

The Senior Citizens` Tale

Bill and Molly Spooner

Bill and Molly`retired` to Milton Keynes from London when most of the city was still on the drawing board. Instead of putting their feet up, they became involved in voluntary community work on their estate. Twelve years later they`re still more active than most people half their age – which just goes to show you`re never too old to be a pioneer.

Molly: We came to Milton Keynes in September 1972 and this estate was the first to be built. It borders onto Stony Stratford and we liked it because we were attached to the older part of the area, not like some where they`ve built houses in the middle of a field. We liked it very much from the word go. We think our flat is ideal for old persons like us. We`ve got a small garden back and front and there`s only two lots of old people in each court – all the other flats are occupied by single people.

Marvellous Neighbours. The young people have adopted us and we`re `grandparents` to most of the children around here. We`ve got marvellous neighbours but we didn`t realise how wonderful they were until I was taken ill and had to have a pacemaker. Then they came up trumps. Also, when Bill was in hospital they gave me a lift to Northampton every day so he never went without a visitor. They did it out of kindness.

When we came the rest of the city wasn`t built. There was just a lot of houses and they all looked alike. If we visited anybody we had to take our boots off on the doorstep or we brought in half the clay of Buckingham! And of course there were no pavements or roads or anything and even the gardens hadn`t been laid out then. But the corporation showed us pictures of a wonderful flowering city. We don`t know where it was, but they said ours would look like that eventually. But we didn`t wait for them to do their stuff. My husband bought turves and laid the lawns. We had a sack of daffodils given us which we planted under the trees – and so we had the first flowers on Galley Hill. Everybody came round to see the flowers.

We never saw the flat – we took it unseen. We didn`t even know where it was. We arrived at the station at Bletchley and no one seemed able to tell us how we were going to get to Wavendon Tower {*headquarters of Milton Keynes Development Corporation*}. We couldn`t find a taxi – there were no buses outside the station. But finally we found the taxi and the taxi man took us out to Wavendon. It cost us quite a lot and left us at Wavendon and drove off. So when we`d been interviewed and got our keys and paid our first two months` rent we were stranded at Wavendon. We hadn`t seen our flat and didn`t even know where Stony Stratford was. Anyway, finally we got another taxi which brought us to the flat and we paid him off. It was quite an expensive operation!

When we`d seen our flat and gone outside, a milkman turned up on the step and said: "Can I be your milkman?" So I said: "I don`t see why not. Can you tell us where

there's a bus station so we can get a bus back to Bletchley?" He said: "I'll do better than that, if you get on my milk cart I'll run you round to the bus station in Stony." Which he did. So our first day consisted of him running us around to the bus station on his milk wagon so we could get to Bletchley to catch the train back to London. We didn't know there was a station at Wolverton.

I used to work voluntarily on the desk at the Community House. Roger Kitchen and Margaret Lever were the arrivals workers and round them they got a team of people who'd moved in to help people as they arrived – most of them from London. Some didn't have any furniture, especially if they had been in furnished accommodation. I knew a couple with a small baby who'd only got a bed. They'd been allocated a house but they certainly didn't have enough money to furnish it. So we had a scheme going called Tugboat. Some of the families who came up here were a bit more affluent than the rest and they decided as they'd got a new house they were going to get rid of their old furniture. Tugboat would pick it up and store it in the MKDC garage that they'd allocated for us. So when people turned up without anything we rallied round the flag boys, and as they became better off themselves they'd sometimes give the furniture back to Tugboat to be reallocated. It was an on-going scheme so people could get a bit of a home round them without going into a lot of HP.

We Never Considered Ourselves as Old

I didn't have any preconceived ideas about what Milton Keynes was going to look like. They gave us all the paperwork to look at, but I waited to see what the place was going to turn out like. I still think Milton Keynes is a long way from finished because all these fields that we're now looking at, one day – not in my life time 'cos I'm too old – but one day they will join together and then they can call it a city. At the moment it isn't a city, there's no cathedral. It's just a lot of housing estates and one big shopping precinct at the moment. But one day all the fields which separate the estates will be built on because the population will grow.

As for the things we've done well, we helped to get the old peoples' club started. My husband's 76 and I'm 72 and we've never joined. We never considered ourselves as old. In the early days of the club we had visions of exercise to music, interesting people coming to speak, but now it's just an afternoon cup of tea and bingo. So we're not involved with it any more. I helped start the whist drive at the school and now we've got quite a nice whist drive going. The teachers from the school are very helpful and we've got some young people who come and play. Also we've got a good swimming club, Mothers and babies go on a Thursday afternoon, parents go one evening.

Bill: I started up the allotments. There's now a statutory rule that so many allotments should be allocated per housing estate. We started at Greenleys, but it wasn't very successful because it wasn't fenced in and people were getting their vegetables stolen. We also got involved with the community newspaper. I'm now looking at the

very first issue, printed in June 1972. It's very interesting looking back because under the heading Postbox it says: "With a bit of luck there will be a permanent postbox on Galley Hill soon. But in the meantime the postman will collect the mail daily from the Community House." But since then, thankfully, they've built a postbox, telephone kiosk and a shop on Galley Hill. In the Community House, where we did our welcoming thing, we put tables and chairs and we used to provide free morning tea or coffee and chats so that young mums who were a long way from London and their mums could get together and make friends. We've always had a good Community Association here. People took advantage of it and it worked beautifully. That is one of the reasons why this estate has been so successful. Everybody knows everybody else. We helped run dances – we had one or two nice dances and the school allowed us to use their hall.

We helped with the holiday playscheme where volunteers took 20-30 children. The wife and I decided that as I used to be a keen fisherman we'd take some of them fishing. We found canes and made some fishing nets out of their mum's old stockings and we took 20 children to the river Ouse and a splendid day was had by all. At 5 o'clock they didn't want to come home. After that, to our surprise, there was a knock on the door and a gentleman stood outside who said: "Are you Bill Spooner?" So I said "Yes" and he said: "Well I would like to give you these." He had three brand new fishing rods with all the tackle which was a present to the children. We had a completion to win them.

I used to collect old newspapers in my car. Altogether we made £100 which was given to the Community Association. The paper I had left I sold for £9 and we went out and bought some material for a Father Christmas costume. One of the ladies in the court made it up for me, I've been the Father Christmas of Galley Hill ever since. The children see other Father Christmases in the city centre and elsewhere but I'm always their real Father Christmas. Also, on Christmas morning, I go to Newport to The Green, the old people's home, and give out their presents.

Molly: He does about seventeen engagements as Father Christmas every year.