

BEYOND THE GRAVES

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WONDROUS WOMEN

Lady Sarah Brooke-Hitching

Sarah Knussuth, daughter of David Brooke of Stannary was born in Halifax, Yorkshire in 1849. She was brought up by her grandmother, her father having died within four months of her birth. She was a well educated and informed lady, travelling extensively and showing remarkable business foresight and ability. In 1878 she married Sir Thomas and later adopted the name Brooke-Hitching by Royal licence. They were associated with King Edward and often seen at Court.

Lady Sarah was a connoisseur of antique furniture and her artistic abilities led her to arrange and furnish beautiful houses both at home and on the Riviera where she was a popular and much sought after personality. Among their houses were St Lawrence Hall; Corston House, Spencer Road, Ryde; Coombe Wood, Bonchurch and the Steephill Castle Estate, Ventnor.

Sir Thomas was a manufacturer and merchant, one of the HM Lieutenants for the City of London and a member of the Corporation of London for twenty years. He was also Sherriff of London 1902 - 1903, Mayor of St Marleybone 1906 – 1907, and sat on many various committees in the capital. Lady Sarah was instrumental in her husband's business and due to her initiative a more comfortable type of mail cart and perambulator was introduced in the nineteenth century leading to the disappearance of the old fashioned iron wheeled baby carriages.



Postcard showing Corston House posted in 1907

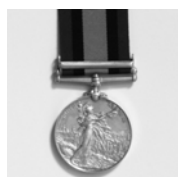
Lady Sarah Brooke-Hitching died at her home, Weston, Queens Road, Ryde on 22 October 1932 and following a quiet service at All Saints Church, was laid to rest in Ryde Cemetery.

Source: Isle of Wight County Press 29 October 1932, Who's Who in the Isle of Wight 1913

Kleo Friend

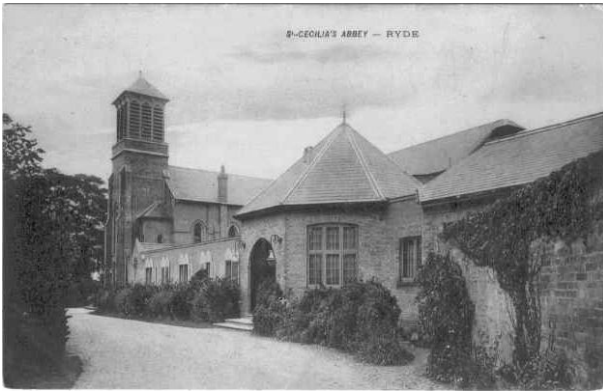
Miss Kleo Friend, a highly regarded and very experienced nurse, was a key personality in the organisation of Red Cross and Auxiliary Hospitals in Ryde, notably Hazelwood and The Castle, during WW1. She was the Commandant of both and corresponded regularly on military hospital matters with John Oglander, the Island Lord Lieutenant. Lady Mabel Gough-Calthorpe also corresponded regularly with John Oglander on local war related events and often spoke of Miss Friend and her highly trained band of nursing staff.

In February 1915 she writes: *"I know of course for some unaccountable reason there is a dead set against Miss Friend - when I asked why and what it is I am told it is her temper, but for all that she is a clever woman **very** keen over her hospital work and who takes the greatest care of her nurses and although I know most of them well, I have never heard a word of complaint from **them**, on the contrary; the Tommies also like her and call her a good sort and to me it seems really wrong just because a few people in Ryde (heads of departments) are jealous of her, our wounded men are to be prevented coming..."*



Miss Friend had previously served as a nurse in the Boer War, employed at the Victoria Hospital, Mafeking and was awarded the Queen's South Africa Medal 1899 - 1902. For her WW1 service she was awarded the Royal Red Cross 2nd Class ARRC medal on a bow ribbon and also the British Red Cross Society War Commemorative Medal 1914 - 1918.

Mother Bernadette Smeyers



In 2003 Mother Bernadette Smeyers, retired Abbess of St Cecilia's Abbey, Ryde celebrated her 100th birthday. At the time she was thought to be the oldest Abbess in the world and received congratulation messages from Pope John Paul II, the Queen and the Belgium King. She was also celebrating the 75th anniversary of her vows and the 50th anniversary of abbatial blessing in this year.

Born Marie-Madeleine Smeyers in Louvain, Belgium on 5 August 1903 she came to England when her family were forced to flee Belgium during WW1. Her father was a Belgium civil servant and followed his government into exile. He continued to work for them in London.

She was first educated by the Paridaen Sisters in Louvain and then at St Mary's Abbey, Mill Hill, London before being sent with her sisters to a school in Ventnor run by the Benedictine Nuns of Pax Cordis Jesu. At age 23 she joined the order which by then had moved into St Cecilia's Abbey at Ryde. Taking the name Bernadette she worked on the poultry farm, taught philosophy and became an excellent calligrapher. She served as secretary and prioress, second in command to Abbess Ambrosia Cousin. During this time she was her chief collaborator in persuading the Solesmes Benedictine Congregation to admit St Cecilias to the congregation; the only outside community to have been admitted.

In March 1953, following the death of Abbess Ambrosia, Sister Bernadette was elected to replace her and threw herself into the role with vigour. She was known for her enthusiasm of the traditional Latin and Gregorian Chants. In 1974 she encouraged the nuns to record the chants and they sold 3500 copies in the first six months. Richard Baker contributed to their popularity by playing an excerpt on his BBC radio show 'These you have Loved'. St Cecilias recorded more than ten CDs between 1980 and 1992 and encouraged other communities to follow. Mother Bernadette also introduced courses in Greek and Hebrew and took great interest in book-binding, artwork and making the altar bread.

Mother Bernadette will be most remembered for her work establishing the first Benedictine monastery for nuns in India. She was first approached for help in 1962 by Dom Bede Griffiths, a monk of Prinknash Abbey who lived in a Christian ashram in India, and an Indian, Father Benedict Alapatt of St Andre Abbey, Bruges. Mother Bernadette embraced the idea and set about raising the funds to build the monastery. She also sent two of her nuns from the Island to India prospecting for land and accepted seven Indian girls into St Cecilias to receive the full Benedictine Foundation.



Benedictine Abbey, Shanti Nilayam 1970

Before the girls arrived the St Cecilias' nuns learnt all they could about India and its customs, to understand and help the girls adjust to the shock of European culture. They borrowed film, slides and tapes including traditional music and dance from the Indian Embassy in London. The girls also learnt practical skills here to contribute to the monastery's upkeep once they returned to India. Mother Bernadette travelled to India three times. By 1970 the monastery of Shanti Nilayam, Bangalore in the village of Byrathi was built and the Indian Sisters took possession. Shanti Nilayam is recognised for its blend of Indian culture and Benedictine tradition. The nuns are allowed to wear saffron coloured saris or a white Benedictine habit and some of the furniture has been replaced by traditional Indian mats. In 1996

Shanti Nilayam was granted Abbey status and Sister Teresita was elected Abbess.

In February 1987 Abbess Bernadette Smeyers resigned her office deciding it was best before she became too incapacitated to perform all her duties. This was a very hard decision for her as all superiors of the Solesmes Congregation are elected for life, but she was happy to see her nuns elect a much younger Abbess to succeed her and continue the work of St Cecilias. She continued to live in the Abbey taking part in all the activities until the day before she died. Bernadette Smeyers died aged 102 on Saturday 17 September 2005 at St Mary's Hospital, Newport after a fall the night before. She made light of it telling the nuns she was "just doing some gymnastics".

Source: www.aimintl.org/communs/asie.htm, obituary The Independent 20 September 2005, www.bbccmusicmagazine.co.uk, obituary The Telegraph 23 September 2005, www.indcatholicnews.com, The Bede Griffiths Sangha Newsletter.

'SAINTED LADIES'

When considering the wondrous women of Ryde we cannot fail to mention two 19th century ladies who within their own lifetimes were almost regarded as saints.

Elizabeth, Countess of Clare (1793 - 1879) was one of the first residents of the newly built Brigstocke Terrace in 1829. She had moved to the Island following the scandal involving her husband, the Earl of Clare, and his relationship with the late poet, Lord Byron. Whilst as a dutiful wife she was expected to stand by her husband, whatever the circumstances, it appears she did not choose to accompany him to India where he was conveniently being relocated but set about establishing herself on the Island as a charming, philanthropic and exceedingly rich socialite. Her brother, Lindsay Burrell, was already a popular member of Island sailing life and had the beautiful Gwydyr House built as a family home.



Some people must have objected to the loose morals (by association) and lack of wifely duty which the Countess displayed, and she was also to find disfavour when she converted to Catholicism and set about establishing the first (and very grandly designed) Roman Catholic Church in Ryde. However, whilst she was known as the Lady Foundress of Ryde's Santa Maria Basilica (as she liked to call it), her brother was a main benefactor of the building of the Anglican Holy Trinity Church. In fact Mr Dashwood was employed as builder of both churches and they were opened within a few months of each other in 1846.

The Countess worked tirelessly on improvement projects and was known as the Lady Bountiful of Ryde. She convinced the Ryde Hospital authorities that Catholic priests be allowed to visit the sick and organised the Catholic burial section at Ryde Cemetery. The Countess considered the most appropriate way to counter anti-Catholic prejudice was with Christian kindness and generosity so she would give to the poor and needy of Ryde, Catholic and non-Catholic alike. The Countess also executed her grand plan for the building of a Dominican Convent at Carisbrooke. Further afield she contributed to the first Catholic hospital in London and the building of a Catholic Church in Croydon.



Mary Harriette Player Brigstocke, 1824 - 1904

Miss Mary Harriette Player Brigstocke (1824 - 1904) was the daughter of Elizabeth Player and Captain Thomas Brigstocke. She never married and devoted her life to being a benefactress of Ryde. Her major concern was the family chapel, St Thomas' which she owned. Over the years she replaced all the windows and fittings, this included the installation of magnificent stained glass windows depicting St Thomas; most of the pews were replaced; she replaced and re-sited the organ; and she purchased a very expensive new font. All these improvements and refurbishments cost several thousands of pounds. She also ensured that the graveyard was well kept, personally supervising the work at times. As well as her own church Miss Brigstocke donated generously to all of the other Ryde Churches.

She had almshouses built in Player Street for six poor aged women of the Parish. Once a month, up until just before her death, Miss Brigstocke had parcels of groceries made up for the inmates and usually delivered them personally.



Very keen on all sports and a skilled horsewoman herself, Miss Brigstocke supported all the local sports and athletic clubs and the Working Men's Rowing Club. She was also involved with the YMCA. She made sure she supported all the local schools as well as the Friendly Societies. In the 1890s Miss Brigstocke purchased the Recreation Ground (£1,500) and presented it to the Town Council. Not forgetting, she was also a great benefactor of the Isle of Wight Infirmary. In her younger days she had been the main influence for purchasing the addition of a Town Hall Clock.

Miss Brigstocke may have been considered a saint not just by all the people of Ryde but perhaps by all living creatures! She was very sympathetic to animals and had drinking fountains erected in St Thomas' Square, the Esplanade and West Street, amongst others, all to benefit the horses and cattle.

Source: stmarysryde.org, Ryde Heritage Audio Trail © RSHG

Charlotte Rosa Raine

Charlotte Rosa Raine was born in October 1819 at Doughty Street, London, daughter of Richard Raine, Gent, and Anne Joblin. Charlotte never married and in the 1881 census she was described as a Lady Authoress and lived at St Margarets, Woodstock, Oxfordshire. She also owned property at 7 St Peter's Place, Brighton, and for many years resided at Haylands Manor, Ryde.



Haylands Manor, Ryde

Charlotte took great interest in the welfare of the people in the parish of Swanmore where she organised many beneficial schemes including a Clothing Club. Although Haylands was generally considered to be a poorer neighbourhood, due to her generosity, the children looked well dressed and looked after. If anyone was sick they were assured they could obtain everything they needed at the Manor. Charlotte knew every member of her community and at any gathering would immediately spot anyone missing and make enquiries after their well being. She was well loved and spoken of enthusiastically by all her knew her.

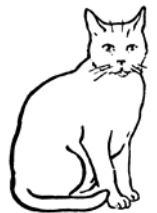
She regularly invited the girls from the Sunday School to her home giving them the run of the beautiful gardens, likewise often the Mother's meetings were held at the Manor. She was a great supporter of St Michael and All Angels Church and paid for the Chancel to be built, a lasting monument of her generosity to the parish.

Following a short illness Charlotte Rosa Raine passed away on 19 June 1894 at Haylands Manor, aged 74. Her funeral took place at St Michaels Church with celebrations of Holy Communion at 7 and 8 o'clock in the morning followed by a full choral celebration at 10.30. The church was crowded, the service taken by the Rev W F J Hanbury. The coffin was then placed on a wheeled bier and covered with the St Michael's pall; violet with a white cross. Hymns were sung on the road to Ryde Cemetery and mourners and personal friends numbered over 300. It was estimated in total there were 1000 people present in the cemetery to see her remains laid to rest in a grave lined with moss, ivy leaves and flowers and covered with splendid wreaths.

In her will, some called 'an eccentric will', the total value of her personal estate was valued at £86,000. She left her lands and property in the parish of Wolvercot, Oxfordshire to Lord Randolph Henry Spencer Churchill in recognition of his 'commanding political genius' and in acknowledgement to the Marlborough family of the favours and benefits derived from their estate by her late father. She left the majority of her books to found a public library for the parishioners of St Michaels and All Angels, Swanmore, and various amounts to Christian charities around the country. Nothing very unusual so far but the second half of her will was dedicated to her pet cats and horse –



"And as regard to my pussies..." Many of her cats were individually named (Titiens, Tabby Rolla, Jenefee, Ursula, Louise, Dr Clausman, Oscar) and left to Ann Elizabeth Matthews, Elizabeth Willoughby and Lavinia Sophia Beck in Haylands with instructions for her executors to pay them £12 a year for maintenance for as long as the cats lived; her other remaining cats were also given to Ann Matthews with instructions for their maintenance of £150 a year to be paid out of the balance of her father's Lambeth Waterworks shares (but not to include any kittens subsequently born).



There was also instructions that Ann was to live out this annuity in the village of Haylands (or elsewhere) in a cottage and garden for the maintenance of the same pussies, unless "Rev William Martin Spencer is willing to permit the pussies to reside on the premises and in the garden at Pound." Charlotte also provided for her black mare Fenella, authorising her executors to take from her estate a sum sufficient to pay for the horse's board and lodgings for life.

Instructions were also left for any other living creature of hers to be taken care of. She was one remarkable lady.



Source: Isle of Wight Observer 23 June 1894, Kilmore Free Press, Australia, 8 November 1894

Website: www.rshg.org.uk

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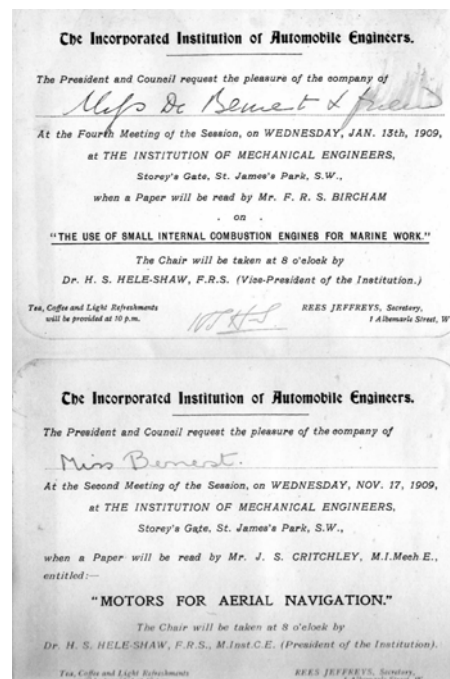
Cleone de Heveningham Benest (1880 – 1964)

This remarkable woman was born in Forest Gate, Essex and spent the first part of her life in St Brelades, Jersey with her mother and grandparents. By 1891 they had moved to Ryde, living in The Strand later moving to Hollymount, West Street, Ryde. Cleone was a serious sportswoman being a member of the Ladies' Isle of Wight Golf Club and a superb fencer, taking part in the national finals of 1908, but her passion was for motor transport and mechanical engineering.



She passed the RAC's certificates for driving and mechanical proficiency, and the City and Guilds of London motor engineering exam in 1908 – she was the only female candidate.

She attended meetings of the Incorporated Institute of Automobile Engineers by special invitation even though women were not allowed to become members at the time.



She took every opportunity to drive any form of motorised transport including cars, lorries and buses, and between 1905 and 1907 was allowed to drive the Isle of Wight Motor Syndicate Ltd Milnes-Daimler and Thornycroft buses in Ryde. She kept a scrapbook containing timetables, newspaper cuttings and articles detailing the progress of the local bus services.

Cleone corresponded with motor vehicle manufacturers and visited some of their factories to develop her knowledge during the early 1900s and had her own well equipped workshop where she maintained her own vehicles. One of her vehicles was a 1906 Lanchester, registration number DL 154. In June 1909 she took part in the Hampshire Automobile Club hill climbing competition at Lord Montagu's Beaulieu estate and, not only won her class, but recorded the fastest time of the day, 103.6 seconds, in a Fiat 24hp car.



Her talents went beyond driving and car maintenance, as shown in this excerpt from the Isle of Wight County Press October 1909 –

"IW Fine Art Society - An interesting exhibit was a model of Bleriot's aeroplane, one-eighth the actual size, shown by Miss C Benest, who also cleverly executed metal work and wood carving."

Thanks to Mark Chessell for the information and photographs

Alice Mary Bolton

In 1935 Alice Mary Bolton celebrated her Silver Jubilee as a nurse with the Ryde District Nursing Association. She was one of the best loved and most popular members of the community due to her nursing performance and kindness. Nurse Bolton trained in London and worked at the Brixham Cottage Hospital before coming to Ryde in March 1910 when there were only four members on the staff of the Nursing Association. During her first years in Ryde she personally supervised an average of 116 maternity cases each year and altogether in her career attended over 2000 confinements in the town with only one case of maternal mortality.

Nurse Bolton Fund. — The following list of contributions have been received for the above fund: Dr. L. Firman Edwards £1, Mr. Thorne £1 1s., Mr. Hackshaw £1 1s., per Mrs. Hackshaw 1s., Miss F. Matthews 5s., Mr. and Mrs. Nicholson £2 2s., Madame M. Santley £4 2s., Mrs. F. G. Holt £1 1s. — Total £8 43s. Further contributions can be sent to Councillor S. R. Bird, 3 Union Street.

Isle of Wight Times 14 May 1936

In 1918 Alice became the School Nurse, leaving two years later for well earned rest. When her health began to fail, a special fund was organised in Ryde on her behalf. She died on 12 June 1936 at Home Hospital, Ryde. Her funeral at All Saints Church, Ryde on 15 June was conducted by the Rev Neville Martin assisted by the Rev E J Forse. In his address the vicar said they had gathered to pay respect to one who spent her life in the service of mankind and who did all she could to alleviate the suffering of those in her care. Only a few weeks before her death she could be seen pushing her bicycle up the hills of the town all hours of the day and night to reach and bring comfort and hope to the people in need.

Nurse Bolton was laid to rest in Ryde Cemetery. Upwards of 50 floral tributes were sent including those from the Ryde District Nursing Association, the Isle of Wight Midwives, the Red Cross Centre, the Nurses Fellowship of the Mothers' Union, her fellow members and Home staff, the licensed motor drivers at Ryde Esplanade and 'Three of her babies'.

Alys Kate Last



Alys Kate Last (right)
with her mother (centre).

Alys Kate Last was born in 1887 in the parish of Calbourne, daughter of Benjamin & Harriet Last. Her father was born in Little Saxham, Suffolk and married Harriet Morrish at St Swithins, Thorley. By 1901 her father had died and she was living with her mother at 18 Partlands Avenue, Ryde.

Alys, described as 'very tall for a woman', trained as a teacher and worked at Bettsworth Road Girls' School, Ryde until she resigned and left teaching in 1912 to take up a nursing career. She trained at the Nightingale Training School at St Thomas' Hospital, London and later returned to the Island becoming Matron of the Royal IW County Hospital, Ryde.



Alys Kate Last was awarded several medals during her nursing career including the "Nightingale School - Alys K. Last 1916", the "Territorial Force Nursing Service" the "Guild of all Souls", and the "Hospitals Emergency Service"