JOYCE MOLYNEUX AND THE CARVED ANGEL RESTAURANT, DARTMOUTH

Tom Jaine

It is 50 years, less one month, since I came to Dartmouth to start work on the renovation of the building in which we sit.

South Embankment dates from 1888. Before that, the river washed the back yards of the properties on the east side of Fairfax Place. Once the embankment was completed, properties in Fairfax place had their rights extended to the new river frontage. A memory of this survives in the fact that the mains drainage from the property which most recently was Kendricks Restaurant snakes beneath the intervening buildings to join the main sewer on South Embankment. There were hairy moments when waste from the previous occupant of the Fairfax Place building blocked the drains in no uncertain fashion – not, it must be admitted, during actual service at dinnertime.

The building that was Kendricks started out in life as the home of Robert Cranford, stationer, printer and founder of the Dartmouth Chronicle, which was printed in his back yard. His building incorporated much material rescued from the demolitions in Lower Street, towards Bayard's Cove – much as did Newcomen Cottage, overlooking Coronation Park – and indeed as did this building (in minor key) which boasted a 17th century chimneypiece on the first floor. This was removed and cast in a skip after its dreadful replacement in full Cotswold style was installed in the 1960s. Colonel and Mrs Webb, the parents of the publisher Richard Webb, found it in that skip and were able to rescue it for installation in their new house being built for them on Warfleet Creek.

York House, the large mock Tudor building on the corner of South Embankment and the Quay, was built in 1894. Its style echoed that of the new buildings being erected in Fairfax Place, including Cranford's the stationer. No 2, this building, was put up at the same time. Always much lower, with a flat roof. It was always a retail business, beginning as a photographer's (or possibly a leather goods shop – both certainly existed in the early years). Before its conversion into a restaurant in the early 1960s, it had been split into two lengthwise. One door led to a shop, the other to the Western Bus Company's office and waiting room. There remains, behind many layers of kitchen fittings, a safe where the employees stashed the day's takings (built into a former grate).

The origins of the Carved Angel, as the new restaurant was to be called, lay in Bath, at a restaurant called the Hole in the Wall that was run by my step-father George Perry-Smith between 1951/2 and 1972. In the last year or two of his ownership, he had taken two women into business partnership: his later-wife Heather Crosbie and his principal chef, Joyce Molyneux. Joyce had worked at the Hole since 1959, Heather for a little longer. When the restaurant was sold, there was a tax burden that could only be avoided if the enterprise was rolled over into a new business. Various schemes were considered, but they eventually settled on buying a small restaurant in the village of Helford in Cornwall. The only drawback was that the forecast revenue might not be sufficient for the three partners so it was proposed that a second business be purchased and it was opportune for me that I joined the group at that time so that an

even split of labour might be arranged: George and Heather in Cornwall, Joyce and myself in Dartmouth.

The business we bought in Dartmouth was already a restaurant. Its name was Glenies, named for its founders in the early 1960s, a couple called Glenie who were at that point the popular landlords of the Victoria Hotel, now Browns, in Victoria Road. The Glenies made a great success of their restaurant, cooking Dover sole, salmon and lobster with gay abandon at fine prices for visiting yachtsmen. Later Prime Minister Edward Heath had been seen happily dining there. At the turn of the new decade, the Glenies opted for retirement in Spain and sold their business to a young couple called Chaplin. Their tenure was not so successful, hence it being on the market in 1973.

The décor and condition of the place was not what we would have wanted, resulting in a thorough refit. The end product had little connection with what went before. The dining room was modern, light and spare (some might then have said too spare); the kitchen was well planned, capable of coping with all scales of business, thoroughly ventilated (an important, yet difficult to achieve, point), and – most important of all – was entirely open to the view of the diners – entirely open, right down to the ground. Joyce responded to this situation with aplomb. She had already been used to an open kitchen at the Hole in the Wall (one of the first, I would contend, in Britain) and her method of working was so calm and quiet that no diner would be alarmed by shouting, argument or bangs and clatters (the washing up was undertaken behind closed doors to one side). This construction work was finished by the summer and the first meals were served to all the builders and tradespeople involved on 3 July 1974.

A word on why the Carved Angel was so called. When we bought the premises, we evidently could not continue to call it Glenies. We hunted for an historical topographical name, but since the place was built on land reclaimed from the river, there was none. A book that I enjoyed was a study by Ambrose Heal (of the furniture shop) on London tradesmen's cards of the 18th century. In those days before the numbering of streets, tradesmen did business from a rich array of signs and identifiers: 'At the sign of the Green Artichoke' and suchlike. One that caught my eye was 'At the Sign of the Carved Angel' and I put it to my partners. By happy coincidence, a friend of Heather Crosbie, called Bill Haynes, had turned to wood carving in his retirement in Ashdown Forest. He accepted with enthusiasm the project of carving an angel: it turned out to be a handsome but forbidding Archangel Michael. I thought of installing it as a ship's figurehead on the façade of the building but retreated from that in view of practical difficulties; so he took up residence on his bracket in the middle of the restaurant. Eventually, the new owner after Joyce's tenure had ended, sold off the entirety of fixtures and fittings (to their eternal shame) and the Angel was bought at auction by a former wine-merchant supplier of ours. This anecdote should be taken as the gospel, against the current story, disseminated by the present manufacturers of Carved Angel Christmas Puddings, that Joyce named it the Carved Angel because she was presented with a handsome carving of an angel by a local carpenter.

The menu that was offered the townspeople of Dartmouth was at first modelled on that which obtained in the Hole in the Wall. Firstly, the style of cooking: the easy shorthand was Elizabeth David, whose books had appeared throughout the life of the Hole, and whose philosophy very much coincided with that of George Perry-Smith. A longer analysis might have likened this style to that of right-thinking middle-class people who

had embraced the charms of French and Mediterranean lifestyle and cookery in the postwar years. It was supercharged good dinner party food, cooked with enthusiasm, robust flavours and style. It was not the by now attenuated haute cuisine model that had been denatured and rationed out of existence by most British commercial cooks (with the exception, perhaps, of the very best hotel kitchens).

A problem with this first menu was it was predicated on a level of business that Dartmouth could not supply. We had thought the presence of the Naval College, the steady surge of summer visitors and support from second-homers would provide ample numbers of customers. We also inferred, wrongly, that the presence of four bank branches, the existence of national chains such as Woolworths and Boots, the survival of elite brands such as Gieves the men's outfitters, and the apparent success of thriving local shops such as Cundell's the grocers, Batterbees the ironmongers and Hawkes the builders' merchants meant the level of trade was very high. In point of fact, we did very badly in the first few years of our existence. There were regular winter nights when we had no customers at all; it was barely ever worthwhile opening for lunch; and a time when Dartmouth was cut off from the outside world by heavy snowfall, we had no more than ten clients during the whole of one week. So much for local support.
The consequence was that we thereafter offered a much shorter menu, changing daily, although the style of dishes remained the same. Lunchtime opening was something that varied over the years, not becoming a regular or constant feature until 1980 or thereabouts.

A word on those quiet winter nights. Of course, we were all present and needed to be kept occupied. It helped that Joyce had had such sound training not just in restaurant cooking but also domestic science or, to use an earlier word, housewifery. She was able to think up and direct the creation of jams, marmalades, Christmas puddings, quince pastes for eating with cheese, and a host of other things. This was the foundation of our expedition to France in the autumn of 1976 when we were able to benefit from an initiative of the Devon County Council to take a collective stand at the agricultural fair in Caen, chief town of Devon's twin authority in Normandy, Calvados. We set off with a van loaded with Christmas puddings, fruit cakes, a host of jams and Cheddar cheese from the Waldegrave estate in Somerset and Quicke's in Exeter. By and large, the expedition was a success and we undertook it for three years. It was also the foundation of the Christmas pudding business, which continues to this today in the hands of third parties. We began selling them principally through the London shop David Mellor, in Sloane Square. The recipe for these puddings was that first laid out by the Victorian writer Eliza Acton. It was a lighter pudding than many, fruitier, more sophisticated.

Joyce's career until this point can be laid out thus: she was born in 1931 in Handsworth, a suburb of Birmingham, the middle child of William Maurice Molyneux, assistant chief chemist to the firm of W. & T. Avery, scale makers, and his wife Irene Mary (née Wolfenden). In 1939, as war threatened, the three children were evacuated to Worcestershire, where Joyce was billeted with a family of three girls and attended the local Ombersley primary school and, when she was eleven, the Birmingham King Edward VI Grammar School for Girls, which had been evacuated to Worcester at the same time. She returned to her home town in 1943. Leaving school at sixteen, she stated her wish to learn cooking and was sent to the Birmingham College of Domestic

Science. She recalled it being run by a 'Scottish mafia', where the standard text was the Edinburgh School of Cookery and Domestic Economy's *Plain Cookery Recipes* of 1907 (they also did *Recipes for High-Class Cookery*, but not a lot of use during post-war rationing). Her first task was to cook very small portions of 'brown stew'. Leaving college (where she had to resit her cookery exam), her father found her a job in a canteen at W. Canning & Co., manufacturers of electroplating equipment. A fellow-student alerted her to the chance of a job at the Mulberry Tree in Stratford where she was taken on as general assistant by the chef, who worked alone, in 1951. Douglas Sutherland was classically trained, very well regarded, and gave Joyce a thorough grounding in professional cooking over the next eight years. It was good enough for her to be able to teach George Perry-Smith (an amateur) a thing or two when she joined him at the Hole in the Wall.

When there was a change of regime in Stratford in 1959, she saw an advertisement for staff at this restaurant in Bath in the *Lady* magazine. Her application was successful and she soon realised it was no ordinary business. Perry-Smith dressed like a bohemian, had a commanding presence, insisted that his staff work both in the kitchen and the front of house (purgatory for Joyce, who was quite shy), and cooked food of generosity and spirit that did not abide by the rules of classical cuisine. Most of the staff were young women like Joyce, often indeed young middle-class slips who looked on it as a finishing school. But they always worked flat-out, and there was tremendous team spirit. Joyce survived her time waiting at table and concentrated on the kitchen. Here she was soon often in charge.

When Joyce became, in one sense at least, her own master as she assumed the reins of partner at Dartmouth, she emerged from behind the towering presence of George Perry-Smith to be assessed by the public at large on her own merits. It was not that there were no women chefs at all in the public realm, but they were in definite minor key. It should be recorded that there were two women chefs at least in Devon in the early seventies that many may remember: most celebrated was Sonia Stevenson at the Horn of Plenty near Tavistock, and then there was also Elizabeth Ambler at Haldon Thatch near Exeter. But it has been interesting to watch how Joyce grew into her role over the years and how her specific qualities in the kitchen came to be valued by a wider constituency. For example, her kitchen was never the locale of bad language, behaviour or stupidity such as were made famous and notorious by the bad-boy chefs Gordon Ramsay and Marco Pierre White; her kitchen also employed (at least latterly) a disproportionate number of women, many of which went on to distinguished careers themselves. Her style of cooking also came to be recognised as having great value. It was adaptive to circumstance – the presence or absence of certain ingredients; it was accessible to all, both from the point of view of excellent flavour, and from its lack of overworking or pretentious presentation. It was natural. It relied predominantly on local and individual growers and suppliers. This became a leitmotif quite early on, in part because Dartmouth was at the end of a very long supply chain in national terms and it would be better to look to your own locality. (This did not stop us, it should be confessed, from welcoming with open arms a London-based customer who would turn up with the latest offerings from Covent Garden in the depths of winter when we were gasping for green vegetables to lift us from our gloom.)

My wife Sally and I left the restaurant in 1984, choosing a different career-path based around our house at Allaleigh, between Cornworthy and Blackawton. There was a

certain interregnum in front-of-house management, but Joyce soldiered on. Matters settled down somewhat with the arrival of Meriel Matthews who would stay with the restaurant, in full control of the administration and management, in partnership with Joyce, until her retirement. Meriel was the niece of George Perry-Smith; she had had experience in the catering industry, but had spent many years married to a motor agent whose business was selling Mercedes Benz to British servicemen in West Germany. She had children, who were by this time old enough to support the punishing hours of restaurant life and the week-long absences occasioned by the fact that her home was in Somerset, not South Devon. Although, I think, Joyce and I got on famously, she must have found my assertiveness, loudness and stupidity quite hard to bear. We were very different characters. I don't think Meriel and Joyce were two peas in a pod, from the point of view of character, but there was real warmth in their relationship and they were tremendously mutually supportive. Meriel, I think, made Joyce's last years of work a very positive experience.

Joyce retired to her house in Bath, which she had bought with her mother when working at the Hole in the Wall in the 1960s. There, she continued to cook with enthusiasm. Every Christmas, and whenever she came down to Dartmouth for a semi-regal visit (especially for the food festival), she brought us jars and jars of pickles, preserves, jellies and such like. It was quite close to the end of her life that she began to get unsteady on her pins and that her niece Sara thought it would be best if she moved somewhere closer to help and support. Her final home was in a magnificent Georgian manor house run by BUPA just to the east of the city. It was unfortunate that Covid struck when it did, making visiting almost impossible. Joyce indeed caught Covid, and survived.

Joyce's career path is interesting. When cooking in Stratford on Avon and then Bath, she was a valued member of staff but had minimal public profile. This, of course, increased when she was the chef-patronne in Dartmouth, but the profile of the restaurant itself took several years to become known more widely in the country at large. I have referred to nights of zero custom; I should also state that there were almost no years when we made a profit. My partners would say it was my incompetence that was the cause, and there's little doubt they were right. But it was also that restaurants were not the phenomenon that they are today when so much more of people's disposable income is spent on eating out and such like. But gradually, Joyce's achievement was recognised. The Good Food Guide was a constant cheerleader, nominating it the Real Food Restaurant of the Year in about 1983 and forever writing it up in the most glowing terms. Then Egon Ronay's guide was supportive too, and Joyce was asked to join a team of five chefs to cook a large launch banquet at the Dorchester Hotel in about 1981 – that was an experience that none of us country bumpkins will ever forget: we ended the day with a staff dinner at the Gavroche. The Michelin Guide awarded us a star in about 1978, and these were precious prizes indeed. So, by the mid-1980s Joyce had a level of fame and the certain respect of her peers. This greatly increased when she was featured in the successful television series Take Six Cooks in 1985. This was in the early days of TV cheffing and it definitely had a great impact on Joyce's reputation and the standing of the restaurant itself. This was absolutely cemented when she wrote her own recipe book, in combination with Sophie Grigson, The Carved Angel Cookery Book, which was published in 1990. It was a tremendous success and made it certain that if you said

you were or had been involved with the Carved Angel, people knew immediately what you were talking about.

Joyce was a remarkably discreet person. She was never shy or retiring, but she kept herself to herself. Most of us thought of her as the perfect spinster, yet in fact she had a life partner, who she kept firmly under wraps so far as most of the rest of the world was concerned. When working in Stratford on Avon in the 1950s, she had fallen in with a Spanish waiter colleague named Stephen or Esteban. As is the way with working in this industry, Stephen moved from job to job, but they were able to visit each other whenever they had time off. Towards the end of his life, he worked at the Priory Hotel in Bath, so matters were more convenient thereafter. Joyce would go back to Bath at weekends and, of course, she had a month's holiday in January every year when they would fly off to Barcelona, Stephen's home town. I met him very infrequently indeed. Unfortunately, towards the end of the '70s, he developed a heart condition and died before Joyce and he could enjoy a well-earned retirement.

The legacy of the Carved Angel is difficult to sum up. Of course, it lies with its staff and how they continue either its philosophy or its style of cooking. Staff was often a tremendous problem, especially before Joyce found fame on a national stage. At the outset, it was difficult to find staff locally who had the right skills or attitude. But if they were brought in from afar, they had to be housed. Then, working essentially antisocial hours, they had to be amused and often they found it difficult to cope with the winter ghost-town aspect of Dartmouth. One grand Algerian boy whom I persuaded to give up working in London and join us in our very first months, couldn't stand the isolation and left after a month or two. We tried hard to light upon local people who might fit the bill and some of our greatest successes were had in that respect. We tapped the school, we also tapped Plymouth catering college and some of our graduates went on to fine careers. As Joyce became more celebrated, so she was joined in the kitchen by several like-minded women, and although it was never consciously a feminist enterprise, it was only natural that two female partners would often hire female staff.