

# MA COOPER, AN EARLSDON LEGEND

Our thanks again to local historian Mary Montes for this fascinating insight into the life of one of Earlsdon's most legendary characters:

"Ma Cooper's !" How many of us still remember the bus conductor's cheerful shout as he reminded us that we were approaching the City Arms Pub ! How many of us locals never think of referring to the Pub as anything other than "Ma Cooper's" ! There must be thousands of people as familiar with its nick-name as with its real name "City Arms", but how many, I wonder, ever ask themselves "Why?"

Who was this Ma Cooper ? Obviously she was a one-time licensee, but what was it that has held her in folk memory over so many years ? From documentation - church records, census returns etc. it is possible to trace the bare facts of her life. The essence of her character, her personality, we can only surmise from vague recollections, often second hand, of people whose lives she touched.

She was born in Hertford Square, the Butts, Coventry and baptised Mary Jane Seymour at St. John's Church on 26th. July, 1837 (this was before St. Thomas's was built) the third daughter of William Seymour and his wife Mary (nee Buswell). She had two older sisters, Ruth, born in 1828, and Ann, born in 1831, with a brother George who arrived three years later in 1840.

By the standards of the day the family must have been in fairly comfortable circumstances. Hertford Place was recently



Ma Cooper (centre of group) outside the original City Arms building. The pub as we know it now was built on the same site in 1930.

built and in a pleasant area, and William, although only a gardener by profession, must have been a successful one as he actually owned the house they lived in - home ownership was not the common occurrence it is today - whereby he qualified for the privilege of having a vote. But when in 1848, nearing the age of 70, William died things would have changed drastically. Mary, now a widow aged nearly 50, was faced with the problem of supporting herself and a family on her own. With no pension or supplementary benefit in those days a widow without sufficient private means either had to go to work or go into the workhouse with her children. Mary chose to work, became a laundress and began to take in washing. Her two eldest daughters were old enough to support themselves, but Mary Jane and George, not yet in their teens, were still dependent on her. As soon as she was old enough, when she was 13 or 14 however, Mary Jane left home to make her own way in the world.

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There was little or no choice then of careers for young girls, domestic service being usually the only occupation open to them. For most that meant becoming a 'maid-of-all-work', while for those who were fond of children but not educated well enough to become governesses, it meant nursemaid work. Mary Jane chose the latter and we now lose sight of her for a few years as she presumably moved from job to job.

(continued on next page)

# —LOOK!—

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MA COOPER - continued:

In 1871, in a house called 'The Firs', Rother Street, Warwick, Edgar Flower, youngest son of Edward Fordham Flower the Stratford brewer, was living with his wife Isabella and their six young children. The children's nursemaid was Mary Jane Seymour, now aged 34. In the next few years three more children were added to the family, the last one, born in May 1876, was a frail little girl they named Violet Honora. As her Aunt Sophie noted in her diary, she was "never strong and did not develop well mentally". When she caught scarlet fever from the other children she had no resources to fight it and died on 18th January, 1880 aged four years. It was probably Mary Jane's care of this child that



endeared her so much to the Flower family. 5

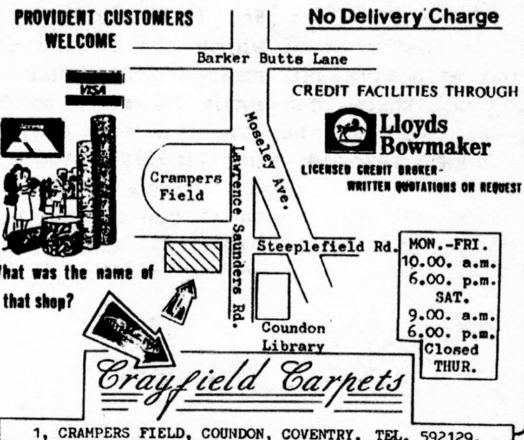
Now no longer needed as a nursemaid - the remaining children were growing up, the boys away at school and the girls in the care of a governess - her life with the Flower family came to an end, although it is clear that they retained an interest in her until the end of her life. She returned to Coventry to live temporarily with friends in St. John Street.

*We will continue the story of Ma Cooper in our next issue.*

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## ❖ E.C.H.O. Diary of Events ❖

If you're organising an event - tell us and we'll tell everyone else. Please let us have details of items for inclusion by 24th July for the August issue.

JULY 1st 10.30 am National Childbirth Trust - Breastfeeding Open Morning for all pregnant/breastfeeding women at Liz Britton's, 5 Shaftesbury Road.

1st 7.30 pm St. Barbara's Ladies Group - Mrs. J. Formela: Singaporean Experience. Meeting Room, Church Hall.

2nd 7.30 pm Coventry Society - Mr. Peter Lee: New Aspects of Old Coventry. Gilbert Richards Centre, Broadway. Visitors welcome.

3rd 8.30 pm National Childbirth Trust Fathers' Group meet at Earlsdon Cottage. All elated/exhausted fathers welcome.

4th 10.00 am - 12.30 pm Car Boot Sale and Car Wash - King Henry VIII School Yard. Sellers £5, buyers free, car wash 50p. Details tel: 711397.

4th 10.00 am - 12.00 noon Mini-Market, St. Mary Magdalen's Church (luncheon 11.30 am)

6th 8.00 pm Monday Club - Miss U.V. Meddins: The Royal Commonwealth Society for the Blind. St. Barbara's Church Hall. All ladies welcome.

6th 8.00 pm Theosophical Society - Mr. Peter Barton: The Field of Change. Meeting at 68 Earlsdon Avenue. For more information tel: 73795.

7th 2.00 pm National Childbirth Trust - Tea Afternoon at Maggie Parkes', 5 Newcombe Road.

7th 8.00 pm National Childbirth Trust - Branch Meeting at Koco, The Arches, Spon End. All members welcome.

18th 10.00 am - 12.00 noon Mini-Market, St. Mary Magdalen's Church.

23rd 10.30 am National Childbirth Trust - Coffee Morning at Kay Payne's, 76 Hartington Crescent.

AUG 1st 10.00 am - 12.00 noon Mini-Market, St. Mary Magdalen's Church (luncheon 11.30 am).

3rd 8.00 pm National Childbirth Trust - Branch Meeting at Koco, The Arches, Spon End.

# AN EARLSDON LEGEND

8/87

CONTINUED

We continue with the story of Ma Cooper of the City Arms from last month's issue.

Under what circumstances she met Robert Cooper, one time weaver turned publican, we have no way of knowing. However it was, Mary Jane Seymour, Spinster, aged 45 (actually she

was 46) and Robert Cooper, Widower, aged 65 (from having an elderly father she now had an elderly husband !) were married at St. Michael's Church, Coventry on 22nd. November, 1883.

Robert, also born in Coventry, had set up home with his first wife, Sarah, in West Orchard in the 1840's and raised a small family. In common with most of the other weavers in the City, however, when the ribbon weaving industry took a plunge in the 1860's he fell on hard times, and like many others he looked for alternative work and became a publican. His pub was the Lamp Tavern on the corner of Market Street and Market Place, right in the City Centre, and it was there that he took his new wife in 1883. His children of course were now grown up and married.

What a different life it must have been for Mary Jane. From caring for young children in the cultivated atmosphere of Edgar and Isabella Flower's pleasant Warwick home to the rough hurly-burly of a noisy City Centre pub ! It must have taken a woman of great adaptability and very strong character to be able to cope with it. But it seems that that was exactly what Mary Jane was.

Her married life, unfortunately, did not last long. Robert died aged 73 and Mary Jane was left a widow. She took over the license of the Lamp Tavern and there she stayed for the next seven years. Nearing the age of 60, however, in 1897, probably both she and the Flower family felt that she needed a somewhat quieter life, and she was offered the tenancy of the City Arms, Earlsdon.

Albany Road had just been opened, linking Earlsdon for the first time directly with the City, and from then on the estate was to grow by leaps and bounds. New streets were laid out and houses built all around the area, with the consequent rise in population, although by City standards it was still a quiet backwater. The home that Mary Jane moved to was not the big black and white building of today of course, but a typical modest old Earlsdon cottage, a pub since the early 1860's and a popular venue for old and new residents alike. Short, stout Mary Jane,



or 'Ma' as she now came to be known, in her long black skirt and starched white apron soon became a familiar and respected figure. Her kindness and consideration was a byword, not only to her patrons but their families too, as was her firmness in dealing with those who might transgress her strict code of behaviour. She only needed to say "You've had enough, lad, get off home to your wife and family !" and the culprit meekly submitted. Although at times very outspoken - she didn't believe in mincing matters - there is no doubt that she became deeply loved and respected throughout the whole area and a familiar sight to all, patrons or not, as she sat in her favourite chair in the City Arms' doorway.

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'Ma' died at the pub on 4th. August, 1921 at the age of 84 - not 91 as was generally believed - of simple old age, cared for at the end by her cousin Tom Buswell and his wife and attended by Dr. Ernest Kenderdine. Crowds of people, including Mr. Flower, attended her funeral at the London Road Cemetery where the service was conducted by the Vicar of St. Barbara's Church, the Rev. Bryant. None of those who went to pay their last respects that day could ever have dreamed that her name would live on as it has. Over the decades it has become the most familiar and often repeated name in Earlsdon

- **'Ma' Cooper of the City Arms**

*The following anonymous lines, poor though they are poetically, epitomise the affection that was felt for 'Ma'. They were written in 1915 during the First World War.*

**'Ma' Cooper**

all the ladies I love best,  
There's none like Mrs. Cooper,  
Who's always ready with a jest  
To suit a maid or trouper.

To every kind she speaks her mind  
On everything the world's done,  
And cares no jot for all the lot  
Of what folks say in Earlsdon.

She may not suit all she does meet,  
But then she says what's true;  
And truth is not always so sweet  
To either me or you.

Yet she is kind, and never blind  
To good in any other,  
And many say in grateful way,  
To them she's been a 'Mother'.

There's not a Pub that sells good cheer  
Rivals the 'City Arms'.  
For there you get the best of beer  
With all its natural charms.

And when I leave I know I'll grieve,  
When I am distant far,  
To leave behind that very kind  
Dear Lady known as 'Ma'.

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## Holiday Playschemes

5

### BROADWAY PLAYSHEME

Gilbert Richards Centre, Broadway  
Monday, Tuesday, Thursday 12.30 - 4.30 until  
August 13th. Entrance 10p.  
Contact: Mrs. V. Randle, 51, Mayfield Road



All our own work! (standing l. to r.) Adam, Lee, Nicki, Stacey, John and Stephen; (seated l. to r.) Graham, Victoria, Toni, James and Rakesh.

### HEARSALL PLAYSHEME

Hearsall Community Primary School, Bristol Road  
Monday 1 - 4pm, Tuesday 1 - 4pm, Wednesday 10am -  
4pm until August 5th - Fun Day at the Butts  
Stadium.  
Contact: Michelle Johnson tel. 74625



Photos by Lin Dean-Smith

Jade Connally enjoying her playscheme.

### SPON END PLAYSHEME

Spon End Playcentre, Hope Street  
Monday - Thursday 11am - 3pm for 5yrsplus, Friday  
Monday - Thursday 11am - 3pm for 5 years and over, Friday 9.30 - 11.30 Playgroup only; until  
August 28th.  
Contact: Mrs. Vera Gisbourne tel. 56907

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