

UNVEILING OF BLUE PLAQUE TO MAUREEN GARDNER 17 MAIDCROFT ROAD, COWLEY, 7 JULY 2012

Speech given by her brother, Michael Gardner

It was in July 1930 that my Father, Mother, and sister Maureen came to live in 17 Maidcroft Road. Two years later in 1932 I was born, and then started a very happy association with this house lasting approximately twenty years.

It was a very happy childhood for both Maureen and myself, together with our two bloodhounds Pedro & Harmony, despite the intervention of the war.

During one poignant night in, I think, 1941, my parents woke us both up and took us into their bedroom to see the whole sky glowing red. Quietly my Father said to me, 'That, son, is Coventry burning.'

The neighbours we had could hardly have been bettered, being both friendly and supportive. On one side we had the Harrisons and on the other the Baycocks, and I am pleased to say that Pat, now Pat Mabbutt, who apart from being a neighbour was also a Bridesmaid to Maureen, is present with us today.

Other neighbours I remember well were the Gibbs opposite, the Orchards, the Freemans, and at the top of the Road the Smiths; and once again Peter Russell Smith is here with us today.

It is I suppose obvious that, as her brother, I view Maureen and all of her talents from a somewhat biased perspective, but I have little fear of being contradicted when I say that she was one of the nicest and most charming people that I ever met. Those of you who did meet her will agree with me I am sure.

As a youngster she went to Donnington, and then to Temple Cowley School. She showed a well above average ability at sport, and in particular running. In fact she was running in a race at a fête in Combe Martin in Devon, where the family were having a camping holiday in 1939, when the announcement came over the Tannoy system that war had been declared on Germany.

Maureen's first love however – much supported by my Mother – was ballet dancing. She studied under Madam Espinosa in London and was about to join the International Ballet Company when she was smitten by serious illness. The Doctors forbade her from travelling any more to London each day, and so, at the behest of my Father, she joined the Oxford Ladies Athletic Club.

Here, at the Iffley Road, she was able to train with mature students such as Ken Bailey, Robin Pinnington, John Wilkinson, and later Nick Stacey, so that in 1946 she was awarded her first International as a sprinter.

Geoff Dyson, the newly appointed Chief National Coach to the Amateur Athletic Association, met her whilst advising the Oxford University Athletic Club at the Iffley Road track. Realising that her suppleness as a ballet dancer, combined with her natural speed, should make her a fine hurdler, he persuaded her to take up the event, and he became her coach.

She had immediate and illustrious National and International success, and her most memorable race was undoubtedly the 1948 Olympic final at Wembley where she was beaten by Fanny Blankers-Koen in a photo finish with both athletes breaking the world record.

In an article in 1956, Fanny describes the Olympic Hurdles Final in 1948 as 'the most memorable race in my career ... it had been a wonderful race and I was proud to have beaten such a wonderful athlete'. The final was in August, and in September Maureen and Geoff were married in St Mary Magdalen Church in Central Oxford. Pathe News and Movietone news reels both covered the event, and so the crowds lining the streets of Oxford were witnessed in cinemas throughout the country and beyond.

Collections had been made in Oxford for a wedding present for the couple, and a Queen Anne Bureau and display case were presented to them.

Fanny Blankers-Koen received a new bicycle from the population of her home town in Holland, as a tribute to her Olympic success. These were the days of Amateur sport.

It was in August 1949 that Maureen came to stay with my parents, and she left this house to go to the Churchill Hospital where she gave birth to her son Tim, and I am delighted that he has come from Sanderstead with his wife for this occasion.

Whilst preparing for the 1952 Olympics she became pregnant, and when her daughter Judy was born she retired from athletic competition.

Before I hand over to Tim to say a few words, I will finish by saying that Maureen, whilst being a classroom assistant at St Christopher's School, started her first Maureen Gardner School of Ballet in Cowley. Later she started similar schools in Wanstead London, Ottawa Canada, and lastly in Winchester.

Only two or three years before she died, she was appointed Chief Examiner to the Royal Academy of Dancing, which she regarded not only as an honour, but also a challenge.

An accomplished pianist, dancer, singer, teacher, and above all athlete.... No wonder I was proud to be her brother, and devastated when she was taken from us by cancer when she was only 45 years old.