

Carol Norris, about Miss Lord on 1 July

Oaklands has its roots in Irish soil. In 1900 Letitia Elizabeth Lord was born in a small village in County Cork, the eldest daughter of a Chaplain to the British Forces at a time when Irish Republicanism was vocal and dangerous. She had four brothers and a sister. Nevertheless they had what seems now an idyllic childhood, roaming the country lanes of rural Ireland in a donkey and trap with no adult supervision. The children were educated at home by a governess who attended daily to school them with their cousins in the large rectory. However at the sound of the bell they did not rush into the schoolroom - far from it. They scattered around the huge garden, hiding in their favourite places, while the poor woman had to lift her long black skirts and trudge through the mud to find them! They sounded a pretty wild bunch! All that came to an end when Elizabeth was around twelve years of age. Because she was so headstrong it was decided she could not be sent to boarding school in England like her brothers (because she would keep running away). So it was arranged that she would stay with two friends of her mother in Hampstead and attend Hampstead High School for Girls. She hated it, of course, as it was extremely strict and she was very independent and single minded. As her hatred of the place grew, she became determined to train as a teacher and to one day run her own school, according to her own ideas of how children should be taught. She did indeed achieve this. After attending the Froebel Institute she got a job in a small school in Blackheath, named Oakland House. She taught there for some years until in her thirties she decided it was time to find her own premises and live her dream.

Exactly why she came to Loughton is unclear. She first leased premises at the bottom of Traps Hill, on the corner of what is now the Brooklyn Parade. Within a term she had enough pupils to pay the rent and she continued there throughout most of the War. In the mid-1940s the school had grown beyond the size of the building and she knew the lease would not be renewed because it was to be knocked down to make way for shops being built. She found this Albion Hill site, which was absolutely perfect for her ideas of how small children should be learning - plenty of outside play, nature walks, learning through discovery and on the edge of a forest.

Miss Lord ran Oaklands successfully and eccentrically for many years - some in partnership with Mabel Reid. ; In 1967 Miss Reid retired and Miss Lord soon found out that she had really been the administrative mind (such as it was!) and that without Mabel she needed a secretary. I joined her in November 1968, bringing my two small children with me. I discovered that the school did not even own a filing cabinet. Her idea of book work was one large hard-backed exercise book with the children's names in it! They were divided into columns for Forms and I soon found that not every child was in the correct age group. ("There wasn't a space there, dear") Her friend paid the salaries and she had a large book with names and addresses in it and a ledger for fees. The cash box with the Cooks' wages in it was under a large cushion which I sat on my first day and wondered why it was so uncomfortable! Miss Lord's attitude to officialdom was anarchic to say the least. I well

remember the first Inspector of Schools who visited in my time. He peeped an apologetic head around the study door and she greeted him regally with "You've come on the wrong day!" He hadn't, of course, but she had wrong footed him. She then announced that because it was the Garden Room Nativity Play dress rehearsal he would have to come and watch that. He spent the best part of an hour watching small kings and shepherds in tea towels, trying to get up and see some other part of the school in vain. His parting words were "If you built a toilet block, Miss Lord, you could be recognised!" Her reply? "Why would I want to be?" That soon shut him up.

She could be both regal and hilarious - often at the same time. She had a wicked sense of humour and never minded upsetting people she didn't particularly like. One very grand mother used to stand outside her study door most afternoons in a pair of white tennis shorts and Miss Lord would push her grumpy West Highland terrier out to sniff her bare legs with its cold nose. The mother was dying to kick him away but couldn't because she was all too aware that Miss Lord was smiling sweetly at her through the open doorway. It was never shut. She would exchange pleasantries until she had had a least five minutes' worth enjoyment from it.

Not only was the study door never shut but neither was the front door - or only in extreme weather. It was often so cold in winter that I worked in my coat. How we never lost any children now seems a miracle. I do remember one occasion when Mrs Macy (a IVth Form teacher for many years) upset an hormonal eleven year old with her sarcasm and the child rushed out of the gate and up the hill towards the forest. Miss Lord had calmly got into her car and driven up the hill to find her - it didn't take long. We also had the incident of the fire extinguisher! A small boy pulled the pin out of the extinguisher on the first floor and flooded the entire cloakroom area, bringing down some ceiling plaster. All Miss Lord said to him was "Why did you do that?" He answered, "I wanted to see what would happen if I pulled that thing out of that thing". ; She replied calmly, "And now you know." And that was an end to it.

She was also fairly relaxed about an elderly cook's attitude to private property. She could be seen waddling down the path every afternoon at two o'clock with several heavy shopping bags she hadn't arrived with. When I was new I commented on it. "Erm... do you think she might be....?" "Oh of course she is, dear. Always has. I think of it as a bit of a bonus." Extraordinary.

She had a very easy relaxed way with children. She really did enjoy their company and always took the IVth Form to a restaurant with their mothers in the July when they were leaving. There was also the tradition of visiting the Regents Park Open Air Theatre every summer. She was never happier than if she had a dog and several small children in tow. If parents were late collecting, the children could be found with their Headmistress in the kitchen, making a pot of tea and rifling through the biscuit tin. There were also occasions when entrance exams. were taken at that same kitchen table! My daughter sat the Common Entrance to Felixstowe College sitting at the table with Miss Lord making tea

behind her and leaning over her shoulder making comments on the questions. She later signed a form assuring the College that the exam had been taken "Under Strict Examination conditions."

Her mother joined her living in Spring Grove for a short time before she died. Afterwards Miss Lord asked her brother to take the Ashes back to Ireland on the ferry. He refused, thinking it rather macabre. So she sent them back through the Post. "Mother would have loved travelling by Royal Mail!" she told me.

Her final term as Headmistress was very sad. She would reminisce a lot and sometimes just sit with tears streaming down her face. I knew her extremely well by then, having worked alongside her for thirteen years, so I knew better than to say anything. She was mourning the loss of her lifetime's work and there was nothing anyone could say to make that loss any easier to bear. Ten years later she was persuaded to go into a Theydon Bois Retirement Home on a temporary basis, and sadly she died there. She had never been made to do anything she didn't want to do since Hampstead High School days. I always felt she died of temper! At 92 she did not take kindly to young so-called "carers" calling her Elizabeth. She was, after all, a Victorian, and one of those inspiring ladies who called her own tune, wrote her own destiny and asked no-one's permission to live as she chose.

Sometimes I get a quick glimpse of her. She has a wry smile. I think she rests in peace.