Despite having been only three months old at the time, Audrey’s life has been marked by an endless series of interviews, articles, National Geographic features, and documentaries on her rescue from the sinking of the Lusitania in May 1915.  Only last year she was invited to a presentation at the University of Glasgow, and as recently as 2004 the BBC flew her to County Cork to film her walking along the promontory at Queenstown, near Kinsale, where the recovered bodies had been laid out, and where her parents had spent three heartbreaking months hoping to find their two lost baby girls.

But Audrey was more than just the last survivor of the Lusitania   -   much, much more:

 Her mother, Amy Lea Duncan, was the daughter of a Scottish grocer transplanted to New York bearing the Golden Goose: the franchise rights to Lea & Perrins Worcestershire Sauce in the United States.  In 1909, at New York’s wedding of the year, she married Major Frederic Warren Pearl, a military surgeon from Boston who had served with distinction in the Spanish American war of 1905.  They travelled extensively in the early years of their marriage, Denmark being a favourite country whose charm they would later share with their children.  In the course of his adventure seeking, Frederic was arrested as a British spy in Germany in 1914.   But the authorities in Lübeck had reckoned without his formidable wife, who stormed in with the leader of the US legation in Copenhagen in her wake.  His captors did not detain her husband for much longer.  In the awful but appropriate American slang of today, she was one kick-ass lady.

 Amy soon found that she was pregnant, and they returned home so that Audrey could be born in New York on 5 February 1915.  Three months later, with their four children and two nannies, they set sail for England to take up Frederic’s posting as physician at the Embassy of the United States, and later director of the US Field Ambulance corps in World War I.

 The German U20 torpedo struck the Lusitania at 1:40pm on 7 May 1915.  The Warren Pearl parents were among the 761 saved. Their children Amy and Susan were among the 1198 lives lost, together with Greta, the inexperienced young Danish girl employed in haste at the time of Frederic’s arrest.   Eighteen year-old English nanny Alice Lines tied the three month-old Audrey to her waist, grabbed the five year-old Stuart, and in desperation jumped into the sea.  It is said that her long unravelling hair was spotted by one of those lucky enough to have got into a lifeboat, and Alice was yanked aboard by the hair, thus saving three more lives.  Alice lived to be 103 years old, and the bond between her and Audrey remained strong and true until Alice's death 10 years ago.

 The sinking of the Lusitania was the incident that drew America into the war.  Arguments still rage over the true facts, notably whether there was an arms shipment aboard, or whether the incident was a ruse perpetrated by Churchill and American businessmen in the arms trade.  As First Lord of the Admiralty, Churchill had written to the President of the Board of Trade about the desirability of attracting neutral shipping to these shores in the hope of embroiling neutral countries in the conflict.  Moreover, as head of Naval Intelligence, it was surprising that he did not use his knowledge of German U-boat positions to escort or protect the Lusitania.  Coupled with his curious but masterful publicity campaign after the sinking, he might in today’s world have faced a parliamentary enquiry, been dismissed, a large chunk of the history of the twentieth century would have to be rewritten, and you might today have been reading this in another language.  There is no conclusive evidence for any version, so chalk up another one for the conspiracy theorists.  Does this matter at a personal level?  All that registers, as it does for hundreds of other families, is the thought of two little girls who lost the chance to grow up, fall in love, have families, and be aunties to Audrey's daughters.

 The family settled in Sussex and London, and in time three more children were born.  Audrey was sent to several schools before going to North Foreland Lodge in Kent, a school that concentrated less on the academic than on Life Skills   -    the only school to have had in their curriculum at one time  *Husband Hunting.* Audrey excelled at lacrosse, swimming, cricket, tennis and netball.  In fact, she was an all-rounder, even becoming mid-Atlantic table tennis champion on board the Queen Mary’s maiden voyage, on a 21st birthday treat to visit family in New York.  She never failed to chuckle wryly when recounting that the 1915 disaster had secured the family a lifetime 25% discount with Cunard Lines........... so that this ticket cost her parents £40 instead of £53.

At the age of 12, she was taken to join the clambering throng to watch Charles Lindbergh landing at Croydon airfield after the first solo trans-Atlantic flight in 1927.  This indelible memory personalised her sadness five years later when Lindbergh’s baby son was kidnapped and murdered.

 Following Lindbergh’s landing, Audrey resolved to keep a diary, and from 1928 onwards religiously recorded her days.  It is a chronicle of the 20th century through the eyes of one who loved life:

 The front and back sections of each year’s diary carefully lists every book that she’d read in that year, every play that she’d seen, every film, every dinner that she’d been to; she recorded her travels, being driven down the Mall to be presented to Queen Mary at Court on her 18th birthday  - recalling Queen Mary’s heavily accented English   -  country weekends, ski-ing at St Moritz with the Kennedys, hosting Oxford-educated Prince Chichibu, younger brother of Emperor Hirohito, listening to George V on the radio, the agonies of the abdication, celebrating the coronation of King George VI in 1937, and most of all, the seemingly endless round of Debutante Balls, including her own at the Hurlingham Club.

 At one of these balls she met Pearl Lawson Johnston, who was to become her lifelong friend and companion.  Pearl introduced Audrey to her brother Hugh, who was immediately smitten by this vital and vivid American.  But she was playing it cool:  partly due to the uncertainties of a possible war, and partly wanting time to sift through the half dozen or so other proposals of marriage, she decided to keep Hugh on the backburner until the end of the war.

To today’s casual observer, her diaries suggest a superficial, shallow life, the lotos eater existence of the privileged classes in the inter-war years, satirised so well by Evelyn Waugh in *Vile Bodies*.  Nothing could be further from the truth:

Audrey was inspired by her mother, a dynamo driven to repay her rescue, a woman who had used her position and connections as a springboard to launch herself as a significant charity fund raiser and socialite in English society    -    these were the days before the Nanny State, and these events were the main way in which funds were raised to help those in need.  Arguably, the poor are better off under today's Welfare State, but this is now, that was then.    Audrey took her lead from her mother, with a lifelong dedication to the RNLI, the Red Cross, St George's Hospital, NSPCC, and unsung works for other charities, stepping up her work during the war years.  Indeed, the only valid charge that might be levelled at the middle classes’ lifestyle is that, when they did decide to involve themselves with charities, they’d usually be able to enter at a much higher level than most.  Nothing changes.

 Audrey loved music and she loved trying out all the latest dances, very often wildly around the home with her beloved younger sister Roddy.  The family was quite musical:  her mother was a friend of John Philip Souza, Mr Oompah Oompah himself, and the young Audrey had been taken to tea with Cole Porter.  Perhaps consistent with her love of music was her ability with foreign languages:  French was the easiest, because she had been sent to a finishing school in Paris, a small établissement run by three sisters each of a certain age.  They provided visits to museums and galleries, lectures, and a total immersion in French culture.  In later life her eyes would light up when she recalled her piano teacher that year.

With the onset of World War II, she threw herself into her charitable works with new vigour, particularly for the Red Cross, and driving for St George’s Hospital. In 1940 she was employed by the government of the United States, who had set up a legation at 40 Berkeley Square to provide diplomatic representation in London  for seven occupied European countries.  Her boss was the dashing Tony Biddle, who had managed to escape via the windows of his embassy in Poland ahead of the advancing German armies.  Her accounts of travelling to work by bicycle, or going home by bus during a blackout, were told matter of factly by her, and made all the more chilling for that.  Her diary for 1944 is fascinating  -  presumably she was privy to military intelligence at her place of work, because certain dates are marked with advances and victories in the Allies' (including Russia's) slow and certain drumroll progress towards Berlin   -   an unstoppable countdown towards the final denouement, and the huge push to carry out Churchill's requirement to shake hands with the Russians as far east as possible.

And now, after the war, push came to shove for Audrey.  Hugh had been pressing his suit since before the war, and in 1946 his patience was rewarded at their wedding at St Margaret's in Westminster before 1,000 guests.

Hugh's maternal grandfather was  Beauchamp St John, 16th Baron St John of Bletso, a descendant of, amongst others, the Earls of Bolingbroke and  Margaret Beaufort, mother of Henry VII.  Hugh's paternal grandfather, the adopted butcher's boy John, had invented Bovril and built up the once mighty Bovril and Marmite organisation.  Hugh's father George had been created the 1st Baron Luke, less for his business enterprise than for his great charitable works, typically donating their London home     -    Hugh's birthplace and now the site of the Churchill hotel    -   to the Red Cross as a depot during World War I.

They were an unexpected pairing -  the conservative, country-loving English gentleman and the free-spirited city dwelling party girl.  None of today's Internet dating sites would have matched them, let alone a marriage bureau of the time.  No, this was a match made in Heaven, no boxes to be ticked on a form that would suggest 56 happy years together.   Their union was an expression of Hugh Walpole's comment that *“The most wonderful of all things in life, I believe, is the discovery of another human being with whom one's relationship has a growing depth, beauty, and joy as the years increase. This inner progressiveness of love between two human beings is a most marvellous thing; it cannot be found by looking for it or by passionately wishing for it. It is a sort of divine accident, and the most wonderful of all things in life.”*Hugh's own diaries sing out of a love that was in turn romantic, passionate and devoted for life. He certainly didn’t marry her for her cooking - her idea of cuisine was a tin opener and a loaf of white bread - so she clearly found other ways to get to her man’s heart for all those years.

They produced three daughters, and Audrey settled into London life as the wife of a prominent English businessman, accompanying him seven times on visits to Bovril's beef herds at the company's estancias in Argentina.  Thanks to her sparkling personality and love of people, she was the perfect companion and consort for Hugh.  In another life, she might have been a diplomat's wife, and this side of her shone through later when Hugh was High Sherriff of Bedfordshire in 1966 (?).

But Hugh was a committed countryman:  The St John family had experienced a reversal of fortune in the late 30's, so their home at Melchbourne Park could not be maintained and consequently fell into disrepair.  The house was used for storage by Bovril, then commandeered by the USAAF during the war, who used it as a supply depot and for occasional performances by the Glenn Miller band.  Hugh bought the house after the war as their new country home.  Gradually over the years they spent more and more of their time there, gradually giving up London for a base in a typical freezing English country house described in so many novels.  The cost of heating oil at today's prices would have brought them to their knees!

Audrey made the transition well.  She had no love of field sports.  Hunting and riding left her cold.  She'd willingly given up the life she loved in order to be with her man, and threw herself enthusiastically into tennis, entertaining, cultural interests, village life and charity work.   Everyone has a prevailing weather pattern inside their heads - some people can win the lottery and be depressed again in a month.  The prevailing weather pattern inside Audrey's head was sunshine, with very occasional dark clouds.  Like all of us, she was not saved from heartache and loss in her long and full life.

Hugh's sister lived with them in Melchbourne, and no account of Audrey's life is complete without reference to Pearl's:  She had been Master of the Hunt at 21 (side-saddle), racehorse breeder of renown, Magistrate, Tax Commissioner, Dame of the St John's Ambulance Corps, head of the WVS in postwar Berlin, and again in Hiroshima 1951, an authority on Florence, panjandrum of the Girl Guides, High Sherriff of Bedfordshire, and behind many undisclosed charitable endeavours.   It was interesting that these two different personalities grew old together, yet never squabbled    ........ after all, Prozac was invented for old people who become depressed and ratty, but it was never an issue for them.  Aside from possible edgy competition for the Alpha male   -  healthy regard for a beloved husband and brother - there were very few cross words.

Audrey continued to love the arts and music, from the Classics to Broadway musicals to Teddy Bears' picnic.  She loved the shock of the new, and her gameness endeared her to her grandchildren far beyond the blood tie.  How many people have a Facebook page set up by a grandson: 'My Gran Rocks'?   It also helped that she had a great passion for furry animal toys, especially the wind-up ones that dance or play music.

In May 2005, at a ceremony in New Quay, Wales, she launched the lifeboat *Amy Lea* to markthe 90th anniversary of the sinking of the Lusitania and recovery of the 761 survivors.  She raised the money for the lifeboat herself, and named it after her mother. The assembled host watched nervously as this shaky veteran was helped onto the dais: Holding the microphone stand in her left hand to steady her, and a glass of champagne in her right to unsteady her, she launched into a monologue with all the pizzazz of a professional stand-up comedienne.  She was already a darling of the RNLI, and this episode alone confirmed her as their secret poster girl.  In its first month of service, the *Amy Lea* saved seven lives,

She did have a ready wit, skill at wordplay and repartee, and this never left her, even when she was eventually losing her other faculties.  Had she been born 50 years later, she might have had a career as a presenter or PR lady.  Her verbal twists were all fondly remembered, as in "what's for dessert?"  'Summer pudding, mum' ......... "and summer not.".  Later, when her hearing was failing, she employed a creative deafness, so the listener wasn't quite sure how much of it was deliberate, and not genuine mis-hearing, as in "Do you think Camilla should be Queen?"   ..... 'I'm so sorry, dear, I don't think we have Vanilla ice cream'

In her later years, she never complained about her limitations, content to sit in her kitchen. ever-present snifter at hand, pointing to the outside, whatever the weather, whatever her eyes could see, it was always, "England at its loveliest, don't you agree?"  It was here that she welcomed special visitors from India in 2007:

One of her grandsons had become engaged to a girl from Bombay, and her parents had come over to pay their respects to Granny, as she would not be making the journey to Rajasthan for the wedding. In a private but colourful and vivid ritual, she was garlanded with a necklace of fresh stephanotis, and leaves and herbs were scattered.  At the climax, the mother of the bride knelt low for the matriarch's blessing, then urged everyone else to kneel to be blessed by Granny.  Months later, the bride's mother revealed that, as she bowed, Audrey leaned forward and whispered in her ear, "Now I know why I was saved from the Lusitania".  Her new in-laws had instantly discovered what everyone else knew:  To know her was to love her.

Audrey was blessed with ten grandchildren and two great grandchildren, a full dividend on her life. She never lost her faith, had no fear of dying, and looked forward to her next journey with serenity.

At her Melchbourne funeral on 5 February, congregants have been told not to be startled if they hear her talking wristwatch from the coffin: *'Cock-a-doodle-doo!  The time is 3 O'clock'*, followed by an imagined voice, "Is that the time?  Time for a snifter, don't you agree?"