

Fergus Byrne met Margery Hookings in Broadwindsor



Margery Hookings © Photograph by Robin Mills

I was born in the sitting room at Park Farm in Donyatt, where my parents had a tenant farm. It was part of the Somerset County Council smallholding scheme. Both my grandfathers were soldiers in the First World War and benefited from the 'Land fit for Heroes' initiative. The village of Donyatt was unique: the council had bought the entire village, including farms, the pub, the school, and even the living of the church. My father took over the farm after my grandfather.

It was a dairy farm with about 20 cows. My mother was very imaginative and well-read, and she would choose themes for naming the cows, ranging from exotic flowers like Bougainvillea and Hibiscus to Native American tribes and even characters from *I, Claudius*. I had a wonderful upbringing, and I remember riding one of the cows, which was quite boringly named *Fillpail*. My mother died last year at the age of 99 and left behind a treasure trove of family history, including a breed book detailing the cows we owned. She had been deeply involved in village life, organising events like village fêtes and participating in local groups. Her passion for local history and family stories inspired my own interest in storytelling.

I was the youngest of five, four girls and a boy. The story goes that my dad was milking when I was born, and when the nurse told him it was another girl, he just turned around and went right back to the cowstalls. I always felt like I needed to

Margery Hookings

prove myself, because I think he was probably hoping for a second boy. I went to the local primary school, where there was one teacher, Mrs Lock, and 19 pupils. Although I passed the 11 Plus, the Grammar school at Ilminster was closed, so I went to Holyrood Comprehensive in Chard.

So, going from this idyllic “Laurie Lee” country bumpkin existence to a school of well over 1,000 was a big shock. I was very conscious that all my siblings were quite clever and had done well. There were three teachers and a nurse-midwife.

I didn't like school very much, and when I was 15 and due to sit my biology O-level, I had a baby, my daughter Amy. I kind of kept it secret until the last minute. Although I feared my parents' reaction, they were incredibly supportive, especially my mother. After Amy was born, I re-sat my O-levels and later completed A-levels in the sixth-form, the only part of my schooling I actually enjoyed. Mum cared for Amy during the day and I took over in the evenings.

I'd always wanted to be a journalist. I loved writing and was fascinated by people's stories and local knowledge. My mother used to be the village correspondent for the *Chard & Ilminster News*. I applied to numerous journalism training programmes and was eventually taken on by Mirror Group Newspapers in Plymouth. It was a mix of on-the-job training and classroom learning, and I worked alongside some remarkable people, including Alistair Campbell, Sarah Bosley, who became Health Editor at the Guardian, and David Wastell, the political editor of the Sunday Telegraph and foreign editor at The Independent and Telegraph.

After qualifying, I took a job at the *Bridport News*. Although I didn't know Bridport well, I quickly fell in love with it and have lived around here ever since. My parents continued to support me, and Amy eventually joined me. I covered everything from court reporting to council meetings, and I cherished the opportunity to get to know the community. We printed everything on carbon copied paper in those days and would send the copy off to the printer by bus. It's so sad that real local newspapers are failing.

After a few years at the *Bridport News*, I moved to the *Dorset Evening Echo* as a district reporter. In the meantime, I had had my son Aaron, and when the news teams merged and the industry became more corporate, I decided it was time for a change.

I joined Magna Housing Association in Dorchester as their public relations officer, and after that, ran the Half Moon pub in Melplash for three years with my new partner, Andrew. When my father found out we were going to run a pub, he said, “You're mad, that's worse than farming.” But it was great. We hosted music events, including a mini-folk festival and a jazz festival, which were great fun. There was a strong music scene in the area in those days, and my family has always had a love for music. My uncle George Withers, a Somerset farmer, was well-known for his folk singing.

After leaving the pub, I returned to the *Bridport News* as a reporter and later became the editor. This was one of the

best jobs I've ever had. We had a great team. I loved being able to record what was going on in the local community. We ran important campaigns, such as fighting to keep Mountjoy School open and supporting the Woodland Trust's purchase of part of Allington Hill. We had to report on tragic stories, too, but we also had amusing times. I launched the ‘Find Fido’ section, where we hid a photograph of Fido May, a well-known local character, in the paper. We also launched the *Bridport News* around the World, where people sent in photographs of themselves reading the paper in different countries. However, as the newspaper industry continued to change, I decided to leave it completely in 2004.

I got a job with the North Dorset Primary Care Trust and did an Open University degree in Humanities with a focus on Creative Writing while balancing work and childcare for my granddaughter. I loved the course and discovered a passion for creative writing.

In 2008, I started a blog under the pseudonym Maddie Grigg, writing about life in an anonymous English village, which I called *The Enchanted Village* and then *Lush Places* after William Boot's fictional newspaper column in the satirical novel, *Scoop*. I was eventually unmasked locally as the writer, but the blog caught the attention of the editor of the *People's Friend* magazine, who invited me to become a weekly columnist in 2015.

After leaving the Primary Care Trust, Andrew and I decided to fulfil our dream of living in Greece, so we rented out our home in West Dorset and moved to Corfu. We lived in a small village, where we rented a house to do up from the Tennant family and immersed ourselves in the local culture. I wrote a book about our year in Corfu, which has been well-received. Although I loved the experience, I missed my family and the sense of community back home, so we eventually returned.

Back in Dorset, I took on various freelance projects, including PR work for the Electric Palace and Bridport Literary Festival. I also completed an MA in Creative Writing during the COVID-19 pandemic, and during lockdowns, I started a daily music event called *The Sound of Music from the Square Window*, where I played songs from my window overlooking the square in Broadwindsor. It was a shared experience during a difficult time, which people enjoyed.

I also worked with Farm Radio and have been involved with Windrose Rural Media Trust since 2005. I've just completed a project called *Born & Bred: Stories of Then and Now in Broadwindsor, Dorset*.

While I've got quite a few future projects to work on with Windrose, I'm also looking at something that came up when I got a message out of the blue from someone in Nova Scotia who told me I was related to Ernest Hemingway. I've always resisted Hemingway because I don't like him as a person, but I've got to overcome that because it turns out to be an interesting story which I think might take me a while to research and write. 