

My Playgroup Days

Barbara Howell

For ten years playgroups and PPA were a major part of my life. My husband often used to say ‘Before we were married, Barbara asked, “You won’t be one of those husbands who goes out every night and leaves me baby sitting will you?” – that is because she wanted to go out every night!!’ Sometimes it felt like that – with all those meetings. There is a lovely story about meetings in Mold – where we used the Daniel Owen Centre for our meetings. Diane Bellis was an Area Organiser at the time and her playgroup age son asked ‘Who is this Daniel Owen?’

My own involvement started when my neighbour and long term friend Ceinwen Jones, tried to get our three year old children into the playgroup that Myra Cuffin ran in her home – the only playgroup in Prestatyn at the time – 1969 – and found that it was oversubscribed. Ceinwen was a trained teacher so, after some thought I asked whether she would be willing to start a new playgroup if I helped her. She agreed and that was the start of my own involvement with the Playgroup Movement. To give us a start, Myra generously allowed us to use her home for three afternoons a week. She also gave us her waiting list. We were off but it was soon clear that we needed more space. We scoured the town and eventually found the Liberal Headquarters in the High Street. There was a panic when the Fire Service said that such a room – over a chip shop – would be a fire risk! The Playgroup fathers came to the rescue and made it acceptably safe. Goodness knows how many children passed through the group over the years.

Myra encouraged us to meet with like-minded people who had started a Flintshire Group – I remember a conference when Marianne Parry from Bristol was the speaker – heady stuff! With the knowledge that Flintshire would soon be part of Clwyd, we had some joint meetings with Denbighshire and met more enthusiasts, particularly Marjorie Dykins, who, even at that early

stage, must have had a vision of Wales PPA. First though, there was the task of drawing together the North Wales Groups. Playgroup development was very patchy and many people travelled long journeys. I remember collecting someone from the Conwy Valley and driving to a meeting in Llangefni. I had my husband's car, which was new. When it was time to come home it was dark and I could not find how to switch on the lights – but we found a policeman in the town and he was delighted to be able to show us where the switch was – we were young then!

Barbara Thomas had been Flintshire's County Organiser and she needed to give up the post. Once again, I said, this time to Cathie Barrett, would she do it if I helped her? We collected six volunteers to be Area Organisers and arranged to share our skills in a training course. Two of those six, Jeanne Cook and Liz Harrison, are still personal friends, thirty years on.

All this was a tremendous learning opportunity, broadened by my attending meetings in London in various capacities, sometimes with Cathie. There was one occasion when Cathie and I were so involved in putting the playgroup world to rights that we forgot to get off the train at Crewe and found ourselves in Warrington. Brenda Crowe and Maude Henderson, our National Advisers, must have had nightmares about our enthusiasm.

PPA was restructured and a series of National Committees formed. I was asked to chair the one about playgroups for children with special needs. John Watson was PPA's Chairman at the time and he used to hold what we might think of as 'cabinet meetings' for the six or so Committee Chairmen – more wonderful learning and a special occasion for me, when some of us went to meet with Dr David Owen, MP – I cannot remember what his post was but he was in the real Cabinet – and oh we were important!

Myfanwy Edwards was appointed as National Adviser for Wales and then there were posts advertised for part time Development Officers. I was interviewed and offered the North Wales post – a lot to do in three days a week. I feel sure that the places farthest away from Prestatyn must have been short changed but I always remember that whenever I drove over to the west coast, I seemed to be rewarded by good weather.

I retired because my husband needed me in his business, but how I had grown!

Talk about being in the right place at the right time, I feel I was. Women's Lib was happening but there were lots of bright young mothers who were still staying at home with their young children, with lots of home tasks to do but short of stimulation. Many of them had moved area because of their husband's work so there were gaps in their social lives waiting to be filled. I have a lasting impression of great halls full of such young women at PPA Conferences. What a buzz!

If I seem to mention a lot of names it is because people are the first thing I think of at the mention of playgroups but I know that there was a lifelong benefit for my son – and for so many of his generation. I gained in personal skills, confidence, knowledge and understanding – as did so many of my generation.