

Iris Bedwell (née Salisbury)

Iris was born in Abergele, east of Colwyn Bay, north Wales on 18th September in 1921.

Her mother was Florence, née Davies, (known as Flo to her Dad) and her father was Robert. He came from Flint and owned his own steam traction engine. He used to do road works and later did surveying and pipe-laying in the Abergele area. He had been captured at the Somme in W.W. 1 and the only reading material he had was a Bible. He read it from cover to cover and back again. When the vicar tried to get him to be more regular at Church in later years, he used to say, "I know that Bible inside out - I don't think I need any more of it."

Her home did not have electricity, candles being used upstairs and oil lamps downstairs, right up to the time she left to go in the forces at the beginning of the war.

She was the second of five children - her elder brother was Robert Evan (second name after his grandfather and Florrie's father, the Baptist minister in their village) born about 1919. He served an apprenticeship to enter the Royal Air Force just before the war. In 1939 he joined the Service as a Flight Mechanic. After the war, de Havilland, the large Aircraft manufacturers 'borrowed' him from the RAF and he eventually went to work for them at Bedford. He and his wife Jenny lived there from then on.

Richard Mervin was born in 1924 and he became a tank driver in a Tank Corps in WW2. His tank drove just in front of General Montgomery's tank at the D-Day landings in 1944. Her next and only surviving brother is Leslie. He was expected to be a girl, so there was no name for him for some time. He was just called Boy. This stuck among the family members and was still often used for him later. He now lives in Norwich.

Some time later, when Flo thought her child-bearing days were over, in 1929 a second daughter was born and called Sheila Mary. She was born on 7th April, which was on Easter Sunday that year. Sheila now lives in Coventry.

Iris went to the local village school and because her father was English and her Mother Welsh-speaking, she grew up bi-lingual. She would sometimes go down to her grandfather's chapel when the Baptistery pool was to be filled. She was supposed to watch that it didn't overflow, but while she sat there, she would have a little go on the chapel organ.

She enjoyed cookery, needlework and knitting at school and her best academic subject was Religious Knowledge. She was not fond of sport of any kind.

Her mother often used to say to her, "You'll go a long way, because you're such a bossy little madam!"

Her friends at school were Peggy, Gwyneth, Blodwyn and Halwyn. She was always a bit bossy, so when their teacher Miss Whitlow had to leave the classroom for a short while, Iris was often put in charge!

When she was still quite small, her mother was about to dress her in a pretty frilly dress and her father said, "Isn't she vain enough, without dressing her up in that finery."

Her out-of-school activities all focussed around the church and chapel. Monday was Girls' Friendly Society, Tuesday was Band of Hope and Wednesday was Brownies and later Girl Guides.

Her hobbies all focussed on domestic crafts. She loved cooking, sewing, embroidering, knitting and crochet and excelled in them all. She made some excellent fruit scones.

On a Sunday, she went to 8am Chapel with her mother, then 11am Service at St Michael's Church. After dinner, she went to Sunday School at the Church and rounded off her busy day with Evening Service with her mother at the Chapel. Her mother's father was the minister there and after the morning service, he would call in at his daughter Flo's on his way home. One Sunday, he arrived rather sooner than expected. Iris was busy sewing - an activity upon which he frowned on a Sunday, so she quickly stuffed it behind her in the chair.

At one point while he was there, her mother asked her to go and fetch something, but she shook her head and glanced behind her. This happened several times, until Mother suddenly realised what was the matter, so she went and fetched the item herself. As

Iris said afterwards - "Granddad would have had a fit if he'd known what I was doing!"

Iris left school at 15 in 1936 and went to work as a nanny for a local doctor, caring for his little three-year-old daughter. She stayed with him until she was 16½, when she applied to start nursing training at the hospital in Rhyl. Her old employer spoke up for her, so she was able to begin training even though she was not the statutory 17 years of age. She enjoyed her training, but it was very hard work. The sister in charge was very strict and demanding. On one occasion Iris was given the job of issuing bedpans on a men's ward. She walked down the ward with a bedpan, but was stopped in her tracks. Sister made her stack four pans one on top of the other - poor Iris could hardly see over the top! She was then sent down to the bottom of the ward. Peering over the top of her pile, she said to the man in the end bed "Please will you take one?"! On another occasion the Sister noticed that she'd tucked in the top sheet of one of the patients very tightly. "This man came in with an appendix. He'll be going out, though, with flat feet!"

On Friday September 1st 1939, Iris and two of her friends, Peggy and Gwyneth, went to Rhyl to join the ATS. Iris's father was very cross about this and when she told him that on the Saturday she was going to need to be called early so that she could catch the train for Blackpool to go for training, and please would he wake her, he refused, so she had to manage for herself. Her mother was not at all pleased either and warned her that if she "got into trouble" while she was away from home, she'd have to go to the workhouse, because Mum and Dad wouldn't have her at home!

She was not quite 18 when war broke out and but had completed her nursing training. When she was asked by the recruiting officers what her job was, she said it was nursing, but that she wanted to learn to drive. They laughed about this because she was so small. "You'll need a box to get in and out of the cabs!" they said. But Iris said she wanted to drive cars, not lorries and ambulances.

She did her early training at Hereford, which was where she met Alf. Not long after they'd met, Alf was posted back to his unit, while she was posted to Oxford as a driver to a Brigadier. She was based in a

rather grand private house in Oxford, nothing like the barracks she'd had to put up with so far. She drove the Brigadier all over the place, but it wasn't until after the war that she discovered what he did. He was a dentist and used to drill out the back teeth of personnel in the Secret Service, so that secret messages could be inserted, to be delivered behind enemy lines. He ended up retiring to Cliftonville and it was to him that Iris and Alf went when their home at Brooksend was flooded out by the rains in the 1973.

Their courtship was quite short and they planned to marry at the end of August in 1941, when Alf had been granted two weeks embarkation leave. Iris managed to get just one week's leave, but that was enough for their purposes.

Iris was expecting to be married in uniform, as war-time shortages made wedding dresses almost impossible to come by. However, her mother had performed a miracle and, unknown to Iris, had a lovely dress for her, plus two bridesmaids dresses for Sheila, her sister and Megan her cousin. They didn't let her know immediately she got home, but when she eventually found out, she was delighted.

The wedding was planned for 11 o'clock on the 29th August, but her grandfather was conducting a funeral at the Baptist Chapel at that time, so they waited till 12 noon so that he could be there. Her mother gave her a hanky that she had had at her own wedding, as her "something old" item, that superstition ruled must be included. The wedding was at St Michael's Church in Abergele, with the Vicar officiating. The vicar said to Alf, "You can be sure of one thing - you'll never go hungry because Iris will always be able to make you very good fruit scones!"

During the reception, telegrams were being read, when they discovered one from Alf's regiment, telling him to report back for duty immediately. There were floods of tears, but Alf had to go and so the 'old' hanky her mother had given her for the ceremony was well used! It later became the start of a large collection of hankies she has now accumulated.

She and her new mother-in-law travelled back to Thanet for what was supposed to be the honeymoon - and Iris ended up sharing a bed with her mother-in-law, instead of her husband that night!!!

After the week's leave, Iris returned to her unit and went home to her mother and father whenever she had leave. In February 1943 Alf was granted a brief leave and as a result of this, their daughter Barbara was born on the 6th November that year. Iris had planned to have the baby at home with her parents, but there were complications and she was rushed into hospital in Colwyn Bay. Alf was granted compassionate leave. Because she was so ill, Alf ended up staying at the nursing home for almost 6 weeks. Giving the baby a name would have been no problem if it had been a boy, as it would have been Michael, after the church in which Iris had been baptised, confirmed and married. However, she was eventually named Barbara Katina.

After the war, when Alf was demobbed in 1945, they came back to Birchington, and Alf went back to his job at Quex. The accommodation they were given had been converted from the old laundry and was not ideal for bringing up a toddler. They named the little house 'Wellbury', using the ends of both their surnames, and it still bears that name today.

Alf then got a job as a gardener up in Bromley, but the place didn't suit Iris, and so he had to bring her back to Thanet.

He was able to get a job with the Sayers at Cleve Farm where his father worked. To begin with, they lived with Alf's parents at 2, Oast Cottages. Billy Sayer then allotted Iris and Alf 4, Church Street (now Plumstone Road) Acol, just opposite St Mildred's Church and they were living there in 1955. While they were there, Barbara started school at Park Lane Birchington.

After Billy bought College Farm at the bottom of Brooksend Hill, he offered them College Farmhouse in Crispe Road, but this was very small in those days. He then had two of College Farm Cottages renovated and made into one dwelling and Alf and Iris moved in sometime after 1955, where they have continued to live ever since.

Alf's Dad worked on at Sayer's farm at Cleve until he was 90 and only had 2 years of retirement. He was still planting potatoes at 90! He lived at 2 Oast Cottages all that time and used to cycle to work each day. Both Alf's parents were able to attend Barbara's wedding in 1964. Alf's dad spent his final couple of years with Iris and Alf at College Farm Cottage after his wife died in 1965, the year that

Winston Churchill died. He came down on the day of Churchill's funeral to watch it on TV with Iris and Alf and stayed with them from then on. Alf and Iris used to take him back to 2 Oast Cottages to visit it and sort out his belongings every so often, but he didn't live there again.

Iris returned to nursing in the 1950s and worked at Margate General Hospital until 1976. It was during this time that she met her long time friend, Shirley, who helped her with some of her later ventures after she had retired. During the 1950s and 60s, Iris was helping to organise the Red Cross training in Margate. She tried several times to get a unit started in Birchington, but without success.

In retirement, Iris ran her flower shop in Station Road for about 24 years. She retired from that in 2001 and nearly drove Alf mad for a couple of weeks. He encouraged her to take on the lease of a tiny shop in the Square, which she called "Oma's Delight", where she reigned supreme for another couple of years.

In between all this, she was very active in the Chamber of Commerce, becoming its President in 1985 and continued as President on and off for a number of years, till the Chamber had to be closed, due to lack of support in 2004.

She was also elected to the Parish Council in 1988, the year after it was formed. She became Chairman in 1994-5 and 1995-6, and was heavily involved with the Twinning Association, connecting Birchington with La Chapelle d'Armentieres in 1989.

Alf wrote a number of stories about her various escapades, including the time when she painted-out an offensive Benetton Advert on hoarding by the old Central Garage site, for which they both ended up being held in a cell in Margate Police Station, while it was being investigated. This was in 1991 on their Golden Wedding anniversary, of all days! Iris has also always been a great supporter of the Residents' Association. She has enjoyed many fund-raising ventures in her time and because of this got very involved with the Carnival Association too, along with her very supportive husband Alf.