

## 9 – Mickie

The 1939 electoral roll for Richmond (at the same time as William and Lilian were working for Lord Berners and listed at Hamlet Gardens) lists the Nelson family at 2 Deanhill Rd, a few months before the start of World war II.

William Patrick Nelson

Lilian Josephine Nelson

Phyllis Nelson

Mignon Nelson

Douglas Nelson.

This substantial house is on the corner of Deanhill Rd and Upper Richmond Rd. It is almost next door to Deanhill Court where Lilian and William lived from 1955.

This listing is fascinating in that it reveals that Douglas was living with the family and that Mignon was there too, listed as if she were a sister. Douglas would have been 21 on December 5<sup>th</sup> 1939.

The 1939 register, the census of the population at the start of the war in September 1939, is far more accurate than electoral rolls. Like a census it lists everyone where they were on that day, but unlike any other records the original files were updated for more than thirty years and alternate names are added in.

The 1939 register for 2 Deanhill Rd lists William N P O'Callaghan and Lillian (sic) J O'Callaghan. William's occupation is given as "Private Secretary" and Lilian's as "Unpaid House Duties", though this has been altered to "Domestic". William's date of birth is 22<sup>nd</sup> March 1882, which agrees with all other known sources. Lilian's was originally entered as 15<sup>th</sup> August 1886 (she had cut two or three years off her age before) but this has been corrected to 1883.

Most extraordinary is the way in which Lilian's name has been altered three times. The original register document was updated whenever anyone changed their name, or more accurate information became available. This must have required a massive amount of clerical work. At different times her name has been changed to "Gillian J", then back to the more usually spelled "Lilian J" and then finally to Elizabeth Mary. (The form of her name on her death certificate is "Elizabeth Mary Josephine.")

	2	2	BRYANT, Lilian J.	-	F	18 <sup>th</sup> Dec 1892	M	Unique Sales
	M	2	3	BRYANT, Sonnet G.	-	F	25 <sup>th</sup> Oct 1912	S. Secretary to Electrical Co
This record is officially closed.								
This record is officially closed.								
2, Scanie Ross	3	1	O'CALLAGHAN, William	-	M	22 <sup>nd</sup> Nov 1892	M.	Private Secretary
	3*	2	O'CALLAGHAN, Lilian	-	F	15 <sup>th</sup> Dec 1890	M	Home duties
This record is officially closed.								
4, auto	4	1	COLE, James C. E.	-	M	30 <sup>th</sup> Aug 1890	M	Civil Servant M.
	4	2	COLE, Rosal.	-	F	27 <sup>th</sup> Sep 1896	M	Home duties unpaid
This record is officially closed.								

The blacked out name is Douglas as details are not given for people born after 1915 and still alive in the 1990s.

At the same moment that William and Lilian are in East Sheen Mignon and Phyllis were in Sunderland. They were sharing a room, as travelling dancers. They had both put their names as Nelson – Mignon Nelson and Phyllis Nelson – as if they were sisters. The names have been altered, at some later time, to Mignon Denise Harman and Phyllis O'Callaghan. This is the only evidence of them working together.

	11		DAWSON, GLADYS M.	-	F	16. 6 05	M	THEATRE-DRESSER (TRAVELLING)
This record is officially closed.								
This record is officially closed.								
	14		NELSON, PHYLLIS EDITH	-	F	15. 12. 10	S	DANCER (TRAVELLING)
	15		NELSON, MIGNON	-	F	18. 12. 11	S	DANCER (TRAVELLING)
This record is officially closed.								
	3	1	GIBSON, WINNIE E.	-	F	19. 6. 89	M	UNPAID DOMESTIC DUTIES
		2	GIBSON, ROBERT	-	M	9. 12. 77	S	AUCTIONEER & VALUER

They were probably performing in a review "Take Cover" which had just opened at the Sunderland Empire, starring northern comic Frank E Franks.

This register gives Mignon's date of birth as 18<sup>th</sup> December 1911 when her actual birth date was 18<sup>th</sup> December 1912.

Though it seems likely that East Sheen was the family home throughout the war years Lilian continued to use Hamlet Gardens when she began working for her next employer.

During the war, Sir Kenneth Clark was Director of the National Gallery, responsible for the protection of its treasures and also for the famous series of National Gallery concerts. While he kept a flat in London his wife Elizabeth (she always called Jane) lived at Upton House, Tetbury, Gloucestershire with her sons. Jane moved into Upton House at the beginning of the war in autumn 1939. She worked for the Ministry of Information film unit, where she came into close contact with the composer William Walton, whose war work was composing for films that would support the war effort. During this period, according to Walton's wife's biography of her husband, Jane had an affair with the composer. At the same time Kenneth Clark was considering leaving his wife for another woman. They were all good friends in spite of this.

Kenneth visited his family when he could but it is important to understand that Lilian was employed by Jane Clark at Upton, and that Kenneth would not have come into contact with her often.

Clark's son, Alan, in a telephone conversation with Ismene Brown remembered "Mrs Nelson" at Tetbury. He believed she had been working for the family for about eight months at the time when he met her. He was home from boarding school. This would probably have been in the summer of 1940. He described her as a "trout", in contrast to his father's comments in his letter of Michael Kennedy in 1968 that Mrs Nelson *"had dyed red hair and the remains of considerable beauty."* (In 1917 Lilian had auburn hair and hazel eyes, according to the Canada/Us border crossing document. Twenty five years had passed by the time the Clarks knew her.)

The Clark's left Upton House towards the end of the summer of 1942 when Kenneth set off on a long trip to Sweden and his wife and sons moved to a new house in Hampstead. Their flat in the centre of London had been destroyed in the blitz, the Clarks being thrown out of bed by the explosion, but uninjured.

Lilian, therefore, must have been at Upton House from the beginning of the war, soon after Lord Berners abandoned 3 Halkin St, until the last quarter of 1942, a period of just three years.



*Upton House, Tetbury, Gloucestershire*

Almost miraculously a letter from Lilian survives in the Lord Clark archive at the Tate Gallery. This is another vivid and revealing piece of evidence and confirms the basis of the story that Clark told Michael Kennedy many years later.

Lilian had taken another flat in Hammersmith. There is no evidence that William was ever at Upton House. Perhaps he remained in London and Phyllis and Mignon used this as a base when they were not touring.

*43 Hamlet Gds  
Hammersmith  
W6*

*April 27th*

*To Sir Kenneth Clark*

*Dear Sir*

*I hope I am not troubling you too much asking you if you would kindly sign the*

*enclosed papers & photos of my daughter as she has got a chance of work for ENSA as soon as she gets these papers signed. She has been home since Coventry. I hope & trust you are feeling better. I am going to work for Lady Clark in 6 weeks time when Nelson's leg comes out of plaster. She has been so very kind to me. God Bless & protect her.*

*very respectfully yours*

*Lilian Nelson*

The handwriting is very strong and suggests a forceful character. She used a dip pen as can be seen from the changes from a vigorous start with a full nib to its gradual drying followed by another vigorous dip of the pen. The simple evidence of the signature is valuable. At this point Lilian signs herself very forcefully "Lilian Nelson." This is how she sees herself or wishes to present herself.

Considering that this is the only letter I have found from Lilian it is rather startling that it concerns the incident which sparked off this mystery. This brief letter confirms the key parts of the story Clark told in his letter to Michael Kennedy in 1968 - that Lilian's daughter, in reality her unofficially adopted daughter Mignon, needs her passport signing and that she plans to work for ENSA, travelling abroad to entertain the troops.

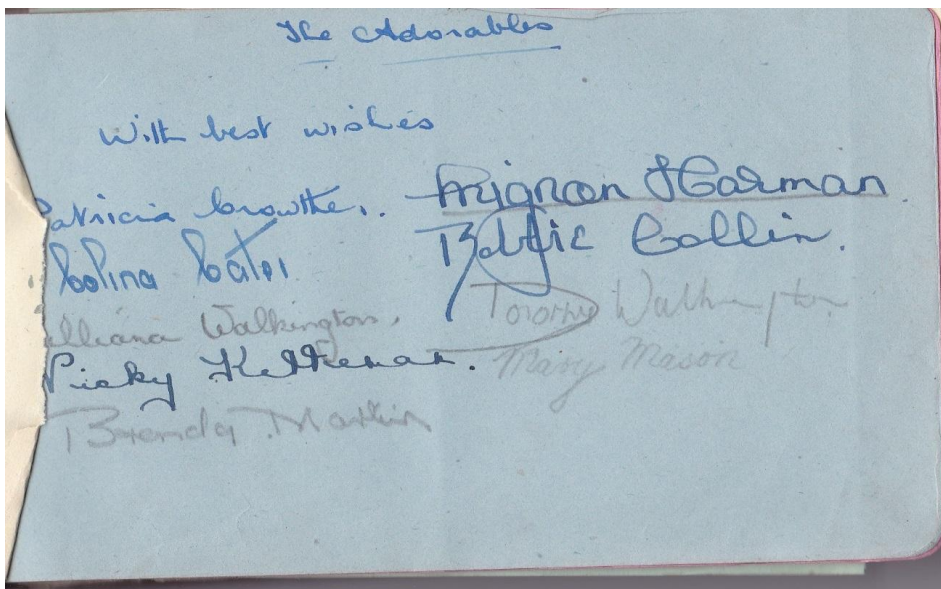
The letter is dated April 27<sup>th</sup>, but with no year given. In the Tate Archive it is filed in the correspondence from 1941/2 and there is reason to accept that this is correct. Lilian's comment that her daughter "has been home since "Coventry" inevitably suggests the Coventry bombings of November 14<sup>th</sup> 1940. Had she been working there at the time?

If this is the case the letter would be dated April 27<sup>th</sup> 1941, but Mignon worked in Coventry for several pantomime seasons, so reference need not be to the bombing.

She was a regular performer in spectacular pantomimes produced by Emile Littler at the art deco Coventry Hippodrome, which had opened in 1937.

These seasonal events took the whole year to produce and Littler set up a pantomime factory in Birmingham to plan, rehearse and build sets as well as a separate business to produce costumes. There were more modest shows at the Hippodrome in its first few years but "Cinderella, Emile Littler's "First All-Comedy Coventry Pantomime", opened on January 13th 1942.

Gay Harris who began her dancing and teaching career as a "juve at the age of 12" (actually under-age) at Christmas 1942. She remembers Mignon well, but has always remembered her as "Aunty Mickie". This is how she was known by the young girls she looked after at Betty Fox's School of Dance in Birmingham in the last year of her life. It was only after our first conversation that Gay realised that when she first met "Aunty Mickie as "head girl "of "Millie Jackson's Adorables" in the 1942/3 pantomime she had signed her autograph, in round and rather childish writing as "Mignon Harman." The name was a surprise to Gay. Gay had underlined the name to show that she was the lead dancer.



"Cinderella" starred Peggy Wilding as Cinderella and Phyllis Hunter as Dandini with Ted Ray as Buttons. Gay knew Mignon until her death. Betty Fox, who knew Mignon throughout the 1940s until her death believed she had no living relations. Neither

had any idea that Mignon had an adoptive sister or mother or was anything but alone.

The Pantomime was "written, devised and presented by Emile Littler". It also featured: "The 24 Adorables trained by Millie Jackson, Emile Littler's 32 Bright Eyes Trained by Betty Fox and "Ponies supplied by Barnaby Parsons." Millie Jackson ran a School of Dance in Bloomsbury. She trained, and presumably choreographed, many troupes of dancers for shows all over Britain. These were largely made up of local dancers hired for the show and went by many names. There were "Eight Glamour Girls" in Dundee in 1940 and "Rhythm Rockets" in Bristol in 1941.

The "Adorables" appeared in the Coventry pantomimes throughout the 1940s and there were also troupes under this name performing through the summer of 1942 in Exeter, Plymouth, Bristol and Derby. As Millie Jackson tended to use new names for new troupes it is possible that this was the same troupe and that Mignon toured with them. It is unlikely that Millie would have used local dancers on a summer tour, with all the extra work of training new people, and she is likely to have kept Mignon as her trusted "head girl."

As "head girl" she would have been responsible for all the practical aspects of looking after the other dancers. Gay Harris underlined her name in her autograph book to show that she was the lead dancer. The Emile Littler shows were major events and demanded the highest standards. Mignon's career has to be seen as a successful one. She had been in the most highly regarded troupe of Tiller Girls and now, fifteen years later, she was in a top-quality show.

In 1943 Lilian spent a short time working for another high profile family. This may have been a temporary arrangement while her employment by Lady Clark continued.

In the early years of the Second World War Sir Oswald and Lady Mosley, who, as

Diana Mitford, had been a close friend of Lord Berners and known Lilian Nelson at Halkin Street, were imprisoned as threats to national security. They were held, with other married couples, in the Preventive Detention Block at Holloway Prison, not as conventional prisoners. A fellow prisoner, after their release in November 1943, said "We've never had such laughs since Lady Mosley left."

With Oswald Mosley very ill the family, including their sons and a nanny, moved into temporary accommodation at a dilapidated pub, the Shaven Crown at Shipton-under-Wychwood. Life was difficult, with, as for everyone, a severe shortage of food. Diana had to do the cooking.

The press was full of stories about the notorious couple. This had the unexpected effect of inspiring a number of letters offering help. The most significant letter was from Lilian Nelson.

She wrote: "Dear Madam, I would come to you if you were at the North Pole"

Diana invited Lilian, and her husband (or supposed husband), to come to the Shaven Crown. This would have been at the very end of 1943 or the start of 1944. Lilian must have finished working for the Clark's at the end of 1942 and she may not have had employment since then. She might have read about the Mosleys release and seen an opportunity.

Lord Berners was a visitor at The Shaven Crown and may have met Lilian again. Diana said that "he was a trifle put out to find they had acquired the best cook he had ever had."

Diana told her biographer Anne de Courcy that, on her first day, Mrs Nelson used their entire fortnights butter ration on a "superb apple tart." When Diana complained Lilian replied: "People like you can always get more."

This may seem like an unrealistic attitude in 1943, but perhaps there had not been shortages at the Clarks in Tetbury, and Lord Berners, at Faringdon at least, was able

to supplement rations with produce from his home farm. Anne de Courcy writes that the Nelsons did not settle in after this episode but stayed long enough to help the Mosleys move into their next home, Crux Easton, near Newbury. By April 1944 Diana was contacting one of her previous cooks. She had spent a time looking after the cooking for herself. Lord Berners had visited and, helping Lady Mosley, had seriously burned his hands taking a lobster thermidor out of the oven.

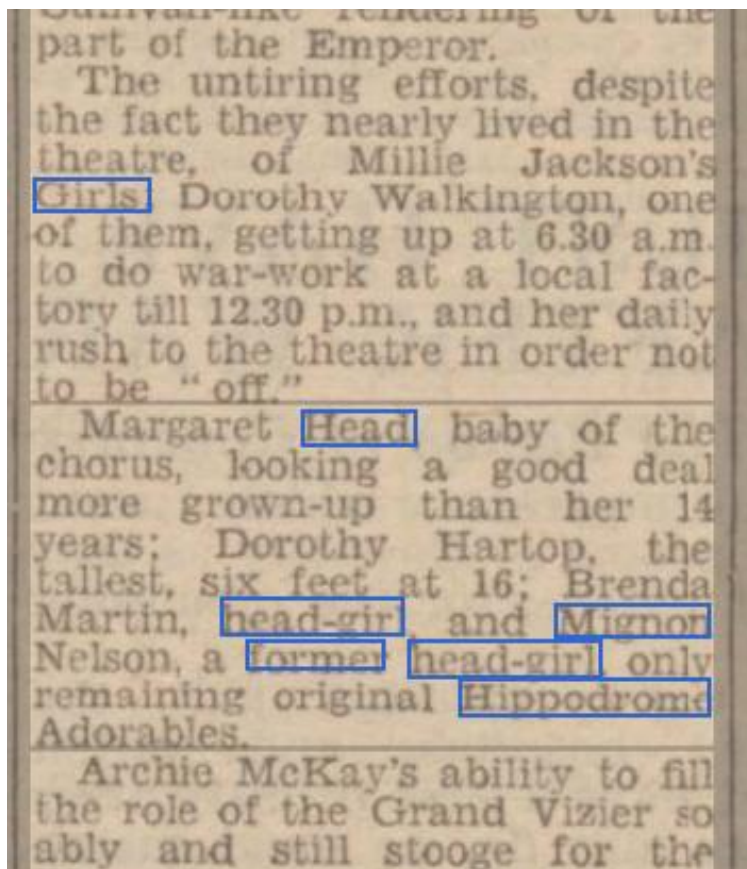
Betty Fox began teaching dance in 1932 at the age of 13, originally at her family home at 294 Tiverton Road Selly Oak. When her mother, May, died her father, Edward, bought a larger house at what was then 50 Bristol Road which could be used as a home for the dance school. Betty had worked in London as a young dancer herself and had formed a working relationship with Emile Littler which proved vital to the success of her School of Dance. Littler set up a base for the production of his pantomimes in Birmingham and Betty was closely involved in his shows both in the Midlands and in London. In 1938, when she was only 19, Betty supplied "60 Bright Eyes for his London production of Cinderella. They would have worked very closely together in the year-round production process of the shows Mignon became a friend and colleague of Betty early in the war, though it is unclear when they first met. There may have been a connection in London, perhaps through Emile Littler who also worked with Phyl Blakeston, Mignon's "head girl" in their Tiller Girl days.

Phyl was rumoured to have been Littler's mistress. Littler was married to Cora Goffin who starred as principal boy in some of his productions, but he seems to have taken an interest in other dancers. During the war he may have had more than a professional connection with Betty. He was said to pick her up in his Rolls as she walked to her wartime factory work. She was embarrassed to be wearing slacks and a headscarf. There was a story that he had given her, or offered her, a smart car. There is something very puzzling about the relationships of Littler, Betty, Phyl Blakeston and Mignon.

At some point during the war Mignon moved in with Betty and her father. There are no electoral rolls between 1939 and 1944 but she can be found on the 1945 roll with her name bizarrely mistranscribed as "Nighon Harman".

Though the exact relationship of Betty and Mignon is impossible to fathom it appears that they were closely involved with the pantomimes and other shows throughout the war, with Betty as choreographer and organiser for the juveniles and Mignon as "head girl" of the adult dancers. In spite of her troubled days in the first half of the thirties Mignon had continued to have a successful career and she had found a new home and friendship with Betty Fox.

The Coventry Evening Telegraph, Wednesday 9<sup>th</sup> February 1944, includes an item of memories of the pantomime which had just finished. This includes "Brenda Martin, head girl and Mignon Nelson, a former head girl, only remaining Hippodrome Adorables."



Still, in the 1940s, she was unsure what name to use. Gay Harris remembered her as "Mickie Nelson" but when she signed Gay's autograph book in 1942/3 she wrote "Mignon Harman."

Mignon's last season was in Babes in the Wood which opened on December 11th 1944.

By the time of the 1945/6 Coventry show in which Gay Harris appeared as one of the "Betty Fox Babes" Mignon was no longer able to dance. She was "hunched," as Gay said, in agony.

The girls thought she had terrible verrucas. She had to go to the hospital every week for treatment. Betty Fox, who had known her as a close friend for several years, was employing her to look after the girls who slept on the top floor in a dormitory. "Aunty Mickey", according to Gay, was treated like a servant by Betty and "put upon. She made them toast and porridge. Gay's memory of Betty and Mignon suggests that their relationship had changed. The impression I have been given by people I have spoken to is that Betty seems to have been a hard and unsympathetic woman. She kept the girls in order with a stick. Discipline was, of course, very important, especially considering the high quality of performance that was expected of them.

Though Betty may have been a strict teacher who did not inspire much affection Gay insisted that all the girls loved "Aunty Mickey." She was, Gay told me, very dark. She wore masculine clothes, loose slacks, though "everyone did in those days. I asked Gay if Mignon had seemed affected as her Tiller Girl colleagues thought. No, Gay said, not affected but lady-like and beautifully spoken. Gay worked for Betty after the 1945/6 show and she was aware what had happened to Mignon.

On 23rd June 1946 Mignon committed suicide.

The death certificate gives the cause of death as "Asphyxia due to inhalation of coal

gas. Suicide whilst the balance of her mind was disturbed". She had put her head in the gas oven. Her occupation is given as "housekeeper/companion". No other particulars known. Her name is given as "Mignon Denise Harman". This is the name that has been written in as later addition to the 1939 Register document. The death certificate notes that she was "also known as Mickie Nelson." There seems to have been doubt as to which was her real name. Betty Fox thought Nelson was her real name and Mignon Harman was a stage name.

Phyl Blakeston heard about Mignon's death later that year while working on one of Emile Littler's shows. She heard the news from one of the other dancers.

*"The frightening thing was as far as the news reached me(one) of the girls had heard it. Did I know that Mignon had killed herself by putting her head in the gas oven, after all those years going to do it(she would???) get over it you would have thought."  
(Phyl Blakeston)*

Doremy Vernon felt Phyl had a very cruel attitude to Mignon. It is unclear exactly what it was that Mignon should have "got over" since her previous suicide attempt over ten years earlier.

There is a hint of some resentment which might have had its root in the connections between Mignon, Betty, Phyl and Emile Littler. It is impossible to be certain what had driven Mignon to suicide. The fact that her career, which had lasted almost twenty years, had ended through her physical state, was probably enough. There may have been other things which had lain dormant since the Tiller Girls days.

Another factor may have been her sexual orientation. This may be nothing, but some of her Tiller colleagues suspected that she was gay because of her embarrassing crushes on other girls. This may have been more a case of being desperate for love, and the effect of a difficult childhood. There was, in possible contradiction, a rumour of a "rich Jewish boyfriend". There is, though, a possibility that Mignon had unreciprocated feelings towards Betty. Betty married less than three months after Mignon's suicide, on September 9th 1946. It is very likely that she was already engaged to Joseph Coulson in June.

What was the impact of this suicide of a friend she had lived and worked with for most of the war years coming so soon before her marriage? What was the effect of Betty's relationship with Joe on Mignon? Would there have been a very practical effect? Where would Mignon have lived? Would she have had a job? Betty's marriage was, it appears, not very satisfactory. "Uncle Joe" surprised Gay by his candid comments about his marriage. Joseph Coulson died on March 16th 1953. Betty was still only 33.

Another possibility is that Mignon had a bipolar condition, which might account for her mixture of "happy go lucky" behaviour and suicidal depression.

A tragic aspect of this story is that Betty, and Mignon's other friends, did not appear to know anything about her mother, or unofficial adoptive mother. They believed she was an orphan and yet Mignon had been in touch with her mother at the time of the ENSA application. The reference to Coventry in Lilian's letter suggests Mignon was already involved with Betty. If no next of kin were believed to exist no attempt would have been made to trace any. There is no sign of Mignon in The London Gazette where appeals for next of kin are posted.

The newspaper report in the Birmingham Mail for Monday June 24<sup>th</sup> 1946, an evening paper published immediately after the inquest, gives some more information:

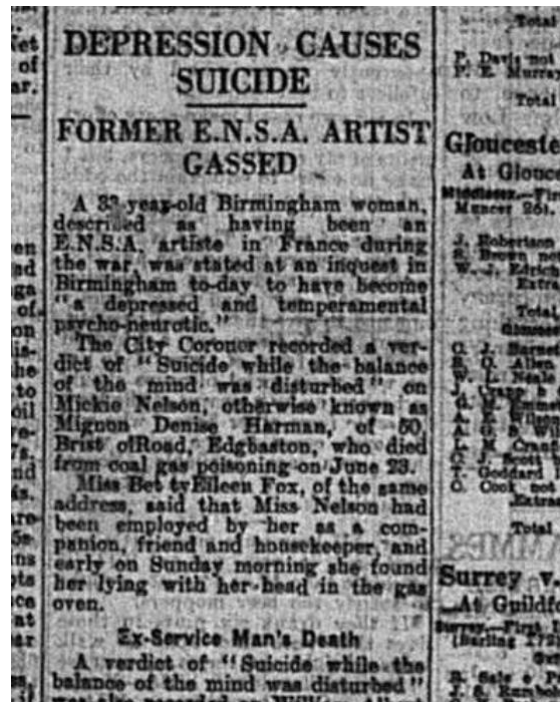
#### *DEPRESSION CAUSES SUICIDE*

#### *FORMER E.N.S.A. ARTIST GASSED*

*A 33 year old Birmingham woman described as having been an E.N.S.A. artiste in France during the war, was stated at an inquest in Birmingham to-day to have become "a depressed and temperamental psycho-neurotic."*

*The City Coroner recorded a verdict of "Suicide while the balance of her mind was disturbed" on Mickie Nelson, otherwise known as Mignon Denise Harman, of 50, Bristol Road, Edgbaston, who died of coal gas poisoning on June 23<sup>rd</sup>.*

Miss Betty Eileen Fox, of the same address, said that Miss Nelson had been employed by her as a companion, friend and housekeeper and early on Sunday morning she found her lying with her head in the gas oven.



## THE INQUEST

Records of inquests are held in secret for 75 years. The documents of Mignon's inquest became available in 2021 and we can now give them in full. This is sad and disturbing but gives us a vivid and detailed picture of Mignon at the end of her life,

and a revealing insight into how she was seen by those around her.

249.

No. 249.

INQUEST HELD AT THE CORONER'S  
COURT, VICTORIA COURTS,  
BIRMINGHAM.

Date 24<sup>th</sup> June 1946.

Upon the body of

*Trickie Helen otherwise known as  
Dorice Harman.*

Cause of death

*coal gas poisoning.  
Head in gas oven.*

VERDICT

*S. B. M. D.*

I  
City of Birmingham,  
Warwickshire.  
To Wit

AN Inquisition taken for our Sovereign Lord the King at the Coroner's Court, situate in Newton Street, in the City of Birmingham, in the County of Warwick, this 24th day of June, 1946,--  
by me, William Henderson Davison, Esquire, Coroner of our Lord the King for the said City, on view of the body of Mickie Nelson, otherwise Mignon / Denise Harman,  
to inquire for our said Lord the King, when, where, how, and by what means the said Mickie Nelson, otherwise Mignon Denise Harman, --- came to her death.

And I, the said William Henderson Davison do say:--

That the said Mickie Nelson, otherwise Mignon Denise Harman, --- on the 23rd day of June, in the year aforesaid died at 50 Bristol ~~Street~~ Road, Edgbaston, -----  
----- in the City aforesaid.

That the cause of her death was Asphyxia due to the inhalation of coal gas due to her placing her head in the oven of a gas cooking stove after first turning on the gas, at the place and on the date aforesaid:

And so do further say that the said Mickie Nelson, otherwise Mignon Denise Harman, whilst the balance of her mind was disturbed, did kill herself.

And I do further say that the said Mickie Nelson, otherwise Mignon Denise Harman, ----- at the time of her death was a female person, of the age of thirty-three years, and was a spinster, a house-keeper, and companion, formerly a professional dancer, no further particulars available.

In witness whereof I, the said William Henderson Davison, have to this Inquisition set my hand and seal, the day, year, and place, first above written.

*William Henderson Davison*

Coroner



The coroner was clearly not sure of Mignon's name. The death certificate gives her name correctly but adds "also known as Mickie Nelson" but this report puts "Mickie Nelson" first. The 1939 Register has her as Mignon Nelson, which has been changed to Mignon Harman, presumably after her death, as the Register books were updated until the 1970s.

Her age is, correctly, given as 33. The death certificate says 38, which must be a misreading of 33. No-one who knew thought she was that old.

Betty Fox gave a detailed account of what happened and of Mignon's state of mind. Betty clearly thought the Mickie Nelson was her real name. "Mignon Denise Harman" must have sounded like a stage name, which indicates that it was always unusual and exotic. She danced in the pantomimes as Mignon Nelson, which suggests that she had no wish to forget her second adoptive family. Betty thought she had no blood-relatives, but did she know nothing about the Nelsons/O'Callaghans?

Betty says she had "always understood" had come from a Catholic orphanage in Kent. She must have remembered this from things Mignon had told her as there is no reason to suppose she knew anyone from Mignon's past.

She says Mignon had been living with the Fox family for four years. If this is correct it would mean that Mignon first came to Bristol Road in 1942. The police report says "about six years" which would mean that she had lived with Betty since the 1941 pantomime, and possibly moved to Birmingham (or perhaps originally Coventry for the production) soon after the beginning of the war. If Lilian's comment that Mignon had been home "since Coventry" refers to the bombing in 1941 it would seem to be the case that she had been in the 1941 pantomime, then travelled with Ensa, and then in 1942 returned to the Midlands for the next three pantomime seasons. Her last was in early 1944, when the Coventry Evening Telegraph called her "former head girl." That was her last show. By the time of the inquest she was a "former

professional dancer” and one suffering very painful foot problems. This end of her career and her physical pain are surely to have been influences on her mental state.

Mignon had told Betty about her suicide attempt – perhaps only one of them – and Betty thought that this was ten or twelve years earlier. That would put the event in 1934 or 1936.

The police report gives her age as 35 and also gives her ID card number. This error could be based on a year of birth on the ID card which would have been taken from the 1939 Register which was used as the basis of ID cards and ration books.

Birmingham Police

REPORT

24th. June 19 46

From

CHIEF INSPECTOR D. J. DAVIES

Coroner's Officer

W. Henderson Davison, Esq. J.P.

H. M. Coroner

Birmingham.

PS4204 (20) (a) 566/16

Mickie Nelson otherwise Mignon Denise Harman, age 33 years, of 50, Bristol ~~Street~~<sup>Road</sup>, Edgbaston, Birmingham, a spinster, ~~a housekeeper and a companion, formerly a professional dancer,~~ <sup>a housekeeper and companion</sup> no further particulars available, died Sunday, 23rd. June, 1946.

Registrar:- Mr. Ordish.

Betty Eileen Fox states:-

I live at 50, Bristol Road. Deceased was a friend of mine and worked for me as housekeeper and companion. She was 33 years of age and was an orphan. As far as I know she had no blood relations, and I am carrying out the necessary arrangements connected with her death.

Deceased has been with me for about 4 years. Her original name was Mickie Nelson, but when she went on the stage as a professional dancer, she took on the name of Mignon Denise Harman and has been known under that name since. I understood that she came from a Catholic Orphanage in Kent.

Since she has been with me, she has been troubled with rather bad feet as a result of her dancing and was having regular treatment at the Foot Clinic. Her feet caused her quite a lot of pain and discomfort. She was also rather weak in the chest, and in addition had been under the care of Dr. Wand of Bristol Road for a neurotic condition. She was liable to fits of depression, when she would lose all interest in things around her, and become very miserable. The last time that she saw the doctor, as far as I recollect, was about 6 weeks to 2 months ago. Just recently, especially during the past 2 or 3 nights, she has not been able to get proper sleep and has been very restless. She has also been very depressed and at times, somewhat peculiar in her manner.

Owing to her condition, about 10 or 12 years ago, whilst residing at London, she made an attempt to take her life by drinking some form of disinfectant, but after hospital treatment, made good recovery.

She was of a very highly strung and temperamental disposition, and this did not improve matters.

On Saturday, 22nd June, 1946, deceased was in one of her depressed moods, and during the day, refused to go anywhere with me. We usually went everywhere together and were quite close friends. She would not come out with me during the evening, but chose to remain in the house. Whilst there, she re-cleaned the floor of the living room, although this had only been done that morning and there was no necessity for a further clean. This was just part of her strangeness.

I came home at 9-20pm., and then we had a few drink together. I had a glass of ale, and deceased had two small glasses of whiskey. This did not upset her at all, as she was inclined to be a rather heavy drinker, so she was perfectly normal from that point of view. I could see, however, that she was in one of her "moods", and therefore kept near her as much as I could.

I retired to bed at 1-0am., Sunday, 23rd June, expecting deceased to follow me. We occupy the same bed. She did not do so, and twice I went to her to persuade her to get to bed. She said she would shortly, but she wanted to see to the Ration Books first. I went back to bed and dozed for a while. At about 4-0am., I awoke and found that she had not retired. I found that the bathroom light was on, as also was the light in my study and the Ration Books on the desk. I then went downstairs and found deceased lying on the floor of the living room in which is fitted the gas cooker. She was fully clothed, and lay with her head in the oven of the cooker. The door and window of the room had been closed. Her head rested on one of the grids which had been placed at an angle inside the oven, and the other shelves had been taken out and placed alongside. The meat which had been in the oven

had been placed on a table, and I later found that the dogs had been shut in the lounge.

The tap of the gas supply was turned fully on, and the gas - supplied through a quarterly meter - was still escaping. I turned off the tap, pulled her away from the cooker, and called my father. He came down to help, and Dr. Wand, who was sent for, was at the house within a few minutes. Deceased had then been taken to the open window, and the doctor started artificial respiration. The Police soon followed him and an apparatus was applied, but deceased showed no response. At 5-15am, the doctor said she was dead.

Except for the occasion that deceased has told me, I have never heard her make any threat to take her life, although there have been times when she has hinted at such a thing. I have been unable to find any letter or writing which she may have left bearing on the death.

Edward Fox states:-

I live at 50, Bristol Street, Edgbaston. Deceased's friend, last witness, was my daughter. I have heard her evidence and confirm what she has said.

I was called at 4-0am., Sunday, 23rd. June, 1946, and saw deceased lying on the floor of the living room close to the gas cooker. There was a smell of gas in the room, and I saw that the shelves of the cooker had been removed and the grids de-arranged. Deceased showed no sign of life, neither was there any indication of any injury. I pulled her to the window which I opened, turned her face downwards, and by then Dr. Wand was at the house and started artificial respiration. This was continued by the Police who arrived within a few minutes, but deceased's condition showed no change. At about 5-20am., the doctor pronounced life extinct.

I have never heard deceased make any threat to take her life or do herself any harm. There have been occasions when her depressed and moody condition has led her to hint at such things, but there has been no actual threat to carry out such an action. I have not seen any letter or note which she may have left respecting her death.

Richard Murray states:-

I am Police Constable, "B" 43, Birmingham City Police.

At 4-14am., Sunday, 23rd. June, 1946, I was on Area Car Patrol when I received a message to go to 50, Bristol Road where there was a case of coal gas poisoning. I arrived at 4-16am. and saw deceased lying on the floor in the Kitchen by the open window. Dr. Wand of Bristol Road was in attendance, performing artificial respiration. I continued with the treatment, and the Novox apparatus, brought by the Police ambulance, was also applied, but without success. At 5-25am., Dr. Wand pronounced life extinct.

There were no marks of violence on the body, and no sign of any injury. I saw nothing of a suspicious nature. The shelves of the gas cooker had been taken out and placed at the side, whilst the grids had also been re-arranged, one of them forming a rest where I understood deceased's head had been found. The tap of the gas supply was of the safety pattern, and the gas is supplied through a quarterly meter.

I made a search of the rooms, but was unable to find any letter or writing, bearing on the death.

I was given a history that deceased was a very highly strung and temperamental type of woman, who had recently been rather depressed and moody. I was also told of the previous attempt which she made to take her life whilst in London, several years ago.

S. Wand, Registered Medical Practitioner and Police Surgeon to the "B" Division, 40, Bristol Road was called to this occurrence and pronounced life extinct. He had attended deceased prior to her death, and also, later reported to the Police that in one of her pockets he had found a phial which had contained  $1\frac{1}{2}$  to 2 grains of morphia, and thought it possible that deceased may have taken this prior to placing her head in the gas cooker - hence her showing no response to the efforts of the artificial respiration. He will attend the Inquest and give evidence.

*Victor Buckley*  
P.C.R.238.

Area Car M.15.

"3"

Ladywood, 23rd June 1946.

P.O.B.43 Murray.

Woman commits suicide. Coal gas poisoning.

Supt. C. Walker.

At 4-14 a.m. Sunday 23rd June 1946 I was on duty in Area Car M.15 with D.C. Walsh as observer when I received a call to 50 Bristol Road where there was a case of coal gas poisoning.

I immediately went there arriving at 4-18 a.m. same date and there saw Miss Mignon Denise Harman aged 35 (Y.A.J.A.407608) a professional dancer lying beneath the open window in the kitchen with her head on a pillow. She was fully dressed and Dr Wand of 40 Bristol Road, Edgbaston was performing artificial respiration. I took over from the doctor and was relieved at intervals by D.C. Walsh and Dr Wand. The Police Ambulance from Duke Street attended at the same time as myself with the Novox Apparatus and this was used in conjunction with artificial respiration for the following periods, 4-23 a.m. to 4-30 a.m., 4-35 a.m. to 4-40 a.m., 5-1 a.m. to 5-7 a.m. and 5-12 a.m. to 5-15 a.m. a total time of 21 minutes. This was given under the direction of Dr Wand.

At 5-25 a.m. Harman was certified dead due to coal gas poisoning.

On making enquiries I found that this girl is an orphan and has no close relatives. She has been living with Miss Betty Fox aged 28 and her father Edward Fox aged 64 at 50 Bristol Road for about 6 years. At about 9-20 p.m. Saturday 22nd June 1946 Harman had been out to the Earl Grey L.H. to buy bottles of beer and returned within a few minutes. She had then remained in the house apparently drinking. At 3-35 a.m. Sunday 23rd June 1946 Miss Fox with whom she sleeps woke up and found that Harman was not in bed and on going into the kitchen on the ground floor found her lying on the floor with her head in the gas oven. With the assistance of her father Fox pulled her close to the window which was opened and then called Dr Wand who arrived at 4 a.m. The door & window in the kitchen were both closed but the chimney is not blocked. One gas tap which serves two bars in the oven was turned on and on testing it I found that there is a good supply of gas released. The gas meter is of the quarterly type.

Harman is a very nervous type of woman and easily aroused to anger but from enquiries she was apparently quite happy living with Miss Fox who is a dancing teacher. About 10 years ago Harman attempted to commit suicide by taking poison whilst living in London.

I made a search of the rooms which Harman used but could find nothing which indicated the reason for her actions. In the front sitting room I found 3 empty Davenport beer bottles,  $\frac{1}{2}$  bottle of Woodpecker cider,  $\frac{1}{2}$  bottle of Dumbarton Whiskey containing  $1\frac{1}{2}$  inches of neat whiskey and 3 empty glasses. In the kitchen I found  $\frac{1}{2}$  bottle Davenport beer and a  $\frac{1}{2}$  pint glass approximately half full of beer. This girl was a very heavy drinker and smoker and it was not unusual for her to drink 6 or 7 pints of beer during an evening.

The body was taken by me into the bedroom and left for examination by the Coroners Officer who are to be informed by telephone from Information Room.

Copy of Coroners Form attached.

*Richard Murray*  
P.O.B.43.



## 10 – Elizabeth and Phyllis

The members of the O'Callaghan family I have spoken to knew nothing about Lilian's career in the 1930s and early 1940s. They do know that she preferred to be known as "Mrs Nelson." Only her daughter-in-law, who had been close to Phyllis in later years, had heard of Mignon, as Phyllis's close friend until her suicide.

The family stories are about the following period in Lilian's long and complicated life.

In the late 1940s Lilian and Phyllis were closely involved with the international playboy Prince Aly Khan, and, according to Jane O'Callahan, his father the Aga Khan. Lilian cooked for him, probably at his house in Ireland, where he had a racing stud, and Phyllis is rumoured to have been one of his many girlfriends before he married Rita Hayworth in 1949. Phyllis had silver gifts from the prince. Perhaps Lilian was able to provide a reference from Diana Mosley, who had been Diana Mitford. Aly Khan knew her sister, Deborah, Duchess of Devonshire, in Ireland.

Douglas's second wife Jane wrote:

*While William was working for the Aga Khan, teen-age (actually in his 20s AB) Roy worked part-time for the Ali Khan as a valet. Roy told me the story that when first started working for Ali he was sent out to buy some very large, very sweet strawberries which then cost 5 shillings each. He came back with the strawberries and started to give Ali change from the purchase. Ali turned to him and said, "Don't you EVER do that again," meaning "Don't bother to give me the change. That's yours to keep."*



Prince Amin Aga Khan, Lady Anne Tree, Peregrine Hartington, Prince Aly Khan and Deho at Lismore in 1951





*Two of William's sisters, Lilian and William in Dublin c 1946-50*



*Three generations of O'Callaghans. William, Roy, Roy's daughter Mary and Lilian's sister Mary Ann in Dublin, c1946-50*



*Phyllis- a Paris studio portrait, late 1940s?*

There is a tantalising photograph taken, probably by Lilian, by the entrance to Flats 18-22 Deanhill Court, East Sheen, a very smart block which is still a favourite of actors who take what a present-day resident told me was the “thesps’ express” from Waterloo after the theatres finish.





Could the woman on the left be Mignon? The others are Edith O'Callaghan, Lilian's sister Mary Anne, Roy and Phyllis.

Mignon died in 1946 and Phyllis's outfit has a 1950s look, though she was always very fashionable. The latest possible date is August 1950 when Mary Anne died. This is a rare visit to London from Dublin by Mary Anne and Roy.

In 1939/40 the electoral roll shows that Lilian, William, Phyllis, Mignon and Douglas were all living at 2 Deanhill Rd, a few streets away from Deanhill Court.

Mignon was dancing in Coventry and living in Birmingham during the 1940s, appearing in the Birmingham electoral roll in 1945 at Betty Fox's address.

There are no electoral rolls during the war. Lilian, William and Phyllis may have lived at 2 Deanhill Rd during that time, but the Nelsons had left 2 Deanhill Rd by the time the 1946 electoral roll was produced, being replaced by Frank, Ann and Ronald Frith.

Where were they?

Elizabeth and William O'Callaghan appear as electors at 21 Deanhill Court between 1955 and 1960, when William died, and Elizabeth is listed on her own in 1961.

What happened between 1945 and 1955?

From 1947 to 1955 Phyllis used the address 478 Upper Richmond Rd for her dance school and agency. Neither she nor her parents were living there. This was the home of Henry and Sarah Wickers. There were other people living there, presumably renting rooms. In 1947 these were Richard and Nellie Watkins and Margaret Harris. By 1948 Margaret Harris has gone.

478 Upper Richmond Rd is on the corner immediately opposite Deanhill Court. I suspect, but cannot prove, that the explanation to the puzzle is that, in 1946, when Douglas had moved to America and Mignon was based in Birmingham, William and Lilian moved into the flat at Deanhill Court, but they did not register on the electoral roll until 1955.

The electoral registers list John N Harmer and Joan M Harmer as voters at 22 Deanhill Court from 1945 to 1953. In 1954 John is listed as the only voter.

They may have moved in to look after the flat while the actual owners were away which would explain why they were not listed in the records. Phyllis used the neighbouring house as her correspondence address. There is a suggestion of deception here – Phyllis does not want her business correspondence going to 22 Deanhill Court. Is it significant that Phyllis stops using that address in 1955, when Lilian and William appear on the roll at Deanhill Court?

To sum up –

The photograph dates from before August 1950, Mary Anne's death. This is five years before the O'Callaghans were definitely living at 22 Deanhill Court.

Phyllis used the address 478 Upper Richmond Rd as a correspondence address from 1947.

As that address is immediately opposite Deanhill Court is probable that Lilian and William were living at Deanhill Court, subletting from the Harmers in some way, from 1947.

The family had moved from 2 Deanhill Rd by 1946.

Therefore it is possible that the photograph could date from 1946.

The occasion of the photograph is then clear. This is a visit to England, just after the war, of Mary Anne and Roy. Phyllis has come over from her room elsewhere and Mignon, who would think of Sheen as home, is there from Birmingham.

If this is the case this is very soon before Mignon died. The contrasting expressions of Mignon and Phyllis might have all kinds of meanings. If this is not the answer the woman on the left must be Phyllis's partner after 1947, Irene Grose, but it is very hard to relate this person with the photograph of Irene from about 20 years later.

From 1947 Phyllis ran a theatrical agency giving 478 Upper Richmond Rd as her address.

The earliest mention of "Graham-Nelson" as the school and agency was known in "The Stage" on 15<sup>th</sup> May 1947, less than a year after Mignon's death.

"WANTED attractive dancers Ht 5' 5" Resident season Douglas. Audition 26 West-st., Friday 2-4 p.m."

"Graham-Nelson" was Phyllis and her new partner Irene Grose, who used the professional name Renee Graham. This first mention of the organization is in Douglas, Isle of Man. (Phyllis and Renee retired to the island in the 1970s.) On the 21<sup>st</sup> August they advertised for a dancers for a review "near London", giving their address as the Pavilion, Onchan, Isle of Man.

Graham-Nelson advertised regularly on the front page of the Stage from then on. On 2<sup>nd</sup> October they advertised both for "Good Head Girls" for panto and dancers and juveniles for London and for a Matron for the Camberwell area, where they were providing dancers for the pantomime "Babes in the Wood". On 27<sup>th</sup> November they

advertised for dancers and a Head Girl for panto in Burnley.



In the same season they also provided dancers for Ipswich. This was a very busy business.

On 18<sup>th</sup> March 1948 Irene Grose and Phyllis Nelson-O'Callaghan "known as Graham-Nelson" placed a notice on the front page of The Stage announcing that they were applying for a licence for London County Council to "carry on an Employment Training School and Agency for Theatrical and Variety Artists at 182 Hammersmith-road W 6."

In the 1950s there are references to "choreography by the Misses Graham-Nelson" and in 1948 Irene wrote a letter to the Stage under the name of "Irene Graham-Nelson". For the 1949 Southend pantomime "Irene Graham-Nelson" arranged the dances. Irene and Phyllis were presenting themselves as a couple.

I have been able to find very little about Irene. In the 1939 Register she was a travelling dancer in Blackburn, born 1914, at the same time that Phyllis and Mignon were in Sunderland. According to a distant relation Irene was born in Onchan, Isle of Man, the daughter of Eden Hildesley Grose and Sarah Clarke. The 1939 register gives her date of birth as 8<sup>th</sup> February 1914, whereas her father's army service record gives 8<sup>th</sup> February 1914.

These mentions of "Graham Nelson" show that Phyllis and Irene were already operating as a couple in May 1947, and as they were setting up dancers for a

summer show at that point it has to be assumed they had started working together before this.

From 1955 Graham-Nelson use 22 Deanhill Court as their address. On 17<sup>th</sup> October 1957 they advertise the availability of their “12 English Roses” for “London Cabaret, Masonics, etc.” giving the Deanhill Court address.

On 22<sup>nd</sup> October 1959 “The Kit Kat Girls are advertised, apply to Nelson 22 Deanhill Court.

On 13<sup>th</sup> October 1960 there is an advertisement for dancers which asks for girls to write “Patrice” at 22 Deanhill Court. In January Graham-Nelson, Eight Vanities (a Graham-Nelson troupe) and “Patrice Babes” were appearing at the Capitol, Horsham.

The last mention of “Graham-Nelson” is Thursday February 19<sup>th</sup> 1961 which offers “A Graham-Nelson Dance Team immediately available for tour or season but gives Phyllis’s new address, Pedlars, Horam, Sussex. William had died in 1960. Lilian moved to Teddington for a few years and Phyllis and Irene retired to a cottage in East Sussex.

On his death certificate William Patrick O’Callaghan is described as “Private Secretary (retired.) He died at the West London Hospital Hammersmith on 13<sup>th</sup> October 1960, aged 78. Lilian is named as informant, as “E M O’Callaghan”, 22 Deanhill Court, East Sheen, W4.

REGISTRATION DISTRICT		Hammersmith							
1960	DEATH in the Sub-district of	Hammersmith	in the Metropolitan Borough of Hammersmith						
Columns:-	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
No.	When and where died	Name and surname	Sex	Age	Occupation	Cause of death	Signature, description and residence of informant	When registered	Signature of registrar
4777	Thirlanth October 1960 West London Hospital, Hammersmith	William Patrick O'CALLAGHAN	Male	78 years	of 22 Deanhill Court East Sheen, Barnes, Private Secretary (Retired)	(a) Unnamed (b) Renal congestion (c) Hypertensive Heart disease, Exacerbated by Gravel, Diabetes, & HYPERT.	E.M. O'CALLAGHAN Widow of deceased 22 Deanhill Court East Sheen, S.W.14.	Thirlanth October	F. G. Bots Registrar

Lilian's great nephew remembers being given a horrible brown coat that had belonged to Aly Khan, probably after William died, and his mother describing Lilian's home as being full of tailor's dummies wearing costumes and a stuffed gorilla.

For the next few years (the electoral rolls are only available up to 1965) she lived as "Elizabeth Mary O'Callaghan" at 35 Holmesdale Rd, Teddington, sharing a house with Charles H B Hoult and Elizabeth M Kenny.

Surprisingly, Phyllis became a state registered nurse in 1965. It is hard to believe that she is 55 in this photograph.



Lilian, as Elizabeth Mary Josephine O'Callaghan, died on 25<sup>th</sup> February 1973 at the Princess Alice Hospital, Eastbourne. Her last address was 57 Harebeating Drive, Hailsham Sussex. She is the widow of "William Patrick O'Callaghan, Private

Secretary (retired.)” The informant was Phyllis, who had been living a few miles away at Pedlar’s Cottage, Gun Hill, Horam.



*Phyllis has written on the back of this “Mum - the last picture.” This is Lilian (left) with Rene, Phyllis’s partner. The car, a Vauxhall Viva HB, dates it to no earlier than 1966. Phyllis still had this car when her sister-in-law Jane visited her in Sussex in 1985. It is hard to see Rene as the same person as the woman on the left of the Deanhill Court photograph.*



DEATH		Entry No.
Registration district Eastbourne		Administrative area County Borough of Eastbourne
Sub-district Eastbourne		
1. Date and place of death Twenty-fifth February 1973 Princess Alice Hospital, Eastbourne		
2. Name and surname Elizabeth Mary Josephine O'CALLAGHAN		3. Sex Female
5. Date and place of birth 15th August 1883 Irish Republic		4. Maiden surname of woman who has married Connelly
6. Occupation and usual address Widow of William Patrick O'Callaghan Private Secretary (retired) 57 Harebeating Drive, Hailsham, Sussex		
7. (a) Name and surname of informant Phyllis Edith O'Callaghan		(b) Qualification Daughter
(c) Usual address Pedlars Cottage, Gun Hill, Horam, Heathfield, Sussex		
8. Cause of death (a) Bilateral Broncho-pneumonia 11. Fractured Neck of Femur and Toxaemia due to purulent cystitis Certified by A.C. Somerville, Coroner for Hove District of East Sussex after Post mortem without Inquest.		
9. I certify that the particulars given by me above are true to the best of my knowledge and belief ..... <i>J. O'Callaghan</i> ..... Signature of Informant		
10. Date of registration Twenty-fifth February 1973		11. Signature of registrar M.S. Broadhurst, Registrar

In the 1980s Phyllis went to live in Ramsey, Isle of Man. Jane O'Callahan remembers visiting her. She had a photo and a biography of Aly Khan on display. Jane writes:

*"After she quit dancing professionally, she taught dancing. In the entranceway to her Isle of Man home when we visited her in about 1995, she still had a rack of dance costumes her students had worn. Even in her 80's she was still quite agile. And still very beautiful."*

She also had a watch given to her by the Prince.



*Phyllis O'Callaghan and her brother Douglas O'Callahan, Isle of Man 1995*

Phyllis died in 2006 at the age of 95. She was the only one of Lilian's children to have accompanied her mother through all her troubles and, it seem certain, the last person who could have explained how Mignon came to live as a member of the family.



