

South Yorkshire, a Serene Setting for a Homecoming

By Darby Patterson

Granddaughter of Frank Darby (Born 1896)

I grew up with my grandfather, a man whom I remember as handsome, sharply funny and almost completely overwhelmed by the two other women in the house – his wife and their daughter, my mother.

Thus, it was natural that I would identify with him, standing strong against the dominating powers of the other females in our tiny house in the Midwest. So, I listened intently to his tales of his childhood in England, how he'd sailed across the ocean at the tender age of 15 and been sick the entire trip from being conscribed to the deck below the waterline that was reserved for the cheapest tickets. And each time he traveled back to England for a vacation, in my imagination I sailed with him and I mourned for the loss of my only friend in the house. At the same time I eagerly awaited his return and the tiny costumed dolls he brought me. I drank in the stories of the places he'd been. Birmingham, Silsden, Wolverhampton, Dudley – all music to my ears.



I was 40-something when I finally made my way to England for the first time, though in my dreams I'd been there repeatedly. Since I didn't know any addresses or full names of relatives on the dozens of old black and white photos I'd lovingly saved, I never met any of his family. It was enough just to be there. In fact, at the end of my first nine hour flight I looked down upon the green island with its dense small forests and meandering roads and waterways and thought, "It's okay if I die now. I see England." I was at peace with a plane crash.

After other trips I finally found family through a genealogy website – genesreunited.com. I posted a plea and a cousin, then two, emailed me. I was, of course, on my way back to England at the first opportunity. Package of photos in hand, heart in my throat, my husband and I went to the southern reaches of Yorkshire County. There I visited streets in towns that hadn't changed for 100 years and I had the old photos to prove it.

Although this niche of England doesn't call legions of tourists, it is nonetheless visually beautiful and filled with charm. This, and the fact that we traveled in off-season November, made the visit to Shipley, Bingley Silsden, and Skipton, - small towns that dance around the Aire Valley and up to the Yorkshire Dales – intensely personal.

We were fortunate indeed that our guide – and my long lost cousin, Malcolm Slater, – was a councillor in the Yorkshire regional council, as was his wife, Val. They guided me to destinations-of-the- heart with warm enthusiasm. In Silsden, where my grandfather was born 1898, we roamed the winding streets of the town centre and plotted out where the missing Number 12 Bridge Street might be. I sat upon the wall of what is now a car park thinking of what was once home to my grandfather. Perhaps it was there that his mother died in childbirth? We snapped photos of pavement.

Up the hill we continued, to find the row of houses on Bolton Road where he'd sat with his grandfather after the death of his mother, Sarah. I had the photo of him in a little sailor suit, a sweet two-year-old, and the old mustachioed man cupping a bent pipe who sat on the doorstep at his side. With the help of an elderly man and constituent of Malcolm's, we found it. We knocked on the door and inside the house was a young couple who insisted we take all the photos we liked.

Back in the town centre we held up my postcard from Grandpa's legacy and compared then and now. Same bridge and buildings; same River Aire spilling over rocks and delighting ducks and children. Only the signs on shops were different and, of course, the cars and people.

So often, when one holds a vision for many years of how a place might be, reality is disappointing. But Silsden was grander than I imagined. Not black and white as in my photos, but crisp autumn colors. Not silent but dancing with music from the stream that runs through the town and with chatter from a new generation of people who call it home.

Meandering roads led us out from Silsden to a nearby village where my cousin walked with purely English fervor through a churchyard skirting the Leeds-Liverpool Canal. The grass was thick and tall, damp. Gravestones old, eroded with time. A wind with a sharp edge picked up and Malcolm called me to a spot near the back of the dark, centuries-old church. There in the late afternoon shadows, he extended his arm and presented me with the gravesite of his grandfather, our common ancestor. We posed for a photo, both holding back tears of gratitude for the gifts of time.

It was, of course, these intensely personal moments that are etched into my memory. But I now also own the beauty of this quiet corner of Yorkshire County with its undulating landscape and many hues of green and gold; Tiny cottages ablaze with flowers even though winter was approaching; grand estates and humble pubs with their painted signs; the smells of heartwarming hot pub food wafting out the open, leaded windows; people who, despite your funny accent, welcome you as an old friend. These are the timeless charms of England and proof to me that, yes, we can go home again.

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Photo: Frank and his grandfather, William Darby, on the steps of his home in Silsden in about 1898.