

FLORA LAUNDON

I am just starting part one of my life's story so at the end I start at the beginning. Now aged 95 Flora Laundon born on the 2nd May 1916 during the First World War. My parents Florence and Leonard lived at South Norwood, 45 Edit Road, where I was born. Florence Damaris Lillian; Florence after my mother and my godmother; Damaris after my grandmother; Lillian after my other godmother dear aunty Lily and I live there right up until the time I came to live in Hythe in 1954 but what a lot has happened in that time and so now I speak about my childhood and youth. I was the eldest of four: Flora, Vera, Eileen and Richard. To start with we all went to the little church school, Holy Trinity, where we had a good basic grounding. At the age of 11, to the astonishment I think of the head teacher there who hadn't singled me out being a quiet and modest child, I won a scholarship (there were only three in the borough of Croydon) to Croydon High Schools, Girls Public Day School as it was and there I spent several happy years until 1934 making friends and enjoying myself in a very splendid academic sixth form. Sadly, during that time or at the end of that time, my father was stricken down and they thought he was about to die so my mother – and I did not dare argue with this – said you must leave school this week; so there I was just about to do my A Levels and off I went. What was I to do? Well after consultation over careers (because at that

time in the 1930s there was tremendous unemployment) I was starting at Harrods as one of their apprentices. We had to have daily experience in the departments but as an apprentice we were not allowed to serve at all until we finished our whole year. To the great joy of the head of the department, who was one of the Directors of Harrods, I was their top apprentice. Fortunately for me, after 18 months my father was fully recovered and he said this won't do, this sort of job does not suit you – you must leave. So yet another careers confrontation took place and it was decided, and by this time of course it was June, that perhaps I ought to apply to a College of Education as they are now called. So down to Brighton we went. Brighton, my dear father said, that is a very nice place to be in and we can come and see you very often in Brighton so there I was for the next two years. At the end of that time – I have to brag about this – I really did very well and got extremely good marks in the final examinations. So back to Croydon I came where I was fortunate enough, so great was the unemployment, to be appointed to a very good secondary school. In those days Croydon was very much ahead of the rest of the country; it had already reorganised itself. I was well trained by a splendid head teacher called Miss Babbage and there I was from 1934 until the end of the war really. During the war, however, we were all evacuated and I went to Somerset where I met many, many friends; and I was down in Somerset from 1940 to 1942

when back to Croydon I came and then I was again attached to my same school. However, during this time, as the war was on, one of the things we did in the school was that I ran a little rabbit farm and right through the war the children kept rabbits and most of our Christmas lunches were these rabbits. One day, however, I was busy demonstrating – this was in 1945 and the war was almost over – to a class the skinning of a rabbit when a message came up to go down to the Head's Study. There I discovered that the County Inspector had singled me out for some sort of promotion because a lovely church school, Archbishop Tenison's, needed a new head. A small girls school only 200 pupils and with several other candidates. I attended the interview and was appointed to a great wrath of the older candidates; I was only 27 at the time. I stayed there for several years until the 1950s when the school was amalgamated with the adjacent boys school to become a large secondary grammar school. What was I to do? I knew perfectly well that the new school would not appoint me and so I looked around and fortunately somebody at the Canterbury Diocese to which Croydon was still attached heard about my experience and suggested that I might like to come down to Kent. So after some months studying advertisements I discovered there was a vacant post in Hythe. Now at that time Kent was a very slow authority in reorganising following the new Education Act and I applied for the job and was appointed. I think at the time

the staff thought that a dragon had appeared and in a way they were quite right because my predecessor dear Miss Wheeler had been there for many years long before there was any reorganisation and so my career in Hythe began.

And so I came to Hythe in 1974. I had already been head teacher since 1944, 1944-1954 at Archbishop Tenison's Church of England Secondary School in Croydon, a splendid old school founded in 1714, and when I came to Hythe in the old building down in the town I inherited a school which had originated in 1814 in the time of the development of church schools in the country. The school I took over in Hythe, Hythe Church of England Secondary School for Girls, comprised just over 100 pupils and by the time I left there were 213 and with those we took ourselves up to the new premises in Saltwood known as St Leonard's Secondary School for Girls. There were 213 of us and I shall never forget the splendid day when we arrived in that new building: it was like going to heaven as far as the school was concerned. We were there until the school was amalgamated with the boys when I retired in 1978. During that time the school leaving age rose twice and I finished up with a school of over 600 pupils. I was very happy there. I had a lovely staff, many of whom I still keep in touch with, as I do with so many of the former pupils who call themselves the

SLOGAs, St Leonard's Old Girls' Association. We still meet twice a year for a summer gathering of some kind and a Christmas lunch and it is very pleasant to see them all again and in particular a former member of my staff, Diana Duthroit, who at the time taught drama and English and now a very close friend of mine. I shall never forget the occasion when we had a speech training festival and invited Diana Sheridan, the actress, to come and adjudicate. How very pleasant it was and so I have very many happy memories of a long teaching career which began in 1935 until my retirement in 1978. I think I had a vocation somehow to be a teacher.