

Ernestine 'Nini' Trevenen James

Ernestine 'Nini' James (nee – van Gessler Verschuur) one of the first of the Blue Badge Guides. She helped to design the badge – which had previously been dark red.

Nini became a historical guide almost by accident. As a Dutch lady coming to live in London with her English husband, she was fascinated by the city and wanted to know more about its history. She found a course with the British Tourist Office, run by Maurice Pike, who became a great friend. The day she had taken her final exams she was rung up by someone asking her to guide a family around the City of London. This was before package travel. "Well... I don't think I am qualified yet" she said. "Oh yes you are, I was your examiner!" So she began, in her 40s, an astonishing career which took her to every part of the United Kingdom, into many private houses and ceremonies, making lifelong friends along the way.

During Chelsea Flower Week, because of her Dutch connections, she was asked by Madeline Maidstone of the V&A museum to give a talk on the History of the Tulip. This inspired her to develop several more lectures for the V&A and to take them round the USA and the Netherlands.

Nini James was born in Java to a Dutch father and an English/Armenian mother (who had also been born in Java). Her father was to become a respected Governor of Yogyakarta. Nini always said she had a wonderfully happy childhood going to a multicultural school, visiting the great cultural sites of Java - Borobudur by moonlight, The Prambanan Temples, which the Dutch were restoring, after an earthquake. She also dug with the archaeologist, Steyn Callefils, on the same site where Java Man had been discovered in the 1890s.

The Paku Alam (Prince of Yogyakarta) created Nini an honorary princess so that his wife could teach her to dance the Serimpi in the palace with his daughters.

Many people, travelling from Europe to Australia, would break their journey in Java. Nini was kissed by the legendary ballet dancer Anna Pavlova. She was taught to play tennis by Davis of the Davis Cup. When Prince Leopold and Princess Astrid of the Belgians came to stay, the Princess played with Nini and her dolls. Nini was so enchanted by this beautiful woman that, aged 14, she declared that if she ever had a daughter she would call her Astrid. Twelve years later she did!

When her father retired, very young, in 1932, they travelled the world before settling in The Hague. They visited the countries around the Mediterranean, the Balkans by train, and all of Scandinavia. They lived in the U.S.A. for several months where they were known as Mr. and Mrs. Very Sure, as van Gessler Verschuur was too difficult to pronounce.

Nini met her future husband at a dinner dance in Sussex, She was there to improve her English. Immediately attracted to this handsome RAF pilot, she slipped into the dining room to switch the place cards so that she could sit next to him.

They met four times before Trevenen was posted to the North West Frontier in India. They corresponded by airmail for two years before Trevenen proposed to her by telegram. Nini's brave parents let their only daughter travel by train through occupied France in late March 1940, she caught the plane to India from Italy, the journey took four days. Germany invaded Holland in May and Nini did not hear from them till after the war.

In 1943 Trevenen was sent for as the British needed more pilots to fight in Europe. The journey, by sea, took three months from Bombay, via Cape Town, Nini and daughter Astrid sharing a cabin with two other mothers and babies.

After the war the family was posted to Alabama in the south of the USA at the height of MacCarthyism, then to Germany in 1949. Nini's favourite posting was Paris in 1953. When there, Nini went to all the museums, art galleries and couture fashion shows. She never went out without a hat, gloves and a frilly umbrella – she made her collection of twenty nine hats herself and many of her own clothes.

Trevenen took his 'Golden Bowler' in 1957, eventually becoming the Estate Manager for Waddesden Manor, newly gifted to the nation by the Rothschilds. Together with the curator Phillip James (no relation) Trevenen's job was to make the house ready to open to the public.

The family lived in the servants' wing of the house. In summer they swam in the ornamental ponds and were allowed to wander through the wonderful collection. When the house opened, the curator asked Nini to take visitors around the house. She had no training then but the 18th century collection was her favourite period in History.

Eventually, arriving in London and becoming a historical guide. She also became an active member of the Anglo Indonesian Society and fully supported her husband's work lecturing to sixth forms and colleges for his charity Population Concern with Jean Medewar. In the '60s, Nini was the only woman member on the Wine Society Committee.

Nini guided till she was eighty two, calling her daughter to say she was giving up "not because I'm tired darling, but it's gridlock in London and you have to queue to get in to Westminster Abbey, it's no fun any more!" She continued to go on London Walks, discovering a more intimate side of the city and made friends with all the gardeners in nearby Regents Park. Aged ninety five she moved to Wiltshire to be near her daughter.

She leaves a very close family, who all celebrate her curiosity, her stories, her laughter and her kindness.

Nini Trevenen James, Blue Badge Guide
Born 4th December 1916
Died 6th June 2017