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Blog

"We were asked to go to Australia. We didn't even know where it was..."

12 December 2014 by [Dickie](#)

2 Comments 



Anne Swifte (nee Duxbury) far left departing for Australia in August 1950.

The Merseyside Maritime Museum exhibition **On Their Own: Britain's child migrants**, tells the heart-breaking story of child migration.

Anne Swifte (nee Duxbury) was ten years old when she left her home in Ormskirk for a new life in Australia. This is her emotional story of loss and resilience...

Anne Swifte: "I was born in 1939 to parents Jessie and John Duxbury in Ormskirk Lancashire England. I remember very little of my childhood years and very much of it has been blotted out,

probably due to the various traumas in my life.

My first memory is of playing outside the Canal House in Burscough with my sister Nina, who was four years older than me. I was about four. An ambulance arrived and I naturally thought that it was bringing my mother home from hospital. I have since found out she had tuberculosis.

I next recall my father saying to me, 'you can come in and see your mother, but you must not cry'. Nina and I were taken into the parlour and our mother was there lying in a wooden box which I now know was a coffin. I do not remember if I cried or that anyone explained to me that my mother was dead.

She was lying there, her skin very white and she was very still. I still have that vivid memory and picture in my mind today. I have spent a lot of time researching my family history and obtained my records from the Children's Society in England. These records

state that my paternal grandmother looked after me until my father arranged for me to be placed with my elder sister, Nina at St Anne's in Ormskirk in 1945.

I don't even remember that Nina had gone to the home before me. My paternal grandfather was the lock keeper of the canal and lived in the lock keepers cottage beside the canal. The records go on to say that there are many comments recorded about my progress and development while in care, some positive and some negative.

These often showed lack of understanding of the impact of grief, adjustment and developmental difficulties I faced after the death of my mother and the separation from my father, extended family and the place where I lived. My memories of life at St Anne's, which I remember as Quarry Mount, are very scant. I remember walking to school and Sunday school, often in the snow. I recall having to study the Prayer Book each Sunday.

I have memories of having to place a black mask over my face, probably a gas mask. To this day I am fearful of anything obstructing my face. The happy times I recall were when we played in an area called 'The Dell' which I know was an old quarry. I recall the Dell being covered in spring with flowers and we had a swing to play on.

"One day we were called to the office and my father was there. We were asked if we would like to go to Australia to live and Nina said, yes. I doubt very much if either of us knew where Australia was.

My next recollection was in 1950 of being on a ship. I was very seasick and although it was a long trip I only remember travelling through the Suez Canal and a celebration when we passed over the International Date Line. I recollect arriving in Fremantle, Western Australia, there were five girls and ten boys in our group.

I do not recall who looked after us, anything about the ship, **S.S. Ormond** where we slept or what we ate, We left the boys in Fremantle and my next recollection was driving over a big bridge (Hobart Bridge). We were sent to Clarendon Home in Kingston Beach near Hobart, Tasmania.

Life at Clarendon was mostly good. I do not remember many bad experiences. We used to walk to the local school and church. I recall working pretty hard at the home, cleaning lots of shoes, peeling very large buckets of potatoes and helping in the laundry, taking sheets out of the boiler and putting them through the mangle.

There was another trauma in my life when my sister Nina, at the age of 16 was sent to live with a family to help care for their children. My only experience of family life was when we were sent to live with a family for two weeks during the Christmas holidays. Whilst at the home I passed the test to go to high school.

I use to travel for 45 mins on a bus each morning and afternoon and recall being very sick. As a result of this I was sent to a boarding hostel and travelled back to the home each weekend. I always wanted to be a nurse and as soon as I was accepted at age 17 I went nursing.

I then moved into the Nurses Home for the four years of my training. There was a lady who was on the Committee of the Clarendon Home and she acted as my friend and guardian and I used to spend time with her during my days off. She used to run a boarding house and I used to help her in the kitchen and dining room.

It was there that I met my future husband Peter, a pharmacy student, he had friends that used to live at the boarding house. We were engaged in 1958. I graduated as a registered nurse in 1960 and following Peter's graduation we married in 1962.

We had four children, unfortunately the last one died just before he was two years old. Peter and I had a very happy life together we rented a house until we could afford to have our first home built. I continued working as a nurse until my first child was born. In 1968 we moved to Devonport in North West Tasmania where we bought our own pharmacy. We employed a live-in child minder to help with the children.

In 1973 we moved to Launceston Tasmania. We bought a pharmacy and I returned to full time nursing and during that time I also returned to part time university studies I and graduated with Graduate Diploma of Business Administration. I worked in the operating theatre, later to become theatre manager. I progressed to be the assistant director of Nursing and later to risk manager of the hospital.

I am proud of my children they have all done very well in life. My son works as a miner, he is a qualified boilermaker welder, he is married and has two step children and one child born to him and his wife. One of his stepchildren has just given me my first great grandchild.

My second child, a daughter, has followed in my footsteps and graduated as a nurse and is now nurse manager of a maternity ward. She is happily married and had four children unfortunately one was killed at age 14.

My last daughter qualified as a nanny and travelled to America she later returned home and works as a secretary for a local doctor. She married later in life and does not have any children.

My last child, a boy as previously mentioned, died just before he was two years old. The death of my own child and then my grandchild was a deeply traumatic chapter in my life. We supported each other through this period.

In 2009 my darling husband Peter died, this was also a deeply traumatic time for me and I felt that my world had ended. I have a wonderful family and many supportive friends and

they helped me through this period. I now have a Danish partner and he has travelled to England with me and met my cousins and I have also found a cousin living in Melbourne.

My sister Nina married and had three children, she married a man who was Swedish but living in Tasmania. They went to live in Sweden in 1972. As you can see, Nina and I did not spend many years of our life together but we always kept in touch through letters and telephone. In 1973 I found my father and went to England to visit him, he had been sick and had previously had two strokes.

"My father gave me a photo of Nina and I, taken just before we left England. He had carried this photo in his wallet since we left in 1950. He told me he did not want to let us go but that he thought it would be the best thing for us.

I spent six weeks with him and my stepmother and her sister and brother-in-law. I was unable to spend any time with my father alone as there was always someone with me. I later learned from my records that my father had married before we left England and that my stepmother refused to take Nina and I to live with them.

I have researched my family and met two cousins in England who I have visited and still keep in touch with. One of them has also visited us here in Tasmania. I also have a cousin living in Australia who I only found two years ago.

"My sister Nina died in Sweden last year and I still correspond with her children. Life for me has had its many ups and downs but I believe that this has made me very resilient and somehow I have managed to bounce back from my many traumas.

Through the help of my husband Peter, my partner Kurt and my sheer determination I have been able to meet up with my father and cousins, one of which has researched my family tree for me and I am very grateful to them all. I believe I was one of the lucky child migrants because I sent to one of the better homes.

Life has been difficult for me but I am deeply sorry for those who were not so lucky as I was. Many of them have suffered mental, sexual and physical abuse and told that their parents were dead, when in fact they were not."

The Merseyside Maritime Museum exhibition **On Their Own: Britain's child migrants** is open now. Free entry. It runs until 5 October 2015. The exhibition will go to the **V & A Museum of Childhood** in London from 24 October 2015.

There is also a dedicated site for **Britain's Child Migrants** which contains oral histories and message board.

Tags: child migrants, exhibitions, human rights, maritime history, merseyside maritime museum

Ali Filder says:

15 January 2015 at 9.52 am

Thank you for sharing your storyand to museum for delivering so poignantly....humbled....so heart wrenching to hear what some children endured at a time when people were less informed on the emotional impact on children....my Mum went through own tragedies although not sent away....so thank you opening our minds to this ...giving us time to reflecton our personal histories.....through this brilliant new concept at Museum of Liverpool

Sam says:

16 January 2015 at 3.32 pm

Thank you for your comment. We feel that it is important to tell the stories of Britain's child migrants, and are proud that Merseyside Maritime Museum helped to create this award winning exhibition, and is now the first venue in the UK to host it.

(Comments are closed for this post.)
