

“Number please?”

Audrey Cole

I don't recall my Mum talking about her childhood in Manchester (UK), which she left with her family in 1914 at the age of 14. We often talked about her life in Blackpool, perhaps because that was my place of birth. I am a true *“Sandgrown'un,”* the only one in my family. According to Wikipedia people born in Blackpool “are called *Sandgrownians* or *Sandgrown'uns* (as are people originating in Morecambe and Southport)....” That is because of the famous beaches in those coastal towns. Blackpool is one of the largest and, perhaps, most famous, seaside resorts in the UK. As the late comedian, Stanley Holloway said, “There's a famous seaside place called Blackpool that's noted for fresh air and fun” I can but won't recite the rest of “The Lion and Albert” which I am sure is available on the web if one is interested. Suffice to say – although now hard to believe – at much earlier points in my life I have stood on various amateur stages, dressed as best I could in Mr Holloway's and other performer's images and recited it and other dialect pieces!

Blackpool is located on the West coast of the UK on the Irish Sea. Blackpool's seven miles of sandy beaches are gorgeous and, literally, attract about 4 million visitors each year. A one time visitor might have to be visiting in the off season or on a very rainy day to even see the beaches! It has always seemed to me that in summer, at all times when they were not covered by the sea, the beaches were covered by deck chairs, umbrellas, towels and people! Those visitors not on the beach would be strolling along the promenade or enjoying the many places of entertainment, including Blackpool Tower, the Winter Gardens, the Pleasure Beach, the Theatres, the Ice Rink, the late season “Illuminations,” – Blackpool has it all!

Mum always said that, crowded as it was in the summer, what was great about living in Blackpool in those early days (1914 to 1926), was that many of the facilities remained open when the crowds left. She loved the winters and not only for the walks on miles of empty beaches. Mum also loved ballroom dancing. She didn't do much dancing in the tourist season but for her, winter

was dance time. Although the Blackpool Tower Ballroom with its magnificent decor and superb dance floor was OK in Mum's opinion (its first world famous Wurlitzer organ was not installed until 1929, a few years after Mum's dancing days), she and her friends much preferred to dance in the Winter Gardens where the Empress Ballroom (built in 1896) had one of the largest dance floors in the world. Mum often talked about those dancing days which, apparently, ended soon after Mum met Dad. To my knowledge, Dad never danced! Hmm!

Mum also told us about the short time that she worked at the top of Blackpool Tower. Well, not quite the top! Near the uppermost exit of the elevator on the spectacular walk around viewing level, is a small concession kiosk. I don't recall what it sells, presumably, tobacco, confections and souvenirs. Mum worked there one summer in her teens. Somewhere, I also have photographs of Aunty Marion, Mum's sister, in costume, as a fairy I think, in the 1920s, appearing in what I believe was an annual children's show at the Winter Gardens.

Although born there, I must admit that I find the Blackpool of today too busy, too noisy and, at times, just too tacky! But millions of people including my brother, Keith, would strongly disagree! Keith has made many return visits to the UK since he and I emigrated to Canada in 1957. Whether there on business or for pleasure, he has somehow always managed to fit in a quick visit to Blackpool. Keith, like our Dad, was born about 9 miles North of Blackpool in Fleetwood, where our family lived. Fleetwood is better known for its fishing industry and as the port of departure for the ferry to the Isle of Man.

How I came to be born in Blackpool, when Mum and Dad lived in Fleetwood is a story in itself. When Mum and Dad married they bought a house in Fleetwood, just a long block from the shore. Fleetwood, on the South side of Morecambe Bay on the Irish Sea, has a history of flooding. The two most severe floods ever, were in 1927 and a later one in the 70s. Mum was more than 8 months pregnant with me at the time of the perhaps most famous Fleetwood Flood, in October/November 1927. Over 90% of the town was under water and 6 people died in the flood. Only the area around the Mount, the location of Milton Lodge School, a private school which I later attended, was not flooded. The Mount is a lone and attractive hill near the sea shore in a very flat coastal town. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=laYuIOOe6o4>).

Mum has told me of how nervous she was, being confined to the house so close to my anticipated birth. She couldn't go anywhere although some people were

getting around by boat and paddling on doors, etc.. I assume there would have been some way to get to the hospital were I to have decided to be born, but Mum and Dad were worried enough to arrange that Mum go to her parent's home in Blackpool. I recall being told I was born during the Fleetwood Flood and although that is true, I was actually born a few miles away in Blackpool. Since Dad was not with us in Blackpool, I presume he had some way to get to and from work. Or, maybe not, since I believe that much of his work was conducted on the telephone. Fortunately, the waters in Fleetwood were subsiding by the time I eventually arrived in this world.

Today, we often hear about happily married, or otherwise committed, couples who first met through the primary communication system of our times, the world wide web. Perhaps, today, we assume that such unions could only happen in the current "with it" digital era, that such relationships could never have occurred in those awfully dull and dry, traditional days gone by. Not only am I sufficiently romantic to believe that true love will always find a way, but I come to that belief naturally. Mum and Dad met on the 1920's communications equivalent of today's internet, the telephone! Nothing is new!

Telephones were not automatic back then. There were no cell phones (mobiles), no touch tone, no dial up, no world wide web. In fact, there was not even world wide telephone contact. The first public transmission between the UK and the US was earlier in the year I was born. Back then, every single telephone call, wherever its potential destination, required the expertise of Telephone Operators to make the necessary connections. I recall that one picked up the phone and the operator would ask, "Number please?" In the UK, the operator, with headphones, would be sitting in one of the many General Post Office (GPO) "Telephone Exchanges" in front of a large vertical board containing multiple rows of sockets and numerous coloured cables. Those operators had the sole responsibility of plugging particular cables into particular sockets to establish the communication chains necessary to complete the connections. The speed of the connection, depended to some degree on the dexterity of the operator. Mum was a GPO telephone operator.

Arithmetic was Dad's speciality. He was always a wiz with a column of figures. He should have been an accountant. But Dad was the eldest of four sons. As was common in those days in working class families, the eldest child had to get a job immediately on leaving school at 14 in order to contribute to the family expenses. In the UK until the end of WWII when the government

brought in a new Education Act, secondary school education was only available to those who could afford to pay for it and to those who passed the half day examination for a County or other similar scholarship providing free education. Dad was quite smart and got a job as assistant to the headmaster of a famous public (meaning private) school in the area. He obtained night class diplomas in shorthand, typing and book keeping. By his mid 20s he was serving both as the executive assistant to the president of a then successful wholesale fish company which, I believe, used leased trawlers to bring in the fish. Also, presumably in his spare work day time, Dad took his own place at the telephone as a wholesale fish salesperson in that company.

Clearly, within those activities, he made numerous telephone calls day by day. From Fleetwood, each one of those telephone calls had to go through the Blackpool Telephone Exchange. He, literally, fell in love with Mum's voice. He told me once that if his call was not absolutely urgent, he would hang up and keep trying until he got Mum as the operator! Mum, on the other hand, has also spoken of the strict GPO rules prohibiting non essential communication between operators and callers. But, somehow (?!?!), Mum and Dad continued to connect! Finally, and Dad always said it "took a lot of persuasion," Mum gave in and agreed to meet Dad! I am very glad that she did! They were married in September 1926.

In the UK in those days, women were not allowed to remain in the Civil Service once they married. On termination, they were given a so called "dowry," a relatively small severance sum. That arbitrary process, the subject of much debate and criticism, provides a good example of the discriminatory treatment that typically faced women in the labour force in those days. It was not an immediate financial problem for our family until the Great Depression in the early 30s when everything collapsed. Dad lost his job. They lost the house and virtually everything except the furniture which they wholly owned.

The next few years were tough. We moved around a lot with the furniture as Dad found various but, unfortunately never permanent jobs. When I got a County Minor scholarship to High School at the age of 10, I enrolled in my 7th school! In those days in West Yorkshire where we were then living, if one failed or did not qualify to sit for the County Minor scholarship, one either paid the full cost for High School education or one stayed in elementary school to the school leaving age of 14.

World War II conscription left the government with critical staff shortages in

the civil service. Many of the men were called into the armed forces. The government had little choice but to bring married women back into the civil service. Mum returned to the Post Office. Once again and for the duration of WWII, she worked as a telephonist. I wonder how many thousands of times, she uttered those words, "Number please?"

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