

# A COMMUNITY LIFE: MEMORIES OF MARKET HARBOROUGH

by Marjorie Adcock M.B.E.



## Early Life and War Service

I was born in Cheshire but came to Harborough at the age of six and lived in Great Bowden for a time and went to the Church of England Primary School and then went on to the Grammar School, of which I have happy memories. It was a much smaller school in those days. From there I initially took up a commercial course but decided not to go down that road and decided to take up nursing. I applied to Leicester Royal Infirmary for a four year training course. I was accepted and at the end of that I was persuaded by my sister tutor to apply for a diploma in nursing getting on to the administration side I needed midwifery qualifications to do that so I did my training at Birmingham Loveday Street Maternity Hospital.

Instead of going on to acquire further qualifications D-Day was imminent (June, 1944) and with my friend, who had been with me throughout our training, decided that we would apply to the Forces. They wanted to put us into the Q.A.s in the Army but that was a larger force, but we would much rather go into the air force or the navy. We then went to the Air Ministry for an interview and we were both accepted to go into the Royal Air force Nursing Service. I was called up very soon after D Day and went to a large Royal Air Force casualty clearing hospital in Wiltshire near Wroughton. It had been decided that this was to be a casualty clearing station because it was in easy access of Swindon railway station.

The air ambulances came in night after night bringing in the wounded. Being near Salisbury Plain there were many landing strips. The severely wounded we kept and the others went by train to various hospitals. There I stayed until the European War ended. It was really an amazing experience to deal with the war wounded.

I was down to be posted and in those days there were stations all over the world – the Gold Coast, India as the Japanese War was still on in the Far East. I was then posted overseas but my friend wasn't, and this is where we parted company. I was told to go to Liverpool for embarkation. I had no idea where I was going. I was told to board this ship 'The Duchess of Richmond,' which was a troop ship and off we sailed. As we entered the Mediterranean we heard that the Japanese had surrendered. This troop ship had a complete hospital, as well as 1,500 troops, and so we were directed straight to Singapore. It took two or three weeks to get out there. When we landed in Singapore the army had taken over the main hospital and so then we took over part of the Japanese Hospital out at Seletar, and we worked side by side with the Japanese until they were evacuated back to Japan. Close by to this hospital was a leper colony to which we paid many visits taking sweet rations for the children as they had suffered many privations during the occupation. I stayed in Singapore for about a year and then was posted up to Hong Kong. We had an R.A.F. station sick quarters there which was like a mini-hospital really. It was all very pleasant.



MARJORIE IN THE RAF NURSING SERVICES 1944

I was out there for about two years but I wanted to return home to get married. My husband to be had returned from prison camp in Germany. I was on a three year tour but I had a chance to fly down to Rangoon to escort a very ill patient who was going to the Ratcliffe. So I came home by Sunderland flying boat which was lovely, with my patient and landed in Poole Harbour on Thursday. I reported to the Air Ministry on Friday. Matron said 'I know you want to come home but I would have no staff left if I bring all my nursing sisters home.' You have a week's leave and then return to Hong Kong.' That was Friday and we were actually married in Harborough Church on Tuesday by Bishop's licence.

In those days once you were a married woman you were out of the service. So I went for my demob medical at RAF Halton and then got a nasty letter which asked me to return immediately as my chest x-ray was not satisfactory. I had contracted Tuberculosis (TB) overseas and so I went back and forth to R.A.F. Halton to receive treatment for nearly two years. It was fortunate I came home at this point. I was very well treated by the RAF and finally demobilised. My TB was cured and then life was then looking up. We started married life and eventually had three children.

### **Life in Local Politics**

My husband was a solicitor in the town and being a member of the local Conservative Party was approached to stand as a local councillor. However, after nine years pressure from work forced him to make the decision not to continue as a councillor. I was then approached by the party to see if I would stand in his stead. I took over my husband's seat in the middle 1960s and that was the start of my career in local government and time as a councillor. This was the old council. I represented Great Bowden ward until reorganisation came in 1974. The councils then were divided into urban, rural and county council. The urban council included Great and Little Bowden. I represented North Ward which was Bowden and the area as far as Leicester Road. There was also South Ward and West Ward. Three wards in total. There were 12 councillors. The population was fairly static at about 10,000 between the wars and remained so into the 1960s. The other parties represented on the council were Labour and Liberal plus a few independent councillors. The Council was predominantly Conservative in composition with Labour being the next largest party. It is a shame that party politics came into local government. I think that most people who stood were standing in the interest of the town. Today it is much more party political than it was in the past.



THE OLD URBAN DISTRICT COUNCIL OFFICES, NORTHAMPTON ROAD.

### Canvassing for Local Elections

We used to do a lot of canvassing - a lot more than they do now. Nowadays it just seems to come through the post. We did a very personal canvass and a very thorough canvass. Then there was leafleting. Then knocking up on election day and having volunteers at the polling booths to count up and check numbers. It was all very well done. It was extremely important in getting other women to vote. We had a very good election machine.

I successfully stood four times for elections. I think it was in the early 1980s that I gave up being on the Council.

### The Operation of the old Urban District Council

There were four committees the Finance Committee, the most important one, Health and Housing, Public Services and Planning. I was active on all of them in turn. I went on Health and Housing first and was immediately faced with a controversial decision. I had a difficult time when I first went on because the Council needed a new refuse disposal site. I represented Great Bowden and it was proposed that the new site be placed on a field just along the Langton Road past the houses. The Great Bowden residents opposed this plan and so I was immediately thrust into a conflict. It was a fiery initiation into local government. It was quite a fight. As a councillor I was urged by the residents of Great Bowden not to go along with the decision and not use that field. Fortunately the decision was made that the refuse disposal was to go to Desborough. Nimbyism (Not In My Back Yard) was rife!

### Local Government Changes in 1970s

Under the Local Government Act of 1972 local councils were to be re-organized. This was a big issue at the time and involved the question whether there should be a successor parish council for Harborough. It is still an issue today. Lutterworth has its own town mayor and that goes back to an old tradition. Harborough never had a mayor. At the time of re-organisation a question arose, all over the country - should a town have a separate parish council? We did not fulfil the requirements of national government and therefore we did not proceed to apply for a successor parish council. That has since been amended so I understand it, and today we may be eligible. At the time it did not seem right that we should set up another tier of local government when the object of the exercise was to reduce the number of councils. And so Harborough has never had a parish council. A parish council would have to be administered and would incur extra expense. But a lot of people still feel quite strongly that there should be one. There were many parishes in the district which had their own parish council but Harborough did not.



FINAL MEETING MH DISTRICT COUNCIL 18TH MARCH 1974.

The Local Government Act 1972 came into operation in 1974. This meant Harborough had to be put together with other council areas to make a larger council. The boundary commissioners who were responsible for dividing up these areas wanted to put the Harborough Urban Council with Oadby and Wigston. We felt very strongly that Harborough was a natural centre as it had been for many years. The problem was the county boundary. We did put out tentative suggestions to the villages over the county border south of the Welland as far as Naseby, Oxendon, Farndon etc and that they would come in and form a cohesive district with us. They were based at that time on a rural rate, and there was a difference between a rural and urban rate.

They would thus have to pay a higher rate. Farndon came under Daventry's jurisdiction and their response was 'hands off!' Even today children from Farndon go to school in Clipston or Guilsborough and yet it is almost part of Market Harborough, and the villages have always looked to Harborough. The county boundary has always made this issue difficult for us as in regard to local government. We were so determined to keep Harborough as a centre and not on the periphery of Leicester. To do so we had to find an area which the boundary commission would accept. That area needed to have approximately 64,000 people. It was proposed that Lutterworth should go in with Blaby. To get an area of 64,000 people we had to consider Harborough Urban, Harborough Rural, Billesdon and Lutterworth. We needed Lutterworth to come with us, but Lutterworth didn't want to come. Another proposal was to go in with Blaby but Nigel Lawson was the M.P. at the time and objected on his constituents' behalf.

Lutterworth did not feel that they related to Harborough, but we were bound on our course and fortunately we had the support of our local M.P. John Farr, and also the county council. We put our case and it was accepted. It has not been a very easy district to administer with the addition of Lutterworth. It is the largest district in the county in area but that is what we had to do to get the compromise. Rutland also became a small independent county and that helped.

### **Chairman of the Council**

The choice of Chairman of the Council was a lot to do with timing of service, to which all parties agreed. It was not pushed politically. I first took the chair of the old Urban Council in 1972 – 1973. In the following year 1973 -74 Eric White was Chairman and I was Vice-Chairman. Not everyone wanted to be chairman. There was never any dissension over this issue at all. The role of the Chairman was to conduct the council meetings. Committee meetings of course had their own chairmen. The main council meeting was held once a month.

When you are Chair you represent the town at all kinds of events for local organisations. This was the public side of the position. We had a very good swimming baths where swimming sports competed. The Chairman was expected to attend functions there when invited. There were all sorts of school events as well public dinners. The National Farmers Union had an annual dinner to be attended. There were many dinners for anything promoted locally. One big event I did was to receive the Duke of Edinburgh as Chairman of the Council for his award scheme. He landed by helicopter on Welland Park and was received by me as Chairman of the Council. When the National Farmers Union offices were opened in the Cattle Market (they didn't stay very long) the Duke of Gloucester came and had to be received. As a councillor you are put on school boards and representation on other organisations. It can become very busy and is bound to impinge on ones private life.



MARJORIE AS CHAIRMAN OF HARBOROUGH URBAN DISTRICT COUNCIL 1972 -73.

### **Council Functions**

Schools were not the prerogative of the council but housing was. A lot of council house provision went on in contrast to today. The Urban Council was completely responsible for all council housing but now of course that's gone as it is run by housing associations. Then there was direct labour we also collected our own refuse and had our own team. I don't know if you read in the Harborough Mail the other week that the public toilets cost £53,000 have all gone to contract that's when you have lost control.



MARJORIE AT A FORMAL DINNER FUNCTION.

The council has lost direct control over so many things in fact I do wonder what is left. There only seems to be planning and even planning is encroached upon by central government. We used to have highways. Not the main highways but the side roads and Tom Hustler was in charge of those, and after him Lesley Wisher. We had a housing officer Michael Burdett. He was very good. People knew him and he knew people. They don't now - you're just a number.

### **The Association of District Councils**

One of the committees I sat on for some time was The Association of District Councils and I represented Market Harborough at county level. These meetings occurred on a monthly basis. I was then put forward as a representative for Leicestershire at national level conferences. I attended quarterly meetings at County Hall in London with other associations from around the country. Issues such as housing and planning were then discussed at national level within a local context. Where areas could be designated for housing expansion the government would usually listen to our collective views. Of course there was much more district council control over council housing at the time and this was an important issue. I used to travel up with the Northamptonshire County member whose name was Ken Hakewill who was a relative of our local historian Bob Hakewill. Ken lived at Braybrooke and so it was convenient to travel together.

At national level I was on the Tourist Committee and we used to visit various resorts like Blackpool. The Chair of the committee was the Mayor of Blackpool and he invited us to meet there. We discussed various issues related to how resorts could be developed to attract visitors. People were beginning to travel abroad for their holidays much more and local resorts were losing out and so this became a big issue at the time. I served on that committee for about two years and then re-organisation came.

### **Magistrate and Board Member of Gartree Prison**

I've been a magistrate. From being a magistrate I was on the board of visitors at Gartree Prison which was quite an onerous task. In those days a certain percentage of the Board had to be magistrates. They were an official overlooking body. They were not social visitors, although it was called a Board of Visitors. You were responsible to the Home Office, to the Home Secretary for the well being of the prisoners and the staff, as well as the condition of the premises. We also adjudicated cases in those days if there was an assault on an officer for instance. We were always looked upon as part of the prison establishment by the prisoners. The Governor would not adjudicate on cases that were referred to the Board. When I was on the Board it was a top security prison. It has been de-categorised since then. It is a centre for lifers now which has had a stabilizing effect.

Sometimes the Governor felt certain offences had to be referred to the Board and so we sat like a court martial. Our powers, however, were limited. After the first major riot the prisoners were dispersed to eight other prisons. We were asked to adjudicate two prisoners who had taken part in the riots and had been transferred to Wormwood Scrubs. There were three of us on this panel plus the clerk.

The problem about being a magistrate was that I had to retire when I reached seventy. And quite honestly I was not ready to retire. It was the one thing I really appreciated doing.

### **Voluntary Work on Appeal Committees**

I was a trustee of the old Grammar School and in 1981 I was asked to chair an appeal committee to support the old Grammar School building. It was discovered that the pillars needed replacing. A committee was formed and an appeal was launched and sufficient money was raised to replace the pillars and the floor and the kitchen was refurbished and updated.

Another appeal I chaired was as a result of being a member of St Dionysius Church. In 1983 Canon Crowe was the vicar and he said to me one day 'I wonder whether you would consider getting together a group of friends to support the church.' I agreed and called a group of townspeople and it was decided to set up a support group for the church. The church had received its Quinquennial Survey Report and it was obvious that a major operation was required to restore the stone work. This meant that a major appeal had to be launched and all these people kindly agreed to form an appeal committee. I chaired this committee and we put out an appeal stating that this important building should be supported. It was successful and the stone work was restored.

As President of the Inner Wheel (the wives of members of The Rotary Club) an inaugural meeting was set up in Leicester to introduce the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme. I attended this meeting and came back to Market Harborough and suggested setting up a local scheme. I chaired that committee for my presidential year and then

Joan White continued. When the Duke of Edinburgh came to visit the town I was asked to receive him. Recently I have been made an honorary member of the Rotary Club and try to attend as many meetings as I can.

I was also involved with the Leicestershire Association for the Disabled. I used to help on flag days here and help with transport. I even drove the first community service vehicle which was able to transport people in wheel chairs and take them to occasions such as the local operatic society shows. I handed that over to Joyce Dexter who extended it to swimming for the disabled.

I was also a Feoffee (Trustee) of the old charity namely the 'Town Estate' which amalgamated the Great Bowden and Little Bowden charities to form the 'Harborough and Bowden Charity' which gives considerable help to voluntary bodies and individuals. As a result of my work in the community I was awarded the M.B.E. in 1987 and I was very happy to receive it personally from the Queen.



MARJORIE WELCOMES THE DUKE OF EDINBURGH TO MARKET HARBOROUGH