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La Naissance du Cercle Français

by Ruth Hazeldine

If I hadn't gone into 10a that autumn morning in 1987 the French Circle might never have been born. Seeing an unfamiliar face and guessing the lady was new and should be welcomed, I approached her and started chatting. Her name was Pamela Lowes and to our surprise we found that we had both been students at the Institut Français many years ago, she succeeding me by about two years. Since that time we had both married and had children and we mutually lamented the fact that we had had very little opportunity to practise our hard-won facility in the language due to domestic responsibilities and husbands who preferred to holiday elsewhere than France.

We both had the idea at the same time: "Why don't we," we said in unison, "meet occasionally to speak French to each other?"

Excitedly, we agreed that there must be other people in Highgate who had either learned French at school or on exchange visits but who, like us, had lapsed and forgotten how to speak it. I was at that time editor of Buzz and suggested that Pamela write a letter for the correspondence column I had instituted, inviting people to respond to an appeal for a group of francophiles to meet and form a French-speaking circle. I put our idea to Mat Schwitzer, the Chairman, who, to no one's surprise, immediately picked up the ball and not only ran with it but persuaded the head of French at Highgate School, David Weight, to lead the group. Mat ensured 10a was made available for our meetings.

The Christmas 1987 issue of Buzz included an invitation to discuss the possibility of founding a Cercle Français on the Jour (sic) des Rois, January 6th. David Weight led the circle until he retired and moved to Norfolk, when Mat himself took over. He was succeeded by Elizabeth Woodman who organised our réunions with such enthusiasm and efficiency that when she gave up after 14 years at the helm, it has required the efforts of five of us to replace her! (Sadly, Pamela had died some years earlier of cancer).

Elizabeth initiated so many enjoyable events: quizzes, play-readings, discussions, presentations on a wide range of subjects, food and wine evenings (of course – it is the French Circle!), an annual dinner in June and our marvellous Fête de Noël in December and the Fête des Rois (Epiphany) in January, both of which traditions continue.

The Cercle now is organised by Penny Sewell, Daphne Forrest, Jane Campbell, Christine Knight and me. We meet on the first Wednesday of the month from September through to May at 8pm in 10a. All standards of fluency are welcome, wine

and bouchées are served; the entrance varies according to the occasion, usually about £5. Look out for our posters and do join us! Vous serez les très bienvenues!

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