

A Letter about the Wedding

In an impromptu escape from the personal and family pressures of the pandemic reality, I recently opened a box of old letters. It was one of a number of boxes shipped over from the UK after my parents, of their own volition in the mid 80s, left their rented home of over 50 years to live in a senior's residence. At random, I stuck my fingers in the box and pulled out an old, battered, unfamiliar envelope. As I looked more closely. I saw, in my Mother's faint but very neat hand writing, the words, "Audrey's Letter about the Wedding." But which wedding? Me and Fred? Mum and Dad? My brother? I was intrigued.

I opened it carefully. Inside was a letter from me to Mum and Dad written in November 1947 a few days after my 20th birthday. At that time, I was still in the UK and working as a technical illustrator in a small company owned by my Aunt and located about a 30 minute train ride South of London.

The letter seemed to be about family things, my birthday and thanks for messages and gifts. There was brief mention of the "the wedding" but it wasn't until the end of the second paragraph that it hit me! The letter was about the wedding of Queen Elizabeth and the Duke of Edinburgh. You may be interested. The letter follows with only a few minor edits. My explanatory comments are in italics and brackets.

"My birthday was cut rather short by having to go up for the wedding. We had a hurried tea with birthday cake and the usual ritual of blowing the candles out. We left Weybridge at 6:35 for Kingston, then to Putney and from Putney to Camden town. It is much cheaper to go to London that way. We arrived at Hampstead at about a quarter to nine. ("We" means Aunty Marion, my Mum's younger sister, my late cousin Jean, her then 11 years old daughter and me. "Hampstead"

means the apartment where Uncle Stewart's Mother and sister lived, at which we had been offered temporary accommodation). We listened to the news which said that crowds were already lining the route. The ten o'clock news sounded worse, so we decided to just have a quick nap then go, instead of staying in Hampstead all night. We didn't sleep much, I'm afraid – excitement, coupled with strange beds and the fact that we were not fully undressed. After initially dozing for a short time, then waking to ask what time it was, we decided to get up. It was 2:30 am. I doubt if either Aunty or I had an hour's sleep between 10 and 2:30 but Jean slept.

We got up, had a cup of tea and left the apartment at 3 am. We walked to the Swiss Cottage Tube Station (Subway) foolishly hoping to go into the city by tube but it was closed. We stood there for a few minutes deciding what to do and a taxi came along. I just stuck out my hand and it stopped. There were two men inside and they didn't mind us sharing it so we got to Trafalgar Square. The two men, Bill and (?) had already been there but had returned home to get a camera. The taxi only cost 3 shillings for the three of us which was good going for the city at 3:30 in the morning.

We decided to get as near to the Abbey (Westminster Abbey) as possible so we walked down Whitehall. Oh, when we got out of the taxi at Trafalgar Square, I was absolutely amazed by the activity there. There were barrow boys, programme sellers, hot chestnut stands, and almost as many people as during any day. Some people were already camping all along the pavement (sidewalk) and others were walking up and down. It was all quite exciting. The night was very warm which was fortunate and it wouldn't have been very pleasant had it been freezing (If you have never been to the UK that comment could be misleading. If I remember my High School geography correctly, the

UK has a "temperate" climate; Canada's climate is "extreme." I understand the average lowest UK temperature last winter was about 6 degrees C.)

We walked down Whitehall and Aunty suggested the first port of call should be the "Ladies." While she and Jean queued up (about 3/4 of an hour), I went to find a place to settle. I got a nice little space by the Cenotaph and sat down to wait. When Aunty and Jean came, I decided to go where they had been but to save time, I went across to Westminster where there was no queue. I went around Parliament Square and round by the Abbey but people had been there since six the previous evening so there wasn't much chance of a good vantage point. Anyway, we at least already had a front view where we were so there was no point in changing. Aunty and I sat on our little folding stools and Jean sat on the case. (I don't recall what the "case" held but, presumably, our necessities.) By this time, it was after 5 am and time was passing quite quickly. As we sat, it began to get light. By six-thirty, the crowds began to arrive and we had plenty to interest us with buses, lorries (trucks), cars, and road sweepers (men with brushes, shovels and little carts), etc..

We had one tussle with a woman who arrived about 6:30 am. Aunty and Jean were standing up by that time behind the barrier but I was still sitting down, just in front (I think to protect Jean). The woman came into my place and nothing would induce her to budge. She gripped the rail and I really lost my temper. Anyway, gradually, we managed to push her further down. She was certainly a terror.

The traffic stopped about nine am and the Air Force arrived to line the route. Time passed quite quickly and then, just after 10 am., the first guests began to arrive. There were hundreds of cars, from Rolls

Royces, Packards, Daimlers, Chryslers, big American cars, down to taxis and a little Morris Eight - very battered, too. The road men who sanded the route got a rousing cheer each time they passed. For the order of the procession of Royalty, I'll lend you the official programme but I must have it back as I want to keep it (H'mm, I wonder where it is!)

On their journey to the Abbey, the coaches and cars were on the opposite side of the road but we did get a glimpse of everyone. Elizabeth looked lovely. It was all very exciting.

The Service was relayed over the air to all parts of the route and we followed it on our programmes.

Then the return journey; it was marvellous! They were now on our side of the road, within a few feet of us. We had a perfect view. Philip and Elizabeth looked smashing (a then current descriptor), and so did everyone else. It was over too soon, that was the snag.

All the time, the crush of the crowd was amazing. We were swayed this way and that – that and the surges forward were terrible. We in the front row were crushed hard against the barrier, so crushed that I had to slip under it and sit in front to get my breath!

When it was over, we decided to go to Buckingham Palace to see them come out. On the way, we stopped in St James Park for a drink and a sandwich. If we hadn't, we would have seen them come out the first time but we missed that. Anyway, we got a good pew on the parapets surrounding the Palace and sat there hoping for the best. While there, a girl climbing the wall fell and I looked down and it was Cherry L (a girl from my village in Yorkshire). She wasn't hurt and remained with us all afternoon. I also saw Jack B (grandson of Mum's neighbour)

and his father in the Park but I didn't get close enough to speak to them. It is a small world, isn't it.

We were rewarded for our long wait by two appearances on the Balcony, first, the Royal Family and later, Elizabeth and Philip. The little pages were sweet. They kept waving and running in and out – they thought it was a great joke.

After what seemed endless waiting, the Royal pair left for Waterloo (railway station). They had a Cavalry Escort and were in an open coach. We had a perfect view and Elizabeth looked lovely in her dusty blue outfit. We wouldn't have missed it for anything. After that, there was nothing to wait for so we went back to Hampstead by tube to collect our belongings, had a cup of tea and returned home via Putney and Kingston. Altogether, it was an exciting day. We arrived or, rather, we staggered home at 8:20 pm, weary but happy. After a hot bath, I went to bed and slept solidly but still have not fully recovered from that loss of sleep on Wednesday.

Well, hope this has told you all you needed to know about the wedding. You would never have stood the crowds, Mum, you would have been out in no time. The St John's Ambulance people were kept very busy. People were fainting all over the place. The first one to go near us was the young Airman on duty about 2 yards away. One moment he was standing at attention and the next moment he had fallen to the ground. Anyway, we managed to survive.

Well, guess that is it! Cheerio for now,

Lots of love,

Audrey