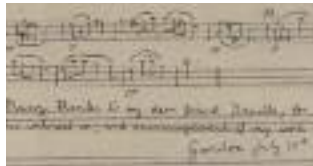


Over the rocks and past the tip:

snippets and serendipity from the life
of Dendle French





Number 2 Tredomen Terrace, Tredomen near Ystrad Mynach

was the house I was born in - literally, as my mother gave birth at home. It was a small house, with the front door opening straight into what we called 'the front room', which we only used when visitors came. At the back was a living room and kitchen, with a sink and a large scrubbed table.

My mother had a primitive mechanical washing machine but not many other mod cons, and there was certainly no indoor loo or a bathroom. My brother Allen and I shared a bedroom; we played outside in the garden and in nearby woods where we enjoyed making 'tents' from branches of spruce. We visited family at weekends at Penybryn, walking up and over what we called 'the rocks' above the Tredomen Works. This provided the machinery and maintenance for the colliery at Penybryn, and both my father and I worked there - though my tenure was brief as I began but did not complete an apprenticeship.

At Penybryn we'd visit relatives on my mother's side: her parents, Uncle Stanley (killed in an air raid on Weston Super

Mare while on holiday), Uncle Ernie, Uncle Cliff, Aunt Alice and Uncle George - all my mother's siblings. They all lived in the same street in Penybryn in the parish of Gelligaer. By strange coincidence, Wyn Beynon, who I tutored at Hockerill College in the 1970s and 80s, later became vicar of that parish.

Other family outings took us a little further afield, for example to Barry Island for seaside days. Allen and I would sit in the back of our father's Austin 7. Before that Dad had a Morgan - a strange, elongated three-wheeled affair with bucket seats at the back for us children. We didn't venture far in that one but it was lovingly kept in a garage at the back of our garden.

In August my father had a week off and drove us, through Gloucester and Taunton, down to Axminster to stay with my grandparents, Charles and Alice French who lived in a tiny cottage just outside the town centre. We'd all stay a week and then Dad would drive back alone to go to work, and return to collect us at the end of the month in time for school.

Just opposite the cottage was a field with a stream at the bottom. The area where the cottage was situated was called Millbrook so I suppose the river was the Millbrook. We paddled and caught tiddlers in a net - we loved pottering about in the river. Grandad was an invalid; during the first World War he had been shot in his chest and the bullet was still lodged there, close to his heart. He would sit all day in a deck chair at the edge of the field outside the cottage and watch the world go by.

Other memories of our stays with our



Dendle's grandmother with his father, Frederick and aunts Connie, Nellie and Dorothy. Joan had not been born yet!

grandparents include taking trips on *Puffing Billy*, the steam train that ran from Axminster to Lyme Regis. The train struggled to get up the hill, but had a lovely run down into the town and the station. From there it was quite a trek to the beach but worth it; we loved being on the beach. I had learned to swim at school - we were taken to Llanbradoch to the pool there - so the sea was a treat.

My father's sisters - mu aunts of course - all lived in Axminster, too. There was Auntie Connie who kept *The Trout* pub just up the road; Aunt Nellie, who worked in the laundry in the town; Aunt Dorothy, who was the only aunt who let us have jam on our cake, and the youngest of Dad's siblings, Auntie Joan.

Of course, with all these aunts, there were a few cousins around, too. They included John and Tony Mitchell, Auntie Connie's sons and June who was Auntie Joan's daughter.

I am afraid to say that I can't remember all the cousins' names but we didn't see them all that often. Sadly, we have lost touch in later years although June is in touch with the family today through Facebook!



Puffing Billy, the steam train from Lyme Regis to Axminster Dendle remembers



A three-wheeler Morgan from the 1930s,

As a young child, I was fascinated by music and musical notes. I got a plank of wood and marked on it all the keys, black and white, of a piano keyboard and wrote on them what notes they were. I based it on picture in a childish book I had called *Arthur Mee's Children's Encyclopedia*. The book had chapters in it about the different notes, and I learned them but didn't know what they sounded like of course because I was hammering them out on a piece of wood! Then one day when I was visiting my grandmother and grandfather (my Mother's parents), who lived nearby, over "the rocks" and past the tip, I noticed on the piano, which I had never played before, a sheet of music with the words "A Christmas Carol" and just one line of notes. I wondered what it was and I remembered the notes and their value, in terms of length and so on, so I played it and to my delight, out of the piano came the tune *Good King Wenceslas*! It gave me the urge to learn more. I didn't have my own piano, we never did at home, but my parents got hold of a little harmonium because of my interest, so I learned on that. As an adult, I was keen to acquire a piano at the earliest possible point, but it didn't happen until we moved into a clergy



house in Northgate Street in Gt Yarmouth in 1961 as a young married couple, by which time we had also acquired three small children! To our delight, the previous occupant had left for us some magnificent Edwardian furniture which included an electrically-powered Challen pianola. We still had this when Elizabeth, Alison, Jeremy and Andrew were teenagers, and it moved house with us several times. However, it was so heavy and difficult to move around that when we left Bishop's Stortford we managed to find someone to do a swap with a "normal" piano - another Challen.

I also got a viola as part of the deal! The piano has remained in the family and granddaughters Ella and Anna now have the pleasure of its fine tone.

As a footnote: the house in Northgate Street - number 30 - had never been a clergy house before we moved in. It had belonged to a Miss Hall, whose father had bought it in 1904 when it was first built, for about £800! This generous lady sold it to the church for the same sum almost sixty years later - and included all the furniture and the piano mentioned here, most of which was contemporary with the house itself and had been there since her father's day.

I spent four years doing a London University BD, based at a place called Ford Manor in Surrey. The grand house was owned by a Mrs Pauline Spender Clay, one of the famous Astor family and widow of the MP for Tunbridge Wells. She had a butler called Nicholls and lived in an apartment within the house - surrounded by 50 theological students!

She had a magnificent garden with the most wonderful collection of azalias and rhododendrons outside of Kew, so it was said.

Many years later, when I was about to move from Bishop's Stortford to become vicar of St Paul's Walden, I was being shown round the beautiful church there. At the back of the 14th century church is a modern annexe, and on the wall I spotted a tablet indicating that the building was built by a parishioner in memory of...Mrs Pauline Spender-Clay. The name jumped out at me, of course and I asked what the link was with my new parish. To my surprise, the church warden who was showing me round told me that Mrs Spender Clay was her mother!

The churchwarden in question was Rachel Bowes Lyon, widow of Sir David Bowes Lyon, the Queen Mother's younger brother. She was very surprised that I had spent four years living in their family house! We exchanged stories about Mrs S-C, and I saw it as a bit of a sign that I was meant to take the job. As an aside, Joyce Grenfell was a cousin of Rachel, and in one of her books she describes how, as a child, Rachel Spender-Clay used to ride on her bicycle at Ford Manor, without holding the handlebars!



Hon. Pauline Spender-Clay (née Astor)

While still training at Ford Manor, I was allocated a church to support and learn from, in the nearby village of Hammerwood. I helped with the youth club, did some bell-ringing and sang in the choir. The choirmaster there was a chap called John Swayne, a Lieutenant Colonel who had been part of the Control Commission in Germany after the war. John and his wife Molly took me under their wing and offered me huge support; this wonderful couple became life long friends.



The extraordinary Georgian screen in All Saints Church, St Paul's Walden, where Dendle officiated at many weddings - seen here with the cast of the latest film version of Emma (2020).



Gordon Jacob, well known twentieth - century composer was taught by Vaughan Williams, and was himself a teacher of Malcolm Arnold. He lived at Saffron Walden in Essex in the 1970s and 1980s. I got to know him, and we became friends, when he became a regular visitor to the college of education where I was chaplain in Bishop's Stortford- Hockerill College - to speak to students about his music.

Later, in the early 1980s, after we had moved to St Paul's Walden (Whitwell) on the Bedfordshire side of Hertfordshire, I found myself chairman of the Hitchin Concert Orchestra, having been a player in the string section. One of the members of the orchestra, Judith Hill, was a professional-standard flautist who had been for many years the first flute in the orchestra. The committee wanted to mark her loyalty and contribution by commissioning a work for flute and orchestra in her honour. And because I was acquainted

with Gordon Jacob I suggested him as the composer.

I approached Gordon and asked if he would compose a flute concerto, but he said he had already written two! Instead, he suggested a set of variations for flute and orchestra on an original theme. We agreed that this would be perfect and I took Judith to meet Gordon so that he could judge the standard he should write for.

She started to play him the first movement of a flute sonata by French composer Poulenc. After a few moments, he stopped her and said, "You'll be able to play anything I could compose for you!"

Eventually the full orchestral score and parts arrived: entitled *Variations on a Pastoral Theme*, it comprised several variations on an original theme Gordon had composed for a film score. We performed it on 13 November 1982 in St Mary's Parish Church, Hitchin to an appreciative audience which included the composer himself.

On the 25th anniversary of my ordination to priesthood, celebrated at St Paul's Walden the same year, two parishioners, unbeknown to me, contacted all the friends in our address book, inviting contributions to a kind of ***This is Your Life*** book. Gordon generously contributed a manuscript of the theme from the commission, with a kind dedication at the top, now framed and proudly hanging in our sitting room*.

* Now in Jeremy and Colin's.



This Celtic cross is a really lovely thing to have on my study wall. It was given to me by James (Jim) Reilly, an American astronaut who flew on three NASA shuttle missions. I officiated at Jim's marriage to Allison Benjamin in the chapel of Glamis Castle and he and Allison have become friends. I have since also baptised both their children in the chapel - they got me out of retirement and back up to Glamis both times!

The really special thing about the cross, which was made by a jeweller in Colorado where Jim and Allison live, is that part of it is made from silver Jim took into space in June 2007 - so it's been on 220 orbits around the earth totalling 5.8 million miles!

It is a very romantic story. Jim and Allison shared a love of space - her role, I think, was education director at the Houston space centre. But it was a close encounter in the castle chapel which started their romance. Jim told me how he had had a sixth sense that Allison was 'the one' while they were there. It was 2007 and they had both come to Scotland on different missions.

Allison was visiting schools in Dundee and Angus as part of the Discovery Space School Education Programme and Jim was presenting a Tam O'Shanter to Perth's Black Watch museum - he had worn it when he was orbiting the earth in the space shuttle Atlantis.

A friend of Mary Strathmore (the Dowager Countess) suggested to Jim that he should come to the castle to meet the countess at the same time as the Space School were having a visit. Jim told me later that during a tour of the castle, when they all came into the chapel, he suddenly had a vision of himself standing at the altar, with Allison as his bride - even though they had hardly met! Then, later on, as they were sitting down to a meal in the castle, Mary asked Jim, "wouldn't you like to sit next to your wife?", pointing to Allison!

They went back to the States, started to meet up and romance blossomed! When they decided to get married, of course there was only one place for it, and I was so pleased to officiate. They are a lovely couple. It was actually one of the last duties I had as chaplain there after 16 happy years in the role.



With Jim and Allison's son Jacob, at Glamis



Dendle and Margaret shared many walking holidays all through their married life



They were delighted with the bench commissioned by friends and family for their 50th anniversary in 2006 - the bench is sited at a favourite spot in Glen Clova.