

### **Mary Jane Wyatt of Mill Cottage, Llanblethian - A Tribute**

Not a day goes by without Mary Jane being in my thoughts, every household task I do, every stitch I knit or sew, cooking or washing and even papering a wall, I hear her sweet gentle Welsh tones. It was a very lucky day when I was billeted to Mill Cottage as a five-year-old evacuee from Kent along with my eldest sister Audrey. Two very tired children stood on the doorstep, it was dusk on June 14<sup>th</sup> 1940. A growling lions head door-knocker gave us a fright and my 13-year-old sister bent down to me and whispered "If I say run — run"; I held her hand tightly and the door opened and there stood an old lady in black, on crutches, hair tied up in a bun fashion. She smiled revealing two yellowing teeth in her mouth and said " Oh you poor little things I'll have to fatten you up for Christmas!"

"Run" said my sister and we did, not knowing where we were going. Audrey had seen the large black cooking range behind this lady, with a blazing fire and a big oven to one side. "She's a witch" she cried out to me as we ran, "we must hide; she wants to eat us for Christmas".

A large figure loomed up in the darkness and picked me up, and a kind voice said "Now my dears, don't be afraid of Mary Jane. She won't hurt you, give her a chance and I know you will be fine with her, everyone in the village likes Mary Jane, and she makes marvellous apple pies". He took us back to the cottage and so began my life with Mary Jane and her elderly husband Frank. Once settled into the way of life in Mill Cottage I discovered that when Mary Jane was about five she had broken her hip falling down the stone stairs where she then lived a little cottage next to the Almshouses on the bridge. But Audrey could not settle. Being older she wanted to be out and about with her friends, and complained to our English teacher who moved us to a farm near Maendy called Efail Roper farm. I hated it because I was left alone there, and I was neglected. My Mother came to visit and was horrified, I had scabies and yellow jaundice so she took me to stay at Maendy farm opposite the school, finally she met Mary Jane in Cowbridge who asked for me to return to her on my own. My sister had by now left school and was working at the hospital at Crossways and lived in.

Mary Jane began teaching me to "grow up useful" as she called it. I had to lay the table in a particular order, carry everything from the pantry. She always produced a good meal even though there was a war on. We pickled onions and eggs in a big crock under the pantry shelf, herbs and bacon hung from the ceiling, jams and pickles

filled the top shelf. We began making Christmas puddings and Christmas cake and stored nuts in a large tin. That pantry was a magical place for me. A mesh cupboard in which all pies and opened food was kept (to keep flies away) stood to one side, and best of all my sweet ration lived in a tin just inside the door.

Routine was part of my life, washing on Monday of course, we used water boiled in buckets on the fire in winter and on a primus stove in summer. The only tap was just outside the back door and the toilet was in a little shed at the end of the garden. In spite of this, and having no kitchen sink, Mill Cottage was spotless inside and out.

I loved school holidays because I could help Mary Jane with the chores. Tuesday was ironing day, all done on the kitchen table, and the whites were spotless. When put on the old wooden clothes horse to air in front of the fire, I can still feel the warmth of the fire on my cheeks and my slippers were always warming on the hearth when I got home from school. At bedtime we would take the clean washing upstairs and put it away, I would then be tucked up in bed and Mary Jane sang "Goodnight little girl, good night" as she made her way down the stone stairs that wound around the back of the cottage chimney. She sat on each stair and eased herself down, and she managed to get around the house without her crutches.

Wednesday was bedroom day and my job was to get under the beds to dust the springs and lino. Thursday was cooking, apple and rhubarb pies, meat and cheese puddings. Some evenings we darned socks or knitted.

Mary Jane did sewing for people in Cowbridge. One day I brought home from school a nightdress case I had made, Mary Jane inspected it and said "Whatever are these .. homework boulder stitches? They are much too big I thought I'd taught you better . . . now undo them and do them again". "But Miss Thomas said they were all right" I replied. "Well you can tell Miss Thomas that I have done more sewing than she has seen potatoes, come on we will undo this seam and do it again, no one asks how long it takes to do a job but they all want to know who did it." she said. I then finished the case to her satisfaction.

Always the gentle Mary Jane was there for me, to encourage or scold gently at whatever I did. Friday was shopping day in Cowbridge. I was sent upstairs to get her beloved watch, we had to be sure not to miss the bus, she would make slow progress on her crutches to the bridge at Greenfield

House where the bus from Llantwit Major stopped. We got off at the top of Eastgate calling in to Mr & Mrs Wadham's shop, she would be given a chair to sit on while she placed an order to be delivered later that day. If I was with her on school holidays I would carry a small bag home with us, we then went in the post office then the butchers, Mansel Edwards, by then it was time to pick up the bus at the Town Hall and return home. Sometimes I would walk the mile into Cowbridge to pick up things from the chemist or to get "lights" for Ginger the cat at the butchers, when I returned Mary Jane would smile and say "I don't know how many footsteps you have saved me but I wish you a shilling for every one".

I had Saturday jobs to do, scrub the front steps and the back yard and also the toilet shed. Once a month I polished the glass and cutlery. Some people used to think I was hard done by and that I should always be allowed out to play, I never felt that way. I always had plenty of time to play with my friends Maggie Williams (Evans) and Anne Ashcroft who lived next door and Violet Rae who lived in the Bake House, there was Vivian Flanders and of course Ronnie Harris. I enjoyed helping Mary Jane.

I did not want to go home at the end of the war and tied myself to the garden gate when my sister came for me. I'd hidden behind the Baptist Sunday school all morning wondering if I would ever again be back to join Mr & Mrs Spencer for Sunday prayers, but home I had to go.

My Mother promised me that I could go back to Mill Cottage for my school holidays in the summer and I did, saving sixpenny stamps each week from my school saving scheme.

We never lost touch even when I grew up and went to work in Chatham Dockyard as a Tracer. When I married it was a bit more difficult but I always wrote to her.

Frank died in 1956 and Mary Jane in 1976 at the age of eighty. I'd lost one of the best friends I'd ever had and my pride was apparent when I saw the little church packed for her funeral. The vicar looked down at her flower-strewn coffin and said "If I'd known that Mary Jane could fill my church like this I'd have fetched her here every week, if I'd had time to so"

I think that was it in a nutshell for me and for all those people, Mary Jane had time . . .

*Mrs June Faulkner, Maidstone, Kent*