

Derbyshire based 99 year old Sarah Jane Hughes, a star of the Co. Down talks, to Gerry Molumby



MAIN PICTURE: Sarah Jane Hughes at her home in Alfreton, Derbyshire.

When you sit down with someone living their 99th year of life you ensure you have access to plenty of refreshments, as this is going to be a long chat. I had met Sarah Jane Hughes (known as Jane or by family as 'Jess') before; most recently at this year's Nottingham St. Patrick's Parade, and had heard glowing affirmations about her from main carer and grand-daughter Debs.



27: Tony Baker, Patrick Fleming, Deborah Hughes (Sarah's grand-daughter and carer). Seated proudly 99 year old Sarah Jane Hughes from Co. Down.

Jane said many things during our conversation but when I asked her impressions of coming to London after the 2nd World War, at the age of 28, she described it thus *"When I walked the streets of Brixton I cried for London. Tears poured from my eyes as coming from near the mountains of Mourne, I had never been able to imagine such destruction, yes I cried for London"*. Jane born 5 days before the end of World War 1, and today when we are overwhelmed by imagery constantly I understood how the trauma left by the Blitz of London most have affected her mind's eye. Jane cherishes a new photo album neatly collated by her son Adrian which contains the black and white pictures of the milestones in her life. For most of Jane's life photographic images were often mail posted between families from Britain to Ireland, often having to save up and go to a studio to have them taken? We are in an era of immediate Skype and selfies but Jane lived often for years with visual and vocal separation from her family in Ireland but accepted it as normal.

The dust and stench had hardly settled on the fields of Flanders, when in a warm cot in the village of Crossgar, Co Down was placed the third born to Mary Daigan and Robert Patrick McClements, Sarah Jane Hughes. She told me *laughingly "my parents were small farmers, with milk from the cows, and eggs from the chickens to keep us busy baking bread"*.

Sarah regaled about picking bilberries for the neighbours to make wine and I was immediately transposed to the rural Donegal of Brian Friel's *Dancing at Lughnasa*. Educated at the Nazareth House Convent in nearby Belfast Jane secured a good foundation education which served her well in life's opportunities. So at the age of sixteen she was expected to fend for herself and set off to work in one of Belfast's

many shirt factories. Here she attended night school to accomplish qualifications in bookkeeping, shorthand and typing.

Dark clouds were again hovering over Europe and World War 2 was pending. Jane had the opportunity of shelter back home in Crossgar on occasion but remembers the American soldiers in Northern Ireland and was able to mimic them by remembering them saying "Got any gum chum". Jane told me that during and after the war the Department of Employment decided where you want to work. As I had qualifications in book-keeping, so in 1946 I came to Brixton where my sister Anne, husband and five children lived and in 1947 I was sent to work in Lyons Tea shop in Margate"

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Rationing was still in force in Britain and the late forties and fifties were difficult times Jane told me. Jane always had strong family values, so between looking after her nieces and nephews she went dancing a lot in her new city, she met and married a Royal Air Force Warrant Officer James Arthur Hughes, his family called him Tim and his wages was just about enough to pay rent and feed family. Jane confirmed the difficulties of life in England after the war, she told me that in the building boom after the blitz they were allocated a council house in Margate and to pay for things like the TV rental and licence Jane took in families from London who wanted to come to the seaside in the summer. This meant that she offered hotel service while her own children and husband had to make do in front room. Jane also kept working locally in a care home to bring in some extra money needed. She was keen to remind me that there was no government welfare for many years after the war and what was becoming a fledging welfare system was frugal and unlike today frowned upon as a throwback to the charity of the historic workhouse etc.

Independence and self-sufficiency she learned on the farm in Crosscar and has carried on all her life. Jane and Tim had two sons Adrian who has worked over the world in the car interior design trade and Jim a pharmacist and the family moved to Luton, Beds in 1958. In 1976 when Adrian moved to work in Germany his Jane and her husband moved to Nottingham where their son Jim was working in the famous Pharmaceutical Firm Boots. Jane now lives in supported housing but independently in Alfreton, Derbyshire near her niece Debs and partner Tony.

When we met her grand-daughter Debs was very keen to tell me that throughout her life, because of family circumstances that 'Nan' (Jane) "was a mother to me and my children". Nan's son Adrian confirmed this in telling me she was a strong woman and when needed was able to stand up to anyone who was negatively affecting her extended family while still able to be lovingly tactile and for that we are eternally grateful to the 'Star of the County Down'.

