



The Morrisises of Bryn Myrddin

The Reminiscences of Elaine Barry: Part 1

Bryn Myrddin – the house – lies just to the east of Abergwili overlooking the Bishop's Palace, formerly the residence of the Bishop of St David's, now home to Carmarthen Museum. Above Bryn Myrddin – the house – is Bryn Myrddin – the hill, Merlin's Hill. And below both the house and the hill stretch the flatlands of the Towy valley and the castles and the follies of the centuries.

It's a lovely view - changing according to time of day and the season of the year. At times it is obscured, for though the two Bryn Myrddins are no more than a couple of hundred feet above the floor of the valley, they can be surrounded by morning mists which force house and hill in on themselves like two abandoned orphans huddling together for comfort. A magnificent beech and its commoner neighbouring trees are home and climbing frame playground to a small tribe of squirrels. In the early morning light and the darkening pre-dusk rabbits hop on the vast lawn in front of the house where once tennis was played and the gilded youth of the valley practised forehands and flirting. A quick brownish-red fox sidles purposefully through the grass to check his hunting ground. A robin waits impatiently for the daily seed scattered on a tree stump by a resident for the house is now divided into half a dozen flats. A wren flits

among the pots and stones of a small doorstep garden. During the winter months blue-tits and yellow hammers peck upside down at moulds of cooked fat hanging from low branches. Despite its ancillary role in the story of the Fall of the House of Morris Bryn Myrddin still holds onto some of the magic associated with its name and position – both social and geographical – at the head of this part of the Towy valley.



For the last seventy-four years Bryn Myrddin has been the home of Elaine Barry, eldest daughter of Ryle Edward Charles Morris and his wife, Alicemargit. Elaine was born in her mother's bedroom in 1932 and was christened Elaine Mary Elizabeth Honoria Sophia Morris. She has lived the greater part of her life here. This is her story – and her account of her father and mother's story. It is also Bryn Myrddin's – the house's – story.

The house was built around the year 1860, a dozen years after the property was sold to the Carmarthen banker Thomas Charles Morris by a London lawyer. At that time the then existing house was called Penybanc Ucha. According to Francis Jones in his *Historic Carmarthenshire Houses*, the change of name to Bryn Myrddin was at the insistence of Mrs Morris who considered the name Pen y Banc - Penny Bank - 'inappropriate' as a banker's home. Pen y Banc was pulled down to make way for the rather grander gentleman's residence which replaced it. It was not a simple process. There were three architects drawings completed and even when one of them was decided on financial pressure ensured that some cuts and adjustments had to be made before it was finished.

Before the building of Bryn Myrddin the Morrisises had lived in Llanstephan in The Cottage. Again the name belies the reality - for this

was a substantial property, its privacy shielded by a large wall, overlooking the Towy estuary. However it was some ten miles south of Carmarthen and Thomas Charles' daily trip in a pony and trap ate substantially into a busy working day spent at the bank on King Street and the nearby solicitors' office of Walters and Williams where he also worked.

Since swallowed by Barclays, in its early days the Morris Bank was a substantial regional commercial business, printing its own notes and coins, one of which Elaine Barry still possesses and presumably can't lose, moulded, as it is, into the base of a vase.

Elaine's father was born in the final decade of Victorian Britain. The youngest of four children he was probably destined for banking or the law had not a higher and more capricious fate intervened. He was educated at a prep-school in Malvern, before Bath College took him on to Christ Church, Oxford – "a time he disparaged" – and then by turns Sandhurst, The Welch Fusiliers and a trench in Belgium on the Western Front in the middle of the First World War.

He had been there a mere two days when the order came through for the Fusiliers to go 'over the top' and advance on the German trenches. Within a few yards a piece of shrapnel put an end to his war and - very nearly - his life. The metal split open his skull so badly that, according to his daughter, his brains were exposed. He was carried to a makeshift field hospital, thence to a hospital on the France-Belgium border and finally back to London and the care of the appropriately named Dr Head.

"It's amazing that he survived. He was totally demolished. He had to learn to walk, to talk, to eat – everything – all over again. It took him

thirteen years. He was an invalid right up to his marriage in 1931. He was still having epileptic fits on his honeymoon. It affected him for the rest of his life. As children – [Elaine was the eldest of four] – we were told to make no noise, not to upset him."

Any ideas of a career in banking or legal work were now abandoned. Gardening was recommended and Ryle Morris enrolled at a horticultur-

fairy tale 'princess' – a view corroborated by her daughter.

"She was not 'beautiful' – certainly not as beautiful as her sister. She had a strong face – long and oval. She was not interested in 'fashion', 'beauty' or 'make-up' – definitely not in her later life anyway. She was very practical and energetic. She liked working in the garden. She drove the tractor."



Ryle and Alicemargit

But if that was how she ended up it was not how she started out. Raised a Catholic, Alicemargit spent the last years of the First World War as a nun in the Sacred Heart Convent in Vienna, ending the last months of the war with next to nothing to eat. After the war her horizons broadened, for when one of her cousins married Charlie Short, an American, Alicemargit sailed to New York to be nanny to the couple's growing family. She used her time in America to the full, learning to drive and meeting Roosevelt, though whether Teddy or FDR is not clear. By the time chance decreed she meet Ryle Morris she spoke German, French, English and a smattering of Hungarian.

For some time before they met Ryle had been dipping his toe in the matrimonial waters – so to speak – but to little effect. The attempt to get him married off to a suitable woman was in the main the self-adopted challenge of Great Aunt Alice of Middleton Hall, a daughter of the Abadam family. There

was also a London base for the family and Great Aunt Alice took it upon herself to introduce Ryle to fashionable London society – the life of balls, theatre, parties and other such social occasions then flowering in that light-hearted decade of the 1920s which blossomed so briefly but so colourfully between the Great War and the Great Depression.

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least 'one sad romance'. But if Ryle was put off by this unsuccessful foray into the matrimonial market place Alice remained optimistic.

"Don't worry, she will come!"

And come she did. But not upon the London scene. What happened was something of fairy tale with almost a Ruritanian setting. If Ryle had been disappointed once in love, what happened the second time around was the stuff of the most romantic dreams.

For Christmas 1930 Ryle was invited to the castle of an Austrian nobleman, Count Coreth. The connection was via the count's English wife, whose mother – so Morris family lore has it – was related to Robert Whitehead inventor of the torpedo.

If the torpedo connection is tortuous it at least allows for a suitable metaphor on the explosive effect that the entrance of Alicemargit to the Boxing Day Ball had on the so far desperately unlucky Ryle Morris.

"He always said that as soon as she came into the room he knew she was the one!"

Sunk or what!

For the next five days the two were inseparable. Long walks together in the snow – at all times accompanied by a chaperone, or as Elaine refers to her – "a gooseberry" – ended on New Year's Eve with the announce-

ment of the engagement of Alicemargit Hoyos and Ryle Morris.

"The story is that after he had asked her to marry him and she had agreed – and he was a very good looking man, the scar on his head always covered by a little black cap – he came back into the room and announced the engagement to everyone with the phrase, 'I have plucked the fairest rose of Austria.' And everyone clapped."

It's a metaphor which perhaps also reflects the importance of their combined passion for horticulture as much as for anything else.

And with that Ryle returned the very next day to Wales. Letters were exchanged on a daily basis and barely four months later on April 7th 1931 the two were married.

If the setting for the romance was romantic, the setting for the wedding was equally appropriate and impressive. The couple were married in the baroque splendour of Karlskirche in Vienna.

While they were away on honeymoon a no doubt delighted Great Aunt Alice set about overseeing a makeover for Bryn Myrddin to have it suitable for a member of the Austrian aristocracy. Electricity was installed – and central heating – and the whole house was redecorated.

Elaine has letters of that time which detail the pains Great Aunt Alice took with her new responsibilities. Her difficulties – principally the directions she required from Ryle as to what was needed at Bryn Myrddin – were not helped by the annoying if understandable preoccupations of Ryle with his new bride to the detriment of more prosaic and domestic matters. If one's head is in the clouds who cares about the plumbing?

The return of the new Mr and Mrs Morris to Bryn Myrddin has a feudal feel to it. The couple were met by all the Morris tenants at the station.

"Abergwili turned out in force for the homecoming. The car was pushed up the driveway and everyone stood in front of the house with bouquets of flowers. A bonfire was lit on Merlin's Hill."

In fact though Alicemargit had visited England before she had never seen Bryn Myrddin or even set foot in Wales, though her parents had been to the house. She seemed to take over her new role of mistress of the house with no problems and certainly her first born, Elaine, was never aware of any difficulties.

"It was only after my father died and her letters to him turned up that I realised there had been any problems. She was very diplomatic."

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Splendid baroque interior of Karlskirche, Vienna