

Mary Isabella (Mabel)
1883-1973

Mabel never married but did have proposals into her late seventies. She went to the Domestic Science College in Atholl Crescent, Edinburgh, (the Do School) but returned to Watermill and lived with her parents at Watermill and Lumbs.



The Atholl Crescent School of Cookery

Mabel is second from the right. She was very small!



She later lived in Edinburgh in a four storey house at 43 Mardale Crescent which she ran as a boarding house for students. The east side of Mardale Crescent was knocked down to build Napier College and she moved to an attic flat at 16 Grange Terrace.

Gerrard Burnett believes that at some stage she was Matron and Bursar at Gordonstoun School founded in 1934. Her cousin John Murray and her cousin's husband William Moir Calder were connected to Gordonstoun.

She was fun and close to her many nieces and nephews and great nieces and nephews. June and Lesley were frequent visitors as were their many cousins. In 1947 many of her nieces and nephews stayed with her for the first Edinburgh festival.



James Burnett, Stuart Watt, June, John Watt, Audrey Meff, Auntie Mabel, probably 1947



As a student I used to visit her regularly, partly because I had been told to, but also because I enjoyed a good chat and a break from the Pollock Halls. She also invited my friends over to parties! She was always helping others, even old people who were much younger than her. She lived to 91.

At Lumbs c. 1914.
Mabel is on the left

In 1946



Susan O'Brien's account of Mabel:

MABEL WATT

"Auntie Mabel", as she was known to many descendants over two generations, was born a twin, but her twin died young, probably at birth. She was the first female to go on to any kind of tertiary education: she attended what was then known as the Edinburgh School of Cookery, which had been founded in 1875 with the twin aims of encouraging the access of women to higher education, and the improvement of diet in working class families. By 1891 it had premises in Atholl Crescent, which included residential facilities for the students. Later it had other titles and ultimately it was absorbed by Queen Margaret University. When I was young in the 1960s, women studied for a two year diploma which covered not only cooking, baking and household management, but also catering on an industrial scale. My school bursar was a graduate, for example: this was not in any sense a refined finishing. There was a separate course for childcare and nannies by that time, though we do not know what the course involved in 1900.

Mabel then returned to Watermill, the family farm near Fraserburgh, where at least five of her siblings were still young enough to require care. It is nevertheless puzzling that she returned, and she remained with her parents until their deaths. Rae laughed as she reported that when Mabel became engaged to be married she "didn't like what he wanted to do to her", but there was more than one engagement (including one to a farmer from New Zealand) and many suitors. One was a diplomat from the West Indies; another was Prof William Moir Calder, who became Professor of Ancient Greek at Edinburgh University, but he gave up and went on to marry one of her cousins (Isobel Watt Murray, daughter of Isabella and Francis Murray). Perhaps Mabel was traumatised by witnessing her mother's multiple home births, two of which ended with babies who died? Rae also said that Mabel was quick to take offence, but she was remembered as being a matchmaker and "such fun" by Lesley. All the other descriptions of her are of a particularly kind and nice person, who went out of her way to help many, including Rae who was left behind in Edinburgh during World War II with a new baby, a husband far away and her own family outside the UK. Rae and baby Anne moved in with Mabel and Rae regarded her as a life saver.

By this time, Mabel had left Aberdeenshire and moved to Edinburgh. This may have happened soon after the death of her father John in 1933- and the arrival of Alan's wife at the end of that year, or it may have been later. Certainly, in 1943 Jeanie died of a stroke at the age of 90 in Mabel's house. Mabel had put her training to good use by opening a boarding house, taking in students, and made her living as a landlady for most of the rest of her life. At first she had a four storey house at 43 Mardale Crescent, in the Bruntsfield area, but when the property was made subject to compulsory purchase in order to found Napier College, she went to an attic flat at 16 Grange Terrace. She was a famously excellent cook, happily remembered for superb teas and cheerful parties. She permitted each of her student lodgers to invite one friend for tea on Sundays, and she was always hugely interested in what happened to all of them. She was keen to be up to date with ideas and fashions. Peter remembers her on holiday in Callendar when she was in her eighties: she sashayed along the street in fashionably huge glasses, wearing multiple strings of beads.

Mabel was also very affectionate, and Alistair said she had saved him when he became a boarder at the Edinburgh Academy in 1956, when he was 8. Anne, aged 12, was sent to St Denis in Edinburgh to board at the same time, as their father Donald had gone to work in Liberia. Rae took the youngest, Peter, to Liberia with her. This arrangement only lasted a year, because the marriage was faltering and Rae insisted on returning to Edinburgh. She wanted the children to return to school as day pupils. But for that terrible year, as Ali remembered it, he and Anne would take a bus to Mabel's house every Sunday after church. There they would be fed, cuddled, comforted and sorted out before being sent back alone on separate buses in the evening. He would have been pretty traumatised without these respite Sundays: as it was, he shuddered at the memory of smuggling paper bags into school breakfast, and spooning all his porridge into them under cover of his blazer.

Mabel was a central point in the family over a span of generations. When they were in their early teens, Lesley and her cousin John Watt both stayed with her in order to attend the first Edinburgh Festival in 1947, and then returned for the next two Festivals, having acquired new social skills as well as enjoying musicals and culture. A generation later, Alison Forbes visited Mabel regularly when she was a student at Edinburgh University. Mabel died in Edinburgh in 1973, aged 91.