

## **A FOND FAREWELL TO THE FRIDAY CLUB**

**by Muriel Brooks 10 February 2022**

It seems that the coronavirus pandemic that began in 2019 has put paid to the already-fading Friday Club, killed it off, driven nails in its coffin, and is about to bury it. It is so sad to see it go, and I think it appropriate to write an eulogy and blow our own trumpets. Below is attached a short document I wrote 20 years ago at the request of Gloucestershire Rural Communities Council and that is where one can see details of the thinking behind what we did. Here, however, I am about to do what is usually frowned upon – that is, name some significant names (with heartfelt apologies to all who have been left out). In the late 1980s I was recruited to be a Day Centre driver by Lindsay Gardiner, who was quite severe with me when I muttered about being very busy with three small children. She told me I would find time to do it on occasional Fridays, and indeed I did – as did many other current mothers of Eastcombe Primary School children as well as a good range of other beneficent people. We were outraged when, for various reasons, the Day Centre had to close. It ran for 18 years, and made a great contribution to community life. A meeting (about 45 people turned up) was held to see what could be done, and plans were made for its successor which we would call simply the 'Friday Club'. We named a Chairman – Eileen Horn-Smith (who annually gave all helpers a very good summer lunch), a Secretary - me, and a Treasurer – Pamela McWilliam (whose good work was followed later by Libby Rolls).

When I realized that I could not single out many, I looked back at the records and found that in 2011, halfway through the lifetime of the Club, I had about 70 names on the mailing list. Sometimes there were more, recently there have been very few. Our philosophy was to involve as many people as possible, so although there were never more than about 15 members at a time, we had 'team leaders', helpers and drivers, members' families and other people in the village involved. Favourite visitors were always the school children, who sometimes came in to sing, rehearse their plays, bring their packed lunches to eat with us, recite, play music. Always the mutual pleasure of the meeting was palpable, even though the ages of those involved ranged over more than 90 years. Almost equally popular with the members were visitors such as Dr Bessie Crouch, people connected with the Chapel – and indeed and especially Anita Heywood and Margaret Kershaw who not only helped but also led gentle exercises. These were much appreciated by the ladies present, but Reg Fawkes used to say 'Oh cripes, I'm off,' and take himself to the pub for a Mackeson. He returned for lunch when the coast seemed clear. His niece Beryl Freebury and others connected to Scouts and Guides had action songs that left us rather more puffed than Anita did.

I think what I am trying to say is that Friday Club was fun for all involved. There was much hilarity even when joints hurt a lot. At the end of the session once I was following two members, Molly James and Gerry Lowe, both in their mid-nineties, up the lane and heard Gerry say 'Do you, know, my face *aches* with laughing!' No wonder Friday Club was popular: it wasn't just a case of 'getting people out the house' – it was more like having a regular happy family party. Helpers as well as members valued it – indeed, some helpers were older than some members (though we had an unvoiced policy of not accepting members under 75). I remember our surprise after the death of one of our drivers, Walter Wright, to discover he had been 87. Oops!

I should particularly like to pay tribute to Karen Winstanley, as nurse at Frithwood Surgery who had special responsibility for the elderly. She was an occasional driver, but much more importantly she was our conduit between the elderly

population and the doctors of that time. Not only did she come to administer 'flu jabs when we were in session, she also alerted us to particular health issues – and we could mention anything worrying that we had noticed among her patients. Sadly for all, I believe that her post was not continued after she retired, so those running Friday Club in recent years have found it less easy to recruit new members.

Another unique – I think – feature was that for years successive landlords of The Lamb supplied the hot main dish that we served for lunch. We were extremely grateful to them. Team leaders took on making the puddings (very popular) as they could be produced at home. The thread was broken with the arrival of Hungarian landlords who, although very nice, did not have the same level of commitment to the community. Indeed, they needed to be paid properly. We did not wish to pay more than £40, so providing the food ourselves then became a bit of a heavy task. Towards the end of time at the Chapel, cooking had devolved on to just Felicity Waggett and myself, with Vicki Musson also continuing as a team leader. After I jumped ship in 2016 they soldiered on at the Scout Hut, still with a lot of helpers and drivers and outside visitors, still continuing traditions such as the Christmas party. We would occasionally go out for a pub lunch – the Club was always in funds – and also there were some memorable al fresco meals, usually at places that involved exciting driving. Sarah Lewis provided Coronation chicken, salad, new potatoes, massive meringues (yes, you understand it was memorable) served on the terrace at Fidges Hill House. Surrounded by lavender, looking over Bismore in the sunshine, we were very happy and Grace Winstone announced that it was 'the best meal I've had since in service'. Since about 1930, then. And Avril Dooley and Graham Brown would have us down at Bismore Farm, bliss. It was once so hot that I had to go home for a heap of hats, and very nice the chaps looked too in my wide-brimmed straws... Great thanks also have to go to Rose Dickenson, who lives out past The Camp. For years, in gratitude for our care of her mother Vera, Rose entertained Friday Club members and that day's drivers and helpers, to a full Christmas lunch, cooked by Rose and her family and served at a long table in the conservatory. We also visited sometimes for a summer garden party, and were always sent home with Stancombe Stone garden ornaments... Rose was helped by Cicely Wiggins and Eileen Bucknell, and that reminds me to say that we fixed no geographical limit on membership, provided drivers could be found. Vera lived by Belvedere Mill, Adam Smith and Basil Weaving came from Bisley, Olive Hunt from Oakridge, other members from Brownshill, Bussage and Chalford. Marion Smith – born in May Cottage, Eastcombe – and Frank Patient came all the way from Ebley. In the early days of Friday Club some members had known one another all their lives, but as that generation of 'locals' died there were others new to this area – such as my own mother – who came from all over to be near family members. All such families were so grateful that Friday Club provided friendship for all.

Bisley had lost its provision for the elderly, though there is now something available. Those of us running the Friday Club helped inspire GRCC to spread the word and initiatives such as Oakridge's lunch club took off. Even women who ran the day care at Horsfall House in Minchinhampton came to 'see what you do that our members say is so wonderful'. The inimitable hard work and dedication put into Friday Club, and other village organizations over many years, by Felicity Waggett contributed largely to her being awarded the MBE recently, something which makes us all very proud. Thank you to all who were involved, however tangentially or briefly, with Friday Club over the years. We did well!