CHILDREN OF THE MILL

Joan Barker née Collins

My two brothers, John and Patrick and I (Joan), were the last children to be born (between 1915 and 1919) at the Mill House, Radford. It lies below the village of Timsbury in the Cam Valley, south-west of Bath. The Mill still stands, but its house and gardens have slowly vanished after sheltering generations of the Collins family.

There were Collins in Timsbury back in the 1600s. According to the church records Hilgard was a churchwarden in 1605. There have been Collins miners, farmers and millers, among others, since 1607 according to one aunt. They were Mill owners, as far as our records go during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

In 1785 a James Collins and his wife Sarah, rented the Radford Mill and the rectangular stone Mill House, built in 1706. By 1788 they owned the property. Their nine children, if their nursery was the same as ours, would have looked out from the back of the house onto a quiet, pretty valley of green fields sloping up to Timsbury. By the time the youngest was five, just across the lane the Somerset Coal Canal was being carved through their valley changing their view into a high bank, capped with passing boats and towing horses, transporting coal from the local pits to the towns.

There were benefits: compensation money, investment and trade possibilities. Four of the boys took advantage of the growing population. William worked the Mill and expanded profitably into Bath. John and his wife (see the church plaque) built the Radford Brewery and a nearby Georgian house. with family portraits – eventually by a nephew, James Edgell Collins (see English Painters reference list).

The influence of non-conformism. 1819-1895. was growing and the inheritors of the brewery turned to market gardening. George, our great-grandfather, father of James the painter, farmed the valley, building himself the house on the left of the road, going from the station site up to Timsbury. He also set up a tannery nearby. Jacob set up a tallow candle business and, I think, at onetime, there was a private school in his house.

George’s second son was our grandfather. William Nuth Collins, who took over the Mill and married Sarah Coombs from Radstock, in 1858. As they grew their twelve children would have seen fewer passing boats at their window. By the time the youngest was twelve only nine and a half miles of canal remained, and by 1898 it had closed. Instead, trains puffed past the nursery windows, at first only between Paulton and Camerton. With a halt and sidings at Radford to help collect Timsbury Colliery coal as it slid down tramways to the valley, and from the newer Lower Conygre pit.

The children of this generation tended, eventually, to move away from the area, through marriage or searching for different work, transport being easier.

The Twentieth Century

The valley was more peaceful in 1915, when I was born, than it had been for generations. Mining nearby had stopped. My brothers and I looked out of the nursery onto a quiet lane leading up to the village on the hill, passing the cider apple orchard on the left, with violets on its banks. The inviting red apples. which tasted horribly sour, were gathered in when the cider machine came to crush them and catch the juice - interesting to watch. We walked up the lane on Sundays to church, hoping that on the way back the miner would be in his garden and show us his pigeon loft.

Doctor Beevor hurried down the lane if we were ill. We children caught diphtheria, then a killer disease, and were isolated in the nursery with a disinfected sheet over the door. Tickly potions were painted on the backs of our throats with a paintbrush. Even a poisoned hand could be serious before penicillin. In the previous generation, the news had to be kept from my grandmother that her three year old and one year old sons had both died of an infection whilst she was upstairs caring for her newborn, William, who died a year later. By the 1900s we were luckier!

Perhaps it was remembering such things that made my mother insist on some very annoying garments: woollen body belts, that slipped, to protect our kidneys; the trying liberty bodice with dangling suspenders; walk-in combinations (woollen), galoshes, and leather gaiters that pinched as every button was hooked. My brothers suffered the first day at school, as they undressed for games.

Our father, Henry Collins, was the third living son of William Nuth Collins and Sarah Coombs, and the only one sent away to train as a miller. He managed the Mill when his father died in 1911 (aged eighty), helped by his youngest brother, George. The Mill was converted from water to steam; the engine- room throbbed with suppressed power and the Mill yard was busy. We were not allowed alone in the Mill, but on occasion were able to break off nobbles of cattle cake to chew, intoxicated with the smell, warmth and fragrance of the grain upstairs, and the heady noise and steam of the moving machinery.

We were happy children, but there were dangers and we tended, when smaller, to be locked in the nursery sometimes, during part of Monday's wash day when everybody was busy.

The front of the house, of dressed stone, opened onto a narrow lawn, and directly opposite the door was the old mill wheel in its deep bed, unprotected. To the right, was the mill pond, approachable like the outside lavatory, with wooden seats in the laurels. The main garden, where we were taken to play, was across the busy mill yard and had a sewer across the end - no wonder my mother employed a succession of 'home-helps', some much loved.

Wherever we played in the home fields was surrounded by water: by the huge delightful smelling walnut tree, by the water fall, near the yellow king cups, in the fragrant Henry Co and his daughter, Joan.

Morgan Sweet apple orchard, always water. Always water, but we never fell in, nor were we thrown in the mill pool to learn how to swim as we were told was the fate of the boys of an earlier generation. However, we had our moments; one small brother broke a leg swinging on the big yard gate. One fell down a steep bank into thick nettles when I was in charge of him, and I once jumped, unbeknownst, into the back of lumbering mill delivery wagon as it clattered out of the yard on its local rounds. One of our calls was to the little old lady in the cottage up the hill, on the way to Meadgate, who had bees making honey for her by swimming up and down inside a jar on her little windowsill. On the way back I learnt how the wagon man Fall a back wheel, into a thick metal shoe, to help the horse as it went down a steep hill.

There were other excitements. My father organised that we children should be taken out of the valley in the afternoons to the surrounding hill-top for fresh air, and pony Tom was required to pull us up one of the hills in the governor's cart.

If the home help involved was sensible, she took us up the steep lane to Clandown where we opened the swing gate to enjoy the common, the air and the wild flowers after pony Tom had been rewarded with a cool drink in the pleasant leafy trough in the shady hedge at the top of the bill.

A much more dangerous direction to go was up the hill towards Meadgate because if pony Tom heard the distant descending rattle of the Foden traction engine, with its red fire blazing below its base, bringing coal from the Tunley pit down to the coal trains at Radford Halt, he would go mad with terror, and we had quickly to find a convenient field gate to get him, and us, off the road.

My mother was glad when cars replaced horses, saying there was often much tension with horses. My father had a dark green car, with a strap over the bonnet, and ladies were sensible they wore scarves when travelling in it, but be also had a lively chestnut in the stables. I remember us peering anxiously out of the window as he wrestled in the mill yard with this lively, excited animal between the shafts of his high dogcart, ending with a dramatically speedy and noisy exit round the corner of the stables and down the lane towards the road.

My mother had plenty of help in the house but was still busy. There were hungry workers to feed every day. I remember I learnt the Lord's Prayer from her as she cooked on the big coal range in the kitchen. It was wartime, and though we had plenty of food, she often had to make special test loaves as the Government kept diluting the quantity of flour allowed to be sold. Tiresome for millers. Soap was short and she made this, a process hard on the hands. We had fish quite often, arriving fresh, delivered by the post, in special woven-straw baskets, from far off coasts.

My mother also managed the cool dairy room underneath our nursery. If we were upstairs we would bear through time window the sound of a man singing, 'K, K, K, Katy, I in the cowshed', and the man with the pails hanging from the wooden yolk on his shoulders, would emerge from the little tunnel opening under the former canal bed, which led to the fields on the hillside beyond where we had cattle, and a Jersey cow. He carried fresh milk into the dairy room below us, and the milk was poured into large, very clean, round shallow, metal pail and left to cool for the cream to rise. This was eventually skimmed off, into a revolving metal drum with a handle, to he turned by hand until one heard and felt, at last, the flopping sound of butter forming. I preferred the quicker job, with butter pats, making neatly decorated squares. I believe for clotted cream a

certain amount of heating the milk was required before skimming off the cream, but I do not remember how the heat was achieved.

The Mill House had five bedrooms upstairs, besides our playroom, and attic rooms above, occasionally with maids. Tile drawing room had tall windows and white, panelled walls. The first tea party my mother gave there, someone in the kitchen forgot to put the tea in the pot. My mother was musical; there was a piano and she played well. There were musical evenings when everyone brought their music or sang. On Sundays we sang hymns round the piano. My father had, in the dining room, a gramophone with a big horn. There was a breakfast room, kitchen pantries and sculleries, above which a little office was built for kind Mr Minter, bookkeeper for the Mill. In my dreams, I flew down the stairs, round the hail and back again. It was a busy, working house; nobody sat and was waited on.

Let us end with a last look from the nursery windows and then a walk. I envied earlier children who could look out on boats and horses, and enjoy family picnic expeditions, and even, on special occasions, apparently, a lively piano on board. Then there was no water to freeze up in the winter for the energetic to try skating to Bath. I never remember even seeing a train pass by from our window, although they came up from Camerton to the Radford Station. Later, when old enough to explore on my bicycle I watched with excitement the filming of Ghost Train at Camerton. One day we looked out of the nursery and there was a group of men, with coloured patches sewn on their trousers, digging up the ground where the canal had been.

My father had hired a gang of German prisoners, from Hallatrow, to prepare more ground for growing food. It was First World War time, and they brought a barrel of dried fish to eat and my mother gave them bread.

He made signs that more bread would be appreciated with his walking stick, and to us on our favourite walk, along the railway line towards Paulton, on the valley side, as far as our magic mountain - I believe the old Lower Conygre batch. Our legs were not quite long enough to stretch from sleeper to sleeper, but the sun always seemed to shine. Two places I shuddered at and passed quickly by: the pig sties where, once a year, we heard screams of violent fear as men struck the pigs for winter food; and across the silent mill pond the small steep weir that controlled it, where I had nightmares that I was crying helplessly with the water falling to engulf me, probably from all the warnings Mill children

heard in their ears. On Sundays along the valley the sun seemed always to shine. My father killed an adder on the line with his stick, and there we were, climbing our mini mountain, covered with trembling grass for us to pick. Lucky children. There were many, many nearly as young, who, over the years, underground, had pulled heavy coal trucks on their knees for their living.

In 1922. when I was seven, our father died of heart failure; he was 54 and had just bought the Mill at Bathampton. My mother and he had had ten years together. I remember my grandmother, in her 90s, often used to visit Sarah, née Coombs, at the Firs, Radstock, crying for her son,

My mother moved us to Sarabeth' at Tunley, where she had lived as a child. Her mother had green fingers and the house was covered with ja and greenery. My great aunt, Elizabeth Pike, gave us a great welcome and we grew happy again at Tunley.

The 1920s were years of extreme depression, Radford Mill fared badly. My uncle George was not successful, nor his nephew who joined in with a poultry business there. Both failed, and died, and the Mill passed to other hands, young ones now, its history perhaps, starting again. Our parents' grave is in Timsbury cemetery, near the central trees, a Collins' sister lies near and Doctor Beevor's grave not far away. There are earlier family tombs, near the church tower and by the east wall of the church yard.

After the war some of these men decided to remain in England. On fine Sunday afternoons my father took.

Update on 04.01.17 from the present Owner, Richard Fox: "We've just discovered (courtesy of the pictures) that Frank's cottage was originally built as a one-storey small building extension that was a scullery; but then was upgraded to a two-storey building with a bookkeeper's office over the scullery. We just looked closely at the stonework yesterday, and discovered this!"