

## **Helen Lillian Barron**

This is the story of Helen Lillian Barron, a story gleaned gradually in many conversations with her over cups of tea, while working on jig saws and foraging through piles of old magazines and cards in her living room. It has been a hidden story, secret almost, that could so easily have been lost, but remarkable for the picture it paints of a life, nearly a century long, lived in just one place, and of Lillian herself, and her qualities of steadfastness, devotion and humour.

Lillian was born in the Kensal Green area in August 1925. The next year her parents brought her to 42, Ravenscourt Gardens, which leads from the Goldhawk Road to Ravenscourt Park. The only houses along the west end of the road were on the south side. North of it was probably open ground where later Stamford Court and the Masonic Hospital would be built in the 1930s. That same year, 1926, Lillian's brother Jim was born. Brother and sister lived at No 42 for the rest of their lives.

Their father came from north of London, probably in Hertfordshire, where he had a rural childhood, with two sisters. During or after WW1 he was stationed in Wiltshire where he met Lillian's mother. When married they migrated to London and first lived in Kensal Green before moving to Hammersmith. Lillian's father was a pastry cook and worked for a local firm, often bringing home doughnuts or other pastries at the end of his working day. Her mother was a dress-maker and made clothes for the ladies of St Peter's Square and the local area.

Although No 42 was a modest end-of-terrace house the upstairs rooms were let out, certainly throughout Lillian's young childhood, presumably to help with family finances. This meant that Lillian and Jim grew up in confined circumstances, in the little ante-room to the kitchen and the downstairs back room. The larger, front room was sacrosanct and immaculately tidy, out of bounds to the children, because this was where Lillian's mother received her clients when they came for fittings. There was access for the family to the bathroom upstairs once a week. The rest of the time the family used an outside loo in the garden. As time went on, the children slept in two small rooms upstairs. As for play space, this for them was not nearby Ravenscourt Park, but the small garden, just below the District Line tube. All their lives they lived to the sound of the trains rattling by. For them summer holidays were spent staying with the family of a sister of their father, who lived near their grandparents in Hertfordshire. There is a wonderful photo of Granny Barron in her later years; clearly someone to be reckoned with. You'll see it in the hall where we go later for refreshments. (In time the photos will be kept in our church archives.) One other connection with the country that Lillian had was when she used to catch the train on Saturdays to go hop picking in Sussex.

School for Lillian was a local primary, possibly Flora Gardens, and then Fulham County School for Girls. As a young girl she went to the Baptist Church and belonged to the Brigade, but when her brother Jim joined the Scouts at St Mary's Stamford Brook, Lillian and her friend found their way there too, joining the Guides. Later as a teenager she joined the Red Cross at Hammersmith. This connection proved to be life-long.

The other life-long-thread for Lillian was her job in the Civil Service, in HM Inland Revenue (HMRC to us), first at an office in Hammersmith and later in the West End. I didn't hear much about her work, but know that on retirement she was active for years with the Civil Service Association. Jim, became an engineer, and in his spare time was heavily involved with the Scouts and then, increasingly as the years went by, with church music and singing in a church choir. When the choir at St Mary's Stamford Brook was disbanded because the church was turned into flats, Jim and his fellow tenor there, Joe Hogg, joined the choir at St Nics, and so began the Barrons' association with our St Nicholas Church.

During the War Lillian was busy night and day. I was astonished to learn from her that trenches were dug in Ravenscourt Park, and there Lillian spent many night shifts in the air raid shelter on duty with the Red Cross. My guess is that the Red Cross was where she made her friends during her adult years. Much later, when Anne McBride arrived in London in 1978 as a young woman and transferred to the Red Cross at Hammersmith, she met Lillian and began a friendship that has lasted over forty years. In those early days for Anne, Lillian was her detachment commandant – very thorough in her commitment to her volunteers. Until fairly recently she served the General Services Group as its treasurer. It's good to know that members of the Red Cross will be at the crematorium to remember Lillian after this service.

I didn't hear about holidays from her and wonder if they were few and far between, but there was at least one major expedition to Kenya, which I heard about when I was about to go there myself. The trip took Lillian to Mombasa and Tsavo Park, a vast area.

Everyone who has visited her knows how much she loved cats. She had one with her always, and had cards and photos of cats all around her. Her house was absolutely crammed with knitting wool and patterns, for rather than sewing, which her mother did expertly, and probably to get away from being pressed into service to do the hemming, Lillian turned to knitting. Although she didn't marry or have a family of her own she enjoyed children, and while Anne was doing her teaching would happily walk her two in their pram around the gardens at the Hammersmith Centre, when they got restless.

Here at St Nics we first got to know Lillian (who in her maturity used to worship at St Peter's Hammersmith) when she came with her brother to help him with his stall for tapes, CDs and Vinyl at our Fairs. After his death, in 2008, she transferred her help to the holders of the Bric a Brac stall. For years she kept house for Jim and herself, after both their parents had died, and very particular she was about Jim's being on time for Sunday lunch, as Anne can testify ! Once the monthly lunches at St Denys's House were established, Lillian enjoyed the excellent meals prepared by others and her monthly catch-up with people at St Nics, appreciating the chance of company and familiar faces.

Four years ago she was 90. She couldn't quite believe it, but there was no escaping the fact that a birthday on 17 August 1925 made her 90 in 2015. To celebrate this extra special birthday, Margo Jales hosted a tea party for Lillian at her home, where a feast, prepared by some of the guests, was laid on of delicate sandwiches, newly baked scones with strawberry jam and cream, and a lovely chocolate cake, decorated, to Lillian's delight, with two cats. There were banners and balloons, cards and flowers, a rousing rendering of Happy Birthday and much talk. For Lillian it was hard to credit that she'd achieved her 90 years, but she much enjoyed her party and was most appreciative of it.

Today we have the opportunity to celebrate her again: her kindness, her welcome to all who visited her, her astuteness and her wicked sense of humour (as a neighbour put it), her quiet, religious commitment and her positive approach to life. All who came in contact with her - her Red Cross colleagues, her devoted solicitor and all who work with her, those who have faithfully taken her Communion these past ten years, the carers in recent years and those who made her last days peaceful, her neighbours and all of us at St Nics who knew her – will have a clear picture of Lillian in our memory and will miss her. To an outsider her life might seem confined and unexceptional, but not to her. Contentment and appreciation of her time here and of other people have been the hallmark of Helen Lillian Barron whom we will remember very fondly.

Christabel Ames-Lewis