

An Inspiring Pit Brow Lass who became a Missionary Doctor

BY SHEILA RAMSDALE

For a number of years I corresponded with this wonderful woman, Mary Tomlinson, who started life in 1899 in a terraced house in Loch Street, Pemberton. She worked in the cotton factories at the age of thirteen and later in the mining industry on the coal face, but also had a religious calling to one day become a missionary in India. She had never heard of India until she spoke to the Methodist Minister at her local church. He set her on the path to obtaining qualifications



Sheila Ramsdale presenting a copy of the book to Dr Jannath, Medical Director of Health

at Wigan Mining and Technical College (now the Town Hall), then further training to become a nurse. Finally, she was encouraged to become a doctor and completed her studies in 1930.

She decided to become a missionary doctor and embarked on a six month journey to Madras in India, ending up in a Methodist Missionary hospital in an outlying village called Ikkadu where she worked with very poor young women.

I discovered her when I was doing research on Irish immigration to Wigan. I read a newspaper article which showed her on furlough in Wigan in 1936 where she was giving lectures and fund raising for her hospital. She completely fascinated me, and by then she was long retired and living in a village near Great Yarmouth. I managed to contact her and she agreed to send me copies of her diaries, which I then transcribed. By then she was in her 80s and it was very clear she wanted no publicity in her lifetime. She stated, 'I have only been a servant of God'. She was a very humble person but her story was truly remarkable.

After Mary died at the age of aged 101, with the help of a friend, Rita Fell, who also at the time worked in Wigan Local Studies, I wrote a booklet about her fascinating life. Before completing the book, I went over to Chennai with my husband to find the hospital she had worked in. I met the Medical Director of Health, Dr Jannath, and I was awe-struck to be standing on the very spot she had lived and worked. I promised I would return when I had completed the booklet and I did this in January 2020. Needless to say Dr Jannath was very surprised when I turned up one Monday morning to present him with a copy. My mission was finally accomplished.

If you wish to know more about this wonderful woman, copies of the booklet can be purchased at a cost of £7.50 from the Museum of Wigan Life, Library Street, Wigan or from Sheila Ramsdale on 01942 244309.