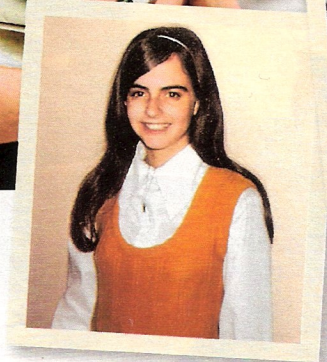




Diane, left, and Valerie last year; below, as teenagers



The write stuff

What started as a shared Beatles obsession between two pen pals turned into a 43-year, transatlantic friendship **by Jane Bianchi**

Last summer, when Valerie Larkin's son, Lee, told her that Diane had called, she assumed it was the dog-sitter. "I guess she won't be able to walk Jack today," said Valerie, who lives with her family in Derbyshire, England. "Well, no," Lee answered. "She'd have to come an awful long way to do that."

The Diane who'd called wasn't the dog-sitter, but Diane Schwarzbrott, Valerie's American pen pal of nearly 43

years. She was coming to England and wanted to meet Valerie face-to-face—for the very first time.

Diane, a nurse and mother of three originally from St. Louis, first wrote to Valerie when they were both 13. "In 1964, every true Beatlemaniac wanted some connection to England," says Diane. So a friend from school who already had a British pen pal (one of Valerie's classmates) played matchmaker.

Back in the eighth grade, the girls mostly wrote about their mutual crush. "We were really stuck on Paul McCartney," says Valerie, an optical technician and mom of two. The teenagers went on to write about everything from "fantabulous" transistor radios to *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* As they grew older, the two women, now 55, shared more meaningful milestones (boyfriends, husbands, and, eventually, children) by sending photos with their letters. For holidays and birthdays, they'd exchange small gifts, like scarves or manicure sets.

Unlike many pen pals, they never lost touch. "The secret was not writing letters too often," explains Diane. "You had to wait until something exciting happened first."

But on 9/11, letters weren't enough. Knowing Diane had moved to a suburb of New York City, Valerie telephoned to make sure her family was OK. "I was really touched," says Diane. "Hearing her voice for the first time cemented our bond." Before they said goodbye, they decided they should meet.

The opportunity finally came last July. On their way to a Scandinavian cruise, Diane and her husband, Sheldon, made a stop in London. With her husband, Cyril, in tow, Valerie took the train to meet them.

The two women immediately recognized each other from the pictures they had sent and ran to embrace, giggling like schoolgirls. "She has such a bubbly personality," says Diane, "just like I expected." Adds Valerie: "Our husbands got along well too. They had to, really, because we were so busy chatting."

Valerie, who hopes to visit her friend in the United States someday, is confident that nothing will stop them from writing: "Over the years, I never once doubted that Diane would reply to my letters. She has always been there for me." ■