

# July 2024 Newsletter

## Some Dates for Your Diary

In October we are featuring some of the history of one of Colwall's famous former residents – the nationally acclaimed artist Dame Laura Knight, R.A.

On Saturday 19<sup>th</sup> October between 10.00 a.m. and 12.00 p.m. we will be hosting a display about Laura Knight and her associations with Colwall. The venue is Colwall Library.

Two days later, on Monday 21<sup>st</sup> October, local historian Heather Whatley of the Dame Laura Knight Society will be giving a talk about Laura Knight. The venue is Colwall Village Hall and doors will open at 7.00 p.m. with the talk starting at 7.30 p.m.

## Women's Cricket In Colwall in the 1930s by Liz Hill



On the 28<sup>th</sup> August 1933, British Movietone produced a newsreel on a women's cricket match taking place in Colwall. This 1 ½ minute newsreel entitled "Woman Cricketers Play Serious Game" can be viewed at: <https://youtu.be/vB-slF6k8?si=Myx-cvFNyy2twUe>

The newsreel provides imagery of Colwall looking lovely in the 1930s. The famous England cricketer Elizabeth Alexandra Snowball, who was known as 'Betty Snowball', (pictured left) is one of the players.

A transcript of the narration of the film is provided below. The attitudes of men towards women have fortunately improved in the intervening years between then and now...!

### Transcript

*"It is not so very long ago that the idea of women aspiring to play cricket was a subject for mirth and a festival week of women's cricket even in the localities so remote from Lords as Colwall in Herefordshire might well have caused humorous comment in the county pavilions.*

*In 1933 it is very different and the chief wonder at Colwall is that the ladies have abjured the flannel trousers or shorts which adorned feminine limbs in other branches of sport and recreation. In this restraint, we may honour them for cricket is not a game of which the established form should likely be changed.*

*At the moment Miss Striker is batting and her opposing captain Miss Snowball is behind the stumps. The umpires are men which perhaps is unwise because what chances are for traditional gallantry if a gentleman is called upon to give a lady out."*

## Colwall Home Front Project

As we've mentioned before in previous newsletters, Colwall Village Society is running a project to add to our records of life in Colwall during the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War. The aim of the project is to record memories and photographs for future generations, as well as having an event in 2025 which will celebrate Colwall's Home Front, along with an accompanying booklet.

We have been making steady progress and a small group of volunteers have had a couple of preliminary meetings and are already doing some research. The intention is to look into a broad selection of subjects associated with life in the Parish during the war years. Amongst these are Invasion and Emergency Procedures; Farming; Schools and Evacuees; Small and Large Businesses; the roles of the Women's Voluntary Service, the Red Cross and the church.

Our research is taking many forms and as well as trawling through the CVS archives we are doing desktop investigations using the internet. We are also out and about undertaking interviews with those with stories to tell, looking at physical evidence in the local landscape, and intend to do a group visit to the Hereford Archives and Records Centre at Rotherwas near Hereford to look at local records held there.

It's not too late to get involved and we'd still welcome some more help. If you'd like to contribute in any way then please contact Liz Hill, the CVS Chair.



## The marriage of Erika Mann to W. H. Auden by Andy Ball



In 1935, whilst working as a schoolmaster at the Downs School in Colwall, the English homosexual poet – W. H. Auden (1907-1973) married a lesbian German – Erika Mann (1905 -1969).

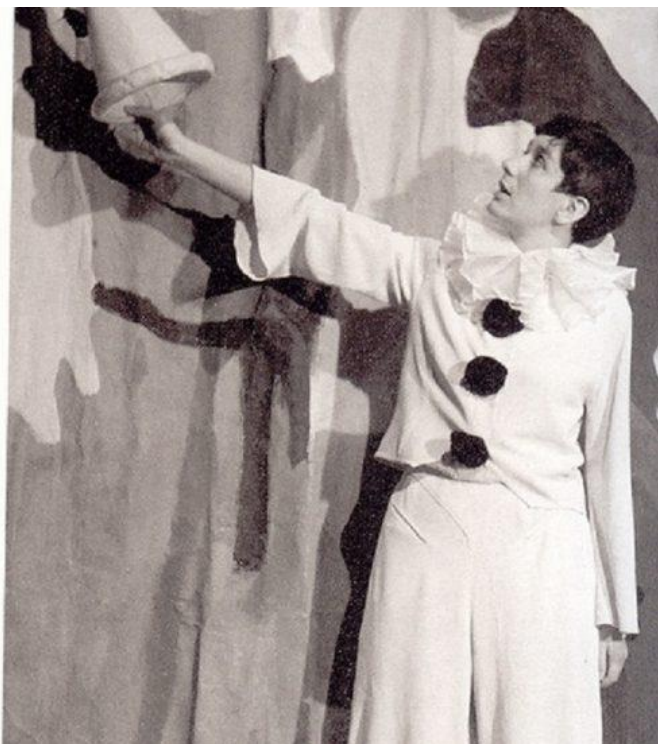
This strange pairing is a little-known part of Colwall's past that resulted in a surprisingly long-lasting friendship. The story of their marriage has many comedic elements but also provides interesting insights into the lives of two famously complicated characters.

Auden came to teach at the Downs in the autumn of 1932 having previously spent two years in a similar role at the ailing Larchfield Academy in Helensburgh, Scotland. The Downs was a far better prospect, a well-run, flourishing school, at that time with over eighty boy pupils. For the headmaster at the time - Geoffrey

Hoyland - the appointment of Auden was something of a coup. Auden's poetic talents were beginning to be recognized nationally following the publication of his first publicly available book *Poems* in 1930 by T.S. Eliot for Faber and Faber.



Auden proved to be very popular with the pupils and an exceptionally unconventional and eccentric member of the staff. He had many unpleasant habits – notorious untidiness, bad table manners, appalling dress sense; and an addiction to chain smoking cigarettes and to biting his fingernails. However, he had a very positive impact at the Downs, immersing himself tirelessly in both the academic and the cultural life of the school enabling many pupils to lead a fuller, more joyful time there during his first stint as a member of staff (1932-1935). He subsequently returned, by invitation, for another session of teaching during the summer term of 1937.



Erika Mann was a German born actress and writer, the daughter of the novelist Thomas Mann. In the early 1930s she lived a bohemian life in Berlin and became a critic of National Socialism in Germany. From 1933 onwards she ran a satirical cabaret called *Die Pfeffermühle* ('The Peppermill') that included a series of songs and sketches that were anti-Nazi in character. After Hitler came to power Mann took the revue on tour through Europe, but by the spring of 1935 she discovered that the German authorities planned to strip her of German citizenship. Her solution to this was to ask one of her brother Klaus's friends - Christopher Isherwood - if he would marry her so that she could obtain British citizenship. Isherwood was gay and already in a relationship, so declined. However, he was also a friend of Auden, so with Mann's approval Isherwood wrote to Auden to see whether he would be willing to help. Auden's reply was as brief as could have been possible. '*DELIGHTED*' was the reply that he immediately wired back.

Why would a homosexual English poet and schoolmaster wish to marry a lesbian German actress whom he had never met? A woman who incidentally had previously also been married and subsequently divorced. It's a hard question to answer but Auden at the time was quite politicised, as a left winger, and this marriage, in a small way would be an anti-fascist stand from both political and cultural perspectives. He had also, after leaving Oxford University in the late 1920s, spent some time living in Berlin so he at least had a connection with Germany and could speak the language.

Mann posted photographs of herself to Auden at the Downs school which Auden was careful to intercept before other staff members could open them first. The images were of a boyish looking woman, in costume, with an Eton crop with a sharp swirl over one eye. '*There is my wife!*' exclaimed Auden to his friend Austin Wright upon whose accounts much of this period of Auden's life is detailed. Auden, by this time, was having some doubts about his hasty agreement to the wedding. There were two components to this. Firstly, he had concerns over how this would be welcomed by his very religious mother. Secondly, there was the question as to how Geoffrey Hoyland from The Downs, would view his actions. '*We shall see the headmaster pacing the lawn*', remarked Auden.

The story goes that Erika Mann arrived at Malvern by train but alighted one stop early at Malvern Link instead of at Great Malvern station. There she greeted the only man on the platform with the words '*It is so kind of you to marry me!*' Conversely at Great Malvern station the story goes that Auden rushed up to an unsuspecting woman exclaiming '*Darling, how lovely to meet you!*' - to which she immediately recoiled in horror! These accounts are very Audenesque in character and are very unlikely to have happened.

Austin Wright's account is more likely to be truthful. He describes how Mann was invited to come to England during the Summer term of 1935 and that he and Auden agreed to meet her at a local pub. Auden, a notoriously bad driver apparently drove there, ploughing across the village green with a white boulder trapped under the car. The meeting apparently went well. Auden was impressed with her, doubly so as she turned out to be an international rally car driver, with a licence, who insisted on driving them back to Malvern...

The couple chose Ledbury registry office as somewhere suitably low key and private for the wedding ceremony, which was to be a simple affair. Auden went with Wright to see the registrar in advance to work out the details. Unable to provide proper accounts of Mann's name, or indeed her age, to the bemused and incredibly tolerant registrar, Auden and Wright emerged from the old-fashioned office sometime later. *'He would have married me to the poker.'* Auden said.

Mann stayed in Great Malvern at the Abbey Hotel and the day before the wedding ceremony Auden took her to see Cecil Day-Lewis and his wife in Cheltenham. The engaged couple signed an agreement to make no future financial calls upon one another.

On 15<sup>th</sup> June 1935 Auden and Mann were married at Ledbury Registry Office. The marriage certificate was witnessed by Maurice Feild and Peter Roger. Maurice Feild was the arts teacher at the Downs. Peter Roger was a gardener at the school with whom Auden was having an affair and they were, at the time, sharing a nearby rented cottage. After the ceremony the wedding party returned to Colwall where photographs of the group were taken outside Maurice and Alex Feild's house.

According to Humphrey Carpenter's biography of W. H. Auden there was no celebration of the wedding. The only decoration was a bunch of flowers and cabbage leaves tied to the radiator knob of Auden's car. Auden drove Mann back to the Abbey Hotel in Great Malvern and returned to teach lessons at the Downs later that day. Carpenter claims that most people at the Downs knew the purpose of the marriage but little was made of it. That seems to tie in with the general air of tolerance at The Downs towards Auden's often eccentric actions. It is likely that people at the school would also have been aware of Auden's sexuality, even though at the time homosexuality was illegal, but they were accommodatingly willing to turn a blind eye.

In a letter of the time Auden wrote to his friend Stephen Spender. *'I didn't see her till the ceremony and perhaps I shall never see her again. But she is very nice.'* Once again this was likely to have been a part truth – the wedding was unlikely to have been their first meeting. Auden was also wrong about the extent to which he and Mann would continue to associate with one another in later years.

In May 1936 Auden and Mann collaborated to arrange another wedding. This time a union between Therese Gieshe, a member of 'The Peppermill' cabaret, who similarly needed a British passport, and a male nurse called John Simpson. Simpson was a friend of Auden's associate E.M. Forster. The ceremony, held at Birmingham Registry Office, was enthusiastically arranged and paid for by Auden, but the pairing was as eccentric as that of Auden and Mann. Gieshe was described as being manly, clad in tweeds and heavily built – as wide as she was tall, clutching a bouquet of flowers; whilst Simpson was physically tiny, and chose to dress entirely in brown.

By a quirk of fate both Auden and Mann subsequently ended up living in America in their later lives and Auden continued to see Erika Mann and her family even when he was more settled in a long-term relationship with an American Jew - Chester Kallman, whilst Mann also had other relationships with both men and women during the rest of her life. Auden continued to support Mann and in a letter to her dated May 1939 he said *'[...] whenever or if ever I can help you in any way, you must ask me.'*

Their friendship deteriorated slightly during World War II as the Mann family became staunch anti-Nazis, whilst Auden tried, in the main, to distance himself from the politics of war. However, when Mann died in 1969 she was still married to Auden and she left him a small bequest in her will - such was the enduring nature of this very unusual marriage of convenience.

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