

## A Lifetime of Cooking

WHEN I was first married it was a MIRACLE if water was boiled correctly or an egg boiled. Luckily Bob spent the first two years of our marriage doing his National Service which gave me some time to hone my cooking skills.

AFTER five years of normal family cooking, when our two children were old enough for school my career in cooking began. My first job was in school meals working at Putnoe and Newnham Schools. Work was hard but we had plenty of fun times. We were told to empty the grease trap, four of us started but being heavy, full of grease, one let go. We were covered in smelly grease. On another occasion one of the cooks cut her finger which was covered in a bright blue plaster. This unfortunately was lost during the preparation of the vegetables and after a long search was never found. However when serving the teachers at lunchtime I noticed on the Headmaster's plate the offending blue plaster. Quickly I was able to replace the offending plate before it was noticed.

AT this time I was transferred to Bedford County Council Social Services and worked at Highfield Residential home for the elderly. During my time here I was able to sit for the City and Guilds Catering Industry Certificate and passed with credit. I loved cooking the various diets for the residents also Cyrenians' meals collected and delivered by the nuns from Clapham Park Convent. When the nuns came to collect the Cyrenians' meals the carrying containers were not clean and I had stern words with a Sr Theresa (who will come into the story later). As the officer in charge would not let me continue studying for the highest grade City and Guilds I left for a position at the industrial unit of Cincinnati Milacron which suited Bob as there were no unsocial hours. Hot meals and sandwiches were prepared each day for fifty people. Every Thursday the main meal was chicken curry. One day a customer indicated that the curry was not hot enough. Bad move! The next Thursday we put in half a box of curry powder. The curry was enjoyed by all and we broke all records for the sale of cold drinks that afternoon. It was during my employment at Cincinnati that my mother passed away and due to the stress it was the first time I walked out of a job. Although not expected, I did get an excellent reference.

THE next move was to the Provincial House in Clapham, the home of the Daughters of the Holy Spirit an order originating from France. On arriving at the big house I knocked on the large, heavy oak door with the metal ring. Two large bolts were heard being pulled back from the inside and opened to be welcomed in by a short demure nun. I was shown into a large dark oak-panelled room full of

weird African masks and eventually into the interview room. The interview panel consisted of Sr Theresa Ryan (she of the dirty food boxes) and two other nuns. I held nothing back during the interview which went well and after some three weeks of waiting (during this time the nuns gave prayerful thought to their requirements) I was employed on a one month's trial. My employment lasted six years.

THE property consisted of a large Georgian house with a refectory and L-shaped kitchen, beautiful round church and residential block with reception rooms. In the early days the property stretched from Kimbolton Road to near Mulliver's Lane in Clapham. One gatehouse was at the Kimbolton Road end (which can still be seen to day as a private residence); the other gatehouse is just off Mulliver's land where two ladies in the care of the nuns lived. The property is now much smaller due to the building up of the large Brickhill estate. All the buildings were set in beautiful grounds, well-manicured with a large vegetable garden and fruit orchard which was covered in daffodils in spring. Also residing in the garden were ducks and a very grumpy old donkey. The nuns worked their ministry throughout the locality and ran a prayerful retreat and conference centre for groups of up to 20+, mainly Catholic pilgrims all through the year. All the catering was undertaken by myself and a staff of five. The menus were varied and we were worked very hard but my six years in the post were the happiest of my working career. Unfortunately the retreat numbers fell off and the nuns were unable to keep the business a going concern and had to sell up and I was made redundant.

I returned to Bedford County Council Social Services and the post of part-time cook for three years at Puttenhoe. Needing more hours I moved to Brookside Home, Kempston for disabled adults cooking there for two years. I then moved to Sunflower House respite home for adults and children as a cook-in-charge for a further six years until I was forced to retire due to ill-health in 1996. Being retired is suiting me very well relaxing and letting Bob do most of the home cooking but I do get involved sometimes to keep my hand in!

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