The remarkable Miss Jennifer Barnard, striding out in a manner that belies her 83-years, takes me up a steep sandy path and stops at a vantage point high above the beautiful Blue Pool near Wareham.

She waves a hand towards the shimmering water below. “Extraordinary isn’t it? There is nowhere else like this place. It has a very special atmosphere.”

She’s not wrong. Impossibly blue as its name suggests and surrounded by overhanging trees and wild heathland, the pool is a remarkable sight - a mysterious oasis hidden in the depths of rural Dorset.

Visitors to this exotic location - once the centre of the old Purbeck clay mining area at Furzebrook - are astonished to find that it exudes an atmosphere that really does seem to come from another time and place. Not unlike Miss Barnard herself.

“Miss, I do like to be called Miss,” she told me when we first met. “It’s a generational thing I suppose.”

So we wind the clock back to 1935 when Jennifer Barnard first arrived at Blue Pool. She was six years old and her father, the anthropologist Thomas Theodore Barnard, had just returned from working in Cape Town with the idea of establishing a family business back in England.
Country tea houses were very fashionable at the time and Dorset seemed a good location; when Tom Barnard saw Furzebrook he knew he’d found the perfect site. It had everything - a house, cottages, a farm, beautiful natural countryside and the astonishing Blue Pool.

The old flooded clay pit, dug out around 100 years earlier, was already a well-known beauty spot. Artists like Augustus John and later Paul Nash loved the place. In 1911, the somewhat Bohemian John set up an artists’ commune at Alderney Manor outside Poole. He soon discovered Furzebrook and painted his mistress Dorelia McNeill on the banks of the Blue Pool. The celebrated war artist Nash painted and photographed the pool in the 1930s while living in Swanage and having a passionate affair with the “seaside surrealist” Eileen Agar.

The old Purbeck mines had been used for years, supplying quality Dorset clay for the manufacture of tobacco pipes and fine china for big names like Wedgwood, Minton and Royal Worcester. Flooded to a depth of 40 feet The Blue Pool got its name from its extraordinary colour which is a result of light diffracting on the tiny particles of clay suspended in the water. Reacting to different temperatures the pool can suddenly appear vivid blue in winter or pea-green in summer. To catch it at its best you have to be lucky. Fortunately I was.

When Tom Barnard built his tea house on the edge of this magical pool it was an instant success. Miss Barnard, who still runs the business nearly 80 years later, remembers it being built: “The first bricks were laid in April 1935 and the tea house was opened to the public on June 8th.” Unfortunately the booming business was not immune to the arrival of the Second World War and the tea house was shut for nearly six years after being requisitioned by the Army. The Blue Pool estate was turned into a military reception station and medical facility.

Far more exciting for Jennifer, her younger sister Susan and their brother Tom was the arrival of American GIs on a training exercise for D-Day. “They had to
Augustus John painted his mistress Dorelia McNeill on the banks of the Blue Pool

Miss Barnard showing a picture of the painting Augustus John did of his mistress Dorelia at the Blue Pool in 1911

practise paddling boats across the pool in near silence. We thought they were wonderful. They were so kind to us and of course they gave us sweets.”

Young Jennifer officially started working at the Blue Pool in July 1946 and has been there every summer since. The tea house, built of sand and lime bricks with a Canadian cedar wood shingle roof, blends in perfectly with its surroundings. It still retains its unique 1930s style and many of the tables, the lights and floor are original.

“We don’t change. That is part of our charm,” explains Miss Barnard. “People come back after years away and are so relieved to find things exactly as they were.”

The estate was declared a Site of Special Scientific Interest back in 1985 and was held up as pioneering example of sound ecological management long before environmental issues became of widespread concern to the public.

Its 25 acres of heathland is home to badgers, deer and many rare plants, birds and reptiles. It attracts naturalists and ornithologists as well as others in search of tranquility and a cream tea reckoned to be one of the best in Dorset.

There is also an on-site museum showing the early history of clay mining in the Purbecks and how the arrival of tobacco and then tea had a huge influence on the area. Miss Barnard warms to the task of showing me around, glancing at an array of pipes, she comments: “It’s remarkable how two plants - two drugs if you like - completely changed the fortunes of this community.”

The museum has some wonderful displays of pipes and rare ceramics as well as a painstakingly recreated model of the rail network that served the Purbeck mines in their hey-day. “We got that from a man who had spent 10 years building it,” explains Miss Barnard, and then with a smile adds, “His wife wanted the spare bedroom back.”

The Blue Pool is open from 1 March until 30 November. The Tea House and Museum is open from 18 March until 31 October. For more information visit their website at bluepooltearooms.co.uk