



Women in the Second World War: Marjorie Mackett

The year 2020 was the 75th anniversary of the end of the Second World War and Ventnor Heritage Centre mounted an exhibition that focused on what life had been like for those living in the Undercliff and its surrounding villages. Covid-19 prevented the Centre from opening last year and so the exhibition has been left in place for the 2021 re-opening (Wednesdays to Fridays 10-4), although it has been available as a video presentation on the Centre's website over the past 12 months.

The Undercliff area, of course, played host to women who were serving in the armed forces, including the WAAFs stationed at the RAF radar establishment on St. Boniface Down and the WRENs engaged in the secret tracking of messages in the German Naval Enigma code, based at a large requisitioned property on the Whitwell Road. Many such women were not from the Island, but the inevitable corollary was that there were Island-born women who also served in the forces and were posted to establishments at different places on the mainland. One such individual was Marjorie Mackett, born in Ventnor and a pupil at St. Boniface School. Her first job was in Philip Bagwell's well-known newsagent shop at 74 High Street. Then, in 1942, she signed up to join the WAAFs (Women's Auxiliary Air Force), despite being formally under-age. After training at Farnborough, she was initially posted to RAF Boscombe Down in Wiltshire, but was soon to move to the top secret spy installation at RAF Medmenham at Marlow in Buckinghamshire.



Based at Danesfield House, the station became home to part of RAF Intelligence and, in particular, photographic intelligence. It was here that the results of photographic reconnaissance operations in European and Mediterranean theatres of war were processed. By the time of VE day in May 1945, Medmenham had accumulated 5 million photographic prints and 40,000 reports. While Marjorie was posted here, she worked alongside Sarah Churchill, Winston Churchill's daughter.

By 1946, Marjorie was back in Ventnor working as a photographic assistant with W.J. Nigh & Sons Ltd., the well-known local post-card publisher. It was here that she met Bernard Nigh, a director of the firm, who had his own distinguished war record, and they became husband and wife. After raising four children, Marjorie served for many years in the Royal British Legion's women's section. She also participated in many other local women's groups and was a lifetime member of the RAF Association. Her story was typical of many young women of the early 1940s who saw their life-paths suddenly taken into strikingly unconventional realms, acquiring not only new status, but experiences that were to colour their lives forever.

Ventnor & District Local History Society: Michael Freeman, from files in Ventnor Heritage Centre, especially those of the late Fay Brown. Thanks to Jenny Gardner, Marjorie's daughter, for supplying the picture of her mum.



Ventnor & District Local History Society is a registered charity, working to preserve and record the history of our area and make it available to the public in the Ventnor Heritage Centre.

The Society and Heritage Centre are run and managed by volunteers.

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