Mary Squires was a familiar face in the Dorset village of Abbotsbury. The local people made their money fishing, and by making rope, baskets and cotton stockings. They could not make everything they needed to live and so they would buy goods from Mary, such as needles, pins and pots, when she came to the village. And Mary would buy bread, cheese, tobacco and tea from the local shops and use the village water pump. Sometimes she could afford to buy a fish or a bit of meat.

When not making a living selling goods that local people needed, Mary might be seen sitting by her fire, wrapped in her dark-coloured cape and smoking a pipe. She was a bit different looking and so some people were a bit scared of her. Usually Mary would try to reassure people that she would never hurt anyone. To help make her living in the world, she offered to mend broken pots and for a few pennies she would tell your fortune by reading your palm. But when she was tired she would sit with her pipe and enjoy a small ale, as she did at Litton Cheney in Dorset early on New Year’s day in 1753. Local people wanted to chat with her, but she was weary with walking and did not feel like making small talk.

The vicar, George Harris, was pleased to see the Squires family arrive in Abbotsbury later on that New Year’s Day, 1753. Mary and her family had spent the Christmas season of 1752 in South Parrot and Yeovil in Somerset. They reached Dorset on the 29th December and stayed at the Red Lion inn. Mary was hoping for news of her younger daughter, Polly, who was ill and had stayed in Middlesex with relatives rather than travel in the deepest cold of winter. Local people in Somerset were worried that Mary might not be very well as she walked along with her family. But all seemed to be well when they arrived in Abbotsbury. The Squires family were familiar to the villagers, they always paid fair prices and they brought important goods, entertainment and news to the local people. Most people in England lived in villages like Abbotsbury at the time.

The Squires family stayed in Abbotsbury for a week and enjoyed the New Year celebrations with the villagers. There was dancing until late, accompanied by Melchisdech Arnold, the local blacksmith, on his fiddle. William Clarke the shoemaker very much enjoyed his dances with Mary’s daughter, Lucy. And John Ford, the local carpenter, drank cider and caught up on news with Mary and her son. It was a cold week and the local tax officer was grateful to George Squires, Mary’s son, for lending him a great coat to keep warm. Everyone helped each other to make a hard life easier.

When the week was over the Squires family set off towards London. Mary and her family always travelled everywhere on foot. They did not have horses to help carry their loads and to speed their journey. People like the Squires moved from place to place selling what people needed and offering to do mending jobs for money. Sometimes the Squires had to sleep in cow houses and barns, but usually they could stay in inns, and people commented on their smart clothing. Oh, but that January was miserably wet. At Dorchester they needed help to cross the flooded River Frome. George carried Mary across on his back and Lucy sat behind the local miller on his horse. And they could not stop. They had received news that Polly had become very ill and so they pushed on, anxiously, through the night, despite the terrible wet.

It was such a hard journey in the cold and wet. The family slept out rough some nights and sheltered in a barn for another. But people in Coombe Bissett in Wiltshire were kind and took them in by the fire to get warm and dry. The Squires (and people like them) were fascinating to the local villagers. Mary was asked to tell fortunes, while the rest of the family helped people by mending their broken pots. But they really needed to get to London and so they took to the road again the next morning.

Lucy’s heart was still back in Abbotsbury and she dictated a letter to send to her sweetheart William Clarke from Basingstoke on the 18th January. It was written for her as she could not read or write herself. And there was no time to wait for a reply. The family were walking at least ten miles a day and so they reached the village of Brentford in Middlesex on the 20th January. Mary was so relieved to find that Polly was fully recovered and could rejoin the family. By the end of January they had made their way to the village of Enfield and went into lodgings.