

A visit to Buckingham Palace, 1957

I was Assistant Private Secretary to the Minister of Health and the Minister in 1957 was Mr Denis Vosper, who was a very friendly man. He was about 6' 6" tall and would occasionally walk about in the Ministry building and talk to any member of staff he encountered. He had heard that Dorothy and I were the proud parents of two boys but that we had decided that we should have a daughter also. Dorothy never visited the office but the Minister would occasionally ask me whether "this daughter of yours had yet put in an appearance". One day he said to me "Look, Cooper, let me know when she appears and I will see that you and your wife get tickets for one of The Queen's Garden Parties in the summer". So after 18th January, when Miss Bossyboots duly arrived, I mentioned it to the Minister and sure enough we had the promised invitation.

It was very exciting just getting the invitation. Then there was our dress to consider. I am afraid I left the choice of Dorothy's attire to her and her lady friends (who joined in her excitement). I walked miles round Soho, Wardour Street, etc, looking for a shop which would hire out to me a morning dress – top-hat, etc. John and Peter would be at school; Diana would be with Nanna Cobb for the day. Nanna lived in Woodgrange Drive, just round the corner from Rutland Avenue, where we lived. The great day dawned and in true British style it dawned bright but was forecast to be wet later on. Before we took Diana round to Nanna's we laid her on a waterproof sheet in a playpen on the lawn. We were actually watching when she climbed the side of the playpen and stood on her feet, aged almost six months.

Having left Diana with Nanna and instructed the boys to go to Nanna's after school that day, Dorothy and I went by train taking our glad rags in boxes and bags and went to my office at the Ministry of Health in Savile Row. There we changed and walked to Buckingham Palace, enjoying the looks we got from passers by. We walked as directed through the Palace and across the lawn. Whenever it rained, we and the hundreds of other guests retreated to the refreshment tents and enjoyed the cake, sandwiches, strawberries and cream, etc. In the dry spells we looked round the gardens and watched the Royal parties as they met pre-selected VIPs. Which VIPs can I remember? Frankly after all this time, none! But we were happy, people-watching and came away very content with the good fortune that had come our way presumably as a reward for my doing a job that was considered well done.

Our second Royal Garden Party was in 1985, a very different one from our earlier visit in 1957. I had worked as a Warden in the State Apartments at Windsor Castle for five years and was about to retire at age 65. I assumed the invitation was a mark of acknowledgement that I had done a good job. Whatever the reason, Dorothy and I were delighted and took pleasure from looking forward to the day and getting our clothes ready. Times had changed for men. We no longer had to wear morning dress or uniforms. Lounge suits were not only permitted but were the predominant male attire. Dorothy had no trouble selecting a dress. We had been on holiday to Thailand and purchased a length of silk which she had had made into a beautiful three-piece suit – and it was ideal for the sunny day we were lucky to have.

We travelled to London by train of course and went to Peter's office at Carlton House Terrace to have a last minute tidy up before walking to Buckingham Palace. How blasé can you get! As old hands on these occasions we enjoyed the looks of passers by!!

At the Palace we saw a number of people whom I knew from my Ministry of Health days. Goodness knows how many famous faces we saw - the Royal Family and selected guests who were gathered to meet them – many from overseas and a number of politicians. As in 1957, the refreshment tents were popular, this time to get a little shade – and of course strawberries and

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cream. Dorothy and I were strolling across the lawn with nobody near when the Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher passed and spoke to us. Her words were truly English "What lovely weather!"

When the time was up we all departed and Dorothy and I had another memorable occasion to chalk up in our reminiscences.