



How an English doctor cruised into Cobden ~ and cared for her community ~

Dr Janet van Leerdam's journey into the world of Australian medicine has a sea-faring twist to it.

Would you believe our Dr Janet worked as an assistant surgeon with P & O shipping lines on the SS Canberra and the SS Himalaya?

"My main task was to look after the crews – I learnt a lot!" she said.

"It was also a wonderful opportunity to travel the world and meet some wonderful people – the most memorable being former Australian prime minister, Sir Robert Menzies."

Janet, who was born in a small town called Altrincham in Cheshire just south of Manchester in England, qualified as a doctor at Manchester University and decided she wanted to work as a general practitioner.

After a year of mandatory hospital jobs, she did obstetrics (delivering babies) for six months before completing a diploma in anaesthetics "just like my father and grandfather".

Not ready to settle down after a trainee year in general practice, Janet decided to take to the high seas as an assistant surgeon. "In those days, women were not allowed to be senior officers," she said.

So how did Janet get to Cobden?

"After 18 months on-board service, I was able to leave the ship in Sydney to travel further and visit inland Australia, rather than just the ports. A GP I met on board offered me a locum position in Geelong but, when I arrived there, she had sold her practice.

"Fortunately, she found me a locum job with Dr John Brayshaw in Camperdown. On New Year's Eve, 1972, the receptionists at the practice (one being my now sister-in-law) organised a blind date with this single guy – Keith van Leerdam. Six weeks later, we were engaged!! He had to work quickly as I was about to leave on further travels."

Well done, Keith, we say.

PRACTISING MEDICINE AND RAISING A FAMILY

Janet lists qualifying in medicine as one of her greatest achievements – an introduction to a wonderful and satisfying professional life.

She is eternally grateful to Dr Peter Fox in Timboon who was the only doctor in the district prepared to employ a young

female GP from England. She worked with Dr Fox for twelve years, until 1985, when she took the big step of setting up her own practice in Cobden.



"I started with one patient a week and watched it grow into full-time work and able to provide a service to people beyond Cobden," she said.

"Setting up a solo general practice to provide holistic medical care and starting a practice in nutritional medicine 30 years ago was a great challenge. It was treated with great scepticism by most of the medical profession at that time."

On a personal note, Janet rates her marriage to Keith and having three wonderful daughters, all practising Christians, as real highlights.



Keith and Janet, with Ruth (left), Ann and Linda

"One of the reasons I married Keith was because of his strong Christian belief. I am very grateful to the Christian Reformed Church for helping me to understand the gift of Grace and the true freedom through Jesus," she said.

"But I must admit I had to learn the peculiarities of Australian country life living in a Dutch family," Janet said with a smile.

Her three daughters are all living in Melbourne – Ann in Fitzroy with husband Dan and her first grandchild, Willem Keith. Second daughter Ruth lives in Croydon and works in the Children's Ministry in the Stairway Church while Linda lives in Warrandyte with husband Cam and three foster children and a foster grandchild (which makes Janet a great grandmother!). Linda works in the promotions department of a charity, Christian Blind Mission (CBM).

Janet recalls many summers camping at Port Campbell where the family kept the whole park amused every time they erected and dismantled their tent! She also remembers a more recent train tour of South Africa with her late husband – from Johannesburg to Cape Town – when they saw so many interesting animals, bird and plants and learnt so much about South African history.

Yes, there is a doctor in the house!



"Cobden has been a wonderful place to spend my married life and to bring up my children. It has been friendly, welcoming and accepting of this strange Pom," she laughed

"There has always been a group of people ready to lead and help the town to progress and what the town has been able to achieve in the past years is quite remarkable – especially when one looks at most other small country towns. I just hope that the next generation takes notice of what has been done and will step up to take the lead and continue to make Cobden the progressive town that it is today.

"I had always thought it would be wonderful to work in a small community with its own hospital and be able to offer holistic care and, here I was, doing just that in a way that would have been impossible in England.

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

"Being involved in the community has been a great way of giving back to the communities which have supported me so well. The Christian Reformed Church of Cobden welcomed me and, with them, I have been able to be involved in most Cobden community events over the years."

Janet has certainly contributed consistently – as a primary school councillor, a religious education teacher for twelve years, a member of the chamber of commerce (now Progressing Cobden), secretary of the Cobden Combined Churches Crib Committee, a Cobden District Health Services Board member for 20 years (four years as president) as well as overseeing the completion of Heytesbury Lodge from conception to fruition.

With other local churches, she has also played the lead role in beginning the LinC Affiliate to provide practical help to those in need, and to convene the WEL (Women Enjoying Life) group which gives single women the opportunity to go out to entertainments and meals, something they might not do on their own.

Janet takes up the story behind the Spring Festival: "I was talking with Alan Hart at the deli counter in Lees Supermarket one day when the idea of the festival was born and I have been involved with it ever since except for a few years when work commitments were too great. It has been wonderful to see how the community has embraced the idea and how the festival has grown to what it is today."

Being able to assist in the establishment of a new medical clinic in Cobden has also been a source of satisfaction to Janet. "This will help with the succession of general practice in the town so that the nursing home can continue and therefore the employment of all the staff and the associated businesses can be assured," she said.

Dr Janet is now looking at her future with some excitement. "Being well past retirement age, I feel it is now time to do so. I am looking forward to moving to Melbourne towards the end of the year to be close to my daughters and grandchildren.

Certainly, time has always been at a premium during her training and working life. "Even in my younger days, medicine did not leave a lot of time for pastimes but I enjoyed going to concerts with the Halle Orchestra and I joined a squash and tennis club which was very social – no competitions!!

"Now, some years later, I try to squeeze in some gardening, walking and developing my interest in birds and music.



Janet, in her productive vegetable garden

"Whether I find work in Melbourne is yet to be seen but baby-sitting, helping in three gardens and assisting with the washing is definitely on the cards.

"I feel it is important to make this drastic move while I am still capable of making new friends and becoming integrated in a new society.

"Cobden will always be in my heart and I am sure I will have severe withdrawal symptoms."

We wish you well, Janet. You have been a wonderful contributor to our community and we thank you for it.

CHILDHOOD AND EDUCATION REFLECTIONS

Janet feels privileged to have had the opportunity to attend English private schools where she boarded from age 11. "This was good for me as I was the only child of elderly parents and it taught me to be tolerant of others. It was a good life and I received a good education," she said.

"My childhood was very protected but growing up in post-war England did not provide many luxuries. All the children in the street played together and we roamed in and out of each other's houses. It was a very happy time. One of my friends from that time now lives in Portland, Victoria, and we have seen each other regularly over the past few years.

"Manchester University was a wonderful time – plenty of fun along with the study, and I was able to live at home with my parents."



Janet with husband, Keith, who died in 2010. The photo was taken in 2002 at Linda's engagement party

COBDEN CALENDAR

- Sunday 6th April:** 11am onwards "Meet and Greet" Day, Cobrico Hall. Free entry, food all day for a small charge. Family disco, raffle with lots of prizes. Phone: 5595 1796 or 5595 1231.
- Monday 7th April:** 7.30pm Progressing Cobden meeting. Heytesbury Room.
- Sunday 13th April:** 10am Farmers Market, Apex Park.
- Monday 14th April:** 7.30pm Spring Festival meeting. Heytesbury Room.
- Senior Citizens' Hall:** **Bowls** 1pm Mondays. **Cards** 1pm Mondays, Thursdays, Saturdays. **Hoy** 1.30pm first Saturday of the month.