



The Making of
**SWALLOWS
AND AMAZONS**

(1974)

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Sophie Neville

The Making of
Swallows and Amazons (1974)

James Clarke & Co

and

The Lutterworth Press

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Swallows and Amazons (1974)

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The Making of
Swallows and Amazons
(1974)

Sophie Neville



The Lutterworth Press

Sophie has reminded me of one of the happiest times I ever spent on a film. The fun that was had, the friendships forged, the challenges overcome, are all delightfully recalled with a freshness and sense of adventure that has made me smile all over again.

Virginia McKenna OBE,
'Mrs Walker' in *Swallows & Amazons*

Amazing. It brought so much that I had forgotten flooding back. Thank you! My father will love it, too.

Simon West,
'Captain John' in *Swallows & Amazons*

Looking at your pictures, I relive all the thrills, wearing the costumes, the people and the lovely carefree, but caring, atmosphere. Extraordinary, extraordinary how it all comes back.

Suzanna Hamilton,
'Mate Susan' in *Swallows & Amazons*

A smashing book about childhood adventure. . . . It is a truly touching read and I'm sure fun for the newcomer as well as those who lived through it. LOVED it.

Richard Pilbrow,
Producer of *Swallows & Amazons*

Sophie brings to life all the many memorable characters who worked on the film and in particular the other children, the Director Claude Whatham who developed a great relationship with his young cast and the stars Virginia McKenna and Ronald Fraser. . . . The result is compulsive reading as she recalls that cold wet summer, while the camera crew wrapped up warm and she shivered in her skimpy dress as Able Seaman Titty Walker.

Roger Wardale,
biographer of Arthur Ransome

A fascinating insight into filming on location in the Lake District.

Classic Boat

Sophie's magical *Swallows* tales . . . a heart-warming account of making the movie.

Daily Mail

Sophie Neville, who played Titty in the film based on the classic Arthur Ransome books, has revealed the behind-the-scenes secrets in her new book, released to coincide with the anniversary of filming.

The Telegraph

. . . My ultimate adventure dream, as that of a whole generation, was one of playing Titty in a film!! So your account is recounting that dream for all of us.

Jill Goulder,
The Arthur Ransome Society

You don't need to be a *Swallows & Amazons* fan to enjoy this book – it's universal!

Winifred Wilson,
Editor of *Signals*

A fascinating insight into behind the scenes of the film world. Sophie cleverly intersperses entries from the diary she wrote at the time into her amusingly written memoir of playing Titty. Lots of photos throughout the book bring the scenes to life – a delightful read.

Celia Lewis,
author of *An Illustrated Country Year*

Your reminiscences are a treasure-trove.

The Arthur Ransome Trust

Gorgeous.
Yours magazine

A delightful book.
The Lady

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*For my ever patient husband Sim
'He's winged his arrows with the parrot's feathers'*



Claude Whatham with the Swallows.

Note to the reader:

Sophie's childhood diary entries are presented
in a sans serif typeface.

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Director Claude Whatham showing Simon West and me
how to use the 16mm camera.

Opposite: returning to *Swallow* with our purchases from Rio.

The Cast and Crew of *Swallows & Amazons*



The Cast

Mrs Walker	VIRGINIA MCKENNA
Uncle Jim	RONALD FRASER
John Walker, Captain of the <i>Swallow</i>	SIMON WEST
Susan Walker, Mate of the <i>Swallow</i>	SUZANNA HAMILTON
Titty Walker, Able-seaman of the <i>Swallow</i>	SOPHIE NEVILLE
Roger Walker, Ship's Boy of the <i>Swallow</i>	STEPHEN GRENDON
Nancy Blackett, Captain of the <i>Amazon</i>	KIT SEYMOUR
Peggy Blackett, Mate of the <i>Amazon</i>	LESLEY BENNETT

Mrs Dixon	BRENDA BRUCE
Mr Dixon	MIKE PRATT
Young Billy	JOHN FRANKLYN-ROBBINS
Old Billy	JACK WOOLGAR
Sammy the Policeman	DAVID BLAGDEN
Nurse	KERRY DARBISHIRE
Baby Vicky	TIFFANY SMITH
Mrs Jackson	MOIRA LATE
Mr Jackson	BRIAN ROBEY JONES
Native on the Rio Jetty	MR PRICE
Shopkeeper	MR TURNER
Polly, the green parrot	BEAUTY PROCTOR

Supporting Artists

Visitor at Railway Station	MRS PRICE
Native on the steamer	MARTIN NEVILLE
Steamboat owner	GEORGE PATTINSON
Motorboat mechanic	STANLEY WRIGHT
Boat mechanic	JAMES STELFOX
Casual holiday-maker	HERBERT BARTON
Man just returned from abroad	L. LUCAS DEWS
Cyclist at Rio	SARAH BOOM
Motorcyclist	JACK HADWIN

Rio Visitors

JANE GRENDON	JANE PRICE	SIMON PRICE
TAMZIN NEVILLE	PERRY NEVILLE	PANDORA DOYLE
ALAN SMITH	JANET HADWIN	PEGGY DRAKE
WILLIAM DRAKE	JILL JACKSON	LINDSAY JACKSON
NICOLA JACKSON	FIONA JACKSON	SHANE JACKSON
MAGDA KHAN	LORNA KHAN	ZENA KHAN

and the
KENDAL BOROUGH BAND

The Crew

Director	CLAUDE WHATHAM
Producer	RICHARD PILBROW
Screenplay	DAVID WOOD
Associate Producer	NEVILLE C. THOMPSON
Original Music	WILFRED JOSEPHS
Conductor	MARCUS DODS
Art Director	SIMON HOLLAND
Costume Designer	EMMA PORTEOUS
Set Dresser	IAN WHITTAKER
Sailing Director	DAVID BLAGDEN
Director of Photography	DENIS LEWISTON
Production Consultant	HARRY BENN
Production Manager	GRAHAM FORD
Film Editor	MICHAEL BRADSELL
First Assistant Director	DAVID BRACKNELL
Second Assistant Director	TERRY NEEDHAM
Third Assistant Director	GARETH TANDY
Continuity	SUE MERRY
Camera Operator	EDDIE COLLINS
Focus Puller	BOBBY STILWELL
First Assistant Cameraman	DAVID WYNN-JONES
Assistant Cameraman	CEDRIC JAMES
Sound Recordist	ROBIN GREGORY
Boom Operator	JOHN SALTER
Camera Boat Advisor	MIKE TURK
Sound Editor	IAN FULLER
Dubbing Mixer	BILL ROWE
Wardrobe Master	TERRY SMITH
Make-up	PETER ROBB-KING
Hairdresser	RONNIE COGAN
Chief Electrician	MARTIN EVANS
Grip	DAVID CADWALLADER
Electrician	PETER BLOOR
Best Boy	DENIS CARRIGAN
Property Master	JOHN LEUENBERGER
Action Props	BOB HEDGES
Stand-by Props	TERRY WELLS
Carpenter	BILL HEARN
Scenic Painter	MICK GUYETT

Stills Photography	ALBERT CLARKE
Publicist	BRIAN DOYLE
Production Associate	RICHARD DU VIVIER
Production Accountant	BOB BLUES
Production Secretary	SALLY SHEWRING
Producer's Assistant	MOLLY FRIEDEL
Chaperones	DAPHNE NEVILLE JANE GRENDON
Unit Nurse and Driver	JEAN MCGILL
Tutor	MARGARET CAUSEY

Other crew members

Lee Apsey	Richard Daniel	Craig Hillier
Ron Baker	John Pullen	Harry Heeks
Graham Orange	Mike Henley	Joe Ballerino
Ted Elliot	Eddie Cook	John Engelman
John Mills	Ernie Russell	Toni Turner
Phyllis B	Nick Newby	Les Philips
Gay Lawley-Wakelin		

Clive Stuart of the Keswick Launch Company
 John and Margaret of Pinewood Caterers
 Robert Wakelin, David Stott and other drivers
 from Browns of Ambleside

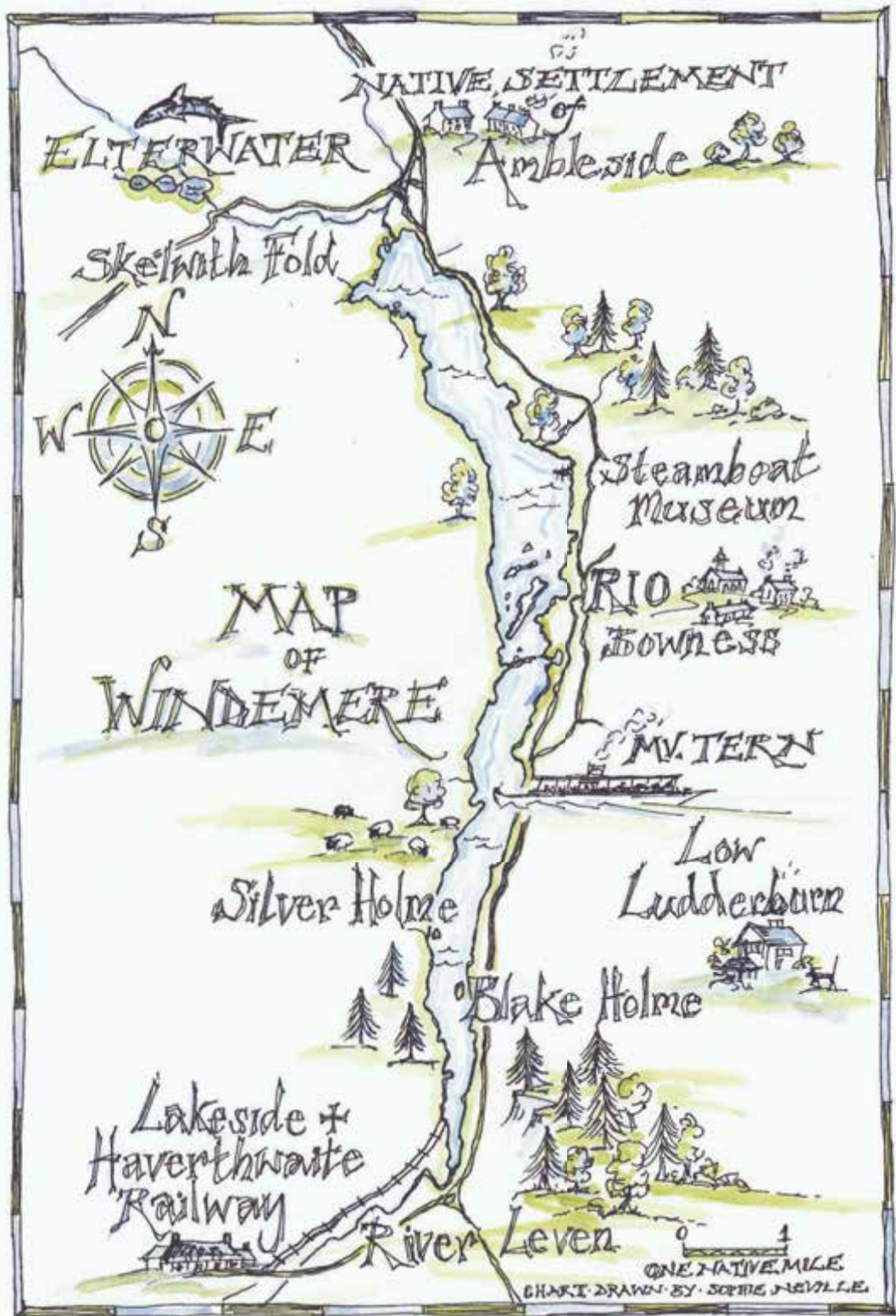
Mrs Dora Capstick, who gave Ronald Fraser accordion lessons
 John Foster, snake handler

Lighting Equipment by Lee Electric (Lighting) Limited
 Sound Equipment by Delta Sound Services
 Construction by F.T.V. Scenery Limited
 Film Processing by Technicolor
 Filmed in Eastmancolor

Made on location in The Lake District National Park, England
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 10 Long Acre, London WC2, England

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KANCHENJUNGA

Coniston
Old Man

HIGH HILLS

Ruskin
Museum
Coniston
Gondola

Lanchard
HOLLY HOWE
Bank Ground
Farm

WIDE
OPEN
SEA

Beantwood

MAP
OF
CONISTON
WATER

THE DOG'S HOME

The Heald

SAVAGES
Grizedale
Forest

Peel Island
WILD CAT
ISLAND



Rusland
Church

Brown
Howe
BECKFOOT
+
AMAZON BOATHOUSE

High Nibthwaite

Boathouse at Slate Quay

Allen
Tarn

River Crake

Introduction

Serendipity

serendipity /ser-uhn-dip-i-tee/ *n.* an aptitude or faculty for making desirable discoveries by accident.

Serendipity, indeed. The word has been brought to my attention so many times that I've started to take note. The serendipity in question connects me to a rather large, bald man with a massive moustache called Arthur Ransome.

Sometimes extraordinary things do happen to ordinary people. Little girls can find themselves becoming film stars. Long ago, and quite unexpectedly, I found myself appearing in the EMI feature film of Arthur Ransome's book *Swallows and Amazons*, made for a universal international audience. I played Able-seaman Titty, one of the four Swallows. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that I became Titty for a while, wearing thin cotton dresses and elasticated navy-blue gym knickers, which the camera crew soon referred to as 'passion killers'. The book was written in 1929 and although the film adaptation was made in the early 1970s it has an ageless quality and has been repeated on television year after year, typically on a Bank Holiday between movies starring either Rock Hudson or Doris Day, sometimes both.

I came by the part of Titty because I could play the piano. Although I had no ambition to be an actress, at the age of ten I was cast in a BBC dramatisation of Laurie Lee's *Cider with Rosie*. I played a little girl from the valley of Slad called Eileen Brown. Laurie Lee told us she was the first person he'd ever fallen in love with. He knew my parents and was around during the filming since he had a cottage nearby. I'd been to a village school in the Cotswolds myself and enjoyed being in the classroom scenes, despite having to wear a drab and rather itchy green dress. I was too shy to put myself forward when the director, Claude Whatham, asked if anyone knew the chants to playground skipping games, but I



Me as Eileen Brown with
Claude Whatham in 1971.

coped with having to fall in love. It only involved smiling broadly. The difficult bit was that I had to accompany the eleven-year-old Laurie Lee on the piano while he played a violin in the village concert. I plodded through *Oh, Danny Boy* at an agonising pace.

‘Do you think you could play a little faster?’ the director asked.

‘No,’ I said, flatly. ‘These are crotchets, they don’t go any faster.’

Claude Whatham must have remembered my crotchets, for two years later, in March 1973, a letter appeared, addressed to my father. It arrived completely out of the blue, from a company called Theatre Projects:


Dear Mr. Neville,

Claude Whatham has asked me to write to you concerning Sophie.

We are at present casting for a film version of SWALLOWS AND AMAZONS which Mr. Whatham is going to direct. We were wondering if you would be interested in your daughter being considered for one of the parts in this film.

If you would like to telephone me at the above number, I would be delighted to give you all the information about it. I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,


NEVILLE C. THOMPSON.

Amazing!

To gain a part I had to be able to swim. I think this was to do with ensuring I would not drown. As it happened I could row, sail and swim

quite well. My parents had taught me. I can't remember Claude asking me about this when he interviewed me. He only wanted to know what my favourite television programme was.

'*Blue Peter!*'

'Why?'

'Because they show you how to do things.'

It was exactly what Mr Whatham wanted to hear. Why? Because that is how Arthur Ransome wrote his books. He doesn't tell. He *shows* his readers how to sail, how to camp, and how to fish. I had already read most of the twelve books in the series and loved the stories. What I didn't know then was the effect they would have on the rest of my life.



I couldn't envisage myself as Titty at all. The illustrations show her with dark hair, cut in a bob. Arthur Ransome had described her as 'a little eager imaginative child of about nine'. I was now aged twelve, and thought myself far more like the practical Susan, Titty's elder sister. However, I was soon persuaded that I could climb into the character and *play* the part of Titty. I took this assurance on board and did my best to behave like a nine-year-old with a vivid imagination. Thankfully they cut my straggly blonde hair, and I soon started singing out the dialogue that I already knew off by heart from reading the book: 'I expect someone hid on the island hundreds and hundreds of years ago.'

While Arthur Ransome was obviously impervious to the cold, I was not. I shivered terribly in the sleeveless cotton dress I was given to wear as we sailed off to Wild Cat Island, but otherwise I enjoyed playing Titty and soon became her in every way. She was a child who took to telling stories and drawing maps, her mind entering that of an imperialist explorer of the early twentieth century.

‘Here we are, intrepid explorers, making the first ever way into uncharted waters. What mysteries will they hold for us? What dark secrets shall be revealed?’ Titty wondered, transforming the English Lake District into an exotic land inhabited by natives and savages, some of whom used bows and arrows, while on a houseboat in a desolate bay lived Captain Flint with his green parrot. A parrot that she wanted very much indeed.

The letter from Theatre Projects came while my father was away on business in South Africa. Mum never, ever opened his mail, but made an exception this time. Had she not done so, I would have missed the opportunity to be considered for the part. She replied on his behalf, and Dad took us all into London the morning he stepped off the plane.

Chapter One

Preparations for Filming

By May 1973 I was on my way up to the North West of England to take a leading part in the feature film of *Swallows and Amazons* that the producer, Richard Pilbrow of Theatre Projects, had somehow persuaded Nat Cohen of EMI to finance. I had no idea of the responsibility being laid on my shoulders, or of the huge sums of money involved. I was just doing it for fun.

My lack of concern emanates from the pages of the diary that I kept. I have three volumes, in readable italic hand-writing, detailing what we did, and indeed what we said, on every single day. The wording is childlike but, as a little bit of film history, the diary provides the facts from an interesting angle. My mother was pleased when I started to type them up forty years later. She'd been nagging me for years.

On the inside cover of the first volume, I wrote:

I had been very lucky to be picked out of all those hundreds of children for one of the six who were cast. I had been in a film with Claude, the director, before but only for three days. He short-listed me for the part of Titty. I was then chosen with 22 others for a sailing holiday [a cold weekend in March at Burnham-on-Crouch] to see how we reacted and sailed.

This weekend had proved something of an endurance test. It was miles from where we lived. The weather was awful, with driving rain falling on rough seas. The only warm piece of clothing I took was a knitted hat. We slept in cabins aboard a permanently moored Scout boat with flowery orange curtains. There were no parents around to boost our morale, the sailing was challenging, and I felt bitterly cold the entire time.

Richard Pilbrow brought his two children, Abigail and Fred. With him was Claude Whatham, Neville Thompson (the associate producer), and



The final audition at Burnham-on-Crouch in March 1973.

David Blagden who, as Claude was no sailor, was to be the film's sailing director. He told us that he had read *Swallows and Amazons* forty-two times, which sounded daunting.

Out of an initial 1,800 who applied, twenty-two children had been short-listed and were effectively auditioning for the six parts. I still meet people who went up for them. We didn't read from a script, we weren't asked to improvise or act out a scene and there was no film test, but 8mm movie footage was taken. I wonder if it still exists.

While there were only two or three boys up for the role of Roger, there were five girls auditioning to play Titty. At one stage Claude had a chat with the five of us in our cabin, all the Tittys. The others were so sweet that I didn't think I stood a chance. I was undeniably gangly and felt that I kept saying the wrong thing. One of the other girls looked incredibly together. She had pretty, fashionable clothes and would make a point of brushing her hair and wearing jewellery, just as Mummy would have liked me to have done. While I was used to boats my sailing wasn't up to much. I was completely in awe of the seamanship of Kit Seymour (who would land the part of Nancy) and how fast she got the dinghies to whizz through the driving rain.

We were all lucky to be the right age at the right time. I was perhaps the most fortunate because at twelve-and-a-half I was really too tall for

the part of Titty. I was a year older and a good two inches taller than Simon West, who played Titty's older brother, John, but Claude must have known that he could cheat this on-screen. I wrote: 'In about a week's time they rang up to say I had got the part and Mummy a chaperone.'

One of Arthur Ransome's most famous quotes is: 'Grab a chance and you won't be sorry for a might-have-been.' The chance was grabbed.

The Lake District gets very busy in July and August, so busy that the production team were advised to film during the summer term. This was a bit of an issue as I was at boarding school, a conventional Anglican convent. By law, before I could work as an actress, my parents needed formal written permission from Sister Ann-Julian, my headmistress. This seemed unlikely. She wrote back, saying that she had prayed about it with my housemistress Sister Allyne. They gave us the go-ahead.

The filming was to start on Monday 14th May 1973. We were told there would be forty-six days on location with a full crew for a ninety-minute movie.

Friday 11th May – First day in the Lake District

On that Friday, Mum saw my father off to work, dropped my two little sisters at their village school and took me for a medical to satisfy our local County Council. What they would have done if I had been deemed unfit I do not know, but I had already passed stringent medical tests for the company insuring the film, who'd sent me to the grandest doctor in Harley Street. My mother then bought me a stash of hay-fever pills before driving from Stroud in the Cotswolds to Ambleside – a journey of about two hundred miles. Her small, rattling, red Renault Four hatchback was packed to the gills. My diary entry, spelling mistakes and all, reads as follows:

We got to the motor-way and travelled up to Westmorland and the Laks. Half-way we stopped at a motor-way service station and filled up with petrol. We had lunch. I had steak followed by a nickerbockerglory. We went of again. We turned off and wound our way through the county until we found the guest-house.

Mummy and I unpacked. When we had finished all the others came. They unpacked and we watched television until a minibus took us to the hotel to see Claude. When we went in before us lay a magnificent tea. We ate a fair amount and then Claude came and talked to us about the

film and told us we would not have a script. We watched color television there and went back. We had super I went to bed and Suzanna came later and went to bed too. (She slept with me poor soul!). We rote our dairys and slept a well-earned sleep.

The film company took over the rather grand hotel on the lakeside. They booked us children into Oaklands, a solid stone Edwardian guest house above the little town of Ambleside. 'To separate you from the hurly-burly of the crew', was how my mother saw it. The others had all travelled up by train, via a last minute costume fitting at Morris Angel and Son Ltd, Theatrical Costumiers, Shaftesbury Avenue in London. The Evening Standard took a shot of them on the station platform.

Kit Seymour, who came from Middlesex, was playing Nancy Blackett, 'Captain of the Amazon and terror of the seas.' Her sister, Peggy Blackett, was played by Lesley Bennett, who was often described as being talkative and bubbly.

Simon West, who was cast as my brother John Walker, Master of the *Swallow*, was from Abingdon in Oxfordshire. His father worked at the nuclear research station nearby. He had only auditioned because his sister had been keen to be considered for a part herself. Claude said that Simon was everybody's idea of the perfect son. 'He has only to be told anything once.' He was both bright and practical, exactly like the character he played. I never had a brother in real life so it was quite interesting to gain a ready-made one.

Suzanna Hamilton took the role of my sister Susan. She went to the Anna Scher after-school theatre club in Islington and was the only one of us who had a pronounced ambition to act. She explained that she would have to be credited as Zanna Hamilton as there was already a Susannah Hamilton registered with Equity. Suzanna would have preferred to use her full name but was glad she had been christened Suzanna with a z. Most people called her Zanna anyway. I grew aware that we were having to make decisions that would affect our future.

The part of my younger brother Roger had been given to Stephen Grendon (always known as 'Sten'), with whom I'd appeared in *Cider with Rosie* when he played young Laurie Lee. Sten, who was now aged eight, couldn't swim well, but Claude adored him and was determined he should take on the role. He had travelled up from Gloucestershire via the costume fitting in London, with his mother Jane, who was to act as an official chaperone along with my mother. I wasn't quite so sure about having a little brother. He seemed very energetic.

And me? What did people think of me? Documents from the producer's office described me as 'a skinny, wide-eyed, little girl who loved to have a sketch pad near at hand'. They were right. While Mummy had been buying antihistamines at the chemist, I was choosing a paintbox and brush.

As my diary relates, we were taken for tea at the Kirkstone Foot Hotel to meet Claude. He was a small man, habitually clad in jeans, with a denim jacket. He seemed young and trendy for an adult. We had all got to know him a little during the weekend sailing in Essex, which had served as our final audition, but he was more respected and revered now, surrounded by assistants of different kinds, all anxious to please.

I can only think that we were thrilled to hear that we would not be learning lines, never realising it was Claude's key to getting natural performances out of us. I knew from my parents that Claude had decided not to cast children from stage schools who were trained to deliver dialogue in a theatrical manner. We, who were full of high spirits, were encouraged to start adopting our character names, which was something we enjoyed. Claude's other secret was that he never allowed us to see the 'rushes' – recently recorded film, newly returned from the developers – as he thought it might make us self-conscious. I learned later in life that he was quite right. It's dreadful seeing photographs of yourself, let alone un-edited film clips.



Claude Whatham, Sten Grendon, Simon West, myself
and Suzanna Hamilton at Derwentwater.

From the moment Richard Pilbrow gained the film rights from Mrs Ransome, he had been keen to cast children who were all confident in boats. I don't think Claude fully appreciated how deeply he would value the experience that both Kit and Simon had with sailing dinghies until we were out on the lakes in gusty weather. They were so good he later admitted there were times when they advised him what to do, which both stunned and amused him.

The thing that fascinated us above all else was watching the large colour television in the plush hotel lounge. I'm not sure if I had seen one before. They were hugely expensive in 1973 and considered a great luxury. The set, which had a wooden veneer, stood on legs and showed all three channels – BBC1, BBC2, and ITV, a channel we could not receive at home. We all thought it was phenomenal, including Claude.

Saturday 12th May – Second day

I woke up at about 6.00. Suzanna was already awake. We lay in bed for a part of time. Kit and Lesley came in fully dressed. They had been woken up by the clock in the hall at 4.00. They played Suzanna's ukelele until Mummy came in and told us to try to go to sleep, as we had a tiring day ahead of us. Then we had breakfast with the rest. We collected sailing gear of our own and set off to the hotel. We played in the garden until we were called to have our hair cut.

In the early 1970s most people had long hair. Ours had to be cut and bobbed to match the 1929 hairstyles in Arthur Ransome's well-known illustrations. Mum said that Sten really did have long, flowing hair, which looked extraordinary on an eight-year-old boy. He wrote in his scrapbook, 'When the hairdresser had got halfway through my hair he said let's wash it now. So he washed it with nice smelly shampoo.'

Sten went first and came out looking much older with all his locks cut off! Simon was next. He looked much the same, except with his ears showing.

We thought he looked so much better with a short back and sides, but such haircuts were a big issue. My mother had huge reservations about my hair being chopped off and said she nearly refused to let them. I am very glad she didn't. It was wonderful having it short. My hairstyle proved such a great success that I believe it may have set a fashion for having a graduated bob or 'Titty Haircut'. I noted, 'We all looked much different except Kit.' Suzanna thought, 'We all looked very funny!'