

# Chapter One

## *Preparations for Filming*

By May 1973 I was on my way up to the North West of England to take a leading part in the feature film of *Swallows and Amazons* that the producer, Richard Pilbrow of Theatre Projects, had somehow persuaded Nat Cohen of EMI to finance. I had no idea of the responsibility being laid on my shoulders, or of the huge sums of money involved. I was just doing it for fun.

My lack of concern emanates from the pages of the diary that I kept. I have three volumes, in readable italic hand-writing, detailing what we did, and indeed what we said, on every single day. The wording is childlike but, as a little bit of film history, the diary provides the facts from an interesting angle. My mother was pleased when I started to type them up forty years later. She'd been nagging me for years.

On the inside cover of the first volume, I wrote:

I had been very lucky to be picked out of all those hundreds of children for one of the six who were cast. I had been in a film with Claude, the director, before but only for three days. He short-listed me for the part of Titty. I was then chosen with 22 others for a sailing holiday [a cold weekend in March at Burnham-on-Crouch] to see how we reacted and sailed.

This weekend had proved something of an endurance test. It was miles from where we lived. The weather was awful, with driving rain falling on rough seas. The only warm piece of clothing I took was a knitted hat. We slept in cabins aboard a permanently moored Scout boat with flowery orange curtains. There were no parents around to boost our morale, the sailing was challenging, and I felt bitterly cold the entire time.

Richard Pilbrow brought his two children, Abigail and Fred. With him was Claude Whatham, Neville Thompson (the associate producer), and



The final audition at Burnham-on-Crouch in March 1973.

David Blagden who, as Claude was no sailor, was to be the film's sailing director. He told us that he had read *Swallows and Amazons* forty-two times, which sounded daunting.

Out of an initial 1,800 who applied, twenty-two children had been short-listed and were effectively auditioning for the six parts. I still meet people who went up for them. We didn't read from a script, we weren't asked to improvise or act out a scene and there was no film test, but 8mm movie footage was taken. I wonder if it still exists.

While there were only two or three boys up for the role of Roger, there were five girls auditioning to play Titty. At one stage Claude had a chat with the five of us in our cabin, all the Tittys. The others were so sweet that I didn't think I stood a chance. I was undeniably gangly and felt that I kept saying the wrong thing. One of the other girls looked incredibly together. She had pretty, fashionable clothes and would make a point of brushing her hair and wearing jewellery, just as Mummy would have liked me to have done. While I was used to boats my sailing wasn't up to much. I was completely in awe of the seamanship of Kit Seymour (who would land the part of Nancy) and how fast she got the dinghies to whizz through the driving rain.

We were all lucky to be the right age at the right time. I was perhaps the most fortunate because at twelve-and-a-half I was really too tall for

the part of Titty. I was a year older and a good two inches taller than Simon West, who played Titty's older brother, John, but Claude must have known that he could cheat this on-screen. I wrote: 'In about a week's time they rang up to say I had got the part and Mummy a chaperone.'

One of Arthur Ransome's most famous quotes is: 'Grab a chance and you won't be sorry for a might-have-been.' The chance was grabbed.

The Lake District gets very busy in July and August, so busy that the production team were advised to film during the summer term. This was a bit of an issue as I was at boarding school, a conventional Anglican convent. By law, before I could work as an actress, my parents needed formal written permission from Sister Ann-Julian, my headmistress. This seemed unlikely. She wrote back, saying that she had prayed about it with my housemistress Sister Allyne. They gave us the go-ahead.

The filming was to start on Monday 14<sup>th</sup> May 1973. We were told there would be forty-six days on location with a full crew for a ninety-minute movie.

### *Friday 11<sup>th</sup> May – First day in the Lake District*

On that Friday, Mum saw my father off to work, dropped my two little sisters at their village school and took me for a medical to satisfy our local County Council. What they would have done if I had been deemed unfit I do not know, but I had already passed stringent medical tests for the company insuring the film, who'd sent me to the grandest doctor in Harley Street. My mother then bought me a stash of hay-fever pills before driving from Stroud in the Cotswolds to Ambleside – a journey of about two hundred miles. Her small, rattling, red Renault Four hatchback was packed to the gills. My diary entry, spelling mistakes and all, reads as follows:

We got to the motor-way and travelled up to Westmorland and the Laks. Half-way we stopped at a motor-way service station and filled up with petrol. We had lunch. I had steak followed by a nickerbockerglory. We went of again. We turned off and wound our way through the county until we found the guest-house.

Mummy and I unpacked. When we had finished all the others came. They unpacked and we watched television until a minibus took us to the hotel to see Claude. When we went in before us lay a magnificent tea. We ate a fair amount and then Claude came and talked to us about the

film and told us we would not have a script. We watched color television there and went back. We had super I went to bed and Suzanna came later and went to bed too. (She slept with me poor soul!). We rote our dairys and slept a well-earned sleep.

The film company took over the rather grand hotel on the lakeside. They booked us children into Oaklands, a solid stone Edwardian guest house above the little town of Ambleside. 'To separate you from the hurly-burly of the crew', was how my mother saw it. The others had all travelled up by train, via a last minute costume fitting at Morris Angel and Son Ltd, Theatrical Costumiers, Shaftesbury Avenue in London. The Evening Standard took a shot of them on the station platform.

Kit Seymour, who came from Middlesex, was playing Nancy Blackett, 'Captain of the Amazon and terror of the seas.' Her sister, Peggy Blackett, was played by Lesley Bennett, who was often described as being talkative and bubbly.

Simon West, who was cast as my brother John Walker, Master of the *Swallow*, was from Abingdon in Oxfordshire. His father worked at the nuclear research station nearby. He had only auditioned because his sister had been keen to be considered for a part herself. Claude said that Simon was everybody's idea of the perfect son. 'He has only to be told anything once.' He was both bright and practical, exactly like the character he played. I never had a brother in real life so it was quite interesting to gain a ready-made one.

Suzanna Hamilton took the role of my sister Susan. She went to the Anna Scher after-school theatre club in Islington and was the only one of us who had a pronounced ambition to act. She explained that she would have to be credited as Zanna Hamilton as there was already a Susannah Hamilton registered with Equity. Suzanna would have preferred to use her full name but was glad she had been christened Suzanna with a z. Most people called her Zanna anyway. I grew aware that we were having to make decisions that would affect our future.

The part of my younger brother Roger had been given to Stephen Grendon (always known as 'Sten'), with whom I'd appeared in *Cider with Rosie* when he played young Laurie Lee. Sten, who was now aged eight, couldn't swim well, but Claude adored him and was determined he should take on the role. He had travelled up from Gloucestershire via the costume fitting in London, with his mother Jane, who was to act as an official chaperone along with my mother. I wasn't quite so sure about having a little brother. He seemed very energetic.

And me? What did people think of me? Documents from the producer's office described me as 'a skinny, wide-eyed, little girl who loved to have a sketch pad near at hand'. They were right. While Mummy had been buying antihistamines at the chemist, I was choosing a paintbox and brush.

As my diary relates, we were taken for tea at the Kirkstone Foot Hotel to meet Claude. He was a small man, habitually clad in jeans, with a denim jacket. He seemed young and trendy for an adult. We had all got to know him a little during the weekend sailing in Essex, which had served as our final audition, but he was more respected and revered now, surrounded by assistants of different kinds, all anxious to please.

I can only think that we were thrilled to hear that we would not be learning lines, never realising it was Claude's key to getting natural performances out of us. I knew from my parents that Claude had decided not to cast children from stage schools who were trained to deliver dialogue in a theatrical manner. We, who were full of high spirits, were encouraged to start adopting our character names, which was something we enjoyed. Claude's other secret was that he never allowed us to see the 'rushes' – recently recorded film, newly returned from the developers – as he thought it might make us self-conscious. I learned later in life that he was quite right. It's dreadful seeing photographs of yourself, let alone un-edited film clips.



Claude Whatham, Sten Grendon, Simon West, myself  
and Suzanna Hamilton at Derwentwater.

From the moment Richard Pilbrow gained the film rights from Mrs Ransome, he had been keen to cast children who were all confident in boats. I don't think Claude fully appreciated how deeply he would value the experience that both Kit and Simon had with sailing dinghies until we were out on the lakes in gusty weather. They were so good he later admitted there were times when they advised him what to do, which both stunned and amused him.

The thing that fascinated us above all else was watching the large colour television in the plush hotel lounge. I'm not sure if I had seen one before. They were hugely expensive in 1973 and considered a great luxury. The set, which had a wooden veneer, stood on legs and showed all three channels – BBC1, BBC2, and ITV, a channel we could not receive at home. We all thought it was phenomenal, including Claude.

### *Saturday 12<sup>th</sup> May – Second day*

I woke up at about 6.00. Suzanna was already awake. We lay in bed for a part of time. Kit and Lesley came in fully dressed. They had been woken up by the clock in the hall at 4.00. They played Suzanna's ukelele until Mummy came in and told us to try to go to sleep, as we had a tiring day ahead of us. Then we had breakfast with the rest. We collected sailing gear of our own and set off to the hotel. We played in the garden until we were called to have our hair cut.

In the early 1970s most people had long hair. Ours had to be cut and bobbed to match the 1929 hairstyles in Arthur Ransome's well-known illustrations. Mum said that Sten really did have long, flowing hair, which looked extraordinary on an eight-year-old boy. He wrote in his scrapbook, 'When the hairdresser had got halfway through my hair he said let's wash it now. So he washed it with nice smelly shampoo.'

Sten went first and came out looking much older with all his locks cut off! Simon was next. He looked much the same, except with his ears showing.

We thought he looked so much better with a short back and sides, but such haircuts were a big issue. My mother had huge reservations about my hair being chopped off and said she nearly refused to let them. I am very glad she didn't. It was wonderful having it short. My hairstyle proved such a great success that I believe it may have set a fashion for having a graduated bob or 'Titty Haircut'. I noted, 'We all looked much different except Kit.' Suzanna thought, 'We all looked very funny!'

After that we hopped in the mini-bus and went to the dentist to have our teeth polished. I was first, the others went later. It did not take long. We went back to the hotel and had lunch with Claude, David, Neville and Richard. After that we went sailing.

We had met our sailing director, David Blagden, at the audition weekend in Burnham-on-Crouch. He was a tall, dark, good-looking actor who had been in the film *Kidnapped* and was to play the part of Sammy the Policeman. David was well known for having sailed across the Atlantic in the 1972 Observer Single-handed Race. He made the crossing in *Willing Griffin*, a Hunter 19, the smallest yacht ever to officially participate, and came in tenth out of fifty-nine competitors.

David took us out on Windermere in *Swallow* that day, as we obviously needed to get used to handling a clinker-built dinghy. It was thrilling to be out on the water.

David was with the Captains and mates first, so Mummy, Richard, Sten and I went for a ride in a motor-boat. I steered and Richard took the controls. Then all the Swallows were taken out in 'Swallow'. Then the Amazons went out in 'Swallow', with David like us.

Richard Pilbrow's motor boat was a hired Capri, one of those hideous orange and white fibreglass ones with a small cabin that were thought so snazzy, but at least we could take shelter from the elements.

I faithfully recorded how we spent the rest of the day:

We went to the hotel and then to the Church Hall to have gum-shoes fitted. We came back and I wrote my diary as Mummy and Suzanna went to the book shop.

Next we had supper. Straight after I went up-stairs with Mummy. We washed my hair and went down-stairs to dry my hair under a funny hair dryer. I went up and this time slept with Mummy to get more sleep. I wrote up the rest of my diary while Mummy talked to Jane. I settled down and went to sleep looking on the next day.

### *Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> May – Third day*

A wet day on Windermere.

We went straight to the Lake. We got in the motor-launch and went to *Swallow's* and *Amazon's* moorings. We hoisted sail and went for a long run, where I got very cold.

Back then I only had a terrible blue nylon anorak that provided so little insulation I was unable to enjoy the sailing. It hadn't occurred to us to pack winter clothing or thick woolly sweaters. Richard Pilbrow realised he had also been over-optimistic about the leaf cover in the Lake District, where even the vegetation was still visibly underdressed.

We went back and had soup. We went out again and practiced coming into the jetty and going out. We did this three times and then had a race. The Amazons won.

Although they were old boats, the lugsail dinghies could go at quite a lick. The *Amazon* had a centreboard and was proving much faster than *Swallow*, whose long keel made her roomy and stable but held her back when we were running with the wind. Both were difficult to turn unless you had a bit of speed up. We were used to modern rudders that dropped down into the water, whereas *Swallow* and *Amazon* had shallow ones shaped like the letter 'b'. They had no added buoyancy, but had pig iron ballast under the floorboards.

Then we had lunch with Virginia, Claude, Richard and David. We collected stores and sailed off down the Lake. David was with the Amazons, Virginia was with us and Mummy and Jane in the chaperone boat. We went a long way down the Lake. We landed on the stoney shore and found a lovely little headland and ate our tea. We went back as before except with Virginia with the Amazons. We sang sea shantys. Half way back the motor-boat gave us a tow. We took down the sail and went straight to the waiting mini-bus.



Virginia McKenna

Virginia McKenna was to play our Mother, 'the best of all natives', Mary Walker. I did not know it, but another reason we had to start filming on 14<sup>th</sup> May was to fit in with her availability. She must have been very busy but was completely focused on us, sweet and enthusiastic about what we were doing. I remember her instigating games of Consequences. We all roared with laughter, startling other hotel guests, as she unfolded the strips of paper and read out the results.

‘Virginia McKenna was completely right to play the part of a Naval Commander’s wife,’ said my father.

‘In just a week’s stay she managed to win everybody with her kindness, concern, and the ease with which she works so hard,’ wrote Molly Friedel, Richard’s girlfriend.

A darling of the British public, Virginia was the star whose name was intended to carry the film. We knew her from having loved the animal movies she’d been in – *Ring of Bright Water*, *An Elephant Called Slowly*, *Born Free* and the WWII classic *A Town Like Alice*, for which she won the BAFTA Award for Best Actress. Married to Bill Travers, she had four children of her own when she made *Swallows & Amazons*. I don’t know how she managed to do so much.

Neville Thompson was also with us that first weekend. He was a director of Theatre Projects and experienced in making movies. He’d been the production manager on a number of Ken Russell’s films including *The Devils* (1971) starring Vanessa Redgrave and Oliver Reed, *The Boyfriend* (1971) which featured Twiggy, and the biographical movie *Savage Messiah* (1972) with Dorothy Tutin and Helen Mirren. Here, he was responsible for most of the preparations before we arrived in Ambleside. As the associate producer, he was in charge of the budget, schedule and practical aspects of production, a good man to have on board. I always remember him wearing a sunshiny yellow shirt.

That day, signs reading ‘T.P. LOC’ – the secret code for ‘Theatre Projects Location’ – were being driven into the verges of the road leading to the south of Windermere with large black arrows pointing the way to the first location. The cameras were ready to roll.