

The Monkey Club in War and Peace

by Felicity Owen

In early August 1944, when the fighting in Europe was at its peak, I travelled from Shropshire to London to take up my first job – a clerk in the Ministry of Economic Warfare. As usual the train was packed with young soldiers in their hot battledress and their equipment and my heavy school trunk occupied precious legroom on the five hour journey. We were just grateful that there were none of the usual hold-ups.

Apart from a short visit for Whitehall interviews during a lull in the air raids, this was my first visit to London since 1937 when my family took a house in Egerton Crescent for my sister's debutante season. Now life was very different: my father was again a soldier and our temporary base in Shropshire had already lasted four years. I longed to be part of the action.

Educated mainly at Oswestry High School for Girls, instead of staying on two years to try for a scholarship to Oxford University, I chose to save time by learning German, shorthand and typing at the strangely named finishing school, the Monkey Club. This was evacuated from Pont Street to Hartland Abbey in

Part of the prospectus for the Monkey Club.

*The Three Wise Monkeys are carved over the door of a Temple in Japan.
They suggest that humanity should not absorb evil through the senses.*

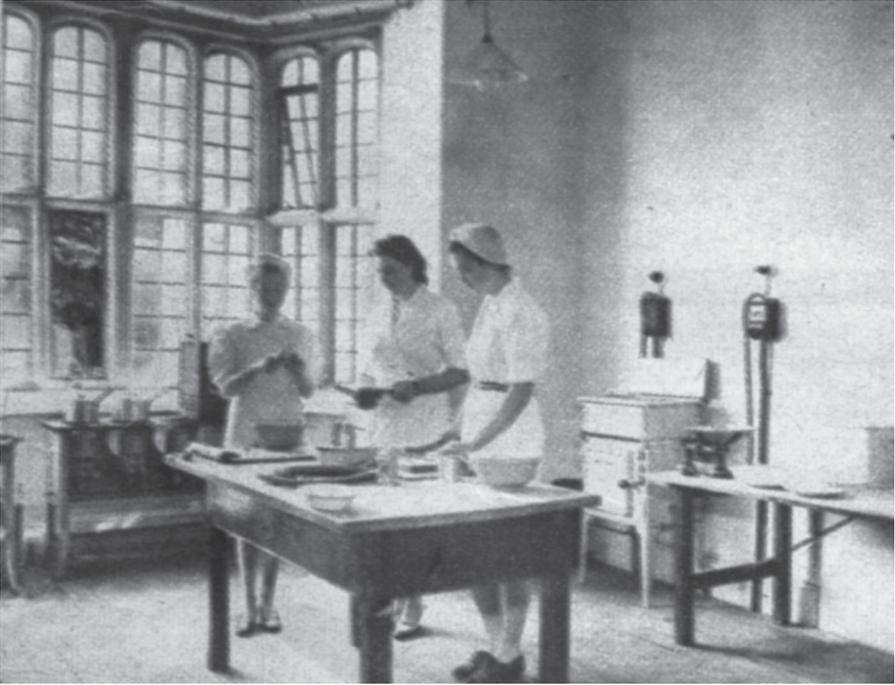


The Club of the Three Wise Monkeys

PROVIDES —

- (A) **AN EDUCATIONAL CENTRE** for Resident and Non-Resident students taking post-school education.
- (B) **CLUB PREMISES** where young people who have worked together in student days and who are still interested in educating themselves, may entertain and enjoy both the social and educational facilities of the Club.

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A Domestic Science class at 24 Pont Street.

North Devon where Miss Marian Ellison and Miss Griselda Joynson-Hicks, a partnership of considerable weight in every sense, presided over a brilliantly versatile educational set-up. Miss Ellison provided the drive while her less voluble partner was a superb manager and her name offered an introduction to a range of society familiar with her father, Home Secretary from 1924-29 nicknamed Jix, later Viscount Brentford.

The Club of the Three Wise Monkeys was registered in 1923 at 24 Pont Street by Miss Marian Ellison to provide post-school education for girls, full or part-time, in a wide variety of subjects. Residents were charged in the 1950s 130gns a term, and brochures specified that members should be in by 11pm, unless otherwise agreed, and to limit cigarettes to four a day. Gradually the membership built from all parts of the world and, although the courses were basically to acquire either secretarial competence or a cooking diploma, innumerable variations and part time pupils helped to create a unique establishment. With languages well taught, the Club provided an alternative to a finishing school in Paris or beyond. The catering even extended to cocktail parties and coming-out dances as the Club spread into adjoining houses. Such frivolities ended with

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Girls working on part of a christening cake for Prince Charles in December 1948.

the outbreak of war yet, from Devon, the management continued to provide Club accommodation for members who were war workers and I was promised a room at 23 Lennox Gardens.

In the taxi from the station I was surprised to find London looking so serene apart from Hyde Park sadly distorted by gun emplacements and barrage balloon sites. The German secret weapon was already doing damage in certain areas, while the part of Chelsea furthest from the river was to remain relatively unscathed. Lennox Gardens, a tall Victorian red brick development looking into high trees, seemed asleep. Nobody hurried to open the front door and none of the usual welcome materialised, but I pushed in. Eventually an overworked functionary rescued me from the hall having demanded my Ration Book and directed me up one floor. There, I opened the door to the refrain of 'I'll be seeing you in all the old familiar places' and the horrified occupant of a delightful double room full of photographs of a handsome RAF pilot. From Maureen, his grief-stricken fiancée, I soon learnt that he was missing over France and she just needed to be alone. Feeling totally inadequate, I promised to look for another billet, but no help came from the animated supper party downstairs and I crept back to the only spare bed; at least we had our own comfortable bathroom.

The morrow had to be better: the 30 bus from Brompton Road stopped in Park

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Lane by my office, Aldford House, a block of flats near the Grosvenor House Hotel. I was kindly received by the senior German translators, mostly former language teachers, and managed to make sense of the test telegram. The reward was a desk facing a blank wall and a daily supply of the least important missives, reducing in number as the industrial business of Germany succumbed to the advance of Allied Forces.

In the first months I was saved from the boredom of the 9-6 day by V-1 flying bombs passing overhead, the siren sending us down six floors to the basement for a nice chat until the all clear. Soon V-2s, noiseless rockets rendering sirens useless, became an equal menace and gave me the bright idea of pleading nerves at night so that the Club allowed me to take my bedding downstairs behind the sitting room sofa. This was not popular at weekends when a member brought a guest with other ideas for ending the evening. Luckily the Club acquired five bedrooms above the Walton Street bakery where I enjoyed the attic.

There were few pleasures in the last dreary winter evenings of the war and I usually hurried off the bus down Ovington Gardens to my now friendly base. Only once was I followed in the blackout and managed to jump on and off a bus

A dance at the Monkey Club.



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More House at 24 Pont Street, the home of the Monkey Club. Photo: Paul Aitkenhead

leaving my pursuer on board. Supper at Lennox Gardens was always good, though my princely earnings of £2.50 a week did not cover my Club charges and I blessed the British Restaurant in an Aldford Street house basement where volunteers produced roast lunch for one shilling. The greatest event was Christmas where the office celebrated with British sherry and an early exit, enabling me to join my sister now living in Markham Square, where a gin and lime followed by pheasant was a nice change.

With the Classic Cinema another attraction, I spent most of my time off near the King's Road and found that my Hartland friend, Penelope Harrison, had joined her sister and three more WREN drivers in the family flat at Swan Court.

This was quite a magnet for officers on leave and Penelope and I could earn a place at parties by working the kitchen. Tins of soup (unrationed) were 'improved' by chopping in winter vegetables and leftovers, spiced by Brown Sauce. Our greatest triumph was on VE night (8 May 1945) when, with over a dozen diners, we joined the crowds celebrating victory and all ended up shouting for joy outside Buckingham Palace.