

LOST AND FOUND

Judy White Staber

Photos and Friends from Long Ago



Silverlands

FOR THE PAST FEW MONTHS, I have been sorting papers and photographs from the past—the distant past—my childhood in England. When World War II ended, I was a small child of four, and my actor mother put my older sister and me into The Actors' Orphanage. I lived there for twelve-and-a-half years, coming to America when I was sixteen to be with my mother after many years without her.

After a long and happy life in the US with a career in the performing arts myself, two marriages, two daughters, and now, finally, retirement in the Hudson River Valley with my second husband, I am sorting the papers of my life. I have written two memoirs—one about my unusual childhood and one about my actor-mother. Both books

required a great deal of research, photographs, and correspondence, so I had created two considerable archives.

My mother had a long and successful life in the theatre as an actor, director, teacher, and producer, both in Great Britain and North America. The memoir about her, *Rise Above It, Darling* (2022), entailed collecting all manner of theatrical memorabilia. After publication, I gathered the materials together and shipped them across the Atlantic to the University of Bristol Theatre Collection, where they would be housed in their archives.

The book about my childhood was another matter. The house I lived in, Silverlands, was a grade II listed building in Chertsey, Surrey, just south of London. Georgian in style, it

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Cordie on the swings

sat on a hill and was a most unlikely home for sixty-odd “orphans” of the theatre—but it was—from 1938 to 1958. We were, according to the letterhead, “children made destitute by the profession.” At any one time, about fifty or sixty children made the most of the twenty-seven rooms and grew up in that house. Later, because we were sort of like brothers and sisters, some of us stayed in touch. When I decided to write about it all, I began correspondence with those I knew and gathered information about the history of the house, about the Actors’ Charitable Trust that took care of us, and about the well-

known and well-to-do people of the British theatre (most notably Sir Noël Coward) who made sure there was enough money to feed us, clothe us and keep us in line.

We held our first reunion in 2000. We tried very hard to find all the children who had ever been there and who could possibly still be alive. Liz and I put out feelers all over the States and Canada; Ann in Australia did what she could in the Oz papers; and my sister Susannah, aided by Richard Attenborough (the Committee was stuffed with famous people), did yeoman work in England looking for former orphans and staff who might be

still alive. Granville Bantock pitched in and found those who had been wards of the Actors’ Orphanage before World War II. Between us, we found more than a hundred, but not all.

After that reunion several more orphans were found and they came to a second reunion in 2005, and a few more came to the third and last one in 2008. All three reunions were held in Chertsey with visits to our fading former home about a mile or so along the Guildford Road.

My memoir about Silverlands was published in 2010 and because of it I heard from Siobahn’s daughter in Vancouver, but no one else until the summer of 2012.

That year was emotional and amazing. I found two more individuals from my childhood at the Actors’ Orphanage—people I had thought I would never hear from again.

In early August 2012 my friend Tom was surfing the Internet, staying indoors during a heat wave. He called me and said he had found a site called Urbex that had photographs and information about Silverlands. Of course, I went on the site immediately. The lovely old house was showing signs of disrepair. I read posts from people who had known of the house. After it was an orphanage, it had been variously a nurses’ home, a branch of Surrey University, and now it sat empty, owned by some foreign gentleman who wanted to tear it down or turn

it into a glamorous convention center. Well, he can’t tear it down, because it is a Listed Building, so maybe he’s waiting for it to fall down. A shame. It was a wonderful house to grow up in. While scrolling down the posts on Urbex, I came across one from a person named Cordie who said she had lived there when she was little. I replied to her post and said I remembered her and asked her to contact me. She did.

Cordula came to Silverlands in 1955 with her mother, Inge Maheinike. Cordie was about four then and I was twelve. Inge came at first to work in the kitchen and later became assistant matron. She had trained as a nurse. Cordie joined the gang of under-sixes—some staff kids, some orphans. My mother had long since gone to Canada, followed by my sister, and that made me feel very unwanted. To take me out of myself, I was put in charge of the little ones.

Silverlands closed in 1959 due to expenses and too few needy children; by 1958 the Welfare State was in full swing. Along with the few remaining children, Cordie and Nurse Inge went to live in one of the two small houses in Watford that were purchased by the Actors’ Orphanage Fund. Nurse Inge was to be Mrs. Parker’s assistant housemother. In 1960, Inge was diagnosed with cancer and she died a year later. Cordie was only nine. Mrs. Parker’s adult son Nigel, who was married, adopted Cordie, and Cordie

went to live with them and their two small children. When the marriage didn't last, Cordie lived with her adoptive mother. At eighteen she left home. She wrote to me in 2012:

Sorry for the delay in replying... I am just so overwhelmed with your email and photos. I only have one photo of me when I was a baby and one of my mother—so it was amazing to show my youngest daughter a photo of me when I was little. I just have to say thank you so much.

I have vague memories of Silverlands... more of the outside. I remember we camped outside—one of the boys had an accident with a lawn mower??? Plus having breakfast and the free gift in the Cornflake packets. I have to be honest; I vaguely remember you and Lulu, the others not so...

I cannot thank you enough for writing back—as my past has always been a non-event. I never knew much about my mum—my stepmother was never forthcoming and things that she did say were not particularly nice, I do not

know why?? So, in the end, I never asked. Then they (she and Nigel) divorced and I never spoke to Nigel till much later.

I am still married to Paul—married in 1985—who I met whilst in England. We live in Brisbane after moving to Australia in 1996. At present I am working for an insurance company... after having our own business for years, I love the fact that I work and leave, with no extra work thereafter.

We have three children—Katie, 26 (born Christmas Day), Thomas, 23, and Annaliese, 20—no grandchildren. I have warned them we're not ready yet as we only just had the children fly the coop, so to speak.

I did see Kirsten and David (the Slaters who were last and best heads at Silverlands). I actually came over with Katie when she was three and caught up with Nigel and his second wife, Jean. Alas, we had a house fire in 1994—Christmas Day—and lost all but clothes we were in. A lot of my papers went and I have not been very good in following up.



Little ones in the sand pit

When I was writing my book, I learned from the Slaters, who knew Inge, that she had had a very hard life. She was a German Jew, had been in a concentration camp during the war, and lost her entire family. While living in a displaced persons camp she met and married her husband. Both had been badly—both physically and mentally—damaged by the war. She was pregnant with Cordie when her husband died in the camp.

After Cordie was born, she managed to immigrate to England, took a practical nursing course, and got a job at Silverlands with her little girl. For me, Nurse Inge was a wonderful, kind, and gentle woman. I was thirteen and going through teenage angst, feeling left behind by my mother and sister. Inge would always be ready for a talk and a hug. I never knew that her life had been so much harder than mine would ever be.



Summer 1958, Norma front center, Gay rear right

Oh Cordie, what a life, but I am so glad I have found her and know that her life has turned out well.

Two days after finding Cordie, we received an order for my book *Silverlands* from England, with an address and email. I packaged up the book, sent it off, and emailed the buyer to say it was on its way. The buyer emailed, saying that she had bought the book for her aunt who had been at Silverlands as a child.

I wrote back that as I had been there from 1947 until 1959, it was possible that I knew her aunt. Could she tell me who that was?

Kirsty, the niece, wrote back that her aunt was Gaynor. I was stunned.

Gaynor was a little younger than me. She had come to Silverlands in 1953 and was my roommate until Silverlands closed. We had tried so hard to find her and now here she was.

I asked Kirsty if Gaynor would like me to write to her. And she wrote back:

I know she found some of her time at Silverlands difficult and was so thrilled that there was a connection there again. My mum wants the copy you have sent to look at. She was sent to a Doctor Barnardo's home and was separated from her sister Gaynor. She

has spent a long time looking for Gay and only found her earlier this year.

Gay now lives in La Jolla, California. Mum spoke to her last night and she was delighted and couldn't believe that we had found you. Just to warn you—she has been ill and is on some painkillers so can be a bit drowsy on the phone.

Gaynor Maria Alexandra Cross-thwaite—how could you forget a girl with a name like that? She had the longest legs of any girl I knew and a lovely olive complexion. She was in fact rather exotic looking, but then we were actors' children and came in all shapes and sizes. I wrote that I would call her the next day.

To find both Cordie and Gaynor was wonderful.

I called Gaynor. We had a long chat. She has been living in southern California since the early 1960s. When she was twenty-one and taking college courses at California State, she was in a terrible car accident with her then boyfriend and another friend. A car, going ninety miles an hour was coming straight at them in the wrong lane on the freeway. Gay was in intensive care for weeks and had multiple surgeries on her hands and legs. She ended up losing half of one leg. She married her

boyfriend. They had two sons, but it was what she called a “pity marriage” and didn’t last. She is now married to a man who has been her friend for years. He also had two sons, so they raised four boys, now grown. She says she is okay now, but still has to take painkillers, but she is happy in her marriage. She has to walk with crutches. How ghastly to be injured so badly, so young. I shall stay in touch now that I have found her. Honestly, it’s like finding a younger sister; we were in the same bedroom together for five years.

On January 15, 2014, at 1:45 am I received a text from a Norma S—subject: Silverlands.

Hi Judy, I've just read your book Silverlands and thought you might like to know that I am the little Norma that you mention in the book. I spent my childhood at Silverlands, but your memories are much better than mine. Maybe I have shut out a lot, but reading your book did bring back some happy times.

I replied immediately:

Dear Norma, I cannot tell you how happy I am to hear from you. I have wondered for years what happened to you and where you went after



Confirmation Day, 1957, Gaynor front right

Watford. Rumor had it, and it was mostly rumor, that you had been adopted by the McKelvey/Reily family, but Val (McKelvey) didn't know where you were. Then someone said you had gone to Australia and became a nurse. I am so pleased that you read my book and that it brought back some happy times.

We tried so hard to find you for the reunions. The first one in 2000 was very large, as you could see by the photo in my book. Then we had another

one in 2005 in Chertsey and the last one in 2008. I have stayed in touch with some of the people, others have disappeared again, but it was good to see them and know that they are alive and well.

Because of my book I have also been in touch with Gaynor and Cordie. Cordie is in Australia and Gaynor in California. Terry Watt, Ed Sanders, and Liz Eastham are all in North America. Liz and I have been close for years and years. She came to America a

couple of years after me and has mostly lived near me for all those years. I think I say in the book that she married former "orphan" Jon Morris (who it turned out was also living near us in New York State). They moved to North Carolina and now they have separated. It didn't work out and she has left North Carolina. She has a small house near her son Michael on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, but she will be moving back to New York State in the spring and I can't wait. Liz and I both went to Silverlands in 1947 and it seems that we have always been together.

Anyway, enough about that. How are you? Where are you? Have you had a good life? Are you married? Children? And do you want to stay in touch? I am respectful of people's privacy and want to know if I can tell anyone "Norma is found!" I'd certainly like to tell Liz and the Slaters, who are very old now and failing, but they would love to hear that you are well.

Let me know if you wish to remain "unfound" or if you would like to hear from

people. I will respect your wishes. And again, I am so, so happy to hear from you. It was worth writing the book just to get this e-mail.

Love always, Judy

Thanks for the lovely reply. I now live in Australia and have been here for the last forty-five years or so. The rumor was right—I did get adopted by the Rieley family; not a good mix, lots of problems for me. Looking back now I must have had lots of unresolved problems. I think I just could not connect emotionally. I was told by Mrs. Holland (head of the Trust) that my mother was getting married again and did not want me, so I think I said yes to the adoption out of some kind of fear for my future. The Trust got me a job as an apprentice cook at a London hospital. Not really me. I didn't fit somehow. Anyway, to cut a long story very short, I decided to go to Australia, which I did when I reached twenty-one. Looking back, which I have made a strong effort not to do until quite recently, I just put all the past right behind



On the beach, at left are Liz, Gaynor, and the Author

me, as a result, my memory of children and staff has been shut out, but I do have very strong and happy memories of the Slater family and would be happy for you to let them know that I am found.

I have made a good life for myself here. I formed a relationship very shortly after arriving here—not a good sign. The result being two daughters, who I brought up on my own. Never did I think of putting them away anywhere no matter how hard things got. Both of

them have had good university educations, and we are a small, but very close family unit. I have two granddaughters and a lovely son-in-law. I live on my own, which suits me. I think I have always been a solitary person. I have a nice property of twenty acres or so in the Aussie bush, 30 km from Bendigo, Victoria. I would be happy for you to pass on to all that I am here. It may help me to get some memories back. I think it's time.

Love, Norma

It is twelve years later and I am now eighty-three. I have lost touch again with those three childhood friends. I am afraid to contact them only to learn that they have passed on. I feel sure Gaynor is no longer with us—she had so many physical ailments. But maybe Norma and Cordie are still in Australia—who knows.

Perhaps I should drop them a line.

I have sorted and packed up, as best I could, all the hundreds of photographs from the reunions, from my childhood days, and from other memories. I have gathered together all the information about the children of the Actors Orphanage, both before I went there and after Silverlands was closed. I have put together the several type-script memoirs by former “orphans,” the letters and newspaper articles and anything else pertaining to Silverlands, as well as the drawings of the house—inside and out—by Brian Pinero-Terriss, a former “orphan” who became a highly respected Channel Island artist and was a dear older “brother.”

Everything has been boxed—the archives of my memories—and sent to the Chertsey Museum's manager and curator, Emma Warren. She has thanked me profusely. “This is an

Everything has been boxed—the archives of my memories—and sent to the Chertsey Museum.

amazing collection of stuff, which I am very happy to add to our collection for the benefit of future researchers.”

Friends have said, “If that were me, I would have thrown it all away.” But I can't do that.

Someday, somewhere, somebody in the future might walk into the Museum and say, “My grandfather/grandmother grew up near here in a place run by the Actors' Trust many years ago. The house was called Silverlands. Do you know anything about that?”

Then the Museum staff can say, “Why don't you come through to our archive room. I'm sure we can find your relative.” ♦