

Mary Anning's House Mouse

Once upon a time I shared this house by the beach with a famous lady.

It was our little game. I knew better than to loiter when Famous Lady was around, especially in the kitchen where the food was. But, every time she swept the floor, she made sure to scatter tasty crumbs under the dresser where I could find them. Ever so kind!

And Famous Ladies don't keep cats, so I got off lightly there too. I still sleep downstairs, here in the cellar. Even though there's been no privacy since she turned the place into a shop. Strangers swapping copper coins for those little boxes of queer shaped rocks and pebbles. All of them useless things you can't eat or make a nest with.

That's when they started calling her Famous, the Great Hunter of Fossils. Creatures long since dead, aren't they? Where's the fun in that?

Then one morning, while [*Famous Lady's maid*] was asleep, old men with tall black hats and moustaches came and put *her* in a box and carried it away. Without even paying!

Next thing I know the whole house has been emptied, all the food and cushions gone, all the taps and pipes ripped out. How's a mouse meant to live with no tank in the attic to drink from? And it's perishing cold.

Today's been worst of all. Monster rumblings and clatterings and smashings, musclebound men gone mad pounding at the walls and floors with great big hammers. Till it all tumbles down on my head. Then they stop, let out a cheer, and wander off into town laughing and chatting to each other. I squeak and shriek but nobody hears. Or cares. Not like Famous Lady before the fossil craze took over.

Question is, who's to come hunting for me?

Jurassic Irony

Fossil fuels are out of fashion

– compressed carbon, loathed with passion

for the damage that it does to the Nature Mary loved

Anning's ghost might find fantastic

her house modelled here in plastic

– compressed oil, Ocean's blight, if left to drift or set alight

My Bridport view is of the Community Orchard and Allotments – and across the River Brit a three storey line of cramped and nameless flats. An outdoor workshop with Sarah in 2019 inspired this piece.

Nominal

Under the gaze of Skilling Hill slums
rare apples ripen on protected land
Pensioners play while their lap dogs chat
– an orchard for “community” where Skilling never comes
(other than to walk across to minimum wage jobs that keep this town on its feet)

And this scenario reminds me of a formative childhood haunt.



Haves and huddlers



At the western city boundary of Newcastle upon Tyne stands what's left of a Georgian manor house, its tied cottages, stables and other outbuildings.

In the 1930s Mount Pleasant was rechristened Heddon Hall to make it fit for a baronet's daughter and her children. Among them my high church father, who stayed till it was time to marry. And when he died it became my home from home too.

Every summer a fête sprawled across the lawns, with tombola, lucky dip, jumble and cake stalls to help prop up the church tower or overhaul the organ. I ran a bookstall in the Morning Room, where after breakfast my aunt liked to sit and do her tapestry, musing aloud on how bullying is all in a child's mind. And, come evening, folk from the village would tip their hats in affectionate reverence, dropping their last few coppers onto the brass platter at the gate: “See you in church Mrs B!”

The task of containing the dry rot she shared with her son, one of three handsome cousins I once played hide and seek with among those wise old trees. The bachelor Army commander in Bosnia and later in Iraq, he turned down a knighthood rather than be seen to be rewarded for his role in an unpopular war. Courted by the Tories to be their local Police Commissioner, he was tempted to use the office just to shut it down, but eventually declined the offer. I shan't forget the hapless woodcock he brought home from a shooting party to be stuffed, mounted and displayed as the dining table centrepiece. His blue eyed balding 1950s teddy bear sits by me as I write.

What else shall I remember?

- specimen roses frolicking round their very own walled garden
- a tennis court long since reclaimed by wild grasses, blossom and bees
- the bats that flew into my spartan guest bedroom at dusk, bringing me to the window to look out on 100 acres of farmland sloping down to the river – and on the far bank a long low terrace of tiny workers' cottages, their blackened chimneys billowing coalsmoke...