

## Mrs James' fascinating memories of Pembrokeshire life

CISSIE JAMES COULD REMEMBER PEMBROKE DOCK WHEN THE CRIMEAN WAR VETERANS WERE BEGGING ON THE STREETS

### DON'T GO OUT WITH THE SOLDIERS



Pembroke Dock as it looked when Cissie James was a young woman. This remarkable photograph was taken from the grassy slope leading up to the Mount at the top of Prospect Place. Church Street is in the centre of the picture, with the parish church of St John just to the left. The old 'wooden wall' lying off the Royal Dockyard is the Nankin which served as a hospital ship from 1866 until after the turn of the century. Subsequent to the photograph she was moved to a mooring off Neyland.

On a warm, sunny afternoon in June 1970, I sat with a very old lady in the cool shade of her living-room. To many people she was a relic of a bygone age, living on in a world she no longer recognised nor understood. But 93-year-old Mrs Elizabeth Janetta Jane James, Llawhaden House, Prince's Street, Pembroke Dock was not like that at all. She had grown old wisely and gracefully. Time had been good to her. She knitted and embroidered without the aid of spectacles. Her hearing was excellent and she spoke clearly and fluently.

I had known her for a goodly number of years and often wondered about the people and events stored in her mind. As a young man in the 1830s, her grandfather had ferried horses across the Haven from Pembroke Dock to Neyland by raft; her father had spent his fledgling years when the greater history of the British Empire was taking place.

She herself could clearly remember men who had fought in the Crimean War of 1854-55 and helped Quell the India Mutiny of 1857, begging on the streets of Pembroke Dock – disabled, poverty-stricken and largely ignored by the civilian population. The daughter of a boat builder, the remarkable woman affectionately known as 'Cissie' was born at 15 Front Street, Pembroke Dock, in April 1877. She came into the world of Gladstone and Disraeli. Within three years of her birth British soldiers were fighting in the Second Afghan War and engaged in bloody battles in Zululand. As a young woman she waved farewell to troops when they sailed from Pembroke Dock for another conflict in South Africa against the Boers and then hurried home to knit comforts for them. "When I was a child", she reminisced,

father brought up the family on thirteen shillings a week. There was hardship, but we were invariably happy. Pembroke Dock was an exciting place to live, with full employment – 2,000 men worked in the dockyard and in the evenings the town centre was filled with off duty soldiers and sailors. “In most homes family discipline was rigid, and parents set their clocks and watches by the big gun fired nightly at the Defensible Barracks. Children had to be indoors by then, and if they disobeyed they received the strap!

“No respectable girl was allowed out after 9pm anyway. Beer was only a penny a pint and there were too many drunks swaggering and staggering about the town” Soldiers were handsome in their scarlet or blue uniforms and in that respect were a source of admiration. But girls who went out with them were shunned by respectable families. We were ordered not to talk to girls of that sort, nor to the soldiers. We were told about the babies conceived on the Barracks Hill because of raffish soldiers! On occasions however, which were much looked forward to, our parents took us into town after dark to see the turnout for the posh balls organised by the garrison, and sometimes the dockyard authority. We watched wide eyed as officers and ladies, dressed in all their finery, arrived in horse drawn coaches and sometimes we’d linger outside to listen to the orchestra play its lovely music.

Golden summers of Cissies’ childhood were filled with visits by pony and trap to Freshwater East and Angle, and picnics on the picturesque banks of the Cleddau. But sometimes there were harsh reminders of families far less fortunate than her own. She recalled: “Some way upriver from Pembroke Dock was a cottage with a low roof. We used to pass this place in father’s sailing boat on our way to Lawrenny or Llangwm. The occupants, a married couple who worked in the fields during the day, had a teenage daughter who was an imbecile. When the parents left for work they tied her with chains to the chimney. “She was chained like a dog and was prone to bark like one; she also howled when we sailed by. Victorian Britain was supposed to be one of the most civilised nations on earth, yet in order to make a living even parents with a genuine affection for a feeble girl had to secure her with chains during, their absence.”

The spritely nonagenarian had vivid memories of the Crimean veterans begging for food and accommodation, stating:” Many were badly scarred and had other forms of mutilation and mother always treated them kindly. But most people were not so well disposed, for reasons I still fail to understand to this day. “More often than not they treated those poor soldiers with complete indifference and the only accommodation they could obtain was in Pembroke Workhouse. Rudyard Kipling summed up their plight admirably. It was ‘Tommy this and Tommy that’ when there were wars to be fought, and he was a splendid fellow then. “But no one gave a damn for soldiers in peacetime, let alone those who had suffered in war. Even the girls were constantly warned to stay clear of ‘Tommy’ in Pembroke Dock.