

OBE Day. Description by Greta Putnam. 1976

November 3rd 1976 was an investiture day for some of those honoured in the **Queen's** Birthday Honours list. The weather was bright and sunny but it was rather cold. We had been told to be at Buckingham Palace by 10 am and Norman had decided to avail himself of the car-parking facilities offered to visitors in the inner courtyard of the Palace, so we set off early to join the nose-to-tail commuter car procession into Central London and found ourselves parked in the Mall about 9.30 am directed by a very young policeman into a position right against a NO PARKING sign and behind one or two even earlier arrivals.

We waited and eventually Norman was told to drive on and the traffic was halted so that we could sweep, very grandly, past the Victoria Memorial, through the main gates of the Palace, across the outer courtyard, under the archway and into the inner courtyard, where he parked-- and the police immediately examined the interior of the car, asked for the boot to be opened and then questioned Norman as to whether he recognised all that was in it. Satisfied that we carried no bombs, the police allowed us to leave the car and cross to the main door of the Palace itself which is sheltered by a glass awning, presumably so that visitors important enough to be driven right up to the door can alight under cover.

Once in the entrance hall, we saw notices which directed recipients of honours one way and their friends and relations another, so Karen went off alone up a flight of stairs and Norman and Greta followed the signs pointing visitors to another flight of stairs and along a corridor.

At the top and bottom of each flight of stairs and flanking each doorway through which we passed were pairs of dismounted troopers of the Household Cavalry, looking splendid in their beautiful and impressive uniforms all gleaming and polished, with their plumed helmets, long black riding boots, shining spurs and swords. They stood so still that the temptation to touch them to see if they were alive was almost, but not quite, irresistible.

The inside of the Palace seemed all red carpet and walls, ivory paint decorated with gold and all the doors covered with mirror-glass. It was truly regal and yet, in a curious way, homely. The splendour was warm and comfortable rather than awe-inspiring.

Norman and Greta became part of the stream of visitors moving towards the Ballroom where Investitures are held. This is a large room of beautiful proportions with a minstrels' gallery at one end and in this a military orchestra was already playing familiar music from shows and films. At the other end of the room were two red and gold thrones beneath a domed canopy and, in front of these, a dais with a table at one side and a reading desk and microphone at the other.

The whole floor of the room was occupied with seats for the guests-- rows of red and gold chairs in the centre and upholstered benches, raised in tiers, at the sides and the end of the room under the gallery.

The guests were shown to their places by ushers who seemed to be retired army, navy and air-force officers of high rank. Norman and Greta found themselves placed fairly high up at the side and end of the room between the door by which they had entered and the gallery and, once seated, found that they had a good, but rather distant view of the important place where the Queen would be.

Karen, meanwhile, had been directed to another room where those receiving the various Honours were divided into their relevant groups and the procedures to follow were explained to them.

All the organisation was carried out so quietly, with so little fuss, that the impression, all the time, was one of great friendliness.

Everyone smiled, all the officials moved without hurry and spoke quietly-- however, there was firmness and control as we discovered later.

In the Ballroom, Norman and Greta watched the arrivals and looked around, admiring the room and especially the six magnificent chandeliers. Only two blazed with light but sunlight streamed into the room from high windows and open doors leading to other corridors and the mirror-doors too reflected the light. The orchestra played, people kept arriving, a real cross-section of the community clad in a very wide variation of what were surely "best" clothes. The men were mostly in lounge suits but the ladies displayed an array of exotic hats-- or no hats at all and there was literally every kind of garment from mink to chunky acrylic cardigans and tweed skirts. At this stage, of course, only friends and relations were to be seen but the recipients of honours later proved to be more formally dressed as the men were in uniform or morning dress as well as many in lounge suits and all the ladies honoured wore hats.

Karen wore a small hat made for her by Nancy Kimmins from a very dark sapphire blue jersey material gathered into a head-hugging shape, a brown jersey dress and jacket that fitted her beautifully and was set off at the neck with a pretty brown and blue scarf, she wore brown shoes and carried a handbag matching the hat in colour. She looked really elegant.

Greta wore a dark green jersey top and skirt, with a striped blouse and turban of the same material, black patent shoes and handbag. Norman looked very smart in a dark brown suit.

About 10.30, the gentleman Usher in charge of the Investiture came to the reading desk near the thrones to explain the procedure. He said that the orchestra was that of the Irish Guards and would be playing throughout, that the Yeomen of the Guard would enter at 10.45 and the Queen's procession at 11am and that the National Anthem would be played then and at the end of the ceremony. He explained that the Lord Chamberlain would read out the title of the Honours bestowed and the names of those receiving them and he asked that there be no applause.

At 10.30, the five Yeomen of the Guard marched in through the door at the gallery end of the Ballroom, down the centre aisle and took up positions on the dais. They were dressed in the familiar uniforms, four carried pikes and the leader a staff. It was a surprise to see, at close quarters, how sharp the bayonet-type tops of the pikes are-- real weapons. All the Yeomen appeared to be quite old and, as they stood immobile in their positions on the dais from 10.45 to 12.15 one could not help feeling that their strong pikes-- or, in one case, the staff, must have been a support to them as well as symbols of guardianship.

Exactly at 11 am, the Queen and her procession entered quietly through a door near the dais, the National Anthem was played as we all rose. She was guarded by two Gurkhas, tiny like herself and dwarfed by the gentlemen Ushers in full-dress uniforms who accompanied her and carried trays on which were the decorations and honours. The Queen wore a short-sleeved blue dress, a diamond brooch and pearls and was bare-headed. The Lord Chamberlain, in morning dress, took up his position at the reading desk and the Investiture began with the awarding of a Knighthood of the Order of the Bath. To Greta's great amusement the orchestra played " Raindrops keep falling on my head" as the new Knight, knelt before the Queen.

In every case, the Lord Chamberlain read out the honour and then ^{the name} ~~that~~ of the person receiving it. The Investitures proceeded smoothly and quickly. Obviously the Queen and her aides have perfected this but it was delightful to see how smoothly everything went, how, in dubbing knights, her hand came up with the sword, fell to her side and then was raised again, empty and ready to take up the sash of the honour to put round the neck of the person kneeling before her. Close watching showed how the gentleman usher behind her gave and received the sword from the Queen as her hand came down although apparently her entire attention was devoted to the recipient of the honour. As each person came in front of the Queen, he bowed, took two paces forward received the honour, the Queen spoke a few words and then there were two paces back, another bow and the honoured one moved away to

the Queen's left and into another room where the honour was taken from him, put into its proper box and returned and then that person was sent round to take his place amongst the watchers in the Ballroom. After the Knights came the Commanders of the Order of the British Empire-- C.B.E.-- no dubbing with a sword now but the medals of the order were fixed by the Queen onto a hook, already put in the right place on the recipient's clothing. The orchestra still played but it was not possible to find any connection between the people honoured or the awards they received ⁱⁿ and the gentle flow of music again. Groups of people ~~on their way~~ to be honoured passed through the Ballroom in small processions from time to time very near to where Norman and Greta were sitting and as Karen passed through, she saw us and gave a tiny wave and a smile.

After the C.B.E.s were the O.B.E.s Military Division-- a steady stream of recipients-- and the pattern of the procedure could be clearly seen. The recipients, having been taken in groups to the corridor bordering the Ballroom on the Queen's right, came forward one by one, first to an officer at the doorway of the Ballroom, then ~~forward~~ ^{forward} to another ~~nearer~~ the Queen and finally, as the previous person bowed or curtseyed and left the Queen, went forward towards her and stood in front of her. As each person reached the Queen, the Lord Chamberlain gave the name. Men were given their christian and surnames, officers their rank and then their names, maiden ladies were called Miss, followed by their christian and surnames and married ladies their christian names followed by ~~their~~ Mrs and their surnames.

It was a very proud moment when Karen, Mrs Finch 's name was called. She was only the third lady to be honoured on that November day. The Queen spoke briefly to Karen, hooked on her O.B.E. (Officer of the Order of the British Empire) and Karen moved away.

Norman and Greta thought that Karen might come and join them when she came round to the Ballroom -- there was room where they were sitting and Karen ~~kn~~ew where that was and indeed she said afterwards that it had been in her mind but such was the gentle and firm control exerted by the ushers that she found herself directed onto one of the small chairs in the centre of the room.

After the O.B.E.s came the M.B.E.s (Members of the Order of the British Empire) There were a great many of those and Norman and Greta, after the high-spot of Karen's investiture, became aware of the repetitious nature of the ceremony and it could, perhaps, have ended rather tamely but suddenly there came the special awards.

Medals for gallantry went to a very young, tall policeman, a helicopter pilot, a London fireman and soldiers from Ireland.

Finally two policemen from Northern Ireland stood together to receive their medals, the National Anthem was played, the Queen and her bodyguards and aides left and everyone relaxed and began to move. Visitors joined up with their honoured relations and friends. Karen, Norman and Greta met up and looked at the O.B.E. in its box lined with grey-- a heavy gilt medallion in a shape rather like a Maltese cross with a very pretty carnation pink ribbon edged with pale grey.

Everyone was moving towards the exits now, through doorways still guarded by the troopers of the Household Cavalry. Karen told how much at home she had felt recognising so many people from the Lord Chamberlain's office and how many seemed to have recognised her. Indeed Colonel Johnson, who had been one of the Queen's aides, made a special journey into the courtyard to seek her out and was extremely friendly and amusing.

Eventually we left, first to go back to Ealing to show the O.B.E to Margaret, Karen's help at Western Gardens and then on to the Centre where there was wine for a toast and everyone waiting to hear about all that had happened.

It was an unforgettable experience-- the feeling of being part of something so important and yet so friendly and joyful-- the tremendous mixture of regal splendour and ordinary people and the thrill for Karen of receiving an honour and for Norman and Greta to have been present at so splendid an occasion for her and everyone else who was there.

Leaving room we were
passed on by a number of
the LCO, most of whom I
had known for a long time.
The last one, a 15 year from
the "Bum, Whipped", "Toss at
HCP yesterday, and I did want
to visit you and all your pretty
girls, but there was no time
so I went off giggling and