

## 6 – Lilian and William

In 1923 Dorothy Cannon was married and Mignon's life at St Leonard's may have ended. There were apparent tensions in the Harman family in 1924. By the end of 1925, if the evidence is not misleading, Mignon had been taken in by a new family and had become, sometimes at least, Mignon Nelson, and at the end of her life, Mickie Nelson.

What actually happened between 1923 and 1925 is still a mystery. Was the unconventional Aimée Mallabey involved with Mignon's life? How did she come to be the unofficial daughter of the unconventional Lilian Nelson?

Lilian and William O'Callaghan, as they really were, were sometimes a butler and cook/housekeeper pairing, as they were for Lord Berners in the late 1930s. At other times they worked separately, often for short periods, perhaps through agencies, requiring a constant change of address. It was a highly unsettled and precarious world for the young Mignon to enter.

Lilian was not born Lilian, but Elizabeth or Lizzie.

Lizzie Connelly (Elizabeth Mary Connelly) was born into a Roman Catholic family on August 15<sup>th</sup> 1883 at Clondalkin, County Dublin, Ireland. Her father was William (born in County Kildare in 1851) and her mother was Mary, born 1856. William Connelly was a railway labourer. In 1901 the family lived at 8 Bluebell, Clondalkin, close to Inchicore, still today the main engineering workshops of Irish railways. Inchicore also had a tram depot with quick links to Dublin City Centre.

Neither William nor his wife were literate. The children were all able to read and write.

Lizzie (as she appears on the 1901 census) had three brothers, William John and Owen, all at school in 1901, and three sisters, MaryAnne, (a seamstress) and Julia and Maggie, like Lizzie recorded as Domestic Servants in 1901.

On May 7<sup>th</sup> 1903 Julia, Margaret and Elizabeth sailed on the Mayflower from Liverpool to Boston, Mass., arriving on May 16<sup>th</sup>. They were originally listed as having no occupation but this has been corrected to “servant.” They were travelling to stay with their aunt, Mrs Jos. Tempest, who lived at 30 Hecla St, Dorchester, Mass, a few miles south from the centre of Boston.

This aunt was Catherine A Tempest. She was listed as the widow of Joseph P Tempest in the 1912 directory of Springfield where she later lived. Catherine was born in Ireland in 1851. Her husband, Joseph, was a stonecutter. Her maiden name was Riley. Though US censuses state that her husband was born in Mass, Joseph was actually from Yorkshire, a quarryman. She died 1918.

There is no trace of Lizzie’s return home, but her sisters stayed in the USA. On April 3<sup>rd</sup> 1904 Julia married Patrick Joseph Donovan, a motorman on the Boston Electric Railway who had been born, like her father, in County Kildare. Julia’s address at the time of her marriage was Aunt Catherine’s at 30 Hecla St, Dorchester. Her husband lived at 20a Cypress St, Somerville, northwest of the Boston City Centre. Margaret also seems to have stayed in Massachusetts.

By 1907 she was, presumably, in England and had met and married her partner for over 50 years, William O’Callaghan.

William O’Callaghan was born in Southampton on the 22<sup>nd</sup> March 1882. His father Charles, born in Southampton in 1854, was a railway clerk. His mother was Emily, also born in Southampton. He had four brothers, Patrick, Walter, Charles and Hugh (a sailor) and five (or more) sisters, Emily, Ellen and Edith, Kathleen and Nora, the last of whom was born in Twickenham in c1885. Charles worked for the London and South Western Railway, which operated main lines to Southampton, Portsmouth and Exeter from Waterloo, as well as south west London suburban services through Twickenham. The O’Callaghans, including Lilian and William, kept close links with the Twickenham area for the rest of their lives.

At the age of 19, in 1900 William was briefly employed as a shunter for the London Brighton and South Coast Railway, at New Cross. He was dismissed as “useless”.

In 1901 he was a railway shunter for the LSWR at Twickenham. This was a tough and dangerous job and William may not have kept at it for long even if he had been less useless working for the rival company.

William used his various names flexibly but in 1905-6 he seems to be calling himself William Walter O'Callaghan. Walter was the name of one of his brothers. The date and place of birth, 22<sup>nd</sup> March 1882 and Southampton, certainly suggest that it was William who was employed, for less than a year, in the Royal Navy, as an officer's servant. This would be good experience for someone whose temperament and vocation was more suited to the work of a butler than the dangers of the railway yard.

William joined the Encounter on 16<sup>th</sup> December 1905 and sailed to Australia, the first of three occasions on which he would be listed on a ship bound for Australia. His service was very short-lived. For unknown reasons his naval record says he was "to be sent home on Oruba", leaving Sydney 7/4/06. In spite of this speedy end of a short naval career, his conduct is marked "VG."

The 1911 census records that William and Lilian had been married four years. I have not been able to trace a marriage certificate. Wherever they met and married they were certainly a couple by 1910, and in the Twickenham area, close to William's family.

There is a family tradition that the O'Callaghans had a first child, Joseph, who died young. I have not been able to confirm this, though there are several possible births in the years before the birth of their daughter, Phyllis Edith Lilian O'Callaghan. She was born at 19 Royal Rd Teddington on 15<sup>th</sup> December 1910.

In the 1911 census William O'Callaghan and Lizzie, now calling herself Lilian, were both employed as domestic servants at a house called River Deep, Cross Deep, Twickenham. This was part of what had been Baroness Howe's villa, partially demolished in 1840. They are recorded as having been married for four years.

William and Lilian's employers are John George Chancellor, a private tutor, and his wife Fanny. Also in the house are an Italian student and an American travelling manager with his wife and daughter.

It might seem that the O'Callaghans had found a settled life, but the Daily Telegraph for Thursday 27<sup>th</sup> July 1911, only four months after the census included this report:

*Meeting a young Irishwoman with a child in her arms, crying at the Easter service at a Twickenham Church, Mrs Bulger, the wife of a local doctor, took pity on her and engaged her as an indoor servant. Soon after, the woman, who was named O'Callaghan, induced Dr Bulger to engage her husband as well. Yesterday William and Lillian O'Callaghan were charged at Brentford with robbing the doctor of goods in the value of £10, and they were remanded for enquiries into their antecedents.*

What had happened before Easter? Had they lost their position at Cross Deep? The child was the seven-month old Phyllis.

The church was probably St James's Catholic Church, Twickenham. Mrs Bulger is listed on the 1911 census as Mexican. Her husband was Lawrence 'Larry' Quinlivan Bulger (5 February 1870 – 17 March 1928) a doctor and important Irish rugby player.



Lawrence Bulger

The Bulgers lived at Poplar Lodge, Twickenham. In the 1911 census they employed a house maid and cook, so one wonders how Lilian and William would have fitted in.

Both were charged -

*On a day between the 10<sup>th</sup> April and 15<sup>th</sup> June, 1911, stealing whilst servnay 1 gold chain and other articles, of the property of Lawrence Quinlevan Bulger his (her) master.*

(UK Calendar of Prisoners 1868-1929, [ancestry.co.uk](http://ancestry.co.uk))

They pleaded Not Guilty of larceny as a servant. They were bailed on 2<sup>nd</sup> August and both discharged on 27<sup>th</sup> September.

It has to be assumed that they were both considered innocent as they very soon after found other employment.

Their son Patrick William Nelson O'Callaghan was born at Hampton Court Palace on 22<sup>nd</sup> November 1912. This is also given as Lilian's address. Lilian gives her name as

“Lilian Josephine”, a combination of names that she used often over the next thirty years.

Patrick became an electrical engineer. He died in 1982.

Hampton Court Palace is as large as a small village. Within the palace are more than fifty apartments. These were traditionally “grace and favour” homes granted to aristocratic widows. As recently as 2009 Patrick’s Christine widow mentioned in a conversation with her sister-in-law Jane (second wife of Lilian’s third son) that her husband had been born at Apartment no. 9. This was the home of the Dowager Lady Napier of Magdala. .

In the 1911 census, taken just eighteen months earlier, the Dowager Lady Napier of Magdala, widow of Field Marshall Robert Napier was living in this fourteen room apartment on the top floor of Fountains Court with her younger son, Albert, a footman, cook and two domestic servants.

Phyllis may have been with William’s family in nearby Twickenham at this point, or she may have been tolerated in the apartment. Patrick was given to the O’Callaghan family to be looked after but William and Lilian did not stay at Hampton Court,

Less than a year after Patrick’s birth Lilian and William made a dramatic move. They set sail for Australia, as if intending to emigrate to the country that William had briefly visited in 1906. Though Patrick was left behind they did take Phyllis, who was now two years and eight months old. They sailed from Liverpool on the Runic, bound for Sydney, on 21<sup>st</sup> August 1913, only six months after Patrick’s birth. They give their country of last permanent residence as Ireland. It seems likely that it had been impossible to keep up the post at Hampton Court with the new baby and they had decided to leave, probably visiting Lilian’s Irish family before deciding to emigrate.

William gives his profession as “Butler”, and he may have hoped to find employment in the same role in the new country. Lilian is listed as “housewife.” With Phyllis to look after Lilian may have hoped to have been supported by William rather than to have to go back into service herself.

The move to Australia was not a success.

Though they had travelled as passengers intending to make Australia their country of permanent residence the family returned to London less than six months later, sailing on the Moravia. They arrived back in London on the 5<sup>th</sup> February 1914. For the return journey William describes himself as a “Chemist”. Perhaps there had been no suitable employment for the 31 year old butler. Another reason for their decision to return may have been that Lilian was pregnant again.

Roy Desmond O’Callaghan was born on 14<sup>th</sup> July 1914 at Chesterton, St George’s Rd, Isleworth, which is also given as his father’s address. They were back home close to William’s father and his family in Twickenham.

This address was the home (in 1911 and in later electoral rolls) of Ernest Albert Lane, 45, assistant secretary of a railway institution and his wife and one servant. It was probably a convenient lodging within easy reach of the William’s father in Crane Rd, Twickenham.

Roy was placed in the care of Lilian’s sister MaryAnn who had married Joseph Redmond and was living in Inchicore.

During World War II Roy was an RAF air gunner flight sergeant and later returned to Dublin to work on the railways, as both his Irish and English grandfathers had done. In the 1940s he also, with William and Lilian, worked for Prince Aly Khan in Ireland.

On Roy’s birth certificate the father is simply named “William O’Callaghan” and is described as a “Secretary Public Company”. From this point until his death William would describe himself as a Secretary as much as Butler, though more often as a “Private Secretary” which implies a post of confidentiality.

Just over two years later, on the 28<sup>th</sup> November 1916 William, Lilian and Phyllis arrived in Newfoundland. They sailed on the Cranley to the port of Botwood, and went on to Bishop’s Falls.

Ten months later, on the 1<sup>st</sup> September 1917, they sailed on the Kyle from Port au Basque, Newfoundland, to North Sydney, Nova Scotia, on their way to Boston.

Their border crossing into the USA on 4th September 1917, gives an enormous amount of information. William's father's address is given as 14 Crane Rd Twickenham, Lilian's father's as 35 Phoenix St, Inchicore, Ireland. From this form we know that Lilian was 5 foot six inches tall, with auburn hair and hazel eyes.

Lilian's has slightly underestimated her age, giving 30 when she would have been 34 in August. Phyllis's age is given as 5 when she was actually nearly seven.

William is described as a clerk, which may be consistent with his description as "Secretary Public Company" on Roy's birth certificate three years before. He appears to have abandoned domestic service for the time being. From the border they were travelling south to see Lilian's aunt, Mrs Joseph Tempest, in Springfield, who died the following year.

By May 1918 Lilian and William were in Massachusetts where their son Douglas Haig O'Callahan was born on December 5<sup>th</sup>. Lilian is now described as a housekeeper.

Because he was born in the USA Douglas had dual nationality.

In the 1921 census Douglas is living as an "adopted child" in Teddington. There is a note in his entry "Sir John F P Gallwey Bart – valet. 38 Victoria St, Victoria," Does this refer to William's employment? He was John Frankland Payne-Gallwey (c1889-1954) an engineer.

NAME AND RELATIONSHIP (SEE INSTRUCTIONS ON BACK HEREOF.)		SEX AND AGE	STATUS	EDUCATION	RELIGION	INDUSTRY	PROFESSION	RESIDENCE	OTHER	
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	
1	James Thomas Archer	Head	37/10	M	Married	Scrubbing Mill Surrey	British	Window Cleaner	Own account 923/55	445 Railway Rd Teddington 1924
2	Sarah Ellen Archer	Wife	45/5	F	married	Hounslow Middlesex	British		789	
3	Thomas Bates	Nephew	29/10	M	Single	Hounslow Middlesex	British	Motor Driver	720/6 Nichols Baker.	364 4660-04 Broad Street Teddington
4	Mary Ellen Bates	Niece	8/6	F	Mother dead	Hounslow Middlesex	British	Whole Time		
5	Douglas Haig O'Callahan	(Adopted Child)	Two and a half	M	not filled	Boston USA United States America	British		Sir John F P Gallwey Bart (Valet)	38 Victoria St Victoria

There is no sign of William, Lilian or Phyllis in the 1921 census. Were they abroad? Douglas was only temporarily looked after. Later he was living with his parents, and Mignon. He was living in Victor Rd. Teddington at the time of his first marriage in 1940, he joined the US Army for World War II. After the war he decided to move to

Massachusetts where, as his second wife said, he had “two maiden aunts.” These would have been Lilian’s sisters Julia (who had, in fact, married in 1904) and Margaret.

Nelson reverted, temporarily, to William when Lilian’s fourth son, Harold Victor O’Callaghan, was born on 18<sup>th</sup> July 1921 at 32 Queen’s Rd Twickenham. The electoral roll for 1921 shows that this was the home of William’s brother Walter and his wife Kate.

There is no indication of where Lilian and William were working. William is now recorded as a “butler/ valet (Domestic Service.)” Lilian is simply “Lilian O’Callaghan”.

There is no trace of Harold Victor, no record of his death. Family tradition is that he was taken away soon after birth and adopted by a rich family.

In 1923 “Nelson William O’Callaghan” is living at 28 Hyde Park Gate, Kensington. This was the London house of Stephen Manuel, managing director of Alfred Young & Co, East India Merchant (from 1921 census). In Cobham they employed several servants.

This is an outline of the lives of William and Lilian O’Callaghan. They constantly change employment, perhaps working through agencies. Their own family is complicated. Phyllis, born in 1911, always lives with them but Roy is sent to live with his aunt in Ireland, Douglas, at least some of the time is looked after elsewhere, and Harold Victor vanishes without trace.

They hardly seem to be in the position of adopting another child. But their lives became even more complicated in 1925, the year in which Mignon seems to have joined them.

This is from “The Banbury Advertiser” of Thursday March 26<sup>th</sup> 1925.

### ***ADDERBURY BUTLER’S LAPSE***

### ***BENCH TAKES A LENIENT VIEW***

*Holding a former immaculate record till the temptation seized him to steal some silver goods belonging to his master, a butler named Nelson O’Callaghan was charged at Banbury County police court on Thursday with*

*the theft of the articles – a silver inkpot, silver matchbox and a number of stainless knives, from the property of Edward Hamilton Johnston, of Adderbury, valued at £2.*

*For the accused, Mr L. S. Whitehorn pleaded guilty.*

### ***Under Notice***

*Edward Hamilton Johnston informed the Court that O'Callaghan was in his employ from August last year to February this year. He left on February 24th, before the notice expired, at his own request. When witness checked his silver on February 28<sup>th</sup>, he missed the silver Match box, silver inkpot and stainless steel knives. The match box and ink pot had been kept in the safe, of which accused had had the key. O'Callaghan had no authority to take the articles.*

*Mr. Whitehorn: Defendant came to you with a good reference? – Yes.*

*Sir Edwin Lutyens gave him a reference? – Yes.*

*The Chairman of the Bench: Did that reference say anything with regard to his honesty? – I don't remember. It was a good enough character to take him on.*

*Mr. Whitehorn: I suppose unless you had had some reference to honesty you would not have taken him into your service? – That is so.*

*Is it a fact that defendant has been under Dr. Meikle for some time? – I am not aware of that.*

*Did you know he was suffering from neurasthenia? -So far as I know his health had been reasonably good. He never went off his work.*

*Apart from this offence you have always found him honest? – Yes.*

*And he was trusted with the silver? = Oh, yes. I have a lot of silver. I might say I hope the magistrates will be lenient. I have no wish to press the case. I think he is his own worst enemy.*

### ***A Thoughtless Act.***

*Police Sergeant Webb gave evidence of having arrested defendant at Vine Street Police Station, London. Defendant was handed over to him by the*

*Metropolitan Police together with the articles named in the charge. When coming down in the train defendant said: What a silly I was to take the things. I can't do otherwise than plead guilty. The ink pot I took into my room to write with. I was a silly not to return the things to Mr. Johnston.*

*Inspector Hudson, replying to Mr. Whitehorn, said nothing else was known against the defendant.*

*Mr Whitehorn said O'Callghan was 43; a married man with four children, and there might be another. He had served in a number of situations. For three months he was a temporary servant to Sir Edwin Lutyens, and had been with Mr Harold Shaw for many years. It was difficult to account for his lapse. During the past six months he had felt nervous and had been to Dr. Meikle for nerves and heart trouble, though it could not be said that excused the offence. O'Callaghan wished him to express regret to Mr. Johnston for having put him to trouble, and would ask the Bench to treat it as a first offence under the First Offenders' Act.*

*Chairman of the Bench: Did he see active service in the war?*

*Mr Whitehorn: He was invalided out of the Army in 1907 for heart disease. His wife is a housekeeper in London.*

*The justices took a lenient view of the case and bound O'Callaghan over in £10 for twelve months with his brother as surety; also to pay the costs.*

One wonders what would have happened if the justices had been aware of the accusation of theft in 1911.

Though Nelson was not convicted and would not have been given a criminal record this incident would have been deeply embarrassing and, surely, would have affected his chances of getting responsible jobs in future. A butler, with keys to the safe, has to be utterly trustworthy and one who also acted as a private secretary would have to have absolute honesty, discretion and integrity..

It does seem, though, that 1925 was a critical year. Something dramatic is going on.

Perhaps the crisis had already happened. Why was Nelson suffering from “neurasthenia”, which could cover many symptoms of what would be called stress today. As the report says, this does not excuse the theft of the silver, which is a curiously pointless crime. The total value was only £2, which might be about £150-£200 today. The stainless steel knives would have very little value, and Nelson, who would have been responsible for the silver, should have been aware that they were only stainless steel.

Though Mr Johnston very generously asked for the charges not to be pressed he does make the odd comment that Nelson “was his own worst enemy”, which does suggest that there was something noticeably odd in his character or behaviour.

The report contains some very useful information which makes it possible to fill in the gaps of the preceding years.

Nelson had been working for Edward Hamilton Johnson for six months, that is from about August 1924.

Edward Hamilton Johnston (1885-1942) returned to England in 1924 after fifteen years in the Indian Civil Service. He was an authority on Sanskrit and later became Boden Professor of Sanskrit and Keeper of the Indian Institute of Oxford University. He lived at the Manor House, Adderbury, a few miles from Banbury, Oxfordshire.

Before working for Johnston Nelson had worked as a temporary servant for Sir Edwin Lutyens. This would presumably have been in the summer of 1924.



*Sir Edwin Lutyens*

Lutyens had been the architect of Queen Mary's Doll's House, a staggeringly realistic 1/12<sup>th</sup> scale model which is now at Windsor Castle. Lutyens was also responsible for the project as a whole, which was a celebration of British art and technology in which everything had to be exact and everything worked, including flushing toilets, lighting and motor cars in the garage.

The Doll's House was displayed at the British Empire Exhibition at Wembley between April and October 1924, which probably covers period in which Nelson worked for Lutyens. The originally Wembley Stadium was built for this event. Elgar composed music for the opening ceremony.



*Elgar conducting at the British Empire Exhibition, Wembley Stadium, 1924*

Douglas O'Callahan's second wife remembers him telling her that his mother, Lilian, had a cup from the Queen's Doll's House. Another version of the story is that Lilian made something for it, but Jane O'Callahan's evidence seems to be reliable. She is the only member of the family who had heard of Mignon. This may have been a gift from Lutyens, or perhaps a souvenir. Douglas would have been five at the time of the exhibition.

There is also a family tradition that Lilian had baked a cake for the Queen. Some of the family have said this was a christening cake, but Jane O'Callahan, Douglas's wife, is sure that it was a birthday cake. In fact the details of all royal christening cakes are available on a Royal Family website. They were generally made by companies, in the case the present queen, by McVitie Price in 1927. A birthday cake is impossible to pinpoint. Many families have legends of royal connections. My own great-grandmother is supposed to have cooked for Queen Victoria, though I can think of no way that this could have been possible. Perhaps it was a generation further back. Lilian, though, did become a very high-quality cook by the 1930s – and yet even at this point, in the early 1920s, there is no definite sign of her working in a kitchen. On the various documents she has been a servant, wife, housekeeper and generally in “domestic service”, all of which might have included cooking, but at what point did this become the focus of her career?

William's (and perhaps Lilian's ) previous employer – for many years - had been Harold Shaw.

Harold Shaw started his career as an actor for Edison but by 1913 he was highly thought of enough to be invited to England to help develop the British film industry, and specifically to make films at the new Twickenham studios, very close to the various addresses which Nelson and Lilian give in the census, travel documents and birth certificates.

Twickenham Studios was established on the site of a former ice rink, at The Barons, very close to St Margaret's station. Harold Shaw's first production at Twickenham, for The London Film Company, was “The House of Temperley”, an adaptation of Conan Doyle's novel “Rodney Stone. Between then and 1923 Shaw made a series

of films which featured well-known actors from the London stage and often starred his wife, Edna Flugrath. His first last films were made at Twickenham, but others were made for the Stoll Film Company at Cricklewood or Surbiton, which also provided locations for one of his surviving films, "Wheels of Chance." This film, shot in 1921, was one of two that Shaw made based on novels by H G Wells who had a close interest in the cinema and was present at the filming of "Kipps" at the Savoy Hotel where he praised the young star.

Shaw remained in England until 1923. He was back in Hollywood in the Spring, filming "Rouged Lips" with his wife's sister, Viola Dana, which was released in September. He was killed in a motor accident in 1926, aged 48.

In his trial report William is said to have had four children, who would, presumably, have been Phyllis, Roy, Patrick and Douglas.

In March 1925 "there might be another" might mean that Lilian was in the early stages of pregnancy, unless it means (though this might more fanciful) that the possibility of adopting a child was already in the air – but why would they consider adoption (which was still not a legal process, when they could not look after their own children? They always had Phyllis and Douglas with them but surely even two would be a strain with such an unsettled career? And now this accusation which could make William virtually unemployable – unless he changed his name...

The disgrace of William and the probable pregnancy of Lilian seem to lead to a crisis in the life of the O'Callaghan family, and to the "adoption" into the family of Mignon. William's disgrace is probably the most important factor in the decision for the family to be known as Nelson, rather than O'Callaghan, though the Irishness of the name might be another factor – though William's family had not been Irish for two or more

After the trial in March 1925, William and Lilian made another attempt to start a new life. On November 24th 1925 "Nelson Wm. O'Callaghan" (42) given as a farmer, Lilian (38), wife and Phyllis (15), scholar, are listed as passengers on the "Hobson's Bay", sailing from London. Again their country of permanent residence is given as

Australia. Their address is given as 45 Railway Road Teddington. This does suggest that life had become difficult for them during 1925 and Nelson has abandoned his career as butler, or private secretary and they are making a second attempt to settle in Australia, a country Nelson had first visited in his brief naval career in 1906.

Name of Ship..... HOBSON'S BAY		-12-		Date of Departure..... 24th November..... 19 25																	
Steamship Line, Australian Commonwealth Line.				Where Bound..... AUSTRALIA																	
NAMES AND DESCRIPTIONS OF <b>BRITISH</b> PASSENGERS EMBARKED AT THE PORT OF LONDON																					
(1) Contract Ticket No.	(2) NAMES OF PASSENGERS	(3) LAST ADDRESS IN THE UNITED KINGDOM	(4) CLASS	(5) Port at which Passengers have contracted to land	(6) Profession, Occupation or Calling of Passengers	(7) AGES OF PASSENGERS						(8) Country of last Permanent Residence †						(9) Country of Intended Future Permanent Residence †			
						Adults of 12 years and upwards		Children between 1 and 12		Infants											
						Accompanied by husband or wife		Not accompanied by husband or wife													
						Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	England	Wales	Scotland	Northampton	London	Yorkshire	Other	Other	Other	
13983	BOH Henry B.	c/o Mrs Powell, Nelson, Sydney, Australia.	3rd	Brisbane	Housewife			65				1									AUSTRALIA
"	ROBINSON Dorothy	"	"	"	Domestic			32				1									"
13984	MILLER Millicent	c/o Commonwealth Bank, Australian House, W.C. 45, Railway Rd, Teddington, Middex.	"	Adelaide	Independent			35				1									"
13985	O'CALLAGHAN Nelson Wm.	"	"	Melbourne	Farmer	42						1									"
"	" Lillian	"	"	"	Wife		38					1									"
"	" Phyllis	"	"	"	Scholar			15				1									"
13986	MAKAY Annie	115, Bendgorn Rd, Thornton Heath, Surrey	"	Brisbane	Matron			56				1									"
13987	BRIDGE Henry W.	c/o G.P. Bridge, Kingsway, Gerards Cross	"	Sydney	Retired	61						1									"

The R M S Hobson's Bay sailed to and from Australia every four months. On its next trip, in 1926, it took 500 young men on a scheme to encourage young farmers.

There is, though, no trace of their arrival in Australia (under any of their names) or any return trip.

Hobson's Bay arrived in Australia on January 11<sup>th</sup> 1926. There is no complete passenger list of the arrival. Their names do not appear on a list of passport clearances.

They may have sailed and returned soon after, or they may never have left. They were certainly back in England only 18<sup>th</sup> months later when they set off, for a second time, to Canada. By that time Nelson did have an employer in England.

What actually happened next is an impenetrable mystery.

Why did they abandon the idea of emigrating to Australia?

One factor might be Phyllis, who was just about to be 15 at the end of 1925. By 1930 she was a professional dancer in a major London Show. At what point did she decide that was going to be her career? Was she already training to be a Tiller Girl and had met Mignon at the school? Was Mignon introduced to the family as a

companion for Phyllis – in spite of their unsettled life-style – and Phyllis joined her at the school?

## 7 – Mrs Harman

There is a tantalising document, which cannot be treated as unquestionable evidence as it has no provable provenance. It is a record card from Mrs Hunt's Domestic Agency. This was the most famous of the agencies which would deal with the hiring of domestic staff, including butlers, cooks and housekeepers. Most cook/housekeepers like Lilian, who did not have a permanent employment, would work through such as agency.

Their archives were partly destroyed in the Second World War but a researcher in the National Archives of Kew, a friend of one of my colleagues, taking time away from his current project, and, it appears, rather obsessed with this mystery, had a look at what survives. He found a box of unsorted index cards. These are not traceable through the Access to Archives catalogue. The researcher did not want me to contact him directly. He provided, via my colleague, other material, none of it directly relevant, but some of it giving interesting background information, such as the use by dance troupes of group passports, and obvious stage-names by the dancers. He knew the Mrs Hunt's material existed but explained that it was fragmentary and confused.

He was looking for anything that might be related to "Lilian Nelson."

To our amazement he found an employment index card for a "Mary Lilian Josephine Alice Harman" This name, he explained, is written in red ink. At some point the name Harman has been crossed out and the name Nelson added in pencil.

There is no identifiable "Mary Lilian Josephine Alice" Harman or Nelson in the census or electoral rolls at this time. There is another Lilian Josephine Nelson in the London electoral rolls who can be clearly separated from Lilian O'Callaghan as Nelson was her married name.

At birth Lilian was registered as Elizabeth Mary. She was most often called Lilian Josephine. On her death certificate she is Elizabeth Mary Josephine O'Callaghan. The name Alice, therefore, is an addition to the names which she usually used.

Though the provenance of the Mrs Hunt's card is unknown the dates match the otherwise known activities of William and Lilian and the last entry matches a record of a Josephine Nelson at the same address. There is no reason to doubt it.

What appears to have happened is that William has suddenly found a good job, working for a Canadian businessman living in Wimbledon and Lilian has signed on at Mrs Hunt's agency for temporary work – as cook to an astonishing series of high-profile employers. She

Lilian and William did use the name Nelson until a few years later, but here is Lilian making use of a new name – Harman.

Though this is deeply mysterious it seems to be the case that Mignon has entered their lives at a moment of crisis. Their lives have been blown into the air but they are landing on their feet.

How

Name and Surname	Age	
<del>Harman Mrs</del>	<del>60</del>	<del>804 6a</del>
<del>Cook (Domestic)</del>	<del>58</del>	<del>804 12a</del>
<del>Housekeeper</del>	<del>57</del>	<del>828 4d</del>
8.12.25 Houghton	57	7/18 50a
23.01.20 Mckerzie Phipp	55	65
10.7.20 Ponsorby	51	93 10 6d
9.9.26 St Clair	51	100 10 36d
21.2.25 Francis		
10.12.1929 Douglas		
12.12.1929 Monaghan		
15.1.30 Douglas		

*Handwritten notes in table:*  
 - Under Mckerzie Phipp: *H. Oswald January 19 obligations Shot days 7 Canada London sometimes Shubreda Cook*  
 - Under St Clair: *Brighthelm and Brookbarkes*  
 - Under Douglas: *London Sunstable Cheltenham Hastings Dorset Scotland*  
 - Under Monaghan: *Hasel Dalmain Mrs Jufow*  
 - Under Douglas: *London Hastings Dorset Scotland*

Most of these names can be identified:

*18/12/25 Houghton - St James (Coincidentally Mignon's 13<sup>th</sup> birthday)*

"Houghton" is almost certainly the US Ambassador to the Court Of St James. Alanson B Houghton assumed the post on April 5th 1925. He served in London until May 1929.

The date suggests that this was a Christmas and New Year booking.

*03/01/26 McKenzie Phipps - American Embassy*

This booking comes immediately after New Year and suggests that she had been a success and was being kept on at the American embassy.

After this entry comes "H (?) Oswald January (13?) obligations."

If this is "H Oswald" it could refer to H R Oswald, the City of London Coroner.

*10/07/26 Ponsonby - Short days Flanders*

*London sometimes Shulbrede Cook*

This is a surprising connection with another English composer. Lady Ponsonby was Dorothea, the daughter of Sir Hubert Parry who had died in 1918. Her husband was Arthur Ponsonby, a labour politician, who became Lord Ponsonby in 1930. Their London house was in Smith Street and Shulbrede was, and still is, their country home in West Sussex which was often visited by Parry. Dorothea's grand-daughter told me that Arthur Ponsonby employed a large number of cooks and other servants and would write comments on them in a note-book. One cook found the book and wrote against his comment "All Lies!" Whether or not this cook met Ponsonby's standards this was a short summer booking. It was, though, long enough to involve travel between the two houses.

09/09/26 St Clair - Dringhouses, Onslow and Brookbanks

It was quite common for a family to employ one cook who would work in both their country house and a London house, or to take one cook to the second house to assist for large scale house parties. This St Clair was Lord Archibald James Murray St Clair, The Master of Sinclair, or more probably. Lord Archibald's wife who would have been responsible for the kitchen staff. Dringhouses Vicarage was the family home in Yorkshire where St Clair was living at the time of the 1911 census. It was a substantial vicarage as in 1911 there was a staff of six. Onslow Square, Kensington, was the London house. This St Clair engagement is the beginning of a Scottish thread.

The next record of Lilian, William and Phyllis is from June 2<sup>nd</sup> 1927.. They sailed third class on the Montnairn from Southampton on June 2<sup>nd</sup> 1927 bound for Quebec. William is now calling himself Nelson, a partial disguise, or re-invention of himself.

This passenger list gives important evidence that Nelson had found a new post after his disgrace, and for the rest of his career he would continue to work for important or high-society people.

"	"	Robert	1	"	"	None	21	22	1	"
154219	ROBINSON	Elis.	1	e/o CP.R.Land Dept. London.	"	Domestic	25	26	1	"
154241	DUNN	Maud	1	"	"	"	29		1	"
154244	GREVES	Lily	1	"	"	"	21		1	"
154252	TURNER	Hilda	1	"	"	"	21		1	"
154280	JAVIS	Jessie	1	"	"	Farming	29		1	"
154288	O'GALLAGHAN	Lilian	1	2,Flat,North Audley St.W.1.	"	Domestic	38	38	1	"
"	"	Phyllis	1	"	"	"		16	1	"
154290	"	Nelson	1	E.H.Kennedy,Droxsont.	"	Butler	43		1	"
154295	PARKINS	Maurice	1	e.o Land Dept.C.P.R.London.	"	Ins.Agent	27		1	"
"	"	Marie	1	"	"	H.Wife		31	1	"

Lilian (her age is given as 38 though she was now 43) and Phyllis (now 16) are listed as "Domestic" and Nelson is now "Butler" again.

Had Phyllis not yet become a dancer? Only three year later she would be in a major London stage-show. Does this imply that Phyllis was not yet at the Tiller school with

Mignon? Perhaps she had temporarily interrupted her career. She was certainly a dedicated dancer. She would be a dance and dance teacher for many years.

Lilian and Nelson have different addresses. Lilian's address, and Phyllis's, is "2 Flat North Audley St W1." This street links Grosvenor Square with Oxford Street.

Nelson's address is given as "E H Kennedy, Droxmont."

There can be no reasonable doubt that this refers to Harold Kennedy, who lived at Draxmont, a large house on the edge of Wimbledon Common. The passenger list gives the name "E H Kennedy" in the home address but there was no such person in the family. In 1911 the Kennedys had eight servants resident at the house as well as their six daughters. They had no sons.

The most obvious meaning of this is that Nelson is working for Kennedy, based in Wimbledon, and Lilian has taken a flat in London where she could take care of her family while taking on short engagements.

The reference to Kennedy also explains the reason for this voyage. Harold Kennedy, born in Liverpool, became a rich lumber merchant in Quebec and, by the 1920s, the Chairman of the Bank of Montreal. He owned extensive property in the province and regularly spent his summers there with his family. In 1927 he sailed to Canada on the Empress of Scotland on the 28<sup>th</sup> May, only four days before the O'Callaghan's departure. They were, presumably, following him to support him in his summer home.

This was a far shorter trip than their previous visit to Canada. They returned to Southampton on the Empress of Scotland, the same ship on board which Kennedy had sailed, on 27<sup>th</sup> July 1927. On their return Nelson O'Callaghan gives his position as Secretary and gives his address as 14 Crane Rd, Twickenham, his father's address. "Secretary" suggests a confidential role in the household, perhaps he was something more than "Butler". Nelson's death certificate, 33 years later, gives his profession as "private secretary" (retired.) Lilian, on her return has her occupation as "housewife" and Phyllis as "nil."

Is it a coincidence that Kennedy was a major player in the Canadian lumber industry and that their previous trip to Canada had been to a remote lumber town? I suspect that William's life might have had more continuity to it than these fragments of

information seem to suggest at first glance. As a butler and secretary, following his employer to Quebec, Nelson would be a trusted and important figure in Kennedy's life – only two years after his trial for theft.

But, if Mignon had joined the family where was she when the O'Callaghans sailed to Canada? The same question could be asked of the six-year old Douglas. Mignon, now 14, was probably at the Tillers school, perhaps pretending to be a year older, possibly already in a professional engagement. Both Mignon and Douglas might have been taken by relations in Twickenham.

In the 1928 electoral roll Nelson William O'Callaghan can be found at 3 Clarence Terrace working for Sir Francis Towle CBE, chairman of Gordon Hotels and founder of the Dorchester. Was he no longer working for Kennedy?

H O	Michael, Jane Louisa	9-10
—	Michael, John William	9-10
O	Fry, John Horace—SJ	1 CLARENC.
H O	Fry, Nancy	1
—	a Lomax, Cyril Ernest Napier (Lieut.-Col.)	3
—	O'Callaghan, Nelson William	3
H O	Towle, Annetta (Lady)	3
O	Towle, Francis William (Lt.-Col.) (Sir) (C.B.E.)—SJ	3
O	Ward, Henry William	4
	Rushworth	

On 19<sup>th</sup> May 1928 Nelson, Lilian and Phyllis left Southampton again, this time for Halifax, Nova Scotia, aboard the Arabic. Nelson is still listed as a Butler, but his address is given as c/o Dawson & Co, 74 Coleman St E6. This, puzzlingly, was a wool-merchants. Lilian is listed as a housewife and Phyllis as a Domestic, still not a dancer, and yet surely she must have been training by this time?

Harold Kennedy travelled to Halifax on several occasions so this could be also a journey under his auspices, though the Clarence Terrace appearance of Nelson puts this in question.

HALIFAX

Name of Ship ARABIC Date of Departure 19<sup>th</sup> MAY 1928 Where bound NEW-YORK

Port of Departure SOUTHAMPTON Steamship Line RED STAR

**NAMES AND DESCRIPTIONS OF BRITISH PASSENGERS EMBARKED AT THE PORT OF SOUTHAMPTON**

(1) Contract Ticket Number.	(2) NAMES OF PASSENGERS	(3) LAST ADDRESS IN THE UNITED KINGDOM.	(4)			(5) CLASS (Whether 1st, 2nd, or 3rd.) Port to which Emigrants have contracted to sail.	(6) Profession, Occupation, or Calling of Passengers.	(7) AGES OF PASSENGERS.						(8) Country of Last Permanent Residence.†					(9) Country of Intended Future Permanent Residence.‡		
			Adults.	Children.	Infants.			Adults of 12 years and upwards.		Children between 1 and 12.		Infants.		England.	Wales.	Scotland.	Northern Ireland.	Irish Free State.		British Possessions.	Foreign Countries.
								Male.	Female.	Male.	Female.	Male.	Female.								
LPP 110410	✓ WEEKS WILLIAM	9 Lynton Row Liverpool	1			NEW-YORK	Yates		59									Canada			
C. 30680	✓ DAY GEORGE E	12, Highfield Street Wotton, Warrington	1			NEW-YORK	Labourer		22									✓			
C. 41202	✓ OCALLAGHAN, NIELSON	3/0, Dawson & Co., 74, Coleman Street London E.C. 6.	1			NEW-YORK	Butler	Wife										✓			
✓	✓ LILIAN		1			NEW-YORK	Wife		39									✓			
✓	✓ PHYLLIS		1			NEW-YORK	Domestic		17									✓			
C 40092	✓ MASON GUY	39 Raffles Road Salford, Lancashire	1			NEW-YORK	Domestic		22									✓			
6762	✓ PASSEY SIDNEY	27, Mount Road, Col Dunfermline	1			NEW-YORK			23									✓			

This time they do appear to have visited Lilian's sisters as they returned on the Newfoundland departing from Boston to Liverpool on 28<sup>th</sup> July 1928. On their return journey Nelson again gives his occupation as secretary and gives a home address of 1b Cresswell Rd East Twickenham.

Kennedy retired to Canada before 1930. His voyage to Canada on the Empress of Australia on May 19<sup>th</sup> 1929 was probably his final departure from England, (he and his wife give a hotel as their last address, suggesting they had already left Draxmont) and this would mark the end of Nelson's employment with him. Shortly after 1930 Draxmont became a hotel.

Lilian's employment through Mrs Hunt's agency returns in 1928 with "Frances Rivington Russell."

There seems to have been no person named Frances Rivington Russell. This is probably an error. "Rivington Russell" almost certainly refers to Constance Rivington Russell. She was born in 1899 and in 1919 married American politician John Gilbert Winant. He was Governor of New Hampshire in 1921-27 and again in 1931-1935. In 1941 Winant became the wartime US ambassador to Great Britain. He was a melancholic man and committed suicide in 1947. Constance was, therefore, Mrs Winant in 1928. It was not a happy marriage and Constance spent a lot of time in Europe apart from her husband. She does seem occasionally to have been known

by her maiden name. She was born in New York but was referred to by Clementine Churchill in a disapproving tone as a "European socialite."

It is curious that a Constance, possibly in Europe without her husband, should be hiring a cook rather than living in hotels. The entry is marked "a l'etranger" which means travelling abroad. The Winants regularly travelled between New York and Europe and also to Hamilton, Bermuda where they seem to have taken summer holidays. For example, Constance can be found travelling from Bermuda to New York in March 1926. In April 1927 she is sailing from Cherbourg to New York. There are no records of any voyages in 1928.

Though the evidence may be incomplete the absence of any arrival and departure records for Constance in 1928 (under either her married or maiden name) suggests that her travels with Mrs Harman/ Nelson as her personal cook were in Europe. Constance did spend time in France, presumably without her husband. Could she have taken a personal cook to France? Could she not find as good a cook in France? Of course the travels may have been entirely within Great Britain where Constance might well have taken houses for short periods.

In the 1929 Electoral Roll Nelson and Lilian O'Callaghan are listed at 3 Adie Rd Hammersmith. As the house was also occupied by the Cross family this was probably the basement flat. They have not yet adopted Nelson as a surname. That change must have happened very soon after this, as will be shown.

Phyllis and Douglas would have been with them. They lived with their parents until the start of World War II. Phyllis would not yet be old enough to be listed (she would be 21 at the end of 1931) and Mignon, if she was with them, would not be eligible to vote until the end of 1933. Phyllis does, in fact, first appear on the electoral rolls in 1933 and Mignon appears in the first surviving roll after the most likely date of her 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, in 1934. The family would be based in Hammersmith for the next few years. During the 1930s they all adopted the name Nelson, including, hesitantly,

Mignon, who would sometimes be Nelson and sometimes Harman for the rest of her life.

*10/12/29 Douglas - London, Hastings(?) Durnock, Scotland*

This was almost certainly an employment with Edith Douglas of 33 Collingham Place, Kensington. Her son, Sholto Courtney MacKenzie Douglas, married earlier in 1929. The Douglas family had historical links with Dornock, not Durnock, and had been living in Bexhill (rather than Hastings) in the 1911 census.

At this point the puzzle of the Mrs Hunt's card gets stranger. Edith Douglas's electoral roll for 1929 shows a "Josephine Nelson" at the same address as Edith and her son.

This confirms that Edith is employing a member of staff, who is then resident, but this person is called Josephine Nelson. The Mrs Hunt's Card lists the employment of someone who was originally listed as Mrs Harman, in red ink and then, later in that period, has been changed to Nelson.

Here is a Josephine Nelson. If this is the same person as "Mary Lilian Josephine Alice Harman" and this is also Lilian O'Callaghan, then this is the earliest record of either of them using the name Nelson as a surname. Perhaps this is the time when the name was changed on the Mrs Hunt's card.

1929 Electoral Roll Collingham Place:

457	Rw	Ow	Macnab, Arthur Alexander	29
458	Rw	Ow	Boddington, Nellie	31
459	Rw	Ow	Clough, Jane	31
460	Rw	Ow	Colles, Annie	31
461	R	—	Kirton, Alice Maud	31
462	Rw	—	Lambert, Herbert Frederick	31
463	Rw	Ow	Nelson, Alice	31
464	R	—	Douglas, Edith	33
			Douglas, Sholto Courtney	33
465	Rw	—	Mackenzie	
466	Rw	—	Nelson, Josephine	33
467	R	—	Whitmarsh, Maud	33
468	Rw	Ow	Fisher, John Jacob	35
			Harris, Mabel Rose	35

Bizarrely, there is an Alice Nelson living next door.

This is peculiar but it perfectly possible for people to appear in electoral rolls at more than address in more than one borough.

*12/12/29 Mountbank Hasell - Dalemmain Mrs Dufour (?) Vivre dans*

The penultimate entry on the index is clearly a Christmas engagement as Lilian returned to the Douglas family for the final recorded position on January 15th 1930. I have been unable to explain "Mountebank which does not seem to be a name connected with the Hasell family of Dalemmain. Dalemmain. Dalemmain is near Penrith, 37 miles from Dornock. Perhaps Mrs Douglas was connected with the Hasell family and provided a cook for the Christmas celebrations at this very attractive classical house.

*15/01/30 Douglas - London, Hastings (?)*

Dornock, Scotland

After Christmas Mrs Harman/ Nelson returned to work for Mrs Douglas. At that point her Mrs Hunt's record ends. The 1933 Electoral roll shows that "Josephine Nelson" continued to be with Mrs Douglas, who died that year.

REDCLIFFE WARD.				POLLING DISTRICT W.
2442	Rw	Ow	Douglas, Edith	33 COLLINGHAM PLACE—cont.
2443	Rw	—	Nelson, Josephine	33
2444	R	—	Harber, Denzil Dean	35
2445	Rw	Ow	Harber, Mabel Gertrude— <b>SJ</b>	35
2446	R	D	Harber, William Francis	35
2447	Rw	—	Jeary, Jean	35
2448	Rw	Ow	Clover, Anna	37
2449	Rw	Dw	Hall, Dorothy Susan	37
2450	R	O	Hall, William Rufus	37
2451	Rw	Ow	Keed, Vera Emily	37

This is, at least, gives an impression of the disordered world into which Mignon entered, whether that happened in 1925 or after the O'Callaghans had decided to be known as the Nelsons.

The Mrs Hunt's card is contentious, but, though this sequence of events is complicated and confusing it is never contradictory.

For the next few years the family would be living in Hammersmith as the Nelsons, and, once she was eligible to, vote Mignon's name would appear with them in the electoral roll – but her name would be unsettled – did she think of herself as Nelson or Harman – or Elgar?

## 8 – Mignon and Phyllis

The first definite trace of Mignon after her time at St Leonard's is in the programme of a Jack Buchanan show "That's a Good Girl" in 1928. This is the London programme, but the show had been on tour before opening at the London Hippodrome, presumably with the same cast, perfecting the performance before it was presented, as very successful show, in the capital.

The programme misspells her name as "Harmon" but there is no doubt that this is she. She is listed as one of "The Eight John Tiller Girls." The Tiller Girls are particularly remembered from Saturday Night at the London Palladium in the 1950s and 60s. Their act was based on highly disciplined high-kicking routines, usually featuring a long line of matching dancers. This was a late incarnation of an enormously successful tradition, not just one troupe but many different troupes all deriving from the vision of John Tiller as long ago as the 1890s. In the twenties and thirties there were groups of girls performing in reviews and pantomimes and in cine-variety. Major cinemas featured stage acts in the intermissions between films including the Plaza, Piccadilly Circus.

This was a prestigious show. Mignon must have been trained at the John Tiller School of Dance for some time before being chosen for this elite group, and beginning rehearsals for the show. It has to be the case that Mignon began her career in 1927 or 1926. This was a professional job, well paid compared to working class pay at the time. The girls, in training or in shows, worked full time, living in digs or hostels set up specifically for dancers, which were very strictly controlled – no men allowed.

The various troupes of Tiller Girls appeared across the country and also, right from the early days, in Paris, Germany and America. John Tiller was a successful business man in the Manchester cotton trade but music and theatre were his

obsessions. In 1885 he became director of the Comedy Theatre in Manchester and he launched a dancing class for children. By 1890 he was able to provide groups of child performers for pantomimes. From the very beginning the standards were extremely high and his dancers were an immediate success. The development of the Tiller girls owed as much to a very strong business sense as it did to Tillers love of the theatre. The growing business also had a social aspect.

The early Tiller girls were from the poor parts of Manchester, such as Moss Side, and the hard work and difficult hours brought in money and a sense of purpose. Within a few years Tiller had produced a series of troupes of child dancers and had also launched older troupes, the Tiller Ballet and The Tiller Combination of Eight Ladies. There were tours across the country and rave reviews of the routines which Tiller choreographed and arranged the music for himself. By the end of the century Tiller had established the Tiller Training School and Lyric Academy in London. Though many of the girls formed acts with a particular theme, "The Superba Quartette," "Snowdrops", "Four Champions ", the press was beginning to refer to "Tillers Girls." Even before 1900 Tillers business had become international and from the beginning of the twentieth century troupes of Tiller girls were appearing at the Folies Bergere in Paris.

The Era on 21<sup>st</sup> February 1925 carried an advertisement for "Girl Dancers for Abroad" for the John Tiller's Schools of Dancing, then at 143 Charing Cross Road.

**WANTED, Girl Dancers for Abroad**  
**GIRL DANCERS FOR ABROAD.**

**Auditions daily, commencing Monday,  
Feb. 23, 1925, at 12 o'clock.**

**JOHN TILLER'S SCHOOLS OF  
DANCING.**

**143, Charing Cross-road,  
London, W.C.2.**

**Provincial applicants and those un-  
able to call, please write, stating height  
and experience, and enclosing recent  
photograph full length.**

This is the only advertisement for auditions I have been able to find in the British Newspaper Archive. John Tiller died in 1926 and the business was carried on by his widow, with the school moving to 10-11 Great Newport St in 1927. (The Stage, 24/11/27).

Mignon was born on 18<sup>th</sup> December 1912. On the 1939 Register she claims to have been born a year earlier, 18<sup>th</sup> December 1911. It is possible that she pretended to be a year older than she was to be part of an adult troupe. She was fourteen on 18<sup>th</sup> December 1926.

The female lead of "That's a Good Girl" was Elsie Randolph who was in several Jack Buchanan shows. She had a long career and managed to appear in two Alfred Hitchcock films forty years apart, Rich and Strange in 1932 and Frenzy in 1972.

**BOOTH'S**  
FINEST MATURED OLD  
**DRY GIN**



Straw colour because it is matured in wood.

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W.C.1

NAVAL, MILITARY  
and  
CIVILIAN TAILORS

The Principals' and Chorus  
Gentlemen's Modern Tailor-  
ing in "That's a Good Girl"  
made by our Firm.

EVENING DRESS A SPECIALITY

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Natural  
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Obtainable during  
the Interval.

THE BEST LUNCH  
IN THE WEST END 2/6

THE MOST  
SELECT DINNER 3/9

SUPPER AFTER  
THE THEATRE 3/-

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17 WARDOUR STREET,  
9 RUPERT STREET, W.C.

Phone: REGENT 1664.

Sunday Concerts.

Private Rooms for Banquets and  
Wedding Receptions.



**"THAT'S A GOOD GIRL"**

A NEW MUSICAL COMEDY

Characters in the order of their appearance:

Watkins ..... Stage Door Keeper ..... WALTER HERALD  
A Person ..... FRED GREY  
Timothy ..... Bill Barrow's Friend ..... WILLIAM KENDALL  
Joy Dean ..... A Detective ..... ELSIE RANDOLPH  
Canzone ..... IVAN BERLYN  
"Alfo" ..... of the ..... TOM BARRATT  
Sunya Berata .. Royal Opera ..... VERA PEARCE  
Francis Moray ..... RAYMOND NEWELL,  
(By permission of ARNOLD THEATRE CO.)  
Bill Barrow ..... JACK BUCHANAN  
John Malone .. Moya's Father ..... LEONARD RUSSELL  
Moya Malone .. Bill's Cousin ..... MAIDIE ANDREWS  
Helen ..... Bill's Aunt ..... KATE CUTLER  
Francois ..... Maitre D'Hotel ..... TOM BARRATT  
Queue Entertainers, the Chorus of "Cavalleria Rusticana" and  
"I Pagliacci," Sun Bathers, Guests, etc., etc.

Eight John Tiller Girls.—ESME WESTHEAD, MARJORY BROWN, IVY HALSTEAD, DOROTHY MARLOW,  
MOLLY ELLIS, MIGNON HARMON, RENE FORSE, VERA OWEN.

Ladies of the Chorus.—LULU ANDRE, LILIAN ASHLEY, AISLEEN BALL, CLAIRE BATCHELOR, DAPHNE  
BRAYNE, VIVIAN FARNHAM, JACKIE GARDNER, CONNIE HARRIS, MOLLY HARTLEY, PEARL JANIS,  
KATHLEEN JOYCE, ELRE LEWIS, GWENETH LYONS, ENDA MACAULEY, DOROTHY MACBEAN,  
VIOLET MARSTON, BETTY NEWNHAM, RONA RAYMOND, EILY RONICA, BILLIE TEVLIN, ENA  
EVERTON, GLADYS FALCK, DOROTHY FAIR, MARJORIE LEE, MARGOT SCOTT, JOAN SUTHERLAND,  
ZOE STEVENS, IRIS TURNER, MOLLIE LUCK.

Gentlemen of the Chorus.—KENNETH BIRRELL, A. BRENTFORD, PHILIP CLARKE, ANTHONY COOPER,  
LOUIS COSTELLO, PETER CRAWFORD, ALGERNON KINGSLAND, ROY MITCHELL, TERRY RENDLE,  
DICK MURDOCH, JACK STEWART.

The Play Produced by JACK BUCHANAN.

Francois ..... Maitre D'Hotel ..... TOM BARRATT  
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KATHLEEN JOYCE, ELRE LEWIS, GWENETH LYONS, ENDA MACAULEY, DOROTHY MACBEAN,  
VIOLET MARSTON, BETTY NEWNHAM, RONA RAYMOND, EILY RONICA, BILLIE TEVLIN, ENA  
EVERTON, GLADYS FALCK, DOROTHY FAIR, MARJORIE LEE, MARGOT SCOTT, JOAN SUTHERLAND,  
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LOUIS COSTELLO, PETER CRAWFORD, ALGERNON KINGSLAND, ROY MITCHELL, TERRY RENDLE,  
DICK MURDOCH, JACK STEWART.

The Play Produced by JACK BUCHANAN.

The show toured opened in Newcastle in February and toured Manchester, Glasgow, Golders Green, Leeds, Liverpool, Sheffield, Manchester (again), Newcastle (again), Glasgow (again) and, in March The Lewisham Hippodrome, before opening at the London Hippodrome on 5th June 1928 for a run of 363 performances. The show closed on 16th March 1929.



*Jack Buchanan and Tiller Girls, including Mignon.*

I have spoken to one person who knew Mignon later in her life. She admitted that she had pretended to be a year old than she was in order to get a job. She was unable to be sure which of these she was. At first she was drawn by the eyes of the girl sitting at the right of Jack Buchanan, but then she wondered if it was the one standing to his right. As all the girls are wearing wigs and made up to be similar it was impossible to be sure, but one of these is Mignon Harman.

In this show Mignon is listed as one of “Eight John Tiller Girls.” The revealing memories of her which Doremy Vernon recorded from interviews with her fellow dancers are all of her period as one of The Plaza Tiller Girls.

This was the most prominent troupe of Tiller girls in London. The Plaza cinema advertised dancers as part of its programme by May 1927.

[\(https://londonfilmiland.wordpress.com/2012/11/08/the-plaza-tiller-girls-1928/\)](https://londonfilmiland.wordpress.com/2012/11/08/the-plaza-tiller-girls-1928/)

It is possible that Mignon was one of the founder members of the Plaza girls in 1927 but *That's a Good Girl* accounts for where she was throughout 1928 while Lilian and William were in Canada and Lilian was "a l'étranger" with Constance Rivington Russell.

After the close of the show it is probable that Mignon was living permanently with the O'Callaghans/Nelsons, and with Phyllis.

"The Stage" for November 7<sup>th</sup> 1929 listed the names of the 12 Plaza Tiller Girls. This may help us identify Mignon in photographs.

They appeared at The Royal General Theatrical Fund annual festival at the Savoy Hotel. Their names were:

Elsie Helliwell, Babs Arthur, Molly Ellis, Phyllis Blakeston, Marjorie Brawn, Renee Force, Olive McLeod, Marjorie Rawland, Sheila Roberston, Dorothea Rogers, Mignon Harmon with Ethel and Mabel Helliell as soloists.

"Harman" is misspelled as "Harmon" as it is in the "There's a Good Girl" programme.

Of these Marjorie Brown (or Brawn?), Molly Ellis, Mignon Harmon, Renee Force and Vera Owen had also appeared in the Jack Buchanan Show.

Ethel and Mabel Helliwell always "book ended" the row, according to Doremy Vernon. The *Picturegoer* 1<sup>st</sup> January 1929 reported that Ethel was leaving for Hollywood, but this clearly never happened as both sisters were still in the troupe in November that year.



*An English girl for Hollywood :  
Ethel Helliwell (right), of the  
London **Plaza** Tiller girls, who  
will work for Paramount, and  
her sister Mabel, who succeeds  
her.*

On 11<sup>th</sup> December 1929 The Bioscope reported that the Plaza Tiller Girls were at Elstree studios filming *Raise the Roof*. Shortly before this they appeared, uncredited, in one of the very first sound films, *Harmony Heaven*, which has been released on DVD and almost certainly features moving images of Mignon. There may be other films which do as the Plaza girls were regularly called on for film work, and had been from the beginning, appearing in a silent comedy, *A Little Bit of Fluff*. In 1938 Walter Sickert used a still from "*A Little Bit of Fluff*" as the basis for a painting of the Plaza Tiller Girls, "*High Steppers*". He had produced two pictures of the girls in 1928, probably based on newspaper cuttings. He may never have seen them in the flesh. These earlier paintings were disliked intensely by the dancers as their arms and legs show none of the precise synchronisation that they prided themselves on.

In December 1929 the Plaza Tiller Girls shot a series of short films:

song.

### **PLAZA TILLER GIRLS** **Pat Heale's Production**

**B**Y the kind permission of Earl St. John, director of the Plaza, and the co-operation of Francis Mangan, Patrick Heale has been able to conclude arrangements for featuring the famous Plaza orchestra and the equally famous Plaza Tiller Girls in a series of musical comedy and revuette talkies. The titles of the first subjects will be: "Film variety," "The South Calling," "In a Lotus Garden," "Follie Town," "Under the Palms," "New Songs for Old."

The orchestra will be under the direction of David Paget.

The Plaza Girls will appear in a series of dances, specially arranged and presented by Francis Mangan.

Special music is being written to these by Walter R. Collins, with additional numbers by Eugenio Coppo. The books, scenarios and lyrics by Pat K. Heale.

Following the policy of the Patrick Heale Music Co., the shows will be completely rehearsed, so that no time will be lost at the studio.

Many film production companies have expressed their desire to utilise the facilities for "saving time on sets" placed at their disposal by this company.

(Kinematograph Weekly 31<sup>st</sup> October 1929)

The Era. 28<sup>th</sup> May 1930, announced that the Plaza Tiller Girls were about to leave on a European tour:

### The Plaza.

The famous **Plaza Girls** made their farewell appearance, prior to their extended continental tour, at this popular Piccadilly Cinema last week. They will be missed in this country, for as seen in so many of Mr. Francis A. Mangan's presentations here, they have proved one of the most talented and delightful troupes possible. As usual, the production here was a most artistic affair; the colour schemes were exquisite and some of the most superb dancing possible was seen. Through a gauze curtain, at the beginning, we observed a beautiful picture, with lovely ladies posing in various attitudes. Then the twelve **Plaza Girls**, prettily dressed in white frocks and carrying white fans, danced. The vari-coloured lighting as they stepped and high-kicked was most fascinating. A pas de deux for one lady in black and the other in white was a big success before the curtain, and their finishing pose was a fitting prelude to the entrance of four of the **girls** in silver bathing costumes in which they looked most attractive. There was an artistic back-cloth for this, and the quartette indulged in some very clever acrobatic stunts, the final splits gaining them loud applause. Then a pretty **girl** clad in pink flimsy draperies put over an excellent high-kicking exhibition. She was followed by the **girl** in attractive jazz bathing costumes and caps. A dozen of them sang and danced in delightful style, and as the gauze curtain ascended again, another beautiful vista met our gaze. Two **girls** were posing in the centre holding up a huge heart, and round them early Victorian and other figures were grouped, whilst in front the dancers gave of their best as the curtain descended amid tumultuous applause. There is no question about the success of stage shows at the **Plaza**.

### The Stall.

Stage shows are again becoming a

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On the 14<sup>th</sup> August 1930 Kinematograph Weekly reported that the troupe was going to film in Germany:

## Plaza Tiller Girls for Ufa Talkie

Paramount Publix organisation has loaned to the Ufa Studios in Berlin for a period of three weeks the services of the Plaza-Tiller Girls and their ballet mistress, Miss Ethel Helliwell, to participate in, and arrange, the dances for their back stage production.

In 1931 they appeared in a Jack Buchanan film, Man of Mayfair, released in 1932. This film, which almost certainly features Mignon, does not seem to be available.



Betty Balfour and the Plaza Tiller Girls in a Newspaper Interlude in Walter Summers' musical "talkie" "Raise the Roof" at Elstree

The Sketch, 2<sup>nd</sup> April, 1930 published photographs of the Plaza Tiller Girls imitating carvings of Indian Dancing Girls.



POSED IN SIMILAR STYLE TO THEIR PROTOTYPES IN INDO-CHINESE ART: THE PLAZA-TILLER GIRLS OF TO-DAY AT THE PLAZA.

THERE is nothing new under the sun, we are always told, but it may come as a surprise to modern admirers of the athletic grace and elegance of the Plaza-Tiller Girls that apparently their art was forecast in the ancient culture of Indo-China! At all events, the frieze of "Asparas," or Celestial Nymphs, from the facade of the Temple of Bayon at Angkor-Thom, bears a strong resemblance to the Plaza-Tiller Girls of to-day. Our readers may observe this for themselves by examining the photographs which we reproduce above. In one the Plaza-Tiller Girls are posed in practically the same position as

that



Is the dancer in the centre of this image Mignon?



*Mabel and Elsie Helliwell can be identified “book-ending” the troupe in this 1930 photograph. Mignon might be the fourth from left.*



Their dances were not only the well-known high-kicking routines:

# VARIETY IN THE CINEMA

By VIATOR.

## The Plaza.

I saw another of those Francis A. Mangan productions here last week, and I think that it was the most beautiful he has yet given us. It was called "The Enchanted Staircase," and there was a massed ballet of Plaza-Tiller Girls and Carlton-Tiller Girls, with Miss Kathleen Burgess as the vocalist. Mr. David Paget and his fine orchestra opened with "Der Rosenkavalier" music, and when the curtain went up, Miss Kathleen Burgess, daintily dressed in a silver confection, used her sweet soprano voice to distinct advantage in "Dance away to-night." This was the kind of theme song running through the show. Then the curtain went up, and we saw a staircase with the steps slanting away. Twelve girls in crinoline frocks danced in good style. Later, the staircase moved downwards and there was a parade down it of pretty girl in various bizarre rod costumes. They were followed by twelve more dancers in silver and red and they danced the Chevalier March in captivating style. The finale was one of the most picturesque things I have ever seen. At the top of the stairs was a lady with a long silver train stretching to the bottom, and grouped on each side of her were girls also with long silver trains that seemed to cover the whole stage. This show drew loud and prolonged applause. I always admire the way the Plaza programme is put through under Mr. Earl St. John's expert direction. There are no tedious waits but a continuity that is all to the advantage of patrons. "The Spoilers" was the big film last week. This week, Nancy Carroll and Charles Rogers in "Follow Through" is the big Christmas attraction, with the usual supporting features on stage and screen.

## The New Victoria.

"Young Woodley" with Frank

enables her soon to get on good terms with her audience, and her subsequent work includes very clever impressions of Gracie Fields, Nellie Wallace and other stars. Myron, Pearl and Co. in a superb dancing act, entitled "Dance Echoes," was the other turn. This week, on the stage here is A. Oumansky's ballet, "The Leoparde."

## Brixton Astoria.

"Be Yourself," with Fanny Brice, and "The Girl Said No," with William Haines, Marie Dressler and Polly Moran, were the film attractions here last week, whilst on the stage were Jack Barty and Jack and Sylvia Kellaway. Jack Barty was attired in marvellous blue check plus-fours, and he was enthusiastically received. All his humour, and he has some indescribably funny patter, is of the type that one doesn't mind one's maiden aunt listening to. He kept the audience in very merry mood. Jack and Sylvia Kellaway, too, thrilled every one with their delightful dancing. They are terpsichorean artists of the highest class.

## Mile End Empire.

Jack Martell was holding the attention of a most interested audience when I looked in at this hall. His natural, unforced humour as he sang and told his stories proved him a most up-to-date and versatile performer. He seems to get on real intimate terms with the audience and in a most informal way simply chats to them, twirling the while his grey bowler, with which he seems to do some extraordinary gyrations. Dean and Ross, in their dancing act, "On With the Dance," provide the other variety item, and in a variety of steps and styles they danced delightfully in their well presented act, the ballet toe-dance of the lady partner evoking great enthusiasm. "The Flirting

torture of which when the signal proved of tuition ter. I very go twist hi weird p well con it reves period o ments o fell in

## The As

At the Theatre programme lows:— Brixton in "Im Lloyd i the sta New Chevali Theatre batic n mas W At O Nagel Wife," Borden stage C dancers humore ported orechest also ce At S are " Dorothe bone, with M On the radio world. Froull Leona Micha Bollin At pictur with Robin

(The Era, 24<sup>th</sup> December 1930)

When Doremy Vernon interviewed former Tiller Girls in the 1970s and 80s for her book "Tiller's Girls" several of them spoke about Mignon as someone they clearly remembered for her personality and for the dramas surrounding her. Mignon is mentioned in the book itself but, extraordinarily, Doremy was to provide me with transcripts of her interviews with women who had known Mignon well. These are startling vivid first-hand accounts.

The Plaza Tiller Girls girls were chosen for their exceptional height. They all had to match in the line-up.

A "Phyllis Nelson", who may reasonably assumed to be Lilian's daughter, as Phyllis used this name, or Phyllis Nelson-O'Callaghan, in her career, makes her first known

appearance on the stage in a spectacular Rodgers and Hart show “Ever Green.” This show made a star of Jessie Matthews. The male lead was Sonnie Hale. The producer was Charles Cochran who was famous for his “Young Ladies” but in this show the name Phyllis Nelson is listed as one of the “John Tiller Troupe.” The show introduced new American dance styles choreographed by Buddy Bradley and had a show stopping finale featuring a revolving stage. For the Glasgow try out before the London opening this innovation was only available at the last minute and, apparently, the stage went one way and the dancers went the other with chaotic results.



By the London opening at the Adelphi Theatre on 3<sup>rd</sup> December 1930 everything went smoothly and the number “Dancing on the Ceiling”, in which the revolving stage supported a vast inverted chandelier, was a hit. It ran for 254 performances, which must have been through most of 1931.

Assuming this was Phyllis, whose career is otherwise impossible to trace before the 1939 Register, her appearance as a John Tiller Girl in this major production raises some interesting questions.

If Phyllis was in such a big show in 1930/1 it has to be the case that she had, like Mignon, been training at the School, or getting experience elsewhere, for several

years before, and yet she was a “Domestic” according to the family’s voyages to Canada in June 1927 and May 1928. Did she only take up dancing seriously after this trip – by which time Mignon was already touring with That’s a Good Girl?


The 1934 film “Evergreen” has almost nothing to do with the stage show, apart from “Dancing on the Ceiling.” It is possible that Phyllis danced in the film. There is no sign of her name in shows after Ever Green, and yet she was a dancer and dance teacher for many years. It is quite possible that she worked in dance troupes in films. There are blonde dancers who might be Phyllis in other Jessie Matthews films but these dancers are always anonymous.



The plot of “Ever Green”, interestingly, is about an Edwardian music hall star who has a child out of wedlock and takes her to South Africa to be brought up. The daughter, once grown up, returns to England and goes on the stage pretending to be her mother, miraculously unchanged after twenty-five years.

*See a Cochran Show!*

CHARLES B. COCHRAN'S  
production  
**EVER GREEN**



*A Musical Show*

**JESSIE MATTHEWS**  
*'Acts, sings and dances most delightfully.'—Sunday Referee.*

**SONNIE HALE**  
*'Gets better and better.'—Daily Herald.*

**CARLOS & CHITA**  
with COMPANY  
*'A really marvellous piece of acrobatic dancing.'—Reynold's Newspaper.*

**THE JOHN TILLER TROUPE**  
*'Were in great form.'—Yorkshire Post.*

**THE BOOK**  
*'Mr. Benn Levy, who wrote the book, has supplied something more than a framework for a grand display, as one anticipates of a dramatist of his calibre.'—Evening News.*

**JEAN CADELL**  
*'One of the successes of the show.'—News-Chronicle.*

**LEON MORTON**  
*'Had me laughing the whole time.'—Sunday Dispatch.*

**THE SHOW**  
What scenes! What crowds!  
What management! What masses of colour! What a splendid splurge of art! A bewildering, beautiful show.  
*—Sunday Pictorial.*

**JOYCE BARBOUR**  
*'Spectacle is enhanced and diversified by her dancing.'—The Times.*

**ALBERT BURDON**  
*'A very funny little man.'—Evening Standard.*

**BARRY & FITZGIBBON**  
*'The grotesque flame of Jean Barry's dancing flickers as beautiful as ever.'—Observer.*

**Mr. COCHRAN'S YOUNG LADIES**  
*'Youthful, beautiful and gloriously efficient.'—Daily Mail.*

**THE MUSIC & LYRICS**  
*'The music is pleasant, especially a number called "Dancing on the Ceiling," which will be a big hit.'—Daily Mail.*  
*'Several sure-fire song hits.'—Daily Mirror.*

Nightly 8.15      Royal **ADELPHI** Theatre      Mats., Mon. & Sat. at 2.50  
*In the Strand*

Mignon was seen as a happy-go-lucky girl, remembered as one of the girls smoking and playing cards between shows, but she was also believed to have had a sad life.

One of her colleagues told Doremy Vernon, researching her book about the Tiller Girls, that Mignon had been adopted by a doctor. This has proved to be true.

Doremy Vernon's interviews with former Tiller Girls included descriptions of what appear to be three dramatic suicide attempts by Mignon. After forty or fifty years the memories may not be completely reliable but there is no doubt that these were shocking experiences for all her colleagues.

*"We were at, what was it Stamford Brook, for God's sake? Yes, the Commodore. She went up on the roof, slashed her wrists with razor blades. Looking back I would think that was half her trouble she wanted to be noticed (Maisie Williams)*

*"There was a Jewish Girl with the Plaza's: Mignon. She was up on the roof when I was there. (Binnie Sisters)*

Binnie's idea that Mignon was Jewish may simply have been due to her unusual name, or perhaps by association with a supposed Jewish boyfriend:

*"She was going out with a very nice boy, a Jewish boy and something, I don't know what, and she ran up to the Commodore, Hammersmith, roof with a jug of peroxide and ammonia and just swallowed it, so she was so burnt she was taken to hospital. She was discovered by one of the boys going up for a smoke. "She didn't die then, anyway she came out of hospital. We thought it was a serious, tragic thing. Thought it very wrong. We kept it quiet, nobody ever knew anything about it. The first time was in Mrs Tiller's time. (Phyl Blakeston)*

Phyl had been "Head Girl" of the Plaza Troupe and later became a dance arranger, particularly for shows produced by Emile Littler. "Mrs Tillers time" implies a date before 1936 when John Tillers second wife died. It may be possible to date this first incident more accurately.

The Commodore Cinema stood at 395 King Street, Hammersmith. Stamford Brook was the nearest Underground station. The cinema opened on 14th September 1929. It was a large cinema with a restaurant and dance hall and designed for cine-variety with an orchestra as well as a large Standaard cinema organ. The cinema was independently owned by Commodore National Theatres Ltd until it was taken over by Associated British Cinemas (ABC) in July 1933. ABC abandoned the stage shows and disbanded the orchestra. This suggests that Mignon's first suicide attempt was in the period 1930-33.

The Commodore was only a matter of yards from Hamlet Gardens where Lilian Nelson and her family lived between 1931 and 1936. Hamlet Gardens is an Edwardian development of "Mansion Flats."

It might have been during the show mentioned here, in the Acton Gazette, 15<sup>th</sup> April 1932, a time when Lilian, William and Phyllis were listed in the electoral roll. Mignon would have been under 21 and not eligible to vote, so Hamlet Gardens might well have been her home too.

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**KELLY.**  
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Summerville. First to Fight.

### COMMODORE ATTRACTIONS

The **Commodore, Hammersmith** pre-  
sents Clive Brook in "Silence" next  
week. It is a paramount production of  
Max Marcin's great play portrayed by a  
talented cast, headed by Clive Brook,  
Marjorie Rambeau, Peggy Shannon and  
Charles Starrett.

William Haines in "Get Rich Quick  
Wallingford" is another feature, and on  
the stage for six days there will be  
"Temptation," a Francis A. Mangan pro-  
duction with the **Plaza-Tiller Girls** and  
the **Paramount Tiller Girls**.

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They were, and still are, smart apartments, very well positioned for public transport and ideal for people working in the city. Lilian and William, can be found on electoral

roles at several different flats. Perhaps they rented vacant flats for short periods while they, or perhaps only Lilian (if William were employed on a regular basis by Harold Kennedy) worked in short term and unpredictable employments.

There seems to have been another incident, this time at the Palace Theatre, Victoria. Doremy Vernon suggests that Vera Manning's version may not be reliable, though it is extremely detailed. The detail of the low parapet does fit the building.

*"I was the first one to save her life. We were in something at the Palace in London. I heard someone screaming. It was a boiling hot summer. As I came out of my dressing room I heard someone screaming on the roof and I found her writhing. Luckily it had a little parapet about 3 feet high. Blood coming out of her mouth, screaming in agony, a white jar by the side of her. It would be a 2 pint jug. She had filled it with peroxide, iodine and bleach and drunk it. She lost her stomach through that, nearly.*

*"I flew downstairs and found some of the Girls.*

.

*"What's the matter, what's the matter?*

*"ME: Mignon's committing suicide.*

*"I don't know what made me do it - I'd heard someone say that if anyone has poisoned themselves give them a drink of milk. I grabbed 2 pints from the stage doorkeeper.*

*"He said That's not yours. I don't give a sod, I said.*

*"I got to the top of the roof and poured it down her throat. Someone had phoned a doctor. He came running up the stairs. They got her down to the dressing room. I looked in once, there was blood all over the floor. The lining of her stomach she had burnt away.*

*"She was a happy go lucky girl, dark hair. Lovely features. "(Vera Manning)*

Phyl Blakeston described the attempt that finally ended Mignon's career in the Tiller Girls. This was in Paris at the Paramount, now the Gaumont Opera. This was a sister of the Plaza in London, designed by the same architect. There was a separate troupe, the Paramount Tiller Girls, who occasionally joined the Plaza girls in London.

*"Mignon had gone without saying a word, nobody noticed that she had gone, then when she wasn't back, others had been trying to get into the loo the door. It had been engaged all this time, when somebody knocked on the door and said that we only had one girl that spoke French, that someone was locked in the lavatory, of course it was Mignon, and they got over the top. "She had cut her wrists, she hadn't cut both, only one. We didn't even know about it in those days. A "cry for help (is) what it was. "Once again it was all kept hush hush. She was taken to hospital. She was stitched and alright. "When we came back to London, of course it was too worrying. Mignon didn't come back. We weren't told why or anything. We didn't ask. We were too polite. We didnt ask." (Phyl Blakeston)*

It is impossible to be sure when this happened but Phyl's comment that *"the first time was in Mrs Tiller's time"* implies that this was later, by implication after 1936 when Mrs Tiller died. It is impossible to imagine what factors, what aspects of her character, led Mignon to these suicide attempts, though the Hammersmith incident does suggest a direct link with Lilian, or perhaps Phylis, living close by. Doremy Vernon asked Phyl Blakeston if she thought Mignon was unstable.

*"No, never. We sat up till three in the morning, four of us playing cards, she was one of them."*

In spite of the injuries she had done to herself (she had chest problems after the poison incident) Mignon's career was able to continue with other companies.

Phyllis and Mignon had parallel careers as Tiller Girls in 1930, but there is no evidence that they danced together until the 1939 Register. Mignon may have been at the Tiller School for a year or two before the 1928 run of That's a Good Girl, but this is not necessarily the case. She could have entered the Tillers by audition, having continued training elsewhere. It is possible that Phyllis and Mignon joined the Tillers at about the same time, 1927-8, but early in 1928 Mignon was touring.

In 1930 the residents at no. 41 Hamlet Gardens are:

Ernest John Edward Davis

William Nelson.

This is the first time William is recorded using "Nelson" as a surname.

Phyllis was with them, but under voting age. Their son, Douglas, was always with them from his birth until the start of World War II.

Ernest Davis has not been definitely identified but he may have been a chauffeur, originally from Chiswick, with a wife Alice Maud Critch whom he married in 1911 when they were both in their mid-30s. Was he a colleague of William? For several years previously Davis had been living in the apartment with a Lena Davis, possibly a second wife. Lena is no longer listed after 1928 and William Nelson had moved in.

The 1931 electoral roll for 41 Hamlet Gardens includes "Lilian Josephine Nelson", joining William Nelson and Ernest John Edward Davis. This was, presumably, a two bedroom flat.

In 1932 no one is listed at no. 41 but at no 46 are:

William Patrick Nelson

Lilian Josephine Nelson

Phyllis Nelson

Ernest Davis has gone. Phyllis would have been just 21, so she may have been in Hamlet Gardens before this but not eligible to vote.

There is no electoral roll for 1933 but she does appear on the roll for 1934, when she would have been, in fact, 21, but possibly claiming to be 22.

In 1934 she calls herself Mignon Nelson.

1277	Rw	Ow	Cohen, Nester	45
1278	Rw	—	Cohen, Rosie	45
1279	Rw	—	Cohen, Isabel	45
1280	R	—	Cohen, Benjamin	45
1281	R	O	Nelson, William Patrick	46
1282	Rw	Dw	Nelson, Lilian Josephine	46
1283	Rw	—	Nelson, Phyllis	46
1284	Rw	—	Nelson, Mignon	46
1285	R	O	Barron, Sidney Ernest	47

25

Was this before or after her third suicide attempt, which ended her career with the Tillers? Though Phyllis Blakeston's comment that the first attempt was in Mrs Tiller's time, before 1936, this does not necessarily mean that the third attempt was after 1936.

The only visit to Paris I can find evidence for in the British Newspaper Archive was in 1932, the same European tour that had taken them to Berlin to make a film. Perhaps there were later trips.

had a great reception on his return after his recent illness. He looks O.K. now.

### *New Show at the Plaza*

I looked in on Monday afternoon at the Plaza to see Francis A. Mangan's presentation, "The Dutch Plate." It is as beautiful a spectacle as all Mr. Mangan's shows, and I particularly enjoyed that charming trio, Tony, Bebe and Renee, in a Dutch dance. Their stepping was excellent. Some marvelous adagio dancing, an act new to me, called the Marcello Trio, was also featured, and Ena Ryder danced well. Clever Ethel Helliwell arranged some delightful terpsichorean work for the Plaza Tiller Girls and the Paramount Tiller Girls. Tony, Bebe and Renee told me that they had a wonderful time in Paris.

### *Lady Ratlings' New Officers*

(The Era, 20<sup>th</sup> January 1932)

The significant feature of this, Mignon's first appearance in the Electoral Roll, is that she calls herself Mignon Nelson. She would use this name on later occasions, including the 1939 Register and her later colleague, Betty Fox, believed her real name was "Mickie Nelson." Mickie was the name she was known by. The implication of this use of the name is that she saw herself as part of the Nelson family, and a sister to Phyllis, by 1934.

Had the Nelsons taken in a seriously troubled person, or had she been with them several years before she becomes visible in the Electoral Rolls?

(There is some reason to suppose Mignon had joined the family much earlier, in 1925, but this is unproveable and depends on a document which is a complex mystery in itself, as explained in Appendix 2 at the end of this study.)

In the 1934 Post Office Directory Lilian appears as Mrs Lilian Nelson, suggesting that she is the householder.

In 1935 no. 46 is occupied by Leslie Jarvis Wilkin. At no. 59 are:

William Patrick Nelson

Lilian Josephine Nelson

Phyllis Nelson

Mignon is now calling herself Mignon Harman

## HAMMERSMITH (SOUTH).

1233	R w	D w	Fletcher, Evelyn	48
1234	R	O	Patrick, Robert—J	49
1235	R w	D w	Patrick, Alice Edith	49
1236	R	O	Fairweather, George Arthur	50
1237	R w	D w	Fairweather, Edit <sup>n</sup> Emily	50
1238	R	O	Thompson, Fred	51
1239	R	O	Haywood, John	52
1240	R w	D w	Haywood, Louisa	52
1241	R w	O w	Hinton-Bailey, Beatrice Helen	53
1242	R w	O w	Chadwick, Adele Victoria	54
1243	R w	O w	Chadwick, Claudine Blanche	54
1244	R	O	Druce, Harry Reid Seton	55
1245	R w	D w	Druce, Katherine Elizabeth	55
1246	R	O	Hennessy, Joseph Brendon—J	57
1247	R w	D w	Hennessy, Freda Olive	57
1248	R	O	Sims, Percy Joseph Sunnucks	58
1249	R w	D w	Sims, Winifred	58
1250	R	O	Nelson, William Patrick	59
1251	R w	D w	Nelson, Lilian Josephine	59
1252	R w	—	Nelson, Phyllis	59
1253	R w	—	Harman, Mignon	59
1254	R w	O w	Bailey, Marion Dorothy	60

## POLLING DISTRICT O.

HAMLET GARDENS —contd.

In 1936 and 1937 the Nelsons are still at no. 59 but "Mignon Harman" is listed as "Mignon Nelson Harman".

## HAMMERSMITH (SOUTH).

1279	R	O	Nelson, William Patrick	59
1280	R w	D w	Nelson, Lilian Josephine	59
1281	R w	—	Nelson, Phyllis	59
1282	R w	—	Harman, Mignon Nelson	59
1283	R w	O w	Bailey, Marion Dorothy	60
1284	R	O	Botherway, Charles William	61
1285	R w	D w	Botherway, Agnes Sarah	61
1286	R w	—	Botherway, Gladys Violet	61
1287	R w	—	Botherway, Edna Pegg	61

## POLLING DISTRICT

HAMLET GARDENS

(Just to add an extra degree of complication to all this, throughout the 1930s a Nelson O'Callaghan is listed in the electoral roll for 1935-7 at 25 Crane Rd Twickenham, immediately opposite William's father. William Nelson O'Callaghan appears at 58 Heath Gardens, Twickenham in 1938. These might be Patrick William Nelson O'Callaghan using alternative names just as his father did. Patrick preferred to be known as Nelson, which can create confusion.)

By 1937 Lilian and William Nelson had found what they would have expected to be permanent employment with Lord Berners. They moved into Berners' house at 3 Halkin Street and they appear on the electoral rolls at that address from 1937-9.

Mignon and Phyllis may have left home to work together at this point. They certainly were travelling together in September 1939.

## 8 – Mrs Nelson

According to Diana Mosley Lord Berners thought Mrs Nelson was "the best cook he ever had."

This is saying something, as Lord Berners was well known for the high quality of his catering. He divided his time between Faringdon House near Oxford, London and Rome. He had a cook in each house.

CITY OF WESTMINSTER KNIGHTSBRIDGE ST. GEORGE'S WARD (P 1)				
1833	Rw	Dw	Staunton, Mary Elizabeth	2
1834	—	O	Berners (Lord)	3
1835	Rw	—	Chaplin, Emily	3
1836	Rw	—	Chaplin, Mildred	3
1837	Rw	—	Nelson, Lilian	3
1838	R	—	Nelson, William	3
1839	R	—	Percy, Robert Heber	3
1840	Rw	—	Talbot, Henrietta	3
1841	Rw	—	Crome, Edith	4
1842	—	O	Feversham (Earl of)	4
1843	Rw	Dw	Feversham (Countess of)	4
1844	Rw	—	Hastlee, Rose	4
1845	Rw	—	King, Ethel	4
1846	R	—	Milne, James	4
1847	R	—		4

*—continued*

### *The electoral roll for 3 Halkin St, 1937*

As well as entertaining international cultural figures like Stravinsky and Salvador Dali there were regular visits from Berners' own social circle, including the Clarks. William Crack was Berners' driver for many years. In an interview about Berners' staff he states simply "Mrs Nelson was the cook in London." There must have been others but Lilian was the one who made an impression.

The Nelsons were listed as residents at Halkin Street between 1937 and 1939. Lilian, Diana Mosley records in her autobiography, was Cook and Housekeeper. This is a doubly responsible position and shows that the fastidious Berners, who had very high standards of a surprisingly traditional kind for such an apparent eccentric, had complete trust in her. It is possible that Lilian worked there before 1937 and only took up residence when Mignon and Phyllis had begun independent lives and she was able to leave her succession of flats in Hamlet Gardens. Berners' previous

permanent housekeeper, Lydia Lyndon died (if she is the Lydia Lyndon on the death records for St George Hanover Square) in 1932.

That same year Berners dismissed his butler Herbert Marshall. Diana Mosley, according to her biographer Anne de Courcy, believed that Mrs Nelson had ended her employment because of her "unsatisfactory" husband but this is probably a confusion with Marshall who both drank and was light-fingered. Lilian and William were certainly at Halkin Street at the beginning of the war when Berners decided to leave London and to close the house down. Losing both Lydia Lyndon and Marshall in 1932 opened the way for Lilian and William. It is possible that the Nelsons started to work for Berners in 1932 or 1933. Berners might have been aware of her reputation before she worked for him.

There were fewer famous guests at Halkin Street than at Faringdon House but in 1937, when Mrs Nelson is first listed, visitors would have included people involved in Berners' successful ballet "A Wedding Bouquet", including Gertrude Stein, who wrote the play on which it was based, the choreographer Frederick Ashton and the conductor Constant Lambert. Constant Lambert, musical director of Sadlers Wells and conductor of Berners three last ballets, was one of the people who apparently knew of the Elgar story from Kenneth Clark, and he must have come into contact with Lilian in the 1930s at Halkin St. He described the house in the late thirties:

*In the hall busts of generals and statesmen were notably improved by the addition of pantomime masks representing negroes and cats. Half-way up the stairs was a large cage housing a rare and exquisite tropical bird. In the drawing room the piano was littered with an extraordinary heterogenous collection of objects ranging from a fish in copper dating from the renaissance to a beer mug representing the Duke of Windsor which played the National Anthem when lifted. But on the piano desk itself might easily be the latest work of Stravinsky with a dedication by the composer and after tearing ones eyes away from the more facetious objects on the mantelpiece one would be enhanced by an exceptionally fine early Corot, flanked by a Sisley and a Matisse.*



*3 Halkin St is the house with the gateway to the left of the front door.*

Though Berners had a reputation as a practical joker and gossip, sometimes a malicious one, this behaviour was kept within a small circle, apart from occasional very public jokes that seemed to be part of a campaign of self-promotion, sometimes connected with his musical and literary work. His close friends, particularly Diana Mosley and John Betjeman, were very eager to emphasise his loyalty and sincerity. John Betjeman wrote to Diana Mosley to emphasise what a wonderful friend he could be and how scornful of all pretensions and how loyal in trouble, effortlessly loyal it seemed.

Diana Mosley, originally Diana Mitford, was one of Berners closest friends, far more than her sister, Nancy, who based the character of Lord Merlin in "Love in a Cold Climate" on Berners. Merlin, though not an accurate portrait, is by far the most sensitive and trustworthy character in the novel. Diana stayed at Halkin Street and remembered chats with Mrs Nelson when she brought up her breakfast.

From his own writings Berners comes across as a very serious and sensitive person with a surprisingly deep, almost mystical, love of nature. He took music very seriously indeed and during this period the influential composition teacher Nadia Boulanger used the house for lessons for younger composers.

Berners had an unusually close relationship with Lilian. In more conventional households the man of the house would rarely have any contact with a cook at all, but as a bachelor, and as a gourmet with a reputation as a cook himself, Berners was directly involved with the kitchen. He and his cook were contemporaries, both born in 1883. How much of her history did he know? He delighted in Lilian as "the best cook he ever had" and it must have been his pleasure in her skills and, I suspect, in her as a person, that led him to arrange an article in the Daily Express of Tuesday July 30th 1937 for us, a very dramatic piece of documentary evidence.

In "Food fit for a Lord Berners introduces Mrs Nelson.

*"He thinks that a cook who is hardly ever spoken to becomes a bored cook. And a bored cook soon becomes a bad cook."*

There is a photograph of Mrs Nelson with pots of jam. It is impossible to guess her age from the poor quality photograph. She is fairly matronly in her white house coat. She has a wide smile of white teeth, a straight nose and short hair. The article says that

*"Mrs Nelson has been to America. She spoke of the American (and Yorkshire) custom of eating cheese with apple tart."*

She gives a recipe for a cheese topped apple tart.

*" 'Apple tart without cheese is like a kiss without a squeeze' quoted Mrs Nelson. This, thought I, may be a matter which might well be decided by a practical demonstration. But Lord Berners was in the kitchen. So Mrs Nelson and I just shook hands."*

# She sees he eats like a Lord

**L**ORD BERNERS collects cooks. At the moment he has three. There is one for London, one for Berkshire, and one for Italy. This segregation is obviously deliberate. It prevents the proverbial broth from being spoiled.

His cooks are good ones because he understands them. He believes that nobody should employ even one cook without first acquiring some knowledge of the art of cooking.

Then faults, if any, can be intelligently pointed out. Praise can be given with the right enthusiasm.

## Don't bore the Cook

**L**ORD BERNERS believes in conversing with his cooks. He thinks that a cook who is hardly ever spoken to becomes a bored cook. And a bored cook soon becomes a bad cook.

"I know half a dozen people," he told me, "whom I would guarantee to spoil the best cook in England in a month."

His four texts of cooking are the making of coffee, soups and pastry, and the roasting of a joint. A cook who can do these four things well, he thinks, can cook anything well.

## Those watery Meals

**I** ASKED Lord Berners if there was any form of food, which he particularly disliked.

*"Apple tart without cheese is like a kiss without a squeeze," said Mrs. Nelson to the Home Page Cook. She is cook at Lord Berners's London house*

sketched the awful meal from the watery soup at its beginning to the indifferent ice which brings it to an equally watery close.

I shuddered and changed the subject hastily.

I asked him whether, as a musician, he was in favour of music with his meals.

"Not as a general rule, but I

who presides over his London kitchen.

## Breakfast Cake

**M**RS. NELSON was extremely kind, because she had already written out some of her favourite recipes for me. So all I have to do is to copy them out for you.



eggs until firm mix all together lightly, and pour into a greased soufflé dish. Put into a charged ice cave and freeze for two or three hours. If liked, sprinkle with chopped nuts before serving.

## Proof Withheld

**M**RS. NELSON has been to America. She spoke of the American (and Yorkshire) custom of eating cheese with apple tart.

She herself has combined the two more closely by sprinkling the tart with grated cheese and making an apple tart au gratin.

"Apple tart without cheese is like a kiss without a squeeze," quoted Mrs. Nelson.

This, thought I, is a matter which might well be decided by practical demonstration.

But Lord Berners was in the kitchen. So Mrs. Nelson and I

She also gives a recipe for "Johnny Cake", an American breakfast dish made with corn meal. This seems a very humble food for Belgravia but it might well have been popular with Lilian's sisters in Massachusetts.

In April 1937 Gertrude Stein was in England for the rehearsals and premiere of Berners' ballet "A Wedding Bouquet." This proved his most successful work and has continued to be in the Royal Ballet repertoire. Though it generally humorous and features a chorus singing Stein's impressionist words, the setting, a French country wedding in the late 19th century, would have brought back memories of a world that

Berners later described in his autobiographical book published many years later as "The Chateau of Resenlieu."

Berners youthful days in idyllic French landscapes inspired his most romantic writing in both music and prose. Gertrude Stein stayed at Faringdon during her visit for "A Wedding Bouquet" but she would have met Lilian when the creators and their friends converged on Halkin Street after the premiere on 27th April 1937.



*A Wedding Bouquet*

She described the event:

*"and then gradually it was ending and we went out and on to the stage and there where I never had been with everything in front all dark and we bowing and all of them coming and going and bowing, and then again not only bowing but coming again and then again as if it was everything, it was all over and we went back to sit down. I guess it was a great success."*



*Lord Berners and Gertrude Stein, 1937.*

Berners wrote to Stein a few days later:

*"Mrs Nelson has discovered how to make the Macon gateau. I will send Alice the recipe when I get back to London."*

Gateau Maconnaise is a cake with meringue.

The Alice referred to was Gertrude Stein's companion Alice B Toklas who herself published a famous, or notorious, cook book. In an interview with Gavin Bryars, an edited version of which was published in Peter Dickinson's book about Berners, Lady Harrod referred to "a frightfully grand cook like Mrs Nelson." (This quotation from the unedited interview was provided by Sofka Zinovieff.) This may refer to her "grand manner" more than the style of cooking. But how did the daughter of an illiterate railway labourer become "frightfully grand?"

Cooks could be a class of their own, and adopt a superior attitude, as could butlers.

Berners and Gertrude Stein attempted a collaboration on an opera after the success of "A Wedding Bouquet" but his heart wasn't in it and it came to nothing. He did complete another ballet for Frederick Ashton in 1939. This was also Berners own idea, and followed a scenario of his own devising "Cupid and Psyche", inspired by a love of classical mythology which he had had since childhood. Composing to his own scenario shows that he had an understanding of form and what would work, of both music and dance. When he did have to make changes to suit the dance and action he was, according to Ashton, completely professional. This experience of dramatic form, mood and timing was later useful when he came to write his film scores for "The Halfway House" and "Nicholas Nickleby."

The new ballet was a failure. The Greek myth was to be told in a light hearted style, but the mixture of classicism and farce confused the critics. In particular the appearance of Jupiter in the style of Mussolini was seen as a bad joke. There were, apparently, boos, though other reviews were less critical. The music suggests that the goose-stepping Jupiter was probably Berners's idea (was he thinking of Oswald Mosely?) but in this case the visual design was the work not of the composer himself but Francis Rose, a young protégée of Gertrude Stein.

The music, though, is pure Berners. It is nothing like the cool classicism of Stravinsky's ballets "Orpheus" or "Apollo". Here, again, is the atmosphere of nostalgic nineteenth century theatre, with the usual sentimental waltzes and some very beautiful moments. A less satirical production might have saved it. As often was the case with these ballets time was short and tempers were thin. Spring 1939 was very much the wrong time for frivolity.

As an old friend of Diana Mosley from long before her last marriage, Berners knew the fascist Oswald Mosley well. He even composed a few bars of a fascist march in 1934, but as this is only known in a newspaper article it is probably a joke. Though Berners claimed to have had tea with Hitler on one occasion while in Germany, which may have been a touch of exaggeration – they may have been in the same restaurant - there is no reason to suppose he had much sympathy for Mosley's politics, even though the would-be dictator was, many people said, likeable as a person.

In strong contrast to the Mosleys a new friend from the period when William and Lilian were at Halkin St was the American composer and conductor Bernard Herrmann, later the great film composer for Orson Welles and Alfred Hitchcock. This new acquaintance, in 1938, led Berners to make his only trip to America with Herrmann in 1938. This is hard to imagine – if only I had been there – but Berners is said to have enjoyed a typical Jewish meal with Herrmann's mother in New York.

Back in Halkin Street there were other visitors who reveal evidence that Berners was, privately, an unexpectedly serious supporter of new music and younger composers. In 1933 the young composer Lennox Berkeley had visited Halkin Street to meet his teacher, Nadia Boulanger who was visiting from France and, it appears, staying there. Boulanger was an enormously important influence, teaching many composers in the first half of the twentieth century, including many famous French names but also British and American, including Aaron Copland. At that 1933 visit Berners introduced Berkeley to his own publishers, Chesters.

This was not Nadia Boulanger's only visit to Halkin Street. In 1939 she was there using it as a base for teaching. There may have been others, but the South African born composer Priaux Rainier came there for tutorials. There is a letter to Rainier from Boulanger in the National Archives:

"Shall arrive Sunday morning at 9 and shall give the lessons at Lord Berners' home, 3 Halkin Street, SW1"

This is yet another hint that Berners' musical interests, and perhaps his life as a whole, were more serious than they have often been considered. Certainly, in the years when William and Lilian were there, it was a fascinating centre of culture.

Cecil Beaton was staying at Halkin Street in September 1939. According to his biography by Hugo Vickers' "Lord Berners deaf butler, Nelson, suddenly shouted 'the war has started' as Cecil was about to step into his bath."

(William may have been deaf but Lilian's son, Douglas, told his second wife Jane that he had been deafened by a bomb, which would have been a year or so later than this.)

Berners immediately abandoned Halkin St.



*Lilian Nelson, Phyllis Nelson and an unknown in the late 1930s. The car is a Riley Merlin, and can be dated to c1936.*



*This photograph was taken by Lilian O'Callaghan in 1936/7. Phyllis is on the right and it is almost certainly Mignon on the left. The Asian gentleman could be a visiting sportsman.*

