Grans, nans, and other mums

Gran-round-the Corner, Gran-at-Greenwich, Jock, ginger and "Up-Jenkins" ***Jeff Hearn*** *recalls three generations of mothers*

If I say the word 'Mothers' what comes to mind is my own: my Mum. There's something almost in the sounds 'mothers', 'mum', 'mummy' that brings it all back. The 'mm' repeats its meaning and conjures up those 'first words'—'ma, ma, ma'.

Over the last year or so, my Mum and I have been talking about her childhood and her family. Both of us have found this interesting, though probably for different reasons. It's also made me think more about three other mothers that I've known in my family, two grandmothers and one great grandmother: Gran-at-Greenwich, Gran-round-the-Corner, and Nan.

Gran-at-Greenwich was my Mum's mum. It was only recently that I learnt her first name, May. From my earliest memories she was old. She was never in good health—bent in the back, fatalistic, and not very happy—she had had a hard life. Born in Ireland, her parents had died when she was very young. Brought over, perhaps sold, to an English family as a kind of child skivvy, she had been adopted and at the same time ill-treated. I wonder if she had been sexually abused. She wouldn't talk about her early life—it was too painful.

Gran married young, and over the next twenty years had at least eight children. Two of these died by the age of two, and another died at six and a half. My Mum was the oldest girl. She had told me how she remembers her mum having a lot of tears—or as she put it 'she had to tell somebody'. Throughout my Mum's childhood the family were always poor.

Not surprisingly, Gran's life weighed her down. As a child, I didn't particularly look forward to seeing her. We always visited her and she was always alone. I don't remember seeing her outside her flat, apart from when she stood at the doorway to wave goodbye to us and once when we saw her in hospital. She suffered from 'bad legs' amongst other things. My strongest memories of seeing her were when just me and my Mum visited—my sister at school or busy elsewhere. I only knew Gran through Mum, both of us were her appendages. I never did see Gran on her own.

Seeing Gran-at-Greenwich was all a bit boring, very much part of normal life. When we went there activity seemed to hinge around tea-drinking, chatting, and moaning. But seeing her was homely and reassuring. She was always kind to me. She wore a flowered or patterned overall, normally with a woollen top underneath. In winter she wore heavy brown stockings, in summer no stockings. I don't remember her in anything else.

What I liked most about visiting were her heavy, brown, 'old fashioned' furniture and her big green curved vases. I also found some of her large old brownish photos on the wall intriguing. These were printed and framed as if they were paintings. I particularly liked the pictures of her husband, my Grandad. He had died when I was two or three. The brown photos conjured up for me an imaginary world of what my Grandad was 'really' like.

I've learnt since then that he was from a French-Irish family, that he had fought for the British in the First World War, been gassed three times, and temporarily blinded. After that he was often unable to work as a plasterer through sickness, as well as through the ups and downs of the building trade. At the time of seeing the photos I saw them as a link with a lost age.

So in these kind of ways I related to Gran mainly through other people and other things: Mum, furniture, vases, photos of my Grandad. It was in this situation that I came to see myself as a grandson. In my family, my relationship with my mother was undervalued, and my sense of being a son came much more from my father, my relationship with him, and in turn his relationship with his father. But being there in Gran's council flat, I was definitely my *mother's* son, and Gran's grandson. And accordingly,



Gran-at-Greenwich—'She wore a flowered or patterned overall'



'My Mum was the oldest girl'



'Gran-round-the-Corner married my Grandad at eighteen'

being a grandson to my Mother's mother was a way of affirming being my Mum's son.

Gran-round-the-Corner was my Dad's mum—she lived just round the corner, perhaps 150 yards away. She was from a slightly 'more respectable' background than Gran-at-Greenwich. Her father had been one of the keepers of the Royal Deer in Greenwich Park, and so she had had a kind of domestic service background, as did many of her own aunts and uncles.

From about five she suffered deafness, brought on by measles. This was a source of bitterness all her life, even with the improvements in hearing aids in the fifties.

Gran married my Grandad at eighteen. He, too, was from a London Irish family. He had a trade, as a glass bottle pattern maker. Gran and Grandad had five sons—the oldest was my Dad: Fred, Freddie, or young Freddie as he was called by them into his fifties.

One of her favourite ways of being was humming to herself

Occasionally Dad complained about the brutality he had received from both his parents, and particularly his mother, as a child. However, beyond that he had a sense of stoic pride in his family. He seemed to have become a kind of second father to his brothers by the time he left school for work at fourteen.

Of Dad's four brothers, one, Eric, was killed in a bombing mission in the Second World War. Gran and Dad, who were especially close to him, never really recovered from this. Photographs of Eric were on our dining room wall throughout my childhood, I've even felt at times a tragic affinity with him, as if I was supposed to somehow take his place. Apparently he was a 'really nice chap'.

As an adult, Dad's relationship with his mum (Gran-round-the-Corner) was pretty cool. Basically, he avoided her a lot of the time, and took the easy route so that my Mum had far more to do with her than he did. He did 'make the effort' on occasions, most obviously at Christmas, parties and other pre-arranged visits. At other times, he was less interested and sometimes less tolerant; and dealing with deafness pained both of them.

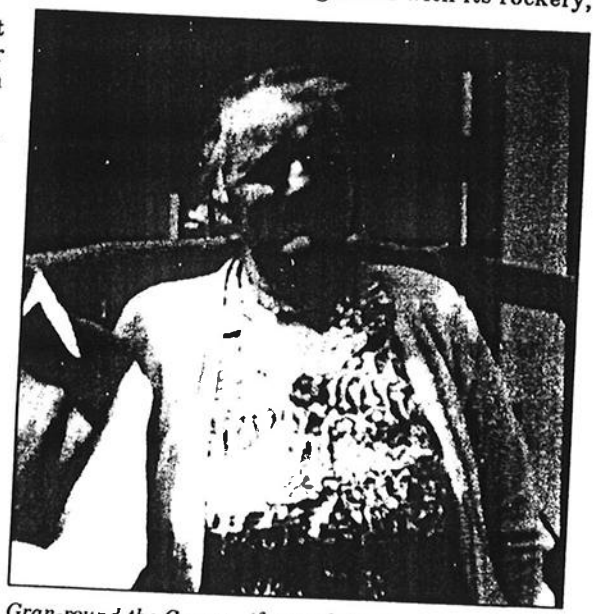
But there was something, grander, indeed patriarchal, about Dad's relationship with Gran. I sensed a definite feeling of him (and me) being involved in something that was felt to be important. This seemed to revolve partly around their working class respectability and the accomplishments of Dad's family. It was also to do with the fact that Dad's family was so overwhelmingly male—with Grandad still alive, originally five sons and no daughters. All this was in contrast to the, or Dad's, undervaluing of my Mum's family—with no Grandad alive, being less respectable working class, and not 'the male line'.

Being in this situation, I feel I learnt what it might be to be a son, by seeing Dad as a son. This was in clear contrast to being with Mum with Gran-in-Greenwich, where I could learn no such thing. So in the company of Gran-round-the-Corner, I was definitely a son, the son of my father, rather than just a grandson.

My own memories of Gran herself are mixed. Much of the time she seemed bitter. Because of her life of deafness, she sometimes thought, probably with good reason, that people were talking about her. At times, she would 'pick up' on words or sounds that were fairly quiet—as when people were talking about her! One of her favourite ways of being was humming to herself—a mixture of contentedness, self-indulgence and peevishness—a kind of resigned vocal sadness inside her head as opposed to quarrelling with others.

Another difficult area was food. My sister and I dreaded going to tea because we were sure we would have the awful pease pudding. It seemed that different things were eaten in her house, like the time she pressed me to have some crystalised ginger at a New Year's party there, and I was almost sick with the unfamiliar taste.

On the other hand, there were lots of things that I really found different and interesting at Gran-round-the-Corner's: her garden with its rockery,



Gran-round-the-Corner—'from about five she suffered deafness, brought on by measles'

wooden trellis and climbing roses, stone birdbath, the hollyhocks, apple trees, the fact that as it was an end house you could walk round the garden around it (unlike our terrace home with no way round between the back and front), the ramshackle outhouse with the outside toilet (that was more protected from the elements and so warmer than ours), the coal shed, the work shed, the kitchen range, even an indoor toilet and bathroom. Then there were the budgerigars, fish in the fish tank, Bruce the dog and Jock the lodger. Lots of things and quite a lot of activity.

There were also times when Gran was full of fun. She liked to be at the centre of things. Despite arthritis and problems in walking at all, she kept very involved and very active with what was going on locally. For quite a while she looked after the keys and the upkeep of the local church hall, which meant she knew a lot of what was happening. At Christmas and parties she would sparkle, in between times of being unpredictable, difficult, and very difficult.

She liked playing the piano, singing, and party games. My own favourite for many years was 'Up Jenkins'. People were arranged in two teams either side of the table. One team, with all the hands below the table, hid a small nut in one person's hands. At the cry of 'Up Jenkins' all the closed fists would be raised and placed, sometimes with a bang, on top of the table. Then one person from the other side would, by elimination, try to find out which hand the nut was in. The game provided lots of opportunities for acting and over-acting—deceit, double bluff, mock expertise, non verbal communication, making your hand bigger or smaller—a silly, team version of poker. Playing 'Up Jenkins', Gran would often have a special twinkle in her eye which I specially liked, whether she was on our or the other side.

Gran outlived both Grandad and Dad; the last time I saw Gran was not long after Dad died. She herself died shortly after—old and sad, as far as I could see.

She had married William Jelly and so took the amazing name of Nellie Jelly

Gran-round-the-Corner's mum was Nan, except that Nan wasn't her 'mother'. On getting married at eighteen, Gran had learnt that her 'real' mother was Nan's sister, who was still alive, and with her own life and family. Gran's 'real' mother had conceived Gran whilst she was in domestic service, reportedly by the man, a married Jewish father, who was her employer. The scandal, or potential scandal, was at least two-fold: for both the married master and the unmarried servant. Gran's aunt had solved the problem by becoming her mother. After learning this, Gran bore Nan a grudge that bordered at times on hatefulness. Sometimes Gran was very intolerant towards Nan—she would snap into a quick rage and mutual incriminations would follow. I remember observing these rows between Nan and Gran with a bemused embarrassment. Like Gran-at-Greenwich, Gran-round-the-Corner didn't really know her original mother as her mother.

Nan was a Victorian figure named Ellen. She had married William Jelly and so took the amazing name of Nellie Jelly, though there was nothing less jelly-like than her. I was very pleased with the fact that her husband had been the deer keeper at the local royal park—this seemed, when I was a child, a significant responsibility and no doubt it was.

Nan always wore black. She seemed to be a real link with the past—and partly for this reason I found her to be an intriguing person. She was also very thin, very erect, and very active; she walked very fast even in her eighties.



'Nan was a Victorian figure'



Nan—'there was nothing less jelly-like'

Nan had a strange perception of people who were younger than her. Those in their seventies and eighties were 'old people', who might even be 'past it', while she in her eighties and nineties was somehow socially younger than them and not 'past it' at all. A truly remarkable woman, she was very intelligent and very biblical. She read the Book every day and wanted me to do the same. She even gave me one of her special bibles a year or so before she died. She had a strong will and a quick tongue. She loved jigsaws and loved me. I admired the way she produced scrap-books from bits of Christmas cards and other bits and pieces as gifts for children in hospital. I saw this as a sign of both cleverness, good will, and compassion. She was one of my first experiences of a really strong woman.

So for all these three mothers, things weren't as they seemed. None of their lives conformed to the mythical 'Happy Families'. For each there had been a severe disruption to what is usually seen as normal family life or normal motherhood. In fact, there is probably no such thing except that alongside those dramatic events in the lives of ordinary folk was the daily toil of really hard work of bringing up all their children and being mothers.

For me, I can now identify how I learnt to be a son through Gran-round-the-Corner, a grandson through Gran-at-Greenwich and a greatgrandson through Nan. More recently, over the last year or so, I can now see how talking about other mothers has been a way of getting to know my Mum better. Mothers are lots of different things: not just what they seem. ◆