

# My Introduction to Theosophy And Sidmouth Lodge



By Suzanne Osswald



My journey with Theosophy this time began when I was around 15 years of age. At the time I lived in a lovely old house in the countryside with my family. I was always a quiet, reserved child, more interested in the charms of poetry and novels than socialising with my peers. Around this time, my Great Aunt was left a house in London, which we fondly referred to as Number 51. It had belonged to a family my Great Aunt had worked for over many years. She asked my mother if we could all come up and help her with clearing the house, which is what we did.

The house was big, old and musty but it had a fascinating library. Needless to say I forsook the clearing and started to browse through the various books. I came across so many interesting ones, which I later found out were to be along Theosophical lines. My aunt said I could take as many as I wanted, since she was only too pleased to get rid of them.

Upon arriving back in Devon, I became absorbed and fascinated with my find. This, I would say was my first conscious introduction to Theosophy in this life and set me on the path which ultimately led me to join the TS in Sidmouth two years later, after my family decided to move there. For the next two years, I read and toyed with the idea about joining either the TS or the Rosicrucians and read lots. By this time, we had moved to Sidmouth as my parents found that by living in the countryside, there was too much wear and tear in their cars and they needed to move to a town.

When I was almost 17, I had decided on the TS and wrote to HQ, who in turn referred me to Arthur Gainsford in Axminster. I was astounded when I discovered that a TS Lodge existed in Sidmouth. I will always remember my first phone call from Barbara Bellamy. She had a deep baritone voice which sounded rather foreboding and warranted much respect. She invited me to come and meet her at Camelot, her home in Vicarage Road. I was really nervous, but agreed on a date and a time. It was spring 1978.

I recall walking along Vicarage Road, wondering which house it was. Sidmouth was still relatively new to me then. Eventually I found Camelot and apprehensively rang the front doorbell. After a moment or two, a rather portly lady opened the door and I could finally put a face to that voice which had so struck a chord in me. But what struck me even more was her uncanny resemblance to HPB. Maybe it was just her blue grey eyes, but I was awestruck.

I was soon made to feel very much at ease as I sat down in Barbara Bellamy's living room, since her manner was not at all overbearing, but warm and welcoming. I knew, however, that she was naturally curious to find out more about this young person who had shown such an interest in Theosophy. She described the Lodge members at the time as "a funny old lot, but perfectly harmless" and hoped that I wouldn't feel too out of place with a group of over 65's. I didn't feel it was too much like an interview as she made me feel so at ease, not something I had experienced with my old school teachers.

Lodge was held at Camelot in Barbara Bellamy's lounge, every fortnight on a Saturday at 3pm. My first meeting experience was as if I had come home. Members at the time were Barbara Bellamy, Arthur and Margaret Gainsford, Hilda Jevons ( a gem for humorous remarks and scone-making), Amy Betts, the librarian from the Midlands, Pam and Allan Swann, who came and went as they didn't live in Sidmouth at the time, another lady who wore a bobble hat, who really only came for the tea and whose name eludes me and our very dear and special President, Elise Riddick, who drove over from Shipton Gorge for each Lodge meeting.



The Old School Room  
where so many lodge  
meetings were held.

Camelot



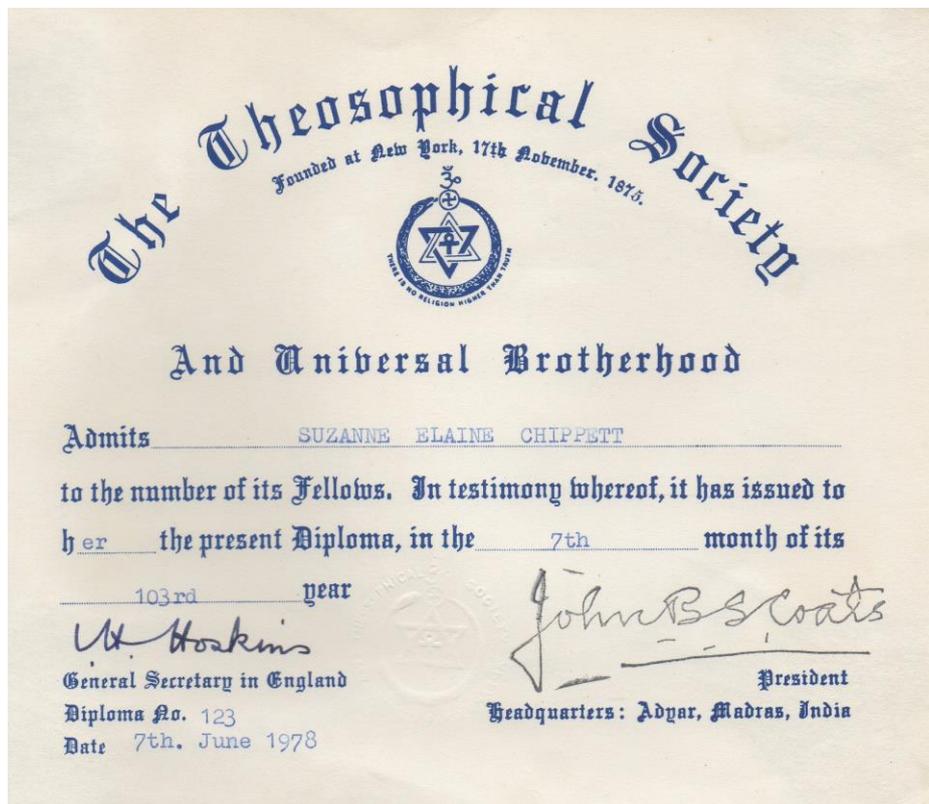
**The old school room (Top)  
At Camelot, where many Lodge meetings were held**

We usually read from a book of which each member had a copy. I preferred to listen and visualise the images. When Elise read, she had the ability to cause one's soul to move. It was a magical time. In Elise's absence on occasion, Barbara Bellamy always found something appropriate to read from her archives. Barbara Bellamy was always collecting meaningful snippets from her readings and sticking them into her various albums. In spring 1979, Elise moved to Connaught Road with her

mother, which was just opposite Camelot. This naturally made Lodge meetings much easier for her to attend.



Suzanne's 21<sup>st</sup> Birthday at Sidmouth Lodge



Suzanne's T S Member Certificate Dated 1978

There was quite a bit of concern amongst Lodge members that I was really too young to only be mixing with older Theosophists and not to have the opportunity to meet younger ones, so it was suggested that I attend the Round Table Camp at Tekels. This must have been in Summer 1978. So arrangements were made for me to go. I went to Camberley by coach and Elise's God Daughter Jonquil, who was the image of Elise only younger, collected me and brought me to Tekels. That year was the International Round Table and so many young folk from Europe were there. Nowadays I guess it would be world wide, but then it was attended by young people mainly from Sweden, Holland and, of course, England. Perhaps some current members who are now around 50 years of age attended these camps in those days. Well, maybe some of the guys now wished they had not dressed up as a dame in the pantomime that was presented to the younger children!

Jokes aside, it was a great experience and I was automatically made a Page of the Round Table Ceremonies. Two of the girls I shared a tent with I am still in contact with. I loved the simplicity of it all in those days, a Nissan hut where the food was prepared, a large tent where we all ate on our tin plates, and of course, the ever lit campfire around which we chatted or where music was played.

All too soon my week came to an end, but I wanted to go again the following year, even though it was just to be a National Camp that time. I begged my parents to let my younger brother come as I thought it was such an amazing experience that surely, he would love it as much as I did. Anyway, the following year he agreed to come. He was 11. He really didn't like it at all and he was so unhappy. Despite I tried to persuade him, much to my despair and embarrassment, my parents had to drive all the way to Tekels to bring my 11 year old brother back to Devon.

In October 1979 or 1980, I can't remember which, the Southern Federation was to have their Conference in Sidmouth. Lodge members had been discussing it for ages with great apprehension, since it required a lot of organizing. They kept saying what a nuisance it would have to be to be polite and gracious and to have to put in so much effort. They rather liked to keep Sidmouth Lodge off the map so to speak. Accommodation had to be found, catering had to be undertaken and Barbara Bellamy's old school room had to be prepared for the meetings. In those days Lodge members did everything themselves, all the food and all the meetings. Elise found Kurt's guest house and some members stayed there and this is how Kurt found Theosophy through his guests that Autumn.

I think around 40 people came, I can't remember. What a lot to cater for, although I think members must have gone out to lunch, but tea was provided. I recall that after a particular talk by Donald Murray, Barbara Bellamy asked me if I had enjoyed it and I replied that he hadn't actually covered anything that we hadn't known already. I think she liked my answer. As time went on, other people joined our Lodge. In particular, Margery and Beverly Adams, mother and daughter Astrologers from Exeter and Bertha and Es Meyer who happened to live in the same road as I did. They were fondly referred to as the Duchies. Then there was Kurt from the guest house. I don't think Elise was too happy about the changing dynamics of the group. Certain people, she felt, were not quite appropriate.

In June 1979, the Lodge hired a mini bus for the day so that we could all go up to London for the Festival of Mind, Body and Spirit at Olympia. It was a wonderful and a very brave undertaking, especially for Barbara Bellamy and for Margaret who was crippled with Arthritis. I remember collecting the Gainsfords from Honiton, since they lived in Axminster. It was truly a wonderful experience and for me because I was so

young and have never experienced anything like this before. We didn't get back to Sidmouth until 10pm. Very tiring for the older members.



1978 - 1979 - 1980



1978

**Round Table Camps, 1978 - 1980**

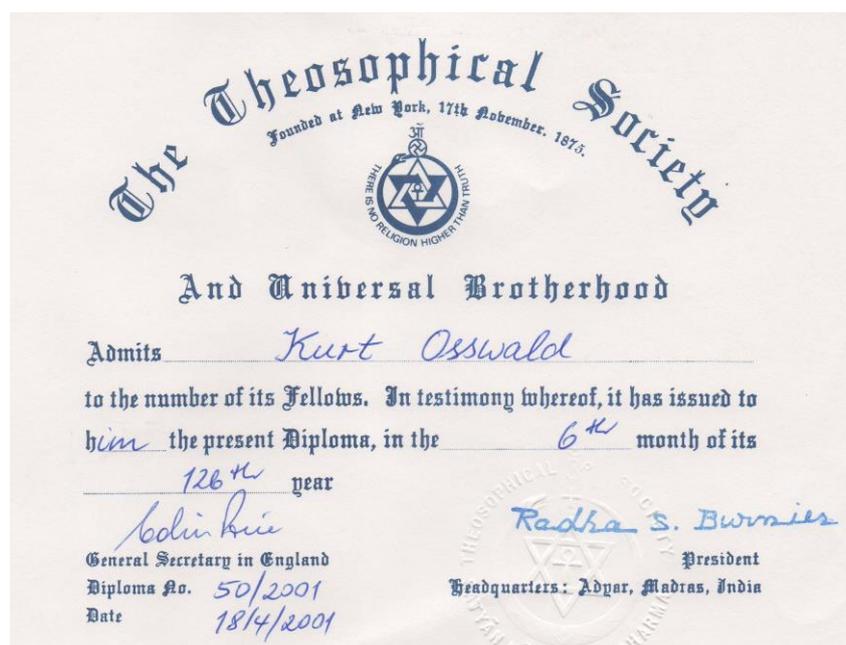
Christmas 1979, I had arranged to go visit Monique, my friend from Holland, who I had met at the Round Table. Her family were TS members and I was welcomed to their home near Utrecht. I spent a few days at the Rudolph Steiner School, where Monique was studying. This was interesting with all the classes being painted in different colours. There was a great interest in horticulture and how plants respond

differently under different conditions. After Christmas we attended St Michael's Winter Camp at Huizen. This was great fun and a time to come together. No one was allowed to eat meat nor smoke on the premises.

During summer 1980 I attended my third Round Table Camp, after which I went directly on to Summer School in Hoddesdon, Hertfordshire. I remember leaving Gloucester Place by coach. I was very excited, The place we stayed was lovely. It must have been an old hotel with beautiful grounds. Mornings we always attended a Church Service, a graceful way to start the day, and then we had breakfast together on the long tables. Various workshops took place during the day. I chose, "Light on the Path". In 1978, Rukmini Devi was at Round Table Camp. She hosted a talk about vegetarianism. I was so inspired that I became a vegetarian after this time. She was George Arundale's widow.

Before the beginning of every Lodge meeting, we would gather in Barbara Bellamy's 'den' (as she called her back room) and chat. The front room was kept a little bit sacred I felt, in preparation for the meeting. We had to leave our personalities outside the door and enter Barbara Bellamy's front room with reverence and respect. Elise would start the meditation, where we would breathe in and out whilst imagining the light coming through the chakras opening and relaxing as it did. When the meditation was at an end, she knocked gently on the hearth. No clanging bells that I have experienced in subsequent years. Then Elise would read from the book, usually "Man, the Measure of all Things". I can't describe how magical this was, but due to earlier preparation and the sound of her voice, this caused, for me anyway, something to move inside. She requested that no questions were to be asked and nothing to be discussed within the meeting, just absorption. I don't think this went down too well with Margery who was bursting to ask and discuss, also Kurt who is, as we know, a bit of a discussor. The meeting was closed with another meditation, which we always knew had come to an end when Elise knocked three times on the wooden fire surround.

Kurt and I got married in 1984 and Elise and her friend Val who lived with her at this time, were our witnesses. Our Reception was held at Elise's house in Connaught Road. Elise made the cake and decorated it with beautiful butterflies. Such a lot of effort. I have kept the butterflies.



**Kurt's Membership of the TS, Dated 2001**



Side view  
of Camelot



No 4  
Connaught Road,  
Elise's house  
1980 - 1985

Side view of Camelot (Top)  
No 4 Connaught Road – Elise's House (Bottom)

After Elise left to live in Ibiza in 1986, we felt deflated and I knew BB was most saddened. BB continued the Lodge for a couple more years before she admitted that hosting the Lodge had become too much for her. Hilda had died. Amy had gone into a home, so with much regret she had to give the Lodge into the hands of the Gainsfords, who had now moved into Sidmouth. Lodge library had to be moved and Margaret became President for a time and although crippled with Arthritis, she did a wonderful job bringing with her the experience of having lived at Adyar.

With BB finding old age a challenge, to say the least, (although she regarded everything as an adventure), I used to go and visit her. Mornings were her best time, around 9.30am. It was difficult to leave the guests, but spending time with BB was a treasure indeed. She told me many things about herself, how she had always lived in Sidmouth but her exoteric freedom in life had somehow always been 'restricted'. When she was 15, she had TB and was no longer allowed to swim in the sea. When she was 16, she worked at Arcot House which was a school. She had an opportunity to go and work in Guildford, but her two older brothers were getting married after the First World War. In those days it was expected that the daughter stayed at home and looked after the elderly parents. BB's mother was 40 when she had her as an only daughter, so her parents were already quite elderly and BB felt it was her duty to look after them. So she stayed at Camelot and started her school there. BB was able to use her father's old music room as a schoolroom and set up the school when she was just 17. So it was children upstairs and in the garden by day and elderly care in the middle room downstairs by night.

She longed for freedom and eventually found this through the TS. After getting a group together with Daisy Peters, who lived in Sidford, and I know that Hilda too was a founding member, finally during World War Two a Lodge was opened in Sidmouth by C Jinarajadasa on May 20<sup>th</sup> 1943. He gave us a signed photography of himself.



I know BB was a member of Esoteric Section and corresponded with Annie Besant.

TELE { GRAPH: OLCOTT, MADRAS  
PHONE NO. 663

THE THEOSOPHICAL SOCIETY,  
ADYAR,

MADRAS, S.

Oct. 15. 22

My dear Barb,

Thank you for your interesting letter. I have not been unjust enough to think you were "slack". Your will power must be very strong. I you remember that your initiation served you well with the slack gentleman from America. (He has done his work with poor Wadia.) Stay as long as you like at Ooty, if you feel it is doing you good.

Don't forget how much you helped me in the fandlei fight, though it brought us plenty of hate. How is your Uranus aspected to mine? Have you any view of how, so far so planetary influences go, the political movement

TELE { GRAPH: OLCOTT, MADRAS  
PHONE NO. 663

THE THEOSOPHICAL SOCIETY,  
ADYAR,  
MADRAS, S.

(Conference - Convention) will get  
on? So far it goes well, but the  
N.C.S.s are furious. If you have  
strength & inclination, you might  
give me your autobiographical idea  
of things.

With kindest wishes

Annie Besant

I think it is likely you are  
trying for the post. <sup>ray</sup> The strong  
will suggest it.

Letter to Barbara Bellamy from Annie Besant

BB owned a Morris Minor called Pearl (she always lovingly named things like her car and her boiler, even her frame that the Doctor told her she must use in later years). Her boiler was Archie, and her frame was Horace. Her best days out were going with Pearl and a friend up onto the Moors. She truly loved Dartmoor. Kurt and I wanted to take her in Goby in later years, but she declined because of old age.

Her nephew lived in Canada and had always promised that BB could come out and live with them when the time came, but just as that time did come, and I know BB would love to have gone for this adventure, her nephew's father-in-law became in need of care and her nephew and his wife took him in. BB felt that it would not be fair to impose herself on them as well and so she declined their kind offer. She thus never managed to go abroad but she always showed me photos of Mount Everest with great longing and interest.

BB finally chose Homesleigh Nursing Home for her later years. She always said that at last she would surely be able to find time to read the Secret Doctrine. I don't think she ever did, as once she moved, that adventurous spirit seemed to leave her. Her house was sold for a ridiculous price and all her books went to bookshops, although we did have some. She had taken quite a shine to Anna Humble Crofts, a Lodge member at the time. She was able to visit BB quite a lot. I think she reminded BB a lot of Elise.

Once I had Sabella, I let my subscription lapse. Kurt still continued to attend meetings which, for a time, were held at Goldie's house. I never met Goldie. In the interim, I spent years of practical service at our Guest House, which Kurt and I ran together. It has been such a learning curve for me. I used to be a self-effacing person and service to our guests and intuitional understanding required me to be so. But living with rather challenging family members over the years, I have developed a more 'stand up and face life with a pair of boxing gloves' approach. Self sufficiency, endurance and creativity are just some of that attributes that I have had to use and develop over the years.

Now I hope I can use what I have learnt during my life as an approach to the new Diploma in Theosophy Course, intuit its basic Principles and formulate them into an understandable whole. I am eternally grateful for having such amazing people being part of my life and they will always be very dear to my heart. The times at Lodge, mornings with BB, Round Table Camps, visits to Monique in Holland, our journeys to Ibiza to see Elise, visits from our TS friends from Brazil, all make for me a patchwork of precious Theosophical moments.

Sidmouth Lodge was always regarded as being a rather special one and by having known its early members, is something very magical and holds the deepest respect for me.

Suzanne Osswald

20<sup>th</sup> August 2010