

A lead into the dark - Gillian's Story

Rob: Today we're here with Gillian, a retired civil servant with an amazing story to tell. When she retired on her 60th birthday, she went home and wept. Feeling cut adrift after a career full of traveling, she needed a purpose in her life after work.

Emily: Now, 20 years later, she's taken up a whole new line of work, on top of being a published author. Gillian, it's lovely to have you with us today. Thanks so much for joining us on the podcast. Can we start with you telling us a little bit about yourself and your career?

Gillian: Indeed, yes. many thanks both of you. It's lovely to be here and to meet you and thanks for asking me. I was born in Leicester 1945 and went to the Leicester College of Technology where I studied business studies and typing and shorthand and everything, with a view to being a PA at the end of it.

I began work as a PA to an architect and then in an engineering company and after that for the rank organization. But I always wanted to travel. I'd got an Uncle who was an Ancient Mariner and he came back with the most fantastic stories, and I just felt that I wanted to go to sea. And, of course, being in Leicester, you couldn't be further away from the sea if you tried.

But, anyway, I applied to P&O and was very lucky to be accepted. So, this was in 1967. I did my standby, which means you just work on a ship before it sails, over Christmas in 67. And then I joined Canberra in January 1968 and off I went on a career with P&O as an Assistant Purser.

Rob: Wow.

Gillian: So travelling all over the place. After two years in Canberra, then I joined Oriana and I stayed there until 1974.

But at that time, female officers weren't allowed to work after 40. You had to retire when you got to 40. There were no pension arrangements, nothing. So I have no pension from P&O.

Emily: Wow

Rob: Wow

Gillian: And so I left then when I was 29 because I thought, what am I going to do when I get to 40? And so, I just went ashore and worked up in Newcastle for a little while. But I just got itchy feet and I really wanted to travel again, and so I joined the Foreign Office in 1976 and stayed there until I retired in 2005.

Emily: Wow.

Rob: Wow, that's amazing. So, I mean, we'll hopefully we'll talk a little bit about your time in the Foreign Office, but perhaps you could tell us a little bit about how you're spending your time in retirement.

Gillian: Well, I really did feel cut adrift when I retired and I looked around for something to do and fortunately in the Chichester Observer, there was an advert for an Usher for the Registration Team for Marriages. So I applied for that and got that job and I really enjoyed it. [00:03:00] It meant that I belonged to something, I got some more colleagues. And after a year they said, would I like to become a Registrar? And so I'm now a Registrar of marriages and still going at it.

Rob: Wow, that must be such a joyful thing to do for a job.

Gillian: It is, I love it. I mean, it can be a bit emotional and it can be a bit stressful, if there are lots of children. But, uh, there we go. But, yes, it really is super. On the whole, it's a very, very happy job. It's lovely. And at the moment, we're incredibly busy. August is 'teachers month', so, of course, every teacher in the world gets married in August.

Emily: So, you're also a published author as well?

Gillian: Well, I am. Yes, for my 70th birthday, I treated myself to a trip to Venice and I absolutely loved it. And I felt I really did want to write about this and just put it down as a memory in a way. But then I got onto writing more and more and so now, I've got four volumes of a travelogue.

And after that I thought I really want to put down for the family, in a way, all my memories of my travels at sea and with the Foreign Office. And so I've now written two books on that. And then I decided - somebody said,

“Well, why don't you just write about your time in the Foreign Office?”
And so I did that as well. So, yeah.

Rob: You must have an incredible amount of energy to do that.

Gillian: Yes, in a way. I mean, I found that I woke up in the middle of the night and then I'd got all these thoughts and I got up and I started writing probably about four o'clock in the morning, and just kept going until about ten o'clock and I did both of the books in about two months.

Emily: Wow.

Rob: Goodness me.

Gillian: Really, you know, because all the thoughts kept tumbling out. And it's amazing what you remember that you think you've forgotten. And of course, then I got in touch with colleagues in the Foreign Office and we went through some memories that they got as well, just to make certain that, you know, they thought the same as I did. And so, it's been wonderful. It's been very cathartic, I have to say.

Rob: I was going to ask that, as you said you felt quite cut adrift when you left and you were, sort of just, “Well I'm suddenly now I'm retired”. It must have been quite a process of like, reconciliation, going through that writing process.

Gillian: Well, it was, it sort of drew everything together, all my memories, and I didn't feel quite so distanced from my careers in the past, which was really good. You know, they were still very much live in my memory and that was important. And also, again, chatting with old colleagues and some whom I hadn't been in touch with for ages. But, because when you're in the Foreign Office, of course, your friends go all different ways. They're probably on a posting or they don't live near you or whatever. So, it was just nice to be in touch with them again.

Rob: So you're a Registrar of marriages, you're a published author. What else do you fill your time with?

Gillian: Um, I learnt bell ringing.

Rob: Wow.

Gillian: Normally people learn bell ringing when they're much younger, but I managed to do it after I retired. I won't say I'm the world's greatest bell ringer, but at least I ring, you know, I ring for weddings as well as conducting them. So I've got one this Friday, and also for church services and I'm a Lay Assistant and a Reader at the church that I go to.

And I also joined the U3A, University of the Third Age, because I was very keen to keep up my languages. I wanted to keep up my Spanish in particular. And so I do that, I've joined a conversation group and also French, so that keeps me going. And sport was very much a part of my life, not so much these days. I don't play much sport, I'm afraid. I really love my golf. In Hungary, in 1991, I was the Hungarian Ladies Open Champion.

Rob: Wow.

Emily: What a life you've lived.

Gillian: I know, my claim to fame, dear me.

Rob: Storied, yeah.

Gillian: Admittedly, it was a fairly fledgling sport in Hungary at the time, but never mind, at least I made it.

Rob: But still, it's a trophy.

Emily: Don't diminish your achievements, Gillian.

Gillian: Oh yes. I really enjoyed it. And I played a lot of golf and when I retired I managed to play quite a bit. I joined clubs and everything, but now over the years, not so much.

Emily: Mmm.

Rob: You've lived such a full and kind of rich life, from what you've described. Do you feel that? I mean, you talked about feeling cut adrift when you, you know, left work. Do you feel the same now or do you feel like, actually, how did I ever fit work in, given all the stuff that you're involved with?

Gillian: No, I'm really grateful for the careers that I've had. And when you ask around or when you see what other people are doing, I do feel that I'm very lucky to have seen what I've seen and done what I've done. But now, you know, this is a third chapter in my life, really. It's different. And so I look on it as different. And of course, I'm no longer a spring chicken and not quite so active as I used to be. So of course it suits me down to the ground now, really.

Rob: Wow.

Emily: That's amazing. It'd be great to hear a bit more about your career with the Foreign Office. I think when we've chatted, before this recording, you said that you were a PA to an Ambassador. So I assume that took you all over the world, that kind of job.

Gillian: Yes, well, I started off in the Philippines. Well in fact, they offered me a posting to Antigua, and much to the horror of the people in the Foreign Office, I turned it down. And they thought I was mad, but I said, "Well, I've been cruising there for the last seven years or so. I don't particularly want to go and spend two and a half years living in St. John's, as nice as it is". So they thought, "Oh dear, we've got a real one here". So anyway, off I went and I thought, "Oh well, now I'm going to be destined to stay in the office for months", as a sort of punishment. But then in two months, they came back and said, would you like to go to Manila?" "Yes", I said, thank you very much, I'll go." And so off I went to Manila and I had three years there.

Emily: Wow.

Gillian: And that was interesting. It was not easy. I don't think it is easy being an Ambassador's PA in any of the posts. When I was there, you weren't allowed to be married.

Emily: Oh.

Gillian: Ambassadors wouldn't accept married women as PAs.

Emily: Wow.

Rob: Why's that, do you think?

Gillian: Because you were meant to be at their beck and call 24 hours a day.

Emily: And I suppose, on the move, if they get re-posted, you go with them?

Gillian: No you don't, you see, you stay. So you have different Ambassadors. When one leaves, you are PA to the one who comes.

Emily: Oh, I see.

Rob: Oh, so you're attached to the office, not to the person.

Gillian: This is it, not to a particular person. There are one or two posts, Washington and Berlin, I can remember, where the Ambassadors did particularly want to take their PAs with them and the office agreed. But normally, no, you weren't allowed to.

Emily: Oh that's interesting, I didn't realise that.

Gillian: Yes, yes. And of course, if you're a family person, then you know you've got your family commitments and so you're not able to, you know, go in in the dead of night and do your ciphers and all this and that sort of thing. So this is why they didn't want a married PA.

Rob: But that obviously didn't bother you at the time.

Gillian: No, it didn't. I'm single. I'm still single, so, um, it was fine. Yes, but, um, it just meant that you weren't in with the families in a way, although they always made you welcome and everything, but you were a bit out on a limb. And in the Philippines, it was very much a man's world. And so being a single female for them was quite an oddity. You know, because it was the done thing, for women to get married.

Emily: Being single, being independent...

Gillian: This is it. But in those days, I mean, we're talking about 1976.

Emily: Yeah.

Gillian: And so it was different then. It was a bit difficult. But again, I played my golf. Well, that's where I took up golf. And learnt to play in the Philippines. And had a super, uh, Filipino pro, who in the end became my boyfriend during the time that I was there, which was quite handy. Although they say, "never teach your wife to drive". Well, don't teach your girlfriend to play golf.

Emily: Ha!

Gillian: Dear me. We had a few arguments on the course, but never mind, not to worry. We got there in the end. So after the Philippines, I went to Peru, which was fantastic because I really wanted to use my Spanish. I got Spanish A level and I just wanted to use it. Um, but when I was there, I loved the country. I absolutely did, but I had a very difficult Ambassador. I really did. And in the end, I got in touch with the office and said, "Could I please be transferred?"

Rob: Oh really?

[00:12:06] **Gillian:** Yeah, and they did transfer me, but then they transferred me direct up to Guatemala in the middle of a civil war. So I was there for just over six months and because Belize became independent, then we got expelled.

Emily: Wow.

Gillian: We were only a mini mission. There were only seven of us, plus, wives and two little children. But the Guatemalans just wouldn't accept us, closed down the consulate general, and off we went. We just had to leave.

Rob: Crickey. How long were you there for?

Gillian: Just over six months, I went there in the April, and then Belize became independent on the 11th September, and this is 1981. And we had three days in which to close the embassy, pack up, and get out.

Rob: Crickey.

Emily: Goodness me.

Gillian: And it wasn't nice. It really wasn't. They were horrible to us.

Rob: It must have been scary.

Gillian: It was, I had to go down into Guatemala City on one occasion to get some papers and I got held up at gunpoint by one of the military people and it really was, I mean, it was scary. I thought he was going to shoot me, I really did. But there you go. Never mind.

Rob: There you go, never mind!

Emily: I bet after that you were like, "I'm never going to have a bad day ever again".

Gillian: Well, this is it I mean, you know, my boss was fantastic, super and... but there was nothing he could do. You know no point in complaining. Although we complained bitterly when we got back to the office, but there you go.

Rob: But that didn't put you off?

Gillian: No, no. No, I mean, we're a very resilient bunch, we FCO PAs, you know, we do get on with the job I have to say because we have to. You know, we have no option. It's either that or leave and I love the work and love the job. So I just stayed. So anyway, after that, I came back because I'd got no posting, you know. I had to come back to London, nowhere to live or anything like that. So the office found me a place in a hostel in Castlegate and I stayed there from the September. And then I got posted to Chile, which was absolutely brilliant. I went there in the February and the Falklands started in the April.

Rob: Goodness me.

Gillian: I thought, what have I done to deserve this? And it was very pertinent to me because of course, Canberra was there. And I'd got friends who were on Canberra. And, you know, I was very worried about her being around and, you know, the danger she was in as well.

Emily: Canberra is the P&O ship.

Gillian: Yes, and the one that I was on, you know, and the one that I loved. And then after that I had to come back for a home posting

because every so often they ask you to go back to London, just so that you can catch up with things at home and everything.

And then after that they gave me Mexico City, which was brilliant, which I absolutely loved again. And I did my full stint there, so that was two and a half years. And then after that I went to Budapest.

Rob: Oh wow.

Gillian: Um, and that was just at the very end, or the very beginning of the end of communism, so 1991. So, that was really useful and very interesting.

Rob: So you've seen countries at, like, quite interesting kind of points as well, you know, like turbulent, sort of, politically quite active, and I suppose getting to live in a place for such an extended period of time... it's not like travelling through a place on holiday, you know, you really get under the skin of the place.

Gillian: Oh you do, you do very much so. And Hungary was not easy for any of us, I don't think. I won't say we weren't welcomed, but we weren't common, if you see what I mean. During communism, they hadn't had many people from different nationalities and certainly not living amongst them. I was one of the first people to be 'outhoused', not in a compound. And in fact, I lived in a flat, a very square flat, owned by Erno Rubik, the Rubik cube man.

Rob: Oh really?

Gillian: So, he used to come by now and then and just check everything was alright, and I could never do his puzzle, and he wouldn't teach me, so there we go.

Emily: And I love that it was a square flat.

Gillian: Oh it was! It was very square. So, yes, I did that, but you know, you couldn't buy anything, it was difficult when you were travelling around. It was, yes, it was not easy.

Rob: So where did you go after Budapest?

Gillian: Then after Budapest, I came home and I was going to go to Madrid, but Dad died. And I thought I just couldn't leave my Mum, really, because she'd, you know, they'd sacrificed so much over all my time abroad and I'd miss them a lot, I'd missed the family. That was one downside of being with the office, you know.

Emily: Mmm.

Gillian: And we didn't have emails or WhatsApps or anything like that. In those days, it was just letters and phone calls, you know, now and then, every Christmas, that was all, it was so expensive.

Gillian: So, I decided in the end that I wouldn't go abroad again. I mean, I desperately wanted to go to Madrid, but I said, "No, I won't". And so I stayed at home and the office agreed for me to stay at home until I retired. So I did. So, then I worked for the Assistant Undersecretaries of State, various ones, until I retired.

Gillian: Yeah.

Rob: One thing that strikes me when you've talked about all of those things and all those places that you've experienced and just hearing you speak, is that you, it's like the sort of, the word resilience, you know, you've got this attitude, which is just, "Well, it's just how it is. We'll just get on with it", you know? And I guess, bringing it back to the whole concept of pensions and retirement, you, I guess you went into the concept of, "Okay, well, it's time for me to now retire" with that similar attitude of, "Right, let's just, this is the next thing. Let's just plough through this."

Emily: But I can understand how, at the same time as that, because I completely agree, I can understand how you felt so lost at the point where you were heading into kind of post-work life. You really talk about your career with so much energy and I can really tell that you really loved your work and where it took you. So I can really understand how retirement was actually quite scary, in a way.

Gillian: I can't tell you how I felt when I walked under that arch for the last time. I mean, you know, even now, I get a bit emotional about it. It was awful. Absolutely dreadful because I belonged to something and I'd felt pride in working for an embassy and it was interesting work and I felt that I was contributing something, however small that I was, and the

same as being on board ship. It was very much like a family because you lived and worked together. And I just thought, “what am I going to do without all these friends around me and not belonging and not feeling...” I felt quite worthless. I really did.

Rob: Wow.

Gillian: And just like a ship cut adrift, sailing in the middle of the ocean with no land in sight and nowhere to go and just not knowing what was going to happen. I think it was the uncertainty, really, at that time. And then Mum had died a little while before, so that was another problem, you know, so I was trying to get over that. And my family are up north, not that we're a big family at all, but my sister's up north. And I just didn't know, I really didn't know, so I sat down and I just felt so sorry for myself.

But after a fortnight, I thought, “Well, this is no good, Gillian. You know, get on with it. You've got to do something.”

Rob: There she is.

Gillian: You know, honestly, I thought “Stop being such a moaning Minnie”. And so fortunately this advert came along just at the right time. And then that was my salvation really, because then I belong to another group as it were the registration service. I have some super colleagues. We really get on very well, we're busy, and I just feel that I've got a purpose in life.

Rob: Mm.

Gillian: You know, I just needed to have a reason. I could have got into charity work. I was the governor of the RNLI, and I would have liked to have got involved very much with them, but, the registration then just took over my life.

Rob: Yeah.

Gillian: So, and that really was a fantastic thing.

Rob Walker: So you talk about walking through that arch. I mean, I could see, you know, you were welling up when you were talking about that. Emotion is still quite sort of raw on that. Did that take you by

surprise or had you kind of tried to mentally prepare yourself for that kind of before the event of you actually retiring?

Gillian: I tried to prepare myself. I mean, I had to accept that I'd got to retire, you know, there was no option and I had to retire on my 60th birthday, the very day. So it was a Wednesday. Now you can just extend your retirement a bit, but in those days you had to go when you were 60. And so I'd attended two seminars that the office offered for people who were going to retire. But there were no single females there. You know, it was mainly couples and how they were going to adjust to, you know, one of them being at home all the time, mainly the man.

Rob: Yeah.

Gillian: But there wasn't anything really for a single female or a single person, you know, as to what was going to happen. But the one thing that they said to us all, and for which I was really grateful, they said, "If you're going to move, don't leave it until you retire".

And I thought, "Well, I don't want to spend my life living in London when I've retired, really". I want to be near the sea because I did love the sea and I thought, "well, you know, my ships and everything and I got some friends down south". And so I decided in the January before I retired in the April the following year, that I would move.

And so I knew that I wanted to be down not too far from Southampton, so I just went down at weekends and drove round and round and round. I hadn't a clue where I wanted to be, but I just, you know, was going to have a look and I found a place that I really liked. So bought that, moved down there, and although it meant that I had a long commute, it meant that I could get involved in one or two things before I retired. I mean, I could start my bell ringing. I could play a bit of golf at weekends and things like that. You've just got to know the area a bit more. But if you retire and then move, it's too much all at once. It really is a big wrench, especially if you want to move far away because you leave your friends, you leave your work, and it really is, it's tough. It truly is. And so I was so grateful for that advice. And that's what I did.

Rob: Yeah, sounds like wise words and sounds like that kind of worked for you quite well. Even if you did still feel the emotional wrench of leaving, you know, when you took that last walk.

Gillian: Yes, but it wasn't so bad because then I was beginning to get a life for myself somewhere else, which was good.

Emily: If you could turn back time, is there anything, in terms of approaching retirement or coming into retirement, that you might do differently?

Gillian: I wouldn't be so apprehensive and fearful.

Emily: Okay.

Gillian: Because something always turns up. One door shuts and another one opens or even more than another one opens. And I think, had I have had a bit more confidence in myself and, you know, in the world in general, I suppose, then I really would have got on slightly better. I wouldn't have been quite so miserable when I retired.

Rob: Yeah, bereft.

Gillian: Yes, indeed. Retirement is very much a leap into the dark. You just don't know what's coming. And I think it's easy to be fearful of the future when you don't actually know what it's going to hold for you. I think I wish that I had discussed it more with some friends, you know, talked about it. I know in retrospect, the friends I've got now, we talk about it in the past, but I think at the time it would have been so helpful to talk to people, express your fears and just get their take on it and see what they think and what they probably propose to do. It would have really been helpful, I think, you know. You wouldn't have felt quite so alone, when you retired.

Emily: Mm.

Gillian: Because you're not the only one, obviously, other people, everybody's retiring. But at the time, you just feel very much as if there's no one else in the world who's in the same situation as you are. But there are people like that, and you don't necessarily realise it until you start talking to them.

Emily: It's so true and it makes me think about other times on this podcast where we've talked to people who've retired and heard their experience and their stories and everybody has said, you know, we really underestimate the impact that retiring can have on you, kind of,

psychologically as well as emotionally. It's a huge change to your life and, you know, a lot of people look forward to retirement is this really exciting, positive thing, which it absolutely should be. So actually that can mean, I imagine, when you're there, when you get there and that's not how you're feeling, it can be quite alarming. And that probably, as you say, can make you feel quite alone. Everybody else is, you know, thinking it's going to be amazing and they're having a great time and I'm here and I feel really weird and I feel quite sad. And I think all of those feelings are really valid because it is a leap in the dark, talking to the people about how you feel can go a really long way. It's really good advice.

Gillian: Well, I think so, because you're right, it is something to look forward to, your retirement, really. And most people do, and that's quite right that they should do. But they have to have a reality of what retirement is going to be. Because when you've been part of an organization, and you've had a busy life, the thought of not having to get up early every morning, and the thought of not having to do anything specific is fine, but that's okay for a certain amount of time, really, you know. You've got to have still some structure in your life, I think, and some meaning to your life. There's more to life than just doing these one or two things. You you've really got to reach out and try and stretch yourself a bit more. You know, but as you said, Rob, to do what you want to do and not what you're told to do. Try and push yourself to do things, you know, don't just sit back because it's very easy then just to sit back. It's up to you. Retirement is very much up to you, what you do. And you can make a great deal of it, really. If you just look around and take opportunities that present themselves, whatever there is out there, you know, you just go and grab it.

Emily: Mm.

Gillian: I have to say, you know, health makes a difference, of course, really, you know if you've got your health.

Emily: Of course, yes, definitely. A few people have said that. Yeah.

Rob: So if you could go back and talk to your 60 year old self, what advice would you give yourself?

Gillian: I'd say do prepare for it. Do accept that you're going to retire. No matter how hard it's going to be, it's going to come and you have to

accept it. And you have to then look forward to the future as a third stage in your life. You know, I'm now on my third career. So just because one career ends, you can take up another one and it doesn't matter if it's paid or if it's voluntary work or whatever, but you know, do something. Really. And do something meaningful to you and to others. I think this is important, you know, but just don't be afraid because it will work out.

Rob: I suppose that, obviously you've talked about your career in a really passionate way. It was something that you enjoyed. It was something that you actively, kind of, wanted to do. A lot of people don't have that same luxury, I suppose. I guess though, the difference in retirement is that it is all on your terms. You get to decide if you want to do bell ringing today. You've made that decision to be a registrar and to continue being a registrar. It's all because you want to, not because you have to, to put a roof over your head.

Gillian: This is very true. Yes. Yes. I belong... I'm on the parochial church council. And one thing I said, when I retired, "I will never ever be a secretary of any organization again. I am sick of taking minutes". So they can find somebody else and they look at me, "Oh, well Gill will do it". Gill will not do it, thank you very much.

Rob: Very good.

Gillian: No way. That's one thing I won't do.

Emily: I absolutely love that.

Gillian: Well, my family will tell you I'm not the world's greatest person when it comes to a mobile phone. Dear me, because, again, I have been on the end of a phone at somebody's beck and call pretty well all my life, all my working Foreign Office life. And I refuse to be at somebody's beck and call and answering a phone every minute of the day, I just won't do it. And so it drives my family mad, you know, because I don't turn the phone on or I don't answer it or whatever, only when I want to.

Emily: Yeah.

Gillian: But I feel, you know, you've got to have these parameters. You really have.

Rob: That's a really... I mean, it's such a pertinent thing to say in this kind of world where we are all at the beck and call of whoever wants to reach out to us at any moment. You know, you see people lifting up their phones, don't you, every two minutes and it's based on other people's interactions with them and not their choice necessarily. So it's interesting that you mentioned that. So have you been able to carry on with the travelling in retirement?

Gillian: Yes I have, I'm still very much a cruise person and very much a small ship person. And now I've managed to convince my sister that she needs to go on cruises as well. So she and I go together, and so that's really super. So when we can, then I'm off doing that. So I try and get around as much as I can, really.

Rob: It's been, it really has been such a pleasure. It's has been a real pleasure talking to you today, Gillian. Thank you so much for taking the time.

Gillian: Well, thank you for asking me. It's just been lovely to relive everything with you. And I do hope that what I've said gives some hope to people who are about to retire. Just grit your teeth and get on and do something in the future. And you'll really, really benefit from it.

Emily: That's a lovely note to end on. Thank you so much Gillian.

Gillian: You're welcome.

Emily: To find out more about anything that we've talked about today or to tell us about something you'd like us to cover in a future episode, head to civilservicepensionscheme.org.uk/podcast. You can also find links to information, transcripts and accessible versions of this podcast in the episode description.

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Emily: Thanks for listening.