh sticks at the river and cricket on the fields. As a way of getting some money we would collect empty bottles and return them for pennies, which we would use to buy the cakes left at the bakers at the end of the day and buy lemonade, these would form part of our picnic the next day. We were quite savvy!



Aged 12 in my new jeans.

I was quite a tomboy so on one of our trips to Oxford Street shopping my mother bought me a pair of American Jeans. She thought they were more appropriate than skirts. A lot of eyebrows were raised from the other mothers in the street as this was a little too modern for them.

To entertain ourselves in the summer holidays, especially on wet days, my aunty Anne (who lived at no. 20) would encourage us to hold concerts my cousin Linda and I would play a duet on the piano. There would also be endless games of Monopoly with my cousins. My Aunty Rose was very good, she let us leave it on the dining room table for days until we finished the game.

I feel I should mention my musical experiences. We had a piano at home and my mother paid for me to have piano lessons. After six months the teacher advised my mum that she was wasting her money as I was tone deaf! This was repeated when I tried to join the school choir at 11. We were practising one day when the teacher told us to stop as she could hear a horrible noise. She told us to carry on singing so she could find the culprit, she tapped me on the shoulder and asked me to leave and I was thrown out of the choir! When I was a Girl Guide leader and took the Guides to church, my daughter asked if I could sit

with the Brownies as my voice was so embarrassing! However, in 1999 I took up Bell Ringing for Chalfont St Peter's Church, I cannot hear the different tone of the bells so I just follow the other bells by watching the hands of the ringers, I still ring today!

There was a man in the street who was a Greengrocer and he drove a horse and cart. The horse was called Queenie and was put out each evening in the fields at the end of the road. Because we allowed his granddaughter to play with us, he would let us have a ride on the horse. It was a really big cart horse, I was scared of it and only went on it once, I screamed to get off as it started to move, I was so high up!

For a lot of children Saturday Morning Cinema was an important part of their childhood, and I was no different. My Mum let me go when I was 12 with the other children and gave me one shilling pocket money. We would travel to Southall by trolley bus, the fare was 2 and a half pence each way, entrance fee was 6 pence, and we had a penny to spend on sweets, which for me was normally a flying saucer and 2 blackjacks! If you went on your birthday then we got in for free (more money to spend on sweets) and you could take a friend and we were allowed to sit at the back of the cinema, which was a real treat. My favourite film was Rocket Man. It was quite futuristic for its day, the hero had a backpack which had a rocket in, allowing him to move fast and capture the baddies! Other films included comedies and Cowboys and Indians.

When I was 12 I took up dressmaking at home, Mum was good at making clothes and taught me a lot, it was the only way we could afford new things. Mum had a Singer sewing machine, which was very precious to her and I was not allowed to use it if she was not there. One day when I was about 13 I was making a dress which was white with red spots on and had braiding round the neck. Mum was at work but I was impatient to finish it, Mum was surprised when she got home to see it all completed and her sewing machine was still OK. If I were making something difficult I would often ask Mrs Bradshaw if she would help me, she had been a dressmaker and was very good. I did inherit the sewing machine from Mum and continued with my dressmaking for many years but now it is cheaper to buy clothes.

I was not really a sporty person and would do anything to avoid sport at school. I was quite a small person and so they did not really know where to put me on the team. When I was at Secondary School I volunteered to help with the library and run the School Fund, this way I managed to miss hockey and netball. Children were asked if they had any spare money for the School Fund and at the end of the week each class would collect the money and bring it to my classroom, there were 16 classes. I would add it all up and register it and then take it to the School Secretary, this money was used to buy extra things the school needed. No fundraising then, so this was the equivalent. It was only a few pennies from each child, but they added up to a few pounds each week. This was the start of my lifetime of volunteering. We were sometimes given the option of playing tennis, which I enjoyed. I had no liking of athletics, preferring gymnastics, which I was good at, but in those days you did not get much opportunity to practise. I never learnt to swim, despite going each week with the school. I remember asking Mum to take me to the swimming baths in Ealing. She could swim and had medals for it when she was at school, but she refused to come in with me to teach me as she felt she was too old at 42 to put on a swimsuit.

Like a lot of teenagers, music was an important part of my life and the first record that I bought was Rock around the Clock by Bill Haley and the Comets, I was 13 at the time. This music was so different to anything that we had had before, it made a big impression on all of us. My girlfriends and I would practice jiving to the music in my house. We would not let boys join us! We then started to go to a Youth Club at St Mary's Church, where we could all dance, the only requisite was that we had to go to church on Sunday, which we did. Mum initially said I could not go, but I asked Roy to intervene, which he did and so off we went. This was great until a new Vicar arrived and said we could no longer attend the Youth Club as none of us had been confirmed, although he never gave us the opportunity to be confirmed, so that was the end of that.

Of course, we wanted to wear the right clothing to go dancing in, and in the 1950s this meant big flouncy skirts with net petticoats. We would rinse the petticoats in sugar water to make them stiff, you had to be

careful how much sugar you added as if they were too stiff you could not move! We graduated from flouncy skirts to pencil skirts and being quite a follower of fashion, I would often take them in more to make them look tighter, which was great to look at but not great to wear. I would have to hitch up the skirt to be able to step onto the bus! Stiletto heels were essential, and it was not uncommon to lose a heel in the tarmac during the summer when the tarmac was soft. Another popular theme was to wear your cardigan back to front, button it up to the neck and wear a nylon scarf around your neck, plus the elasticated belt to accentuate your waist. My love of clothes continued into the 60s with the mini skirt and then into the 70s with hot pants and then maxi skirts. A good shopping trip would mean going to visit Biba's on the Kings Road. I took Mum there once and she was a bit shocked at the communal changing rooms!

The Coronation

The Queen's coronation was in 1953, when I was 11, my birthday fell the day before it. One day as I was walking to school with all my friends across the fields, one of the boys, called Raymond, was crying. He told us he was sad as our street was not having a Street Party to celebrate the Coronation. I told him not to worry, that instead of me having a birthday party the day before, we would all have a party on Coronation Day instead and everyone was invited. Of course, this was met with a lot of joy and everyone was excited. However, I forgot to mention this to my Mum, so when other parents asked her what food they could bring to help, she was a bit surprised! But it all turned out well, we did have a party on Coronation Day. Children were so excited they made flags to decorate the street, many streets had a fancy-dress party but we kept ours simple. It was a wet day, so we had to be inside and of course we had the TV to watch it on as well! A few days after the Coronation, my father took me to The Mall in London to see the decorations that had been put up for the coronation and took a photo of me in the street. The Queen and Prince Phillip did a tour of London in an open top car after the coronation. When they came to Shepherd's Bush we lined the streets to see them, my father lifted me up so I had a good view of them both.



1953 on a visit to The Mall after the coronation aged 11 years.

Holidays when I was young

As a child I was lucky enough to go on a three holidays with my family. This was not necessarily the norm then, as not everyone could afford to do it. We had two trips down to Devon where we would stay in a B&B. The first time we went to Babbacombe in 1948 the toilet was outside of the main house, which of course was not what we expected, so the following year we did a few more checks first, to make sure that the facilities were inside the house!



A photo from our trip to Babbacombe in 1948, mum, Roy and I aged 6.

Our next trip was to Torquay in 1949, the most memorable part of this holiday was some ships of the Royal Navy being anchored just off shore at Plymouth, we did a trip to an Aircraft carrier which was every exciting. Getting on the ship was a little hairy as you had to go up a ladder at the side, my Dad being an exfireman had no trouble carrying me. As usual I got into mischief and got lost on board, my parents found me in the galley with the sailors eating jelly and ice cream having a lovely time. The next year saw us venture to Newquay in Cornwall and my Aunt and Uncle came too. Dad had bought a Bedford Van which transported us all down to Cornwall. Roy sat up front to help Dad navigate and the rest of us all sat in the back of the van on garden chairs! You could not imagine doing such a thing now!

We would also go on day trips from home. These would mainly be on a Sunday, due to Dad working in his shop on Saturdays. Hayling Island was not too far away, so became a favourite of ours. My Dad would often say as we were leaving Hayes: "There is enough blue in the sky to make a sailors top and trousers, so it's not going to rain", but of course it often did. I remember this saying of his still today. As I mentioned my Dad liked to buy new things to try out and one time this was a Dingy, but not just any old Dingy, it was an ex-RAF Dingy, so fairly big. It took us six trips to the seaside to finally launch it as the weather was so bad. This was when my Aunty Winn, Uncle Fred and their baby, Cheryl, were with us, my Mother (who was a good swimmer) sat on the beach with Cheryl while we launched the boat. Uncle Fred, swimming, towed us out into deep water, then he jumped in to help with the oars, he then realised we were in deep water and he was the only one of the 5 of us who could swim. We did not have any life jackets either! Luckily there was no mishap and we all returned safely to shore.



Me in the famous dinghy launch, I can't be held accountable for the awful swimwear!

My Mum would make up picnics for these day trips but it was always a bit of a routine to stop off at a pub on the way home and get a drink. We would not go into the pub; Dad would just take our orders and bring the drinks out to us. I would normally have a lemonade to which my Dad would pour a very small amount of Mum's port and lemon into it to give my drink a bit of colour. One time he forgot to ask what we wanted so I called out of the car window to my Dad: "don't forget my port and lemon!" Other than these holidays as a child with my parents, I did have a weeks holiday with my mum when we went to stay with my dad's sister (Aunty Betty) and her husband in Winnersh in 1953, which was enjoyable but odd as it was not by the sea. When I was 14 my mum was very ill, so her brother and his wife (Uncle Fred and Aunty Winn) took me on holiday with their children Cheryl and Ronald. This was the first time I had been away for 2 weeks, all other holidays had only been for a week. We went to stay in a chalet in Mudeford, it was quite exciting as you had to be rowed across to the sandbank and the man rowing had only 1 leg. The chalet was only 1 room with bunks, you had to go to the toilet block nearby for ablutions. I remember this holiday so well, I had such a fabulous time and my Uncle Fred taught me to float on my back.



Aged 14 on my trip to Mudeford in 1956

Family Life

It is nice to recall these happy memories, but in reality life at home was quite difficult. My parents argued quite a bit and in 1951 my Dad left us all. He did return a couple of times to try and make things work, but truth be told they were better apart. In 1954 he ran into financial difficulty with his furnishing company, he had provided his own hire purchase to customers to buy the furniture but was lax in collecting the payments. Eventually this resulted in Dad getting into financial difficulties when people did not pay, his accountant said he had as much money owed to him as he owed suppliers. But it was all too much, he knew he would be declared bankrupt and the pressure of it led him to run away.

Mum and Dad separated but never divorced but did come to a financial agreement and had a judicial separation, which resulted in Mum buying Dad out of the house and taking on the whole of the mortgage herself. Unfortunately, this led to problems, as Dad's creditors tried to take the house off us to recoup some of their money. The whole thing ended up going to court to be settled, which it finally was in Mum's favour, but not before it had caused her a lot of anxiety and stress. She tried to take her life once when I was 12 in 1954. I woke early one morning and felt something was not quite right and so went downstairs to find Mum with her head in the gas oven. I remember being very distressed by it all, as it was just my mother and I at home, as Roy by then was in Malaya

doing National Service. The court case was settled in 1956 but we subsequently found out that Dad had re-mortgaged the house several years earlier and had not told my Mum this when she agreed to take on the mortgage. This meant Mum had to continue higher mortgage payments for another fifteen years, £7 a month was a lot of money for a single parent in 1956.

The last time I saw Dad I was 13 years old in December 1955. He thought he was meeting Roy, he had sent a telegram asking him to meet, but instead Mum and I turned up. My Mum wanted to confront him about what he had done and asked him to come back to face everyone, but he refused. Despite all of this I do have happy memories of my Dad who had always made such a fuss of me and I did love him. He would take me twice a year to Selfridges to buy a special outfit and we would then go and have afternoon tea at the Park Lane Hotel. For me this was wonderful, a real treat, to this day I still remember being allowed to choose what colour ice cubes I wanted in my drink.

Throughout all of this, my Mum had continued to work. After the café in Bermondsey, she set up on her own running a café near King Edwards Hospital in West Ealing, this was in 1949. I had been looked after by a childminder, Mrs Moore, who lived at 12 Wyatt Close in Hayes. She would take me to Grange Park School and collect me. I played with her two daughters, Janet and Lorraine. However, things changed again when Dad left, as the business became too much for Mum. But she was persuaded to try again by her sister, and they went into partnership together opening up another café. This was in Turnpike Lane, which was on the other side of London, so quite a hike for my Mum. But it also meant I had to be looked after again. This time Mrs Weech was my childminder, she lived over the road at number 9 Balmoral Drive and had three children of her own. I loved going there, she was a very happy lady and kind to me. I would also help her as I was older than her children and by then I was old enough to take her two older children to school.

Unfortunately, the café did not work out for Mum and her sister and she gave it up and then found work in a factory nearer home.

By now I had taken the 11+ exam and passed but there was no Grammar School in Hayes and with all the extra children born in the war, Southall Grammar School could not take children from Hayes. So I went to Barnhill Secondary Modern instead, there were 54 children in my class. At the age of 13, I took the 13+ and passed to go to Ealing College, but Mum could not afford the school uniform and all the extras such as sports equipment. We did ask for help from the local council but they refused so instead I sat an exam to join the commercial course at Barnhill and I went and learnt shorthand and typing. I should have stayed there until I was 16 but by now things were difficult for Mum, who had to go into hospital for an operation, after the operation she had a heart attack and was in hospital for some weeks. So, I left school at 15. I had a really nice understanding teacher, Miss Irvine, who offered to give me private tuition so that I could take my exams. However the council would not let me take the exams as I was not in full time education. It seems so unfair now, but that was how it was then, and we could not do anything about it.

It was just Mum and I at home and obviously she was always concerned about my safety and where I went. I was 15 when I had a boyfriend, who I met at the church youth club. She was OK with this as he lived nearby and did come round to introduce himself, so she felt happy for us to go out together to dances. We would get the bus to Richmond as there were dances at the Castle Hotel. By 16 we had graduated to the Hammersmith Palais; a crowd of us would all go together. This was easy to get to but getting home was more difficult, as we would always want to stay for the last dance which meant we missed the last train home. So we would have to wait for the Milk Train which did not come until 4am and then we had a long walk back from Hayes station. Mum never knew how late we got back, as she was a sound sleeper and always went to bed early, so I was able to get away without telling her. Although it was hard the next day when she would wake me early on a Sunday morning! She would always insist that I pin a pound note to the inside of my bra before going out, in case of emergencies! I would take this off as soon as I left home as it was pretty uncomfortable.

Roy

My brother Roy was always a big part of my life. Despite the big 9 year age gap between us, we got on well and he would always be there to help me out. I remember when I was ill with measles at the age of 6, my mum asked him to entertain me and keep me in bed (the room had to have the curtains shut because of the light affecting my eye) so he decided to teach me to knit. On one occasion after my father had left, I was crying because I had not got a Dad, he told me not to get upset, took me on his knee and told me he would be my Dad, he was 18 at that time. Roy and Bunty ended up getting married, but only after he had done his National Service. My Dad had always had the idea that Roy should be a doctor. But this was not what Roy wanted. In 1949 when he was 16 he had the opportunity to train as an Officer in the RAF, he joined but after 6 months he did not like it and so Dad bought him out.



Roy aged 16 in his Cadet RAF uniform.



Roy and I in our garden before he leaves for Malaya Roy 18, Valerie 9

In those days it was difficult to get employment when you were due to be called up for National Service so he worked for Dad as a Salesman until he was 18 when he was called up. He joined the RAF and signed up for 3 years as this meant he would be able to learn a trade, which would be better for him long term. So, he commenced training as an Aircraft Instrument Mechanic, now known as an Avionics Engineer and he was posted to Malaya. As my mother was a single parent my brother wanted to ask for a compassionate posting, he said he would try and change it but Mum said no, he should go off and see the world, she never held us back. We did not see him for three years. We would correspond a lot and Mum would send out parcels of food, including a Christmas pudding! On return to the UK he completed his apprenticeship at BOAC (now British Airways) as it was a five year course, and Bunty and Roy got married. As he married the girl across the road, he lived with her elderly parents and took over the house, so he was always nearby.

Roy was always someone I could turn to when I needed help or if Mum and I were having an argument about something, this was particularly so after Dad left us, he was very important to me. I also had a lovely sister-in-law with Bunty, who I had known since I was a young girl.

They had a son called Ian, who has become more like an older brother to my children, as he only lived opposite at No.17, he also became an Avionics Engineer with British Airways and then Air Canada. Ian married Jane, who was a midwife, they live in Hillingdon. They had three children, Emma (has a degree in Politics), Matthew (has a degree in Music) & Sarah (has a degree in journalism), my children are their godparents. Emma and her husband Justin had a baby boy in April whose name is Arthur. Matthew & his wife Imogen are expecting a baby in November so I have written down the family history for them. Bunty passed away in 2000 and Roy died in 2013.

Work

When I was young I had dreams of what I would like to do when I grew up, my first ambition was to become a conductor of an orchestra, after seeing Sir Malcolm Sargeant on the TV, a famous conductor at the Albert Hall. Then I saw Sir Mortimer Wheeler, an archaeologist, (the Verulamium Museum in St Albans was established following the excavations carried out by him in the 1930's). He was often a guest on TV shows where you had to guess what an artefact was, I wanted to follow in his footsteps. More down to earth ambitions were to be a Librarian or an Accountant as my dad had wanted me to be, but you needed a degree to pursue these careers and staying on at school was not an options for me.

During my life I have had a variety of jobs, most of which I have enjoyed. As soon as I was 15 I got a job as a Saturday girl in a bakers near home, at last I had some money to buy clothes. Miss Irvine helped me to find my first full time job after I could not take my exams. She took in lodgers and one of them was a manager at BOAC. There was a job for a Clerk at a subsidiary of BOAC known as International Aeradio, based in Hayes, so not far for me to travel. My salary was £4 and 6d a week, of this I gave £3 to Mum for my keep and my share of the mortgage, which meant I did not have a lot left over. So, to help supplement this I kept my Saturday job at Coombes the Bakers, I was paid a £1 a day for this. I continued doing both jobs for several months but in October 1957 I became ill and my mother said working 6 days a week was too much so I gave up the Saturday job.

I worked in the Accounts Department of International Aeradio. I was the youngest there and so initially spent a lot of time making the tea for everyone, and then doing a lot of routine office work. People were generally friendly and would look out for me. One time there had been a murder nearby and I was informed one foggy night that the Managing Director would drive me home, was not allowed to go alone. I wasn't very happy with this, being a bit uncomfortable in the car with him as he was so senior to me and I didn't know what to talk about, I was only 15! I also remember that there was a man from the North who worked there. I always knew that he took his weekly pay packet home to his wife unopened, which was different from most other people who would open theirs at work. By the end of the following week before payday he would run out of money, so he would ask me to go and buy him 5 cigarettes from the Newsagents. He gave me the money to do this, but he did not want to go himself as it was embarrassing to have to ask for only 5, as this was an indication that you were short of cash. I did not like doing it, as I did not smoke but I did and pretended they were for me.

To celebrate someone's birthday we all went to the pub at lunchtime. When asked what I would like to drink I said Babycham. I said I had never been in a pub before, of course, I was only 15 and should not have been in the pub let alone drinking alcohol! I was told not to tell my mother when everyone realised what they had done!

I liked the job but it was not well paid and so after about nine months I went to the Labour Exchange and found a job as a clerk in the accounts department of T Walls and Sons. This was the sausage and ice cream maker. They were based in Hayes and paid me an extra pound a week. I was 16 by now and had been there for about six months when we were told we were going to have a pay rise. There was a lad there who was the same age as me and he went in first to hear about his pay rise, so when I followed, I expected to get the same as him, but of course I didn't, I got less. When I asked why, I was told it was because I was a female and girls did not get the same as the men. I was outraged at this and told them so. I gave 2 weeks' notice immediately and as I left I told the manager my Grandmother had been

a suffragette and I could not possibly work for a company that did not give equal pay!

Of course, afterwards I was a bit reluctant to go home and tell Mum what I had done, so I asked Roy to help, which of course he did and so I found myself back at BOAC. By this time they had increased their wages and so I ended up getting more money. I was based at Heathrow in the Accounts Registry department. I was not particularly enamoured of the work as it was a lot of filing, but I realised it was a foot in the door and as I grew older more opportunities would be made available to me. Those were the days when if you needed to use the toilet you had to ask permission, like being back at school. When I was 18 I applied and got a job as a Clerk Typist in the Medical department working with a Miss Lane, who was nice and often helped me with my dressmaking. It was at this time that I re-met a friend from school who also worked for BOAC, this was Barbara Suckling and we are still friends today.

In those days you could not apply for a secretary's job until you were 21. But when I was 20 and a half a job came up working for a manager in the Flight Operations department at BOAC and I thought I had a good chance of getting it, so I applied. There were 40 applicants for the job and as it was a prestigious department you would be required to wear a uniform. The 'Control Centre' as it was called, was a show place for BOAC and was run on military standards, although I would be working in an office nearby I would be required to help out on Crew Warnings sometimes. I was asked at the interview if I minded wearing a uniform, I lied and said I hadn't realised it was a uniform position and guess what I got the job as they thought other applicants had only wanted to wear the uniform. I stayed in this job until I was 25.



In my BOAC uniform aged 21

Working at BOAC was enjoyable, although it was run on regimented lines as a lot of the Duty Controllers had been in the RAF and would all be referred to as Captain, their RAF title. They were very strict on appearance, one day a button had come off my jacket and I was made to leave and to go and sew it back on even though we were in the middle of standing crew down due to fog. I remember the first time that we actually spoke to a flight when they were crossing the Atlantic from the USA to the UK. It was such a momentous event that the BBC were there to record it. Prior to that the only way we had of seeing where all the BOAC flights were was on a chalk board on two walls, each flight had a number and destination, these were chalked on the boards, if a flight was in transit it had a light behind it to indicate this.

I worked until I had children in 1967 and then left to look after the children. However, in 1971 I returned to work. I had been a bit down and had gone to see my GP, who had suggested that a return to work might be a good idea. He was right. I got a job at Hepworth's the Tailors, where I did double entry bookkeeping for them as well as the stock take. I worked 12 hours a week and this was based in Hayes. I stayed for 11 years, eventually becoming secretary to the District

Manager working 20 hours a week in Uxbridge, by then Hepworths had changed its name to Next, I left when they shut the District Office. By now I was 40 years old I then became secretary to the Finance Director at Kabivitrum, this was a Swedish Pharmaceutical firm also based in Uxbridge. They were a good company to work for and I enjoyed working for them despite a strange first day! I was shown around the offices and warehouses where they kept the drugs etc. The manager showing me around opened up a massive freezer and bought out a bag and said "Pituitary glands!" One of the drugs that they manufactured was a growth hormone for which they needed pituitary glands to take it from. Hence the storage in the freezer! These pituitary glands were supplied by hospitals, when we had a batch we would get them flown to Sweden. They eventually became the first company in the world to make this growth hormone without the need for pituitary glands.

I then became the Assistant Administrative Manager and ran a car fleet of 150 cars, sorted all the travel for the company and was involved in purchasing all sorts of items for the company from stationary, cool boxes (for hospitals to store drip feeds) and plastic covers for IV Fluid bags, it was a varied and interesting job. After 8 years the company moved to Bourne End, we were only there six months when they merged with Little John, another pharmaceutical company and unfortunately the office moved to Milton Keynes. I left as this was too far to commute. I then found a job in Gerrards Cross working for a Car Leasing company, to run their car fleet, but I only stayed 6 months, as again I was made redundant.

I looked for another job and got offered two. The first was for GlaxoSmithKline in Brentford. The second for EMI Group (the music company), and as this was in Hayes, I took this one instead, as it meant I was nearer home and could look after my elderly mother, who now needed more help. I was Personal Assistant to the Finance Controller. I stayed there for 11 years until I retired. This was a really good company to work for. I would be given concert tickets, once for Robbie Williams at the Docklands Arena. Each month we would all be given six CD's. Part of my job was to arrange the Christmas party, and one year I hired RAF Hendon. We had a 1940s/50s party and we all

had to dress up in the theme. I also organised summer events, such as river boat shuffles and a trip on the Orient Express train in the UK. They had to have a music theme because of our connection to EMI! I was promoted to Office manager and retired in 2001 when my boss left. While working at EMI I became a School Governor at a school in Hayes, representing EMI. This was linked to a music grant that EMI gave the school and I also helped to run an after-school club for disadvantaged children, I did this for about 2 years.

Marriage

I have been married twice. I met my first husband at work at BOAC, he worked as a Clerk in the Accounts Revenue Department. His name was Gerald and he was 21, I was 17 at the time, I was swept off my feet. We were married on 18 March 1961; it was a big wedding. However just before we got married, he hit me. He was so apologetic and swore it would not happen again, but of course it did. I put up with it for a few years but then realised I could not carry on, especially as one day I would want to have children and that behaviour was not acceptable. He often came home late, so one day I packed his bags, put them on the doorstep with a note and told him to go home to his mother, which he did. I had not told my family about the violence and so at first they were disappointed the marriage had ended, but when they knew why they supported me.

I divorced him on grounds of cruelty, this was on the 5 November 1964. On the day of the Court hearing I thought my Barrister seemed quite nervous and could not understand why. It was only afterwards, when the divorce was granted, that I found out that I had a Judge who had a reputation of not granting divorces for cruelty. It even made the Evening Standard newspaper that day as it was the first time this judge had granted a divorce on the grounds of cruelty.

I had moved back in with Mum and continued working at BOAC. Gerald had left BOAC by now and worked at a Bookmakers, so I did not have the worry of seeing him at work. My friends at work were incredibly supportive of me after the divorce and a group of us would go out together.

I met David at BOAC, he also worked in Flight Operations. David had not had a settled childhood as he was an orphan and he had been in care since he was 18 months old with a Foster family. A couple of times he went into Children's Homes for short visits, after his mother died when he was 11 he was taken into care by Dr Barnados. They allowed him to stay with his foster mother, which was what his mother had wanted. David joined the Merchant Navy at 16 but after a year decided living out of a suitcase was not for him, he did a few odd jobs until he did his National Service. Like most men of his time he had begun National Service at the age of 18 and had joined the RAF for three years. On leaving he joined BOAC, as they liked ex RAF people as they knew the system and learnt quickly. David became known as a bit of the Jack the Lad as he had several girlfriends. One day someone at work asked him why he didn't settle down, to which he replied he was waiting to meet someone like Val, so started our relationship. We had been going out for 2 years when one day I went to help him to look for new lodgings, when he happened to slip into the conversation that of course his search could be over if he moved in with Mum and I, so we got married! I still remember feeling very excited about what he had said but trying to be very cool about it!

We got married six weeks later when we both had a weeks leave. I was not keen on another big wedding, I had a Fairy tale wedding to Gerry but that means nothing if it is the wrong person. David's only wish was to get married in a church. However, as I had been divorced this nearly proved to be a stumbling block. We were helped by Father Gilson from St Lawrence Church in Cowley, Uxbridge. He knew David as he had christened and confirmed him and said he would marry us after we had had a Registry Office ceremony at Uxbridge Registry Office, as the wedding would not be legal, as in those days he was not authorised to marry divorced people. David and I were married at 12 o'clock on the 4 September 1965 at Uxbridge Registry Office.



I wore a short dress which was blue lace with a little headdress that had a veil and Roy gave me away at the Registry Office. We then went to St Lawrences' church and had the usual wedding ceremony, the only difference was when we went into the vestry to sign the register, we did not have to sign any documents as we had already done this part. My Uncle Fred gave me away in Church at 1pm though, as for some reason Bunty had come to the Registry Office in her slippers, so Roy drove her home to change her shoes, which made them late! David's foster brother was his best man and after the church service we had a small reception back at our house in Balmoral Drive.

Originally, we were going to honeymoon in Austria, but our car needed a new engine, so the money paid for this instead. We did get away though to Milford-on-Sea on the South coast. I had seen a bungalow advertised at work and we hired this, but unfortunately it turned out to be a real disappointment. It was not very clean and had only bunk beds to sleep in. So we tried to find a hotel to stay in for the night. But this

proved impossible as there was a conference on nearby in Southampton and all beds were taken. By 10.30pm we were desperate, and David hit on the idea of asking at the Police Station in case they had any ideas. They suggested we try a hotel called The Anglers Arms in Pennington, which stayed open late as it was popular with lorry drivers, which we did. They had one room left with several beds in but promised they would not let anyone else stay there that night! They were digging up the road as we arrived, so I would not say it was the most relaxing night. The next day we managed to find a caravan in Swanage and stayed there for the week, which was just lovely. This became the start of our love for the town and we would return many times in future years.

Married Life with David

David and I lived with my Mum when we got married, this gave us the chance to save up for a deposit for a house. We needed about £400, which was 10% of the total amount. When we got this amount, I told Mum that I would still help her with her mortgage repayments, as she would not be able to afford these on her own. She told me that half of the house was mine, as I had helped with the mortgage repayments since 1957 and suggested that we buy the other half from her and stay put. David and I discussed this and he agreed, he got on well with Mum, looked upon her as his Mum as he had not known his own mother that well, so that is where we stayed and brought up our children.

I continued to work at BOAC until we had Keeley, our daughter. She was born in September 1967 at Hillingdon Maternity Hospital, I was deemed to be too old at 25 to have a home birth. Keeley was ten days late, I had been for a check at the hospital and they examined me, thinking this might help things along. I did have a bit of a niggly pain after this but went shopping and then went home and cooked dinner for us all, ate my dinner and then went to the hospital. It was an easy birth, I had no analgesia as I did not have much pain and she was born at 5.15am the next morning.

I loved being a Mum and just wanted to show off my new baby. Mum was not sure how I would cope as she thought I was a bit scatty, but

she was a very loving grandmother and made it a point not to be interfering. By the time Keeley was born she was 61 years old and did help with looking after her when I needed it, with the exception of overnight stays. In 1968 a neighbour came round and asked me if I wanted to join the local Residents Association, thus my volunteering as an adult started, I eventually became the Secretary.

Keeley was a good baby and I think I had a fairly easy time, so when I had my son, Kris David, in March 1970, I was in for a bit of a shock, as he was a very different baby from Keeley. He too was born at Hillingdon Hospital after another easy birth at 10.15 in the morning. When Kris was 18 months old I returned to work. I had been feeling a bit down and had gone to the GP, who suggested what I needed was something for me, rather than just being a Mum so why not consider going back to work. This was when I got the job at Hepworths. The GP was right, it was just what I needed. Childcare was managed between David, who did shift work, myself and Mum.

David had been working as Duty Officer for British Eagle Airways when we had Keeley, but he was made redundant when the Chairman shut down the company overnight as he could not get routes across the Atlantic. We had not been expecting this, but David soon found work with London Week-end Television, rostering the crews for the various elements of the programmes, such as lighting and sound. He enjoyed this work but as the shifts were mainly late ones he did not get to see a lot of Keeley and so gave it up after six months. He then worked at Air Gregory based at Denham Airfield. Again, he was responsible for rostering the crews for all the flights. He was there for a year when he was made redundant and was out of work for three months. I was pregnant with Kris at the time and keen for him to get a steady reliable job. He still had friends at BOAC and so returned to work there, based at Heathrow. This was not as exciting as some of the other jobs, but he liked it and stayed there until he retired.

So we settled into family life. David was good for me as he was a calming influence. He was not good at showing his feelings but was very proud of his children and would show his affection in discreet ways. I received a bouquet of 12 carnations on our first wedding

anniversary and after 12 years, this would increase by one until our 25th anniversary when I was given 25.



David and I at our 25th Wedding anniversary in 1990

He told me that they would no longer increase the number of flowers, as this would be ostentatious, but I continued to receive the 25 carnations each year. David was a great Dad and loved the children. He wanted to give them everything, this may have been a result of his own childhood as he had not had much himself. They came home with a dog once. David had taken the children to buy tickets for the circus in a pet shop, they had seen a puppy, said they wanted one and so he bought it. Luckily, I liked dogs, so it became part of the family. I remember that my own Dad had once bought me a dog when he separated from my Mum, but it had been stolen. We then tried several other pets, cats, goldfish, budgies, but I wanted a dog, so we did eventually get another one, my brother came home with a mongrel he had purchased in Shepherds Bush Market. It was very ill and my Mum nursed it back to health, it was by great companion but would often escape, one day when I was 14 he ran away and did not return.

As David worked for BOAC (BOAC & BEA merged to form British Airways in 1974), we were entitled to cheap flights. However, when the children were young I was reluctant to take them abroad, so we bought

a touring caravan and would use this for holidays in the UK. My brother and his family already owned a touring caravan so we would often join them on trips, which was lovely. A favourite location of ours was the New Forest and of course we would visit Swanage, where we had our honeymoon. Although in future years we had many foreign holidays every year, the children would say they had not been on holiday unless they went to Swanage for a least a week each year. I knew we would be going on holidays abroad and David was such a good swimmer I decided it was time for me to learn. Keeley had learnt to swim at 5 years so at the age of 30 I had swimming lessons, I managed to swim a width and then progressed to 1 length. I was so pleased I learnt to swim as we had so many beach holidays and I would have missed so much fun with the children. When I was 40, a colleague suggested we went swimming in our lunch hour, she said we could manage 20 lengths. I said this was not possible, she swam beside me for the first length and realised I had held my breath for the whole length. She taught me how to breathe when swimming and so I learnt to swim 20 lengths and from that day on I have swam 20 lengths every week. When the children were 6 and 8 I agreed to going abroad, and our first venture was to Jersey in 1976. I recall the flight well as there was a nervous passenger sitting near us, he did not like flying. Kris looked out of the window and said: "It's OK, we can go to the beach as the tide is in". He said this because when we took the caravan away, Kris would always ask if he could go paddling and we would say only if the tide was in. This made the passenger laugh.

The following year we went to Malta. David's brother had been a pilot officer in the RAF . He had been killed during the war and his body was never found but his name was on the War Memorial in Valetta and David wanted to show this to us. When the children were 8 and 10, we went to Florida. This had been a dream of David's. We spent a couple of days north of Miami and then went to Disney World, the children did enjoy it but one day at Disney was enough, they preferred the Water park, Wet and Wild, and we spent the day there, which they liked. Florida was a popular holiday for us and we went frequently. Our fourth holiday abroad was to visit friends in Australia. I think David wanted to have a look to see if it might be worth us moving there, to

see if we could have a better life. It was a good trip, but I knew I could not live there, besides being so far from home, I could not live with all their dangerous insect and wildlife! I stood on the spot where Captain Cook had landed in Botany Bay and realised that nice as it was, it was not home. I love history and geography, David loved nature and geography, so we tried to include this in many of our holidays with the children. We visited rainforest in Venezuela and Malaya. Holidays needed culture and nature as well as a beach. Half term often meant visits to museums when the children were young and then National Trust as they got older.

A trip to Canada, took in Niagara Falls and Algonquin Park, where we stayed in a Hotel, this was the first time my son had brunch, which he really enjoyed. One year we went to Paris, as Keeley was going there for a French Exchange and we thought it would be nice for her to have a trip there first. Every year always included a holiday in Swanage. When the children were teenagers we hired a barge a couple of times to go on a canal holiday, this was a lot of fun and the children could bring a friend with them as well.

In 1985 we took the children to Penang in Malaysia, this was a nostalgic trip for me as I wanted to visit the places my brother had been when he was in the RAF. We stopped in Singapore for a few days and stayed at the old Raffles hotel, this was very interesting with all its Colonial History, obviously we had a Singapore Sling at the bar. The children were growing older now and not so keen on going on holiday with Mum and Dad and so our last trip abroad together as a family was in 1987 to Venezuela, we stayed just outside Caracas in a hotel on the beach, quite frightening as they had armed guards at the entrance to the hotel. Fascinating country but not a place I yearn to go back to. We had many holidays and these are just a few of the most memorable.

We took full advantage of the cheap and free flights. As a teenager Kris said he was dragged round the world, as an adult he wished he had been older when we travelled so he could have appreciated it more. Keeley loved every minute of it and is proud that she travelled 100,000 air miles by the time she was 18, visiting 6 continents. Both

children don't seem interested in travelling now. We took Keeley to Rome for her 21st birthday in 1988 and Zimbabwe when she graduated from University in 1991. We had visited Zimbabwe in 1988 and found it a fantastic country, proud and lovely people, beautiful scenery (especially Victoria Falls) and wonderful wild animals. I had taken a photo of David with the statue of Livingstone but managed to cut off Livingstone's head, so when we returned with Keeley we took the photo again, this time with the head intact! It was a rich country, the bread basket of Africa, people would walk from Zambia across the bridge at Victoria Falls to buy food. So as a family we saw many beautiful and different places.

David and I continued travelling after we retired too and had many happy holidays. A few stand out for different reasons. One was a trip to Washington in 1992 to visit a friend whose husband was based at the British Embassy. We were lucky enough to fly over there on Concorde, this cost us £270, the normal price was in the thousands. It was a very interesting flight, although I was slightly disappointed as once we had taken off I thought we would see the curvature of the Earth, but it was so slight you didn't really see a difference! The most exciting thing was landing because it sped up on landing rather than slowing down. I always loved flying. We were able to go and see the White House whilst we were there, as our friends managed to get us tickets. During this trip we also went and stayed in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia. I was working for EMI at the time and the song of the same name by Laurel and Hardy was owned by EMI and I had seen the contract that they had signed, so was keen to see the actual place. We stayed in a lodge in the mountains and I recall that the waitress was a bit surprised when we ordered a whole carafe of wine just for the two of us! She exclaimed "what a whole one!" On another trip to Virginia I wanted to visit the spot where the first British people landed, the American Woman's Association had paid for a large cross to be placed in memory of this event. The land where the memorial is, is now a US Army base called Fort Story. We Drove to the army base and were asked by a soldier for identification. We did have our passports with us, they asked for a driving licence but that had no picture, the soldier looked at us and said" as we were Brits, he would

let us in". We also visited New England and the spot where the Pilgrim Fathers landed near Boston.

In 1996 we went to Cape Town, as David's old shift partner Gordon (who was now cabin crew) was retiring. There was a special meal for Gordon in a private room at the hotel, he had been with BA for about 40 years and the crew from the flight were hosting the meal. At the same time, the South African Rugby Team were there and David saw some of them in the toilets and said to them: "Are you up for a crack?", meaning are they game for a laugh, would they have a joke, going out to see the Air Stewardesses. But they thought he was offering them drugs! We also went to Vancouver, and Vancouver Island, where we went whale watching, all beautiful. We drove to Calgary from Vancouver, which was a long journey but took in many beautiful places. Our favourite beach holiday was to the Seychelles, such a pretty island, we preferred this to Mauritius.

David never wanted to go to Egypt, he had been in Aden for 3 years with RAF, so was not keen on Arab culture. However, the UAE became a very popular place to have a holiday and we had many happy trips to Dubai and Abu Dhabi. We even had a trip to Cairo to see the pyramids of Giza and the Tutankhamun's treasure in Cairo Museum. This was a great trip, especially as we found out there were more pyramids than just the three at Giza. We had a tour guide, a local driver, so he drove us round to see them, which was great, as this way we were told about a lot of the history. We certainly made the most of our cheap flights seeing the world. It was also nice as David knew a lot of the cabin crew because of his work, which made flying even more enjoyable.

But of course, life was not all about holidays. I was offered a job of an assistant at the Nursery that the children attended, but I did not want Kris to be there all day as he was only 3, so I just helped out sometimes instead. The children went to the local Grange Park Infants & Junior schools. I became part of the Parents Teachers Association at Grange Park Junior School and in 1974 became the Secretary of this, staying on until the children had gone to Senior School. The children joined the local Scouts and Brownies. I became involved in

the Girl Guides as they needed help with some of the badges and as I knew needlework Keeley volunteered me. I eventually became a leader for the Girl Guides and even ventured to take my camping license so I could take them camping, which was a big thing for me! This surprised my friends as I had never been an outdoor sporty person. I did this for about 11 years. I used to take the Guides camping to the Scout Camp in Chalfont St Peter, this was my first introduction to the area and I fell in love with Chalfont St Peter and eventually moved there.



Camping with the Guides at Chalfont St Peter Scout Camp.

Keeley left school and went to Hertfordshire University and took a teaching degree in Geography, she got an Honours Degree after studying for 4 years. She then taught at a school in Harefield, before leaving for a promotion at St Andrews School in Uxbridge as Acting Deputy Head. She then taught at Gayhurst Private School in Gerrards Cross for 17 years. Keeley persuaded me when I retired, to come in her class one afternoon a week and teach craft, which I did for about 15 years. Keeley now does part time supply teaching. She lives with her husband in Chalfont St Peter.

Kris left school at 16 and did an apprenticeship in the print trade in Hayes. After printing went computerised he had various jobs before setting up his own gardening business. He also worked as a substation inspector for Scottish and Southern. He now lives in a cabin in the garden with me at Chalfont St Peter, which works out well.

We stayed in the house that we had started married life in all those years ago. By now Mum had become frailer and she eventually got dementia, but with the help of Roy and Bunt and my children, we continued to care for her at home. One time she had gone into respite care whilst David and I were away, my brother and Bunt were going to look after her but Bunt was diagnosed with Cancer and it would have been too much for them. When I went to collect her I said we were taking her home, to which she responded I am already home. We thought perhaps then that was the time for her to have more help, plus I could not ask my brother to help anymore, so she moved into a Care home, where she lived for 18 months. She died at the age of 92. By this time the children had left home, so we decided it was time to move. We found a bungalow in Chalfont St Peter and moved in 1996, which was a good choice and we were very happy there.

David had a passion for recycling, he started in 1985 when he went to the tip and saw that it was possible to put plastic/paper etc in different places to recycle. He purchased bins for us to sort the recycling at home and then he would take it to the recycling depot. He did this long before it became fashionable. We were children from the war, used to make do and mend, from the 1970's people had become affluent and unwanted items would be thrown away and new items purchased.

My extended family

My mother had a large family and I had lots of aunts, uncles and cousins but I always felt different. I had lost touch with my father's family in the mid 1950's, then fate took a turn in events. In 1991 a friend moved to Winnersh, Berkshire and I remembered my father's sister lived there and I had visited her in 1953. On a visit to my friend, Keeley my daughter, suggested I put a card in the local Post Office. I did not know her married name but I did remember she had a 1 year old baby and recognised the road where she used to live. Keeley

wrote the card out in her beautiful hand writing and we paid for 1 month. On the last day of the month my aunty Betty was taking down cards in the Post Office where she worked part-time, as the time had expired. The handwriting was so beautiful that she just stopped to read the card, she was astonished to find the card was referring to her. So I found my father's family again, unfortunately they also had lost touch with him but I still had 2 aunts alive and many cousins. We all met up soon after at the 80th birthday of my Aunt Margaret and I felt immediately at home with all my cousins, the ladies of the family are so alike. I am so much like my aunty Betty that at my husband's funeral friends asked her if she was my older sister.

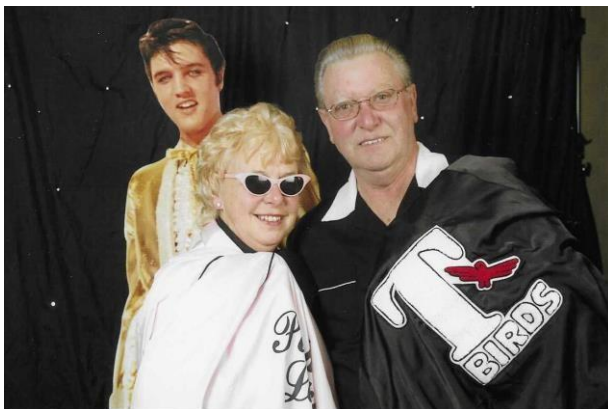
Retirement

David retired first and I joined him when I left EMI. He said I needed to find something to do as he already had his own routine, having retired three years earlier. I had seen an advert for a volunteer driver to take people to a club for people who had visual problems. I went along to see what it was about before committing myself. The charity appealed to me because my granddad and Mum had campaigned for state aid for the blind and so it was nice to continue with this theme.

I joined the charity and after two years in 2004 I became secretary of Chalfont Division, this was Bucks Association for the Blind which subsequently became BucksVision. I am still there today and the work gives me enormous pleasure. The people who attend the social club meetings have become friends and although we have not been able to meet during lockdown I have kept in touch with them, some on a weekly basis. In normal times we meet regularly and book entertainers or someone to give talks on a whole range of topics. This gives them the opportunity to meet other people with sight loss and stops them feeling so isolated, they also enjoy the tea and cakes. I feel that you get so much back from helping people. It kept me going after David died, there was a reason to get up and do something and its very rewarding. My daughter now helps, I roped her in to be Treasurer. Bucks Vision has to fund itself, but usually local charities are very good, and donate money to keep us going. The age range for our group is from 73 to 103.

I took up golf in my late 50s to join my husband in his hobby and when I retired I joined Oakland Park Golf Club at Chalfont St Giles in September 2002. The membership for this was my leaving present from EMI, which cost a £1000. David was also a member and we often played during our retirement. After a few years I ran the Bunnies, which is a group for new lady members, they stay until they get a handicap and learn the etiquette and rules of golf. I did this for ten years with a friend. I also helped with the social committee, becoming secretary, my skills from work helped a lot here. I still play today although I do need a buggy to help me get around due to arthritis.

I have been a Bell Ringer at Chalfont St Peter's Church since 1999 and thoroughly enjoy it. I am Secretary and Treasurer of the Bell Ringing Committee, which involves dealing with bell ringing requests from visitors and for weddings etc and looking after the finances for maintenance, refurbishment of the ringing room and ropes as required. We have not been able to ring the bells since November 2020 and I really miss it. I miss the company of my fellow bell ringers and it also helps to keep you fit as you use your upper body a lot. We are hoping to restart in May 2021.



This photo was taken on our last big family occasion before David died, it was Keeley's 40th birthday in 2007. She had a fancy dress birthday party the theme was 60/70's so I went as a Pink Lady and David a T-Bird from Grease.

David died in 2011, we had been married for 46 years. He was 72 years of age and died of leukaemia following a diagnosis six months earlier. He did have chemotherapy, but he had a rare blood group and so this made treatment more difficult. Although David did spend time in hospital, we cared for him at home in the main and he was at home when he passed away. Losing David was a big loss to us all, he was a popular man and the church was full at his funeral.

So, I have spent the last 10 years on my own, but I have kept myself busy with helping at Bucks Vision, helping Keeley at her school for several years, only giving up three years ago. I also knit and crochet a lot and during lockdown have been knitting for a midwife, who needed bonding squares and hats for premature babies at Hillingdon Maternity and Wexham Park hospitals. To make Bonding squares you knit an 8inch squares, one for the baby in the incubator and one for the Mum and then swap them around, to help with bonding. I have supplied numerous beanie hats for the homeless and baby hats and blankets for a charity for single mothers. I have also been able to travel with a friend who I met three years after David died and it was nice to have someone to travel with, we would often go on cruises, which was one thing David had not been keen on. We travelled on various cruise lines but my favourite was the Cunard Line, quite formal but I like dressing up for dinner. Memorable trips were through the Suez & Panama canals, visiting New York with the ship tied up opposite the Statue of Liberty, which was the view from our balcony. You can't beat Fred Olson lines if you want to visit the Fjords or the Baltic ports, especially St Petersburg, their smaller ships dock so near to the main attractions. Unfortunately my friend developed Alzheimer's two years ago.

In conclusion

I have not said a lot about my children, but I think it is up to them to tell their own story. I am very proud of them both, they have grown into loveable, honourable and caring adults, who could ask for more. They have done lots for me but the one thing that stands out was for my 50th Birthday they arranged a surprise trip in a Hot Air Balloon, which was exhilarating and a little frightening to be in the hands of the elements



Receiving my flight certificate after my hot air balloon trip aged 50.

Reflecting on my childhood, I cannot say it was happy but it had some good moments, the best years of my adult life was after I met my husband, we had a long and happy marriage, he was my soul mate. When I was young I was a shy person, I could talk a lot but underneath I was quite shy. I had more confidence after marrying and having children, suddenly I felt able to try different things, especially with the support and encouragement from David. Now I'm older I would describe myself as an extrovert, an outgoing person, a people person. I was brought up to live a good life, helping people when I could, which I hope I have achieved. I have been lucky to have travelled so much of the world which I am sure not many people born in my era or circumstances could have dreamed of. To see the vastness of Australia when flying over it and Ayres Rock. Hearing the thunder of Niagara Falls before you see it, seeing your first wild elephant in Zimbabwe when it comes out of the vegetation and walks across the

path of the vehicle you are travelling in. Seeing the wonder of Victoria Falls, when you reach it from the dense undergrowth, paddling in the water just off of Cape Town with penguins swimming all around you. I have met so many nice people and have lots of friends and a caring family. I have no regrets, enjoyed every minute and would love to do it all over again.

Valerie Alicia Robbins (nee Thomas) May 2021