CHAPTER SEVEN

Impetuous Idealism

'I am looking forward to the next phase of activity', wrote Phoebe to her friend Hilda Walmesley when she retired from *Pax*.'I want to write, and to do a lot more reading' – but, as ever, there was far too much that needed *doing*.

For the Reading Council for Community Relations, for example. When Harvey de Pass became Reading's first Race Relations Officer, he had no office or equipment of any kind. Phoebe supplied him with both and, as Winifred Darter wrote, 'became highly involved in his work, did his typing before the appointment of a secretary, edited articles for him and gave him the run of the house.'

Phoebe, of course, had long been a champion of equal opportunities for all races and in all countries. She was an outspoken opponent of apartheid, and an acquaintance of Paul Robeson, the black American singer and actor. Robeson was forbidden to leave America during the 1950s because of his outspoken support for the Civil Rights movement, but soon after he was once more permitted to travel, he gave a recital in Reading Town Hall. Phoebe had met him through his wife, a WILPF member, and after the recital invited him back to Castle Street, where the party lasted into the small hours. 'It was one of her proudest memories', wrote Winnie Darter.

She had been closely involved with race relations issues in Reading since large-scale immigration had begun in the 1950s. In November 1954, when the plans for Foley Hall were still embryonic, she had suggested to a somewhat dazed Sylvia Hamilton that the International Friendship League should work with the Government to buy up large properties in the towns

> to which they are being directed...and then establish such houses as homes for West Indians where they would be received in the real IFL spirit and so gain a right idea of the true British people, and so prevent what might become an ugly situation.

Ten years later, she revived the idea with a suggestion to the local Free Church Council that they should set up a Housing Association 'to ease the

housing situation which, basically, is one of the chief ingredients of the so-called colour problem'. Phoebe was concerned to avert 'the possible repercussions within the 'local' population...*before* it erupts, as it might', and when Enoch Powell divested himself of his notorious 'rivers of blood' speech in April 1968, she donned her WILPF hat to write to him and denounce

> the disastrous and already apparent effect of your Wolverhampton speech on the vitally important issue of Race Relations in this country – the tone and content of your speech will exacerbate the fear and hatred that exist in a minority of the people of this country.

Powell, somewhat chastened, replied by sending her a full transcript of his speech. 'You will find no real ground for this criticism', he told her, unconvincingly. He was instantly dismissed from Edward Heath's shadow cabinet for his views, but they accurately reflected the prejudice of many people; and the widespread support which he received legitimised a tougher stance on immigration by the – Labour – government, much to the horror of people like Phoebe.

When the Kenyan government began to expel its Asian population in the late 1960s, the British government responded by tinkering with the immigration laws to curb the influx of Kenyan Asians bearing British passports. Phoebe was appalled, and wrote to the Home Secretary to tell him so, 'as a founder member of the Labour Party and hitherto a loyal but not uncritical supporter of the present government....Time was when Britain was honoured for its humanity'. Many refugees were sent to a 'holding camp' at nearby Greenham Common when they first arrived, and Phoebe's growing reputation as a benevolent 'fixer' ensured that she received a steady trickle of pleas for help, which she addressed as best she could.

Harvey de Pass thus found an enthusiastic ally in Phoebe, and he and his family soon became firm friends. Together they worked to thwart the Heath government's attempts to reduce the rights of immigrants.

At very short notice, the Government decided to charge fees for citizenship, correctly assuming that many immigrants, particularly those who had lost everything when they had been expelled from their own countries, would find it hard to find the money.

There were loopholes, and Phoebe and Harvey did everything they could to exploit them. With the help of sympathetic local lawyers, they turned the house over to the task of enlisting citizens. At some points the place became so crowded that people were sitting on the stairs to fill in their forms. 'It is to their credit that nobody who came to them during those few days failed to beat the deadline', wrote Winifred Darter. 'This was Phoebe at her very best, intelligent, informed and involved in all the big issues of the day, yet intensely

practical when it came to helping individuals in need.'

Although Phoebe finally stood down as Chairman of the Reading-Düsseldorf Association in 1970, German affection for her remained as strong as ever; and when, two years later, they celebrated the twenty-fifth anniversary of the link, her presence was deemed essential. She was treated to 'a right royal reception', and on her return, the *Guardian* published a full account of the Düsseldorf link and Phoebe's part in it.

Phoebe, typically, saw the event as an opportunity to look to the future, and to spread her own view of how the world should be. She praised Willie Brandt's policy of detente with the Eastern bloc, and told her Düsseldorf audience that the link between the two towns was only a start:

> I believe that the peoples of the world fight each other only when the Governments put the imagined interests of their own nation above the real interests of humanity. It is my fervent hope that links such as ours will be multiplied until the chain of goodwill and co-operation will encircle the world, liberate the spirit of man from the shackles of self-interest, and lead to a commonwealth of mankind in which the resources of Nature will be developed and used for the benefit of all.

The Düsseldorf link was widely copied – by 1974 sixty such links had been formed with places in North Rhine Westphalia alone – but it was always Phoebe's hope that the Düsseldorf example would act as a model that might help to melt the Iron Curtain, and generally to play a part in responding to crises elsewhere in the world.

'I have for long been disturbed by the plight of the Northern Irish children who are growing up in a situation of violence and encouragement of violence', she wrote to the *Observer* in May 1972, and suggested that children should be evacuated to less troubled parts of the land. 'I am sure that there are many people who would be glad to give hospitality in their own houses so that the youngsters could have some experience of normal, healthy and happy family life'.

It was perhaps inevitable that Phoebe should have forthright views on the rapidly-deteriorating situation in Ulster, and in July 1970 she shared a platform at a public meeting in St Lawrence's Hall with the Labour MP Paul Rose, spokesman for the Campaign for Democracy in Ulster.

Rose was well-known for his nationalist sympathies, and a Labour Party member from Northern Ireland wrote to warn Phoebe's friend Elsie Simmons that Phoebe would be 'most unwise' to share a platform with him. 'Paul Rose is much hated by Protestants, including progressives. He and the meeting in Reading could cause some extra rioting'.

Such views merely stiffened Phoebe's resolve, however, and her speech,

in which she called on the Government (unavailingly) to ban that month's Orange parades, won praise from all concerned. 'I don't think it could be bettered', Elsie Simmons told her, asking for copies. The CDU secretary declared that it was 'a very fine and lucid address', but there was never much danger of rioting: only fifty people turned up.

'I am saddened that the Labour Party has apparently lost its vision – with a few honourable exceptions', wrote Phoebe to Frank Allaun in August 1967. Allaun had been one of the organisers of the first Aldermaston March, president of the recently-formed Labour Action for Peace, and in Phoebe's view one of the few Labour MPs to keep the faith. 'I wish there were more of you so that your voices could be heard above the clamour of those who have fallen for the materialistic spirit of the age'.

Yet in spite of her disillusion, she continued to work actively for the Labour Party, if only because they were better than the alternative.

She canvassed regularly for the party: 'I must go out and try to winkle out the folks who are too indolent to vote or who may have forgotten', she wrote to a friend on the day of the 1964 election. A Labour government was returned, but in Reading John Lee, the Labour candidate lost by ten votes.

This, to Phoebe, constituted a challenge, not a defeat, and when the party once more chose Lee to be its new parliamentary candidate, Phoebe quickly organised him into holding regular monthly feedback meetings for the membership. Lee was elected in 1966, and was conscious of the debt he owed to her: 'I shall always be grateful to Phoebe for the help and encouragement she gave me, for her idealism, which never flagged nor dimmed with the passing years, and for her unfailing cheerfulness', he said at the time of her death.

Phoebe was 'eager to find a way of harnessing the women's' interest and energy again', and soon had her eye on the new MP's wife Margaret Ann as a potential ally. She was coerced by Phoebe into making her first public speech at a Town Hall meeting:

> I was stunned, and protested that I had never made a speech in my life. I will never forget her quick reply – 'Well its time you started!' She never allowed me to say no, and with her faith in me I did speak…thanks to Phoebe I am still speaking publicly and with pleasure! I thank Phoebe for saying to me, and probably to anyone who came into her orbit – 'you don't know what you can do until you try – and don't be afraid to try!'

But the grassroots organisation of Reading Labour party was then falling apart. The local party in Katesgrove Ward had become almost non-existent by the mid-sixties, and Phoebe had to step in to act as 'Chairman (*pro tem*)'. 'She never tired of reminding me that Katesgrove was 'the heart of the party',' remembers Lee, 'and that we must never neglect that party's heart'.

But for Phoebe, the heart had really gone out of the party, and she knew it. Vietnam was a turning-point for her, as it was for many people. 'The world has gone mad,' she wrote to Andree Jouve in February 1968. 'The 'statesmen' who so recklessly continue the race for more and more arms and who do not hesitate to think of using 'tactical nuclear weapons' in Vietnam are really insane and should be locked up in a mental institution.'

When her own party's leadership had 'abandoned its peaceful international policies in the interests of expediency', how could she convincingly exort the young to keep the red flag flying?

> I do understand how they feel in the face of the urgent immediate problems of our sick and sorry world. I find it difficult to stand back from the fray and take a long view. It seems to me that the alienation of young people is a symptom and a result of the violence of their elders,

she told Mercedes Randall at the end of 1969; and attacked 'the blatant repudiation of moral standards by those who ought to be practicing what they preach. No wonder young people are cynical and bewildered'.

The solution, for Phoebe, was to enthuse the young with the same zeal and the passion for social service that she herself still felt. She never completely gave up on Labour, and as late as 1976 worked hard to convince the new parliamentary candidate 'that what we want to do now is to rekindle the old idealism of the Labour party and really capture people's imagination of Labour as a crusade for social justice and equality'.

She urged the International Friendship League to entice younger members with events and programmes that would inspire them to 'a deeper sense of responsibility, and offer the opportunities for service...if we are to save mankind from physical and spiritual disaster a completely new way of life is called for – a way of life in which the spirit of service replaces self-interest and material values...those of us who inhabit the wealthy nations must be willing to forego some of the luxuries and privileges we enjoy, so the peoples of the Third World can have enough to eat.'

Phoebe naturally identified closely with young peoples' reaction against the materialism of the age, and wrote with all the passion of a student activist:

> Two-thirds of the world population are denied the bare essentials of full human existence, while the remainder have accepted so much material wealth that highly-paid publicity men have to be employed to persuade them that they need and must have the plethora of un-necessary luxuries and gadgets that are turned out by a soul-less industrial machine in which the human element is just a cog!...small wonder that youth rejects us! What is so shocking is that the *quality* of life is becoming debased and that we offer our young people no better vision of the future than the sordid

> competition to material goods and positions of prestige.

In other ways too, Phoebe demonstrated herself to be completely at home with the vibe of the 1960s. The feisty Piscean once blamed a rare failure to fulfil a task on 'domestic and cosmic affairs', and she heartily agreed with those who realised that Western man was on a collision course with ecological survival. She attacked the cult of the motor-car with a passion to match that of the most ardent 1990s road protester. (She never owned a car herself, more from economy than conviction in earlier years, and her old sit-up-and-beg bicycle was a familiar sight on the streets of Reading until she was over eighty.) 'Everything has to make way for the motor-car. The motor-car has absolutely destroyed this country', she told the *Evening Post* in 1976. 'The more roads they build or adapt to accommodate it, the more traffic jams we get.'

Her emphasis on *duties* over *rights* was less in keeping with the hedonistic spirit of the age, however, and it cut right across her sympathies for the new feminism that became such a force in the early 1970s. 'Phoebe didn't call for women's rights, she assumed women's rights', said Molly Casey. What they did with those rights was of far more interest to her.

> Of course we must continue to press for rights and equality' she wrote in 1973, 'but I wish more emphasis were placed on *responsibilities and duties* of women as citizens and that acknowledgement of rights was regarded (and so stated more prominently) as a means of enabling them to fulfil their responsibilities.

A letter of March 1975 in the *Guardian*, in which she attacked what is now called 'politically-correct' language, must have upset some in the women's movement:

> this laboured attempt to eliminate the masculine gender from our language reveals a subconscious inferiority complex on the part of the more militant of the women's' rights movement, as well as distracting attention from the more important aspects of discrimination.

'At 88, Phoebe Cusden still retains the impetuous idealism of youth', wrote her friend Elsie Simmons. Rarely did she admit to being old, or even tired, but she was sympathetic to the problems that her contemporaries felt in adjusting to the new way of things.

'We are living in a revolutionary period and must be willing to reconcile ourselves to changes which may seem to us to be too radical, but which are all part of the birth pangs of a new order', she wrote to a friend in March 1976.

> We are all groping and we must show tolerance of those who seem to be

> intolerant themselves and even somewhat aggressive. We all become a bit more mellow and understanding as we grow older; being nearly 90 tends to make one feel more loving kindness to the young – and perhaps a little envious of their enthusiasm and vigour!

When her activities with the WILPF came to an end, Phoebe turned her energies once more to her home town, partly, as she finally admitted, because of her age. 'I have had to develop a new pattern of life recently: the wheel has turned full circle…as my travelling days are over I have reverted to the local scene and have been engaged in writing a book about local history…it has been fun writing it and it has compensated for the loss of WILPF work'.

The book in question was a history of Coley, the area in which she had lived for most of her life. Originally she planned to write it in partnership with Fred Padley, veteran WEA supporter and socialist, whose excellent *Village in the Town* (about the St John's area of Reading) had just been published; and in July 1973 he wrote to the *Reading Chronicle* asking readers for to send information either to himself or to Phoebe at Castle Street.

Over the next three years, Phoebe interviewed dozens of 'old folk' (her phrase) in Coley and elsewhere, making new friendships and reviving old ones. The book was scrupulously researched and fairly written; and if anyone ever commented on the preponderance of Labour Party figures in its pages, Phoebe could justifiably have replied that this was hardly surprising, since the party had been so strong in Coley. She praised the work of Albert and his colleagues in having got rid of the notorious Coley slums – 'the slums had to go and their demolition cannot be regretted' – while nonetheless lamenting 'the destruction of a community', for which new life on the estates, 'though certainly a vast improvement', was no substitute.

Coley: Portrait of an Urban Village was eventually published by the WEA in 1977. The foreword was written by Lord Bullock, Master of St Catherine's College in Oxford and one of the foremost historians of the day. 'I read your account of Coley while I was on holiday in Wales and greatly enjoyed it', he wrote to her, 'and any historian is lucky who comes across so clear and precise a picture as the one given here.' Her work on Coley was but one facet of Phoebe's new-found enthusiasm for the town's heritage, then under constant attack from the developers – or, as she called them, the 'money-hungry diabetics, craving for the sweets of property 'development'.'

> The changes in Reading are dreadful, (she said in 1979). They have torn the heart out of the town and forgotten the history and tradition. But there are signs that they are beginning to realise that there are other values besides money in local affairs – they must take note of history,

> tradition and architecture. The best of the town is not being preserved – Reading could become a little Venice if they used their imagination.

Phoebe was a member of the Reading Civic Society, whose leading lights included her fellow peace-worker Molly Casey; and she joined them in their many campaigns to preserve what was left of the town's past.

Back in 1938, Phoebe and the *Citizen* had been in the forefront of the 'Hands Off The Forbury' campaign, which, despite accusations of 'sentimentalism', had successfully prevented the Council from redeveloping the town centre's only park. Now, in 1972, the Council once more planned to devastate the Forbury Gardens by driving a dual-carriageway across the little park; and Phoebe joined Doris Thomas and her dedicated team to collect signatures for a new 'Save the Forbury' Campaign.

The Council was equally keen to demolish Reading's grand Victorian Town Hall. Opponents claimed that the building should be saved, and converted to other uses, but were told that it would be too expensive to do so.

'I am deeply concerned that the local authority should allow financial considerations to over-ride historical and amenity values, and the expressed wishes of citizens who have been born and lived in the town, who value the familiar townscape which is so rapidly and ruthlessly being destroyed', Phoebe told the Civic Society, and she looked into the possibility of serving an injunction on the Council to prevent it.

Both campaigns were in the end successful, but Phoebe's concern for the town's built environment was not restricted to preserving the past.

The draft of a document on Reading's planning policy, which she perhaps intended in response to the Central Reading District Plan in 1977, reveals that she was an early opponent of high-rise flats. In it she recommends that no new blocks should be built that were more than three storeys high:

> Flats are not suitable for children for whom they are socially and psychologically harmful. A house with a garden, however small, is more conducive to healthy family life than large blocks of flats. The relevance of this question to the anti-social behaviour (hooliganism, vandalism etc) is becoming more and more evident.

She urged the Council to plan outwards from the town's waterways, with 'imaginatively-planned communities of houses with gardens and open spaces', and bewailed the growth of out-of-town shopping centres: 'I do not approve of 'Cash-and-Carry' stores on the outskirts; they assume that most people possess cars'. Phoebe's last campaign involved her in the fight to save St John's, an attractive Victorian church in the heart of one of the town's most peaceful and attractive corners.

A new church had been built, the Diocese wanted to sell the site of the old building for commercial development, and they tenaciously resisted any proposal that would have involved retaining the building. When Phoebe agreed to serve as president of the Save St John's campaign, the vicar pronounced himself 'astonished at the implications' of her decision; and she had to write to the *Evening Post* to quell rumours that the protesters were 'militant, violent, even hooligan'.

Reading's sizeable Polish community was in need of a Catholic church of their own, and put in an offer for the building. It was at first refused – 'a sad reflection on those who advocate the ecumenical movement, especially at this moment when a Pole has been elected as Pope', as Phoebe observed.

In June 1979, she wrote to the Bishop of Oxford to argue for its retention.

> I was born in Reading 92 years ago and have a deep-seated affection and regard for the historical, cultural and environmental heritage. It has been a cause for widespread regret that much of this heritage...has been destroyed or is threatened.

Ever the diplomat, she praised the community work of the vicar and his congregation, and pointed out that 'a speedy and satisfactory solution... would restore harmony and bring strength to the work of the Church in the area'. Her letter maybe tipped the balance, for the building was saved.

Official tributes came in thick and fast during Phoebe's last years. In March 1976, the University of Reading awarded her with an honorary doctorate, in recognition of her contribution to the advancement of culture through her services to the community. A special ceremony was held, at which her old friend Elsie Simmons paid tribute to Phoebe's 'impartial judgement and true humility'.

Phoebe found it 'a somewhat daunting ceremony, but quite painless and indeed enjoyable', as she told her friend Barbara Coppock; she was more keen to tell her about the dinner the previous night, at which she'd met the Chancellor (Lord Sherfield), and chatted about such mutual acquaintances as Arthur Henderson and Philip Noel-Baker.

Next year, Phoebe travelled to Düsseldorf for the last time to receive the Verdiensteplakette, the city's highest accolade. She was treated even more regally than before. 'It was wonderful to be relieved of every bit of responsibility. Rather like being a parcel of precious fragile porcelain ! Slightly irksome and even humiliating but very comfortable and effortless', as she told her brother-in-law Victor. There she met the British Consul-General who, apparently in reference to the 257 other links that had by then developed, told Phoebe that she 'had done great things for Britain'.... Heaven save me from swelled head!'.

In November 1978, two pedestrian routes in the new Civic Centre com-

plex were named Cusden Way and Düsseldorf Way. It was in some ways a well-chosen location. Cusden Way runs from the Civic Offices to Castle Street beside the Magistrates Court, but it seems a pity that the planners could not have found a more appropriate site, for Phoebe was no fan of the new complex. The original scheme, which Phoebe had so proudly announced in her Mayoral speech, had in her view been 'mangled', and she considered the adjacent civic concert hall, The Hexagon, to be a 'monstrosity'.

'Of course it is nice to have one's little efforts appreciated like this, but I was more pleased to hear about Düsseldorf Way', she told the *Evening Post*. 'I don't know what's got into architects these days, there's far too much stone and concrete for my liking'.

Phoebe celebrated her ninetieth birthday at home, but she had many visitors. She was inundated with flowers ('my room is like a florist's shop!'), and as part of her birthday celebrations, Winifred Darter and Doris Thomas took her to Aston Tirrold, her ancestral village on the Berkshire Downs. 'Her delight was positively infectious', Miss Darter recalled.

At ninety, Phoebe was reluctantly willing to concede that she was not as fit as she had been. 'Oh dear, I do get tired these days. There is still so much that I want to do and say. Things that need doing and saying!' She had been ill for two or three months the previous year, during which time she had been looked after by her daughter. In January 1977 she pronounced herself to be 'now back to normal – though I have to admit that 'normal' at four score and ten is not the same as the normal of two or three decades ago!'.

For some time now, she had accepted that she needed a hearing aid – which she was quite capable of using to her advantage. 'When the discussion on the wording of a letter, resolution or amendment was getting heated,' Verdun Perl recalled, 'Phoebe would deftly remove her hearing aid – thus shutting out the babble. Head bent over her knees, she would be writing, and in a few moments, on her feet, hearing aid in position, reading out wording that no-one could fault. It was uncanny'. Molly Casey regularly accompanied her to plays at the Progress Theatre.

> At one of the more outspoken plays they put on I felt profoundly thankful that Phoebe's hearing was beginning to fail. At the interval she turned to me and said 'I didn't quite catch what was being said'. 'I think it a good job you didn't', I replied. 'It wasn't fit for a nice old lady to hear'. 'I'm not a nice old lady!', replied Phoebe sharply.

She apologised for not attending the 1978 WILPF Council meeting by explaining that 'I am rather unsteady in my gait and balance and don't want to risk being a nuisance to others.' But she couldn't resist the opportunity – for the last time – of urging the League 'to engage in some fresh thinking and constructive

action. I am afraid we are living on our past.... We need a spiritual revolution'.

In July 1979, she fell and broke her hip. 'She was vexed with herself because it 'put her out of action' – and Phoebe never did take kindly to inactivity of any sort', as Verdun remembers. She was nursed first in Battle Hospital, the hospital that she had helped to establish nearly sixty years pre viously; and later moved to Peppard Hospital, in the Chiltern beechwoods north of the town. The Mayor sent his car out to Peppard to collect her for the official opening of her unloved Civic Centre, but according to Verdun, when she visited Phoebe soon afterwards 'she was more interested in the possible siting of Cruise missiles near here at Greenham Common.'

In 1980, Phoebe was transferred to an old people's home, where she found her increasing incapacity more and more irksome. Winifred Darter,'in an effort to cheer her up and keep her interested' began to help her work on an autobiography, but the project did not get very far. (Miss Darter later produced a fine memoir of Phoebe's life, based upon these interviews.) Learning to accept her complete dependency was in itself another challenge for Phoebe. 'She faced this as everything else, with an open mind, willing to learn even at 90 odd. She herself said she probably learned more then than throughout her whole life,' Miss Darter wrote. 'Strong on principles and impatient with sentimentality, her consideration and kindness never led her into the trap of being too soft. One of the last things she said, when a visitor was waxing fulsome in her praise, was 'Rubbish!'

Phoebe died on Friday 23 January 1981, quietly and without fuss, as she herself would have chosen. Burgermeister Bruno Recht of Düsseldorf was amongst the many dignitaries who attended her funeral service at the Crematorium. A fortnight later a memorial service was held at the Friends' Meeting House. Her ashes were mixed with those of Albert, and scattered amongst a small clump of bluebells in the Meeting House garden that had been transplanted from Phoebe's own garden in Castle Street. Bluebells always were her favourite flowers.

> *You must lie amid the masses*
> *of the bluebells and their grasses*
> *listening, as the light wind passes*
> *at even*
> (Phoebe Blackall, 11 August 1909)

'She was one of the people that you always miss', said a friend.