



KATH'S STORY

by Kathleen James as told to Lesley Hale

Though she was born in the Tanyard where she made many friends, it is when she recalls the family's time at Red Hill Farm that Kath's face really lights up with pleasure. Born on 2nd December 1920 when snow was three parts up the door, her parents were Jack Pickering and Sarah Ann Curtis Moon, always known as Saran, she was a daughter of William Curtis Moon, one of the miners killed in the Whitwick Pit Disaster.

Life in the Tanyard¹ was hard. *We were poor, very poor like everyone in the Tanyard. My Dad was a miner, he had to lose a lot of time because he'd got what they used to call rheumatics in those days, – I don't know whether it was arthritis or not. Sometimes he could not get to work, he had to have a day off. Apart from being ill he hardly ever made a full week through the shortage of work.*

Her eldest brother Bill suffered from the same complaint. When he was about 10 he used to deliver milk in the village for the farmer James Richards. Bill had to carry the milk in a great bucket with a measuring jug. When he was too ill to go out his sister Nancy, 2 years younger had to take over. No wonder she complained, *"Our Bill's always got rheumatics when it's snowing."* It would have been as much as either of the children could manage to carry the bucket. Bill was quite small and would be wearing short trousers whatever the weather. Lady Beaumont tackled Kath's mother saying *"Why do you allow him to do it?"* and maintaining that it was stunting his growth. *"We're glad of the money, it all helps."* Memories of Lady Beaumont are usually of her superior ways, expecting the boys to doff their caps and the girls to curtsy if she walked in the village. Little is said about her generosity. She paid for Kath's father to go Droitwich Spa for treatment, and apparently she did this for quite a lot of people. While he was away a very large rice pudding often came up from Swannington House for the family.

Bill always loved farming and as he grew up he did more and more jobs for Mr. Richards. He must have been very competent for when Kath was four he was offered a job as manager of Red Hill Farm. He was about 19 and unmarried and there was the large farmhouse as living quarters to go with the



job so the whole family went with him. But everyone was sad to leave the Tanyard, it was full of children so there was no shortage of playmates. It was hard for her mother too.

Kath remembers clearly her arrival at the farm, it was winter, we went up the paddock and through a building in the stack yard which brought us out into the main farmyard with the buildings all round and as we opened this door the scene that met us was virgin snow. Nothing had walked on it but birds. And I gazed, I'd never seen so much snow in one place.

My Mam was a bit scared you know. With living in the yard and people popping in and out and helping people out, she missed all that. Anyway at one stage when my Dad had to work nights she used to go to the door with him and say now don't say good night and she'd close the door, shoot the bolt across and turn the key. She was afraid someone might be listening to hear him go. It was so very solitary, but we hadn't been there long before my Mam loved it. We all did. And we all used to help out. You know how it is with a farm.

All my brothers loved farming and would much rather have continued with it than go down the pit. There was Albert who was always teasing and a lot of fun and then Horace.

Kath lived at Red Hill Farm for about nine years and they were very happy days but she said they had plenty of ups and downs. Her brother Horace got run over at school and carried 22 yards. He almost lost his life. He cut his ear from the crown of his head so that his ear was just hanging on. Her mother miscarried and had to go into hospital. The next baby was her last, another boy, Walter. Walter developed pneumonia and meningitis, when he was only a few months old, and though he survived he was badly affected by it. At about the same time Kath developed diphtheria. It's forgotten now how prevalent such illnesses were not much more than fifty years ago and how quickly they could spread. Other classmates also had the disease and they went to the Swannington Isolation Hospital, with Nurse Walden in charge. *She was a sergeant major she was. Of course several of the girls and boys in my class they all got it and they were sent there. Well of course being at Red Hills we'd got five bedrooms so they said can you isolate her and my Mam said "Yes" so I didn't have to go. The other kids told me what*

a time they'd had under Nurse Walden, she made them clean all the shoes. They all had jobs to do. But I think she was a good person.

We hadn't been there long before we found we could go to Thringstone and to Whitwick and to New Swannington without touching the roads, over the fields. Going to Whitwick we used to come out in School Lane. But the special outings on foot were not those from the farm but those she shared with the rest of the children in the Tanyard.

We had a nice childhood because there was a lady in Tanyard that hadn't got children, she was called Liza Knight and she was ever so good to us kids. Whenever we were away from school, even after school in the summer, she would take us all round the fields to Whitwick and Thringstone. We used to paddle in the Cutta and we used to take a piece of bread and margarine or jam if we were lucky and she'd have a big bottle of water. We'd be out hours. Well anyway as I got older I used to visit Tanyard. My Mam's sister Clara Challoner was there, she'd got six. My Aunt Ada that's my Mam's brother's wife, she'd got six or seven. I think she'd got six girls and one lad. So I was always in the yard, when I came out of school. I was there until there was someone to take me home. I'd wait there for my Mam to come down to see my aunties, then we'd go back later on at night.

My Mam would say we haven't got to be late, my Dad would be mad if we were late. Well we'd get together and it would be about 10 o'clock before we'd go. We never owned a torch or a pair of Wellingtons. I can never remember any of us owning anything like that. It was pitch black. We used to topple over all sorts of things. My Mam was never scared only one night; we were going along Red Hill Lane and there was a big oak tree and as we got near it something shone silver like. When we got past there was no need to be scared, she said it was a courting couple under the tree. It was the petrol tank of their motor bike that was shining.

At the farm there were cows and sheep and later on Mr Richards set up a poultry farm in one of the fields, tons and tons of chickens, and he had a shed built what they call a mixing shed where all the food was kept and Myrtle, the second of Mr. Richards's daughters, she had the job to look after them. She used to come up on a sit up and beg bike with a bucket on it and we used to help feed them. Walter used to wait for her coming. It made his day you know. He was only little he weren't at school. He was as

enthusiastic about farming as his brothers. He would lay out little fields with stones and then put different stones in to represent animals. In the winter Myrtle used to make up with the bran and that, a hot mixture. My Mam would give her the boiling water. Myrtle would go with the bucket for the boiling water after she opened up the shed. One morning our Walt he was backing for some reason and he fell with his bum in this bucket of water, it scalded him, but she went straight back to the shop and fetched Carron oil and she doused him with this and looked after him till it healed. I shall always remember it. She'd take a bucketful of eggs in the morning and she'd come again at night and get another.

When harvest came it was a kid's paradise you know. My Mam used to make gallons and gallons of herb beer. We'd go and gather dandelions and nettles for it from the hedgerows. She'd make a copperful and in a couple of days it'd be gone. We used to go down to the field and take sandwiches and herb beer and that. We used to come back on the hay drays, it would be dusk before the men would get back to the yard. Oh they did work hard and they would be on the job again at 6 the next morning.

You mind my Mam and the ponies did I tell you about that? Well he was a bit of a stickler this Jimmy Richards and he used to try and catch them out. Everybody overlays sometime don't they? We never owned an alarm clock or anything. My Mam had to get our Bill up and his cousin, Frank Challoner, worked on the farm with him. He had to get the cows in, milk them and have the milk at Swannington Station for the 7 o'clock train. Well some mornings if my Mam were late getting him up she'd get in a panic and she'd put my Dad's old overcoat on over her night-gown and she'd go down the field and fetch the pony up. There was only one thing she couldn't do, she could harness him, she could put him in the float, but putting the final piece of the harness over his head she couldn't manage. Anyway there was just this one thing and then they were ready and they'd go like the devil. And some mornings Jimmy Richards would come up, he were up there at six o'clock some mornings to see if they were up and working. Some mornings they were late but they always managed. I think they'd have got the sack if they'd missed the train.

He could be a tartar and my Mam used to clean the dairy for 4½d old money, twice a day she used to do that. As I said she didn't have Wellingtons, even the kids didn't have Wellingtons, she used to wear my



Kath James



Eric Jarvis, left, with his elder brother Bartlett

Dad's old shoes and of course they were soaking wet because there was running water all the time. I don't know how she did it looking back and there was no electricity. I remember going home from school and it would be getting dusk and there my Mam would be on her hands and knees on the corsey outside the back door with the lamps, even the lamps for the farm, the hurricane lamps trimming them and filling them with paraffin. Inside we only had one lamp on the table in the living room; if you went anywhere else you took a candle

You didn't take a candle if you wanted to go to the privy. You had to go in the dark if you wanted to go at night time – a candle would be blown out in no time. The privy had three holes, two for an adult and one for a child. The privy was next to the cow shed, you could often see down into the cowshed. I don't know how it was emptied, whether the night soilmen came, but I should think it went with the muck from the cowshed and ended up spread on the fields. I can't remember everything of course but things stand out in your mind like seeing my Mam on the corsey doing those lamps.

Her sister Nancy worked out in service in a pub at Coalville called the Fountain. She'd come home on her half day off, on a Wednesday afternoon, working all morning at the pub and then at the farm on her afternoon off. She'd give the floor one good scrub out once a week and my Mam managed best she could the rest of the time.

On a Saturday morning my job was to come down to the village and pay all the debts. With Bill working for Mr Richards we traded with him for the groceries and we used to have them from one Saturday to another. We couldn't pay till the weekend until we'd got the wages so I used to have to go down and pay that and then I used to have to go and get the papers for my Dad and then go to the Co-op and pay for the bread and such like you know. It used to take me about all morning to do that. That was on a Saturday. The other days I had to muck in and do whatever I could. I can remember scrubbing the stairs down with light from a candle going from one stair to another.

Kath always looked forward to going to school but her brother Walter, who was six years her junior, hated it. My Mam used to coax him, she'd say you can have a penny for some sweets. You'd get two happorths of sweets for a penny and she said to our Horace buy two halfpennyworths one for Walt

and share the other one between you. This hadn't been going long before Walt cottoned on to what was happening, he knew the difference between a halfpennyworth and a pennyworth so we never got any more after that. But he didn't want to go to school. You'd get him to the bottom of the paddock and he'd lie down and he'd kick and scream. he was not going to go to school. Horace was a strong lad and he was well made but he wasn't very tall. He'd pick Walter up and put him on his shoulders and his back and I was there holding him on his back and that was how we would take him to school. And I used to think what am I going to do when our Horace leaves. But by 12 months later Walt was a bit better, which was a good job because he was a fair bit heavier as well.

It's easy to understand why Walter hated to go to school, he had a severe speech impediment. He'd had this meningitis and pneumonia and it had left him that he could not speak properly. If you did not know him you would not know a word he said. In those days the infants finished at half past three. There was a teacher, her name was Miss Wright - Kitty Wright. You've heard of Kitty Wright haven't you? She was a local preacher as well and she taught infants. My Mam said when he comes out of school he can't play safely on the road; ask the teacher if he can stay in the class and you collect him. I went and asked this Miss Wright and she said of course he can I'm mostly in till four o'clock. I don't know whether that was so or not. When I went to fetch him she'd got him on her knee teaching him to speak properly. She did wonders for him. Even till the day he died there were some words he could not say properly. He could not say breakfast, he used to say frekfast but apart from that it was amazing. The meningitis had done it and we never thought he'd ever be what he should be.

It was when we lived at Red Hills. I got this scholarship. Miss Emma Robinson taught the scholarship class and she was fantastic. I went and had the medical and everything to go. and there come on ever such short time at the pits and my Dad said you're not going. My cousin, Evelyn Challoner, she went to Broomleys, she'd been there a couple of years, they had to take her away because they could not afford to send her so my Dad said we are not going to do that, we're not going to let Kath get started and then have to take her away. I really wanted to go. I loved school. School was never a bind to me. Every part of it, the sport and the study and everything. So of course I didn't go. it would have been Coalville Grammar School. There were four of us that won that year. Raymond Robinson -

Albert the undertaker's son and Miss Emma Robinson's nephew; Pearl Wardle Swain who lived opposite the Fountain, she couldn't go, they could not afford to send her. The other was Enid Walker of the butcher's shop at Vine House. She went and Raymond Robinson went but Pearl and I didn't so we stopped on at Swannington School.

Emma Robinson took the four of them who'd won the scholarship to London for the day. I'd got this lemon silk dress and a brand new panama. I were ever such a toff and when they took my photo I'd got this mouthful of ice cream; they took a group of us. And they took me on this camel I think it was. We did all the sights. The Zoo. the Houses of Parliament and all that. I'd never been any further than Coalville up to then. I know Pearl hadn't either. I'm not saying Raymond and Enid hadn't because they were so much better off.

So Enid went to the Grammar School and I lost her company. But me and her sister Peg were friendly and Peg she were a case, she didn't care. Miss Hickman used to take us for handwork, doing embroidery and other things you know how you do make things at school. We were allowed to take it home so that we could do some at home and Peg used to say on the afternoon we'd got to do that "Come with me at dinner time I've got to fetch my work this dinner time." And I used to go with her and Noel was a little boy on the rug, he couldn't walk. We'd play with him, we used to sit and play with him till we were nearly late for school. Then we'd go out of their living quarters and there was a shop, her Grandma kept a shop and then the butcher's was there. As we went she'd pick up a couple of little bars of chocolate. Nobody knew and we would tear back to school and they were all sitting there. Miss Hickman would say, "Now where have you been you're late again." "I forgot my work Miss Hickman, I had to go and fetch it." I used to keep quiet but we did have some fun. She was a card. Enid was just the opposite very studious she was. She died quite young and Peggy did too.

We never had a wireless or anything like that. I never remember having presents much, just a little bit of something at Christmas. Bill got a wind-up gramophone. It was the latest thing when he had it. He loved music. Our Bill and my Dad did and they used to play all these old records.



It must have been when he was 21 that Bill met his wife at his birthday party and she had not even been asked to it. She was Harriet, a sister of my Uncle Arthur's wife, Dora. As I say Harriet had not been asked to the party but she came with Uncle Arthur and Dora and so did another sister, Sally. We had not known these two till they turned up at the party. Sally she was full of life and she loved farming and she used to play the gramophone. We'd got a big round table on three legs and she used to dance on this table and my Dad would be going and our Bill would be going suiting their actions to the music. We used to have some nice get togethers.

But it was Harriet Bill married and after that life at the farm was not so easy with two families living under the same roof. Harriet wouldn't rest till she got back to Whitwick. She persuaded him to go and work at the pit for more money which was hard for Bill, but they were happy together. It was a terrible shame because our Bill had never done anything but farming.

My sister got this house down here, (one of the new council houses on St George's Hill) you see so when they built these houses that would be about 1930 wouldn't it. I'd be ten. Through Mr Richards she got the first house because she were living in lodgings and Uncle Arthur and Aunt Dora were living in lodgings in Station Row with my Aunt Flo so they got one and my Aunt Clara was living in Tanyard and they were overcrowded so they got one. We didn't get one being at the farm but we would have got one if we'd been in Tanyard.

Well we had to leave the farm and come back down to Swannington, and we couldn't get a house anywhere and my Mam said she'd take whatever comes, whatever it was like. (At that time, where the post office garages are now, was the Railway Inn). Well we got that little house at the side of the pub. It was in the summer and I was leaving school in the December at the end of the year. We were sadly overcrowded, we'd got three boys and me and my Mam and Dad, so we had to have two beds in one room. We tried for a Council house as soon as we knew we'd got to move but we could not get one. I left school that same year and I started to work at Clutsom's. I think it must have been August, it was summer time I remember, my Uncle Jim and my Aunt Ada, the Moons, they left and went to Leicester. Girls, when they left school, they often had to go to Leicester for work. So when my Uncle Jim was laid off from work at the mines, my Aunt Ada said, "we'll go and you'll get a job in Leicester," so they did. They went to get my

Uncle Jim a job but Aunt Ada got one as well. She worked all her life in Leicester. Well in those days a woman in the village working was unheard of unless she did a bit of cleaning or washing or anything like that.

Some time later one of their children was getting married, so they had a bus to take us from the village to this party. Anyway there used to be a hairdresser, a Miss Adcock, in Piano Row and my Dad were in charge, my Mam had gone earlier in the week to help my Aunt Ada get ready for it because my Aunt Ada was working. Anyway I went and had my hair done at this hairdresser and then I said, "Oh Dad I don't think I want to go and he said "Why not?" "I'm not very well." "Oh", he said, "you've got to go what would your Mam say. Besides you could not stop here on your own. You might feel better when you get there." Well I did and I enjoyed the party, but next day I woke up with scarlet fever so they took me away for six weeks to Markfield¹. Then of course the health people came to look, they come when you get a fever. The toilets were pan toilets and they were that near to the back door, only three or four steps away, and that close they thought that was why I got it.

So Mr Richards, I will give it him for that, he did get us the house. He said the first house that comes empty I'll see that you get it. I'd just started back after I'd had the scarlet fever and we got this house. And I've been here ever since so that's how we come to live down here.

¹ Some of Mrs James's experiences have been told in previous articles in *Now and Then* and in particular in Wendy Moulds's article about the Tanyard.

² By then Swannington Isolation Hospital had closed and it was private house, now Highfield House.

VILLAGE NEWS

It is Open Gardens year again. For the first time the main event will be on a Sunday, the 1st August, gardens will be open between 11am and 6pm. The organisers need all the help they can lay hands on. If you have a garden to open you will be especially welcome or what about splitting and potting up plants or sowing seeds now so that they will be of saleable quality on the day. Although some of the money raised in past