

## Bowness-on-Windermere from 1944 to 1945

In 1944, nearly a year after Beatrix had died, my mother Freda was sent to Bowness-on-Windermere to work, and she wrote about what she saw and experienced there. Incidentally, Freda admired Churchill enormously and often mentioned him in her letters, and so it is a great privilege for me to give this short talk here.

A bit of background. Freda joined the Women's Auxiliary Air Force, the WAAF, in 1941, and after a while she worked as a Catering Officer, helping to organise meals for Royal Air Force and WAAF personnel at a number of RAF stations. In March 1943, my father Bernard, who had joined the RAF's Airfield Construction Service, was sent to the station in Somerset where Freda was working, for a three-week so-called 'Field Course', where he had to experiment with the latest types of high explosive, and to learn how to set up barbed wire entanglements (and – if necessary – how to get out of them!). As Freda later wrote, 'A chance meeting' with Bernard on the first day of his course led to their marriage exactly five months later. During those and the following months they saw each other for the odd week-end, sometimes even for a week-long leave period, but mostly they were apart. In August 1944 my father's squadron was sent over to Normandy to build roads and airfields for the advancing Allied Forces as they fought their way through northern France into Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany.

Separation meant that my parents wrote constantly to each other, and although many of their letters were lost during the war and afterwards, my sister and I found that between us we had about 370 of them.

In mid-October 1944 Freda was posted to RAF Windermere. She was not in the least bit thrilled when she first heard about this move. She had been having a disastrous time in her job near Preston, where her RAF boss seems to have been a difficult and dishonest character – he was subsequently found to have 'overspent' (i.e. taken) £2000 in one month (a huge amount at that time) – and where she had also suffered a devastating miscarriage. So, she had hoped to be sent back south. However, once she had arrived in the Lake District, she was most pleasantly surprised.

Large houses and hotels were requisitioned during the war for all sorts of reasons, and RAF Windermere was in fact the Belsfield Hotel in Bowness-on-Windermere; it is still one of the most exclusive hotels in the Lake District. It was a station for Training Courses for WAAF Officers, and almost entirely organised by women from what I can gather. After having lived in huts for most of the war, Freda was ecstatic when she arrived there: 'Could you but see me, ensconced in my palatial bedroom (Slumberland mattress ... view of Lake...) you would not guess that I was just shivering with fright at having to undertake this job.' She was just twenty-six, and she was completely responsible for organising the catering for about 350 personnel, sometimes more, some of whom were based in the Old England Hotel just a bit to the north of the Belsfield. There was also a 'cottage' somewhere nearby, which was used by the small number of RAF men on the station.

Freda immediately began to enjoy her surroundings: 'never have I seen such glorious autumn colourings – the copper beeches, and the chestnuts, and the grey of the sky and the water of the Lake all combine to produce an unforgettable picture.' Over the next few months she described excursions and outings. Some of these were work-related; for example, in December: 'I went, by staff car! – to the Command Supply Depot at Haverthwaite, 11 miles away. The views over the frost-covered mountains were absolutely marvellous... It's a lovely road: beside us a squirrel ran across the ridge, his bright red coat gleaming against the white and his tail brushing against the long grasses.' Most frequently she explored the area in her leisure time, with other WAAF officers, on foot, by bike, by bus and occasionally by hitching lifts – and usually ended up at a pub or hotel: it must have been fun for her not to have planned the meal in advance! Shortly after her arrival at the Belsfield, she cycled 'Over the fells – up hill and down dale – to a 17th century farmhouse at Cartmel, which is running as a guesthouse, and where we had boiled eggs ... and scones and date slices for tea.' A week later she 'cycled up to Troutbeck and had dinner at a "Queen's Head", and another time she walked up to The Wild Boar pub east of Bowness for supper, and afterwards had 'coffee, black, with brown sugar – a thing I've not seen for years!'. With two others she walked in a snowstorm in mid-December to Hawkshead, 'finding the village deserted and like a picture postcard, all white. We had an excellent lunch at the Queen's Head, an attractive Inn, oaken beams at a perilous level and a nice ingle nook with a warm and cosy little bar. We passed a village school where Wordsworth went – its sole claim to distinction, to my mind, was a sundial above the entrance.' Beatrix would have recognised all these scenes, but the white wintery conditions were new to Freda, who came from Bristol and was used to dirty bits of snow and slush on roads and pavements.

There was more snow towards the end of January 1945. 'I've never seen anything like it! The air is just as crisp as could be and the sun has a real warmth. Two of the officers were ski-ing over the "nursery slope" in the garden.' The following day she went tobogganing – 'I did enjoy it.', and a few days later on her way to Keswick with a fellow WAAF officer by bus, she noticed people skating on Rydal Water, Grasmere, and later on Derwentwater: 'there are several degrees of proficiency – one small boy of about 6 ... was very good, and a man with scarlet socks stood out, too. It was a lovely sight and I was most envious.' That day she also watched a flying boat landing

on Windermere. You may remember that Beatrix was very opposed to the building of flying boats on the lake in the years from 1911 onwards. There was similar opposition during the Second World War, but I have never heard mention of any objection by Beatrix this time round – perhaps she realised that every possible tactic was needed against Hitler and Nazism. The first test flight was made in September 1942, and thirty-five Sunderland aircraft were built at White Cross Bay by spring 1944.

Freda explored Bowness itself. In January 1945 she wrote: ‘...the path to the Post Office is just about navigable – a pipe has burst near the chemists’ shop and one can hardly walk down the road there.’ She frequently posted letters and parcels to Bernard, and mentions buying Vitamin C tablets at the chemists to send to him also. She went to a cobbler who mended her shoes, and also to Herbert and Sons, the photographers at St Martin’s Studio in Lake Road, where she got photographs developed – some taken by Bernard and some by herself. She enjoyed talking to a Mrs Shepherd at the ‘laundry-shop’, who told Freda about the areas of Belgium and The Netherlands which she had visited before the war; this ‘laundry-shop’ is of course now The Old Laundry Theatre and The World of Beatrix Potter Attraction – I wonder how many of us have enjoyed events in both of these in past years. Freda loved a visit to the local Royalty Cinema to see a Noel Coward film, *This Happy Breed*, which she thought was ‘exceedingly good’. She attended St Martin’s Church, sometimes by herself or with other officers, and sometimes on official parade with many of the WAAF personnel. She reported that there was no bookshop in Bowness, just a small one in Windermere, but she found an excellent one in Ambleside, and the bookseller, a Mr Varty, actually took a selection of books to the Belsfield for the officers to browse and buy. When she and another officer took the ferry towards Far Sawrey, the old ferryman showed them how he controlled the static steam engine which allowed the boat to be winched across the lake on wire hawsers: Freda obviously found it very boring and commented ‘What an appalling job!’

Before the war Freda had attended a college in Bristol to study ‘Domestic Science’ – which meant learning all about ordering and storing food (no refrigeration in those days!) and cooking, but also involved sewing, darning, embroidery, knitting, you name it. She was interested in handicrafts all her life, and wrote to Bernard about what she found in the Bowness area. Talks were always organised for the personnel on a RAF station, and after one of them, given by a Mrs Aitken, she commented: ‘[She] lives at Winster, not far from here, and before the war had a small hand-weaving industry. She brought some wonderful patterns of tweed with her and some scarves too. She herself was wearing a wonderful tweed suit – yellow and grey, like lichen on rocks... Vegetable dyes are always used.’ I wonder what kind of wool she used, perhaps Herdwick, and whether Beatrix had known or known about Mrs Aitken, or even whether Beatrix bought tweed for her own suits from Mrs Aitken.

A few weeks later, Freda wrote: ‘Yesterday I met a woman who runs the Grasmere Flax Home Industry and makes the most lovely linen cloths, some cream, some a deep natural colour. ... I feel that local industries like that are to be patronised if possible.’ My daughter Clare now has a long linen runner on top of a chest-of-drawers – I suspect Freda may have bought it from this woman. I found online two adverts for the Flax Home Industry, Grasmere, which had been placed in the local parish magazine in 1939 and 1954 – Beatrix would surely have known about this concern. Incidentally there is currently a flax project at Heron Mill in Beetham in the south of Cumbria.

In December, Freda ordered a sheepskin shoulder bag ‘from a local saddler’. She described it as ‘11 x 9 inches, unlined, on a shoulder strap ... It will be most useful for carrying all my bits and pieces’. When she collected it a couple of months later, she described it as ‘very beautiful’. It cost her £1 2s and 6d (£1 13p) – considerably less than what a similar leather bag would cost today!

By February 1945, she was totally in love with the Bowness area: ‘the beauty of this district is quite beyond description – it’s really exhilarating.’ Her letters contain some real purple prose: ‘I decided against walking conventionally down the path and crossed the garden instead – sparkling, the grass was, with a light frost. The Lake looked wonderful – ... so still, this morning, and the swans idly gliding up beyond the landing stages.’ In April she noted: ‘The countryside is beautiful. ... the valleys are sprinkled with white – and studded with deep cream where sheep and their babies lie. Such little lambs I saw today. North country ones are slow in coming, it would appear.’ And again: ‘The sun has shone, the rain has poured cats and dogs, the mess cat has had three babies ... there is snow on the mountains and three Sunderlands have landed on the Lake. That is the end of the news.’

The war was never far from sight or from her mind. She wrote: ‘One of the funniest things is to watch the gun carriers [rather similar to tanks] being washed in the shallow water [of the lake] – they look like elephants wandering down to the edge and shivering on the brink.’ In early March there was an ‘alert’ in Windermere, though not in Bowness itself. She was always concerned about Bernard – whether he was in danger, where he was staying (he couldn’t say, of course), whether he was sleeping in a tent, whether he was getting enough to eat, and advising him how best to wash and iron his clothes – though he did once at least manage to get some washing done for himself! In her own job, as VE Day approached, she wrote; ‘I am very worried indeed over the food

situation because I regret to say that the Commanding Officer is expecting complete impossibilities in the way of 'dainty trifles' – for 500, remember – and I am equally determined that the cooks shall have a holiday as well as everyone else ... so life is a bit difficult.' She managed, of course, as she always did, and didn't quite collapse under the strain. On 9 May there was 'dancing on the Green beside the Lake, following this afternoon's sports. Quite an entertainment for the townsfolk – nothing else had been arranged... They have just sung Auld Lang Syne and have given 3 very lusty cheers – all to the accompaniment of a firework display by the army (spare ammunition no doubt)'. The partying seems to have continued on and off until the 13th, when she recorded: 'The end of Windermere's Victory celebrations is at hand – The Town paraded – with the Army, the WAAF, ..., Sea Cadets etc ... in a pouring rainstorm and I fear more than half of them will be down with pneumonia before they are very much older!'

In mid-June Bernard returned to England, expecting to be sent to Burma to take part in the ongoing war in the East. He and Freda seem to have had a week's leave together, and for the next few weeks they were able to phone each other while he had vaccinations and inoculations against tropical diseases, and for some unexplained reason visited the School of Mines in Derbyshire. Since phone calls were usually restricted to three or six minutes, they continued to write. Freda mentions '...nowadays food is so much more difficult – since VE Day!' The armed forces had had far better rations than civilians, but this was obviously changing as peace came. She enjoyed sailing on the lake with a few of her officer friends ('to see the hills from water level makes them even more intriguing ... than ever. Sometimes they wear thin coats of mist, sometimes they're covered with green fields, at others they withdraw into deep purple mystery.'). But towards the end of July she recorded a dreadful incident: 'It's been such a wild night – there was a tremendous thunderstorm about [11 p.m.] and a nasty wind howling round the house. I went and looked over the Lake and found it really eerie. To our horror at breakfast we heard ... that an officer and [five] men had been drowned during the night and now the survivors have all come in to get dry. We have fed them and I've just spoke to the Commanding Officer – no one had thought of giving them a fire or baths and they are dripping all over the kitchen. Poor boys – they are only about 19. It seems such a mockery.' Questions were asked in the House of Commons here, and the answers were as follows: 'This unit was carrying out a five-day self-reliance exercise. ... the unit [had] marched a total of 57 miles to Windermere, ..., including a night march of 25 miles followed by a day's rest ... The men were wearing denims, steel helmets, belts, ammunition braces and pouches, and personal weapons, the total weight being 15–20 pounds [I feel that is probably an underestimate!]. After a three-mile march during the early hours of 20 July, they arrived at Lake Windermere and proceeded to cross to Belle Isle at 3 a.m. Two boatloads crossed safely but on the third trip a sudden squall struck up and the boat became waterlogged and sank.' It was noted that such army exercises were still needed and men had 'to be trained for occupation purposes' – for serving in Germany presumably. Freda followed this up a few days later: 'Those poor boys were rowing a dinghy with spades... I think they must be keeping that fact dark – all the papers talk about Assault craft ... Poor lads. There were all so young. My Corporal Turner was on duty when the officer in charge came ... for help. ... – we managed to put them in the men's quarters then sent down some whisky for them.'

Only one further letter remains from RAF Windermere – a muddled one dated 25 July 1945 which suggests that she was going to be granted immediate compassionate leave in order to spend time with Bernard – I think he may have been told that he was about to set sail for Okinawa. However, VJ Day came in August and he was sent instead in September to Singapore to build runways at Tengah and Changi airfields. Although I have letters that he sent Freda from there, I strangely have none from her to him. I think RAF Windermere was closed in late August 1945 and the Belsfield became a hotel again, and the whole officers' training unit was transferred to another RAF station further south, from where she was demobilised at the end of February 1946. Bernard returned to England in September 1946, and they were finally able to start their married life together properly. Freda never really talked to me about her time in Bowness, and she died well before I became interested in Beatrix Potter and the Lake District. Her letters certainly provide a window to the time she spent at Bowness.