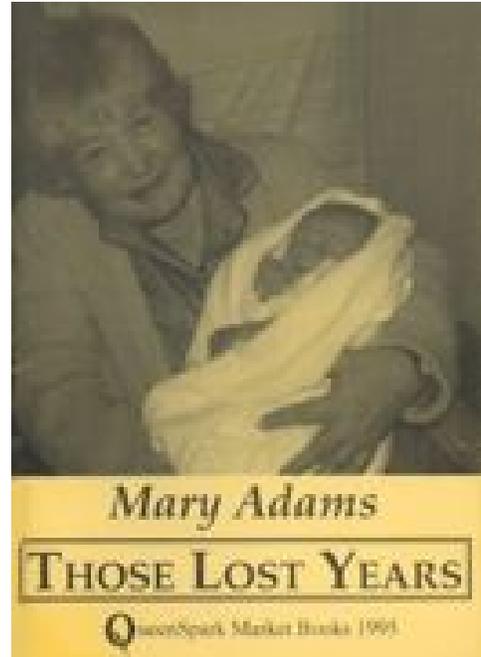


About QueenSpark Books

QueenSpark Books was founded in 1972 as part of a campaign to save the historic Royal Spa in Brighton's Queen's Park from being converted to a casino. The campaign was successful and it inspired participants to start collecting memories of people living in Brighton and Hove to preserve for future generations. QueenSpark Books is now the longest-running organisation of its kind in the UK.

More than one hundred books later, as part of our 45th anniversary celebrations, we are making the original texts of many of our out-of-print books available for the first time in many years.

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About this book

Mary Adams was born in 1930 in Birmingham. The first part of her 1995 memoir recalls her early life when she was sent to a residential school in Hertfordshire at the age of four, transferred to a school in Surrey before the outbreak of World War Two, and then to a convent school in Devon.

Mary was a timid child from a poor background and was frequently bullied, and labelled a “slow learner”. After her parents’ divorce, Mary was sent to a residential farm school in Suffolk where she was beaten and made to scrub the kitchen floor every morning at 5am and the children suffered routine humiliation at the hands of the staff.

In part two Mary describes being sent to St Marye’s convent school in Portslade. St Marye’s was the former Portslade Manor, dedicated as a convent in 1904. It was an institution largely shut off from the outside world which held a laundry and was surrounded by extensive land where the residents were expected to work for long, hard hours, or climb into manholes to clean the drains, and faced routine punishment for minor rule infringements.

Mary expected to stay there for two years but when she was in her early 30s she realised she would never leave. Gradually society changed and closed institutions like St Marye’s fell out of favour, and Mary was eventually moved to sheltered housing in

Hove. Sadly she passed away shortly after telling her story, but it remains a shocking – though surprisingly forgiving - account of abandoned children and adults in institutions in the 20th century.

Today St Marye's is home to Emmaus, where the buildings described by Mary can still be seen.

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Those Lost Years by Mary Adams

Original 1995 Introduction

Between 1904 when St. Marye's opened and November 1994 when it was announced that the residential unit was to close, several generations of young women spent their adult lives within the walls of St. Marye's. They had experienced and shaped a unique and colourful history spanning most of the twentieth century. For almost fifty years Mary Adams was at the heart of this insular world. Yet this remarkable history was slowly and irrecoverably being lost. By the time I had arrived at St. Marye's in 1992 the numbers of people living there had diminished from over one hundred women to less than fifty. Increasing numbers of women had left to pursue independent living, due in particular to changing ideas in the preceding two decades about the choice of lifestyle that should be available to 'people with learning difficulties'.

Sadly, with the exception of rare video interviews or short pieces of writing, much of the women's experiences had gone unrecorded. Formal documentation held at St. Marye's similarly omitted the rich detail of people's personal lives. Scanning the files for 'significant life events' you could be forgiven for thinking that women living at St. Marye's had done little in fifty years. For many individuals it seemed that their only recorded achievements were the date on which they arrived and the day they started work in the laundry.

An entire lifetime of feelings, loves, losses, personal joys and triumphs as well as heartache was left to memory. Those of us privileged to have worked there, and to have shared both in the daily life of St. Marye's and in the people's vibrant reminiscences, will know that the lack of recorded information is a tragic lost opportunity.

In my work at St. Marye's, first as Development Officer and then as Day Services Manager, I have tried to find ways in which some of this personal history could be documented. Not only for posterity and the curious eye of the historical researcher, but for the real benefit of people themselves; a way of helping validate a lifetime's experience during a period of tumultuous change for those living at St. Marye's. The impetus for the writing group was borne from this idea.

There was also a personal dimension. I had become very fond of Mary and had often enjoyed our discussions about her poems and short pieces of writing. So one day I suggested that she write her life story. This Mary did, across half a dozen pages, in the form of a chronology of events. We then began the task of teasing out the personal details and minutiae of a lifetime's experience that is at the heart of everyone's life experience. This was a wonderful piece of work. I feel lucky to have been involved in such a rewarding task. However, I was aware of the need to separate Mary's story from the constraints of St. Marye's. If her work was truly to reflect her life experiences I felt that it had to be separated from the organisation of which I was clearly a part. I was also conscious of our different genders. Despite our burgeoning friendship, I wondered how

Mary felt exploring very private and personal themes with a man. Through a mutual friend I was put in touch with Jackie Lewis, then Co-ordinator of QueenSpark Books, and then with Lorna Jones, who took on the development of both Mary's work and the writing group.

Mary became a very dear friend of mine, whom I cared for very much. She was a rare and special kind of woman, a person of immense talent and boundless love. In 1993 I invited Mary to join me as co-tutor on St. Marye's Computer Crafts Course at Portslade Sixth Form College. Mary later secured her second teaching role on the Remembering Our Lives course run by the University of Sussex. She was so proud to be a teacher. For Mary herself this was a public acceptance of her skill, ability and value. I feel proud to have been a part of that, and privileged that I have shared some very special moments with Mary.

Alex Saunders, August 1995

It was my great pleasure and privilege to work closely with Mary on her writing during the last year of her life, both in a writing group at St. Marye's, and on an individual basis developing this, her life history.

The St. Marye's writing group provided a weekly opportunity for half a dozen long term residents at St. Marye's to explore their shared history in writing, often in the process sharing thoughts and feelings about their lives in a way which, despite the intimacy of decades sharing daily life, was new to them.

Mary's work on her own story had been a major inspiration in the setting up of this group, and her contribution to the meetings was, and is, greatly missed. As a writer, and as a talker she was easily inspired, and in her turn she inspired the others to find their memories, and to bring the fruits of their imagination forth. As a listener she was always attentive, encouraging and kind. Kindness in Mary was not a politeness, an ordinary by-the-by virtue; it was a rich, striking, and radiant expression of her very self.

In our one-to-one sessions I began as the wearer of two hats. As well as being a sessional worker at St. Marye's I was acting as a volunteer from the QueenSpark Manuscripts Group. Mary had submitted her story to the group, and it had been decided that it had the potential to be produced as part of our Market Books series, but, as is often the case, the group felt that more work needed to be done on the manuscript before it would be ready for publication.

QueenSpark Books has a commitment to getting the work of ordinary members of the community into print. In many cases this has involved volunteer members working closely with authors to prepare manuscripts for publication, and so it was that I began to meet with Mary each week, and soon grew the feeling that I was wearing a third hat in our meetings, that of friend.

What the Manuscripts Group wanted to be added to the original draft was a sense of Mary's feelings, about what to us was an extremely unusual, not to say shocking, life history. In order to help Mary to make the amendments requested, therefore, I had to ask of her some very difficult things.

Was it right that she should have had to wait so long to lead a life which she felt fulfilled in, to be able to make the kinds of day to day decisions which most of us take for granted, to be treated with the respect which she had craved and deserved? Was it right that she had been labelled a 'slow learner'? Was it weak and silly of her to have found the early separation from her mother, and the constant reliving of it, so painful and difficult? How would we expect someone to feel and behave after enduring the conditions she describes at the school in Tatingstone? Could she really be called lazy, for failing to wash her wellingtons after a hard day's work on the farm? Was the kind of punishment she received for this 'misdemeanour' a reasonable one to mete out to an intelligent, hard working woman in her early thirties? Was it right that such a woman, or indeed, any woman, should be subjected to the very idea of punishment for such things?

These were the questions which Mary and I discussed as we set about adding her reflections in the manuscript. Apart from the painful nature of the issues raised, to reflect on them also caused Mary to call into question the decisions and actions which others had taken in her life, when to do so went against the grain of all she had been taught for so many years.

I tried hard not to give Mary my answers, nor to demand that she should feel what I felt. Indeed, in the following pages you will be hard pushed to find any shadow of feelings such as outrage or disgust. Pain and anger were for Mary feelings to which she thought she had no right. She was always at pains to be understanding, to be charitable, to be respectful to everyone she encountered.

We were maybe two thirds of the way through our work together when Mary was taken into hospital, and her cancer diagnosed. When I visited her there we talked with hollow optimism about resuming work when she was well enough. When I visited her in the nursing home where she was to end her days, a more honest understanding was exchanged between us. Mary entrusted her work to me, saying "You know what to do with it".

I hope Mary would approve of the way in which I have finished the final editing of the manuscript. Some of her hand-written supplemental work has been slotted into the text. I have also completed a process of shuffling around chunks of the text, which we started on together with the aim of making the work easier for readers to follow, and added sub headings within the chapters with the same intent.

I have been grateful for the time spent on this work, because it has felt so much like time spent with Mary. During our work together I grew to appreciate her, to enjoy her company, and as did most who met her I think, to love her.

Lorna Jones, June 1995

THOSE LOST YEARS

Part 1 - My Early Years

Beginnings

I was born in Birmingham on 30th March 1930. My parents were helping out in a Missionary Guest house in Selly Oak, a suburb of Birmingham at that time. My father was a school master, and my mother helped him by teaching Braille to some blind people who were living there. My brother John Francis Edward was born on August 25th, 1925.

When I was three months old my father went back to Ghana, which was then called The Gold Coast. He was working as a Geography master at Achimota College in Accra, the capital of Ghana. My mother and myself went out with him to the Gold Coast. While out there I became seriously ill. We then had to leave Africa because if I had stayed I would never have survived the climate. I was nearly a year old by then: It took us two weeks to get back to England.

Soon after we arrived home father developed serious malaria and had to resign his job and return to England. He then got a job running a charity establishment in Rugby called the Percival Guild House where we lived in a flat at the top a large building. My brother John went to a local pre-prep school until he was seven, when he started as a boarder at Dartington Hall School in Devon. In 1934 we moved to a flat in Hampstead Heath, and a couple of years later to another flat near Battersea Park. Eventually we moved to a house in Golders Green, North West London where we lived in a road full of Jewish people. We made plenty of friends.

My Mother

Mother to people outside seemed a very friendly and thoughtful person. She could charm a bird out of a tree to land on her she was so friendly. I remember once when we were in a first class carriage on a train an inspector came along. We were not supposed to have been there, but didn't she charm him to let us stay there? To me she was really over-protective, not letting me talk to people. She was affectionate towards me at times but not often. Kisses and cuddles were nearly unheard of towards me. She only gave me a slapping once but she was sorry to me for doing it afterwards. She very seldom comforted me if I cried, only tolerated me. I could not understand why because I was aching for love and affection. She was a good mother otherwise, because it was the

thing in my young days if you were slightly backwards you were to be protected, and mother could not cope with me. In spite of all this I loved her very much and yearned for her love in return.

My mother was a very kind and a sensitive person. When I was three years old she had a bad nervous breakdown and a doctor advised her to send me away for a while so soon after that she sent me to The Madonna.

The First Separation

I was sent to a pre-prep school at four years old attached to the main prep school, as a boarder. I was brought there by my parents (who were, by that time, growing apart). In the car I was alright as I thought that I was going to the seaside for a holiday. When we got there the headmistress came out to meet us with Arnold, her nephew of nineteen years old. My parents thought it was a good idea to leave then, but I clung to mother screaming my head off and would not leave them. In the end, Arnold picked me up in his arms and with me struggling carried me into one of the bungalows. I was four years old and except for being in hospital I had never been away from my mother before. Poor Arnold, he was full of scratches from where I was struggling to be free. I was devastated and very unhappy. It was then I started to feel that I was not wanted by people.

Schooldays in Letchworth

The school was in Letchworth, Herts. We learnt History, Geography, English, Arithmetic, Art, Latin and Nature Study. We had breakfast at eight in the morning then lessons started at nine. We had dinner from twelve to half past, then we had an hour's rest, on our beds in the winter and on boards outside in the summer when it was dry. The school was a mixed prep school for boys and girls up to the age of eleven years old.

We had four bungalows for us pre-prep children with four of us in each, with a nurse looking after us. We had great fun as there were no restrictions. A funny thing happened when we were in the bungalow. We were looked after by a nurse in each bungalow. One evening our nurse was called away by someone after seeing us to bed.

My cot was very near the mantelpiece; on the mantelpiece was a bottle of castor oil which was dosed to us when we had constipation. Of course I was too young at four years old to understand what harm would be done by an overdose. Well I climbed to the top of the cot, got hold of the bottle, called the others to me and started dosing them with the castor oil like I saw the nurses do; but I was giving them an awful lot. I could not have seen what the consequence would have been if the nurse had not returned in time. Two of them were sick immediately but the third did not have any. I tell you there were some sore tummies for a short while, also a very sore bottom where I had had a tanning. Of course I never did it again.

When I was six years old I was moved up to the main building to start my education in

earnest.

Holidays with the Family

My parents came to see me at half term, and I spent my holidays with them. My parents, my brother John and myself often spent our summer holidays in either Teignmouth in Dorset or Charmouth in Devon. We had great fun, as we stayed with cousins of ours. At Christmas we stopped at home, also at Easter. Sometimes when I went home and my father was there the atmosphere was chilly and everyone seemed nervous, because my parents were trying so hard to hide the fact from us that all was not well with them. John seemed to know that something was wrong and was very anxious for me. I was very bewildered because they would not speak to each other for ages, and mother was often in tears which often set me off crying.

When my father met another woman who he wanted to be with he never came home. After that I often spent my holidays at school or with the parents of one of the pupils. When I did go home mother often took me to shows in the West End of London, and then off to a meal. I enjoyed these outings and I came close to mother and felt sore at all she had gone through. But there was one thing she would not give into me over: going back to school. She had a lot of trouble with me. I used to lock myself in the toilet and would not come out no matter what mother said. In the end she had to get someone to break the door in and I had to be carried out. Luckily the lock gave easily as otherwise they would have had to repair the door after each holiday. When I did arrive at the school I was heartbroken to be parted from my parents and was inconsolable for ages. Gradually after a couple of weeks I did settle in, but this trauma was repeated, even when I came to St Marye's. Of course then I did not lock myself in the toilet or scream, but I sobbed so much. I thought that the world had come to an end.

Wartime Memories

Well life went on as usual until 1938 when there was a rumour going around that Hitler was about to invade the Czechs. We were told the Government wanted to have the school building so the children and of course myself were transferred to Weybourne school on the outskirts of Guildford. It was a lovely place in the country with a big playground and playing fields, and also a little wood which at the end of it was the river Wey.

Just a few months before the war started in 1939 the Deputy Headmistress's husband started to make trenches for us to shelter in, in case of any air-raids, in the grounds of the school. I often helped, or should I say hindered him. I started with clean clothes but they and my body ended up absolutely filthy, much to the annoyance of the teachers. Matron was called for and I was marched upstairs to change, but after a while when the Matron had gone I went outside again to help Joseph the Headmistress's husband. We did not use the trenches, because even though we covered them with corrugated iron,

when the weather was bad the rain seemed to find its way into them and they ended up by getting flooded. So, as the school had a very big cellar where they stored a lot of old furniture, we all used that when the air raids were on. The first time we used the trenches; just that once, we ended by splashing about in them.

At the beginning of the war, we had a "Phony War" when nothing happened, but when a German plane flew overhead even if they were not doing anything, the sirens started to wail, then there was a mad rush to the trenches. For two days beforehand we had had some bad storms, and we went straight into a muddy mess half way up to our waists, and of course you know what children are like always full of fun, ready for anything, We started to splash each other with the muddy water. We were filthy by the time we had finished and the all clear had sounded. So no way were we going to use the trenches again, but we started to use the cellars.

I was at Weybourne School until 1941 when I was eleven years old. It was at that time that the bombing was at its height and at night we had to go down to the cellars to sleep there on mattresses on the floor, taking our gas masks with us (they did look so funny). The cellars were very damp, and the German planes went over Guildford every night. The gun fire was really deafening, as the anti-craft gun sites were on the hills all around us.

One night in 1941 we were fast asleep; the sirens had gone; we were in our dormitories but took no notice of it; when we were awakened by a roar of planes overhead. Then suddenly four big explosions which shook the building shot us out of bed, and I say this of myself, I shot under it and again I was funnily hysterical. I was so bad I kept on blowing off one to the dozen through fright. I had to be hauled from under the bed. The nuns rounded us up and we went down to the basement where we slept along the corridor.

Luckily God had his hand in it because no one was hurt nor was there much damage done to the building; only a few panes of glass smashed in the windows and some plaster from the ceilings came down, but oh dear our cows got killed, also our playing fields were destroyed by two huge craters. But a lot of people turned around and helped us to roughly get the fields back to playing order. The other two bombs landed in the sea as well as the German plane. Luckily no one was killed.

Every year on July 1st we always went on a picnic to Peak Hill, on the moors outside Sidmouth; though we went first by charabanc we had to walk a great distance in crocodile. It happened to be Reverend Mother's Feast Day. As it was during the war we had to be very careful. Luckily the place where we had the picnic was covered by trees and if the planes went over they could not see us. Well one day in 1943 we decided instead of having a picnic on Peak Hill we would go to a little quite bay near Sidmouth named Ludlam Bay. As the air raids had eased off we thought it a brilliant idea, so off we went. Just as we entered a wood near the beach a German plane zoomed overhead and started machine gunning everyone and everything on that quite little beach. Luckily

there were some caves nearby and a few people flew to those. It was the Providence of God that saved us. The girls were hysterical including myself, I was on the ground screaming and laughing and Sister Anthony had to slap my face. The funny part of it was that no sirens had been sounded until the plane had done its worst. Anyhow one of our Spitfires got hold of it and shot it down into the sea.

More About School

At school I was made to feel a dunce in a lot of subjects because the school I was at was really for daughters of posh people and my parents were rather poor, but they took me because mother could not find the right kind of school for me. Remember in the 1930s and early 1940s there was no such thing as the Welfare State, but the Head was very good and cut down my school fees.

The children were snobs and of course I had a bad time with their bullying. There were two girls in our form who used to torment the life out of me, and when the teacher left the room they made me, by pinching me, stand on the table and pull my knickers down so that the children would jeer at me. I trembled often with fright and burst into tears. I thought it was awful. In the end the teacher did find out and they were punished by not going out to sports and the two ring leaders were expelled, to my relief. So stopped that type of bullying but the other type went on. I was often pushed off the bench so that the others could sit on it. I did nothing but bawl my head off, the fool I was, instead of laughing with them which I would have done today.

I was slighted often and felt a real outsider. I was often ignored by the teachers because I was so nervous that I seemed ignorant and they did not attempt to help me. There were times when they were nice to me too. It was not all doom and gloom. I loved History, Geography, Nature Study, Religious Knowledge, Basic Maths and English Literature, but all the others I was hopeless at. I think I was a dunce in some things because I could not understand some of the subjects, therefore I was a bit lazy about them. I hated Algebra, Geometry, Latin, Spanish, German, and Chemistry. The teachers often did not bother to teach me. When it was time for exams I was so nervous my memory often went blank and I used to freeze up, even with the subjects I liked. When I was fourteen and seventeen years old I had an I.Q test, which was quite low, but when I went to St Marye's Convent, my intelligence seemed to have woken up from its slumbers!

The subjects I liked I was pretty good at except at exam times as I have mentioned. Once I was brought before the Headmistress because I would not draw an umbrella. I was shocking at art, and as I defied Miss Teeling I had to go to bed and miss a tea party the other children were having. I felt very sad and lonely.

Out in the playground we had organised games, and one of those games was called "What's the time Mr Wolf?". It was a chasing game and it was very exciting. Another girl

and I were the last ones to reach for home (home was a glass door). We were almost there, I was in front, when Clare slipped. To save herself from falling she grabbed hold of me, in doing so I tripped and to save myself I put my hand out and it went straight through a pane of glass. I was in such a state, blood pouring everywhere. Luckily I only cut three fingers on my left hand, one of them badly because a tendon was cut. The Matron rushed me to the doctor, and he put twenty-two stitches in my fingers. For a while the other children did not like taking hold of my hand, but they soon got over that.

Finding my Faith

In 1940, when I was eleven years old, I was received into the Catholic church in Oxford, four years after I had first decided that this was what I wanted. Although the school was called "The Madonna", it was not a Catholic school, but the headmistress Miss Teeling was A Catholic. Shortly after going up to the main building at six years old I had an inclination to convert. Everyone told me that I was too young to know my own mind so I was told to wait until I was nine years old, and if I still wanted to be a Catholic I could go ahead with instructions. Every year in the summer at the Catholic Church just around the corner to the school they always had a wonderful Corpus Christi procession around the streets. It was kept on the Sunday after the feast and unless it was wet, and I was always there to watch them. I thought it was very moving and very colourful. The beauty of what it meant stuck in my mind so much that I am sure that helped in deciding in my conversion.

Miss Teeling had a great interest in me, and she began instructing me in Catholicism in 1939. While under instructions I was often kept in while the other children were enjoying themselves under my very nose in the playground outside the window. I hated this and my mind started to wander quite often. Miss Teeling used to get very impatient with me. When she ever left the room I often darted out to join the others but as always, I got caught and had to write two hundred times, "I must not go out of the classroom". One day I told the headmistress that if she moved me from the window I would not have so many distractions. She would not move me, and I had to train myself not to look out of the window, as the children kept coming to the window and make faces at me and I found it difficult not to laugh. When the instructions were finished I was highly relieved.

I had conditional baptism the day before I made my First Holy Communion. As I had already been baptised as a babe I was not christened. I felt a real warm glowing feeling in me when the priest poured the holy water over my forehead. There was only mother and Aunt Hazel there with the priest. The next day I made my First Confession which made me feel so wonderfully peaceful with God and man because I knew that all my past sins and the punishment due to them were wiped out and I felt absolutely joyful. Mother and I then joined the other people in the church for Mass and when the others went up to receive Jesus in Holy Communion I went with them. Because of the war we could not afford for me to be dressed in white, but I did not mind at all; I just wanted to have Jesus in me. It was a great joy and happiness to me.

The Assumption Convent

When I was eleven years old I left Weybourne school and went to an Independent school for girls at the Assumption Convent in Sidmouth, South Devon. This was the first time that I had been with nuns and I thought that they were angels come to earth as nuns. Where the school was the surroundings were absolutely gorgeous. I made a friend with my music teacher, her name was Miss Trevelly then, and she was very kind to me. Some of the children were inclined to bully me a bit, and many a time she had to come to my rescue. She later became a nun in the same order where she taught me. Her name in profession is Sister Joseph, and I still keep in touch with her and go to visit her. She is getting on now, and she is living in a nursing home in the grounds of the Assumption Convent in Kensington (and a lovely place it is too). I also had our head girl as a friend, she is also a nun now, called Sister Martha.

Our friends were Gill Peerless, now married and Pamela Scott. I was bullied because I was rather a cry baby and very timid, and easily led; also I was bullied because I was judged a simpleton then and teased. I was often left alone when they were not teasing me. I have toughened up now, and do not let people push me around.

At this time my parents' marriage had broken up and I could not go to them for my holidays. So I stayed with the parents of one of the day girls in Sidmouth named Pamela Skinner. I also stayed with them during the holidays. Pamela was a brilliant scholar who was two years younger than me.

My Parents' Divorce

My father had for some time been deserting Mother and only being there when John and I came home from boarding school. Father was a military kind of person and had a no-nonsense way of treating people, and was very strict and severe with Mother, though he had a soft spot for me until I went into my teens. He was also strict with John. When I was twelve years old Father asked Mother for a divorce which took two years to come through. They had hardly anything in common with each other. Mother adored him though and she never married again, although she had plenty of friends, male and female. She took a job in Bermondsey at a youth club to help keep the youth off the streets. She and a Catholic priest were great friends and helped to keep the youngsters occupied.

Father remarried to a lady who was as clever as himself. She was a nice person but not very affectionate. They got on well together. When Mother told me that Father had divorced her I was fourteen years old. I was very surprised and upset for her; being at boarding school I had not realised what poor Mother was going through. When she told me we both burst into tears, but Mother soon recovered from it all. Father was allowed to see me, but Mother had custody of both John and myself, and I was allowed to spend an occasional week-end with him and my stepmother.

Freedom in Hampstead

In 1945 at the age of nearly fifteen I had to leave the Assumption Convent. I was a slow learner then and could not be kept because all the girls there sat for their Matric, as it was called then, (now known as 'G.C.S.Es'). If they passed they went on to either Oxford or Cambridge Universities. I could not grasp a lot of the subjects and therefore was a complete failure in my exams. Also during exams I often lost my nerve, and my mind went completely blank, even in the subjects I was good at, and I got so upset about it that the Head said that I had to leave.

Because I was only fourteen and coming on to fifteen I had to finish my schooling, and also my parents were finding it hard to find a school that was suitable for me; I had to be tutored out at a bigish house in Hampstead. The tutor was a lady and she had four other children to teach besides myself. We had lessons in the morning and she left us alone to do what we liked for the rest of the day while she went off with her boyfriend. She encouraged us to go around naked in the house as it was a very hot summer. Thank goodness we were all girls. I was very embarrassed and shocked as I had grown up in a strict Catholic atmosphere! She was very kind to us and gave us a lot of freedom for that day and age, a bit too much so my parents thought. Luckily for them but not for me a few months after that they heard about a place in East Anglia that specialised for children who were slow learners, so it was decided that I would go there.

Hard Times in Tattingstone

In January 1945 I went to a farm school in Tattingstone, a village in Suffolk. I was not at all happy there as the teacher in charge was very cruel to us; a change from the school I was at - I was very happy there and was rather cross with my parents for being so prudish! Though now I see their wisdom, as I was so vulnerable, but they should not have sent me to such a cruel place. The teacher also had a cook who was equally cruel, but I do forgive them from the bottom of my heart. The school had ten cats and fourteen dogs, a horse and a pony, sixteen hens and four pigs. We also had a big market garden and a man called Hector taught us market gardening etc., and Miss Norton taught us our lessons.

I was often thrashed with a bamboo stick, and made to scrub the kitchen floor in the mornings, every day at five o'clock before breakfast. If I did not do it right I had my ears boxed and made to go over it again. I was also thrashed because I was very kind to the other children, and whenever they were being cruelly treated I used to spring to their defence by telling the cook and teacher off. Also, when they were sick the children were made to stay up and get on with their lessons. The children that were there had very wealthy and well known parents and I am very sorry to say this, but the parents, like mine, did not have much affection for their children.

The one thing I liked about the Farm School was that I had a bicycle and often went all over the countryside on it, also we had an old grey mare and I used to go riding on her.

She was very gentle. I also had a little smoothed haired terrier who I named Johnny after my brother who I adored. Mother got him from a kennel where he was put after he was picked up as a stray. The poor thing was full of fleas and we had to go about de-lousing him. I often got into trouble over him because he kept on chasing the cats. In the end when he was not with me they kept him chained up in the garden. He was very lovable and when I left I was very upset because I could not take him to St Marye's. He pined and would not eat his food and in the end had to be put to sleep.

Towards the end of the war we had some German and Italian prisoners working on the numerous farms around us in Tattingstone and one day the bridle on the horse slipped off, with me with it, and straight into the arms of an Italian prisoner. I was shocked but the crowd of Italians who were with him were very kind and gave me a cup of tea and sat me down on a fallen log. The mistress who was with me told me to come away from them and she did not half give me a thumping. The Italian who had broken my fall did not half tell her off. She then grabbed hold of me and put me back on the horse and got up behind me in a fine old stew!

The Germans were very clever as they made 'Jumping Jacks' out of wood of fallen trees and they were allowed to sell them. When I was out on my cycle rides I often saw the German prisoners, and used to watch them making these Jumping Jacks. If I had been seen talking to them Hell would have been let loose on me, but fortunately no-one found out. They were so kind and gentle, and even so there were many of our own people about to see that no-one came to any harm. One of them even was kind enough to give me one of these Jumping Jacks without any payment, he was rather a fatherly type of man.

Meanwhile Mother could not understand why I came home in the holidays crying, and so she got a Welfare Officer to go and investigate. I was threatened by Miss Norton that it would be worse for me if I talked, but the Welfare Officer saw for herself the condition of the place. It was filthy from all the animals, and the other children. Twelve of them were looking so very unhappy, so I did speak out, and told the Welfare Officer how we were treated, though inwardly I was trembling with fear.

I told her that some of the children through fear often wet their beds, and in the morning they were made to stand in the middle of the room where everybody could see them, with their wet sheets draped over their heads and body, and they had to stand there at every meal until the end of the day. I was often terrified, but I twice turned on them as I was at the end of my tether, and got hold of the stick and broke it in half. The Welfare Officer eventually believed me, and Mother took me away. I had two weeks' holiday, then on September 15th at 11.30am I arrived at St Marye's Convent.

Part Two: Young Convent Life

Arrival at St. Marye's

Before I came to St Marye's I was told that I was going to a place where I was to train in domestic work, that I would only be there for two years, and there would not be any bullying. I was so happy, and glad that I was going to be treated as a normal person. I thought soon I would be going out to a job and then perhaps meet someone that I could marry.

I arrived at St Marye's in the wake of mother and Aunt Hazel on Saturday September 15th 1947. The girls, hundreds of them, had just come out of Retreat, and were jabbering away one to the dozen. I thought good gracious what a lot of girls there were. I was told by one of the Sisters to go and join them while she talked to mother. In reality she wanted me not to notice mother leaving as she had been told it was always a wrench for me to part from her and she thought it would be kinder to me if she left unnoticed. So one of the senior girls called Joey took me under her wing, and we went into a big room where there were twelve oblong tables with six girls at each table.

After dinner I told some of the ladies I was going to find mother, only to be told that she had left. I cried then and thought how horrible of her not to say goodbye to me. I felt so hurt, there again was the repetition of the time she left me when I was four years old. I thought, there it is, her showing that she did not want me to live with her, and I felt that I had been badly let down again by both parents.

Then a few of the ladies were really kind to me and asked me if I would like to go out with them. I cheered up then, and as they were cracking all kinds of jokes I did not have time to feel lonely and hurt. Imelda, one of the ladies, was very funny.

When we came back near tea-time, the Superior as she felt sorry for me sent me out to the Convent garden to play with their dog Jock. I was missing my dog very much as I had had to leave him behind, so I spent hours out on the lawn with Jock, and for a while I felt very happy.

Adjusting to Convent Life

The ladies had all been in Retreat for three days, and had just come out of it when I arrived. I must explain to you what a Retreat is. It is a time of Spiritual Renewal when we keep absolute silence for three days. A Priest, not from our Parish, gave us a holy talk three times a day for about an hour. Some of the talks were very funny, so it was not all doom and gloom. We started with Mass in the morning and finished with Benediction in the evening. We had these Retreats twice a year.

On that first day I started to talk to the girl next to me. She gave me a word of warning, so I had to shut up then, but I could not believe my hearing. I thought it was ridiculous to keep silence most of the day as the girls had told me they did. It was so boring and very frustrating and made me cry, and to be told to stop my nonsense made me cry all the more. I was often fit to bursting, but we did have some respite when the words came out

of my mouth in torrents. These were in three half hour breaks and one three-hour break, much to my relief. Some of the ladies kept making funny faces and it was hard not to laugh, if caught we were told off. I thought to myself thank goodness it is only for two years.

The next day we went to mass that was said in Latin. I thought, "Oh dear, I cannot understand it one bit" and my mind kept wandering here and there. Thank goodness nowadays the whole mass is said in English and is much more interesting, and I am more holier than I was then.

Afterwards we were told all of us had to walk in a crocodile down to the beach with one of the Sisters.

"Oh dear," I thought, "not here as well!", because we had had enough of doing that at school. We were supposed to be like normal adults, not like children. I was told that we were going out alone. So down to a private beach we went. We were not allowed to join in with other people. At the time I did not really feel anything strange about this because it happened the same when I was at school in Sidmouth, but I was a little surprised that grown up women had to walk in crocodile. I suppose that, like the teachers in schools, they did not like people to see us in bare legs and arms. We chased each other in the water, having great fun splashing each other. About an hour before dinner we dressed in a house belonging to a friend of the Sister, and then filed back to the Convent in crocodile. This happened for a few months after I came, after that we went out in groups of four or six and without a nun. What a relief!

My parents were very insistent that I should stay at the Convent all my life because they thought I needed to be protected from the wickedness of the world. Also I could not stick up for myself then which I can do now. We were then very dependent on the nuns: there were thirty-one nuns at St.Marye's when I came. The home was not under Mencap then, but emotionally disturbed women were living there. I was very timid and nervous when I came, and cried very easily of course, having been frightened to death by the people of the previous school. Also being timid I had been a slow learner, but one thing that happened when I came to the Convent was that my brain started to wake up and my intelligence came on by leaps and bounds.

Work and Play

After dinner we sat around in groups and chattered or knitted away, or some of us went off with our pals somewhere in the grounds to play net ball and other games, or to have fun. I enjoyed playing netball, or if it was wet I sat with some of my pals. I enjoyed the weekends because we were allowed to talk more, as except for mealtimes we did not keep silence. We had no radio or T.V. then and I thought, "Gracious, I do hope that this is not going to be repeated every Sunday, I will go mad with boredom!". But fortunately on the fine days we had the games to go to, also when we were practising for our concerts we were kept busy, so I did not have time to get bored.

When Monday came I woke up feeling very nervous.

"What work will I be given?" I thought. One of the senior girls came to me and told me to follow her. I went up to the dormitories and she said that I had to sweep the floors, wax them and buff them with a very heavy jack; then to straighten all the chairs and beds, and woe betide me if I did not get them in a straight line. Of course I started to panic as I knew that I did not have a straight eye, and cried because I thought that I was going to do all this on my own and that it was too much for me. Was I not relieved when they told me that two others were going to help me?

Day to Day Life

The home was self-supporting at the time and we had very little money. In our quarters we had four dormitories, furnished with iron beds and small lockers in which to keep our things. Except for our recreation time we kept silence most of the day. We went to Mass every morning at seven. We had no money given to us except just before Christmas and also once a year for a day's outing, when we went to some place like Chessington Zoo.

We had no running water in our dining room, so we had to fetch a big tin bath from the laundry to do the washing up. We took turns washing everything - crockery and cutlery. One of the punishments if we had done some serious wrong was to do the washing up of everything for perhaps a week or a month all by ourselves. One of the residents used to creep in when the staff were out of the way with some of the others to help them. She helped me twice when I had to do the washing up on my own, but we got caught out, and we each had to do a week. I really felt sorry for this person and told the staff to let her off but they said no. By the time we had finished the week we were really fed up and felt that we would like to see the back of washing up. We did it for one hundred residents so you can imagine how long it took us.

We even did our own decorating, beginning at five in the morning and working through until nine in the evening. I was in charge of getting the paint and the paint brushes ready and seeing the brushes were washed at night and the paint was put back in its' right tins. I also did some decorating myself, mostly the walls, windows, and doors. Six of the ladies helped plus one of the Sisters. One day when we were painting the dining room one of the ladies accidentally knocked a tin of paint over. Luckily it was emulsion paint! As she was on a plank above it went over the lady painting beneath, only on her hair and back. She looked like a ghost and we naughtily laughed at her as she looked so funny. We got a clout for doing so which certainly sobered us down. We stayed up until two in the morning for two nights to finish the job as we could not start until the supper was finished with, round about six o'clock.

We used to clean out our manholes if they got blocked up and I had the job of climbing down into the manholes to bail out the filthy water and muck - mostly grease from the

kitchen. I bailed it out in pails and the others poured the greasy water on to the garden to be dug in and buried. It was amazing that we never got any bad illnesses, but I did the job without grumbling; a funny person, aren't I?

Work on the Farm

When I first lived at St.Marye's I helped to clean the dormitories and to do the washing up in the dining room. After I had been at the home two years I was put on the farm. I was on it for twenty-one years, and we worked very hard indeed. I got up at five o'clock in the morning to let out the hens - we had about two hundred hens and twelve geese. Then I went to seven o'clock Mass, after which we had our breakfast. After breakfast at about half past eight I went out on the farm, which provided us with most of our foodstuff - milk from six cows, eggs from our hens. We had four big fields on which we grew potatoes, cabbages, cauliflowers, swedes, parsnips, brussels sprouts, and corn for hens and cows. The straw was kept also for the hens and cows and we grew hay for the cows to eat.

In the summer we went hay-making. We used to go up to the fields at half past eight, and except for an hour's break we stayed up there until nine in the evening. We had to turn the lines of hay the old-fashioned way with pitch forks, and if it rained we had wait until the hay was dry, then turn it again. We then put it all into heaps, then onto the cart, then made a haystack. We did the same with the corn, but in the Autumn we thrashed the corn also the old-fashioned way. Our farmer got in help from the local farm hands with that, but we were always there to help out. There were four of us young ladies helping with that.

Now the potatoes we also did the old-fashioned way. We set them over a hundred long rows by hand. Patrick with his tractor came behind us and covered the drills up. Then in the spring and autumn we picked the potatoes by hand into buckets and put them into fifty-two pound sacks, and towards the end of the day two of us carried each bag up to a big cart. We stored them in big sheds on the floor, if we did not have any more room in the sheds we put them in pits in the corner of the fields. In the middle of winter when there were none left in the sheds, we went to get the potatoes out of the pits. We also had an Orchard where we had fruit trees of every kind, and we grew our salad stuff there. I also helped Eddie King's father with the vegetables and picked the fruit with the women who also worked on the farm.

When we went up to our fields to set and pick potatoes we got on famously until a big bell pealed out from the Convent about a quarter to twelve. We downed tools and whatever we were doing and rushed to our dinner. The farmer was furious because he had to stop whatever he was doing. Maybe he was in the middle of uncovering or covering up the drills. He always said to us,

"That's right, obey the Galloping Major rather than me!".

When we were hay-making we were left alone to get on with it, and we took some sandwiches and drinks up with us. We had to stay up there because if it rained it might ruin the day's work.

The vegetable fields, the hay fields and corn fields were very near, only the other side of the road from the back entrance to the Care Home in Drove Road. We had to sell them off in 1970. Now they have a Junior school in one field, horses in the other, a school for children with learning disabilities in another, and a home for elderly ladies in the last field.

The nuns also own a field at the back of Manor Lodge, which is owned by the Convent. The Lodge is divided into four flats which are rented out. I live at the moment with two others in one of the flats. I will tell you about my life in the flat later on, but now we must get back to the past. In our back yard we have a long shed that looks like stables. They are used now for carpentry work in the Day Centre, but in the past they were used for six cows, and I often used to help our farmer to milk them.

One of our fields was kept for the cows, and they stayed there for nearly two years. They then went into one of the fields that had been kept for growing vegetables and had been finished with for that year, and seeded out for grass. I often helped our farmer when his assistant was on holiday to drive the cows from the sheds to the fields. Many a time one of the cows went astray and went tearing down the High Street or Drove Road with us running after it. It was quite hilarious! Luckily there was not much traffic about then.

I enjoyed life on the farm, and was very sorry when it had to be sold. I did not have any choice of work, until the recent years but I did enjoy being on the farm because it was healthy work. When I started work I was really very lazy but then I started to realise I was getting nowhere, so I started being good and trustworthy about my work, and then I did work hard.

My Friend, Eddie King

Eddie King's father was the Convent gardener and we got on well together. When I first knew Eddie King he was a lad of thirteen years old, and I had only just come to St Marye's. I got to first know him because he used to serve on the altar in our chapel, and after Mass the nuns always sent him into the kitchen for a drink of lemonade. During the school holidays he often helped his father in the garden. When he was eighteen he left school and joined the army for two years, doing his National Service duties. When he came out of the army he came to work at the Convent as a General Job man. He has worked very hard and has been with us for thirty years. He is now married with two daughters and four grandchildren. Nothing is too difficult for him and he and his family are very nice and do a lot for us.

Home Made Entertainments

In the old days we used to put on concerts, consisting of a play, then singing and dancing. I always took part in the plays. We had operettas, and funny plays. We had two days of giving concerts. The first day for the parents and friends, and the nuns from the other Convents and our own (even Mother General came to them when she was down our way). The second day was for the people from the Parish and their friends to watch us. We started to practice in October and had the concerts in January. We had to practice in the evenings after our work from round about six to sometimes eleven at night, ten at the earliest. It was great fun though, and we had many a laugh. Some of the operettas we did were *The Rebel Maid*, *Rose Marie*, *The Mikado*, *Zurika*, and *The Student Prince*. I had only tiny speaking parts in these, as I could not sing well at all, and I would frighten the cats out of their skin!

After a few years we thought we would have a change, so we started doing plays instead, along with some dances and songs and poetry. We did *Little Women* to begin with, then went on to farces; such as *On With The Motley*, *The Little Princess* and *Paddy The Next Best Thing*. We had plenty of hilarious rehearsals because some of the ladies were born actresses and were very funny, they kept us in stitches! One of the ladies practising with us had to sing *June Is Bustin' Out All Over*. We had a lady with us named June, and she was rather on the plump side and all of a sudden the lady who was singing burst into laughter, and could not stop for ages. She had seen the funny side of the song. She had connected the song with June. We all started to laugh. The person at first did not seem to find it funny and was rather cross with us, but in the end she too saw the funny side of it and ended by laughing too.

When we acted the farce, *Paddy The Next Best Thing*, I took the part of a real busybody old hag, and in it I was always spying on people. In one part of it I was being chased by one of our ladies dressed up as a man, and she was shouting, "You spying old hag!", when I suddenly slipped and fell on the stage. The audience did not half roar with laughter. As the play was on for two more days we added that mishap for laughs. We also went to give concerts to other convents and homes for the elderly. When our director and producer left, we gave up doing our concerts, also most of our good actors had left too.

As well as at Christmas time, we had these concerts on our Superior's and Sister In Charge's Feast Day, but they were on a smaller scale with only a few songs and dances and a small sketch. Our first stage consisted of several small square tin tables tied together, with some of our laundry tables put on top of them, with a long pole tied to some ceiling girders and a curtain put through the pole. It was quite tricky getting on and off the stage. We also made a lot of things for the Superior and Sister in charge, so there was quite a spread. I used to knit gloves. After everybody had inspected the things we went into the dining room to have a right royal banquet, after which we gave our concert.

The Corpus Christi Processions

Every year, from when I first came until the late sixties we had a Corpus Christi procession from our Catholic Church in Portslade, at the corner of Vale Road and Church Road. We went in procession all up the road to the Convent grounds, and there were crowds of people lining the route. The traffic was not at all bad then and we did not need a police escort. Many a time we were caught in a rain storm or worse still a thunderstorm, and by the time we got to our destination we were drenched through. Being young then I did not mind, and anyhow if the sun managed to come out when we got to the Convent it would dry us. We wore straw hats for the procession at one time, and because we had nothing to keep them on with, if it was at all windy the hats blew off our heads all over the place amongst the crowds. We were not allowed to go out of our formation, but I suppose because I was afraid of being told off I did break ranks very quickly. I darted out and grabbed the first hat I saw which more likely than not was not mine because we had our number tags inside them. To help us the crowds themselves went after the hats, and in doing so got muddled up with the ones in the procession. It was hard not to laugh it was so funny.

In the sixties the traffic started getting bad and for a while we did have a police escort for a couple of years. Some of the people came to pay homage to the Blessed Sacrament, and some out of curiosity's sake. When we got to the Convent we went all around our extensive grounds to three altars, and had Benediction at each of them. Finally we went into our chapel for our final Benediction. I was always chosen to carry one of the many banners. My choice was the banner of The Sacred Heart, because it was a symbol of the great love Jesus has for us all.

We always took a long time preparing the decorating in our grounds before the procession. There were two little wooden Summer Houses in our grounds and I always had the job of red bricking the roof tiles and putting creosote on the wood of the inside and outside of the summerhouses. I had to hand mow the large lawns, and weed all the paths with the help of two others. The lawns are mowed now with a petrol mower, all very much up to date. The gardener does that with his assistant. (Eddie's father has long since died.) We also had to put up flags in the grounds along the route we were taking, which were to be strung from tree to tree. Again we had plenty of laughs even though it was hard work, and we were decorating until it was dark.

Convent Discipline

We had instructions every month about our behaviour and how to behave, and many a time the residents had to be shown up as a bad example if they broke silence, also because some of them used to run away with boys. Times seemed very Victorian then. We were punished if we did not do our work right. One of the punishments was to kneel in the middle of the dining-room, at the top of the room so that everyone could see us, for our meals. I was often one of those. I remember I used not to clean my wellingtons after a day's work on the farm. As I had been several times warned what would happen, eventually I had to spend three whole meals on my knees with the dirty wellingtons tied

around my neck.

I had a feeling of guilt and shame, also I felt so embarrassed to have everyone staring at me as though I had committed a mortal sin. I felt that it was very unjust at the time and wished I could have stuck up for my rights, but I was too scared to say anything as I would have been the worse off for it. I always cleaned my wellingtons after that.

Whenever I was punished I always felt a sense of shame and I was very frightened. Whenever I was caught doing something wrong I lived in a fog of fear until I came face to face with the person I was reported to. Then, even though I was punished, wherever I went all through my life it was a relief when my wrong doing was out in the open. When I think of it now I have a good laugh, because it seems so ridiculous to be punished for such small things. I used to cry about it, but now I have toughened up. The sisters loved us so much that they punished us for our own good, but if you had any problems they were kindness itself. When mother died, they went out of the way to console me and so they did to everyone else.

If you were a Catholic and were a model of goodness you were awarded a neck braid and a medal about every six months until you became a Child of Mary. First we had a yellow braid, then six months later a green one, then a brown one, then a pink one, then a red one, then lastly before the Child of Mary's neck ribbon we had to have an Aspirants ribbon for two years. Woe betide you if you were naughty while being an Aspirant, you would have it taken away from you. After two years we were given the Child of Mary's ribbon. The other braids the staff in charge gave us them, but the Priest gave us the Aspirants and the Child of Mary ribbons in a ceremony after our Retreat in September. I was very happy when I got mine, but I lost mine almost at once through being naughty.

This happened because we had a resident here who was absolutely man mad. Well we were going on an outing by coach to Littlehampton, she was one of my group of four. Most of us wanted to go on the Big Wheel but she did not want too, so we left her standing nearby. When we came off she was standing talking to a man whose name was Keith. As we were not allowed to talk to men I was horrified. He took her off on his own, and she told me to keep quiet about it but one of the other residents saw us and went and reported it to the staff in charge. That is how I came to be punished by having my Child Of Mary's ribbon taken from me, but I got it back after six months.

The Go Between

Although they were extremely understanding, kind too, to the poor, also to the "fallen women" as they were called then; the nuns never showed much affection until they took courses to learn to be social workers. I don't know if it was just at St Marye's because

we had rather naughty people sent here to be made into good people. When I came to St Marye's of course I got no affection from anyone but was shown common sense instead, and they too treated me as if I had no knowledge in my head. Gradually they did begin to realise that I had got some intelligence in that head of mine, but in proving that I did some naughty things.

One of the things I did was to arrange meetings between the residents and their boyfriends, which certainly was not allowed. It was a wonder it was not found out who the culprit was until I foolishly gave a message to a dustman to give to one of the ladies' boyfriends. He immediately gave the letter to one of the nuns, and she in turn gave it to the nun in charge. I was sent for wondering what for and with a terrible sinking feeling I knew that I was in for it. I was lambasted left and right and in the middle with their tongues, and for a while I was watched whenever I went out. I was furious, and because I really wanted to be trusted by all in authority I then kept away from the residents who were responsible for all my troubles. Actually I was told much later that the nuns all had a good laugh about it all.

Trouble with Runaways

When we used to go out in groups of six or five down to the beach, some of the ladies used to run away. As I wrote earlier they ran away because they mostly wanted to be with their boyfriends, also because some of them had nothing wrong with them and resented such restrictions so they broke out to get their freedom. A lot of them have done very well. One of the residents went in for nursing and eventually she became a nursing Sister. Another married a solicitor and had two fine children. Another married a band leader and she too had two children. Some of the ladies were missing for a couple of days, or even two weeks but they were always found by the police and brought back. When I took the residents out they were always running away on me and led me a dance. For instance, the ladies I took out for walks in the 1950s and 1960s seemed to make it their business to do the bunk on me.

We had two residents who were sisters, named Gemima and Gloria (two false names) with our group. One glorious Sunday afternoon we sauntered down to the beach. When we got to the Lagoon and a bit beyond it there were several beach huts, and we had settled to sit on the beach near them so that the ladies could undress behind them to put on their bathing costumes. While there my nightmare began because Gemima and Gloria had decided to do the bunk while I was not looking, but something told me to look in their direction and I saw Gloria sprint away. I darted after her, and then Gemima started to run in the other direction. I was in a stew! I did not know which way to go. I had to go back to the others and by the time I had got back to the beach huts the two sisters had disappeared. I was terrified because I know that I would be in the wars when I got back, so I collected the others from the beach. There I had a lot of lip from them because they wanted to have their swim but they came.

When we arrived back I went straight to the Sister in charge. She turned round and told

me I could not be trusted to take anyone out, and off I started to cry and asked her how she could expect me to keep them tied to my apron strings all the time. As a punishment I had to stay in for two Saturdays running, but after that she still gave me the ladies who were inclined to run away. I hated that but could not say anything.

One day I took a group out to the pictures. We all went to see a film at The Rothbury cinema, which is a local radio station now in Portslade. During the main film one of my group wanted to go to the toilet. As we were told to stay with the ladies while they went to the toilet I had to go with her. I waited outside the toilet for a quarter of an hour, when I started to get anxious, so I went in. All the toilets were empty, but one of the narrow windows was wide open, and as the person was very thin she managed to squeeze through and she had scarpared off. I panicked because I knew that I was going to be told off but I had to get the others in my group and leave to go back. They were furious and I was in tears, but back we had to go. When we arrived back things did not turn out so badly as I thought.

Another time I took another group to a cinema in Brighton called The Embassy (which is now Waitrose Supermarket). In the group there was a Greek Cypriot woman and she sat by a Greek man. They started to talk in Greek to each other. After a while the man asked me if he could take my friend home to his flat but knowing what men were like when they ask women to their flats I told him no. What followed was rather funny though it did not seem like it at the time. He grabbed her arm to go but I was quicker than he was and so proceeded a tug of war with him and my friend for ten minutes! The people behind us were getting really cross and my friend was crying. In the end the manager was sent for and I explained to him what the row was about. He sent the man out of the cinema and gave us a caution.

In the end the people who ran away were allowed to leave. The way they left was rather funny because the residents were not allowed to know when anyone was leaving so the staff in charge took whoever was leaving up to the dormitory to pack their things, then they crept up to the Convent front door and left that way.

At St. Marye's to Stay

I had often wanted to leave St. Marye's, and after two years when I realised there was no move to let me go, I thought that there was something wrong with me. I was told I would never hold down a job, because when I was given responsibilities I would let it get on top of me. I used to panic. For instance, I had the job of straightening the beds and chairs in our dormitories, and as I did not have a straight eye I panicked and cried with frustration, until in the end I had that job taken from me and was told that I was no good at doing anything given to me. I hated it when I panicked because I could not be relied on. Nowadays it is the opposite, I am very sure of myself.

By the time I was in my early thirties I had become resigned to staying at St.Marye's and was getting better at my work and able to take more responsibilities, but occasionally

still I would let things get me down at times. One day, shortly after my thirty third birthday in 1963 the nun in charge asked me if I would like to have a little job outside and then come back to St. Marye's in the evenings to sleep. The job was in a priest's house, doing domestic work as the Housekeeper was away and her assistant wanted help.

When asked if I would go I jumped at the idea and was happy and determined to make it work. I went for three months and was getting on so well, although I was not being paid for my work, when I accidentally let it out to my mother on one of her visits. She was furious, and stormed in to the sister in charge. She was very angry with her for letting me do this job when she had been most insistent that I should stay at St. Marye's until I was carried out in my coffin!

I do not know exactly what went on between them, but after a while Mother stormed out and went right past me out of the house. I was sent for, and the nun asked me why I could not have kept my mouth shut, and told me that she would never let me out to a job again, no, not even over her dead body. I pleaded and pleaded to no avail. I wondered why on earth my mother didn't trust me and I felt very let down.

Reflections on the Past

I do not know why I wasn't allowed to fulfil my potential then. Perhaps it was thought then that people who were seen as slow learners should not show what they could do with their lives. We, like children, should be seen and not heard. We were labelled as people with a mental handicap, and were not to be seen to be mixing with normal people out in the community.

I wished that my parents had looked into why I was so nervous and a cry baby, and also a slow learner. I think I would have been much better, more sure of myself if I had lived at home and went to school daily. I was quite envious of the children whose parents lived near the school who went home every afternoon. Also I wished that they had shown more affection towards my brother and myself. I often cried out for affection from people, which I did not get from many. I wished that my parents had not treated me like a person who could not look after myself. All I wanted from them was to be loved and trusted by them.

The Winds of Change

St.Marye's in the Sixties

In the 1960's things started to change. Before that we were never allowed to talk to

strangers outside the Convent, but then we were allowed to. It was very strange at first, because people had thought that the residents were either nuns or lunatics, but slowly they began to realise we were just like other people and started talking to us.

I began to get a little pocket money, half a crown in old money a week; but we were still not allowed to travel by bus. The holidays were still only one week a year, and we got just two days at Christmas. We went to the beach every Saturday, and on Sunday afternoons we danced in our hall. Before the 1960's we never had a radio or television, just a piano.

In the mid 1960's we had our first television, a screen one that could only get BBC1 on it, and it was in black and white. About then our pocket money was increased and we were allowed to do shopping on Saturdays. We still only had one week's holiday which was organised by the staff. Some of the ladies went home to their parents like myself then, some went to other Convents. We were cared for by resident staff. We had all our meals cooked for us, we were told where to go, and we always had to ask permission to go anywhere.

My First Friend Outside

I remember the first person I got to know when we started being allowed to go out and talk to people outside as we became great friends. Her name was Mrs Jackson and I happened to meet her crossing the road leading down to Portslade Old Village. Her husband had died recently and she was crying. As I can't bear to see anybody so upset I went to her and talked to her and she told what had made her so upset. She invited me into her house for a cup of coffee and from then on we became friends, and every morning when I went down to get the nuns' paper I landed into her house for a chat and a cup of tea or coffee.

I also became friends with her daughter and her husband. When Mrs Jackson moved to live in Worthing we lost touch, but out of the blue I had a letter from her inviting me over to Worthing to stay with her for the week-end. Of course I had to ask permission to go. It was granted and I went, and have been since for occasional week-ends until last year when sadly she died. She was seventy and died of Alzheimer's Dementia.

It was very sad because before she got bad her daughter, only forty-four, died of liver cancer. They were very close to each other, and when her daughter died Olive just did not take interest in life at all and began starving herself and not going to bed. No one knew about this until I went on one of my monthly week-ends to her like that, and so I got in touch with one of her daughter's friends and they in turn got in touch with her daughter who lives in Felixstowe. She then took her to Southlands Hospital, where shortly after she caught pneumonia and died. I was very upset and have not gone to Worthing since.

Death in the Family

My mother died in 1966 and I spent part of my holidays with my father and stepmother. They died in the mid-seventies and John my brother had me home for an occasional weekend. I was terribly upset when my mother died. I wept for ages. The staff in charge was very good to me and kept me working hard so that I did not have time to think about it. I was painting the corridor walls then. It was at night time. I really felt so lonely and in the morning I often woke up with swollen eye lids through crying so much. When my father and stepmother died I was not all that upset because we had not been all that close; we had not seen each other that much.

I have a good relationship with John my brother and his two eldest children; they have been very supportive with the changes in my life which I am very happy about. I am grateful to them and I often go home to visit them, especially Jenny my niece and of course my brother. We have got so much closer recently. Also I have got a great sister in law. She is very good to John and for him and they are extremely happy together. She too has been very supportive in what I am doing. I am very grateful to them both. They really and truly have backed me up and only want my happiness.

First Steps Towards Independence

In the late 1960's we had a £6 increase a month. We also started going out to dances, to the pictures etc., we also had a colour television provided in the hall. In the early 1970's we really started moving. We had hired staff coming in to do domestic work, the farm was no longer worked and money for our support was provided by Social Security. But we were still looked after and our clothes and shoes, etc. were still bought for us. Holidays were now ten days at Christmas and ten days in the summer. Some of us had to go to some of our Convents for the summer holidays, but I went with Doreen Cullen to a guest house on the Isle of Wight until I was told to settle my own holidays, which I have done ever since.

It was in the 1970s that a nun came who showed me a lot of affection and trust. She started me on the road to independence, which I had been fighting for years (and had been held down by my parents.) Everything changed then and I was looked up to and was respected. Instead of going out herself she sent me out on shopping messages and to the bank. She encouraged me to start booking my own holidays, and myself and some others were also sent on courses.

It was she, who, to my delight, realised that I had got the gift of selling a lot of draw tickets for our Parish Fete and Bazaar to people.

So started my ticket selling days. I had charge of getting the tickets printed, and of selecting a group of our ladies to sell them. I am very good at memorising names of roads etc., so I directed the sellers where to go, but of course I went with them as well. We used to go into Portslade, Hove, Brighton, Southwick, Shoreham, Worthing, Lancing and Steyning, selling the tickets at houses, shops, pubs and hotels. I also had to see

that they were written in and the counterfoils folded.

I must tell you about an incident that happened one day when we were out selling the tickets. It happened to be the twenty-fifth anniversary of The Battle Of Britain. We were selling tickets near Shoreham Airport when a German fighter came zooming overhead, and for fun I told the others who were with me to fall flat; they did so, and I burst out laughing and told them to get up. Then I told them what had happened during the Second World War. There was a Display at Shoreham Airport and the German Plane was being chased by a Spitfire, one of our planes.

I carried on selling tickets until last year in 1993, when I finally retired from that job.

I was intelligent and it had taken twenty years for everyone to realise that instead of treating me like a fool, and from then over the years people had started to respect me. It boiled down to that I wanted to be treated with the same respect as any normal person wants to have. I have got this now and I do hope that I will continue to use this intelligence towards helping everyone around me.

St.Marye's in the Nineties

A year or so ago I was still in St Marye's home and getting more anxious to be independent. Now in the 1990's there are further changes all for the best. More care staff are employed, we have a very good, caring manager and some kind helpers. Eight ladies have gone into group homes; four in each one with care staff going to see them occasionally to see how they are getting on. Two have gone to family homes, eight into houses with resident care staff, two have gone into two separate Carr-Gomm houses, which are minimum supported. One of our ladies has gone into a one-bedroom flat, and she has somebody coming in twice a week to see how she is getting on. We have also got a three bedroom flat owned by the nuns where I lived until recently with three others, with minimum support from St. Marye's staff.

There are two units of six people in each within St Marye's, also with care support. There is also a unit of about eleven people with disabilities. They have twenty-four-hour support. We also have the main unit, housing about twenty or thirty, which eventually we hope will change into smaller units. Nowadays we do not have any Corpus Christi Procession instead we have a Healing Mass where anybody who is ill and the elderly have a blessing, also laying of hands, and are anointed with holy oils by our parish priest.

When Mass is ended we all have a picnic. If it is fine we have the picnic outside, if it is wet in the big hall in the Convent. I sometimes do the readings at these Masses. I was thrilled when I was asked by the sisters if I would read the epistles at our masses, as once upon a time I had a bad stutter through nerves. I learnt to conquer that in the end through the patience of the Sisters. From then onwards I never looked back and my

confidence started to slowly build up.

Learning New Skills

Our laundry has now closed to the sorrow of some of the ladies, but some of them have gone to work in Bolloms factory in Fishersgate. As my job is in Reception it does not affect me, thank goodness. The Laundry is now a Training Centre for people with Learning Disabilities. We are going out to more courses, so that we can join in with people in the community, which is a good thing. People in the surrounding districts with Learning Disabilities are coming to our Training Centre to learn all kinds of skills. All the staff here are very kind and patient to us and it builds up confidence in us.

I am now quite experienced in computer word processing. I have just finished a course in Computer Skills at the University of Sussex and have really enjoyed doing it. I am now a teaching assistant to the tutors in Local History and in Computer Skills. All this I enjoy very much, and my confidence is so much better than it was. Also I have been trained and Commissioned with six others in our parish to be Eucharistic Ministers to give out Holy Communion to the parishioners. In October I am going to Sussex University to help teach people with Learning Disabilities to 'Remember Their Lives'. Except during work hours, we may go anywhere without asking permission. We handle our own money from the Social Security. I really do like being independent.

My goodness! Times have really changed a lot since I came here. There have been very hard times, when we had to work very hard, but I enjoyed it, and we were happy in spite of the strictness. Nowadays things are made easier for us and we have a lot more freedom, and I am much happier now. Yes, I am really enjoying myself and I am sure that everyone else is too. I have plenty of friends. Although I enjoy being independent, I know that if I come a cropper I would always have the wonderful staff at St Marye's to help me out.

If my parents were alive today they would be greatly shocked, but in time I am sure they would be very proud of me and of what I have achieved. Anyway, they would not have any say about what I am doing. It is my own choice, and I have got the ability and confidence to do everything that I have taken on. If I felt I could not do anything I certainly would draw the line and say nay!

Moving On

I have recently moved into one of the Carr Gomm houses in Pembroke Crescent in Hove. I have a lovely room and the other residents are very nice, there are five women and one man. We share a kitchen and a lounge and do our own cooking. If we wish we may eat our meals in our rooms. I have my meals in the dining room. I enjoy being here and don't feel at all lonely. The people living here are single who have come out of hospital and would like to go somewhere quiet before going back to their families, also people that are looking for a house and want somewhere to stay in the meanwhile.

Some of them can stay permanently as I am. I wanted to come here to live more independently as I had been so suppressed and held down in the past. I want to show people that I can do things that I have not been able to do before. It is a challenge for me, and a good boost to my confidence.

Of course I would take any advice from my friends if I needed. I am eternally grateful to St Marye's for all they have done for me since I have been there, believe me. (The nuns even paid for me to have my hip operated at one of their private hospitals, as I was in awful agony with it.) I still go up to St Marye's every day from Mondays to Fridays part-time to do my work, so you see I am not lonely and it suits me fine.

The Celebration Mass

On Saturday September 24th some of us (the people of St Marye's) went by coach to St Patrick's Roman Catholic in Soho Square in London to a big celebration Mass in honour of the Foundation of the Order of The Poor Servants Of The Mother Of God. When we got there we were surprised to see so many nuns there. The Mass was celebrated by Bishop Patrick Donoghue, the Vicar General of the Order, with several other priests. I came to realise what wonderful people the sisters had always been to everyone who were poor and had problems and I began to feel ashamed of myself and that is why I have made a few alterations to this book, but not many. Towards the end of mass a student performed a dance of thanksgiving. It was a beautiful and moving day. Yes, in spite of everything I owe a lot to St Maryes, in the past and also in the present: in getting where I am now and becoming the person I am - full of confidence in my ability and full of the joys of life.

The Closure Is Announced

On the 25th of November 1994 Mother General came down from London with her assistant in the care home department, to have a meeting with all of our staff. They were at the meeting for nearly two hours. After they came out they told us to go to the dining room. When there we were told that St Marye's was going to close down in two years' time. You could have heard a pin drop as there was a stunned silence for at least ten minutes, then the tears came. The staff went around cheering the ladies up. I had already guessed what was going to happen - I am no fool you know. It is very sad in some ways because a lot of them were put there for care and protection, but in the long run they will be going into smaller places where they will be helped by staff to become more independent and at the same time the staff will be there to give them a helping hand if needed.

The capable ones like me will enjoy life more being wholly independent, but also knowing if we have any problems we too would be helped out by our key workers. My only worry is that I might have to give up my teaching jobs if the Day Care Training Centre is also shut, and that would make me rather unhappy. But so far we might have a 50-50 chance of it being kept open and enlarging on it. Time will tell.

I wonder what Mother Foundress would have said if she had seen all her big buildings being shut down, but I am sure she would have agreed that everyone should be respected, and gain their independence to a certain degree. I shall never forget St Marye's and everyone who lived there including staff and nuns, and I wish everyone Good Luck in their new life.

An Oak Tree

I started as a little acorn
dropped from an oak tree.
I started to grow after a shower.
First I was very small,
then I grew after so many years
to be a big strong tree
with beautiful foliage of leaves.
I was very pleased with myself
at the glory of God's Wonderful Creation.

But alas,
I had to be cut down
to make many things
for ships and cupboards etc.
Then I was glad
because I had helped the world
to make things that they wanted.
I also was able to let
the birds of the air nest in me
which made me very happy.

Mary Adams, August 1994

The End.

1995 Postscripts

I met Mary Adams when I visited St. Marye's Convent in 1991 for the first time. I was engaged in a research project collecting life stories of the women who had lived there throughout their lives.

Mary was introduced to me as 'someone you may like to talk to'. She was. From 1991 till when she died we grew to know each other and, certainly from my perspective, to like each other.

When I met Mary she was writing her family history. She had always had a desire to establish her identity as a real person in a world that had wanted to deny her a place in society. I interviewed Mary many times. She had so many fascinating experiences to relate and she was a great help in my research.

I found over the years that Mary had a profound effect on my life. We shared a number of experiences; the language of Catholicism, and like her, I had been left at a convent by my mother. It was through spending time with Mary that I was able to come to terms with this experience.

In the time I knew her, she always managed to face life and experience it fully. Mary proves that ordinary women and men's lives are remarkable. I miss her a great deal and feel immense respect for all that she achieved.

Mary Stuart
Friend, co-tutor and researcher

It was a devastating blow for many of Mary's friends when she became ill. In many ways she had only just begun to live.

In her last few years she had become a tutor, a trainer, an author. She learned new skills, and gained confidence which she in turn shared and passed on to others. The work she undertook as receptionist at St. Marye's gave her the opportunity to use all her skills and expertise at making people feel at ease and important. She really enjoyed this key role, and fulfilled it with great responsibility and dedication. She relished making a video to be used in the training of social workers. She loved spending time with children. She was proud of becoming a lay minister. She found tremendous pleasure in her role in writing groups at QueenSpark Books and at St. Marye's, and in achieving her ambition to write her autobiography.

She was sad that these opportunities had not been available to her when she was younger. Sad and hurt by the treatment she received, the rejections suffered, the indignations she endured. Sad and hurt, but never bitter, never blaming.

During her penultimate hospital visit, just a few weeks before her death, Mary was offering reassurance to a distressed woman whose husband was ill with cancer. So typical of her, even at a time of pain and deterioration in herself to be comforting another.

Mary is living on in the memories, hearts and minds of so many people with whom she'd had contact, and now, through this, her story, you'll understand why it is with such affection.

Yve Brown, *June 1995*