



The Midwife's Tale

A short biography of

Cynthia Margaret Morris

By Keith Morris

A moment in time

It was a balmy late winter's day in 2014 and sitting across the table from me on the sun dappled patio was a little old lady with bright, twinkling brown eyes, with more than a hint of mischief in them.

It was a moment I should have seized many years ago, but only now had the occasion and an opportunity in time presented itself and I summoned up the initiative and enthusiasm to take on the task.

The occasion was a relaxing week's holiday in a small Spanish-style apartment very near the harbour and bustling restaurant-laden sea-front in the quiet resort of Playa Blanca on the volcanic island of Lanzarote in the Canaries. The 78-year-old lady was my mother – Cynthia Margaret Morris.

I pulled out my laptop and started to type as the words rapidly came forth, often repeated, and clearly remembered as if the events described were only yesterday and not a lifetime away.

Cynthia had often talked of a mysterious and disturbing start to life, one which has haunted her ever since and been a family talking point. I wanted to give her the chance to tell me everything she remembered about her childhood.

The year was 1936

It was August 1936 and Adolf Hitler was presiding over the Olympics in Berlin. Black American sprinter Jesse Owens won four gold medals and broke nine Olympic records – and Hitler's claims for Aryan racial superiority at the same time.

The Spanish Civil War began in July and earlier in the year King George V had died. Edward VIII became king and in December abdicated to marry American divorcee Wallis Simpson.

Cynthia was born on August 27, in the same month as Robert Redford and Yves Saint Laurent.

The country and world was locked into the longest and deepest depression of the twentieth century. Known as the Great Depression, unemployment reached nearly 17%.

Against this simmering unsettling background, Cynthia was born in a hostel in Kidderminster to a single mother, which at the time was not considered an acceptable state of affairs.

Her mother Ada Gertrude Harper, aged 36 years, was not allowed to keep the tiny baby, who was taken into a foster home.

Cynthia's first memory, at the age of three, was standing in the back doorway of a council house in Bloxwich, Walsall. It was the home of her foster parents, Mr and Mrs Jones and their son Bernard, with whom Cynthia was expected to share a bed.

The fostering, for whatever reason, did not work out and at the age of three, Cynthia went to live in a hospital, but not the sort that she later went on to enjoy a long-lasting career in as a nurse and midwife.

Preston Hospital

This was Preston Hospital, an almshouse occupying a listed country hall in the village of Preston upon the Weald Moors.

It was established in 1716 by the will of Lady Catherine Herbert, the daughter of the 1st Earl of Bradford. It was left as a bequest to build an Almshouse in Shropshire for 12 women and 12 girls as a thanksgiving for her rescue when lost in the Alps.

The Hospital consisted of a quadrangle, with accommodation for 12 widows and 12 girls, a chapel, a school and an endowed income.

Cynthia recalls: “For us children it was a great huge place with large grounds which contained rooms that elderly ladies lived in. They were self-contained with a communal toilet, kitchen gardens and coal bunkers for the elderly. I remember going round to see old ladies and they used to give us bread and butter and sugar sandwiches.

“There was a big drive with a row of tall lime trees up to the metal gates. At the start of the drive lived a couple of caretakers with their children, who we did not mix with.

“We were not allowed to go anywhere, except on accompanied walks and were chaperoned everywhere.

“I was a naughty, rebellious girl and not well behaved,” recalled Cynthia. “I used to stand at the top of the steps leading up to the hall. I would look down the drive looking towards the horizon hoping that one day my mother would come and see me.

“I did have a birthday card one year saying ‘To Cynthia from mother’. I thought it was the matron, Miss Thomas, who wrote it.

“I also remember a picture of me standing prim and proper with two plaits in my hair in the rose garden with two twins, Juliette and Ronalie, who were identical. I always liked to look neat and tidy, wearing an apron which was tied behind me. We used to have great fun, burying ourselves in great piles of leaves on the lawn.”

On the walls of the hall were big heads of deer and the like and lots of plates and pottery.

“There were about 12 of us children, all girls and orphans and we slept in one dormitory. We used to fight and things - I wasn't a very good girl.

“During the war, I remember hearing the sound of the air raids and we used to be taken down into a big cellar at the home where they kept the milk and various foodstuffs in cupboards.

“On one occasion I ran away and took my belongings and books and some sweets I had saved up. A local farmer found me walking along the river bank and he lifted me up on his shoulders and took me back to the Hospital,” said Cynthia.

She also recalls going to Preston church every Sunday morning, the same church in which she later got married, and can hear the organ playing in her mind to this day.

This would be followed in the afternoon by a walk down to nearby Kinnarsley for a Sunday School class and back to the church again in the evening.

“I remember screaming out loud during one service, I can’t remember why.”

School days

Cynthia also attended the small local junior school, where she first met Josie, who was to become a great friend and eventually a sister.

“Josie was an only child with no brothers and sisters at the time,” said Cynthia. “We just gelled and became great friends. Josie said she wanted me to come and live with her.”

The school itself had big open fires with grates and big crates of milk were brought in and put near the hearth to warm them up because they froze in the little bottles outside during the winter, Cynthia recalled.

“I also remember that I was the only one from the Hospital allowed to take the 11 plus. They bought books especially for me, English, Arithmetic and General Knowledge and I had extra tuition. Uncle Jim bought me Enid Blyton and Rupert Bear books. That was really unfair that I should be so spoilt.

“When I went up to the secondary school at Dot Hill, Wellington, I remember I was made sports captain – they could not really make me head girl as I came from Preston Hospital. As sports captain I had to go up on the stage and read the results of the netball team against other schools. I didn’t like that but braved myself to do it.

“When we played netball, we all wore navy knickers and a blouse. I didn’t like rounders because I didn’t like the hard ball,” said Cynthia.

Adopted daughter

Cynthia was allowed to go to stay with her best school friend Josie and her parents during several school holidays

“At Wayside during the holidays, we made the shed into a tent and we had covers as beds and we used to buy and sell things,” said Cynthia.

At 16, the young girls had to leave Preston Hospital. Josie was an only child at the time and she said she wanted her school friend Cynthia to go and live with her.

Josie’s parents, Stanley and Theckla Rogers lived close by to Preston at Horton. Theckla was a staunch Salvation Army attendee and keen historian and Stanley was a machine shop foreman at nearby engineering firm Sankey’s. He also worked in a betting shop and dabbled in the stock market.

Theckla was supposed to have some kidney problem and been told she could not have any more children.

But they were not the only people to express an interest in adopting Cynthia.

“Everyone it seemed wanted to adopt me,” she said. “The local butcher, Uncle Jim the organist at Preston church who lived with his

mother, and Miss Watson who was the senior mistress at my secondary school. She liked me, I was so spoilt, she used to bring sweets for me. She lived with her cousin, another Miss Watson, a teacher at the same school.

It was, however, the Rogers family who adopted Cynthia at the age of 16, an event which shaped her life from that moment.

“I remember the day,” said Cynthia. “I went to the college in the morning and I was Cynthia Harper. I then went to the court with Mum and Dad in the middle of the day and they legally adopted me. So when I went back to college in the afternoon I was Cynthia Rogers.

“I went to live with mum and dad and Josie and they let me go on the 12-month secretarial course, doing shorthand typing and book-keeping.

Cynthia got a job with a small firm locally and then went on to Sankey’s and later the Army Ordnance Depot at Donnington where she was a typist, until she started her nursing career.

In her free evenings, Cynthia liked to go dancing with Josie.

“We used to cycle down the road to the local dances, at Sankey’s social club and leave our cycles down an alleyway with some relatives in Trench. I remember there was a huge mirror ball in the middle of the dance floor. There were some girls who used to sit on the seats going around the edge and nobody asked them to dance. Josie and I were always asked to dance.

“I used to say I don’t know how to do it but I will give it a go – so I just got up and learnt to dance – I always loved music.

“Mum and dad were very good to me, though mum could be very argumentative. Dad was quiet and they both came from big families in the village.

“I had an address book with my mother’s address written in it, which mum tore out – it said Gladstone Road. My mum did not want me to contact my real mother,” said Cynthia.

A nursing career

Cynthia wanted to become a nurse and Uncle Jim wrote a letter to the matron of Shrewsbury Hospital, to get her in as she did not have a high enough educational achievement.

She was accepted and in 1954 started her three years’ general nurses training and became a State Registered Nurse.

This was followed in 1959 by her 12 months’ midwifery training to become a State Certified Midwife, with six months at Chiswick, along with Ceinwen Williams, Lucy Williams and John Bewley – a trainee doctor who was doing his paediatrics – and the second six months was spent on her own in Cheltenham.

Other close nursing colleagues were Jean Foulkes in Shropshire and Joan Webb and Jill Hopkins from Shrub Hill Hospital in Worcester.

New Year’s Eve 1958

New Year’s Eve 1958 proved another turning point in Cynthia’s life.

Living in lodgings in Shrewsbury and with no-one to go out with for the night, Cynthia thought: “I am not going to stay in by myself, so I bravely went to the Morris Hall ballroom in Shrewsbury alone.”

Also at the Morris Hall were two young Police Constables, Len Morris and Cyril Hughes who were living in the town’s Police hostel, Lindisfarne.

But Cynthia was dancing with a young farmer she knew when the pair arrived.

Around midnight, Len and Cyril left the Hall but returned later when Cyril, whom Cynthia knew, introduced her to Len.

“We must have clicked,” she recalled, “because Len came to the hospital later that same day and took me out on my afternoon off. We also saw each other that evening – three dates in just one day.”

Cynthia then went off for six months to Chiswick, seen off at the station with her big trunk by Len.

After she completed her training Cynthia then went to work in a maternity unit in Wellington until she started her family.

Family

Cynthia and Len were married on October 22, 1960, at St Lawrence Church, Preston upon the Weald Moors and started their married lives in a flat above the police station in Shrewsbury.

They later moved into a separate Police House in Shrewsbury and it was here that Cynthia started their family when twins Tim and Keith were born just ten minutes apart at Shrewsbury Hospital on February 12, 1962. Cynthia stopped her work as a midwife whilst bringing up the children.

In 1964, Len was transferred to the village of Hanwood, near Shrewsbury and it was there that Helen was born in the Police House on July 8, 1965. The twins started school in Hanwood in 1967.

In January 1968, the family moved to another police house, this time in Henwick Road, Worcester, when Len was promoted to a Police Sergeant.

In 1970, with the children all now at school, Cynthia resumed her much-loved nursing career at the Shrub Hill Maternity Unit in Worcester and Len was later promoted to Police Inspector, working in the West Mercia Constabulary HQ control room at Hindlip Hall.

The family was fortunate to be able to remain at Henwick Road for the whole of the children's education at Henwick Grove Primary School then the Worcester Royal Grammar School for the twins and the Worcester Girls Grammar School for Helen.

Len retired after his full 32 years' of Police service at the age of 53 in 1987 and Cynthia continued with her midwifery at Shrub Hill until 1996.

Retirement was anything but, especially for Len who went on to build their own home in the extended garden of Henwick Road and in 1989 continued a life-long love of tennis by qualifying as an LTA coach, which he continued for 18 years until 2007. In 1991 he also qualified as an LTA accredited referee and continued in this profession until 2013.

Cynthia's adoptive parents Stanley and Theckla, despite earlier predictions, had two more children of their own. Clive was born in 1954, the year Cynthia began her nursing career, and Pamela was born four years later in 1958.

Theckla passed away in 2002 and Stanley in 2003. Sadly, beloved friend and sister Josie passed away in May 2009.

Cynthia's biological mother died in 1983, before Cynthia had the chance to meet her again.

She now has six grandchildren: Hannah and Tom, born to Keith, a journalist and website publisher and his wife Nicky a general practitioner; Jamie and Jordan born to Tim, a public sector PR specialist and his first wife, American national and teacher Kelly; and Isaac and Eva, adopted by Tim and his second wife, Shallja, a fellow public sector communications professional.

As well as having a key role in introducing Mum and Dad on that first New Year's Eve, Cyril and Diana Hughes remained best friends of the couple for 65 years. Both couples bought time-share holiday

homes in the Canaries on the island of Lanzarote for two weeks every October, where they shared special memories for almost 40 years.

Cynthia and Len were also veteran travellers, criss-crossing the world visiting Australia, New Zealand, China, South Africa, North and South America, Canada, Hawaii, Fiji, Singapore, Malaysia, the Caribbean and Europe.

A final chapter

The couple moved from Worcester to Rosemont in Ash Vale, Surrey, in the summer of 2015 to be nearer to their close family, with Mum's health starting to fail.

They spent several happy years here before Mum's health began taking a toll. Dad was her main carer for many years and did his very best to keep her in the state to which she was accustomed.

A final visit to Lanzarote was enjoyed in 2016 with Nicky, Keith and Helen, who has now retired from her role as a finance director with a US law firm in London..

In 2022, the couple became great grandparents with the birth of Grayson to grandson Jamie, a tattoo artist, and his partner Whitney, who live in California. Jordan is also living and working in San Diego, as a security installation technician.

Meanwhile, back in the UK, Hannah is a hospital doctor in Brighton and Tom is a software dev ops engineer in London.

Cynthia's health continued to decline but Len kept her living at home with him, with help from carers Susan and Lucy, with short respite stays in various care homes, up until a few weeks before she died peacefully on October 29, 2023. Her funeral took place at Aldershot Crematorium on November 23.



Wedding of Len and Cynthia Morris, Preston upon the Weald Moors, October 22, 1960.