

Through the Palace Gates

By Diana Eley



It was a cold March morning but we had an inner glow of pride as we dressed for the Palace. Today Tony would receive his O.B.E.

We had stayed overnight at an hotel, our children joining us for the grand occasion. Dressed in our finery, Tony left the hotel to collect the car while we took the luggage down to reception.

On his return, Tony's face was long and serious." Just a minor disaster," he said." "A button has come off my uniform!"

With half an hour to go, I sat in the hotel hallway sewing on the offending button with needle and cotton acquired from the Concierge. It wasn't until after the Investiture that Caroline said," Did you realise you had sewn the button on upside down?" (R A F buttons have a pattern on them!)

We left the Hotel and drove towards Buckingham Palace. As we drove down The Mall I was really getting excited. The pink cross displayed in our windscreen allowed us to go through the Palace gates, but first we had to queue outside so that the car could be checked. We waited alongside Daimlers, Jaguars, Rolls Royces, some being chauffeur driven.

At last we drove through the first gate, and stopped by the policeman. We watched the soldiers on guard. They looked very young - and very cold! We drove through to the inner courtyard and parked the car. We weren't grand enough to drive under the canopy and alight by the door! " Leave your keys in ,please Sir ", said the policeman.

With hands on hats we walked towards the door. " Recipients to the right, Guests to the left," said the doorman. We went our separate ways, only to meet briefly again as the route to the Ladies crossed the path to Tony's assembly point!

En route to the loo was a collection point for cameras. Photographs were only allowed to be taken outside the Palace. Through several rooms adorned with mirrors and paintings and down two flights of stairs were the loos. A friend had recommended a visit to the loo before the ceremony as we would be sitting for some while - and it was an experience! Well polished wooden Elsans with a pull handle at the side of the seat is the best way I can think of describing them!

Peter, Caroline and I then made our way to the Ballroom where the Investiture was to take place. Up the red carpeted staircase which was flanked at intervals by guards in ceremonial uniform; along a grand corridor edged with numerous sofas upholstered in pink and into the Ballroom; we were ushered to our seats.

The Ballroom is where the State banquets are held. At one end of the room is a raised dais with two grand chairs under a large red canopy. At the other end is the Minstrels' Gallery where, on this occasion, the Irish Guards were playing.

Cream and gold pillars rise from the floor at various intervals along the walls and six huge chandeliers hang from the high ceiling. An enormous tapestry hangs on each side wall. Tiered cushioned seats are at one end and down either side, and for the Investiture chairs were set out on the ballroom floor.

When everyone was seated the Lord Chamberlain explained the procedure. Four Yeomen of the Guard entered at the back, walked towards the dais and took up their positions. The Queen entered in front of the dais and we stood for the National Anthem. Each recipient was announced and as they received their award, The Queen spoke to them and made them smile. They then sat to watch the remainder of the ceremony.

After the last award was received the Queen left the Ballroom to the National Anthem and families were reunited. Along the corridor, down the stairs and out into the courtyard where the official photographers were waiting. We were blue with cold by the time it was our turn, but hopefully the photographs don't show it!

"I've arranged to meet another photographer from a Medical magazine outside the gates," says Tony. "Who would like to drive the car out of the Palace Gates?"

"I will" says Peter enthusiastically. Tony walked off and we climbed into the car, grateful to get out of the cold wind. Peter turned the key in the ignition - and nothing happened! There wasn't an ounce of power in the car whatsoever!

I was delegated to find a policeman, who smiled wryly when I told him our plight. "It happens all the time madam. Have you an AA card?" By sheer luck I had put my credit card and new unsigned AA card in my handbag. The bobby took the card and went to an office in the Palace. "They will be here within the hour madam".

Meanwhile, Caroline went to find Tony to relate our predicament. By the time he returned the children had endured enough embarrassment, so they took their coats from the boot and departed! We waited patiently and when most guests had left three policemen tried to push start the car. No luck! However, one of the photographers came over with some jumpleads, and hey presto the engine burst into life!

After a wonderful morning, and now with red faces, we drove out through the Palace Gates

(*A curtain twitched, I 'm sure a curtain twitched, I know a curtain twitched Ed*)

