

A Series of Very Fortunate Events

by Jane Reas

You may have noticed the way that Gillian eeee-long-aaates some of her words when she's excited, like when she said

"oooowww gre-aaaat"

when I first told her I'd been into the library at the University of Leeds to ask about some long forgotten tapes that Bill Mitchell had left there many years ago. And then when she said,

"brrrrril-eee-aaaan-t",

when I told her that the curator in 'Special Collections' had been in touch with me to say he'd discovered something that the Archive might be interested in.

But on the day that Gillian and I travelled to Leeds to take a look at the 'discovery', we both eeeee-long-aaaated some words together when they showed us what they'd found.

"ooooooooow faaaaaan-tast-iiiiiii-c", we both said, perhaps a little too loud for the library.

Bu we were so excited, I think we made those words nearly half a mile long.

But that's only part of the story because actually it was a sort of 'Series of Very 'Fortunate' Events' ('Lemony Snicket' had similar experiences but his events were mostly unfortunate, if I remember rightly) that led us to that faaaaaan-taaaastt-iiiiic discovery in the first place.

I'd better start at the beginning!

I'd been a volunteer with the Archive for a few months when I heard Gillian say that Bill had donated some tapes to Leeds University Library a number of years ago and that it would be great if the archive could find out what they were and listen to them – first fortunate event, me being nosey and hearing this.

"I go into the University Library, would you like me to pop in and ask?" I volunteered – second fortunate event, me being a research student at Leeds and a regular library user.

"That would be gre-aaaaa-t" said Gillian, eeee-long-aaating a little but not too much for a wet February morning.

I was on a mission and I promised myself I would ask next time I went to the university but, you know how it is, and how time just seems to race on by when you're not looking. Or put another way, I forgot.

Feeling rather guilty about not having got round to what I'd volunteered to do, it was about 6 weeks later that, finding myself with an hour to spare - and fortunate event number 3, in the library on another rainy afternoon - I suddenly thought,

'Bill Mitchell archive, do it now Jane, you have a mission, remember?'

I headed for enquiries and at the desk told the story about the missing tapes to the young man with long lemony coloured hair (was this a coincidence or a sign I now ask myself?)

He tip-tapped on his keyboard for a moment and then without looking up said,

"Nar, nothing, nothing at all but I do know that the university has recently destroyed all its audio tapes. It's really old technology you know?"

Oh dear, oh dear dear, I thought to myself (I often resort to Piglet quotes at times of stress).

And of course my mind started to imagine that Bill's had been the last tapes destroyed - only last week - why hadn't I asked earlier? Imagination can be a scary thing if you let it.

Despondent I headed towards the door.

"Have you tried Special collections?" the man with lemony hair shouted after me. "You never know, perhaps they went up there" he added, now with a rather sympathetic look on his face. Fortunate event number 4, just enough time left to go upstairs and ask before I needed to rush for my train.

Special Collections at the University Library is rather a special place, which I guess is why they call it that, but in 8 years at Leeds I had never before crossed the threshold of that rather hallowed space. It was very, very quiet, even for a library and some people I noticed were wearing white cotton gloves on their hands. Others were in a room behind a full length glass wall and seemed to be looking through the biggest oldest books I had ever seen. I could imagine how they might smell wonderfully musty - the books, that is, and not the people looking at them.

"Can I help you?" a man behind the desk asked.

Fortunate event number 5, Richard Davies was at the enquiry desk on the very day I walked in. He was to be a really important character in this story – but I didn't know that then (stories are like that, aren't they?)

Again I told him about my mission and added that downstairs the man with lemony hair had said that all the tapes in the library had recently been destroyed.

"It's really old technology" I added, showing off a bit.

Poor Richard tried very hard. He looked in this special collection and that special collection.

He opened up a special file on the computer and said to me,

"You look on there while I look in here".

And then he disappeared for a while into another room, this time behind a solid door with a red 'Staff Only Beyond This Point' sign that swung like a clock pendulum long after he had disappeared through it.

What seemed like ages later he re-appeared.

"Nothing I'm afraid", he said quietly and then added "but the only person who may know something is on holiday for 2 weeks. Give me your email address and if you can let me have any more details, anything at all, we can have another look when my colleague gets back from her leave. But I'm really not hopeful, I'm not hopeful at all".

I wrote my email address down, thanked him for his time and left to catch my train. I wondered sadly if that would be the end of the story.

I contacted Gillian the next day and told her just a little bit about what had happened. It's sometimes best to give people unfortunate news in small chunks. I mentioned the man with the lemony hair but not that the university had recently destroyed all its tapes (being very old technology) and I told her about special collections but not about the swinging sign on the door (I could have mentioned that but decided not to). I did tell her that Richard's colleague was on leave and would have a look when she got back to work.

"That's gre-aaaa-t," Gillian said and I felt a little guilty that she'd eeee-long-aaated when there was really not much to eeee-long-aaate about.

She gave me a few more details which I passed onto Richard and then the days and weeks went by. I kept thinking that maybe I should tell Gillian some more of the unfortunate events but decided to wait until she mentioned it again - fortunate event number 6, because the real story could have made her quite sad.

And then one day 'ping' an email from Richard Davies.

'Who the heck's that?' I thought.

You can tell how much time had passed. I'd even forgotten about the man with the lemony hair to be honest.

'My colleague's back and has located something you may be interested in', the email read, 'pop in next time you are in the library and ask for me'.

"Yessssssssssssssssssss" I thought and it does still count as eeee-long-aating even if you are only thinking it.

'On leave for 3 weeks from today', the email finished.

Oh noooooooooo!

I told Gillian a little casually about the email but she still did a very long

"that's gre-aaaaaaaa-t" and then said, "when shall we go?"

We synchronised our diaries (doesn't that make a story exciting?) and chose Friday of the first week Richard would be back for our trip to Leeds. Fortunate event number 7, we both had full diaries and that was the only date for many weeks that we were both able to make it, and what is more, we really only had an hour between when we could get there and when Richard would be off attending a meeting. It was a close call, as someone very famous once said.

I remember that on the train that Friday Gillian and I chatted all the way about loads of interesting things that made us both use lots of very eeee-long-aated words. I think we were quite excited. Maybe Richard had found 6 tapes, maybe as many as 10.

'Oooooooooow' we both quietly thought to ourselves.

Catching a bus from the train station to the university, we arrived with only half an hour to spare and once inside the library we went straight up to Special Collections and rang the bell to get in. I said before it was special.

We told the lady behind the desk that we had come to see Richard Davies about some Bill Mitchell tapes and she asked us to sit down and wait. Then off she went through the door with the swinging sign. Gillian and I were quiet now. After what seemed like an age the door swung open and out came the lady again.

“Richard says would you like to see one box or all four”

My heart sank just a little I have to admit - only four.

“Not as good as ten”, I thought “but better than one I suppose”.

“Oh”, said Gillian “we might as well see all four”

The lady went back through the door but then almost immediately Richard was there, pushing a trolley with 4 large boxes on it and smiling like a Cheshire cat – I’ve often wondered, do Cheshire cats really smile?

Gillian and I excitedly started to unpack the boxes and that’s when we discovered ‘extremely’ fortunate event number 8:

100 books,

some very interesting papers,

and letters,

and notes

And cuttings

All things that Bill had put into the boxes years and years ago....

And in one box - OVER 90 TAPES.

This was more than either of us had ever imagined. This was like finding a pot of gold at the end of a rainbow.

“ooooooooow faaaaaan-tast-iiiiiii-c”, we both sort of squealed, not once but every time we looked inside another box “ooooooooow faaaaaan-tast-iiiiiii-c”.

That's really the end of the story, but like all good stories it could do with a bit of a twist. I could say that at that very moment the man with the lemony hair walked into the room and was recognised as the long lost cousin that Gillian hadn't seen for 20 years – but he didn't and anyway he wasn't. I could say that the last box contained a magic lamp which when we rubbed it gave us each a special wish – but it didn't and anyway the boxes were so full there was no room for even a tiny lamp.

But I could say that the boxes were full of tapes of interviews made by Bill speaking to people who had personally known Beatrice Potter. Well guess what, that's fortunate event number 9, and its truuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuuue.

THE END – well only of this part of the story.

Gillian Waters is the Project Officer for the W.R. Mitchell Archive and Jane Reas is a volunteer who is helping to transcribe some of Bill's hundred's of tapes. They met when Gillian asked for volunteers one evening at Settle Folly when Bill was talking about his work to a public audience – and that, Jane thinks, is definitely fortunate event number 10!