

A Grand Day Out.

"Yes sir, and where would you like the taxi to take you?" I hesitated a moment and then said "Buckingham Palace please." The reply felt quite unreal.

Marion and I were staying in a hotel near Lambeth Palace and were ordering a taxi to take us to an investiture at Buckingham Palace - the timing was fairly strict for we had to arrive at 10.00 am or shortly after. If we were after 10.15 we would possibly miss the proceedings but could not be too early so pre-ordering a taxi seemed advisable.

The following morning we and our guests – daughter Melanie and son Matthew with Sharon - were ready in good time, and after taking some photographs set off in the taxi. We had an orange car park pass that had to be displayed in the front of the cab and resulted in guidance by police to the designated drop-off point. We then went through the only obvious security check of the day - a policeman verified that the names on our invitation tickets coincided with the names on the passports we were using as photo-ID.

Then we were through the gates at the left-front of the palace and into the Forecourt, the area used for changing of the guards. We went diagonally across the Forecourt, through a tunnel immediately below the balcony used on State occasions and into the Quadrangle. Walking around the quadrangle we went under the Portico to the Grand Entrance that we have all seen on TV when members of the Royal Family have been departing from or arriving at the palace. We went up the steps and into the palace where we were asked to leave cameras and phones in the cloakroom.

We then went up to the first floor and the State Apartments where I was asked to go one way and Marion and our guests were shown to seats in the ballroom. In the ballroom there was music played by an orchestra drawn from the bands of the Household Division and where guests were briefed on what would happen. First the Queen's Bodyguard of the Yeomen of the Guard would enter along the centre aisle to take their place on the dais. Then guests were to stand as the Queen entered from the right accompanied by two Gurkha Orderly Officers and take her place on the dais. The national anthem would play and guests could sit down when told to by Her Majesty and the Investitures would start.

Meanwhile I and most other people who were to receive an award were shown into the Picture Gallery where drinks of water and fruit juice were available and a video of a previous investiture was showing. We were surrounded by and could have viewed the old masters on the gallery wall, but many of us preferred to watch the modern video to see how the presentations worked.

We were then briefed about what we had to do and how to address the queen. After more waiting around the video switched to show what was happening in the ballroom so we could see the queen enter, and the first recipients receive their awards - these were Knighthoods and the people had been briefed in the Green Drawing Room, separately to the rest of us.

We were called forward in groups of ten and in the order that we were to receive our awards. There were several checks that we were in the right order because anyone getting out of position would upset the entire proceedings.

The instructions were very precise. When told go forward and stand by an usher a few feet on the queen's right, wait there until we hear our surname as part of our introduction then go forward until we are in front of the queen. Turn to face her and, for men, bow our head and step forward until our feet are close to the dais the queen stands on. The step was about six inches high.

When my turn came I did all that carefully and the queen hung the medal onto a clip already on my lapel, and started talking to me as she did so. People have asked me since what the conversation was about and I have had to say my memory is hazy. I should admit that all my

carefully rehearsed words including "Your Majesty" at the beginning and "Mam" (as in jam) thereafter were forgotten as the queen was clearly an expert at putting people at ease.

I know in general terms that I was asked about Rwanda, "An unusual place to be working" and that I told briefly of what had been achieved through St. Luke's and the Shyira Trust. With a handshake and words of encouragement from Her Majesty I stepped backwards as previously instructed, turned to the right and walked out of the ballroom.

The medal was then taken off me and put into a decorative box, and the hanger retrieved from my lapel. Then I went into the back of the ballroom for the remainder of the proceedings.

At 12 noon it was all over and the National Anthem played again as everyone stood. The queen processed along the centre aisle and out of the ballroom accompanied by the Gurkhas and other personnel. The yeomen then left to the right of the dais. It had taken an hour to give out 92 awards.



The proceedings were over and we were free to leave. We descended the Grand Staircase, collected cameras and phones and went out into the quadrangle where we were able to have photographs taken, and to take photographs.

It had been a truly joyful event that was remarkably well organised and a privilege to be part of. I have to pay tribute to the Officers and their staff on duty including the Lord Chamberlain, Master of the Household, Comptroller from the Lord Chamberlain's Office, Equerry in Waiting and the Secretary of the Central Chancery of the Orders of Knighthood. All staff were warm and welcoming, talking to recipients and their guests and setting everyone at ease. Above all I must pay tribute to Her Majesty the Queen who was dignified while making people feel at ease.

With photographs taken close to the Grand Entrance we walked back round the quadrangle, through the tunnel and out to the front of the palace. As we walked across the Forecourt I was aware of the many tourists peering through the railings and watching our progress. That did not prepare me for the look of delight on one woman's face as we walked out through the gate – who did she think we were I wondered.

So we went to lunch. Our daughter, Melanie, had made a reservation at a restaurant overlooking the Thames. It was good to spend a couple of hours thinking about what had happened because so much was a blur.

Since I learnt of the award of an MBE for "Services to the Community in Liverpool and Rwanda" I have felt some concern about having accepted it. I knew that someone must have done a lot of work on the proposal and that others had needed to support the proposal, so felt that I should accept. However, I was still concerned about accepting an award when I felt I had only been serving others as I believe God had called me and the people of St. Luke's to do. I have, in recent weeks, put my concern to several people – Harvie and others. One valued comment comes from Bishop John in Rwanda "Indeed the work you have done in humility is for God's Glory; the award is part of His Glory; take it as from the Queen to His Glory."

Allan Hobson.