

# PARTY AT THE PALACE

For about 25 years Brian and I have enjoyed working with groups of young people aged between 14 and 25 years as they tackled the challenges of the Duke of Edinburgh's Award Scheme.

Successful Gold Award candidates received invitations to attend a presentation ceremony and meet members of the Royal family at Buckingham Palace, St. James' Palace or Holyrood Palace but the volunteers who trained, encouraged and supported them through their Bronze, Silver and Gold Awards were not invited unless nominated as a guest (a rare event).

This year to celebrate 50 years of the Award, a Garden Party was held exclusively for the volunteer leaders and supporters and 8,500, including ourselves, accepted the invitation and converged on Buckingham Palace at 2pm on 13th July 2006. I was hopping along on crutches, following a hip operation, so we booked a mini-cab and a taxi to ease the journey to and from the party. I was determined not to miss out this time.



The gates were due to open at 2pm so, in true 'Bainbridge style', we arrived 45 minutes early and joined the other early birds on the benches and grass in Green Park. Garden party guests were easy to spot amongst the cyclists, tourists and joggers and we rapidly got into conversation with D. of E. folks from Hereford.

As a policeman unlocked the gates, huge queues of guests lined up ready with tickets and I.D. (Two different types required please). After the outer gate had been entered, guests joined the long queues forming in front of the palace. The tickets and I.D. were checked again at the archway entrance into the palace courtyard and a third time at the entrance to the ground floor reception area. Here we walked on plush red carpets, past impressive-looking pictures and gold and red seats guided skilfully and efficiently by Palace staff. We passed through a doorway dated 1853 into a pretty room with enormous mirrors and china cabinets filled with dainty plates and cups and flowed out through the French doors onto a huge lawn.

We each had a numbered assembly point to locate on the lawn and there were scouts, guides, cadets and young volunteers holding large numbers so guests soon sorted themselves into 50 groups and looked round to see who was in their group.

People who had worked together in sweat shirts, trousers, wet-weather gear, trainers and boots now found themselves playing 'guess the guest' as they scanned the assembled throng of smartly-dressed party-goers looking for clues. It is strange how different clothes make old friends difficult to recognise.

Our group organiser welcomed us and introduced us to our celebrity guest, Sean Fitzpatrick, retired captain of the New Zealand All Blacks rugby team. He was an entertaining speaker and he made presentations of special certificates to five people in our group who then briefly told us about their work in the Award scheme. Every group had similar short presentation ceremonies so there were lots of interesting celebrities to meet and autograph hunters were active later in the tea tent.

At 3.30pm tea was served in the main tea tent. At last there was a welcome opportunity to sit down - if you could find an empty chair! I was struggling on my crutches by this time and was grateful when Brian found a vacant seat for me.



There were lots of dainty sandwiches and a variety of savoury and sweet bite-sized finger foods which guests piled onto neat rectangular plates. The thicker your skin, the greater the pile of goodies. Empty plates and cups were swiftly tidied away by vigilant catering staff and there were opportunities to return to select more food as required through the afternoon.

At 4pm the National anthem played and the Royal Family arrived and processed through

an avenue of guests, which swept in a large arc across the lawn to the V.I.P tea tent. The Queen, Prince Philip, Prince Edward and Sophie chatted to a variety of guests at random along the route and a small group of photographers snapped away - recording the events. We noticed that a small team of security men with binoculars and telephoto lenses kept an eye on the afternoon's proceedings from the roof of the palace.

The celebrities, V.I.P's and Royals disappeared into their special tea tent, cordoned off to prevent 'accidental entries' leaving the rest of us to enjoy ourselves in the garden. The large majority of guests strolled about the gardens, walked by the lake and listened to the music from two bands (carefully alternating performances from opposite ends of the lawn). The ladies fashions were interesting and incredibly varied; lots of swirly twisted feathers, silk and chiffon and a number of extravagant lampshade style hats. Most men wore smart suits with no hats but a brave few sported white panamas and there was a good smattering of Scots in kilts, amazingly in these weapon-sensitive days, complete with a dirk stuck into their knee-length stockings.

Army, Navy and Air force cadets and scouts in uniform joined colourful Beefeaters to form a guard of honour as the Royal party departed at 5.50 prompt. Ten minutes later at 6.00pm an abbreviated version of the National Anthem announced that the garden party was over. We all filed out through the reception area, courtyard and main gates, back through the crowds of gaping tourists towards St. James' Park and the London traffic. We could hardly believe that 4 hours had passed since we first entered the gates at the start of a fascinating afternoon at the palace.

We made our way from the Palace to Birdcage Walk and slowly headed towards our agreed meeting place wondering how Peter Scully would manage to reach us through the heavily congested traffic. I was finding the crutches really hard work by now. I should not have worried because Peter's taxi suddenly appeared and stopped next to us before we reached our pick-up point. What a great way to end the day.

**MARGARET BAINBRIDGE**