

On Finding PRS Again - and People in Oz - Mavis Thompson

I remember the elation I felt when I received a newspaper cutting from one of my relatives in England who had seen the advertisement in the paper for the first reunion in Newbury in 1995. My elation was understandable as this was the first contact with PRS since leaving the school in 1955. I had started there as a 12 year old in 1950, loved every minute of it, and was heart-broken when I had to leave in 1955, aged 17. I had returned to Durham in England, got a secretarial job and emigrated to Australia in 1966 with my husband and two children. However, in the 40 years between leaving PRS and receiving the newspaper cutting, not once had I come across anyone who had ever gone to the school, and unfortunately I had not kept in contact with any of my school friends since leaving. I disposed of any memorabilia when I emigrated, throwing my pile of 'Cavaliers' out, much to my regret, keeping only my report book and a book on Germany presented to me as a form prize in IIIA, thinking I would never hear of PRS again. I had often thought about the school, as most of us had, and wondered where everyone was, and dreamt of one day walking through the school grounds reminiscing, if it was still there, that is! My mother had a couple of photographs, but even my autograph books had disappeared over the years. I had no-one with whom to talk about PRS with and laugh about the fun we had had. When people had asked me where I had gone to school and I replied 'a boarding school in Germany', it was usually met by a strange look as if I had been an internee in a German concentration camp, until I explained it was a boarding school for British servicemen's children.

I immediately wrote to Liz requesting details of TWA, filled in the application form and became a member. My immediate reaction was to know of any ex-pupils living in Adelaide, South Australia, and to my delight, from the list sent me, there were four, one being Angela Nicholls, who had been in Howe Girls the same time as me. We met in the city for lunch and didn't stop talking for four hours!

I started advertising in the local newspapers and magazines around Australia, and in the first couple of years managed to find more than 30 locatees, most of them in SA and WA, one being Pat Mills in Perth who I used to sit next to in class. I faxed the names and addresses to Pat Woods in England, also a Howe girl from my era, who in turn would let me know of any Oz PRS-ites she had located, and as a result struck up a firm friendship with Pat and Liz.

I was determined to go to the 1997 reunion in Wilhelmshaven, no matter what, to realise my dream of seeing the school again, but after booking was filled with trepidation: what if no-one remembered me, or knew me, apart from Liz and Pat. I arrived at the hotel in Wilhelmshaven a day early, having flown into Bremen, and re-lived the school train journey from Bremen to Wilhelmshaven, with the station names suddenly appearing familiar after all those years. As I was booking into the hotel Liz and Rodger heard my name and introduced themselves. It appeared they had been on the same flight as me from Gatwick to Bremen but even though I had spoken to Liz on the phone, I had never met her. They were going to the school with the Freizeit people and would I like to join them - would I!

That lump in my throat as we drove through the school gate, displaying the school crest, was indescribable, and suddenly there it all was, exactly as it had been 42 years ago, complete with names on houses - I couldn't believe I was actually there. We went into the old staff room to pin some photographs up and I noticed the old honour boards propped up against the wall, and looked at the names I had read so many times during assembly. I glanced out of the window over the playing field towards the bunker and found there were tears streaming down my face.

The following morning the bus arrived and I met Pat and Eric Underhill and Sheila King. That evening we all met at the Pumpwerk - again wondering if anyone would remember me, but I needn't have worried, suddenly there was Val, Brenda, Ann-Margret, Janice and Dorothy, who had all been in Howe Girls with me; there was Charles, John and Jack who had been in my class, teachers, people whose names you knew but had not associated with at school, but it didn't matter, we were all one big family talking nineteen to the dozen with an undeniable bond, we had all gone to PRS. The whole weekend was an indescribable joy.

I still advertise in the Oz press occasionally, and when travelling around Australia I get a copy of the local paper of the town we are staying in and write to them when I get back home to try to find more locatees as I want them to know about TWA and discover the joy it has brought me, but the response has dwindled, so perhaps we have found most of them by this method. However, our current means of finding more of “us” out there is through the internet, and Carol Goronwy sends me lists of new Oz locatees to contact.

Thank you, Liz, for starting it all off and for enriching our lives through re-kindled friendships.

Regards, Mavis