

Three Fragments of Autobiography

by Margery Burrows

(née James, 1900-1941)

Introduction



Image 1

I have recently found an account by my mother about her childhood and early married life, written towards the end of her tragically short life. Her full name was Linda Margery Rhodes James, born 1900. She was the second child of Canon Sydney Rhodes James and Linda Hoare. Sydney was appointed Canon of Worcester Cathedral in 1919. During the 1st World War he was a chaplain to the Armed Forces. Her elder sister was Zoë born 1898 and she had two brothers Peter (whose proper name was Sydney, born 1901) and Philip (born 1906). She married Geoffrey Burrows in 1919 who was in the Manchester Regiment. They had three children, Richard born 1921, Anne born 1922 and Patience born 1926.

She wrote the account as a rough draft in an exercise book towards the end of the 1930's I think (see note 3). Although it is brief with so much unsaid, it brings her to life vividly. Also in the form of a story she describes the stresses and strains and joy of her early married life to a regular soldier constantly on the move.

Jimmy's Kids: Memories of a happy childhood



Image 2

My father Sydney Rhodes James was descended from a long line of colonial sugar magnates, (note.1). His father Herbert was a parish priest in Suffolk and his mother, Emily Horton, the daughter of a Yorkshire admiral.

My father had a long and successful career as assistant and house master at Eton and did not marry till he was 42. When he told the older boys in his house about his engagement the reply was "What you Sir?" in tones of intense astonishment. My mother Linda Hoare belonged to a well-known banking family. Her father Henry Hoare was head of the bank in Fleet Street. (note.2. He died before I was born, but many uncles carried on the business and on very infrequent occasions we visited them there, and were much impressed with the standard of living. The old house in Fleet Street was more like a club than a place of business. Upstairs there were vast reception rooms and bedrooms where the partners could live for weeks at a

time if they wished. When we arrived we walked straight into the bank proper and were then ushered through into the parlour where great uncles and others were working. They took little notice of us.

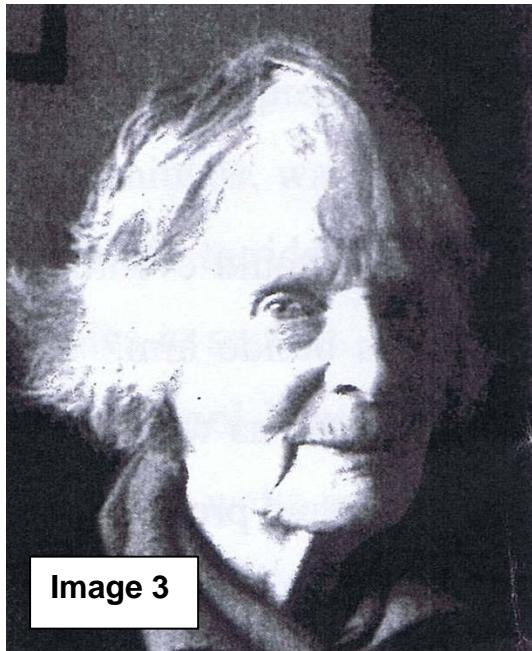


Image 3

Usually my mother's eldest brother, the present head of the bank, would eventually appear and take us upstairs to the big dining room and install us beside him. The choice of food was varied and rich according to our ideas, accustomed as we were to plain living. Each partner's taste in food and drink was catered for and presently the table would fill up with great uncles, uncles and cousins, some of whom greeted us while others took no notice. The food was kept hot by hot bricks placed in Chippendale cabinets. Like everything else in the house they were bought when antiques were new and kept in use ever since.

But this is a digression. My father left Eton, where he was a housemaster, soon after he married when he was appointed Headmaster of Malvern, and the School House was our birthplace. My elder sister Zoë and myself had only 18 months between us. My two

brothers were younger, which was a source of regret to us. We even invented an elder brother, who was away to sea at the age of sixteen and was due to turn up at any time. Life in a big boy's school might have been rather a stereotyped affair, but my mother avoided anything of that kind by the originality of her character and outlook. Her cousin Mary Hallward (*not identified*) came to be housekeeper and was also a matron for the boys, so my mother was able to devote herself to her family. She was at once practical and absent minded. Strong in the arm and delicate in constitution, earnest but with a strong sense of humour, with a missionary's zeal for any of the many causes she took up. They were generally connected with some sort of cure, but she had and still has a panacea complex. What is sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander. If garlic is good for a cold it must also be good for rheumatism, dine on nothing but fruit and vegetables and all your ills will fly away.

She hated anything unpleasant in literature or plays. I have known her burn the offending book and I have heard her complain to the box office about the play.

In all her dealings with us however she showed remarkably sound common sense and freedom from prejudice. She encouraged us to follow our own heart. My sister, who loved animals, was given a real harness for her rocking horse and later had donkeys and ponies to ride and drive. There were chickens to feed, rabbit hutches to clean out and pigs to scratch. My mother made quite a good thing out of pigs, which were fed on the school house scraps. My little brother Philip was allowed great freedom to climb over walls and roofs, fixing up endless contraptions with wire to measure the velocity of the wind etc. helped if necessary by Mother who was very handy with hammer and nails.

Pie making too was one of her joys in which we shared and when we were older, caravanning and camping.

We once planned a Great Expedition round the Isle of Wight on the spur of the moment in a fine spell of weather. We only had the pony trap, one small tent and our bicycles. Feverish activity reigned when the great decision had been taken. The lawn in front of the house was littered with various necessary and unnecessary stores and equipment. There were pillows, rugs and pieces of carpet to put over the tent to keep out the rain! Also a large quantity of bread and other stores which I cannot believe were necessary as the island is far from being a desert one. So long did the packing take that we did not start till late afternoon.

Then the first disaster happened. My brother's bicycle broke in half, luckily without killing him as he was going fast downhill only about 5 miles from home. There was no room for an extra personage in the cart so the only thing to do was to camp for the night in Sandown while the bicycle was repaired. We found a field. It had cows in it but we were undeterred. We cooked our first meal and put up our tent. All this took a long time and much discussion. Finally we got to bed with one piece of carpet handy in case of rain. The sound of cows and of course the pony cropping the grass was the only slight disturbance. We soon fell asleep.

About 2 am we were wakened by large drops of rain. We saw mother advance towards us dressed in a weird assortment of garments with a sack over her shoulder. She said the pony had managed to open our hamper of stores and had eaten half a loaf of bread. She had now stowed it away under the cart, and had put everything else into the umbrella tent.

We snuggled down again under our carpets, but the rain came on apace, settled in puddles on our pillows. There was nothing for it but to get dressed one by one in the tent and run for home.

The cyclists caught the first train, and got back to the house for breakfast. The rest of the party soon turned up and that was the end of the Great Expedition.

I ought to explain that my father built his house, St. Denis at Bembridge in the Isle of Wight soon after he married and we always went there for Easter and summer holidays from Malvern, and later when he retired in 1914 we lived there and kept it for a second home when he was appointed a Canon at Worcester. It was a well-built brick house standing back from the wood, close to the village. The garden was entirely planned by my mother, who planted trees and yew hedges, lawns and a pond.

The chief features were the double hedges of an old road complete with brambles and oak trees which divided the garden in half. She filled this space with bulbs and primroses and my father cut back the trees to make a view from his dressing room window looking out over the harbour. The sunset behind the hills beyond the harbour was his great delight.

I don't remember as a child being especially inspired by beautiful scenery and couldn't understand the raptures of the grown-ups. My own children differ in this respect. Both my daughters delight in the beauties of nature and in pictures, particularly old masters. (Note.3)

Perhaps this was because I was totally immersed in day-dreams. I reveled in reading and identified myself with the hero or heroine of my book. Our reading was singularly uncensored and I remember pitying some older cousins whose mother used to cut out pages and black out words in every book they read. We read anything we could get hold of. My father used to buy the old red "seven pennies" to read on journeys and the shelves were full of these, providing endless fodder of a light character.

At Malvern we joined to a limited extent the life of the school. After nursery days were over we used to lunch in the dining hall with the boys. I used to scurry home from school (note. 4) often late and stand outside panting with a scarlet face, listening to the roar of voices and plucking up courage to make a lonely entrance. We cannot have been fed exclusively on cold beef but that's all I remember eating and yellow pickles. We sat on a dais with my parents, the house-tutor and some senior boys and gazed down on the rows of rounded black shoulders of the sixty odd sitting at the long tables. We knew very few of them and such as ever mentioned us, referred to us as "Jimmy's kids".

The head and second head of the house used often to come to the private side and they were the heroes of our imaginary adventures. Zoë, Peter and I used to lie in bed till we could hear the hymn sung at evening prayers.

This was the time for story-telling. I was naturally more sleepy than Zoë was, but was egged on to think of fresh adventures.

Haystack houses with rooms and windows concealed in the hay were the earliest of our inventions and from them we would roam the countryside as the head of our band, each of us mounted on perfect steeds with an able lieutenant to carry out our behests. My sister invariably the head of the house and I the second head. Names remembered such as Vidal, Arnold Jackson, afterwards a winner of Olympia laurels, and T Gordon who came to stay with us at Bembridge after an illness and had cream with his grape-nuts. How we envied him! He also taught me to make a noise like a moorhen with my lips, which I can still do.

The high spot of the year was the house supper to which old boys used to come. We were allowed to sit up for this at a fairly early age. This was followed by an impromptu entertainment at which Christopher Storrs, brother of Sir Ronald was the star comic turn and Alan Murray the chief music maker. He has since composed many tuneful songs which are heard on the wireless.

I would like to write an imaginative history, full of romance and glory, but I am driven to recording as simply as I can the story of my uneventful career. I have kept no diary, but a glance at our snapshots album or visitor's book will help me to know the sequence of events.

I was born at Malvern, second daughter of Sydney James, who was Headmaster there for eighteen years. Looking back I realise that we were very lucky children. My mother's one desire was that we should have a happy childhood. She herself had suffered under an iron discipline and although we were not given much pocket money to spend on sweets or unnecessary clothes, she succeeded where others have failed with overmuch.

We were quite frankly afraid at times of my father, who with one glance of those penetrating eyes under beetling brows could make any offender quake in his or her shoes, but he was only severe when we deserved it. I remember he used to entertain us in his study, sometimes drawing dragons in blue pencil on a half-sheet of notepaper, or do fascinating things with red sealing wax. First the double brass candlesticks must be put on the table and the candles lit with a Swan Vesta match. Then he would glance at us to see if we were ready for the great moment. We pressed close round his chair, and the stub of the thick wax was held in the flame, sending forth the odour which our souls loved, becoming richly sticky and ready to drip. Quickly, and with unerring judgment he dropped it on the writing paper and rubbed it round into a perfect circle. The process was repeated and our small fingers tried to catch the red hair which dangled from the end of the wax, but it was brittle and broke in pieces. The final stamping of the seal was executed with a flourish of his signet ring and we were allowed to carry off the results in triumph.

In the study we were given to realise, when we were older, my father entertained all, parents, masters and boys good, bad or indifferent, and settled their problems with that breezy candor of manner which endeared him to all who knew him well.

But I'm speaking now of an earlier period when life was a dream and dreams were real. I can distinctly remember clenching my fists tightly and floating downstairs without touching the steps, while the filled edge of my white muslin dress fluttered on the up draught created by my swift descent. Then there was the witch who lived in the bathroom door. I can see her face quite clearly in the graining of the paint. She would certainly catch me if I did not escape before all the water had run away after the plug was pulled out. The final musical gurgle was waited for as I slammed the door and rushed breathless onto the landing.

The study itself had a great fascination for us, particularly the roll-topped desk with its rows of mysterious pigeonholes and the swivel chair which could be whirled round and round.

Distinguished visitors, bishops and the like often stayed at School House and we were accustomed to make polite conversation with them when we appeared in the drawing room after tea, dressed in white muslin with sashes. I had a great variety of them as a favourite uncle

(note.5) used to provide me with a fresh one every birthday. He liked a spice of variety in the female sex. I had curls at one period till we all got ringworm and my hair was cut off.

I can remember a guest who captured our hearts with his sense of the ridiculous. He spent quite a long time drawing ‘ekes’ for us; having come across the word unexpectedly in a nursery rhyme. There was a ‘snowball eke’, an ‘umbrella eke’ and various others drawn from his fertile imagination (note 6). He might have been a lecturer, probably someone of distinction, but I’m sure he never made a greater hit than he did that evening.

VOYAGING

Katherine
Guy
Peter
Ursula
Joy
Jane

Margery Burrows (Wife)
Geoffrey Burrows (Husband)
Richard Burrows (Son)
Anne Burrows (Daughter)
Patience Burrows (Daughter)
Mary Burrows (Geoffrey’s Sister)

“Katherine darling, I have a piece of news for you.” Her tall husband stood looking down upon her. Somehow his words had a familiarly portentous sound. “India?” she asked. He nodded, “We sail on the 22nd.” “Not of this month?” “Not before Christmas.”

The government was quite capable of sending them off at a month’s notice, but she had not expected to go quite so soon (February 30th). Just time to send Peter off to school and what about Ursula and little Joy? Would Jane come to the rescue, kind sister Jane, who had helped them so often before, and could the grandmother (Guy’s mother) put up with them if they spent all their time with her? Her mind seemed to be working in jerks. She held out her hands to her husband. He took them and leant forward to kiss her. “Don’t worry darling, we will all manage somehow,” he whispered. (The children were based at Crowdleham in Kent with their Grandmother and Aunt Mary and Uncle Philip Burrows from 1930 -1934).

“Don’t worry darling?” He was right. They had muddled through in the past, and no doubt somehow they would survive. She had come to him as a young inexperienced bride, hopelessly impractical and dreamy. Her early life had been spent in the cultivated atmosphere of a cathedral town in the midlands. Her father was a well-known divine, her mother his unconventional partner, a delightful friend and companion to all her children. She had grown up in the atmosphere of a happy home, where each member of the family was free to follow his or her bent. Too free she sometimes thought now, as she had never been disciplined to the unpleasant tasks of life. She had been at school all through the war and it was there that she had met Jane, who had been her prop and mainstay ever since. She often considered what would have happened if she had been left to sink or swim on her own. Her young soldier husband, who had been a prisoner of war, had practical ability but no experience of life. Their first baby Peter, now eight years old, had been born while he was serving in Ireland. He did not see the baby till he was six weeks old and for the next two years there was a continuous separation, that time in the Channel Islands with Peter a year old, and Ursula only a few months on the way. They were to be there for three years and came away after three months. That was the first time that Guy had said portentously “I have got a piece of news for you.”

The battalion had a day’s notice to return to Ireland and Katherine was rescued by Jane and carried safely back to England. Ursula was born soon after and they returned to the Channel Islands to finish their tour of duty.

Little Joy arrived four years later when they were stationed on the Rhine. Katherine felt that life had been kind to her and had in one way tempered the winds to the shorn lamb. She had many friends, a devoted husband and healthy babies. She was also a good sailor. This was sometimes a disadvantage as it meant she always had to cook as well as look after the children as her nurse was always seasick. She found one always felt a little squeamish cooking

milky food over a methylated stove in a rocking, stuffy cabin. Then later came the much longer journey from the Channel Islands to Cologne. Katherine could never think of the number of times Jane had come to help pack up and travel with them.

The furnished house had to be left in apple-pie order. They left the Channel Islands in October 1924 and joined the British Army of Occupation at Cologne in Germany.

She remembered running back from the taxi to see if all the windows were shut and the wastepaper basket tidied away. Then they arrived at the quay where the crowds were assembled to see the troops go on board. They had hand luggage for a three-day journey by boat and train with two babies, a nurse and a maid. There were no porters and no-one took any notice of them. The officers were busy while the troops were going abroad. Guy was nowhere to be seen. They waited disconsolately for some time. Her mother had always preached at her "Don't fuss". She did try. She knew it was no use, did no good and made matters worse. The Adjutant, a kindly man, came up to the group "Can I help at all?" he said. Jane, who had been standing clutching the folding cot, thrust it at him "Yes please, hold this," she said and gathering up as much hand luggage as she could, set off for the steamer. Katherine still laughed when she thought of his expression. No officer in uniform may carry a small parcel and the sight of the immaculate officer holding the cot at arms length was unforgettable. She took it from him and explained the situation. He looked relieved and went to find Guy, who appeared at length saying "Hurry up; we are due to sail in 10 minutes." So like Guy to put her in the wrong Katherine thought, and was sorry for the unkindness, but it did not prevent her saying rather peevishly "Where have you been all this time?" "Seeing to the troop's darling, I'm afraid I won't be able to look after you very much. Wives have to fend for themselves on these occasions."

Katherine was beginning to realise that the journey was not going to be an easy one. Guy did his best, he managed to get his soldier-servant off duty to carry some of the hand luggage and at last the whole party got aboard.

Peter aged three and Ursula one and a half, were too young to do more than gaze in a bewildered way at the unfamiliar scene. There were at least eighty other children on board. She tried hard to think if they had remembered everything, and if they had enough food for at least an extra day as well as milk for the children and toys and picture books. They had extra bedding and cots for the children and things for a couple of nights, and the baby's bath. Suddenly her heart gave a thump. She looked wildly round and clutched at Guy who happened to be near "the pram!" she gasped. "What about it?" he said. "We sent it down to the quay last night, has it been put aboard?" Katherine could laugh about it all now, but then she had felt the possible loss of the pram as an impending disaster of the first magnitude. Guy went off to have a look, "I can't see it anywhere," he said. Katherine began to lose her head. She had had an exhausting morning, and was not in the best of health. Jane was below seeing to the storing of the hand luggage. "I can't go on without it" she cried almost in tears. "They say there are no decent prams to be had in Germany." "There is no time to get it now" said Guy, "we are due to sail." Katherine's heart seemed to turn right over. Her knees were shaking. A quiet voice beside her asked what the matter was. "It's the pram?? We left it on the quay." The gangway was still down. The Colonel (Colonel Dorling) walked towards it and leisurely went ashore. "They can't go without me" he said, with a twinkle in his eye and Guy dashed towards the shed and found the pram and together they pushed it onto the deck. Katherine could only smile her thanks.

The rest of the journey was a nightmare devised by some ingenious spinner of red caps at the War Office. Guernsey to Ostend had evidently not appealed to the powers that be. Katherine could only remember isolated moments, each of which at the time had seemed like the last straw. The troops seemed to play skittles with cannonballs overhead or gave endless mournful interpretations of the latest sentimental ditty. There was a continual wailing chorus from the eighty other children aboard and all the usual thuds, rattles and bangs that accompany the removal of baggage from the hold. Katherine played a game to while away the time. At each particularly loud crash she said "There goes our silver box" or "There goes the linen." When at last there was no more baggage left, she and the children dozed off to sleep. At Dover the

troops were marched up to the castle for a meal and Katherine and her family and friends who had come to say "goodbye" lunched at the Lord Warden Hotel. It was a welcome respite Guy was able to join them and they would laugh and joke over their experiences.

There was a bit of a breeze outside as they set off down the pier in a procession. They looked about for the transport which was to take them to Ostend. Jane carried Peter and the nurse carried Ursula. Katherine walked with her father and mother-in-law and the female factotum brought up the rear with the soldier-servants. Dover pier is long. Large cranes lifted package after package and dropped them on deck. That must be the transport which was going to take them to Ostend. The breeze was freshening and the sea, a wrathful green monster, swept in long curves to the shore. Katherine realised that on any other occasion she would have been delighted at the prospect of further adventure. Now, however, a feeling of sick apprehension overcame her. Gathering the wraps more tightly round them the small party battled its way up the pier. Here they found a scene of intense activity. The transport, though obviously old, was larger than what it had appeared at first sight. The decks were swarming with troops which had arrived before them. They clambered up the gangway onto a deck which was slippery with salt water. The transport had obviously done one journey that day, bringing over the battalion that was returning from Germany. They found their cabin with difficulty. It was small, stuffy and housed the receptacle used by the previous seasick occupier. The soldier-servant was called to the rescue and bravely, amidst cat calls from his mates, stepped with it at arms length to the rail.

Then came 'Goodbye England, home and serenity!' The children, their eyes heavy for want of sleep, waved their arms in meaningless farewell. Everyone was waving too. It was part of the game. The crossing was a long drawn out nightmare. Ursula, who had not yet shed a tear, now howled and clung to her nurse who was seasick herself and could do nothing for her. Jane lay on the floor of the cabin. Katherine tried to comfort both the children but they were beyond her help, until tired out they slept. The general factotum wandered round the ship declaring she preferred the fresh air, but possibly there were other attractions. The Colonel met her on her peregrinations and his suspicions roused, asked her what she was doing on board. She did not recognise him and she replied with dignity that she was travelling with one of the officer's families. He felt the intended snub and repeated the conversation with relish at a later date.

Katherine felt that she had never got to the bottom of Alderney. It was a mysterious little island which kept itself to itself. The very windows, of the houses in the crooked main street seemed to contain half-hidden secrets and to peer with resentful curiosity at the stranger who dared to look up at them. The French names over the shops and the quaint tradition of self-government seemed to throw a romantic glow over what after all was a small fishing village. The little fawn and white cows, each economically tethered and moved as often as twice a day, provided an industry for half the population and a large granite quarry exports yearly tons of rock to England. For the rest Katherine could not help thinking it rash of the islanders to ship loads of their territory. She pictured the last man finally hacking away at the rock on which he was standing till he too was engulfed and Alderney was no more.

Housekeeping was difficult with supplies dependent on the weekly boat, water from the village pump and local butter at treble English prices. Guy covered the 10 miles to the port from the house in a baby car which had to be landed by a pulley and winch from the mail boat. He was immensely proud of his achievement in doing 600 miles in the month on an island four miles long and one and a half miles wide. But it had been a happy time. There were carefree days picnicking at Telegraph Bay at the foot of the mighty cliff which year in year out defeats the Atlantic breakers, its grandeur enough for a much longer coastline. Huge boulders are piled one on the other making archway and barriers to fascinate the climbers. Bathing there is sheer joy.

Warm clefts and recesses form natural nooks and shelves for clothing and other belongings. The sea that laps these granite shores has a transparency which must be seen to be believed. Guy used to dive in from the rocks and Katherine, who could clearly see the

bottom, would watch his long form curiously foreshortened, swimming down and down only to return without the pebble he had tried to reach.

LOVE IN IDLENESS: Confessions of an Invalid

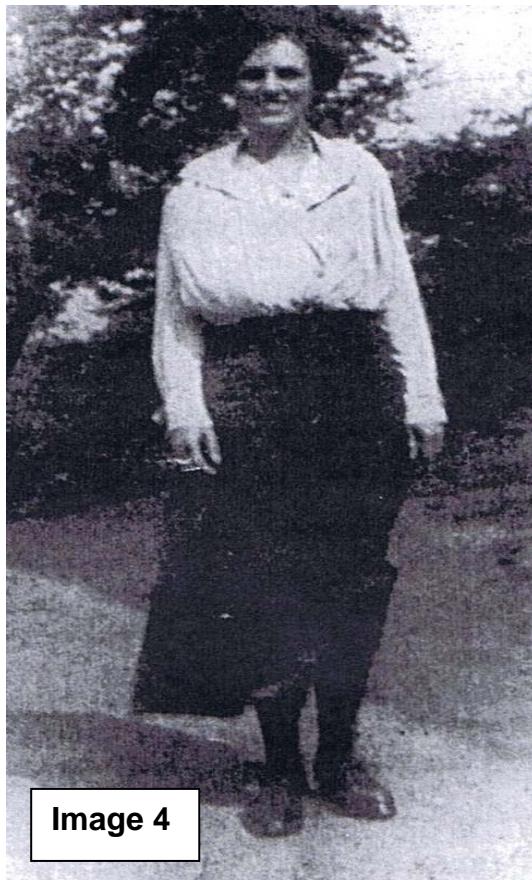


Image 4

Illness is indulged in by some indolently disposed persons as an escape from the realities of life, or so I am lead to believe.

Personally I do not think I chose to be ill for that reason or indeed that I exercised any choice in the matter. Indifferent health has been my position ever since I was a child. My childhood was a happy one, only marred by bouts of asthma and hay fever which clouded every winter and summer till I was out of the nursery.

I am told people quite often pretend to be ill to avoid making decisions. This I can quite believe. But in my case illness has been the cause and not the consequence of my general tendency to allow things to settle themselves.

Notes:

Note.1: The James family had sugar plantations in Jamaica from the end of the 17th to the middle of the 19th Century.

Note.2: When Margery wrote this account her uncle Harry was the senior partner of the bank C. Hoare & Co. which was established in 1672, grandson of Henry of Staplehurst who was Margery's great-grandfather. (Margery's grandfather Harry was asked to retire quite early in his life as he had made some risky investments).

Note.3: Margery married Geoffrey Burrows in 1920 and had three children Richard, b. 1921, Anne b. 1922 and myself, Patience in 1926. I think that my mother in writing of our delight in the old masters is due to the Phaidon Press bringing out their wonderful books on Michelangelo and Botticelli towards the end of the 1930s. We bought them with our Christmas book tokens.



Image 5

Note.4: Both Zoe and Margery went to St James School Malvern which was run by three sisters, Miss Alice, Miss Katrine and Miss Mary Baird. In 1912 Miss Katrine and Miss Mary started a sister-school nearer London at Abbots Hill, Hemel Hempstead and Zoë and Margery went with them. The following year Mary Burrows joined them and she and Margery became great friends. Mary's brother was a prisoner of war all through World War I. He met Margery when he returned home and they fell in love and were married in 1920. Their first child Richard was Miss Katrine's godson, there is a photograph of him in an early photograph album owned by the school.

Note.5: Margery had two uncles Montague (Uncle Monty), a scholar and writer of ghost stories, Herbert (Uncle Bertie) who was in the Royal Army Medical Corps and an Aunt Grace (Gargoose). She had three Hoare uncles, all in Hoare's Bank, Henry, Frederick and Edward

and three aunts Beatrice (Aunt Tittums), Eva and Violet. I do not know which was Margery's favourite uncle.

Note 6: Eke is an addition e.g. a tag to a bell-rope.

Note. 7: After Germany, Geoffrey was stationed at Hythe for 3 years, then in 1929 Secunderabad, India. The regiment was in Burma from 1931-32, returning to Secunderabad for a brief period before moving to Khartoum. In 1934 he became the commanding officer of the Regimental Depot Ladysmith Barracks at Ashton-under Lyne till his retirement in 1937. This was the base for him, Margery and the children for 3 years. From 1937 Margery was constantly ill. Geoffrey became assistant Air Raid Precaution Officer in Winchester. I do know when Margery was diagnosed as having cancer (of the liver I think). She spent some time in the London Clinic in 1938. From the summer of 1939 she lived with her sister Zoë at Kenswick, Lower Broadheath, Worcestershire. Geoffrey having returned to Lancashire as a Civil Defence Officer in 1939, Margery died at Kenswick shortly before her 41st birthday in 1941. A short life lived with humour, love and much voyaging

'Stealing a Policeman' by Margery Burrows.

An Account of an incident in Cologne, Germany in about 1924 (written in about 1935)



Image 6

It must have been 10 years ago when I made a fool of myself; but I can still remember the forlorn feeling of standing, later one night, outside the Opera House in Cologne, watching the traffic passing on its way, bearing with it the other British people, the officers and their wives who were rapidly disappearing by tram, car and taxi.

My husband's Battalion had only lately joined the army of Occupation, and these people were all strangers to me, but they did represent security. If I had been quicker I might have

plucked up my courage, and asked someone for help. But the little car had been obstinate about starting before, and I had never really doubted my ability to get her going. Anyhow, it was too late now; the theatre was empty.

My companion too had left me in the lurch. My husband having gone to camp, I had been glad enough to get someone to come with me to the Opera. She could speak German well, and I could only understand a few words. But when she saw the car would not start she said she thought her husband would be anxious, and I had very little difficulty in persuading her to go home on the last tram.

I climbed into my 'Baby Rover' and tried once more to start the engine. It made a rasping noise, a sputter, and that was all. I began to feel rather nervous.

It must be remembered that Cologne in those days was an occupied city. The Germans, although much more kindly disposed towards the British than they had been to the French they were still "the Huns". British officers were obliged to wear uniform on and off duty. The "hate" propaganda had left its aftermath on both sides. Fear and distrust were natural in the circumstances, and this must have explained my very real panic when a kindly German taxi driver

approached and asked if I had run out of petrol. His guttural voice and teutonic aspect roused my worst apprehensions. I did not know what fell design he might have on my car or my person.



I waved him away and jumped out of the car again to look for a telephone box. Oh, joy! I could see a solitary military policeman, in kindly familiar khaki, marching up the street. I sped up to him and recited my woes: "Car won't start....terrified of the Germans...husband out in camp...nervous companion gone home by tram...what should I do?"

He looked tall, strong, brave, competent, but he knew nothing about motor cars, and had nothing to suggest. However he was just going off duty, and I could see that my plight did not strike him in any romantic light. I was simply an impediment in his path. I found myself asking him to stay by the car while I went to telephone. I showed him by my manner that I thought it was his duty to look after me. I felt I must throw my weight about, in case he deserted me, though I feared I might get into trouble next day for interfering with a representative of the law.

The regulations were very strict at that time. You could not book a room in a hotel, without asking the Town Mayor's permission. Wives of serving officers were grouped with "camp followers" and, as such, subject to military law. So it was with mixed feelings that I left him brooding gloomily over the little car while I went off to put my call through. Could I be prosecuted for stealing a policeman? I do not know, nor did I care.

It was just as I feared. Captain M.....the only officer left in our lines had gone to bed, and had to get up to answer the telephone. I explained my predicament and he promised to come to the rescue.

Reassured, I returned to the car and my unwilling guardian. I said that help was coming, and asked him to stay until it came. I cannot remember what we talked about. I could see he was getting restless, and did my best to keep up a rather one-sided conversation as the sound of passing traffic gradually died away.

There was a longish interval to fill in, and I just began to mark a slight unbending on the part of my companion, who by now I suppose, had resigned himself to his fate, when the squeaking of brakes and the sound of English voices announced the arrival of my rescuers.

What a feeling of relief to see a friendly face once more! Captain M.....apologised for keeping me waiting for so long. He told me he had some difficulty in rousing the mechanic at the circular garage where we kept our car. Then they started off in an ancient taxi, only to find a punctured wheel, in the first hundred yards. There was no spare tyre, so back they had to go, and this time took a client's machine that was in for a minor repair and, with renewed apologies, here they were!

I was equally sorry for dragging them our so late at night, and hoped there was nothing seriously wrong with the Rover. Perhaps one of the plugs, I suggested, or a fault in the starting gear? I was afraid I was no use with machinery, and I had not liked to let strange Germans tinker with my car, especially so late at night.

They quite understood, and were only too glad to be of assistance. The mechanic began poking about under the bonnet.

I felt it was high time to release my captive. I shook him warmly by the hand, expressed my thanks as well as I could, and sent him home to bed.

That is really the end of the story. You can guess the rest. Yes, the tank was dry, yes there was a can of petrol on the running board. My shame was complete.

Nobody could have been kinder than Captain M.....He passed it off as being quite a natural mistake. He even made me feel he had quite enjoyed the adventure.

I found it harder to meet the mechanic's eye. He had lost his beauty sleep for nothing, and might get into trouble with the owner of the garage for messing about with a customer's car. But oh how I thanked my lucky stars that I had dismissed my unwilling chaperone before the humiliating truth came out! Perhaps he still cherishes chivalrous thoughts of the young and foolish officer's wife who kept him on duty an extra hour one night in Cologne? I wonder!

Image Captions:

1. Margery Burrows circa 1922 (nee James 1900-1941).
2. Back row from left: Linda James (nee Hoare) and Sydney James with Sydney's brother Monty and sister Grace (known as Gargoose). Berty the youngest brother is not in the picture. Front row, from left: Peter, Margery and Zoe, the children of Linda and Sydney plus Herbert James, father of Sydney, Monty and Grace. Circa 1902.
3. Patience Bagenal, October 2011.
4. Margery at Abbot's Hill, aged 19.
5. Abbot's Hill School Photo. Miss Katrine Baird the Head and the Sixth Form 1918. Margery James is seated on the ground on the right.
6. Wedding photo of Margery and Geoff at Worcester. On the left is Zoe James and right is Mary Burrows, their respective sisters. Mr Bateman was Best Man.
7. 1932 – Left to Right: Rosemary Britten, Richard, Patience, Anne Burrows, John Britten, Margery Burrows, on the beach at Bembridge.

After note by Ms Bagenal:

When I was about 7 and we were living in Ladysmith Barracks, c.1934 I painted a Yale key gold for the opening ceremony of the Manchester Regiment Museum – I can't remember who opened it – Colonel Dorling possibly. My father certainly had a hand in it. He was CO at the time.