

## Life story of Josephine Foster

Josephine Foster, now 76, has led a varied life doing wartime work; becoming a Wren; being a daughter, sister, wife and mother; and as time went on, becoming a grandmother and a teacher. Born in Colchester, England in 1927, following several excursions into other parts of England she eventually returned to Colchester.

Jo finished her schooling at Colchester County High School in 1944, whereupon she went to the labour exchange to find a job. She says she told them she liked to work with numbers (she was good at maths), so they found her a job as switchboard operator with the local Telephone Exchange. It was still wartime and, although she soon found that sitting still for eight hours a day was not for her, she was required to keep working there until the Essential Works Order was rescinded.

In 1947, finally able to relinquish her job on the switchboard, she decided to join the Wrens (British Women's Royal Naval Service). They were in particular need of naval air women, a new branch at the time, she says. After the initial training period she was sent to Scotland for naval air women's training after which she was posted to Northern Ireland, near Londonderry where, she says, "I worked on all sorts of airplanes for three years . . . I was the air mechanic who checked the engines and made sure they were serviceable to fly." Jo showed me a piece of memorabilia, a brass model of a Sea Otter, a biplane used for search and rescue at that time.



Jo and 'Flash' Harper. "propping up a Harvard."  
1947. Photo courtesy J. Foster

Her three years were almost up when she met a young man in the hangar who, following his training, had recently arrived at the naval air station. She thought at first he seemed a bit brash but soon discovered "he danced superbly." Nevertheless, by 1950 she had completed her term of duty and so returned to her home in Colchester, where her mother still lived, and went to work at a local plant as a viewer, on the engineering side. If she had been a man, she said, she would have been called an inspector and received double the pay for the same job.

The man she had enjoyed dancing with so much visited on weekends from Lee-on-Solent and in time they became engaged, finally marrying in 1953 when she was twenty-five. She had given up work when she married, as women often did at that time, Jo says, and it was later that year that their son was born. They lived in several places after that, moving as required, living in the naval air base's married couples' quarters. It was a loosely-knit community, with couples settling in and then before too long moving out again. But after five years and three different naval bases, Jo's husband was told his job as aircraft artificer with the Fleet Air Arm of the Royal Navy would be taking him around the world for a year, and wives would not be able to accompany their husbands. So in 1958, Jo moved with her son to Colchester.

That same year Jo visited her husband while he was in Gibraltar, taking her son with her. That was the year, also, they bought the beach hut which would be a source of pleasure for

many years to come, on the coast at Walton-on-the-Naze. In the hut was a gas cooker and a tin bowl for washing up, and everything they needed for a day out at the beach.

On her husband's return at the end of the year they moved again so that he could take up another post with the Navy. Their son was now of school age, so when her husband was sent to a Fleet Air Arm base in Scotland two years later, in 1961, they decided she would return to Colchester with the eight-year-old, where he could receive a more stable education. The ten-month-term in Scotland turned into three years, during which time Jo settled into a Colchester way of life.

Over the next few years Jo's life evolved, and her stability in the community became more evident. Scouting had been one of her interests previously, in Colchester and in other places, so once again she volunteered. Within a couple of years she had taken a job as a telephone switchboard operator, as she had done before when she first left school, this time with the University of Essex just as it was starting up. But in 1965, when she was 38 and her son was eleven, she decided to become a teacher, training at Clacton for two years, then beginning her teaching career at Montgomery School, a school for army children. She remained there for twenty-one years, retiring in 1988 at age 60.

Two years after she retired Jo had a mammogram and the results were not good. She had a mastectomy, and had treatment following that to prevent a recurrence of the cancer, but was soon able to put that behind her and get on with the things important to her. She recalls that her father had died fifty years earlier, and that life had been hard after that, growing up with just her mother and sister, also a teenager in high school at the time. Many years earlier, in 1888, her grandfather had made his way on foot to Colchester from London, stopping here to raise eight children. Her father was also one of eight. She had wanted to go to Australia and so she did, after her recovery, staying with family friends and relations in Perth, Melbourne and Brisbane, and taking a side trip—included in the package—to Hong Kong.



Mrs J. Foster w/model airplane. Photo S McPherson 2004

Jo feels fortunate that she has a lovely son and daughter-in-law, and two grandsons. Her husband, who had come out of the Navy in 1969, retired from a career in teaching at 63 when she was going through breast cancer. Her mother, “a fantastic character,” lived next door for many years until her death at age 95. She is committed to the church, and enjoys activities such as the mothers' union and the travelling she has done with them. Volunteering with the Scouts is still a priority, on an annual basis

at least, at this time. She has been camping with them, but that was “back in the dimming distance.” Travelling with her husband is one of her main sources of enjoyment, whether on coach trips or abroad, to their favourite destination, but the beach hut, which they had been going to for 44 years, sadly burned down in 2002. She claims to have a long history with her local pub, of almost seventy years, beginning at age seven when she walked in and asked for “half a pint of old, to make the Christmas pudding.” But has she changed since then? She says she started smoking while in the Wrens but quit twenty years ago when her second grandson was born. And she sees herself now as garrulous, whereas when she was younger she was not talkative at all.

Recently, Jo was asked to speak to children at the Castle Museum in Colchester about her experience as an evacuee during World War II. Many Colchester children, including Jo and her sister, were evacuated in 1940 to safer areas of England due to the fear of invasion of the south-east counties of England following Dunkirk. The two girls were sent to Burton-on-Trent, where they stayed for about four months, until they were able to return home. A postcard from her sister and a letter Jo wrote home are included in the museum's collection of that time.

One of the first things Jo did after she retired was to go on a holiday with her mother – to the Isle of Wight. She told me she thought sixty was a good time to retire, saying, “I’ve still got enough energy to do the things I want to do. . . I feel very fortunate.”

As far as mandatory retirement is concerned, she thinks that while 60 is a good time to retire, the big question is money. “Can people afford to retire . . . or have they got to go on working to meet their day-to-day expenses?”

Life story of Josephine Foster written by Sue McPherson following interview in 2004.

Diversity in Retirement website: <http://DiversityinRetirement.homestead.com> 2004-05.

*The Dilemma of Mandatory Retirement.* Sue McPherson writer, website design