

Notes from Local Interest Group 28th September 2023

Present in Hall: John Price, Bridget Ashton, Cherry & Victor Williams, Helen Barnett, Mollie Moore, Alison Duncan, Christine Sargeant, Iris Lloyd, Dawn Richards, Gina Goodge, Maldwyn Evans

On Zoom: Maureen Lloyd (ML), Wendy & Dainis Ozols, Roy & Avryl Lloyd, Bronwen Jenkins, Allison Joyce, Sylvia Illingsworth, Grace Davies, Margaret Price

Apologies: Elsa Harflett, Ann & Howard Dean, Joan Lloyd, Tim Francis, Gareth Jones

Gossip AGM

ML showed everyone the accounts for the Gossip, year 2022/23, explaining that the year ends in August and that subscriptions are due in September. Subscriptions can be paid to the person who delivers the Gossip, direct to ML or via a BACS transfer to the Gossip account (details from ML). ML thanked her very efficient team of deliverers and everyone who has made a contribution to the Gossip over the last year. It certainly would not be possible to publish the editions without either of these.

| Rhosgoch Gossip 1/9/2022 to 31/8/2023 | | | |
|---------------------------------------|------------|----------------------|------------|
| Opening Balance 1/9/2021 | £ 2,387.50 | | |
| Printing Costs | £ 1,076.00 | Sales & advertising | £ 1,808.00 |
| Cas help | £ 430.00 | | |
| Postage | £ 79.25 | | |
| Zoom | £ 143.88 | | |
| Hire of Hall | £ 12.00 | | |
| Office supplies | £ 73.95 | | |
| Website costs to be refunded | £ 166.72 | | |
| Total expenses | £ 1,981.80 | Total receipts | £ 1,808.00 |
| | - | | |
| Loss | £ 173.80 | | |
| | | Closing Bank Balance | £ 2,213.70 |

ML reminded people that the Gossip pays for the Zoom subscription. This means that it is for use by anyone within the community and that groups or individuals should get in touch with her if they would like to make use of this resource.

ML also spoke about Local Interest Group and asked that anyone with suggestions for future meetings should contact her please.

ML then handed over to Cherry Williams to introduce the speaker for the evening, Bridget Ashton. In her welcome, Cherry reminded people that Bridget had been to speak in Painscastle Hall last September, when her topic had been her experiences when living at Top o' Lane, on the Begwns, in the late 1940s, and then her time as a child in Hay. Her talk had been based on her book, "Hay Before the Bookshops or the Beeman's Family". Cherry had stayed in touch with Bridget and has recently read her latest book, "Cold War, Warm Hearts", which is about Bridget's travels around Eastern Europe in the 1960s.

From Top o' Lane to Behind the Iron Curtain

Bridget started by telling us that the family left Painscastle to live in Hay-on-Wye in 1950. There they remained until Bridget was 11 years old, when they moved to Northumberland. After school, she had trained as a teacher at Hereford College of Education and it was after she completed her training that her adventure began, in 1966. She decided that she wanted to travel behind the Iron Curtain and so she set off, on her own, with very little money and everything packed into a rucksack. During her adventure, she wrote diaries and these form the basis of her memoir. She also submitted articles to the Newcastle Journal in order to raise some money to support herself on her travels.



Bridget showed us a map of Eastern Europe (on previous page), with the Iron Curtain clearly marked, and said that her travels had taken her to East Germany, Poland, what was then Czechoslovakia, Hungary, the former Yugoslavia, Romania and Bulgaria. Her talk would highlight some of the places she found herself in and the people she met and made friends with along the way. This was a highly unusual trip for a young person to make at the time, being both behind the Iron Curtain and because she was a young lady, travelling alone.

Her first stop, after getting into East Germany via Berlin, was Poland, where she arrived on a steam train. The Polish border guards thought that this was highly unusual and advised her to get back on the train and leave Poland. However, she insisted that this is where she wanted to be and eventually she was allowed into the country. Her first impression was that there was very little traffic on the roads, but she managed to make her way to Warsaw and then up to Poland's "Lake District", where she met four young men with whom she travelled as far as Gdansk. From here, she went to the hills in the south of the country, where she met a lady and her family who had just finished their hay and maize harvest. She showed us a picture of the family and said that they had been extremely kind to her. In all, she spent about four weeks in Poland, staying mainly on farms thanks to the kindness of the local people.

Since her Polish visa was only valid for 30 days, she eventually had to move on, but the authorities would not allow her to get on a train because of an issue with her visa. Eventually, this was sorted out and so she made her way to Munich in West Germany. Once there, she worked in the Agfa factory for about three months in order to earn some money to fund the next stage of her trip. At weekends, she was obviously free to travel and she often made her way over to the border with East Germany (the Iron Curtain). Here there was a "no man's land" which was heavily guarded on both sides. However, some friendly West German border guards took her over the border into this area. They explained to her that many of the families on the western side had relatives on the eastern side from whom they had been cut off when the border had been demarcated after WW2, in 1949.

From Munich, Bridget travelled into Austria where she met a Scottish girl in Vienna. This girl was smuggling Italian shirts into what is now Slovakia and so Bridget joined up with her and they travelled together to Bratislava. Because they had made some money from selling the shirts, they were able to stay for a couple of nights in a "posh" hotel. When they left, they got a lift to the border and managed to cross quite easily into Hungary, where Bridget planned to stay with some friends in the far south east of the country. Bridget said she had an amazing time crossing Hungary and that she had received an extremely warm welcome from the family with whom she was going to stay, even though she arrived very late at night. Her family knew this Hungarian family because their son had stayed with her family in Northumberland as a refugee from the Soviet invasion after the 1956 revolution. The family could not have been more welcoming and she spent three weeks with them, over Christmas. Christmas Eve was particularly special with some amazing food to eat. The house had no running water – every house in the village had a well and a simple water lifting device outside.

The next leg of her journey took her to what was then Yugoslavia. She had been encouraged to visit Belgrade by a young Yugoslav who she had met in Poland. Whilst here, she earned some more money by teaching English. She shared a room in a hostel with two Albanian girls and she and one of them visited a village on the River Danube that was due to be flooded when a dam was built. She recalls feeling very sad for the villagers, who were extremely friendly, and wondering where they

were going to live once the dam had been built. In fact, the whole village was moved up above the level of the lake and the people all rehoused.



From Yugoslavia, she travelled on to what is now Slovakia. She had come prepared to earn some money – she had bought cocoa in Yugoslavia because she knew that she could sell it in Slovakia and the cash she earned enabled her to afford to stay in a hotel for two nights to get out of the pouring rain. She hitchhiked her way to the north and found herself in a small village (near the border with Ukraine). Her accommodation was in a farmhouse (with “facilities” in an outhouse as was the case with all the rural properties at the time) where she slept on a wooden bed covered with rugs and a feather quilt to cover her. She said she had a wonderful time here. The farm was part of a collective, where people worked for a very small wage. All their animals had been taken from them and were managed communally. The neighbouring village had retained their small strips of land for their own crops, and Bridget’s host called this “feudalism”. The cows were all milked by hand.

From here, she crossed into what is now Czechia and she stayed near the West German border. In her hostel, she met a young man called Peter and together they went on an expedition to visit a church that she had seen on a hill nearby. However, overnight the church had disappeared, blown up for some reason. The two of them were taken into custody by some soldiers – they had obviously strayed into a sensitive area – and this was very frightening at the time because they did not know what was going to happen to them. Eventually, they were let go after paying a fine, part of which was to pay for the benzene used in the vehicle in which the soldiers had transported them, and the rest of which was to pay for electricity for the Iron Curtain fence! The soldiers warned them not to go near the border again.

Bridget made her way back to Munich, where she stayed in a youth hostel. Here she met an Irish-American called Bill, who was fascinated by her story. He stayed to work in Munich while Bridget and her sister Rosie travelled to Romania. They went up into the mountains where they met some shepherds, who were tending around one thousand sheep on the hill pastures. Initially, the shepherds had approached them hoping that they would have some cigarettes that they could cadge. Bridget learned that these shepherds would spend four months with their flocks up in the mountains, staying in cabins and grazing the animals up to a height of 2400m. The flocks came from the lowland collective farms. The shepherds were dressed in traditional clothes (see photo on next page) and all of their supplies had to be brought up to them on horseback during their stay.



Bridget and Rosie then moved on to Bulgaria, going to the part of the country near the Turkish border. Here they visited a collective pig farm and Bridget showed us a slide of the farm's Five Year Plan.

Back in Munich, Bill found a letter waiting for him; he had been called up to serve in Vietnam although he had already done his two years' draft. However, he managed to pretend that he had not received the letter and they left Germany and hitch-hiked back to the UK, and to the North East where Bridget's home was. Bridget and Bill later married and made Northumberland their home.

Whilst she had been away, Bridget had kept in touch with her family by post (no internet in the 1960s and phone calls would have been impossible). They would write to her via hostels – she would let them know in advance where she was going next. Although this must have been a worrying time for her parents, they could at least communicate, if only in a very delayed manner.

Apart from the fact that travel behind the Iron Curtain was not that straightforward in the 1960s, one of the most amazing things is that Bridget achieved all of this with no knowledge of the languages of most of the countries she visited. She only spoke a little French, but learned some German, Polish and Serbian in the countries she passed through. Despite the language uncertainties, she still managed to communicate, make friends and enjoy some amazing hospitality along the way. Bridget also mentioned that another issue was crossing borders, which often took a long time and could be worrying, especially when the border guards took your passport away.

Bridget finished her talk by reading from her Headmaster's report from Painscastle School, which she had attended for a year. "Bridget is a very plucky girl to travel the distance she does at the age of 4 years". Every day, she walked the one and a half miles there and back to school from Top o' Lane. This was an extremely prophetic observation by the Headmaster, Mr R Gwillim (who just happens to have been Cherry's uncle). Little did he know how far she would travel on her own in the future.

Bridget's book, "Cold War, Warm Hearts", can be obtained at bookshops in Hay, or on Amazon. Cherry also has some copies to sell so please contact her first if you would like to buy one. Her first book, "Hay Before the Bookshops, or The Beeman's Family", has a full chapter about family life in Painscastle in 1949. Both come thoroughly recommended by Cherry!

(Many thanks to Bridget Ashton for allowing us to include the map and photos in the notes.)

ML thanked Bridget for coming so far to give us such a fascinating and interesting talk, which she described as “quite an adventure”. Thank you also to Cherry Williams for organising the evening. There was plenty of chat afterwards and those in the Hall were able to learn more from Bridget about her amazing trip.

As usual, refreshments were enjoyed by all – many thanks to everyone who helped with those and the clearing up afterwards. Thanks also go to John Price who, once again, managed the technology which allowed the Zoom audience to be fully involved in the meeting, something which is very much appreciated.