

Denbigh and Guernsey Girls World War II

Members of the Denbigh and District Probus Club were delighted to welcome Mary Steel, a former Headmistress of Howell's School, Denbigh, who is from Aberwheeler, to their April meeting in the Oriol Hotel, St Asaph to speak about the World War II Guernsey Girls' evacuation to Denbigh.

Mary was born and brought up in South Wales. She is a graduate in Modern Languages from the University of Wales in Cardiff. She embarked, not without some trepidation, on a teaching career in inner-city schools in Liverpool, followed by four years in West Africa. One outstanding memory of that time is that of crossing the Sahara in an elderly land rover.

Returning to the UK, Mary worked as a housemistress in several girls' and co-educational schools before becoming Deputy Head of St. Margaret's School in Bushey. In 1991 she was appointed Headmistress of Howell's School, Denbigh, and, proving that she is a glutton for punishment, in 1998 took up a second headship at Abbots Bromley School for Girls, in Staffordshire.

Although now retired and limited to the more pedestrian leisure pursuits of reading, classical music and crossword solving, in her younger days, Mary sailed as a mate with the Ocean Youth Club, teaching young people to sail in ocean-going yachts.

For some seven years, Mary was a regular presenter on Radio 2's 'Pause for Thought' on Sarah Kennedy's 'Dawn Patrol' and took part in a television programme hosted by Melvyn Bragg in the series 'Not Just on Sunday' which examined the role of faith in the professional lives of participants. Now she is putting her diminishing brain cells into learning Welsh and relishing her various roles in Girlguiding.

Mary told members and guests how as a new Headmistress of Howell's school, she was aware that all new heads were required to attend a five-day course dealing with all sorts of things – legal, financial, management etc.

Twenty Heads from all parts of the country attended the five-day course and got to know each other well. On completion, the course leader suggested that they keep in touch as they would be going through the same experiences and that it would be good to have reunions from time to time.

They did that with the first reunion being at Cadbury's World in Birmingham and the next one being held in the Guernsey Ladies' College, hosted by a lady called Margaret who had been on the course and was Principal there. At the reunion, they were given a tour of the school buildings and Mary was extremely surprised to see a picture of Howell's School, Denbigh displayed in a prominent position in the entrance hall.

She of course enquired why the picture of her school was on display and was stunned to hear the information about how girls from the college with their teachers were evacuated to Howell's school during the second world war and remained in N Wales for five years.

This was the first Mary had heard of it and when she came back to Wales, she had a look in the archives but there really wasn't anything about it.

In Guernsey on 19 June 1940, it was announced in the local paper that there would be an evacuation of the whole school to the UK the next day to avoid the Nazi invasion of their island. The teachers and 100 girls were transported in the hold of a cargo boat, Batavier 1V bound for Weymouth, all seated on bales of straw with only one suitcase each that they could carry. The suitcases had to be inspected before they were allowed on to the boat. The evacuees were just in time as France surrendered the next day and on 30th June the island was occupied.

A total of 5,000 schoolchildren were evacuated from Guernsey and 1,000 remained on the island. Sadly, some were left behind because of a misunderstanding about departure times.

As they left, one 9-year-old girl saying goodbye to her father said 'Don't worry daddy, I am going to forget all about you so that I won't miss you', such a heart-breaking thing for them both. She said that she only

realised much later that it wasn't raindrops wetting his shoes, but her father's tears.

On arrival in the UK, the girls and teachers started off in Oldham, then Derbyshire then, because of an invitation from the then Howell's school head teacher Miss Robinson, 63 girls aged 6 to 18 moved to Denbigh on 21st September 1940 and were billeted with local families.

Most had a really warm welcome with 1 girl in a household of 9 feeling welcome and warm but some others with well to do families being resented by the servants who felt they had been lumbered with extra work.

They were all day girls at Howell's school but were never integrated into the school and stayed as a unit. The war meant that they did not receive post from home as their homes were now occupied by the enemy and of course there were no phone calls, however Red Cross negotiations in 1941 meant they could receive letters and over 7000 were sent to evacuees right across the UK.

Initially each letter was only allowed to be 10 words long but eventually this was increased to 25 words per letter which was the standard for prisoners-of-wars. The reply to any letter had to be on the back of the one received, meaning that they could not keep their letters or treasure and re-read them ever. It could actually take months for the letters which cost 6d each in postage, to arrive with news by then being outdated.

There were messages such as 'Baby Mary died last December,' 'Your son died in England' however as the family had 2 sons in England, they had no idea which one had passed away, 'Your father has been deported to Germany', and the girl that received that message never saw him again.

Miss Robinson, the head at the time, spoke to the Howell's girls about being careful not to overwhelm the newcomers and to keep their distance. Whether she intended it or not, the Howell's girls took it to mean that they were to have nothing to do with them and that is what happened. Later on, they were mortified that they had been so insensitive. Some said that they had noticed some girls in a different uniform but thought no more of it.

Finally, the island of Guernsey was liberated in May 1945 and the girls returned home on 3rd August 1945 on the Hantonia.

Liberation Day is the most important day in Guernsey's calendar and commemorates the island's freedom from the German Occupation during World War II. It is celebrated annually on 9th May, with the festivities providing an opportunity for islanders to remember the days of Occupation, which played such a monumental role in shaping both the landscape and the lives of the people of Guernsey.

In 1995, to commemorate 50 years after the end of the war, it was decided in the Easter holiday to hold a reunion of the girls who had been at Howell's school during the war and Mary suggested to Margaret that it would be nice to invite the Guernsey girls as well. At the time it was a light-hearted suggestion and she did not really think they would take up the offer. 19 came to Denbigh – 13 having flown over from Guernsey. They had both happy tales and memories to recount about their time and welcome in North Wales but there were so many sad and difficult memories of those times when some recalled how they returned to Guernsey and members of their family were dead or they simply did not recognise the people they had left behind after 5 years away and they found out about the harsh conditions that their relatives and friends who remained had endured.

Denbigh and District Probus Club welcomes new members to join their group for monthly meetings (held at the Oriel Hotel, St Asaph) where they enjoy lunch, friendship, and a talk from a guest speaker.

For further information have a look at the club web site denbighprobus.com or contact –

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The speaker at the next club meeting on Monday 15th May will be Jane Moore who will speak about **the History of the National Garden Scheme and Open Gardens in 2023.**

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