

Tough as a rock cake – but as warm as an Aga. The doyenne of the Great British Bake Off shares a few slices of her wisdom

# All rise for Mary queen of cakes



Pictures: GRANT TRIPLOW

always had home-cooked everything. It wasn't until I was at school I realised food was something I was quite good at.

'My domestic science teacher, Miss Date, encouraged me and when I took home my cooking, my parents and my brothers would say: "Oh, that's a bit of alright, why don't you make another one?" which was very encouraging.'

'When it came to leaving, I decided to go into food.'

A stint doing catering at Bath College followed. Then, at 17, Mary went to study domestic science at a school in France.

'I hadn't been away from home before and I remember staying with a family who had ten children.'

'Our first meal was horse meat. I'd just left my pony back in England and I cried all the way through the meal.'

She took her Cordon Bleu exams in Paris ('dead easy') and came to London in her 20s, where she worked for the Dutch Dairy Bureau and then as a recipe tester for a PR firm, before writing the first of her many books.

'I couldn't believe I was being paid to cook all day every day for everyone from the Egg Council to the Flour Advisory board. Being paid to do what I loved was a complete joy.'

She married her husband Paul, now a dealer in antiquarian books and paintings, in 1966 when she was 30, and went on to have three children, Thomas, Annabel and William. Unlike so many mothers at the time, she only took five weeks off after each baby before returning to work.

'None of my friends had careers,

but I loved my work and Paul was marvellous with things like the school run.

'It wasn't like today. There was no maternity leave and if you didn't come back to your job soon, someone else would jump into your shoes. By then, I was cooking editor of a magazine and there was lots of competition.'

Sitting here in the white and duck-egg blue kitchen of her gorgeous two-storey Queen Anne Grade II-listed house, with the Aga blazing, delicious home-made shortbread on the table and smiling snapshots of her children and grandchildren dotted around the work surfaces, it would be easy to assume Mary Berry's life has been untroubled.

**B**UT 20 years ago she suffered the most unbearable tragedy when her youngest son, William, who had been a pupil at Prince Charles' alma mater Gordonstoun, was killed in a car crash when he was just 19.

Her face flushes and her bright blue eyes fill with tears as she describes the day he died.

'William was a bright button,' she says. 'He was at university in Bristol studying business when he came home that weekend.'

'It was a sunny Saturday in June and he went out in the car with his sister, Annabel, to get a newspaper. He was normally such a careful driver but that day he simply drove too fast. When the two of them didn't come back for lunch I thought:



"That's funny" and then a policeman came through the door.

'And, well, you know when you see a policeman come to the door ... I felt so sorry for him having to break the news. He told me William was dead and Annabel was in hospital. I thought: "Oh no, not two."

'Paul and I went straight there and they were so kind. I was drinking tea in a waiting room and then I saw a pink tracksuit covered in mud running up the corridor and I thought: "At least we have Annabel."

'Paul and I went to look at William's body. That's a good thing to do. People say: "Should you go and see them?" but there was never any

hesitation in my mind. I wanted to know. He was so cold.

'Since the accident, we've become very close as a family. His death has taught me all sorts of things.'

'If there's a tragedy in someone else's family I would automatically go straight up to them and talk to them. Because when it happened to us, even some people we knew would cross the road to avoid talking to us.'

'But the best thing you can do is go up to them and let them talk. The worst thing you can say is: "You'll get over it." You feel like socking them when they say that. You never get over it; you learn to live with it.'

Which is precisely what Mary has

**Oh crumbs! Mary Berry with Jill's Victoria Sponge and (left) a nervous wait to see if it passes the taste test**

done in her very dignified, very English way. Today, she is busier than ever. She's just written a new book, is up at 6am the following morning to film and keeps cooking and teaching. 'Why would I want to retire?' she asks. 'I don't even think of it as a job, it's just something I love to do.'

Her dogs Millie and Coco are barking and it's time to test my Victoria Sponge.

'You've used two eggs, yes?' she says. 'You've got a good rise for two eggs but I would have cooked it at 160 degrees, not 170 if you were using a fan oven.'

She cuts into a slice and takes a mouthful and the wait for her verdict is agony.

She smiles. 'I think you've done very well,' she says. 'It cuts through very nicely and tastes good.'

I'm overjoyed. The seal of approval from Mary Berry – surely some form of certificate is in order? At one point she even disappears outside with the cake, telling me she's going to take a slice to her husband.

As we bid our goodbyes, I'm wondering whether to apply for the next series. Then I catch sight of Mary's dogs in the doorway. Now I could be wrong, but was that raspberry jam and whipped cream they were licking off their noses?

■ *The Great British Bake Off Masterclass is on this Thursday at 8pm on BBC2.*