

Growing up in Tarbert during the 1950s

By Mary Marquis (MacDougall) Veitch

How often in recent years, I have wished I'd had the forethought to talk to my grandmother, Mary Marquis, about her early years and growing up in Tarbert in the 1870s and 1880s. She was the first-born of Alexander Marquis and his wife Margaret Johnson. She was born on 29 November, 1874, in the Back Street, then the family moved to Dawson's Land before they moved to Bannockburn Buildings in Barmore Road.

By her early teens Mary Marquis had 'been taken into service' by Lord and Lady Pender, who owned Erines, an estate where they spent three months every summer, holidaying in the Highlands, before returning to London for the rest of the year. It was on the return to their grand home in London that they decided to take the 14-year-old Mary Marquis with them. She worked as a scullery maid for several years. Among her main tasks was the job of keeping all the fires burning throughout the house. She had responsibility for clearing out the ashes, resetting the fires and carrying the coal buckets from the cellars to every floor. It was hard work for a young girl, but she worked hard and eventually became lady's maid to the mistress of the house.

How had she felt being taken away from her family at such a tender age? What was the journey from Tarbert to London like in the last few years of the 19th century? Was she homesick? Were there other servants who also came from her home area? What did she do and where did she go in London if she had a few hours off? What were conditions below stairs like for a wee lassie so far from home? She must have had so many experiences that were alien to her contemporaries still living in Tarbert. She would have had so many memories of her life in London. Some would have been worth remembering, perhaps others she chose to forget. Whether good or bad, she didn't talk about them to me and I never thought to ask. She was my Granny and I was a wee girl.



Mary Marquis in the 1890s

When I was born on 25 March, 1946, she was 72. The same age as I am now! As the first daughter of her second daughter Mary McCoag Johnson, I was given her maiden name, Mary Marquis (MacDougall). I must have been among the earliest Baby Boomers! I spent a lot of time with her at Torranbeag. Her hands always smelled of onions. Even now, when I'm cooking with onions, I love to smell my left hand. It evokes wonderful memories of Granny Johnson.



Mary Marquis, James Johnson sailing the 'Molly'

She 'toasted' the thick fishermen's socks worn by my uncle Malcolm in the oven of the range in the kitchen. She managed to singe those socks on a regular basis by stoking the fire too generously. She always had a pair of socks on her knitting needles. The wool was either lovat green or navy blue. When her friends came to visit for a wee 'copan' in the afternoon, they would sit and 'yarn' while she knitted another few inches of sock.

Culinary skills were limited by cooking facilities in the 40s and 50s. Everything was either boiled or fried but mostly boiled. One pot cooking was all the rage. Take one huge iron soup pot, add a piece of boiling beef or shank of mutton with carrots, onions, turnip and potatoes, a few 'kneeffuls' of pearl barley, boil for several hours, add some curly kale ¹ and serve sprinkled with parsley. Hey presto, 'the dinner'. White fish was simmered in milk for a while then two or three beaten eggs were stirred into the milk to add extra colour and sustenance. Serve with bread. There yeas are, 'the tea' on a Sunday.

We also ate a lot of herring fried in oatmeal with boiled potatoes and boiled salt herring served with boiled potatoes. And boiled potatoes served with a cup of milk. And let us not forget the soup. Everyone just made soup. End of. There were no recipes. You just made soup – with whatever was available. We ate a lot of rabbit stew with carrot, turnip, onions and boiled potatoes courtesy of our farming relatives down Kintyre. There was 'dooker' soup with carrots, turnip, onions and potatoes. This was definitely an acquired taste or one driven by hunger and availability of finer ingredients. It was so oily. There was always a thick oil slick gleaming on the surface.

At New Year we had a hen, given to us as a seasonal present from a cousin from 'down the country'. This was boiled and served with carrots, turnip, onion and boiled potatoes. The soup that manifested itself from the cooking liquor, would keep us going for days in the week after New Year. Potatoes were added to thicken it, along with the humble leek. There was 'plain' bread. I preferred the white crust. There were rolls, porter biscuits, plain cookies, water biscuits and soda bread; all bought from the baker's. We make toast on a toasting fork on the open fire. The

taste was so superior to modern day toast. In periods of nostalgia I still like to make toast like this on an open fire.

As a child born in the mid-1940s my diet was influenced by food rationing. And so, it was that my mother figured that if I had school dinners I would benefit from an extra ration of meat; the meagre portion provided at school plus my share of the family ration at home. We had wee books of five dinner tickets for the week. The colour of your ticket was determined by your place in the family. There was a decreasing charge for each child as it went down through the family. My dinner ticket was blue. I have no recollection of how much it cost or when I stopped having school dinners, but I can still smell 'the dinner hall'.

As well as a range in the kitchen we had a Valor parafin stove. My mother would slap a girdle on top of the stove and make pancakes and girdle scones for the tea. I used to go to my auntie's at Northlea on a Wednesday afternoon, half day in the shops, and make tablet on top of the parafin stove with my auntie. A dangerous pastime for an under five you might argue. These were the days before the invention of Health and Safety, Risk Assessments and the like. The days when children were given strict instructions and stuck to them unquestioningly!

Another 'mod con' introduced around this time was a Burco boiler which was used on a Monday to boil sheets, towels and nappies in the days after we stopped using the washing house at the top of the garden. We used it to heat bath water too. Slightly later than this we got a 'geyser' above the 'jawbox' to heat water for washing the dishes. Everything changed when we got an electric cooker in the mid-50s. My mother could bake cakes in an oven where the temperature was regulated unlike the oven in the range. We had roasted meat, the Scottish equivalent of Toad in the Hole, (butchers sausages immersed in beaten egg and baked in the oven), macaroni cheese, Eve's pudding, rice pudding, baked Farola, pies and pastries. It was at this point that I became very interested in cooking and all things 'domestic' and decided I wanted to be a Domestic Science Teacher! But it was not to be. I had to do French and Latin and therefore was excluded from even applying to the 'Dough School'.

I started school after Easter in 1951. It was customary at the time for children who became five years old before Easter to start school after the Easter holidays. There were six of us in that group. We went through the summer term with the age group above us then 'started' again in August with the rest of our school year. I think we had a distinct advantage with the extra four to five months of foundation education. The forerunner of Pre-school perhaps? I enjoyed school and progressed up through the Primary School. I was fortunate to benefit from the input of several members of my extended family and friends of my parents who taught me many extracurricular skills.

In those days the majority of children went to Sunday School every week and a good proportion went to Church as well. There were only two Sundays a year when we didn't attend. That was when there was Communion on the last Sunday in May and in November. I can't remember what my brothers and I did in November but in May we went for a walk round the Glen and looked for tadpoles in the ditches along the roadside. There was a Seaside Mission which came to Tarbert in the summer. That was great fun and was held in the Templar Hall.

¹ Kale was our staple green vegetable and was also used to supplement the sheep's diet along with turnips. In recent years, I have found it amusing that my Sassanach friends have embraced the humble curly kale, now sold in plastic bags in the supermarkets alongside Mange Tout from Peru and Sugar Snap peas from Kenya. They all rave about its nutritional value and rate it worthy of a place on anyone's dinner plate. I find myself casting my mind back to a muddy, wet and windy field in a dreich landscape where bedraggled sheep munch solemnly on lumps of kale and chewed over turnips. (Known as swedes to our neighbours south of the border and most commonly sourced in Devon)



Having left Tarbert to go to a school outside of the village, Mary now lives in Rutland, by co-incidence only a few miles from myself. At present, she is overseeing the renovation of her family home in Tarbert, 'Sunnygraig', which she intends to use as a holiday home for her own family.