

## Photo Journal

### Me and my relationship to Woolwich

My dad was posted to India during WW2. He got very interested in Hindi and Urdu. When he returned to London, with no idea what he was going to do next, a friend showed him that he could apply to study Urdu at SOAS. That's what he did, and went on to be a lecturer there all his working life.

After university I went to India too. I started to learn Urdu and Hindi with my dad before I went. I was there for almost two years. A plan evolved to train to teach in primary school and to look for a job where I'd be working with children of South Asian parents. That didn't happen straight away - I taught first in Catford and then in Lee - but then I got a promoted post in Nightingale school on Bloomfield Road. There I got the chance to study to teach English as an additional language. And I met Sheila!

After our romance began I came to live with her on Shooters Hill, first in Ankerdine Crescent (where, coincidentally our daughter has bought her first home) and then in Admaston Road, where we lived for more than thirty years.

My relationship with Woolwich has always included seeing it, to some degree, through the eyes of people whose parents, or they themselves, came originally as migrants.

But a strange thing happened. One day I was walking with my dad near Lesnes Abbey and he said "I think one of my uncles lived near here." As our family researched their history I discovered that his paternal grandparents, his father and two uncles lived in Plumstead. His grandfather, who died young, and the youngest uncle worked in the Arsenal. I'd had no knowledge of these Plumstead roots before I'd been living there for a while. At one point I was teaching in Conway School, very close to one of the houses my ancestors had lived in. They had all died before I was born.

My next job was at Bannockburn school in lower Plumstead. I was language coordinator and my responsibilities included oversight of bilingual children's learning. This linked well with the latter part of my dad's career when he arranged to be seconded to the extra-mural department and travelled the country teaching Urdu and Hindi in short intensive courses. I worked with him and others using materials he had developed.

For the last ten years of my teaching career I taught and facilitated music-making in primary schools and, in early years settings, working with parents and care-givers to. So I think about Woolwich as a musical place. Global Fusion Music and Arts, run by old friends of ours, does a lot of great work.

Recently I read Ian Nairn's pen portrait of Woolwich, published in 1966:

"Your eyes tell you that it is a provincial centre that has got embedded in London by mistake. It has more independence than many towns fifty miles from London (Aylesbury, for example, or Bedford). Powis Street, a commercial gold mine from end to end, has come down from the Midland cities, and in the process lost its Midland drabness and taken on alertness and savoir faire. It ends in Beresford Square, opposite the main gate of the Arsenal, where an open market flows all over to the despair of buses accustomed to more docile suburbs. Thumping self-centred vitality; complete freedom from the morning train to Town. It is always being rebuilt, as it must be – that is its nature; but I hope that Sam's in Plumstead Road has many more years of life. It sells Government surplus, has been there sixty-five years already, and would be very nearly my favourite London shop. The fascia is completely hidden by boots, capes, jackets: the tiny entrance leads to a very long shop packed with goods, receding into the distance like a hall of mirrors. Cornucopia, like the whole of the centre of Woolwich: stuffed with goods, yet never impersonal. Window-shopping here is really fun."

I had glimpses of this Woolwich in the sixties going there with my grandmother (who lived in Hither Green) for Cuffs department store sales. There was also the Royal Arsenal Coop store.



Thinking of the families I have known who lived in social housing in Woolwich, I often wonder what happened to them as the town centre has been regenerated. A while ago I read the account of the Tesco development ('Woolwich Central') written by Alex Green who was chair of the committee that approved it. In brief, he writes "what was built from 2010 onwards was rather different from what had been approved in 2007 thanks to a wave of cost-cutting changes in the interim." I'll always vote Labour, but I'm not at all happy with the way local government interacts with developers and the buildings that are then erected. I'm very concerned about the future prospects when the army leaves Woolwich.

Woolwich Works looks promising.

#### Some points on Woolwich in our lives.

Admaston Road is in Plumstead. We sometimes shopped in Herbert Road and more recently the Links coop. When the children were young we often went to Eltham for the supermarket shop and because there was a good bookshop that always had a very good stock of remaindered children's books. There was also a shop selling secondhand CDs. In more recent years we've often shopped at Blackheath Standard. Our contact with Woolwich town centre has been sporadic. I have a sense of it having declined markedly and, if that's changed much, we haven't found our way back there. The Tramshed used to be a really good music venue until problems with licensing messed that up.

Now that we've got the border with Charlton close by we've started going to Charlton Park and the Old Cottage cafe, and to Maryon and Maryon Wilson Parks.

## A typical day

Every day two carers come four times a day; a different pair of women for the first two calls and another pair for both the teatime and bedtime calls. They're all very nice people.

There's a slow process underway involving the community physiotherapist and occupational therapists to work towards us being able to reduce the care package and to travel again with the equipment we now need. We'll be glad to have fewer constraints on getting out and about from home and it being possible once more to get away for a night or two.

There's washing to do everyday and cooking. I help with many aspects of Sheila's care.

Sheila likes to listen to a lot of tv news and the Daily Politics. I'm very interested in politics too, but I use the ipad to seek stuff out alongside the tv.

We listen to a lot of music.

When I looked back over this journal it brought into sharp focus vital IT has been in maintaining social contact, creative activity and new learning - and sanity!

## Saturday 24/4

Listening to BBC Radio 4 Saturday Live and Kitchen Cabinet . Not very attentively. Using ipad and phone to share my Task 1 piece with a friend and my kids. Reading Elvis Costello interview in Paul Kello's More Songwriters On Songwriting and looking up artists he mentions (Fiona Apple; reading her life story makes me count my blessings). I love the way that ipad and internet make this possible (but it easily consumes lots of time).

Just looked up Beyond the Sea, which Sheila said she likes (and bookmarked a performance on Spotify - there's another modern-times thing!). I hadn't connected it with Charles Trent and La Mer (thank you google and wikipedia). Takes me back to French classes at Shrewsbury House.

Have to decide today whether going to Thompsons garden centre with Alice feels safe enough. [We didn't go]

Stephen (our son), his wife Jessie and baby Isobel were with us from lunchtime onwards, Alice and Stan joined us later. We sat in the garden chatting.



## Sunday

Andrew Graham Dixon's series Art of France which loomed up after we'd been watching gymnastics (for tips). Then looking up Chardin on Google Arts and Culture



I discover (via WhatsApp) that it's my sister's 'favourite ever self-portrait'. And google helped me learn that Cezanne had lots to say about it. In recent years I've paid attention to whether it's pastels that the artist has used.

We enjoyed watching tv coverage of the European Gymnastics Championships.

Sheila's very happy that Call the Midwife is back on.

Used Whatsapp to catch up with my sister.

Used Jamulus software to play traditional tunes with friends who are in Peebles and the brother of one who lives in the Lake District. We does this most weeks and also on Tuesday evenings when we do

rock and pop stuff. In between times there are lots of messages back and forth about practical arrangements - and banter, which I enjoy a lot.

In the evening I tried unsuccessfully to transfer photos of Izzie onto an electronic picture frame.

## Monday

Nothing on the calendar.

Alice's birthday trip to Colchester Zoo.

Daily Politics, News. Sheila v affected by news of sentence on Nazanin Zaghari Ratcliffe

A close friend came over to return my melodeon. We chatted for long time.

Choir - didn't do it tonight. Zoomed out!

After Sheila had gone to bed I did a zoom call with friends from Lewisham Choral Society. We used to go to the pub after rehearsal and we've been meeting this way for a long time now. Very wide-ranging conversation an lots of humour.

## Tuesday

We did a dance class with Stella Howard. We started in 2011 and we know and love her and our classmates very well. We have a WhatsApp group that a number of our classmates post to regularly. That's been a place to share my many photos of the garden

Stephen, Jessie and Isobel were with us from lunchtime onwards, Alice and Stan joined us later. We sat in the garden chatting.

Global Fusion Music and Arts run a singing session (led by my former boss - a very nice bloke). Zoom call and a weird way of singing together. Jamulus would be much better but there are technical challenges that rule it out (for the Choral Society too).

Jamulus session rock and pop. This has got me playing guitar a lot more (and mandolin and banjo) and listening with close attention to recordings of songs we want to do so that I can add to the piano scores my friend relies on and otherwise think about which musical features we want to replicate or tweak. Sheila's enjoying this new development.



## Wednesday

I help Sheila with our end of a zoom session with the hospice physiotherapist Fiona. It's made a huge difference.

I went to take out the wheelie bins and then walked in the garden taking photos.

Garden pics.

Phone counselling session. This has been invaluable in this challenging year.

## Thursday

'How To Build A Girl' on Prime, recommended by Jess. We both enjoyed it.

In the evening I went to Eltham to get my second jab. There was a long queue. Behind me was a man without a mask who kept creeping in too close. I had to ask him to give me more space, which he did after making a face. I'm not looking forward to negotiating this kind of stuff!

Alice and Stan were with Sheila in my absence. They had a go at checking in with a Protein dance event via Zoom and Facebook. I brought Mc D food in and had a bit of time with them.

Guitar and zoom pedal: I found an effects pedal I hadn't remembered buying! After Sheila had gone to bed I put headphones on and noodled happily for a while. Some of the settings produce very singular sounds, but it's interesting persevering and thinking what use might be made of them. Home recording beckons.



## Friday

Everything happened at once first thing in the morning. A district nurse arrived to take a blood sample and the community neuro rehab team physio came to work on manual handling with carers.

We went in the garden for a while.

In the afternoon checked in briefly to Dance for Health to say hello to Stella and our classmates. We had a physio session booked half an hour later with Fiona.

Jess sent us a lovely photo of Izzy and lots of pics of flowers in the family home garden.

I played guitar while Sheila napped and, after she'd gone to bed, read more about the effects pedal.