

Memoirs of Mary Ag Morris

I was born on 21st April 1938 in my mother's bedroom, the bow-fronted room in Bryn Myrddin overlooking the lawn. My earliest memory is at the age of three following my sister Elaine jumping down the last six steps of the impressive staircase in the front hall. She jumped it easily with her long legs and I fell cracking my head really hard on the oak blanket chest at the bottom which left me with an egg on my head which is still there to this day! I can see my father carrying me upstairs to my room (no. 6) and comforting me and tucking me into bed. The rooms at Bryn Myrddin were numbered, not actually but in conversation. When I was a child, room 1 belonged to Mair's Nanny, 2 was Mair's, 6 was Mummy's dressing room and I slept there until I moved into the bigger room 3, 4 was Daddy's, and 5 was Mummy's. Rooms 7 and 9 were guest rooms; 8 was Elaine's. Another room was used by Miss Jones, the School of Art teacher who lived with us after the war, as her sitting room. Down some steps on the right was Aunty Mary's room [Mary Edith Morris, 1887 - 1974] and further down was Margie's room and Miss Jones's bedroom.

Another memory which must have been about the same age was sitting at the feet of a beautiful elegant lady dressed in black with white hair by the fire in the dining room. This was Aunty Ai (Alice Abadam who was president of the Feminist Movement who was the sister of Edith Abadam of Middleton Hall, my grandmother who I never met.)



From left: Alice Abadam holding baby Mary Ag on the lawn of Bryn Myrddin, Alice's sister Edith Abadam, the grandmother Mary Ag never met, Elaine holding Mary Ag with their mother Alicemargit, sisters Mary Ag and Margaret.

I also remember the evacuees rather vaguely. I believe we had families from London living in what is now the brewing kitchen and have a memory of a huge fat woman shouting at several children running round the back yard. I have a clear memory of one of the prisoners of war called Wagenknecht. He had come from a country village as a child (I can't remember which country but he was possibly German). He used to make an incredible job of stacking logs perfectly in huge piles ready for the winter which I loved to watch. Another prisoner was an Italian and he stuck in my memory as he gave me a gift. It was a cigarette tin in which he had arranged a picture of the Virgin Mary and decorated it with pictures cut from playing cards. I really loved it and only wish I had kept it. We also had "silent evacuees". These were huge boxes from one of the museums I think in London which were kept behind a screen in the drawing room. Apparently they contained various artefacts for safe keeping and at some stage, little insects started to crawl out of them onto the floor and had to be dealt with so goodness knows what was in them!

Growing up in Bryn Myrddin was a unique experience and hard for outsiders to understand. It was a great place to grow up but our life was not all fun and games. We had a huge walled garden in which vegetables and fruit were grown, together with six bee hives. We kept a herd of about seven goats and a billy goat, pigs, chickens, ducks and beef cattle for fattening up and Puss, our wonderful cart horse. Life totally revolved around the work created by these things. We used to take the goats on a walk through the fields to Merlin's

Hill every morning and go and collect them for milking each afternoon at around 4 p.m. They are the most mischievous of animals and many a time we would get a call to go over to the hill to look for them as one or other of them had got out onto the road and had to be put back on the hill. Jones, the general worker on the estate did the milking and mucking out except on Sundays when we girls did both jobs together. We fed the chickens, collected eggs, and fed the six or so cats out in an outhouse, but mainly we worked in the gardens. My father had gone to horticultural college [Usk Agricultural College] when he came out of the army and recovered from his head injury [sustained in France in 1916], with a view to setting up a working estate and making money out of it. My mother was the keenest of all gardeners and the hardest worker I ever knew. She drove the tractor and worked on all kinds of farm projects with Jones who used to say he could not keep up with her! She would get up at 5.30 am on the days we took produce to market and I would sometimes get up with her to pick strawberries or runner beans or flowers and pack them all ready. We went to the Women's Institute market with her and loved being there and we were really spoilt by all the members at the age of 6 or so onwards. Sometimes we would pick blackberries or bilberries or nuts and were allowed to sell them on the market in little punnets for pocket money. One of the jobs I remember fell to Margie and I was picking up acorns into buckets which were then stored in the stables to feed to the pigs. We however devised a really easy method of doing this job until we were found out! We used to go to the bin, fill the buckets and then run and play in the grounds until we thought we ought to be seen tipping some acorns into the boxes!

Haymaking and cutting the corn were exciting events. The men used to scythe the edges of the field by hand then the combine harvester would come along and cut the corn into stooks which were thrown out onto the ground. The last central piece of ground was where all the little animals would gather having been driven out of the field by the machines and this last bit was cut with a scythe too to avoid them being hurt. Little rabbits, voles and mice would scatter to the edges to hide again as the last bit was cut. We and all the maids and men followed behind the harvester collecting the stooks and arranging them into tripods to allow them to dry out on the field. Once they were dry enough they would be loaded onto the cart which was called a "gambo". This was pulled by Puss and we either got on the top of the cart or I do remember being allowed to ride on Puss which was like being on top of the world. The threshing machine would be located in the woodland behind the walled garden. The stooks were fed into an opening at the bottom of which were fast moving blades which separated the corn from the stalks. On one awful occasion the chap pushing the stooks in pushed it in with his leg which got caught in the blades and I believe he lost his leg. When dear Mrs Howells was told about it she said "oh well he has had a cup of tea so he should be alright". The hay was also taken by gambo to the top of one of the fields and arranged into a hayrick usually shaped like a little cottage to preserve it for use in the winter. We always had a picnic on these occasions brought out by the maids in huge baskets and consisting of ham or jam sandwiches and tea in metal cans, sitting out in the sun after all the hard work.

Talking about the maids, there were quite a few people who worked at Bryn Myrddin when I was little. Jones (Harry Jones who lived on his own farm called Penpolion on the back lane behind Bryn Myrddin) and another chap called Lewis worked outside. Inside were Mrs Howells who lived in Myrtle Cottage in the back lane; Beatrice Evans who lived in Rose cottage; Mrs Sanderson (Sandie) who lived in Abergwili and when I was very young she used to bring her two children, Renee and John, to work with her; Mrs James who lived in Abergwili; and Maggie who had been in Bryn Myrddin when war broke out and remembered Daddy coming into the kitchen on that day to tell them all the news. Also Mrs Thomas, a tiny little bustling lady who was given the task of teaching Margie and I how to clean – I don't think she did a particularly good job as I am not very good at it even now!

Once a year a chap called Mr Field used to come to Bryn Myrddin with his two ferrets in order to cull the rabbits which were living on Merlin's Hill in their hundreds. I think most of the rabbits went away with him but some were stored in the limehouse to use to feed the cats.

There were always people outside the family living in Bryn Myrddin and we were hardly ever just ourselves. After the war, my mother invited Annie Jones who had been head of the School of Art to come and make her home with us when she retired. She had a bedroom and sitting room upstairs. She was the dearest soul and fitted in incredibly well considering she was a meat eater and a non-Catholic!! She had incredible tact when the conversation around the dining room table was all about The Faith and kept her council even if she obviously found it hard. On one occasion [ca. 1965] she took my two little girls who must have been about four and five into Carmarthen to Dathan Davies, the clothing shop and bought them a little smocked checked dress each, Denise in pink and Fran in blue because she objected to them wearing trousers! I have a photo of them in these dresses and they were lovely. Miss Jones's sister, "Miss Madeleine" came for very long visits and taught us French.



From left, Margaret, Ilona Hoyos, Alice Abadam holding Mary Ag, Eddy Hoyos, Elaine, in 1939. Photo from Ilona's holiday diary.

Our grandparents, Eddie and Ilona Hoyos used to come over from Austria to spend three months of the winter with us as the winters in Schwertberg were pretty harsh and they were getting old. I have some memories of Grandpapa as a very tall man with white hair, very deaf and very cuddly! He was a wonderful pianist and played impromptu without ever using music – a gift I really envy. Grandmama was great fun and used to play a lot with us children. Her great gift was imitating voices. She had a little set of cardboard cutout figures and several boxes and from these she would tell a story holding a figure from her childhood and doing their voices and moving them about the boxes as if in and out of rooms. We loved it when she did this for us. Whenever she was waiting for an event such as being taken out in the car she used to sit by the front door doing crochet. This was usually a pair of cotton crocheted gloves which she always wore. She actually came to live in Bryn Myrddin when grandpapa died and lived to a great age but she missed him terribly. She was a real flirt and used to amuse everyone how she flirted with Jack Phillips, the Lord Lieutenant of Carmarthen whenever he came to Bryn Myrddin for a meal and he used to take her out in his car sometimes. They were both in their 70s at the time! [Ilona died, age 88, in 1968 at Bryn Myrddin.]

The other person who always lived with us when I was growing up in Bryn Myrddin was Aunt Mary. She was my father's sister and before Mummy and Daddy got married. She had managed Bryn Myrddin and I think she

found it really hard to accept my mother coming over from Austria as the new mistress of the house. She was allowed to discipline us children in a way that would never be acceptable today. She was not a stranger to using a horse-whip on Margie and I if we got out of line which we frequently did as we tended to giggle and play the fool when we were supposed to be working! Our parents found it hard and my mother told me that once she went to ask advice of the Bishop as to what they should do about the situation to which he replied "if you do not have an Aunt Mary then you should go and find one as the discipline can only be good for the children". Elaine was the only one who would stand up to her and tell her she was not her mother and that she would not take any notice! Aunt Mary was the one who organised most of our daily activity. We had to help her in the scullery cutting up all the various buckets of goat food, preparing food for the cats and chickens and ducks which we then went with her to give out. She adored her goats, and most of her friends were involved in the goat world in some way. Sometimes she would take us on outings to meet these friends who lived out in the country around Carmarthenshire, and on these outings Aunt Mary was really lovely and we forgot all the harsh treatment we received at home from her. She had one dreadful habit and that was waking either Margie or I up in the night to do some task. She had been in the Police in Cologne and found it hard to sleep so she would wander round the house and grounds and find something that we had not done and irrespective of the hour, we would be awoken to fetch a cardigan off the lawn or tidy our shelf where we put our clothes at night or clear up some other mess she did not like. I am convinced this is what led to my problem with bed-wetting when I went to boarding school which went on until I was 9 years old and was a real embarrassment to me. Aunt Mary tried to teach me to ride on Bessie, her little Welsh pony. Her method was putting me on at one end of the east walk, whacking Bessie on the rump and shouting to me to stay on! I hated it and never became any good with horses. Much the same method was used to teach me to ride a bike. I was put on at the top of the lawn, pushed down the slope and usually ended up in the spikes of the yukka bush!

Our faith played a big part in our lives. In the early days when we did not have a car, Aunt Mary had her little Welsh mountain pony, Bessie, and we used to traipse into Carmarthen for Mass in a little pony and trap outfit clip clopping along the three miles or so which was great fun. The only problem was Margie and I usually ended up getting a pinch on our legs for something we were doing wrong from Aunt Mary so rather dreaded sitting in the seat near to her back! Each evening we used to say the rosary together usually in the drawing room. We always had something to do whilst this was going on which could be podding beans which were dried and saved for the winter use, mending or darning socks or making something to give to a member of the family for birthday or Christmas presents. Daddy used to hold the rosary and we were always delighted when he fell asleep and missed out one of the decades of the rosary, making it a shorter event. On our feast days we were allowed to choose an outing to celebrate our special day which was fun. My feast of St Agnes on January 21st did not make it easy as the weather was usually grim but I think I always wanted to go to Pendine and did so in freezing winds which we still enjoyed as it was a day from the hard work.

Christmas was a magical time. It started on 6th December with the Feast of St Nicholas. We would put our shoes in front of the drawing room fire to be filled with a little gift such as raisins, a tangerine and Christmas labels for us to use on our presents when Christmas came. They were always decorated with "snow" made from cotton wool. When we all went to boarding school Mummy still sent us a Nicolo parcel until we were 17 or so and I believe Mair still carries on this tradition with her family. Leading up to Christmas Eve, Jones would go to the plantation of trees my mother had planted when she came over from Austria and cut a tree which was as tall as the drawing room – probably about 15-20 ft. We used to see this coming in through the front door but then we did not go in there again until Christmas Eve. The angels then came to the house to decorate the tree, leaving trails of their silver hair up and down the stairs and building up the excitement of the coming event. We girls had the job of decorating the stairs. This would involve collecting ivy and holly from around the grounds and winding red crepe paper around each spoke of the staircase encasing the branches and making a splendid display. The pictures all had holly or Scotch fir branches put above them too and the house would take on a wonderful smell of the forest. Then Christmas Eve would come. At 6 p.m. all the tenant

farmers and their wives and children and the maids and gardeners and their families would come into the old kitchen where there was a massive scrubbed table and there they would be fed a Christmas dinner. When they were finished they would all come into the dining room which had a double door leading into the drawing room. The youngest child of the group would knock at the door which would be answered by the ringing of a bell enabling the door to be opened for us to go in (Jones could just be seen hiding behind the tree with a bucket of water at the ready in case of fire!) The sight of the tree glowing with real candles from top to bottom and hanging with all the wonderful traditional hangings was something never to be forgotten. All around the room white sheets would cover the sofa and chairs on which lay sections marked out for each of us with our presents on them but there was no question of our touching them until much later!

The next part of the evening consisted of various people performing for the family or the family performing for the guests. There was a young boy called Melvin, the son of Beatrice Evans who was one of the maids and he would sing beautifully. Ieuan Jones sang too and old Mr Tom Jones who lived in a cottage up the back lane had an incredibly deep voice. I would usually have to play something on the piano and Margie too. Then my parents gave out the presents to each family and child in the room. I cannot remember what these were but I think the women used to have some material or a door mat or an apron and I know the children had a toy each. They would all leave after profuse thanks and Christmas wishes and we would then have our supper before going to bed. At 11 p.m. we would be awoken to get dressed and go to midnight Mass in Carmarthen, when the Church of St Mary's was full to bursting. There were always a few drunk men at the service which used to amuse us but all in all, it was a magical service with beautiful singing and the wonderful smell of the incense. The nuns from the convent always used to give us a little gift in our favourite colours to take home, blue for Elaine, mauve for Margie and red for me. I do not think they were still doing it when Mair came along. We then went home and back to bed. Our presents were still waiting for us in the drawing room and after breakfast we were allowed to all go in and open them. My best ever present was an aluminium wheel barrow as I had always used the big wooden one in the garden which was very heavy and to have my own barrow was amazing!! We did not have expensive things at all but always little thoughtful gifts. The things we gave everyone else was always something we had made, as I remember hardly ever having any money except to take away to school. I made my father pen wipers, canvas bags to carry things up to the garden, bibs to hang around his neck as his arthritis prevented him in bending one of his legs so he always dropped things down him and needed the bib. For Mummy I think I must have done embroidery on hankies and blotters for her desk.

In the evening shortly after Christmas Day Mummy would take some of the wax candles from the tree and melt them in a ladle in the open fire in the drawing room. She would then pour the melted wax into a bucket of cold water and this would solidify and form a patterned shape. She would use her imagination on looking at the melted mass to tell fortunes or expectations of coming events in the lives of each of us and one always felt one could see exactly what she was talking about!

When the Spring came there were snowdrops everywhere in the grounds and just before Easter we used to go out as a family and pick hundreds of them. These were packed in moss and sent to Auntie Cajetana Bowman, my mother's sister, as they were her favourite flower. She is the mother of David and Rachel and died at the age of 38 of cancer so that David and Rachel ended up being brought up by their father, Sir John Bowman and a cousin he married, Frances Whitehead. We would then all walk down to the family grave where our Morris grandparents were buried in Abergwili church to put snowdrops on their grave. Auntie Mary was buried there later.

We had some lovely outings which have stuck in my mind. Once a year the maids, Sandy, Mrs James, Mrs Howells and sometimes Mrs Thomas and Jones would come with us over to one of my father's farms in Llanstephan where the Bowens of Hengilisaf lived to pick blackberries. We would be allowed to go anywhere and picked about 40 lbs each year to take home for jam. When we had finished we would be taken into the

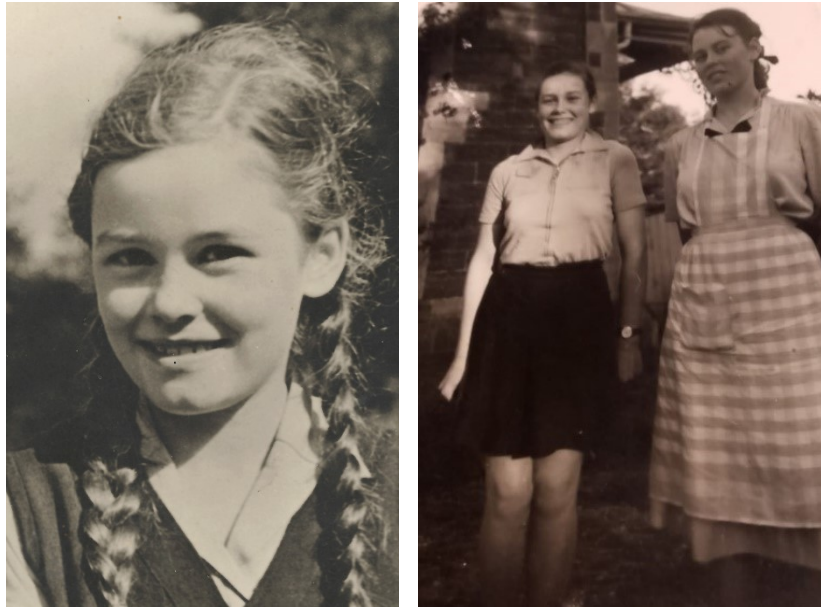
farmhouse for a tea the like of which you never see today. The table would be laden with goodies, sandwiches, cakes, apple tart, hams and so on. The best thing I loved about these outings was the real cows' milk! We only had goats' milk at home and the cows' milk tasted so much more creamy, it was delicious. Another outing would be picking bilberries. We either went to a place called the Rock and Fountain which I believe was near a reservoir up on the Newcastle Emlyn road or else we went up to the top of Hermon where the bilberries abound. Again we would usually have some of the maids with us so it was a treat for us all. In summer we often went to the sea in Tenby. Our cousins, Herbert and Charlie Vaughan lived there and we would go to their house to change and then go down for a swim. On one occasion Margie and I were given a piece of seed cake to eat after our swim and went to sit on the steps outside the dining room whilst the grown-ups were talking and as we did not like the seeds, we picked them out and pushed them through the cracks in the staircase. I am sure this must have added to the mouse problem of the household!! When Mair was born we went swimming quite a bit in the River Towy across the fields on the flats below Bryn Myrddin. I distinctly remember Daddy putting Mair up onto his shoulders and her jumping off into the river – she was also incredibly brave and daring! On our wedding day, she climbed up onto the roof at Bryn Myrddin and ran along the guttering to put up a flag for us – very dangerous indeed.

People we mixed with were usually from other estates in the county. There were dances held at Clynfiew (Lewis-Bowens), Cwmgwili – (Jack Philipps and his son Gruffy who I had a crush on), the farmhouse of Pam and Hugh Griffiths over near Llandeilo the name of which I can't remember, the Mansel-Lewis family, the Enthovens who lived over near Llandovery, the Vaughans of Rhandermewin and many more. These friends and families were the people who came to tea at Bryn Myrddin and invited our family back to them and were the main circle we all mixed with. However, on a daily basis we did not have friends in to play or go out with apart from Jean Jones (the daughter of Ieuan, as his wife worked for Miss Jones) so we were very much in our own little world. Things did change when Mair came along as she was able to go into Carmarthen and meet people and mix with friends through the youth club, which we had never done.

Mair was born when I was eight years old [on 23 July 1946]. Prior to her birth, Margie and I were sent with Mrs Thomas to stay in Newquay at the house of the local Post Master. We used to spend every day on the beach and collected mackerel from the local fishing boats as they came in for our breakfast. Mrs Thomas used to sit in a deck chair whilst we played and on one occasion I thought I would be very clever and swim under a boat and out the other side but it was too far! I only just got back before losing my breath but it was very scary and Mrs Thomas did not even notice. When we got back to Bryn Myrddin there was Mair who was a great joy as she was such an adorable child, full of smiles and giggles and grew up to be the bravest and most daring of us all.

When I was somewhere between 4 and 6 years old apparently my parents went on a bird-watching trip up to North Wales. They took me with them and left me at the convent school which I adored. When they came to take me home I reputedly made such a fuss that they left me there and I spent a couple of terms there being sent up on the train from Abergwili in the care of the guard. Mummy said I looked like a mushroom with my fat little legs and a large round boater straw hat on!

Probably between Conway and the age of about 8, I went to Carmarthen convent school and I remember Margie was with me for some of that time. We used to have lunch with the nuns instead of in school for some reason. This school was run by the Sisters of Mercy who had come over from France to form a convent and to teach in Carmarthen and a lot of the nuns were friends to my parents and used to come out and have tea on the lawn in Bryn Myrddin on many occasions. Our dearest friends were Sister Henri and Reverend Mother "Ma Mere".



Mary Ag Mary Ag aged about 8 years (left) and with Margaret, 1940s (right)

I then went to the convent in Ramsgate where Margie had been sent. I remember loving it there but I was in trouble for making Margie giggle and disrupting her life so Aunt Mary persuaded my parents to take me away and send me to Princethorpe near Rugby where Elaine was at school. I was 8 or 9 when I started there. Elaine was the games captain and much loved by everyone. Elaine and I used to travel to Rugby by train and in our luggage we each had a sack of bran. This was the outer husks from the milling process of wheat or barley and was supposed to provide roughage in our diet. When we reached the Severn Tunnel, we used to open these bags up and throw out the contents from the train window! I used to stick up for Elaine and berate anybody who criticised her in any way, or so I have been told. Whilst I was there I suffered regularly with bronchitis and eventually my health was bad enough for a move to be suggested which was when I went to the La Retraite convent in Weston-super-Mare. I stayed there until I took my O levels (I passed five: English Lang, English Lit, Music, Scripture and French) and it was there I knew Christine Hosegood (now Mears) who found me after about 20 years and we have been in contact since. I was not at all academic and was always in trouble at school for some mischief or other but loved it. It was great to have lots of friends and people to go around with and I felt quite bereft when it was time to go home for holidays. Margie and I did everything together which made up for lack of other friends. I do not remember playing with Elaine, she is six years older than me so I suppose I was too childish for her. Elaine used to have friends over to play tennis but I had usually been sent to bed by then and would watch from my bedroom window. Peter Heneker said it was quite common to see me pressed against the glass of my bedroom window watching them play!

When I was about 16 or so a young man called David Bruce came to the county to work on a farm. He was a Catholic and was introduced to my parents at church so they invited him to come over to Bryn Myrddin whenever he wanted some company which he did frequently on his little motor bike. I had a real crush on him and used to run out every time I heard the bike coming up the drive. I am sure he thought I was just a silly little girl and nothing ever came of it but I later heard he had been killed in the army abroad.

I decided with the agreement of my father that I would leave school straight after my O levels. Knowing I was not likely to be able to do A levels, it was a good thing for me to leave and leave enough money to keep sending Mair to her school in St Leonards as she was much cleverer than I would ever be! I signed on for a year at the School of Art in Carmarthen where I did dressmaking. My father and I had many discussions about my future and all I ever dreamed of doing at that time was going to Agricultural College to do farming and farm management. However Daddy did not like the idea of me staying at home and not getting out in the world to

meet other people so it was then that I had the idea that I might join the WRNS [Women's Royal Naval Service, a branch of the Royal Navy]. One of the girls at school, Bunny Thomas, had joined and came back to school with glowing reports of the fun she was having. My parents and particularly Aunty Mary were not keen on the idea and Aunty Mary said "we all know what the girls who follow the troops are like" but eventually someone who everyone respected said they thought the WRNS were a cut above all the services and it would be a great career so I was allowed to join.

I first went to HMS Burghfield near Reading for basic training which consisted of learning how to clean a toilet and do ironing a specific way! The greatest fun was the marching which I loved with the band music accompanying us. Once I had finished there, I had to decide which branch to go into and I wanted to go into radar but for some reason (probably because they were short of recruits) I was persuaded to become a Signals Wren. This meant training at HMS Mercury near East Meon in Hampshire. There I was taught the skill which stood me in good stead all my working life – that of touch typing. We had a big classroom with about 30 desks with typewriters on and a screen in front of us where the letters were lit up. Our hands were covered so we could not see the keyboard and as a letter lit up we typed it by feel – brilliant method and I was soon typing at over 70 words per minute. We lived out at Soberton Towers and had great fun. The Pinky was the nearest pub and we all learned to enjoy the local scrumpy. I remember being in a pantomime we put on at Mercury and I was Prince Charming with long boots, tights and a blue velvet jacket – I felt fantastic!! It was really like being at boarding school so I found it easy but lots of the girls found being away from home quite a struggle.



Mary Ag (top right) in the WRNS in 1956 and in Malta in 1958

After passing out at Mercury I went down for a few weeks to HMS Culdrose in Cornwall where we slept in huge hangers all crowded round a boiler sleeping with our great-coats and boots on as it was so cold! We went up in a helicopter whilst I was there which was quite an experience as it did not have any doors and was bitterly cold. After, this my first draft was allocated and I was sent to the Admiralty in London. My quarters were out in Kensington and I bought a scooter to travel backwards and forwards, going up the Mall each morning into the door just under Admiralty Arch to our underground offices. I used to go to Humphrey Lyttleton's jazz club and Chris Barber too, dancing at the Lyceum ballroom, roller skating at Brixton roller rink, ice skating at

Queen's Ice Rink and spending a lot of time at Lyons Corner House or trying on hats in C&A which was always a laugh. I stayed up all night once on the pavement outside the Albert Hall to hear Frankie Vaughan and seven of us took a box to go to an all-night concert as well. One of the leading hands at the admiralty, John Cribb, asked me to go down to Brighton with him in his red MG! At that time "going to Brighton" was a euphemism for a naughty weekend but we only drove there and back in the day. We bought fish and chips, sat on the pier, walked up and down a bit and drove home with the top down on the car and I loved it. On another occasion, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police came over from Canada to perform in a musical ride in London and then in Harrogate. An invitation went out to the WRNS to come to a ball at the Dorchester in Park Lane. This meant an evening dress and luckily, one of the things I had made at the School of Art was a ball gown in shot silk turquoise material with twenty little buttons down the front all fastened with matching material loops and I felt great in it. The Mounty who was allocated for me to entertain was called Dudley Wright and he was very handsome. We got on famously as he had a girl friend at home so we were able to enjoy ourselves without any tension. A lot of the other girls made really quick relationships with the Mounties but I was quite relieved that mine was already spoken for. Then they went on up to Harrogate and I went up by train and stayed in a little B&B in order to watch their musical ride. We then said goodbye as they were going back to Canada but it was a lovely occasion and Harrogate is a beautiful place known for its wonderful flowers.

I did not have a boy-friend at all as I was pretty shy and had never had any experience of being alone with boys whilst living at Bryn Myrddin, as every party we went to we were always accompanied by our parents. I was teased quite a lot about this and at times it was quite lonely but I am glad really that I did not get into any difficult and meaningless relationships. When I had been at the Admiralty long enough to warrant another draft, I was called in to see my commanding officer to tell me she had had a request from our cousin, Fischer-Hoch who was married to cousin Donne of The Plas Llanstephan to find out whether I could be released for three months in order to help him sail his boat to the Bahamas. At the same time I was told that my next draft was to be to Malta and I could choose. Thank God I chose Malta or I would never have met Ray!

I flew out in [1957] in RAF transport which I remember was incredibly noisy and uncomfortable but it got us there in one piece and we landed at Luqa airport. The heat hit me as we got off the plane and felt wonderful. There was an open-backed lorry waiting to drive us to WRNS quarters at Sliema where we were billeted in Whitehall Mansions. It lay beside Sliema creek and was like an enormous hotel. We lived in shared cabins with a "patch" each which was the word given to the space comprising a bed, wardrobe and locker for which I was responsible and which had to be spotless on inspection days with all my clothes laid out in perfect symmetry. I am not naturally tidy but I did manage to get a wonderful polish on my patch floor! We did all our washing by hand and as we wore white skirts and blouses, these had to be washed most days. However, we would wash them and then take a pillow and go up on the roof, lay our clothes out in the sun, have a chat or a sleep and in about one hour everything would be dry enough to iron.

The day after we landed at Luqa I was on the bus to see my new working environment which was at Lascaris in Valetta. My memories are not particularly clear but some of it has come back to me on thinking about it. We walked from the bus in between high buildings gradually going underground until we were right in cellar-like offices that smelt of damp and echoed. I imagine these were the conditions the Maltese had to endure for those years when they were being so badly bombed, but it was our work place. I went into a small office where there were four teleprinters with three girls working on them and a leading hand in charge. I introduced myself and found out his name was Ray Rolph who was later to become my husband!

I worked typing on the teleprinters most of the time but also worked in the main signal office above our little office. My job there was decrypting signals which came in over the RATT [radio teletype] machine. This machine churned out reams of inch-wide paper filled with little holes. Each hole, when put through another machine translated into words. The girl who ran the machine was called Beryl and she could read the words just by looking at the paper, which I never learned to do. I would be faced with a little booklet with typed

letters or numbers in blocks stuck into it and I would have various machines, books and guess-work to try and figure out what the signal said. Another part of the job we WRNS did was to type up the weather every morning by 6 a.m. This consisted of pages and pages of weather reports to be sent out to all ship and shore bases and was extremely important to ships' movements of course. Half of the office was taken up with small booths with Tels (telegraphists) and their morse keys constantly tap-tapping away. There must have been about 30 of us in all working in the main signal office, and we all got to know each other pretty well. In fact one of the Tels was married with a little girl and Ray and I used to baby sit which was a real treat as it meant we were actually in a proper house for an evening instead of in our quarters. The one thing I remember about baby sitting was how cold the house was. All Maltese houses have polished concrete floors or, in some cases, marble floors and hardly any heating so we usually sat with blankets over our knees whilst we were there. We never once got up to any mischief – I think I was very naive and never thought of any hanky-panky and I had, after all, had a very strict Catholic upbringing!

The office where we did the encrypting had a huge table at which sat about six or eight of us girls and supervised by a Chief. We had two chiefs, Chief Chandler and another. Chief Chandler was a wonderful man and always very kind to me. We worked a four on, four off, system of duties which meant we would do an "early" a "late" and two nights and then have four days off although the first day off was spent sleeping. Some nights were very quiet and I could get my head down on the desk. Ray was in charge of the look-out (the bridge) at the top of the building overlooking Valetta harbour, and he had to signal with lights to any ship coming in that sent a signal requesting entry or any other problem. When Chief Chandler was on duty I was allowed to go up on the bridge with him during my break and take him up a cup of coffee. The harbour was an amazing sight from up there and I loved watching ships coming in and out and seeing how efficiently Ray did his signal work!

After three days of working in the office, Ray asked me out to dinner in Valetta. I was thrilled and he took me to Sherry's restaurant which was in a bridge over the middle of Valetta (sadly no longer there) and was apparently very expensive. I had been brought up as a vegetarian only eating meat occasionally but I thought I would be brave and ordered a steak as that was what he was having. I only managed half of it as it was as big as my plate. He told me a while later that it had cost him a week's wages to take me to Sherry's so I felt very guilty.

Our courtship was really idyllic. Ray lived at Manoel Island which was quite a long way from Sliema but every day he used to walk all the way over and we would go to the beach or the cinema or just talk and walk. On pay day we often went to the dances at the Phoenicia hotel where we drank rum and pep which cost very little so we could afford too much and I remember falling into the rose garden on one occasion on our way back to the bus! [The Art Deco Hotel Phoenicia opened in 1947 and is still one of the best in Malta; <https://www.phoeniciamalta.com/>] The buses then were the wonderful old Leyland type which have now been replaced by Arriva – very sad but probably more efficient. The Leylands always had an array of rosaries and holy pictures dangling from the mirror by the driver – a reminder of what a truly Catholic country it is. After a while we rented a scooter and were able to go further afield. We loved Mellieha Bay as it was sandy and we often used to go there straight off night duty and sleep on the beach. On one occasion I got sun stroke doing just that and ended up in sick bay and being put on report as it was a self-inflicted illness! It cost me half a week's wages which were only £7.00 per week anyway. Wild grapes trailed over the rocks above the bay which we picked and ate, and also we often used to stop and pick figs by the roadside. As we were always broke, I used to make big fat jam sandwiches in WRNS quarters at "snack" time and bring them with me and we would buy a bottle of wine for 2/6 to enjoy. After four weeks of getting to know each other, we decided we would plan to get married and we got engaged. Ray took me into Valetta and asked me to wait by the carriages in the middle of town while he went off to do something! When he got back with the inevitable little box, of course I knew what it was and he gave me a darling little diamond ring which just fitted up to the knuckle of my little finger as I have quite large hands!! Later on when we went to buy our wedding rings, we

went to the same shop to choose them. The shop keeper brought out a rusty old Huntley and Palmer biscuit box full of wedding rings which we had to rummage through to find two that fitted us – no wasted displays in that shop!!



Mary Ag and Ray in Malta, 1958

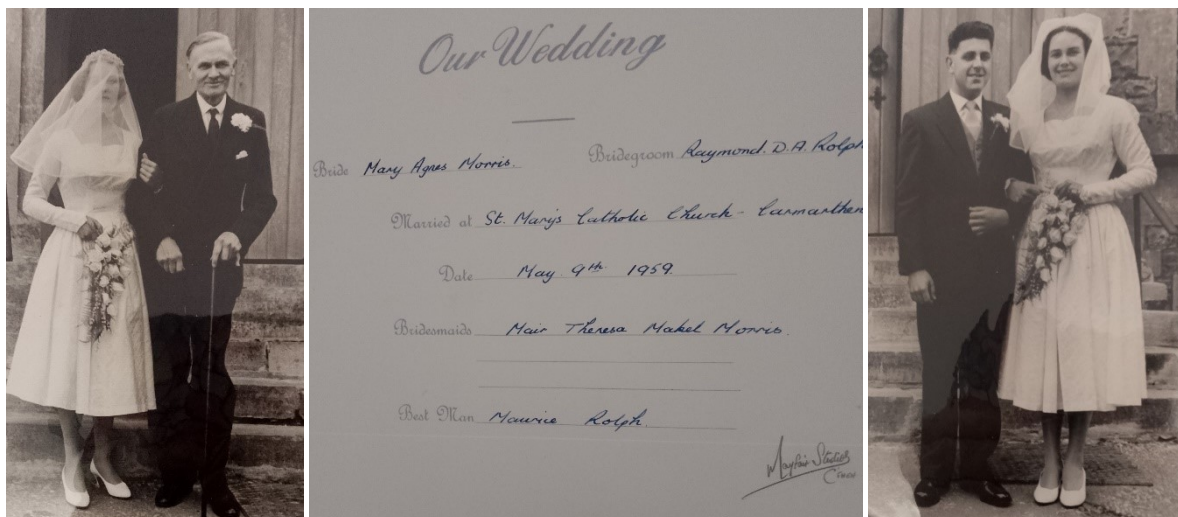
I wrote to tell my parents that we had got engaged and they were pretty worried so asked a Captain who they knew from home, and who knew me and happened to be in Malta with his wife, to have a look at Ray and report back. The wife was the biggest snob on earth and after taking us to lunch at the Phoenicia it was obvious they did not think Ray was “good enough” for me and wrote home to tell my father exactly that. However I was very lucky as there was also a priest on the island we knew who used to live in Laugharne where Dylan Thomas came from not far from my home. He was a White Russian and someone my parents both admired and we met up with him and he and Ray formed a tremendous friendship and he wrote back to my father to say how much he liked him and how much in love we were and what an excellent match he thought it would be. Thank God my father took the word of the priest and not the snob!! Also I shall never forget how sweet Elaine was about all this. She wrote to Ray encouraging him to stick to his guns and not be put off by the parental pressure coming from Wales. He really appreciated her kindness to him.

As I am a Catholic and Ray was not, he felt he ought to try and find out about my faith so he arranged to go to instruction to a wonderful priest, Father Nolan, each week. Ray was beginning to think he would like to convert to Catholicism and had a lot to learn so we used to go out to Rabat where there was a lovely little cafe in a shady courtyard run by two dear old English ladies who specialised in English tea. We used to have a pot of tea for two and two boiled eggs each with soldiers and marmalade and go through the catechism and other

instructional books to help him understand the faith. He was eventually received and confirmed at St John's Cathedral in Valetta in a moving Mass and ceremony conducted by the Maltese Archbishop.

One of the memorable things that happened whilst we were on Malta was meeting Mabel Strickland [Mabel Edeline Strickland, OBE, 1899 – 1988, was an Anglo-Maltese journalist, newspaper proprietor and politician]. I think it may have been through Father Brookes, the White Russian priest or it may have been someone my parents knew but we received an invitation and went to meet her in her mansion. It was set in the most beautiful orange grove and was high up on a hill (can't remember where) and the inside was sumptuous [this was Villa Parisio in Lija, Malta]. However, as you entered the front hall two cockatoos were chained to heavy stands eyeing up the visitors. One of these saw Ray come in and flew straight at him which gave him the fright of his life. Luckily the chain was too short for him to reach but I am sure he could have done a really nasty injury. We went out into the garden for supper in the orange grove which was really beautiful. I remember Mabel Strickland talking about the cloud that was beginning to hang over Malta and the worries she had about her beloved island. Shortly after that occasion, things began to feel a bit uncomfortable and within a few weeks, we were going to work in buses with reinforced glass and stones were thrown at us as we drove through Sliema and Valetta – all very scary. I gather on having been back twice since then that it was a huge regret to the Maltese people to lose the British as they had got on so well with them. [Malta was a British colony and an important strategic location for the Royal Navy in and after World War 2. In 1955, discussions began about its integration into the United Kingdom or independence. It became independent as the State of Malta on 21 September 1964.].

In April 1959 it was time for me to go home and Ray was coming to the end of his seven-year draft on Malta. The wedding was set for May 9th and we both had to get home independently, me going first. I flew out of Luqa on 18th April expecting Ray to follow the following week. However when I got back to my home in Wales, I had a very worrying time to wait. He could not get a flight for ages and in the end was sent up to Luqa to await the next available flight home on 4th May. He stayed there overnight and was lucky enough to get one on 5th May. I then had to rush up to Paddington to meet him, take a train to Southwick in Sussex to meet his parents and travel home to Wales for the wedding.



Mary Ag on her wedding day with her father Ryle (left), and with her husband Ray (right)

It was decided that we would have a small wedding for the sake of Ray's parents who were not used to company. Consequently I had my 21st party just before the wedding in Bryn Myrddin when all the County friends and relatives were invited and it was a lovely occasion and a chance for me to introduce Ray to everyone. Mum and Dad Rolph, Maurice and Joe (Ray's brother and half-brother) came up that night to stay at Bryn Myrddin and we were married on 9th May with a full Mass in St Mary's Catholic Church in Carmarthen.

We then went back to Bryn Myrddin for a wedding breakfast and opening of our presents which, as was the norm in those days, we had three toasters and several other duplicate presents which is why nowadays people always have wedding lists! That afternoon we took off in a hired car for North Wales for our honeymoon, having spent our first night in The Cliff Hotel at Gwbert just outside Cardigan. We then drove up the coast to Aberaeron and called on an elderly cousin, Mabel Pryse Saunders who was a dear old soul who had been particularly fond of Peter Hughes and helped him financially, leaving him her house in the end. We had tea there and she regaled us with her tales of the time she was in Malta and had danced through her velvet slippers!! We spent one night in Betwys y Coed which was beautiful. We carried on up to Maesyneuadd where there was a hotel Elaine had worked in and spent a couple of nights there. By this time, we had had enough of living out of suitcases and were anxious to get on with organising the rest of our lives so headed back to Bryn Myrddin. We spent a couple more nights there staying in the flat which was eventually to become the home of Sheila Price and which was the only completed flat at that time. We caught the train down to Portsmouth and booked into a B&B and started out on our new life together.

[Update added in 2025:] In Portsmouth, we trawled round the flats looking for somewhere to live and found a flat above a boys' prep. school. Frances Anne was born in Portsmouth in 1960. Next, we moved to Portland as Ray was on a ship in and out of harbour there, and that's where Denise Mary was born in 1961. We moved to Headley near Bordon in Hampshire, where Andrew Peter was born in 1962. Ray then left the Navy and commuted to London as a policeman, until we had a police flat near Marble Arch and then bought a house in Winchmore Hill where we stayed until I was pregnant with Alice Louise in 1969; she was born in 1970. When Ray left the police we moved to Newcastle Emlyn where we bought our shop. Daddy died when we were there (in 1971), and we offered Mummy our stabling where she made herself a flat and lived for 7 or 8 years until she moved to a nursing home in Oxford where she died in 1979. When we sold the shop after Mummy had gone, I worked in Cardigan for a loss adjuster until Ray had the start of all his illnesses and we moved to Sussex in 1988. Ray died in 2001; Denise in 2020. Now, in 2025, I still live in Sussex and have 9 grandchildren and 6 great-grandchildren.

