

Unveiling of Blue Plaque to Mabel Purefoy FitzGerald

12 Crick Road, 14 October 2022

Speech made on behalf of Ros Elliott

by her son Henry Anderson-Elliott

Thank you all for coming, it's very nice to be here. I am speaking on behalf of my mum, Ros Elliott, who lives next door at number 11 and sends her apologies that she couldn't be here herself this morning.

My mum and her family moved into number 11 in 1959, when she was 18 months old. We believe this makes her one of the last, if not the last person alive with personal memories of Miss Fitzgerald, and these she wished to share.

As a child, my mum's main interactions with Miss Fitzgerald were when she and her siblings would go next door to collect the tennis balls they had thrown over the wall. They had been asked not to ring the doorbell, as their neighbour was rather elderly and did not like to be disturbed, and instead would creep around the side of the house.

This, my mum assures me, was terrifying. Miss Fitzgerald would usually be sitting at the open sitting-room window watching the birds in the weeping ash tree which used to stand at the back. On seeing the children, she would invariably shout at them to "mind the flowers" at impressive volume and with little warning. Worse still, this was a demand that they always failed, unable to work out what plants in the overgrown jungle of a garden were considered precious.

As my mum grew older, she realised that the shouting was not in anger, but was in fact the result of Miss Fitzgerald's increasing deafness, particularly when she started to brandish an impressive and ineffective ear trumpet.

But her most memorable encounters were on the telephone. Miss Fitzgerald became, quite knowingly, unable to hear anyone actually reply on the other end of the line, and as such would just start speaking instructions as soon as she felt the call had probably been answered, before promptly hanging up.

These calls came in three varieties.

The first was that she needed her shopping collected from North Parade or a letter posting at the end of the road, always in the pouring rain. She would normally stand at the front gate and accost passers-by to run her errands, but in bad weather that delicate arrangement fell apart.

Secondly, and more alarmingly, was that she had been burgled. Miss Fitzgerald's house was a trove of artefacts that made the Pitt Rivers Museum look both bare and

well-spaced. Inside the front door stood huge carved wooden screens from a Burmese temple – books piled high in every room, and the walls were fully covered by artworks. She would almost certainly have been home when burglars walked in her frequently unlocked doors and was only alerted to the thefts by the squares of un-faded wallpaper where the paintings once hung.

Thirdly, and most dreaded, was asking whether someone could come and bury her cat. Miss Fitzgerald had 6 cats, all of which she survived, and there remains a line of 6 small graves in the back garden.

However, beyond her eccentricities, my grandad, Roger Elliott – who lived next door for 59 years of his life – would often remind us all that Miss Fitzgerald formed part of a long and proud tradition of Crick Road scientists. He wished that here be remembered as such, as a place with history

Towards the end of her life, as we have heard, Miss Fitzgerald was finally awarded a Master of Arts from the University, conferred on her at a special congregation by Vice Chancellor Sir Alan Bullock.

As Martin Goodman then wrote, in his account of her high-altitude research:

“On turning one hundred herself, her Oxford neighbour Prof. Sir Roger Elliott, then Wykeham Professor of Physics ... brought in the support of the Regius Professor of Medicine, Sir Richard Doll to cosponsor a degree award...: the degree from which her gender had earlier precluded her.”

In 2009, speaking at the unveiling of the blue plaque next door for J. S. Haldane – another scientist of the Crick Road contingent, and whom Miss Fitzgerald had herself worked alongside in 1911 – my grandad had some final words that I would like to borrow:

“Mabel Purefoy Fitzgerald was lively and clear-minded ... [well into her 90s]. She had remarkable stories to tell about her long life – from her travels by mule in the American West, to being read a bed-time story by Robert Browning. Perhaps she too deserves a blue plaque sometime.”

Happily, and deservedly, today that comes true.