

# PARTY AT THE PALACE

## Buckingham Palace on Monday 3rd June 2002

••••• by Jim Francis •••••

The letter dated 29th April 2002 began, 'I have great pleasure in inviting you, on the Queen's behalf, to 'Party at the Palace' at Buckingham Palace on Monday 3rd June.'

I then remembered that, with other members of the family, we had all phoned a given number provided on the television, "to apply for a special concert to celebrate the Queen's Golden Jubilee." Apart from the attraction of the venue, the night was to bring together great talent and great sounds to span 50 years of golden memories including four stars who had been honoured by the Queen: Dame Shirley Bassey, Sir Elton John, Sir Paul McCartney and Sir Cliff Richard.

We were soon to learn that many millions had also applied for tickets and that as far as our family were concerned, Mary and myself were the only ones of the other 12,000 to receive the card stating that "The Master of the Household has received Her Majesty's command to invite Mr and Mrs Francis to a Concert to be held in the Gardens of Buckingham Palace on Monday, 3rd June 2002."

There followed a list of conditions and suggestions such as no children under the age of eight should attend, no luggage, video cameras or food and drink would be allowed into the gardens. The persons performing apart from those mentioned came to over thirty including Tony Bennett, Eric Clapton, Tom Jones, Queen plus special guests, Will Young, Rod Stewart and many, many more.

On our arrival on the night we would each receive a hamper containing smoked salmon roulade, Golden Jubilee Chicken with a Pasta salad, Strawberries and cream, Oaten Cakes and half a bottle of Champagne. There would also be available beer, tea, coffee and water. Also a vegetarian

alternative if required. While we ate our picnic on the lawn, a pre-party entertainment would be provided by the Big Buzzard Boogie Band, Bootleg Beatles, The Magnets, Mee, Soulfish, Weapons of Sound and many more including magicians, in fact a typical family party introduction.

A few days after the invitation from the Palace a letter arrived from NUMAST, the Merchant Navy Union, asking whether I would like to take part in the Golden Jubilee Festival Weekend, that is, in a procession to take place on Tuesday 4th June down and around the Mall to mark the Queen's Golden Jubilee, as there was to be a Merchant Navy contingent in the Services Parade.

Mary, on learning about this advice insisted that if I was marching, then as she had been in the Merchant Navy for two years, she would also like to take part and so, with this information passed to the General Secretary at head office, the following day we each received our security wristbands and instructions to be in Tothill Street at 1pm. "Look out for the Red Ensign. First there will be a practice form-up and position in the parade. A packed lunch will be provided. WC facilities close by".

There also arrived in the same post, two tickets from the Queen's Gallery Buckingham Palace, that we had booked by phone. "Royal Treasures: A Golden Jubilee Celebration", for Sunday 2nd June. As we were going to spend several days in London we had decided to pay a visit to the new Queen's Gallery opened in May 2002 as part of the celebrations. It provides over three and a half times the display space of the previous Queen's Gallery, inaugurated in 1962. The contents are well documented and quite breathtaking with portraits by Reynolds and Gainsborough. In the Cabinet

Rooms are seventy pieces by Fabergé. I don't know why they have on display the recent addition to the Royal Collection of 'The Queen' by Lucian Freud, presented by the artist in December 2001. We were told that it improves the further you stand away from it, which, to a sailor, means over the horizon!

And so on the big day, Monday 3rd June, with 12,000 other members of the public who had won prized tickets in the ballot, we made our way past more than a million spectators who were determined to join in first hand with the celebrations by watching giant screens around the palace and in the park. Within minutes we were inside the palace collecting our hampers and out onto the lawn picking a spot close to an agreeable group of entertainers. We were struck by how orderly and well mannered the guests were, the attendants also, in fact by everybody during our stay in London over several days. When we entered a building a door was opened by somebody with a smile. When we left they hoped we had enjoyed ourselves.

The concert itself has been well documented but you have to be at a venue to appreciate the atmosphere. Quite a lot of the time we were standing up, singing and waving our arms to the music. When the artist finished the audience sat down and at the next song or hit, we were up and off again. Finally the Queen, complete with her family, came on-stage and we all listened to the Prince of Wales paying a public tribute to both his mother and father. When he finally turned to the Queen and said "Mummy!" there was a deafening cheer from the audience. It was great to have been one of the lucky "few" to have been there that night. Then followed the fireworks and within minutes afterwards we were leaving the grounds, with the parade to look forward to the following day, "down the Mall and round the Queen Victoria memorial at 108 paces a minute!"

On the following day arriving at the meeting point at 1pm, we soon found the

Red Ensign and roughly 140 Merchant Navy personnel, serving or ex-mariners, with ninety in uniform from the ferries and cadet colleges, carrying three banner flags and many smaller flags. The rest of the contingent comprised an assortment of retired pilots from different ports, retired ships' captains, (one in his eighties complete with uniform and walking stick), and quite a few elderly DEMS, (one had twenty medals and a certificate at hand complete with confirmation of each war zone - three from Russia, two from America, one from Canada.) I learned that you could wear your father's medals on your right breast with your own on the left side.

It was interesting 'yarning' away with all these retired mariners. Every year between 200 to 300 go back to Archangel and Murmansk for reunion gatherings. Goodness knows what they get up to! One said it cost him £100 for a night in a local hospital to be treated after some heavy celebrating! Some spoke of comrades who had married Russian girls which proved disastrous for these ladies. On their return to Russia the seamen found that their wives had been sent off to the salt mines by Stalin and were never heard of again. One retired mariner showed me photographs of his father during the first world war in a prison camp in Germany. After the war he went back into the Merchant Navy and was drowned when the hospital ship he was on sank in 1944. On board were 400 stretcher cases bound for the U.K. Quite a few marchers belonged to the Merchant Navy Association, where there is a strong demand for The Merchant Navy to be recognised for the 33,000 killed during the last war alone, possibly through the award of a medal.

Close behind our contingent was a small group of men who I thought were Morris Dancers. I was to learn that they were Coast Guard officers from Falmouth depicting the service in the eighteenth century when farmers performed this service, part time. In Horseguards Parade Ground they had a cart

28 and two bullocks to climb into, complete with equipment.

As the time grew nearer for the march, our elderly parade marshal arrived, leaning heavily on a walking stick, arranging us into lines often. Then, as happens at such moments, a police van full of uniformed police officers, pulled up beside us. The parade marshal "wasn't having none of this?" He went over to the police driver and said, "I suppose you've stopped here because we're in the Merchant Navy and we're going to get drunk and start a fight!" "Watch it", came the reply, "any trouble from you grandad, and I'll get extra 'back-up' and put you in the 'cooler.'" On his return, the marshal winked at us and said, "that's put that lot in their place! Now, how about a sing-song."

As the time passed, slowly we edged our way up towards the top end of the Mall, different groups being shuffled to and fro. Eventually, the lifeboat service were in front of us with a large craft being towed by a tractor. Behind us was the British Legion of about a hundred strong, each carrying a large banner, little did we know that when we came within sight of the T.V. cameras, David Dimbleby wouldn't give the Merchant Navy a mention with such competition fore and aft!

We were soon to find how helpful it was

to have a military band playing. Once we were in the Mall, Mary and I, together with the 138 others in our group were striding out as if we were in the Brigade of Guards. The shouting and cheering from one million spectators was unbelievable. One man shouted out, "Good old British Merchant Navy! We wouldn't have won the last war without you!" It then suddenly, seemed all worthwhile being there. As we rounded the Queen Victoria memorial, with the uniformed block marching ahead, we 'oldies' at the rear waved our flags, the captain from Palm Line raised his walking stick, the invalid in his wheelchair his cap, and the Queen and Duke of Edinburgh, both laughing, waved back.

Soon we were back at base. With farewells said, then it was onto the tube, into the car and back to Dover after a most remarkable memorable few days.

*N.B. Statements overheard from the public:*

*"How could Britain be so good at making such ceremonies run like clockwork - yet be so incapable of making trains run on time?"*

*"All those who thought the Windsor dynasty could not survive the pressure of modernity were wrong. The British monarchy is alive and well!"*

*What we will remember, most of all, is the sound of one million cheering people in the centre of London and not one cross word.*

## The Western Heights Preservation Society

*report from Chris Taft*

The Western Heights Preservation Society (WHPS) has now been in existence for almost two years. It was set up not only to help preserve Dover's Western Heights, but also to disseminate information on its history and make people more aware of the site and its fascinating and important development. At the foundation of the Society the following mission statement was adopted, which highlights our aims:

*The Western Heights Preservation Society was formed for the conservation, preservation and restoration of the Western Heights fortifications at Dover.*

Since the official foundation of the group in July 2000 we have launched several projects, both public facing and behind the scenes.

Some of our past and present work is summarised below.