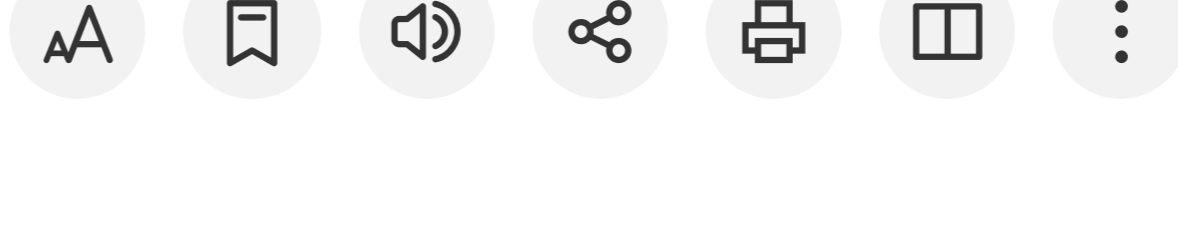


In at the deep end!

WRITER MARY MAE LEWIS SHARES AN HONEST ACCOUNT OF HER CHILDHOOD IN 1950S TUNSTALL WITH HISTORIAN MERVYN EDWARDS



2 May 2026



THIS week, we're in Tunstall to recall a 1950s childhood. I've spent some time recently talking to folk about the elements of their history that cannot generally be described as nostalgic – in other words, those aspects of their past that are altogether darker.

Never mind mawkish, rosetinted, dewy-eyed accounts of yesteryear. For some people, growing up in the Potteries of old was a challenge. Rites of passage? Far more than that. Some children suffered ordeals that shaped their personality. Are we referring to long-term damage here, or did disquieting experiences help to form character?

Local author Mary Mae Lewis, of Abbey Hulton, gives an honest account of her own troubles and triumphs in growing up in the 50s.

"I was born in 1949 at the Haywood Hospital in Burslem," she tells me. "My parents, already in their mid-30s, had a seven year old son. They married before the war and were settled in a three-bed terrace in Greengates Street, with no bathroom and the outside toilet down the yard.

"My father was an engineering pattern maker and mother an aerographer. I was the youngest of 13 cousins, who mostly lived nearby, as did my grandparents.

"We were a close family but I was – according to my brother – spoilt! I didn't think I was. My brother and father fought constantly – so much so that the walls shook. I was traumatised.

"I remember him dragging me along on his hand-made wooden trolley when my leg had become caught underneath and him not stopping. My knee was torn to shreds!

"I remember one of my cousins had a bike and said he would teach me to ride.

"He promptly put me in the saddle and pushed me off down the street. Of course, I fell off!

"I got thrown in at the deep end of the swimming pool, too, before I could swim properly."

Mary Mae, by the way, became an excellent swimmer so perhaps we now know where the incentive came from. At any rate, the rough-and-tumble of her early life is still vivid in her memory.

She appries: "Having a smack for misdemeanours such as answering back was common. My mother hit me across the arm with a poker once.

"Everyone I knew accepted corporal punishment. If a teacher hit you, your parents would say that you must have deserved it! On one occasion, a teacher slapped me hard across the back, which, to this day, I think I was undeserved! I wasn't afraid of doing a bit of fighting myself either, and wrestled with boys in the playground sometimes. I got a severe telling off, once, when a girl's glasses were broken in a fracas."

Like so many folk of her generation, Mary Mae recalls make-yourown fun holidays and the chance to enjoy escapades by the briny.

"All tensions aside, we were still a loving family. My dad built a caravan with a friend and it was sited on a farmer's field (complete with patches of cow dung and some

times haystacks) overlooking the sea in North Wales. I was about four.

"In the early days, we often travelled by motorbike and sidecar before progressing to an old car. The best memories of my childhood there are of climbing trees, wandering among the rock pools on the beach and swimming in the sea and river there – first with water wings and a rubber ring.

"No wonder I took to swimming like a duck to water when we began having swimming lessons at my primary school. We went every week to Tunstall baths for four years. I used to swim in the River Severn too, at Bridgnorth, where an auntie and uncle lived."

How many readers recall Tunstall in the 1950s? It was changing during Mary Mae's formative years. High Street welcomed Hubanks' modern market in 1950 and a Swettenham's in 1955.

Among the well-known folk lost to Tunstall in that decade were the redoubtable Martha Rigby of the Wheatsheaf Inn in 1951 and Arthur Durose (of the famous family of art metal workers) in 1953.

People enjoyed dancing at the Scala Ballroom in High Street or the Mecca Ballroom in Greengate Street – both long gone.

This was the Tunstall of Mary Mae's childhood – and it was a Tunstall

school that nurtured her love of books, as we are about to hear: "Going to Summerbank Nursery School was wonderful. Miss Bartholomew was the head and Miss Meigh was my teacher.

"I remember her perfumed presence, red hair and colourful clothes. I remember I gravitated to the book corner there. I learned to read very quickly.

"The Blackberry Farm books were my favourite at the time and I longed for a pet dog! (I never got one until I was in my 20s). I went back to see the teachers when I was 19 and on a teacher training course studying children at play.

"I don't remember much about infants' school except that we played 'jacks' on the steps of the school entrance at playtime."

It may say much about the times that Mary Mae never had to wait too long for her next smack.

She continues: "It was at that age that I had to go to a child minder before and after school, as mum was working full time again. The stern lady smacked us children for nothing and I distinctly remember I was never allowed to sit on a chair, but always had to sit on the floor to watch TV. To this day I will not sit on the floor!

"Once at junior school I no longer needed a child minder and was able to walk myself to school and back and let myself in with the house key. At home I had to make the coal fire in the living room, every day after school, peel vegetables and set the table ready for mum to get home and cook the evening meal – which we called tea! At the weekends I had to clean all the bedrooms and do the ironing etc.

"Summerbank Junior School was quite innovative. I enjoyed it. We had country dancing in the hall, nature walks out to what we called Banky fields, and in summer we had art classes outside. A peripatetic music teacher came in to play the piano at school assembly and she gave violin lessons. I did that for two years with the instrument lent by the school but never had time or space to practice."

Mary Mae's natatorial skills came to be cultivated by by a couple of well-respected local tutors.

She conveys: "By this time, I had been chosen to attend advances swimming classes at both Tunstall and Burslem, first with coach Mrs Joan Higginson, then her and the coach Derek Taylor.

"I ended up swimming for Staffordshire and regularly represented Newcastle Baths swimming club in competitions all over the county and even into Cheshire, until I was about 16."

As long as I have known this local author, I have always fancied that...

I can see my mum sitting reading Mills & Boon romances now, with one leg under her bottom and a woodbine dangling from her mouth.

Mary Mae Lewis

... she has deep-rooted views on prejudice and fairness. If you dig deeper, you can sometimes discover explanations for this in her Tunstall childhood.

She muses: "As a writer, I am often asked whether I 'lived at the local library.' Strangely, I developed a phobia of libraries. I had to go to Tunstall Library every couple of weeks for my mum. I can see her sitting reading Mills & Boon romances now, with one leg under her bottom and a woodbine dangling from her mouth. I would visit the library with six books and ask the assistant to change them for two romances, two murders and two historical novels.

"My chin hardly reached the counter. I was dealt with what can only be described as contempt and I couldn't get out quickly enough. I have had a short story called The Library published in an anthology that was inspired by this experience. It was at this stage that I began to understand snobbery and class distinction. At school I was singled out for buttons being missing off my cardigans and having holes in my socks!

"Like nearly all children at eleven, I took the eleven plus. Although I was in the A stream and on the top table, I didn't pass. I was disappointed but then reasoned I hadn't been coached well enough to pass. I was so overawed at having to go to the grammar school to sit the exam I had been sick the night before and never slept.

"Furthermore, I suspected there was a bit of underhandedness going on!

"Still I passed at thirteen – and all's well that ends well! No regrets!"

En passant, I suspect that she no longer has any phobia relating to libraries. I base this assumption on the fact that she recently presented a talk and book-signing... at Audley Library!

Mary Mae Lewis now lives in Abbey Hulton and is the author of Where There's A Will There's A Woman and Don't Stop The Fiesta.



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