



MOVING STORY

A headline act

SINGER SARAH MCQUAID HAS LIVED AROUND THE WORLD, BUT IS HAPPIEST IN CORNWALL

Words by **Liz Norbury**, photographs by **Charles Francis**

Singer Sarah McQuaid was born in Spain, and has lived in the USA, France and Ireland. She and her guitar are much in demand at folk clubs and festivals throughout Britain and beyond. But one of her happiest musical memories is taking part in a Christmas celebration in the Cornish village which has become her home.

Sarah, her husband Feargal Shiels and their children, Eli and Lily Jane, had lived in St Buryan for just six months when she was invited to play at the Nativity play at the parish church. "We didn't expect to find ourselves welcomed with such open arms," says Sarah. "I've never known a place with such a strong community spirit.

"There are a whole load of organisations and events here, from the church choir to the cricket club and the vintage rally – and there is strong community support for them all. The village is twinned with Calan in France, and there was a huge dinner in the community hall when the French came over. It was brilliant fun. We had the coach driver staying with us, but next year, we'll be matched with a family."

Sarah's mother and stepfather lived in Cornwall for years, but she and Feargal had no plans to move from their house in County Wexford until circumstance intervened. "When my mother died, my stepfather couldn't manage on his own," she explains. "He said he would give us the house, and renovate one of the sheds as a cottage for himself. He's always felt

more at home here than anywhere else."

Her mother and stepfather were both artists, and before moving to St Buryan, divided their time between Washington DC and Newlyn. "They founded an arts magazine, but had reached burnout stage and wanted to step back from it," says Sarah. "They wanted to live somewhere where they could be really happy.

"The house in Newlyn was lovely, but it was at the top of a steep hill and it was damp. When they decided to move, they had a list of requirements: the house had to be dry; my stepfather didn't want to be able to see any other house; there had to be some kind of water; and there had to be a little bit of land, but not too much. I said: 'You'll never find a house to meet these requirements' – but lo and behold, they did!

"My mother really loved the garden – it was the focus of her life. I still have her notebooks: pages and pages about what was coming into bloom each month."

Sarah and Feargal were never in any doubt about taking up her stepfather's offer. "I knew it would be great for the kids to grow up in the country and go to a village school," says Sarah. Feargal, brought up in a seaside town on Ireland's east coast, was enchanted by the moorland of West Penwith. "I'd always had a dream of living somewhere like this," he says.

Sarah spent most of her childhood in Chicago, and her life in music began when she joined the Chicago Children's →

LEFT: MUSICIAN SARAH MCQUAID ABOVE FROM LEFT: SARAH'S WELL-USED GUITAR CASE; THE LUSH GARDEN IN ST BURYAN



LET'S MOVE TO... ST BURYAN

Choir at the age of eight. "We did a couple of tours a year, and went all over the States," she recalls. "At the same time, I was writing songs, which I carried on doing all the way through school.

"When I went to France at 18 to study philosophy, I started singing in a local club. Someone told me about a band doing traditional Irish music which needed a singer and guitarist. I didn't know much about Irish music, but I discovered that I loved it."

Sarah later lived and played back in the United States and in Ireland, where her musical career took off. Her debut album, *When Two Lovers Meet*, was recorded in 1996 and featured some of the traditional songs she had come to love.

But a stint working on a magazine at University College

"Eli would have been in a class of almost 40 children in Ireland. Here, there are 11 children in his class"

Dublin led to an offer of work at a publishing company, and there was suddenly little time for singing. "I was told the job would be for three months," she remembers. "I ended up editing magazines for 11 years. I kept thinking: 'I'll do this a bit longer, then I'll become a full-time musician'."

By then, Sarah had married Feargal and become a mother of two. Both she and Feargal had a 60-mile daily journey to work in Dublin. Feargal recalls: "I was working in social care, in a residential home. The job was great – but the commuting wasn't."

Sarah, meanwhile, was living "a crazy lifestyle. The kids were in the nursery for 10 hours a day, and I was spending three hours a day on the road. It was a high-pressure job, and if I had a deadline, I worked late and was lucky if I saw Eli and Lily Jane before they went to bed, which was no way to live. I would be crying in the car on the way home.

"What made me see the light was being invited to co-host a workshop at a guitar festival with one of my heroes, Dick Gaughan. I hadn't taken my guitar out of its case for four

years, since Eli was born, and I hadn't played in public for seven. I had to re-learn the guitar for fear of the humiliation that would ensue. I was a ball of nerves, but I got great support from Dick. He said: 'You should go out there and do it'.

"I couldn't just give up the job – we had a mortgage to pay. But to my amazement, I found I could line up some gigs, then a distribution house re-launched my CD and got me a slot on Irish national television. At first, I thought I could play in local pubs. Then I was asked to play at respected festivals. I quit the job in February last year and I've been working steadily ever since. It's been great."

During the last 12 months, Sarah and Feargal have been turning the house at St Buryan into a family home. "We had

new floors and central heating put in, and had to rebuild the staircase because it was caving in," she says.

"The house was originally two cottages for local farm workers, and was derelict. The people who were here before my parents renovated the house themselves, but the plumbing was done with the wrong kind of pipes, and there wasn't a working window in the place! We'd like to bring the place back to a more traditional style.

"My mother's paintings and etchings are on the walls, and I have my grandmother's desk and dining room table. I had some of her frying pans with me in Ireland, and my mother had the rest here. This is the first time the pans have been back together."

Eli started at St Buryan School two months after the move. "It was good timing, and it's a very good school, which is a huge bonus," says Sarah. "He would have been in a class of almost 40 children in a prefab in Ireland. Here, there are 11 children in the class.

"There are lots of Cornish names at the school. It certainly

gives the lie to everything you hear about villages being taken over by second homes. It's not true in St Buryan."

Fergal is now working as a postman, but has also put his previous experience in social care to good use by doing occasional days at the John Daniel Centre for adults with learning difficulties in Penzance.

Meanwhile, Sarah is enjoying her most artistically fruitful period yet. Almost 12 years after her first album came out, her second is about to be released. Called *I Won't Go Home 'Til Morning*, it features traditional American songs which she remembers from her childhood, plus her own song, *Only An Emotion*.

It will be swiftly followed by another CD, *Crow Coyote Buffalo*, a collaboration with fellow West Penwith musician Zoe Young (featured in last month's *Cornwall Today*). The duo call themselves Mama, partly because they both have young children.

"I got talking to Zoe at the school gate, and she wanted to play me some songs she'd written," says Sarah. "She said she didn't have words, so I asked her if she'd like me to write some. We've written about 20 songs now."

In recent months, she has also toured Ireland, Scotland and Holland. "I see a lot more of the kids as a touring musician than when I was a 9 to 5 worker. A lot of festivals are child-friendly, and I'm trying to take tours to fit in with the school holidays. Feargal, Eli and Lily Jane came with me to Scotland, and we got to see some really nice places. In Ireland, they stayed with their grandparents," she explains with a smile.

"If I'd thought things were going to work out like this, I would have left my job years ago. Fergal used to go blue in the face telling me to do it – but I thought my music was too acoustic, quiet and folk. I never dreamed I could make a living at it." 

I Won't Go Home 'Til Morning by Sarah McQuaid is out on October 20. *Crow Coyote Buffalo* by Mama is due to be released in late November. For more information, visit the website www.sarahmcquaid.com

A traditional Cornish village with a friendly, active community, St Buryan is set in an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. It enjoys easy access to Penzance and the attractions of West Penwith, including the Minack Theatre and the beaches at Sennen and Porthcurno.

FACILITIES

- Good primary school
- Village shops
- Listed 14th century parish church, with the world's heaviest full circle peal of six bells
- Community centre
- Many local organisations, including football club, Young Farmers' Club and

- male voice choir
- Neolithic stone circles, Celtic crosses and holy wells throughout the parish
- Several summer festivals, including ploughing match and agricultural preservation rally featuring traction engines, rare breed animals and demonstrations of farm equipment

WHAT'S ON THE MARKET?

HIGHER TREVORRIAN FARM, ST BURYAN £490,000
P A WILKINS & CO, NEWLYN 01736 367546

This deceptively spacious detached former farmhouse enjoys a sunny aspect and open rural views. It is off the main road and has large, mature gardens. The property is in need of some updating and has the potential to be split into

two properties. Features include partial double glazing, gas-fired central heating, an attic room, six bedrooms – two en-suite – two bathrooms, shower room, two separate WCs, a garage with store room and parking for six cars.



ABOVE FROM LEFT: SARAH WITH HUSBAND FEARGAL AND CHILDREN ELI (LEFT) AND LILY JANE; THE FAMILY'S EXTENSIVE CD COLLECTION; BEJEW, ST BURYAN