

Fergus Byrne met Jan Thorne in Bridport, Dorset

*Jan Thorne © Photograph by Robin Mills*

I was born in Eglinton, County Londonderry, Northern Ireland, in 1953 and am one of four siblings, with only six years between us. Dad was in the Royal Navy, which he had joined at 16. We moved several times in my younger years and didn't have the best accommodation because he wasn't an officer. I have memories of mice running around my feet in one home that had an outside toilet, eek! A posting to Malta was lovely and a great place to learn to swim. When we returned to the UK from there, it was to Culdrose, Helston, and that's where he finished after 21 years' service.

My secondary school education was at Helston Grammar, from where I went on to train as a secondary school PE teacher. I had already met my to-be husband, Chris, at the same grammar school. When we graduated in 1974 he got a job in Bridport at Colfox School as a woodwork teacher, and so I stayed in the area, not in teaching but at the amazing Beaminster store called Pines, now the NFU office. Although we were engaged, times were such that we rented separate accommodation. Chris had a caravan in Pymore, and I had a little flat in Beaminster, so that it did not look as if we were living together. We put an end to this farce by getting married on 21st December 1974.

I worked at Pines until our first child was born in 1977. That also coincided with when we bought our first home, a 2-bed cottage in Middle St, Bradpole. With no maternity pay, etc, it was a case of working from home, which is when I did sewing

for Humon Beings, (named after Hugh and Monique), sold tupperware and had a little stall in town, selling cakes, etc.

We have lived in Bradpole ever since, moving up to the top of the village to a larger cottage with a big garden when our third child was born. It's a lovely leafy area of Bridport where our children spent many happy hours playing in fields and in the river at Happy Island.

I've only ever worked part-time. I started helping out at our children's school which was voluntary, doing their PE, and then when the Leisure Centre opened in 1986, myself and another PE trained mum, Jane, were asked if we would run Gym Tots. They had lots of Artistic gym equipment and had no idea what to do with it. We had great fun making it up as we went along.

Within a few years, we were running classes for all age groups, including adults, and some of you may remember seeing some of the children at fetes doing gymnastics displays, or perhaps were one of them! Hard work but great fun. Teaching gymnastics in several of the local primary schools and further afield for Dorset Council followed.

My husband Chris, and children Duncan, Alison and Andrew have always enjoyed sport. One which I never knew about whilst living in Cornwall was Cornish Pilot Gig Rowing. I had a go in 2011 when Bridport Gig Club had not long been established, and have been a member ever since, training as a Coxwain and holding the post of General Rowing Captain for several years. I love it. Every time you row out of the harbour at West Bay it is magical.

I am also interested in wild gardening. In 2017, a neighbour, Rose, and I approached the parish council offering our time to plant bulbs, etc. They were supportive, and the group Let's Get Bradpole Buzzing finally got going in 2019. There are six areas where we do two hours work every 10 days. We don't maintain them, we just focus on improving biodiversity. It's fun, and the parish council has provided us with a shed, loads of tools and money each year to buy bulbs and seeds. So, it's worked out well for them, us, the residents of Bradpole and most importantly, the pollinators.

During our children's school years, I was always involved with the Parents and Friends associations, helping to raise funds for extra activities or equipment. One memory that will always make me smile is creating a float for the Colfox School entry into the Carnival. It was called West Bay Watch with the good looking students suitably oiled on the float whilst several Mums trailed behind in our swimming costumes with our heads poking out of a very large piece of blue plastic.

When the Ukraine war broke out, I volunteered along with lots of others to pack donated supplies, which were sent to Ukraine. This was organised by Claire Nuttall and Jane Wain. However, a lot of the donations could not be sent, things like summer clothing and bedding. When the initiative ended, thousands of pounds were raised by selling some of the items.

A group headed by myself asked if we could use what was

left to set up a 'shop' for the Ukrainian refugees who we knew were heading to West Dorset.

We had no income, but Martin Ridley kindly let us have premises on St Michael's Trading Estate free of charge, as did Palmers, who let us have premises at The White Hart Yard in Beaminster rent-free. The Bridport Round Table bought shop fittings too, so we were able to support the incoming Ukrainian refugees. We created a lovely space where folk could pick up items they needed without having to open their purse. Everything was donated and then given away free of charge.

Our Community group was first named Bridport Clothes Bank 4 Ukraine. We still count a lot of the Ukrainian refugees as part of our 'customer' base, but have evolved and now support anyone struggling to make ends meet under the title Bridport Clothes Bank. We take cars filled with clothes, shoes, bedding, household goods, books and toys to outreach spaces weekly at St Mary's Church, St Swithuns Church Hall in Bridport and twice a month to The Community Centre in Beaminster. On the first Saturday of each month, we fill the BYCC Hall with as much of our stock as we can, giving it all away for free, which leaves space on the shelves for the new donations. Details of where we can be found plus where donations can be left are on our Facebook page and soon to be up and running website.

In May this year we moved into a 500sq ft unit at the Bridport Youth and Community Centre. The manager and Trustees have been hugely supportive in helping us turn what was a dark and dirty ex car workshop into a bright and airy space where volunteers sort and pack.

The move to bigger premises could not have come at a better time. The increase in the number of uplifts shows the increased volume of clothing and other goods that our great team of volunteers need to process.

Alongside coordinating the Clothes Bank two years ago, I was drawn into supporting folk setting up home. One day, someone offered the Clothes Bank a free sofa. We displayed a photo, and it was requested and delivered to a flat. When the volunteer returned, he said the family had nothing else—no beds, no bedding, furniture, or kitchen equipment. Through the marvel of social media we were able to source the things they needed. Since then, a small group has helped 55 folk, mainly families set up homes. It is not something that we can sustain, but I do hope that one day Bridport will have a space where people can choose and have delivered household items for free.

My family continues to grow with four grandsons and two granddaughters, as well as a great-granddaughter aged three. I've helped out where I could over the years and am still going. My husband and I look after our great-granddaughter every Tuesday for the day. Being a grandparent is a special joy. I have no yen to live anywhere else. West Dorset and Bridport suit me perfectly. There are so many activities to choose from, and if support is needed, it can be found.