



“WAS THAT THE BREAKFAST BELL?” by Jenny Drewery

There’s an old friend of ours, up the top end of the Esplanade, not looking too well at present. Has anybody else noticed? Hard to tell what the trouble is, but we had a good gawp before passing by on the other side. We hope it’s something minor and the experts can put things right, because over the years our dear and deserving friend welcomed *thousands* of families to Scarborough – mainly Methodist ones (like ours), some quiet and orderly, some a little rowdier (like ours). Ah, those were the days! But now – well, let’s just hope for the best. Certainly it will be better when the scaffolding comes down.

Walking past number 63 Esplanade is the strangest experience for me. I can still see the old Austin Cambridge parked outside with all of us spilling out of it, and buckets and spades clattering onto the road, and the black elastic spider, strained to snapping-point, just about managing to clamp down the motley heap of suitcases on the car roof, with the rain-proofing polythene flapping about and bits missing, where the wind had whipped them off on the motorway. I can still see my sister Diana, green in the face from travel-sickness, and little sister Cathy, flushed and rosy after a good long kip. Helen had outgrown family holidays, and was doing mysterious things of her own.

I can hear Mum and Dad trying to marshal us, and Dad booming away at Reception: “HELLO, MY DEARS! HERE WE ALL ARE AGAIN” and calling everybody “Blossom”, and Mum’s quieter tones as she left him to it and took charge of us lot: “No, you can’t go in the lift on your own.” I still see her now, sitting in the bay window of their sea-facing room, with her head in an Agatha Christie, one hand rooting around in her bag for money because we wanted to go to the drinks machine again. Behind her was the blue sea, with the boats, and the little oil-rig on the far horizon, and down below was the Holbeck putting-green. *Our* putting-green. We loved going into that room. It was sunny and light and always tidier than ours. This, of course, was “The Cliff”, part of that great old family of Methodist Guest Houses, and our utter, cherished favourite. The parents would go as host and hostess, which meant they had duties to do and notices to read out after the meals, and concerts to arrange on Friday and Sunday evenings, and cars to organise for anybody needing a lift to South Cliff Methodist on Sunday mornings, and elderly guests to rescue when they’d gone all the way down the zig-zags to the bottom and couldn’t get back up again. (The cliff-lift used to have a lunch break in those days). So when Ma and Pa were busy, we would charge down to the games-room and sulk if somebody else had got to the table-tennis before us, or we’d sneak into the lift on our own, or go off to the Maze down the road, which is now of course flattened, with Dulverton Hall standing on top of it.

Mum and Dad gave us a few rules:-

“Don’t say rude words in your room at night, because people can hear you through the walls.”

“Don’t write anything daft in the Visitors Book!”

“When we come back late with the fish and chips, don’t put the wrappers in the hotel bins! -- the management will think they’re not feeding us properly.”

Now and again, Dad would come over all pompous. “I’d be grateful if just one of my girls could make it downstairs for Morning Prayers! Especially when *I’m* officiating.” And Mum would say, “Oh, Ben, let them enjoy themselves! They’re on holiday.”

Sleeping right through the Rising Bell (!), one of us would suddenly stick a head above the covers at twenty to nine, and panic, and shake the other two, and in the desperate chaos of clothing and clutter, there’d be a distant noise and we’d go, “Was that the Breakfast Bell? Quick! We can wash later.” We’d fall over ourselves in the doorway and somebody would grab the lift while the others caught up, and then we’d nonchalantly join the queue coming out of the lounge after Prayers, hoping Dad wouldn’t notice we’d only just arrived, and there it was – that lovely airy dining-room with its white tablecloths and silver cutlery with MHH printed on the back, and that gorgeous smell of bacon, and pots of coffee, and then the chink of crockery and huddle of chatter as everybody got stuck in, and Dad shuddering when the nice waitress asked if he fancied the Continental breakfast for a change, and Mum asking what we wanted to do today. We’d go into a squabble and then demand first the games-room and then the Naval Battle, with the Tree Walk tonight, and the Open Air Theatre tomorrow night. “And tell her to stop snoring! I didn’t get a wink!”

And every year, the inevitable question. “Is ‘Igginbottom here?”

Ah, ‘Igginbottom! A frequent guest at The Cliff. He told wonderful jokes at the Friday night concerts, and although I assume he’d once had a Christian name, his powerful old wife *always* called him “Igginbottom”.

Up at The Cliff, there were those great characters, the moaners. “The bedroom basin’s the wrong shape!” we heard, as somebody tore a strip off the manageress. “The soap won’t stay put! It keeps sliding down into the sink, and it’s *not good enough!* It’s never been any good, this place, and I should know, I’ve been coming here for thirty years!”

But it was up at The Cliff, and the other Guest Houses we’d stayed in, where I think I first found what the word “fellowship” actually meant. It was one of those trusty Methodist terms I’d grown up with, and when you’re raised in a church family, you take words like that for granted, unquestioningly. Then you see it in action, at the Guest House concerts and at the meal-table, and you feel it in the very walls.

And I remember that horrible day when we heard that The Cliff had been sold, because of its lack of en-suite facilities, and I recall how we mourned, uncomprehending. How could anybody close our hotel because of toilets? -- we *loved* padding down the corridors at dead of night to the loo. You never knew who you were going to meet on the way. Perhaps that stern old lady who always gave us dirty looks. Maybe Mum, still up late with a good book. Maybe even ‘Igginbottom, wakeful and restless because Mrs Higginbottom was hogging all the bedclothes. Maybe they’re still there.

And I wonder now, if the people occupying the flats in that grand old building have any idea of the history they’re living with, and what it meant to us, and to so many, many thousands like us. It still makes me sad.

I miss it all terribly.