

Experiences, Memories of DMJ's, Places and Events associated with them

I have tried to put on paper some of my thoughts, memories and experiences associated with the DMJ's (formerly Ladies of Mary) that have occurred during the 8 decades of my life.

My earliest experience was related to me by my father and sisters. My father and mother took me to Coloma as a babe in arms to introduce me to my sisters who were boarders at the school. We were taken to the chapel by Mother Anastasia (whose sister was an acquaintance of my father) to pray for my family as my mother was very sick. I myself became a boarder in early 1939 at the age of 8.

One of the Sisters who stands out in my memory at that time was Sr. Sophie, known as 'the Portress' as she answered the front door to visitors, welcoming them and asking if they could spare a 'farthing' for the missions.

September 1939 - the outbreak of the 2nd World War: part of the school was evacuated to Eastbourne but only for a short period as it turned out not to be a safe haven. We were then transferred to Llandilo in South Wales, which for me did not hold any happy memories. I was pushed from billet to billet and never had a chance to settle. As individuals we were placed with couples or families, as were the nuns and lay teachers. Coloma had to share a school where we were allowed half the day, the local Welsh pupils having the remainder.

Mass was said once a week on a Sunday in a room set aside in a Public House. I can still remember the odour of beer accompanying us through the service. At that time Catholics, and especially nuns, were alien in that part of Wales so there were no Catholic churches or convents anywhere near Llandilo.

My unhappiness was drawn to the attention of Mother Winefride, our Head Mistress, a person I was in awe of. My impression of her was to alter considerably. Unbeknown to me, M. Winefride contacted my father and between them they thought I would be happier at Hatchlands. The last few days in Llandilo I stayed with Mother Winefride in her billet before being taken back to London by her, where we were met by my father. The

kindness of Mother Winefride during that period I will never forget. Hatchlands was a stately home (now National Trust) near Guildford in Surrey. It was lent to the Ladies of Mary for the duration of the war by Mr. Goodhart Rendell, a recent convert to Catholicism and a serving Officer in the Grenadier Guards.

At last I found security and happiness at Hatchlands. The pupils were mainly from St. Anne's but some were from Coloma. I was to remain there until the end of the war. 'Victory in Europe' night was celebrated there, the nuns having organised an evening party where we had games, ate jacket potatoes cooked round a bonfire, and drank cocoa.

The nuns I remember there were Rev. M. Mary Peter, M. Alphonse Marie, M. Mary Hilda, Mary Antonella and Sr. Patrick (the cook), and M. Felicie (Head Mistress). One of the highlights at Hatchlands was being able to stay up later on a Monday evening attending 'the Knitting Circle', where we knitted scarves for the forces and were allowed to listen to 'Monday Night at Eight' on the radio. We were, of course, supervised, usually by Rev. M. Mary Peter.

Post-war I was given the choice of returning to Coloma or transferring to Merrow Grange. I chose the former, a decision I did not regret.

My post-war Coloma days were very happy and secure. At first I was a full boarder graduating as I grew older to a weekly boarder; in fact I was one of the last two boarders before Coloma became just a day school. Coloma was a safe haven where I found security with the nuns and made many friends, some I retain until today. The Sisters I remember there particularly were Rev. M. Mary Peter, M. Mary Cuthbert, Mother Augustine, M. Mary Victoire, M. Mary More, M. Mary de Sales, and M. Mary Duschene. Some taught me, others just looked after me as a boarder. M. Mary Victoire, who often supervised our recreation time in the evening, was particularly popular as she played the piano and had an amazing repertoire of music to which we could listen, sing and dance to.

On leaving Coloma in 1948 I was devastated, leaving behind my security and not knowing what the future held. The nun who helped and counselled me the most during that period was M. Augustine. I was able to turn to her for help and advice and she set me on the right road to my future. Later M. Augustine became an important person in my life until she sadly died in

2000. She was there in the background of my life and I visited her regularly.

Although I never had a vocation to be a nun I was later to receive the next best thing - Sr. Pat Whitehead informed me about the DMJ Associates. This I joined in the late 1980's, with the help of Sr. Celia and encouraged by Sr. Teresa Clements and Sr. Helen. Now, due to my increasing years and bad health, I am more of a praying member as I have difficulty in attending meetings.

Whatever I have achieved in life I owe mainly to the DMJ's who looked after and taught me in my formative years.

In 1990 I was awarded the Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice by Cardinal Basil Hume at Archbishop's House, Westminster. Among my guests, apart from family and friends, were 4 DMJ's: Sr. M. Peter, my Reverend Mother at Hatchlands and post-war Coloma, Sr. M. Cuthbert, my post-war head mistress, Sr. Eileen Whitehead (Augustine), one of my teachers and later in life a good friend, and Sr. M. Goretti, a school and long-term friend. Cardinal Hume was particularly interested in meeting these DMJ's as Sr. Mary (Dr.) Hickey was his doctor in the Cardinal Hume Centre.

I hope these details and impressions will be helpful - putting words on paper in no way expresses my sincere memories and genuine fondness for the DMJ's and all they have done for me during my life. I apologise for 'my' part in this dissertation but I could not give it justification without doing so.

After thought:

Lourdes - centenary year of the apparitions of Our Lady to Bernadette, I accompanied M. Mary Cuthbert and M. Augustine to Lourdes with pupils from Coloma and St. Anne's. I remember the spirit and magic of Lourdes. M. Mary Cuthbert would lead the singing of '*Tap your Sabots Bernadette*' on coach tours and M. Augustine was seen and photographed riding a donkey at Gavarnie in her full habit. This was the first of my many visits to Lourdes.

Please excuse any mistakes as this was written in a hurry in order to deliver it to Sr. Celia before September.

Ruth de Stefani

Ps Can supply photograph of Hatchlands and M. Augustine on donkey if required.