

# Whose Is This's, Gwen's Or Sis's?

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(Article from *A Miscellany of Merriott Memories*)



*Merriott* people of a certain age will, I expect, instantly connect the above line-up of Safeway buses, photographed alongside All Saints church wall, with the heading above. Moreover, as they do so I imagine they will smile as they remember Sis and Gwen Gaylard.

Sis (Maude) and Gwen were, at the time I can recall, middle-aged twin sisters from South Petherton who for many years worked as conductresses on the Safeways; Sis fulltime, Gwen part-time. Countrywomen to their fingertips, undereducated perhaps, but certainly not fools by any means. Neither appeared to care too much about their appearance and often looked somewhat unkempt. I also thought they were a bit grumpy. A couple of '*characters*', as some might say, but once upon a time they very much part of the south Somerset scene, and are remembered by many with affection.

Sis gained a reputation for cramming passengers into an already full bus. She was very adept at this. Standing at the door, she would push folk in until the sides of the bus almost bulged. Then, with barely a foothold, as the bus set off she would cling to either side of the doorway, her outstretched arms preventing late borders from falling out,



knowing that at the next stop, particularly on the busy Crewkerne to Merriott leg of the journey, sufficient passengers would get off for the pressure to be eased. On such occasions, collecting fares on the bus was impossible and so she would stand in the roadway to take the fares and clip the tickets as the passengers got off. There were occasions when half the standing passengers had to get off to let others out, and then get back on again. If all that sounds chaotic, well, it wasn't; Sis would have everything totally under control, not even lippy teenagers would dare to challenge her authority. That said, though, a tale is told of how a group of lads, having been pushed into the bus by Sis, opened the rear emergency door and went round to the front of the bus, only for Sis, unknowingly, to push them back in again!

I think Gwen was probably called into service when no regular employee was available. She was less boisterous than Sis but equally formidable. Because large numbers of Merriott folk used to go to Crewkerne pictures back in those days and it took two buses to take people home, she was often on duty late on Saturday nights, Sis on one bus, Gwen on the other. Between them, I doubt if anyone ever had to walk home.

But Gwen had other jobs besides bus conducting. She was also a poster girl. No, not that sort! What she used to do was amble around the villages with a pony and trap - her pony's name was Blackie - sticking up posters, not just anywhere but on what I presume were designated sites, one of these being the road-facing doors of some farm buildings down at Merriottsford. Dipping into a bucket with her long-handled broom, she stood up in the trap and applied paste to the hording before using the brush to push the poster or, in the case of large posters, a section, in position. My wife, a South Petherton girl, occasionally accompanied Gwen on a poster-sticking journey. It began with *'Can I have a ride Gwen?' A brief silence followed as ill-fitting false teeth were repositioned from the lower lip to their proper position in the upper mouth, and then came the response; 'Git in then,' and the teeth dropped down again. Little else was said throughout the journey.*

Gwen was also a postwoman, delivering in the villages around South Petherton, again using her pony and trap. A story about Gwen that I particularly love is when she made an eagerly awaited delivery to a so-called 'posh' woman (it was probably Margaret Fish, the renowned gardener) who lived in a big house down Lambrook way who was awaiting news from intending visitors. As she handed over a postcard, Gwen said *'They bain't coming.'*

As for the above title, as a bus hove into view this is what my brother-in-law and his South Petherton pals used to say. *'Whose is this's, Gwen's or Sis's?'* Nowadays, of course, neither, and even the Safeways that served the community so well for so long are no more, which to those of us of a certain age is all rather sad, really.