

KATHLEEN PHILLIPS : 1905 - 1989

Kathleen Eleanora Phillips was born in Eynsham, Oxford on 17th March 1905. She was baptised at Freeland Church, Woodstock on May 28th that year. She lived her early years in Oxford with her parents and older brother Ivor. Each summer, she and Ivor used to come to Birchington, together with their Nurse and their mother. Father would come and join them at weekends or when he could spare time from his work. In the wintertime, they went to Gstaad in Switzerland¹. The reason for coming to Birchington in the first instance is thought to have been connected with friends who had already discovered its delights. Kathleen's father initially rented new house in Alfred Road, now No: 24, called 'Hazelmere'. He later bought the house and used it for a while for holidays, until he bought another property in Nasmyth Road. 'Hazelmere' remained in the family's possession until it was eventually sold during or shortly after Kathleen's lifetime.

Ivor went to school at the Dragon School in Oxford, while Kathleen attended a local Convent School, possibly called 'St Anne's Convent'. In adult life, Kathleen still kept in touch with some of the sisters in the convent, until its closure not many years before she died. This capacity for letter writing and keeping friendships was one of her characteristics all through her life.

While she was down at Birchington in the summer of 1914 at the age of nine, she kept a 'Nature Diary', which, together with her two Steiff Bears, was sold at Auction by Christies 17th May 2001. The diary begins on Friday 24th July 1914 and continues daily until Tuesday 22 September, covering the whole of her stay at Minnis Bay². It gives delightful insights into the lives of children of the upper middle classes, just before the First World War. She says that 'Mother and Jack' (probably the chauffeur) came to meet Ivor, Nurse and herself at Birchington Station when they first arrived. Her various friends, Emily, Dolly and Pamela, feature prominently in the diary. One also gets a very good idea of what the Edwardian Nurse's job was likely to involve.

At the auction, the Steiff Bear lot also included an album of photographs. These gave pictorial glimpses into Kathleen's life between the ages of about 18 months and 9 years old. Most of the collection was taken at Minnis Bay in Birchington, but there is one taken in the garden of their house in Oxford, while a second one was taken at her grandparents' home near Cowley. In it, 12-year-old Kathleen, Ivor, her parents and two uncles joined in a family portrait to celebrate her grandparents' Golden Wedding anniversary on 28th October 1917³. It appears to have been taken in her grandparent's own home, judging by all the ornaments and knick-knacks to be seen. Their own home in Oxford was a large substantial house with a good-sized garden surrounding it.

Kathleen's father, George, had served in the Army during the Boer War. On his return he re-entered the Law and eventually served as a J.P. in the Oxford area. In 1928, the family moved permanently to Birchington⁴.

During the 1930's both Kathleen and Ivor were active members of the Liberal Party and in

¹ Christie's catalogue May 2001

² See separate transcript of the diary, courtesy of Daniel Agnew of Christie's

³ Christie's catalogue May 2001

⁴ From a newspaper clipping in the Phillips' archives

1932 they attended the Liberal Summer School, where they took part in the final entertainment Ivor played a number of different leading parts, while Kathleen played in each of the supporting groups.

On their visits to Birchington, they initially rented a property in Minnis Bay for the summer in their early days. They later bought this property and it was still in the family when Kathleen died in 1989. In about 1932, Lt. Col. George Ingleton Phillips C.B.E., M.A., B.Litt, J.P. bought Orion, in Nasmyth Road. (It is now listed under Coleman Stairs Road.) He was a prime mover in the founding of the Mason's Lodge in Birchington. It was also in the October of 1932 that the foundation stone was laid at St Thomas's Church in Minnis Bay. George Phillips had also had a lot to do with the organisation behind this development. He was one of the Churchwardens at the time, together with Mr A. Ballard. There is a copy of the programme from this ceremony in the archives.

Sadly, George Phillips died in Malta in March 1936 of a ruptured appendix, whilst on a trip to the Holy Land with Kathleen. He had been planning to follow H.V. Morton's book 'In the Steps of St Paul', and had got as far as Malta when he died very suddenly⁵.

In the obituary printed in the April Parish Magazine, Canon Sharp said, "He did much for this place, both in its Church life and in the every-day activities of the village. For 50 years he had served his Church as a lay reader and his opinion was of great value in the various Councils of the Church. It was largely due to his initiative and the generosity of Mrs Kearns, that St Thomas' Church was built (in 1932).

"A Memorial Service was held in the Parish Church on Saturday, March 21st. I was especially glad to feel that old friends of his, Bishop Knight, Canon C.W. Healy and the Rev. A.E. King were able to take part in the service".

His wife and daughter remained at Orion after Col. Phillips died. Kelly's Directory lists the property under Mrs C.I. Phillips until the end of the Second World War. When her mother (Catherine Irene) died in mid-February of 1945⁶, Kathleen decided to move from Orion, but she only moved a short way - into what had been the schoolroom section of Portpool School in Shakespeare Road. The school had functioned for many years from about 1915 until 1929, when it was taken over by Miss Barnes under the new name of 'Gwynant School for Girls' by 1930. This does not appear to have lasted more than the year, and its future appearances are all as a private house⁷. The main part of Portpool School was in Spencer Road and was later renamed Spencer House⁸. There had also been another annex on the block between Gainsborough Road and Constable Road, called Portpool Lodge.

From 1934 onwards, Kathleen's house had been called 'Gwynant' and in that year was occupied by Col. Walter Newnham. The Col. continued to live there until he eventually sold the house to Kathleen sometime between 1945 and 1947. In 1948, Kathleen is listed as the occupant of No. 9 Shakespeare Road ('Gwynant'). Kathleen remained there until shortly before her own death in 1989. The house was used for all the Guiding activities in which she was involved and the large main room used to ring with children's laughter and Guiding songs

⁵ All Saints Birchington Parish Magazine - April 1936

⁶ All Saints Church Burial Register 15th February 1945

⁷ Kelly's Directories

⁸ Kelly's Directories

at the end of the evening. Each year she hosted a party of handicapped Girl Guides for a week's camp in her grounds and house. In her capacity of Chief Commissioner of the Guides in Thanet, she was always in great demand. She herself had been a Sea Ranger as a young Guide.

The house also featured in many of her other activities, for example her connections with the Judiciary, while she served as a J.P. on the Thanet Magistrates' Bench from 1949 to 1977. On one occasion, there was an 'information' party held at Gwynant, at which Mr Dudley Payne, clerk to the Margate Magistrates was honoured on his retirement for his 21 years of service. During the ceremony, Kathleen, who was deputy Chairman of the Bench at this time, presented Mrs Payne with a bouquet. Members of the British Legion were also able to use Gwynant as a place of meeting and fund raising garden parties. Kathleen was always very generous in offering her time, talents and home to whatever causes she took to her heart.

During the war, Kathleen helped the vicar, Canon Maurice Granville Sharp, to run what became known as "The Vicar's School". It was held in Church House, on the corner of Kent Gardens, and was set up to cater for the children who had not been evacuated from the village in June 1940, when the majority of the children had been sent up to Staffordshire. Kathleen taught in the little school, along with several other worthy helpers. There is an excellent photograph of the members of staff and children sitting outside Church House sometime in the early 1940's⁹.

On October 23rd 1946, Kathleen was awarded the Civil Defence Medal, in recognition of the various ways in which she worked during the war. By 1955, Kathleen had been made a J.P. and she continued to serve on the Bench until into her 70's¹⁰. She was known for her fairness and kindness, but also showed deep wisdom.

Kathleen was a lady of many interests. In her leisure time, she had done some attractive watercolours when she was younger. In later life, she did some beautiful embroidery, particularly tapestry work. This was not given a high priority, though, because her many other interests. In the 1930's she was a member of the All Saints Guild of Players, as a photo taken in at the old Church House in 1938 confirms¹¹. The British Legion, W.R.V.S., Friends of Canterbury Cathedral, a guide to Canterbury Cathedral and Girl Guide work were some of the activities that featured in her life.

Her connection with the Girl Guide movement spanned almost the whole of her life. She began her guiding with a company in Oxford c. 1912. In 1923, at the age of 18, she became a lieutenant in this company. When she moved to Birchington just five years later, she was made a lieutenant in the 2nd Birchington Girl Guides. She was also a Ranger Captain and a Sea Ranger Skipper. Then for 10 years she was District Commissioner for Westgate and Birchington. In 1957, Kathleen was presented with the Laurel Award by the Girl Guide movement, for her services to Guiding.

⁹ Held in the Parish Archivist's collection of photos

¹⁰ Kelly's Directories

¹¹ See photo in the Phillips' archives

Another of her activities was supporting the St John's Ambulance Brigade, of which there are a number of photos in the family's collection. Two of them have been collected for the Phillips' archive. Interestingly, it was through the St John's Ambulance that Ivor, Kathleen's brother, met his future wife, Helen Mary Charlton (known to her family and friends as Nina). She came from Westgate and worked for a time in Miss Pearson's School at 'Seapoint' on the corner of Semaphore and Berkeley Roads. They were married at St Saviour's Church in Westgate on New Year's Eve in 1934.

Kathleen also enjoyed travelling and even managed a visit to Canada in the summer of 1987 or 1988, when she was far from well. On her return to the U.K., she underwent major surgery, but sadly things had gone too far. In her last few months, she spent a little time in Shottendene Nursing Home in Margate, alongside her old friend and neighbour Eleanor Metcalfe, as well as some weeks with her niece and nephew-in-law Liz and Robert Oliver at Boughton Aluph, but she tried very hard to cope at home again. Then, just before the end, she returned to stay with Liz, and it was there that she died very peacefully, sitting in a chair, quietly reading her Bible. This was so typical of Kathleen, who was a person of huge faith¹².

She was a great character and amused some of her friends. She was no cook, and would turn up at various friends' houses at about 12.30, in the hopes of being asked to stay for lunch! When she had given up the car, she seldom resorted to a taxi to get herself about. She would just ring up a friend and beg a lift! But in her turn, in her own driving days, she was always generous with her own car, and later with her energies, her time and her money for whatever cause or friend needed her.

She died at Boughton Aluph on 30th May 1989¹³ and was cremated privately at Charing Crematorium. A Memorial Service at All Saints Church Birchington was held on the 2nd of July. The church was packed and every part of her busy, generous life was represented. Everyone present spoke of her enthusiasm for living and her sense of fun. Her house and garden used to ring with laughter, whether it was the young Girl Guides or the much more sedate members of the Bench. She was, without a doubt, one of Birchington's 'characters', and one of whom we can feel justly proud.



Kathleen (centre) with friends outside her home - c. 1955

¹² With many thanks to Liz for this information

¹³ All Saints Parish Magazine - July 1989