



The Morrisies of Bryn Myrddin

Part 2: The Reminiscences of Margaret Vaughan

A previous article in the February 2005 issue of this magazine about the Morrisies of Bryn Myrddin ended with Ryle and Alicemargit arriving at Bryn Myrddin after their honeymoon and the welcome awaiting them when they got there.

There is an apocryphal story about this journey. Soon after they boarded the train for Carmarthen at Paddington, Alicemargit asked Ryle how she would know when they arrived in Wales. He did not make the obvious reply of, "When we come out of the Severn Tunnel", but instead answered, "Oh, that's easy, it will start to rain".

Certainly rain, mud, mackintoshes and wellington boots played a significant part in the memories of my childhood as I grew up at Bryn Myrddin.

My mother's optimistic remarks like, "Rain before seven, fine before eleven" or, on a day trip to the seaside at Pendine, Ferryside or Llanstephan when we set out in mist or fine drizzle that later developed into a heavy downfall, "When the tide turns, the sun will come out"

never seemed to be proved correct.

The first years of their married life together certainly seemed to be bathed in happiness and prosperity, if not always in sunshine. Their first three daughters were born: Elaine in 1932, myself, Margaret, in 1934 and Mary Agnes in 1938 and life was busy and happy.

There were many visitors. Ryle's aunt Alice Abadam and his elder sister Mary often stayed at Bryn Myrddin. Our grandparents from Austria and our Aunt Cajetana and her family, and many other friends and relatives were also guests.

Neighbours from the Towy Valley came to meals, and the large dining room table to which several extra leaves could be added, was frequently full.

There was a sizeable staff of people to manage all this hospitality and activity. The kitchen was ruled by an Austrian cook, Poldi, who made excellent apfelstrudel, though she was said to be very extravagant with butter. There was a scullery maid, a parlour maid, a nanny and nursery maid and at least two men to man-

age the grounds and garden.

We children had a little nursery suite above the front door, a day nursery facing west, overlooking the drive, a night nursery facing south, over the tennis lawn with its magnificent copper beech tree and the nanny's bedroom in the smallest room just above the front porch.

We had most of our meals in the day nursery, which was always cosy, usually with an open fire in winter, protected by a fine fireguard with a polished brass top on which clothes could be hung to air.

Occasionally as a special treat, we were dressed in our best clothes and allowed to join the adults for tea in the drawing room, or lunch in the dining room.

The tennis lawn was in constant use and croquet was also played on a lawn at the foot of a steep slope near the front door.

Our parents were both keen gardeners and the walled garden of about three quarters of an acre was their pride and joy. It supplied most of the fruit and vegetables for the house as well as flowers.

The outbreak of the Second World War was to change all this. We were all issued with gas masks and I remember being very upset because Mary Agnes had a Mickey Mouse one but I was just too old.

My mother arranged air-raid practices, blowing a whistle, after which we all had to collect our gas masks and go down into the cellar as quickly as possible.

These gas masks used to accompany us wherever we went, but were never worn in earnest. The main use I remember for them was for obstacle races at boarding school, when we had to find our own from a pile, put it on and then deliver a message while wearing it! Anyone whose message could not be understood, was disqualified.

Poldi went back to Austria - perhaps to avoid being interned in Britain - and the staff gradually dwindled away to be replaced by a faithful and beloved band who came in by the day and cleaned, washed clothes and cooked, leaving in the evening.

JH Jones, previously one of the outdoor staff, became a general factotum and Ryle was to depend on him for almost everything to do with the running of the place from then onwards.

Our great-aunt Alice Abadam locked up her house in Hamilton Terrace, London, and came to live at

Bryn Myrddin until she died in 1940 and aunt Mary eventually sold Alice's house and came to live with us.

Aunt Alice's most precious belongings were stored in several of the many bedrooms. Mary spent hours sorting through and organising them. She had an immense impact on our upbringing, was rather strict, and kept us in order, so we always had a great deal of respect for her.

After working for seven years at King's College Hospital in London she had become one of the pioneer policewomen and after the First World War served for two years attached to the military police in the British Army of Occupation in the Rhine Province, when she was stationed for a time in Cologne.

Amongst other duties there she attended hearings in the German courts of justice, acted as interpreter and carried out welfare work among girls.

Later she was attached to the Metropolitan Police Force, working in the streets and parks and in the East End of London. She also served for some years in Sheffield. Partly because of her time in Cologne, she was fluent in German and she and Alicemargit annoyed us by using it to discuss matters unsuitable for us children.

She brought with her a little Austin

7, and our parents gave up their car for most of the war. Her petrol ration allowed a couple of visits to Carmarthen a week, so she did the weekly shopping for the household and took some of us to church on Sunday but not much else, so she bought a pony, Bess, and used a governess cart for any other trips.

To get around, we cycled or used the Western Welsh or Daniel Jones bus services, and occasionally the train.

Another person who made a great impression on us as children was Miss Annie Jones, formerly the principal of the School of Art at Carmarthen, as was her father before her. She came to live with us during the war in her early seventies, and stayed until she was over 90.

Very interested in all kinds of art and craft, she was a wonderful person to have in the household, always interested in everything that was going on and fascinating to talk to.

She gave me a charming old Welsh chest, which still houses all my sewing materials, and after I was married, when I took up bookbinding, she provided me with some very useful tools and equipment for this.

When my twins were born in 1961, she knitted me two Welsh wool shawls for them, and I still use her old-fashioned knitting pattern for making socks and gloves knitted on



The three girls: Margaret, Elaine and Mair



Alicemargit and Ryle

four needles.

Her brother Harold, who went with Howard Carter the Egyptologist on several expeditions in the capacity of official artist, unfortunately died before Carter's discovery of Tutankhamen's tomb. Readers of Carmarthenshire Life may remember an article about him illustrated with photos of him and Howard Carter in Egypt.

I still have a necklace of faience beads which Miss Jones gave me from among his possessions, and several articles, from the Illustrated London News and other magazines, about the Howard Carter expeditions, including that to Tutankhamen's tomb.

Three evacuees from the East End of London were billeted on us for a short time, Pat, Lily and Tony. Afterwards we had what my father always referred to as "our silent evacuees", boxes of items from London museums and art galleries, sent into the country for safe-keeping.

Half of the large drawing room was screened off and these boxes were stacked there and in other parts of the house in piles reaching up to the ceiling. We never knew exactly what they contained. The drawing room seemed much cosier at half its normal size.

We all learned to play the lovely Blüthner piano there, having lessons from Mrs Arthur Jones, who lived in Nantgaredig. Sometimes we cycled to her house, and sometimes she came to Bryn Myrddin and stayed for lunch after the lessons.

The walled garden became even more productive, every inch was made to grow valuable additions to the rations. There were several bee-

hives for which we were very grateful during the war for not only did they provide us with quantities of a useful sugar substitute, but we even received an extra ration of sugar with which to feed them in winter.

The chickens and ducks became of great importance and were increased in number, we had a pig or two and began to keep goats.

As we grew older, we children all had our tasks. We gathered acorns to feed the pigs, and my sisters and I used to walk to a neighbouring farm daily to collect a gallon metal jugful of skimmed milk, surplus to their requirements, also to feed to our pigs.

Another job was taking the herd of goats out to a field on the lower slopes of Merlin's Hill in the morning and bringing them back in the evening.

This was no easy task as they had to be prevented on the way from eating laurel and rhododendron leaves, which are poisonous to goats.

Both butter and cheese was made from the goats' milk, which helped to eke out our rations, and any surplus was sold at the Women's Institute stall on Carmarthen market, together with vegetables, posies of flowers,

fruit and jams.

On Friday evenings in the season we worked hard tying up bunches of daffodils ready for this market.

The Myrddin Branch of the Women's Institute, of which our mother was president, took over the large, stone-flagged kitchen at Bryn Myrddin for a couple of weeks in the jamming season and made many huge boilings of every type of jam, jelly and chutney imaginable.

The whole family, and anyone else who could be pressed into doing it would spend a day picking blackberries when they were ripe, usually on one of the farms of the Bryn Myrddin estate. We always thought of this as a splendid outing, with a picnic lunch and the whole day in the open air.

The Bryn Myrddin kitchen was also used for the Women's Institute regular meetings, and Alicemargit learned how to do re-upholstery, so that she could demonstrate it to various different branches of the organisation in the neighbourhood.

As part of the war effort, she also showed them how to make bread using half flour and half mashed potatoes, and how to create a surprisingly warm eiderdown filled with crumpled newspaper, which could be replaced as it became flattened and thus less warm.

We were lucky in that we were never really short of food during the war. Mother and Aunt Mary were

both vegetarians, so were allotted an increased ration of cheese to replace meat, and because we had a pig, Father lost his bacon ration, but there were always rabbits or pigeons available, eggs and the occasional old hen made tender by first boiling and then roasting, and unlimited vegetables and fruit, bottled or fresh.

Directives from the War Agricultural Executive Committee, or War

Ag as we used to call it, resulted in several of the fields around the house being ploughed up for the first time in living memory and various crops were grown.

The cart horse, Puss, was used for the ploughing, harrowing, and carting to avoid wasting petrol. We all



Ryle

helped with both planting and harvesting potatoes, making hay and stooks of barley and oats and loading them into the cart, preparing and carrying out lunch to the fields.

Later in the autumn the threshing machine made its rounds of all the farms, staying for a day or two at each one. Farmers would help each other out on these days and send people or come themselves for the day. There was always a full kitchen at lunch time and everyone was hungry.

As many of the farms were short-handed, prisoners of war, both German and Italian, or displaced persons from countries like Poland, Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia used to be sent to work on the farms and I can remember a succession of these young men being given tasks like scything bracken on the lower slopes of Merlin's Hill, trashing, hedging and ditching.

Probably our mother felt rather sympathetic to them being from another country herself and she used to talk to them about their homes and look at photos of their families.

Because of Mother's Austrian background, our celebration of the various festivals throughout the year was not typical. On New Year's Eve we always used to melt wax candles too short to be used on the Christmas tree any longer, in a large ladle over a lighted candle, and then toss the resultant liquid into a bowl of cold water, where it hardened into strange shapes. Traditionally this would have been done with lead in Austria.

Mother would then try and tell our fortunes for the coming year. Usually the shapes meant nothing or very little, and she had to use a lot of imagination to forecast anything from them, but I can remember the year when we all knew that a new addition to the family was expected, as she turned the piece of wax over everyone shouted at once "It's a cradle!", and it certainly looked like one.

Also on New Year's Eve we used to play a version of Bingo which we called Tombola. Father was always in charge of the bag with all the num-

bers and would select and call them out. Unlike the usual kind of Bingo, there were small prizes for the first ten people or so who got two in a row, the first seven or eight

who got three in a row, and the first three or four who got a whole row. Then there was one large prize for the first person to get a full card.

At each stage the numbers we had covered on our cards had to be checked on the master card, and when he was satisfied that they were genuine, Father would say "Pagabile", or 'payable' in Italian. I don't know why.

At Easter we always had an Easter hunt with eggs and small toys and presents hidden all over the garden and grounds.

When we were very young, before my father developed arthritis, he was still active enough to climb trees and hide some things in difficult places, and there were some traditional

hiding spots used year after year. This tradition was continued for the grandchildren as well in later years.

During the war, when chocolate was hard to come by, we had colourful cardboard eggs with sweets, sometimes home made, inside. There was nearly always a nest somewhere in the garden with painted hard-boiled hens' eggs. Everything was collected into a large basket

and distributed to the appropriate recipients afterwards.

Another Austrian tradition was the celebration of St Nicholas's Day on 6 December. St Nicholas was a bishop,

and in Austria a disguised member of the family would appear, dressed in full bishop's regalia together with a devil known as the Crampus, and distribute presents.

The Crampus was supposed to take any naughty children off in his sack or they would receive a bad potato in their boots instead of presents.

We never actually did it this way, but put out our boots in the hall together with a few carrots for St Nicholas's horse and waited in the drawing room until we heard the tramping footsteps of St Nicholas, or Father Nicolo as we used to call him, passing by outside. We were then allowed to rush out and look in our boots. There was always a trail of cotton wool blobs on the floor – the snow from his boots. Even when we were away at boarding school a little parcel would arrive with a message saying "Love from Nicolo" in Mother's handwriting!

Christmas too, had its own traditions. For several days before Christmas the drawing-room was out-of-bounds, and we were told that the angels were in there preparing for the arrival of the Christ Child on Christmas night. We were always encouraged to make our presents, as the effort involved was thought to be good for us. So we spent hours knitting things, making home-made calendars or even engagement diaries, embroidering little boxes to keep things in and so on.

The main celebration was on Christmas Eve. Mother always wore an evening dress and a lovely necklace for these occasions, and we usually put on our party dresses. We had afternoon tea in the dining room and anyone who lived in one of the nearest cottages, worked for us in any capacity, or helped in any way about the place was invited together with their families.

They had a more substantial tea in the kitchen, and when we had all finished eating, we gathered around the drawing room door, and the youngest child present knocked on the door. When we heard one of the



Annie Jones



Mary Morris

little bells on the Christmas tree ringing this meant that the angels were ready, and they then flew away and we all trooped in. Before us was the darkened room with a tall Christmas tree reaching up to the ceiling, all lit with candles, and a Christmas Crib at its foot. We then sang a Christmas carol, often Silent Night in German, wished everyone a happy Christmas and all sat down and the lights were put on.

All round the room were tables covered with white tablecloths divided into sections with people's names on them, and their presents laid out. But we were not allowed to look at them yet! First we had to perform in some way, say a poem, play a piece on the piano, sing a song or whatever.

The guests also used to do the same, and my fondest memories are of Mr Tom Jones of Penyrallt singing Green Grow the Rushes O, and Ieuan Jones singing Calon Lan in Welsh.

Christmas gifts would then be handed out to everyone present who was not a member of the family, and when this was finished they would all leave. It was very difficult not to keep peeping at our own section of table to see what presents were there, but of course this was not allowed until everyone else had gone!

Christmas Day was somewhat more subdued after all this. We went to church in the morning during the war but after the war at Midnight. Then we had a traditional Christmas dinner with turkey and all the trimmings, plum pudding, mince pies, brandy butter and so on.

Aunt Mary always read Milton's Ode on the Morning of Christ's Nativity to us and we listened to the King's speech on the wireless.

Then there was just time before dark to go down to the cemetery in Abergwili with a cross for the grave of our grandparents. Mother made these with a wooden cross onto which she attached holly, ivy and coniferous branches, and at Easter she used to make them with bunches

of primroses embedded in damp moss, which we always picked on Good Friday afternoon. Similar crosses were placed on Aunt Alice Abadam's grave in Carmarthen when we went to church.



Mair Theresa Mabel Morris
aged 3½ yrs. 1949

By the time the war ended we three girls were all at boarding school, and in the summer of 1946 our youngest sister, Mair, was born.

Mother was keen for her to grow up speaking Welsh, which she did for a time, and the rest of us struggled without much success to try and keep up with her. She, of course would have many memories of the period after I married and left home, and could perhaps provide another article about the later years of the Morrisises at Bryn Myrddin.

It was to become evident as the years went by that the upkeep of Bryn Myrddin and its size were

becoming too much for our parents. Father's arthritis became more serious and their fixed income was not keeping pace with the high inflation of the time.

So they put Bryn Myrddin on the market and planned to build a bungalow in one of the neighbouring fields. This plan came to nothing, though there was a certain amount of interest and at one point we thought the house would be bought as a fishing hotel.

Eventually they divided it into flats, keeping the front downstairs area for their own use and so it has remained to this day. Indeed some of the original tenants are still there. I had already left home and got married by this time, so I did not experience much of the upheaval involved, though we went to Bryn Myrddin every year at Easter for a short holiday, and our children all have very happy memories of these times.

After Father died in 1971, Mother went to live in Newcastle Emlyn near Mary Agnes who was by then married and running a shop there with her husband.

Elaine inherited the house and has

managed the repairs and rentals ever since, until just recently when she was able to pass this onerous task on to one of her sons.

MV

If Mair is willing to continue the story then Carmarthenshire Life is happy to carry Part 3. Then only Alex is left to bring the story up to date!

However, I was contacted after Part 1 by a couple who had worked at Bryn Myrddin but I can't now find a contact phone number. If they read this will they please contact me again on 01239 711779. *The Editor*



North wing



The Towy Valley
looking east from
Bryn Myddin



Bryn Myddin
- the hill

The Beech

