

Jane Bunford

In the early part of the 20th Century Bartley Green was no more than a little farming community on the northern edge of Worcestershire. The overflow from Birmingham was still half a century away. But in this village of blacksmiths and agricultural labourers one character undoubtedly stood out. There is a plaque to commemorate her on the wall outside Bartley Green library.

In many ways it is not the plaque itself, but the wall it is fixed to that makes the point. The wall is eight feet tall; if Jinny Bunford had stood on tiptoe, she could just about have peered over it.

For 60 years Jane Bunford held the dubious honour of being the tallest woman in the world, and she remains the tallest recorded in UK history. Years of always having to bend her way into shops and cottages took its toll on her spine, so an accurate measurement of her adult height was never possible. They say, had Jinny been able to stand up straight, that she was an inch shy of eight feet tall. In a city where the average woman rarely rose more than five feet, Jinny stood head, shoulders, chest and arms above them all.

Jinny Bunford was born in 1895, the daughter of a Bartley Green metal caster, and for the last few years of her life she lived in one of the cottages that used to stand opposite the library in Jiggins Lane. There was nothing unusual about Jane as a young girl. It was (we think) falling off her bike at the age of ten that tipped nature out of balance. Her damaged pituitary gland then went into over-drive.

From the age of eleven Jane Bunford's growth was rapid and alarming, such that she was removed from St Michael's School two years later, no longer able to sit at a desk. Were it not for her height, it was the copper-coloured hair that reached down to her ankles (which was a very long way indeed) that was the most striking thing about her. Her hair was over eight feet long, and more than once she turned down lucrative requests to buy it.

Ginny Bunford passed all her days in Bartley Green, though there were the inevitable less-than-tempting offers from circuses to lure her away. She took a job at Cadbury's instead. Certainly she was a familiar figure in the village in the early years of the last century. What seems to have stuck in the mind of the oldest residents was the sight of her cleaning the upstairs windows of the family cottage without the aid of a ladder.

Very tall people rarely live to a ripe old age. After several years living in quiet seclusion, Jinny Bunford died at the age of 26 in 1922, the cause of death being given as hyperpituitarism and gigantism. She was buried in the graveyard of St Michael & All Angels' church in Field Lane four days later.

That, at least, was what appeared to have happened. Certainly her coffin was taken to the burial ground, and a service held over it. The four boys who carried it

remarked on how light the coffin was. But whatever was inside Jane Bunford's coffin, it was not Jane Bunford. Or not most of her, anyway.

The kind of tempting offers that Jinny had turned down in her lifetime did not stop with her death, by which time she was not in a position to refuse.

It was some years later, in 1971, when the Guinness Book of Records published a photograph of the skeleton of "an unidentified female from Northfield, aged c.24 years" that the truth began to emerge. Jane's bones were not lying in a Bartley Green graveyard, but hanging in the medical museum at Birmingham University.

There are still questions as to how this could have happened. Jane's surviving family denied all knowledge, and the Medical School also refused to disclose how it had obtained the skeleton. Permission must have been granted somewhere along the line. But despite considerable press and TV attention in the early 1970s everyone, including Jane herself, remained tight-lipped as to the sequence of events.

Nor did it change the situation very much. Jinny Bunford continued to be a resident of the anatomical museum for a further 30 years, though access was considerably tightened up. Curiously, that photograph from 1971 seems to have been the only one ever taken of Jane Bunford, alive or dead, and no later ones were to appear.

We have become increasingly sensitive about this kind of thing in recent years, as have the museums themselves. Medical curiosities and anatomical collections have thus been consigned to basement storage or dispersed entirely.

Such was the case with Jane Bunford. After a request from her family, in 2005 Jane's remains were released by Birmingham University, and a second funeral was held for her at St Michael's.

Even then, the secrecy surrounding this most mysterious of Bartley Green residents has not entirely abated. The funeral was private, and the date undisclosed. And no gravestone marks her (hopefully) final resting-place, though there is one to her mother.

A woman who could hardly be missed while she was alive is more easily overlooked in death.