

## 5 MARY NEAL STORIES

### 1. MARY NEAL COMES TO LONDON.

Once upon a time there was a girl called Clara Sophia. Born in England in 1860 in the reign of Queen Victoria, she lived in the city of Birmingham. Her father ran a button factory and they had a house, a horse and carriage and 2 maids. She had 2 younger brothers, Arthur and Theodore, a mother called Sarah Anne, who was always well-dressed, and many pets: cats, dogs, doves, guinea pigs and rabbits.

She was quite a tomboy and didn't like having her hair tied up in ribbons and having to wear skirts and pretty dresses. She played outside in the street with her brothers and they often got into trouble.

As she grew up she became aware of some of the injustices of life. One day she was lying in bed with a very bad headache - called a migraine – and she learnt that the maid who brought a tray of food and drink to her room also had a migraine. She thought it was unfair that she could lie in bed and the maid had to go on working. She also thought it was unfair that her brothers were allowed to go and out and get jobs and learn about the world and she, just because she was a girl, had to stay at home arranging flowers and sewing embroidery. She got cross and bored and decided she wanted to do something with her life.

In 1888, she read a book called *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London*. It described conditions of the working classes in London, the poor quality of sanitation and housing, the lack of jobs and often the lack of food. She resolved to travel to London to see if she could help and found a place to stay in the West London Mission, a group of Christian women, called 'sisters of mercy' who lived and worked together to serve the poor. It was based near Kings Cross, where there were still stables for the carriage horses, cows milked each day, hay markets and 3 major railway stations newly built. Clara took the name of 'Sister Mary'.

At first she was lonely but after a few years she met someone who became her best friend for the rest of her life: Emmeline Pethick. Together they came up with grand ideas about how they were going to change the world and create more just conditions for people who were born into poverty. They saw how tired and cold and hungry people of the area were, particularly the children, and wanted to make their lives more bearable. They took them to the sea-side on holidays to see the sea for the first time; to see cows in fields and walk through woods. After a few years doing this they started an evening Club in 1895 called the *Espérance Club* in Somerstown. *Espérance* is French for hope. Most of the young people who came to the Club were girls who worked in the sewing trade, making shirts, dresses and smart suits for rich people. Aged between 14 and 20, they brought their younger brothers and sisters along too, some as little as 2 years' old. They played games and taught acting, singing and dancing in the Club which made the young people feel more creative, happier and full of life. It gave them courage and hope that life could get better for them.

## 2. THE ESPERANCE CLUB IN SOMERSTOWN, LONDON

The Espérance Club for acting, singing and dancing for the children was based in Cumberland Market, London, where the hay was sold for the stables. Between 1895 and 1914, children joined in from all over nearby Somerstown. Many of their parents worked in the Sewing Trade and when they were old enough so did the children. The work was hard, sewing collars or sleeves or buttons onto clothes for rich people. They sat stooped with bent backs over their sewing all day long in hot stuffy rooms. They could earn a £1 a week, sometimes less.

After work, they went to the Espérance Club to meet their friends and have some fun singing and learning new dances and games. The Club met 4 times a week and became very popular. Older girls looked after the smaller children and sometimes made lemonade for them on a hot day to keep them cheerful. Parties were held parties and special guests invited to see what they'd learnt – important people, politicians, poets and friends of Mary and Emmeline who were also Suffragettes campaigning for women and workers' rights. In 1905, after singing Irish and Scottish songs, Mary decided to find some English songs. She went to visit a song collector called Cecil Sharp who gave her 4 songs he'd collected. They were called Seeds of Love, Lord Rendal, Blow Away The Morning Dew, and Mowing The Barley. The girls learnt the songs quickly and wanted to learn more. Mary decided to try English Dancing too. Cecil said he didn't know any dances, but he did know the name of a dancer he had seen once in Oxford, called William Kimber. Mary went to see Mr Kimber and invited him to London with his cousin Jo to teach English dances to the girls. They learnt by heart Bean-Setting, Constant Billy and Shepherd's Hey, and soon a few became very good teachers. They performed in public at the Queen's Hall and wore bells on their ankles. People clapped and wrote about them in the papers. They were city girls but picked up folk dancing as if they had lived in the country all their lives. Their families could have travelled from the country to the city not long before.

Soon Mary received invitations for them to travel all over Britain to towns and villages in Hampshire, Cumbria, Oxfordshire, Wales, Sussex and Kent. The girls travelled by bus and train and were welcomed into the homes of country people who enjoyed meeting and hearing stories of the city. The girls were well-behaved and earned money for their teaching. Traditional dancers and musicians also travelled to London to continue teaching more songs and dances. Between 1906 and 1914, the girls learnt many dances. The song collector, Cecil Sharp became a collaborator of Mary Neal and helped write down the dance steps so that others could learn them as well. Florrie Warren was the first girl to help him write the steps down. All this work contributed to The English Folk Song and Dance Revival. Cecil later disagreed with Mary about whether dancing could be learnt by heart properly or whether it had to be written down. They had a big bust up over it and got cross with each other. Although the songs and dances were very old, the Espérance Girls helped refresh people's interest in them and show how special they were and what fun they could be. It didn't stop them dancing.



### 3. BLANCHE PAYLING AND CHILDREN FROM THE SWEETIE FACTORY

One of the Espérance girls was called Blanche Payling. She had a brother and 2 sisters, and she lived in Glen St right on the corner of Cumberland Market. Her father William was a tailor. In January 1911 when she was 18, Mary asked if she would go to Thaxted in Essex where the Vicar Conrad Noel and his wife Miriam wanted her to teach the children of the town, some of whom aged 13 and over worked in Lee's Sweetie Factory. They worked a 10 hour day for 5 and a half day's, box making, chocolate dipping and sweet weighing for around 10/- a week.

Blanche went on her own and taught the children 3 classes a day. She went again later in the year with Mary Neal and, in July, on Walnut Tree Meadow, 60 children danced the dances she had taught at the Thaxted Summer Flower Show. Some of the residents of Thaxted today are descended from those 60 children and can tell the stories of how the Morris Revival came to Thaxted. There is still a 'side' of Morris dancers in Thaxted today. There are no children and no women, they are all men! Blanche was asked to write an article in the local paper called The Country Town and this is what she said: 'Some people complain that Morris dancing is heavy compared with other forms of the art, but they can never have seen it properly performed...Some of the traditional performers dance with straight knees, others from other villages bend the knee; some never put the foot out at the back; others disregard this, but the traditional dancers have always plenty of spring and lightness about them.'

Mary Neal was very proud of Blanche and other girls like her. In a small book called Set To Music (dedicated to her collaborator, 'C#') she wrote: "It is no small thing for a little London dressmaker to stay in the house, as an honoured guest, of a country squire, and ride in his motor car and write letters home at his study table, and feel at the same time that she too has something to give."

In 1993, a festival organiser called Lucy Neal who ran a London event which invited artists and performers from around the world to come to London and present their shows, discovered she was related to Mary Neal. She was her great great niece. She was given a book written by Mary Neal herself, her autobiography, which told the stories of how The Espérance Club got started, and the success girls like Blanche Payling had had earning money as teachers, so they wouldn't always have to work as cleaners or sewing girls and could get a better education. Lucy became very interested in finding out more about Mary and the girls. She walked around Somerstown and looked at all the places where they had lived and worked. Mary had lived just off the Euston Road. When she learnt that nearly 100 years later people in Thaxted carried on the tradition of Morris dancing, she wondered what had happened to the teacher Blanche Payling. By looking in libraries, researching on the internet and talking to people, she learnt that Blanche had got married in 1921 in Hammersmith. It is possible she had children who could still be alive. Where do you think they could be?



#### 4. FLORRIE WARREN GOES TO AMERICA. HER DAUGHTER COMES TO LONDON

Another of The Espérance girls who was an excellent dancer and teacher was called Florrie Warren. She learnt dances quickly and was able to teach them to other children very successfully. In December 1910 Mary Neal accepted an invitation to travel to America to tell people about the Morris Revival that was underway in England. She agreed to do this but asked if she could take Florrie Warren with her to demonstrate the dances. Florrie was 18. Together they sailed to New York. It was so cold the boat was covered in icicles and there was a blizzard in New York and the streets were deep in snow. They gave lectures and performances and Florrie was considered a great star. She was asked to dance at Carnegie Hall, one of New York's most famous theatres. When they travelled up to Boston, they were welcomed with a tea party after the show and here Florrie met a man called Arthur Brown who was a young lawyer. He thought she was beautiful and funny and a very good dancer and he fell in love with her.

3 months later it was time for Mary and Florrie to sail back to England. They boarded the ship to sail, and just before the boat left the port Arthur jumped on board and asked Florrie to marry him. She said yes and they both jumped off. Mary sailed to England on her own, and on Valentine's Day the next year, Florrie and Arthur got married. They were happily married and had 3 little girls called Cicely, Dorothy and Vida. When they had been married for 25 years they celebrated by travelling to England to see their old friends Mary Neal and Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence and went to a big dancing party at Mary's house.

Florrie's children, Cicely and Vida are still alive today. They are 95 and 86. Vida became a very good dancer herself. She travelled the world with a famous Russian ballet dancer and choreographer George Balanchine who left Russia to start The New York City Ballet. Vida, like her mother Florrie, was very quick to learn new dances and could learn a whole ballet in a day. She became Mr Balanchine's teacher of ballet and was responsible for teaching dancers the new ballets. Once she learnt and taught 3 new ballets in a week. She loved dancing.

This summer, Lucy Neal travelled to New York to meet Vida Brown and they spent 3 days together talking about the things Mary Neal and Florrie Warren had done. Vida did not know that Florrie's work had been so important as part of the English Morris Revival and was very proud to learn about her mother. She would like to find out more and may be able to come to London next year to see where her mother lived and worked. Although she has lived in America all her life, and travelled all over the world, she realises she is half English.

## 5. MARY NEAL WORKS TO HELP FAMILIES IN TROUBLE WITH THE LAW

From an early age, Mary was concerned with social injustice. She wanted laws that were fair to everybody and she believed that sometimes the law could be very unfair to people that were poor. She became active in politics to improve conditions of work for workers in Britain and she was particularly concerned about children who suffered when one of their parents was put in prison for stealing or being drunk or getting into trouble with the law.

One day she heard that a woman had been put into Holloway prison for locking her 3 children into a cupboard under the stairs and leaving them there. She wondered why a mother would do this and decided to visit the woman in prison and ask her side of the story. When she listened to the mother's version of what had happened she insisted the woman's case be heard again in court. In court she asked the policeman who found the children in the cupboard under the stairs which side of the door the key had been found on. The policeman had to admit that the eldest boy had the key on the inside of the door and was staying there for safety whilst the mother had gone to get some help and some food. The father had been a very drunk man and had been hurting them and they were frightened of him. Mary was able to get the court to let the mother out of prison and be returned to her children. The father was the one who was then sent to prison and the mother went back to work to earn money to feed her children.

Mary's work with the Espérance Club finished when the 1st World War broke out in Europe. The boys had to go and help with the war and the girls were called into factories and to help out also. Mary moved to The Isle of Dogs in the East End of London to help poor families there. When the war finished she moved to Littlehampton by the sea-side to have a rest but she never had one as she was given 2 children to adopt, Anthony and David. They had a dog called Jimmie. In Littlehampton she worked as a Justice of The Peace, listening to many court cases of children who got into trouble with the law, like a country judge. She made sure that their stories were listened to very carefully to make sure that none of them suffered unjustly because they were poor. She thought it would be better if they could go to school and be properly fed and looked after safely, like all children need to be. She wanted children to be able to enjoy their childhoods and was always glad if they learnt to sing and dance because she knew this made them feel alive and happy. She got on well with children even though she had not had a very happy childhood herself. She understood them and loved them. She did not have children of her own. At 77 she got given a 'CBE' medal.

Mary lived a long life and went to live for the last 4 years of her life with her best friend Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence. She could be very funny, quite bossy but was always fun to be around. She loved pine trees and nature and beautiful things and believed people were happy when they felt a part of the rhythm of the universe. She loved dancing and music especially because she thought they were sacred and connected people to the spirit of life. She died peacefully at 84.