

Chapter 2

Joan Mary Dibdin –The Pre-war Years

After passing her Matriculation Exams Joan joined the Royal Academy at the age of 17 in 1937.

Her going to London to study music and possibly find the opportunity of becoming a film star was contrary to the wishes of her Aunt Edith, who had apparently taken a degree of responsibility for her since she was 13 after her parents died in a plane crash. Her brother Peter, however, supported her choice of



study and there is evidence of a clash over the issue. During the following two years she lived a very active life going to the theatre and concerts, spending time with friends and family as well as attending a very full list of lessons and lectures. It should be mentioned that although she had a strong interest in drama and had childhood ambitions of becoming a film star, her main strength was the piano. At the Royal Academy she had lessons from Max Pirani, a well established musician who went on to set up the Music Teachers' College at University of Western Ontario, Canada. As will be amplified later, in a letter written in 1945 to Joan he expresses how capable she was and could have been a pianist at performance level.

Max Pirani (Arranger)

Born: August 4, 1898 - Melbourne, Australia

Died: August 5, 1975 - London, England

The Australian-born English pianist and teacher, Max (Gabriel) Pirani, studied at the Melbourne Conservatory and later with Max Vogrich in New York.

In 1923 Max Pirani formed the Pirani Trio with the violinist Leila Doubleday (later Pirani) and the cellist Charles Hambourg. The trio toured widely in Europe, the Commonwealth, and the USA until 1940. In 1926 Pirani joined the faculty of the Royal Academy of Music in London. After several visits to Canada in the late 1930's, he served from 1941 to 1947 as director of the piano department of the Banff Centre for the Arts. He was a lecturer and recitalist in 1942-1944 at the Western Ontario Conservatory of Music (WOCM), and the founding director from 1945 to 1947 of the Music Teachers' College at the University of Western Ontario. His Canadian pupils included Dorothy Bee, Gordon K. Greene, Audrey Johannesen, Warren Mould, and John Searchfield. In 1948 he returned to England, thereafter publicising and developing the technique of [Emanuel Moór](#) and completing the definitive biography *Emanuel Moor* (London, 1959).

In Max Pirani's obituary in *The Times* (August 12, 1975) Sir Thomas Armstrong wrote: '[Pirani's] methods derived from the main-stream of European pianism... and they were always at the service of an exceptionally broad and discriminating musicianship.'

During those two years at the Royal Academy, Joan must have been in a highly charged state of mind. Not only do we see records of a busy student with lessons, lectures and music practice but also someone with a very active social life. She was seeing a lot of friends and did keep in contact with several aunts and uncles and their offspring and, I believe, must have been seen by them all as a somewhat wild creature at the time.

Friends and Family

Don Haycraft - cousin	Toto (Neil's mother)
Peter Dibdin - brother	Jane - a friend from Q.A.House
Mrs Midd – Family retainer	Aunt Gertie in Reigate
David Muir -boy next door	Aunt Laetitia in Ruislip - Mrs
Redford Family - Carshalton	Frewin – (Laetitia Dibdin the singer.- Lettie)
Tony Mikado	Marian Montford and family -
Frank and Norma	Sutton
Jimmie (Cricket)	

Activities

Drama – Elocution Piano
Visits to concerts at Wigmore hall
Harmony
Going to Parties, Picture Concerts - Theatre and to sports clubs

For the sake of historic simplicity this booklet will continuously refer to Joan Dibdin as Joan however there were times when she chose to be referred to by the following: Joanna, Jo, and Dibby. These will be found in letters as well as sometimes, mistakenly, she was called Johanna or Joe, The name Dibby was used exclusively by those friends from her time at the Royal Academy and by acquaintances derived from them.

Also, throughout this time, there are letters of rejection or encouragement from a number of theatre companies regarding opportunities with them. She wrote to the Old Vic in the middle of 1938 and a number of companies in the country in mid 1939. As late as January 1940 before the blitz started Joan was still looking for acting opportunities, and a letter from Max Pirani shows the help he was offering through contacts. Just in passing it must have pleased Max when, in 1950, Joan finally passed her

music exams and became a qualified musician – fully qualified to teach.

As mentioned before, when first in London, Joan lived at Queen Alexandra House, next to the Albert Hall, which may have been like a hall of residence and it was of her time here that we find reports of her rage and unhappiness.

We have one memorable reference to Joan at that time in a letter written later in 1943 by a close friend Jane, from Leeds, when she refers back to that early time at college.

“ My dear you would just go and be a dispatch rider – how you didn't kill yourself I don't know. Secretly I am filled with admiration because I know I should never have had the nerve.”
“Do you look back on those years we knew each other with great pleasure or have you had nicer things happen since? I shall always remember you rampaging up & down those tiny Q-A rooms (Queen Alexandra's House) like a caged lion – saying you must leave the place come what may! Poor Jo, you did hate it and us sometimes. How silly it is that I still think of you as someone who needs looking after and here you are far more responsible and experienced than I am.”

From a letter dated 24th December 1943

From Jane – married to Harold and working in the War Effort for the Mechanised Transport Corp in Leeds.- 25 of them

From this letter written to her five year after the time we are exploring, we appreciate how unhappy she was in these lodging.

From a diary marked up in a notebook from July 1938 to September 1938, it seems that she negotiated for a room at 28, Cranley Gardens moving in on 4th Sept 1938.

The diary gives some further insights into the emotional state of this 18 year old young lady. Following is a summary of some of the rather poignant entries over two months:

24 July 1938

She, with Peter's help, took her trunk to 28 Cranley Gardens, borrowed a couple of pounds from him and went to Nottingham to see her Uncle Bernard Haycraft who was her mother's sister.

23 August 1938 is interesting in so far as we get a vivid picture of the extremes of pleasure and despair that this very alone girl must have experienced.

"Met Don in the Mikado at 12.00. Got a taxi at 2.40 for the Midland Station. (Nottingham) Micky was there. Then Don came down. I felt awful leaving them all. Don opened my small blue case and said what's in here ? I told him to shut it because everything would fall out. I kissed them both and said good bye. I felt wretched all the journey, I wanted Don so much.

This entry is followed by a description of travelling across to Ruislip to see Aunt Lettie who was not there so having to go back to Victoria and flop down at Mrs Midd's

4th September

By this date Joan had settled for a bit at Aunt Lettie's and then "Later she went out for supper at the Imperial Restaurant with a glass of Worthington. "I expect Don was in the Tavern drinking Worthington at the same time 9.00-9.30pm".

When she unpacked her small blue case she found a packet of 25 Players cigarettes – "Don must have put them there when he opened my case at Midland Station – He is a darling.

Later -- She received a letter from Don saying that he would come to London at the weekend and also he wrote "What about the holiday ? He is a darling and I love him so."

Peter came round later and fetched her box from Queen Alexandra House. When Joan talked to Peter about Don and the holiday he just took it for granted.

7th September

They met Adrian, Bobby and family at Southampton and put them on a boat train and then drove to the house Cremona in Sutton (Cavendish Road) to deliver some of the luggage, arriving there at 9.30pm having stopped at Drift Bridge nr Epsom for an enormous dinner.

Peter dropped Joan off at Morden Station.

8th September

Joan went up to see Mrs Midd who had broken an arm and then went up to Regent's Street to do some shopping.

"Just two more days and Don will be here if all goes well. Oh dear, time goes so slowly and I love him so much"

During my life, Joan had occasionally mentioned that she had a soft spot for Don but had never indicated the depth of feeling that she had for him. The fact that he had talked about a holiday together suggested that the feeling must have been reciprocated.

The significance of Don Haycraft in Joan's life we shall see later. It is likely that he joined up as the war started and was training as a Sergeant in Scotland in the early part of the war. It was indirectly through Don that she was to be set on track for the next era of her life.

The notebook also contained detailed accounts for March 1939 with some from Sept 1938.

See Appendix 2 for transcript of Joan's diaries.

There was little else written in this large notebook but many of pages had sketches and scribbles. Tucked into it were a number of drawings by Joan including cartoons and many sketched of dress designs.

It is worth noting perhaps, for historical purposes, that also tucked into this notebook were letters written by her son in the 1950's.

There is evidence that on 9th Aug 1939 she still lived at 28 Cranley Gardens and on 13th Aug 1939, Joan moved to 95 Queens Gate, just before the outbreak of war. Then by 21st Oct 1939, after the outbreak of war, Joan was living further into town at 12 Granville Place, Portman Square W1.

We get further insights into Joan at this time from another delightful letter written by Jane who was writing a sympathy letter in December 1944 from Leeds, remembering back to the old days ...



“ You never mention your music in your letters, surely it must be an outlet for your feelings and energy? Remember the old days when after a successful elocution or music lesson you used to hurl yourself at the piano, and fairly let off steam? Legs, long dark hair, fingers – all flying about in every direction in your exuberance? Do it now.”

From this time on, Joan wrote entries into printed diaries and from these we get the vision of her continuously meeting up with the three mentioned above: Peter, Don and David, brother cousin and boy next door in her childhood, as well as the many others listed earlier.

There were, at this time, a number of close families that must have been some support to Joan. The Davis family in Reigate that centred on her mother's sister Gertie (nee Haycraft) was a haven of peace and Joan would have known well her three son's John, Pat and Geoffrey. It is worthy of mention that her last grandparent, Georgina Haycraft (nee Lawton), widow of Samuel, died in 24th December 1939. Although Joan never spoke of this grandparent, she was the matriarch of a close family that lived in the Sutton area for many years.

The other Haycraft family was based on her mother's brother Bernard who had moved to Nottingham and, despite the distance from London, Joan knew his children well and they figure strongly in her early years.

It may be that during her holidays from boarding school, Ancaster House in Bexhill, she would visit them as a break from the austerity of living with her Aunt Edith in Saltburn and Castleton. Despite, or perhaps because of, living with her and being under her supervision from the age of 13, we read little of Joan's Aunt Edith during the war years. We know of her death on 13th March 1944 only because of a small insert in Joan's diary.

The other family of significance was the Montford family at Sutton, who as mentioned in the diary arrived back from Australia in September 1938 after Paul Montfort, the sculptor died.

Marian had hated Australia for the whole time they were there from the early 1920's. On returning to England they probably had little money and were offered the chance to rent a family house, Cremona, in Cavendish Road in Sutton. This was owned by the two Aglio Aunts, daughters of Augustine Aglio, and was in effect

a spare house. The Montfords were an artistic family, with Marian a very good painter in her own right and with her children Bobby, a ballet dancer, Nina a painter and Adrian a painter and sculptor. Joan would have felt very much at home in this group. It so happened that at that time, Marian's sister Margaret, had returned from India in 1938/39, with her three children, and as they had no place to live, it was suggested that they join the Montfords at Cremona. Happy families and in 1939, there was war. The stories of life in that household, two sisters and their 6 offspring, are told elsewhere in an autobiography written by Margaret's daughter Mary - "Unspoken Hope".

Once, in the midst of an air raid, I heard the front door slam with ominous violence. Marian, in her husband's old dressing gown, had run out of the house and was standing in the middle of the road while ack-ack [anti-aircraft] guns were popping all around us. What had precipitated that particular row between my mother and aunt I didn't have time to find out, but it took several minutes before I could persuade her to come back into the house. "Get your aunt some tea! She is very upset," said my mother, glaring at me as if I had done the upsetting, as she engulfed the reluctant Marian in a huge bear hug. Their frequent "grand reconciliations," full of tears and tension, precipitated ever-larger rows that often revolved around ancient family history.

This excerpt gives some idea of life within the "artistic" Dibdin Family. Marian and her Montford family would have been good for the young Joan but at the critical time they were all in Australia.

Further Excerpts from "Unspoken Hope" can be found in the Appendix 11 of Volume 1 of "William Joseph Dibdin and Family".

Joan, the orphan from the age of 13 years old, must have felt like a loose canon amongst these established families but will have

derived comfort from their existence and pleasure from their company, despite probably being scornful of their advice or attitudes to her activities.

It would be interesting to be able to talk to these key people in Joan's life and develop more insight into what she was really up to and what sort of heaven or hell she was experiencing.

As war approach, Peter her brother, was working in Town for Crown Properties, a Government organisation having left what had been his Family business a few years before.



Although Joan and Peter used to fight like cat and dog in their childhood, there is evidence of how supportive Peter was of Joan after the 1933 disaster and there are considerable references to her meeting Peter in town socially during her time in London, just

before the war and during. Also David Muir, the young man who lived next door to Joan's family in Carshalton, comes into the picture a lot and, once war was imminent and Peter had joined up, they both visited him at camp in the South. David, it seems, always had a soft spot for Joan and had been a close friend of Peter, touring on the continent two years running in 1936 and 1937 for holidays. There is evidence that, in fact, he was very much in love with Joan, with a passion that stayed, unrequited, until about 1950. As an aside it is interesting that Peter and David toured the Continent, including Germany, in the years 1936, and 1937 taking into account that he was working for the British Government as a Surveyor.

We get a little indication of the grief and stress that Peter must have been feeling at the time when having to deal with estate matters in the early days.

It is hoped that this chapter gives some insight into the strange, even surreal, life experience by two young people orphaned early in life and how they reacted to the sadness of the situation. Peter demonstrated himself to be a loyal, caring and stable individual, taking on serious work and financial responsibilities and supporting his young struggling sibling through her darkest hours. Joan grew from a devastated, stropic, wild young girl into a strong willed young lady who then showed herself to be a caring and loving sister to her older brother. A study of letters between Joan and Peter show how much she was dependant and depended on Peter. While at school she first of all negotiated with him to keep certain items from their home. After that he was her transport and passport for getting out of school for holidays and once free from those shackles, she depended on him to help her survive in London and move her between various flats or rooms.

All letters between Joan and Peter are available in Volume 3 of "William Joseph Dibdin and Family 1850 to 1945"

In the early days, her social life seemed to be within the family with support from Peter. Soon after the outbreak of war Joan left the Royal Academy and became a Red Cross Nurse.

Joan made reference to Peter in her later diaries and seems to have felt sorry for him, suggesting that he was lonely. However there is evidence from a love letter from Bridgend in Glamorgan that, in fact, in 1941 Peter had a girlfriend called Rosie.



This may be a photograph of Rosie

Joan really did realise the importance of Peter in her life and noted in her diary that she wished she could have been more use to him.

Over the years we get the vision of her developing from a somewhat needy young girl into a capable supportive young woman.