

M.B.E.

John and Fiona Earle

Lindsey Davies is our next door neighbour, and it was she who nominated us both for the MBE. We had absolutely no idea this was happening, and when we received the letter saying we had received the award, we were so astonished that it brought tears to our eyes.

When we heard we could each invite three guests to the Investiture, Lindsey was naturally top of the list, and she kindly drove us to Buckingham Palace. It was a family occasion. Two of John's daughters and three grandchildren also came.

In a matter of two hours we went from the quiet back lanes in Hertfordshire to dense traffic on the A1, through a quiet Regent's Park and along the Mall to the gates of the Palace. There, the car was searched; our tickets inspected, and then we drove in through a small crowd to the main courtyard of the Palace, where we parked. We walked up the red carpet to the main entrance and into a huge (and chilly) hall, red, gold, chandeliers and sweeping staircases. The guests were escorted to the ballroom. The recipients went to the main Picture Gallery. On the walls we saw lovely views of Venice by Canaletto, a splendid portrait by Franz Hals, and other works by Rembrandt, Cuyp etc,



We knew that all our companions in the room had done something special, either in a civil or military sense. Altogether there were about 150 of us in the room, and there are 22 similar investitures each year. The Queen officiates at most of them.

The brief reasons for the awards had been published in the press, but something of the nature of the people came across in talking to them. They ranged from tall, lean officers to comparatively elderly men and women who preferred to sit. We first spoke to a Warrant Officer who had been instructing soldiers for many, many hours a day for many years. He smiled and said "M.B.E. My Bloody Effort" and went on to say that he had met the Queen before but felt nervous of meeting her today. Next, John spoke to a journalist from St Lucia. He and his wife had flown over for the ceremony. Then "I got mine for work in heritage. It makes me feel like a flying buttress!"

From a Welsh lady "I saw some mentally handicapped children in a room doing nothing except listen to the radio/TV. I thought 'That won't do' and went round England looking at various training schemes and liked the one proposed by Mencap. I set up a bookshop in Port Talbot and got the children to do some work. They thrived on it."

"I got mine for services to the Power Industry" The majority of civil awards are related to the work people have been doing. Relatively few are for voluntary work. We met a lady who had been involved with the education of underprivileged children in Namibia and another who had set up some schools in Nigeria and taught literally thousands of children over the last 40 years.

A tall young major in the Royal Tank regiment said "I got mine for procuring tanks. It seems I was rather good at it." At least that's what John thought he said – though it sounds like military skulduggery. It would be nice to know what the four young men in the Special Boat Service were thinking. They received the Military Cross we discovered later, and just as civil awards are not given for diligence in a job – that is expected – but something more, so bravery in the services is expected – and they will have done more.

All Saints Alive

Altogether it was a cheerful, warm atmosphere and the people we spoke to were calm, modest, almost self-effacing and several expressed their surprise at being selected.

A Colonel, whose first name was Oliver, came and talked us through how we had to approach the Queen, when to bow or Curtsey, how to stand with our toes against the dais and how to step back immediately after she had shaken hands – and to let go of her hand! Later we learnt that we would go up together. He took us to a sideroom and rehearsed us in our double act. Remembering how Chris Benham rehearses choirboys several times in their exit procedure, John said "Right. We'll do that again." So we did. The whole show was run in a highly professional, but relaxed, manner.

Then, names were called for the next group of 12-15 people to go up to the start line. It was pleasant, the term "Fiona, Mrs Earle" was used. This preserves the individuality of the person and also recognises the marriage. Single women were termed as "Sheena O'Rourke".

The lady who took us to the final line-up knew we were going together and referred to "synchronised swimming". As we stood, with one more person in front of us, John remarked to the man behind "I feel we're on the high dive now". He replied (and he works in the Home Office) "It feels more like bungee jumping to me!"

So our turn came – we walked up, stood by Oliver, and Viscount Brookeborough read out our citation. We stepped up, synchronised our bow and curtsy and stepped up to the dais where the Queen hung our medals on the little hooks that had been put on our lapels.

John had expected the Queen to ask a question and had intended to respond; however he didn't hear what she said as she gave Fiona her medal. It turned out that she had said that she supposed many of the children were orphans. Anyhow, we told her a little about Aschiana. Then the handshake

and John remembered to say "Thank you Ma'am" – to rhyme with jam. Three steps back, bow/curtsy, turn away.

After a short minute, we felt we had been speaking with a very pleasant, caring person and our Queen.

Follow up

After the Investiture was finished and as we were moving away, the Master of the Household, Air Vice Marshall David Walker came to talk about Aschiana to us. John remembers saying "This award is nice for us, but it is important for Aschiana. It means someone must have checked, independently, and found it really is a well-run show." The Air Vice Marshall agreed.

Then Viscount Alan Brookeborough came up to talk and kindly said he thought we were doing a wonderful job. John replied he felt that a problem had come up and we were trying to help sort it out.

Sir Frederick Ponsonby dreamed up this award in 1915. He wanted something that could be widely available to women and men, and originally thought of it as an award to cover wartime activities. King George V suggested it should continue after the war. Ninety years on, it seems his wishes are fulfilled. One of the earliest awards in this session was to a Russian – a double agent – for services to the United Kingdom. He is a Companion of the Order of St Michael and St George. Rosemary, Mrs Rice received an MBE for services to education in Camden and Vicki, Mrs Adkins for services to breast cancer sufferers in Hertfordshire. Everyone had nominations vetted by an expert committee. At the end came the photographs. As daughter Polly said "You two brush up quite nicely!"

After the Investiture we went to the Goring Hotel for an excellent lunch, and met Peter Gilbert's son, who is the Sommelier there. Will this change our lives? Not much – but John was asked to do a talk on Aschiana when the MBE was announced in the Birthday Honours in the Mercury – and there is still the garden, the fruit and Laya to walk.