



WALBERSWICK

LOCAL HISTORY GROUP

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Mea Allan, Westwood Studio, Walberswick: journalist, novelist, biographer, composer, playwright, war reporter



Life in Walberswick

In the September 2019 issue of the WLHG Newsletter ([WLHG NEWSLETTER Sept 2019](#)) Nat le Roux wrote the second part of his History of Westwood Garden – 'The Mea Allan era and afterwards'. He describes how, in 1949, at the age of forty and after ten years as a journalist in London, Mea Allan left her job at the *Daily Herald* and moved to Walberswick. Her father, Robert Greenoak Allan, had bought Eastwood and the west end of Westwood two years earlier, and Mea's plan was to develop her writing career into other, longer, forms than a newspaper article. She settled into Westwood Studio and never stopped writing. The photograph below appears on the back cover of her novel *Base Rumour*,

most likely taken in Westwood Studio in the early 1960s, typewriter and cigarette at the ready.

Mea was born Mary Eleanor Allan in Dumbartonshire, Scotland in 1909; people who met her in Walberswick recalled that she never lost her gentle Scottish burr. Her grandfather, Charles Allan, was a successful bespoke Master boot and shoemaker established in Edinburgh whose company, in 1881, employed 75 men, 7 women and 10 boys. Her paternal grandmother was Caroline nee Schmidt, born in Torgau, Prussia – a town which later appears in Mea's novel *Rose Cottage*. Mea's father



continued the shoemaking business in Glasgow, retiring to Walberswick at the age of 75 with his wife Helen (nee McIndoe Maitland).

Mea Allan seems to have quickly found her feet in Walberswick life. She was a speaker at the Walberswick WI in 1951, possibly relating her experiences as a war correspondent, and was Parish Clerk for a number of years during the early 1950s, issuing her perfectly punctuated typewritten instructions in case of a Flood Warning - see [WLHG NEWSLETTER Oct2023](#)

"These instructions are to be followed only when you consider that the tide will be abnormally high and dangerous.

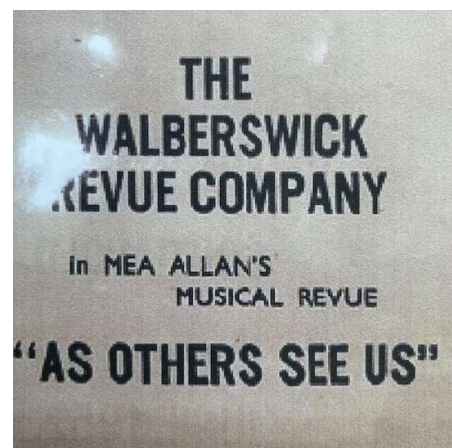
Go immediately to Miss Sanders, 'Cartref', The Terrace, and tell her about the tide. She will probably instruct you to ring the Gannon Room bell. Ring the bell as loudly as you can and for about 30 seconds."

Not one to waste a good story, she made Walberswick and flooding a headline in the *Daily Herald* :



The Daily Herald, February 1954

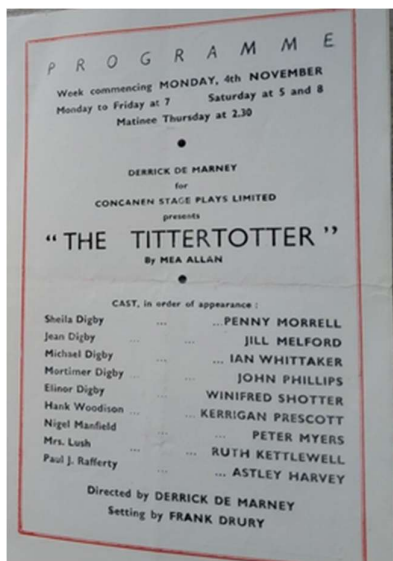
There was always the writing - not just the odd article and not only novels. As well as a typewriter, a piano was installed in Westwood. In June 1952, a production of Mea's musical revue *As Others See Us* based on the various activities of the people in the village, was presented by The Walberswick Revue Company at St. Edmund's Hall in Southwold.



The following year her pantomime *Babes in Wonderland* was performed in Walberswick and Southwold. David and Dione Shirreff of Leveretts in Walberswick, hailed it as:

'a triumphant success ... we have certainly never seen a better amateur performance of the kind. The plot is an ingenious medley of many pantomime memories. We were transported to Wonderland by the beauty of the whole performance and by the rhythm and melody of the songs, which we hope to see published in due course.'

More was to follow. In 1955 her comedy, *The Changing Wind*, toured the provinces, described as having a central theme of 'a big contemporary problem – the growing Americanization of British life'. And in 1957 another of her plays, this time a comedy set in Suffolk - *The Tittertotter* - was touring the provincial theatres, Mea Allan also composer of its theme tune.



Programme for Mea Allan's *The Tittertotter* at Cardiff New Theatre, 1957. Newspaper ad for *The Changing Wind* at the Kings Theatre Portsmouth, 1955.

Mea shared her life in Walberswick with Grace Woodbridge who had had a long career in theatrical productions. Before journalism, Mea had studied at the Central School of Speech Training and Dramatic Art (now usually called Central) and her interest in theatre continued to develop. In January 1960, it was reported in *The Stage* that the two of them were launching the 'Suffolk Theatre Project'. The project - to build a theatre - was estimated to cost £50,000, and the 500-seater theatre – yet to be funded " ... will be the new cultural and artistic centre of the county". The initial aim was to enrol 1000 members, and within the first eight weeks of the launch they had already had 300 on their books. The following notice appeared in *The Stage*:

THEATRICAL EMPLOYERS
REGISTRATIONS ACTS 1925 & 1928
Notice Is Hereby given that

GRACE WOODBRIDGE and
MEA ALLAN residing at West-
wood Studio, Walberswick, Southwold,
Suffolk, and carrying on business under
the name of THE SUFFOLK THEATRE
intend to apply to the East Suffolk County
Council for registration under the above-
named Acts.
Dated August 22nd, 1960.

In June, six months after the launch, Edith Evans (not yet a Dame) became their 500th member and an anonymous benefactor purchased a building in Market Place, Saxmundham for the theatre (now the home of Cotton Tree Interiors). It was planned that the site would contain a ground floor restaurant and snack bar, plus a theatre club with its own bar and a further restaurant and snack bar on the first floor. The auditorium would be built at first floor level in the garden at the rear. A banner celebrating this landmark moment was unfurled by Christopher Hassall, writer, actor and librettist, at a ceremony to mark the occasion of such good news; it read: 'This is the home of the Suffolk Theatre'.

In September the first function held in the new theatrical home was an exhibition of model theatres and puppets. In December there was a production of *Christmas Crackers* with a large cast; Richard Crisp, now Chairman of the Saxmundham and District Local History Society, recalls being in the audience and the excitement of having a theatre in Saxmundham. But sadly, just two years after the celebratory banner and the anonymous benefactor, shows were suspended. There was "no income to meet continuing overheads". Mea Allan, however, had continued to write and published two novels during this time: *Rose Cottage* in 1961 and *Base Rumour* a year later.



Two of Mea Allan's novels and the first of her garden-related histories, all published in the early 1960s. The covers of *Base Rumour* and *The Tradescants* were designed by Clifford Russell who lived in the village at Paules Fenn, The Street ([WLHG NEWSLETTER Feb2025](#))

Both novels are set in Walberswick – thinly disguised as the village of Staveney St. Andrew. In *Rose Cottage* there is a description of the road into the village and the bend from which the church tower is first seen, and how a car driver should slow down:

‘...so that they might devour each detail of red pantiled roof and thatched eave. It was a pretty village where gardening was a positive mania ... even the roadside verges were cultivated.’

The first lines of the opening chapter of *Base Rumour* begin – where else:

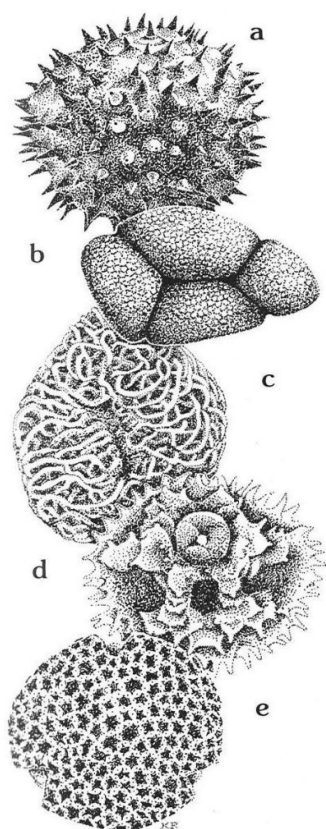
‘The four-ale bar at the Anchor was crowded with its Saturday night regulars. Talk was noisy, cheerful and unguarded, for Saturday night meant you were off the chain with money in your pocket.’

The names of the characters at the bar are still half-familiar: Toshie Cross, Chippy Stannard, Chadd the builder, Charlie Fenn; the world of Staveney St. Andrew in the very early 1960s as

depicted in Mea's novels is recognisable today, some sixty years later. Where previously many of those men in the Anchor had been fishing herring for a living, now most of them:

‘...were in the building trade. This might seem odd in a parish of five hundred souls tucked away in an out-of-the-world corner of the Suffolk coast. It was not so odd when you came to consider that Staveney St. Andrew was fast becoming a mecca for noise-weary Londoners whose one thought was to find a waft of God’s air still uncontaminated by diesel fumes, a haven of peace in which they could refresh themselves before returning to the rat race. Word had got round where these delights were to be found, for the lucky ones already installed here could not help boasting.’

Mea Allan was a prolific writer. In the 1970s she published 10 books, sometimes two a year. This was the decade when she focussed on biographies and histories of gardeners, botanists and plant collectors (*The Tradescants; The Hookers of Kew; E.A. Bowles and Myddelton House; Tom’s Weeds: The Story of Rochford’s; Darwin and His Flowers; William Robinson, Father of the English Flower Garden*), along with books on gardens, on gardening, garden guides, and more than one book on weeds. Later she contributed chapters to other books and publications, among them *The Englishwoman’s Garden*, edited by Alvilde Lees-Milne and Rosemary Verey; all of these were written between 1964 and 1982.



One of these books, *Darwin and his Flowers: The Key to Natural Selection*, was illustrated by a young plant scientist, Keith Roberts (now a frequent visitor to Walberswick together with his wife Nicky whose great grandparents were Francis and Jessie Newbery). This is one of the illustrations.

Pollen grains, drawn from scanning electron micrographs, from cotton, green-winged orchid, storksbill, dandelion and meadow cranesbill. A drawing by Keith Roberts for *Darwin and His Flowers*.

Keith recalls visiting Mea in 1976: “I came to Eastwood several times for tea and to gather up details of exactly what she wanted. I decided on simple black stipple drawings, which she seemed delighted with. I have fond memories of Mea as a forceful and very intelligent woman with a genuine love of plants and gardens.”

Amongst all this horticulture she also managed to fit in a biography of William Gifford Palgrave, *aka* Palgrave of Arabia.

Her horticulture-related writing and research is archived at The Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew. A collection of her papers was donated to the Centre for the Conservation of Historic Parks and Gardens at York University. Her biography of the Tradescants encouraged the establishment of the Tradescant Trust and her contribution was recognised in 1981 when she was made a freeman of the Worshipful Company of Gardeners.

In the early summer of 1982, she published her final biography: *William Robinson 1838-1935. Father of the English Flower Garden*. Mea, in a wheelchair, attended the launch at Robinson’s home, Gravetye Manor in West Sussex. She died two months later in August at the age of 73.



Life at the Daily Herald

This year marks the 80th anniversary of the end of the Second World War and possibly the last major anniversary for those who took part. Mea Allan's experience of 'The Peace' was largely in Walberswick but her newspaper career was almost entirely bookended by the beginning and end of that War. She started at the *Daily Herald* in London on 29th June 1939 where, after a successful month's trial, the Editorial Manager, Percy Cunliffe, wrote offering her 'a permanent appointment as a reporter at a salary of £9.9.0. a week. I sincerely hope that your association with the DAILY HERALD will be pleasant for all concerned.'

The *Daily Herald* had strong trade union links and an almost exclusively working-class readership, with astonishingly high daily sales of 2 million. Her reports were dominated by her coverage of the impact of war, firstly on civilian populations where she documented the experience of families and individuals in different parts of the UK and then, more dramatically, by the period when she travelled to Europe. Mea was the first British woman to be accredited as a war reporter.



The Imperial War Museum holds the Mea Allan archive with papers relating to this period of her life. This photograph shows some of her identity cards, passes and Press accreditations. They are contained in a somewhat daunting heap-upon-heap of boxed files, lever arch files, blue boxes, red files, brown folders, and there are hundreds of her letters. One of her earlier letters is forty-two pages long. Here is one written to her cousin Jean:

Sunday, June 10th, 1945.

Jean Dear,

So much has happened since we last wrote each other. The Peace...and now the coming election. And I've been on the Continent for five weeks. Holland, Belgium, France and Germany. It was a wonderful experience. I went to Belsen and couldn't believe what I saw. It is impossible to imagine it, and almost impossible to realise that one set of human beings has so debased and degraded another set of human beings. The internees numbered 35,000 when I was there, three weeks after the camp had been liberated. When the camp was liberated, the internees were dying at the rate of a thousand a day. When I was there they were still dying at the rate of 200-300 a day.

This is an extract from one of five closely-typed pages. She congratulates Jean on the birth of another daughter, and writes about her visits in some detail, including one to Kevelaer in Germany where she managed 'to loot a teaset and pyrex dishes – and bring them home without crack or chip!!!'. Then to Dunkirk to write an anniversary story of the famous beaches, then Normandy,

Paris and Brussels. 'Meanwhile I've to have that damned impacted wisdom tooth out, and three others, the wisdom tooth requiring a week in hospital. Beastly nuisance.'

Her letters are long, descriptive, affectionate, factual, and written to a select number of female friends and relatives. Much of the value of her correspondence lies in her frankness and the immediacy of her observations, some of the details of which would perhaps not have been printed in the *Daily Herald*. She writes fluently (these were the days of the typewriter, long before Tippex, and in a letter of around 2,300 words I could spot fewer than a dozen of her own corrections – she was an assiduous editor of her own writing).

There are two events that she records, both linked by the name and the horror that was Belsen. The year 1945 also marked the discovery of the concentration camps and the first of the war crimes trials. Here are extracts from the same letter to Jean, with Mea describing her experience of the now-liberated Belsen camp and the huts which she had visited a month earlier:

'Each hut became a cesspool of living and dying humanity in the filthiest conditions and in a mental condition of utter despair.

I got there in time to see what were described to me as "very good huts". In them were lying human skeletons with only the last breath of life in them. One could not regard them as human beings. They were mere shells motivated into the feeblest attempts at action in walking, reaching, feeding, looking. They did not appear to be aware of anything happening around them. Their eyes were unblinking, unnoticing, and on each poor face was graven the horrible indecencies to which they had been exposed and which they had suffered.

She notes that 'the system of starvation was so well carried out that the internees had fallen back on cannibalism...The dead had become to them a means of prolonging the hope of life, if not life itself. Degradation and starvation had reduced them to a state lower than animals...The Belsen smell is something I could not get out of my nostrils for a week, and I spent only seven hours in the camp.'

'I was taken round by a Czech doctor who had answered the Belsen call for help. He was trying ...with the help of 96 London medical students to induce a state of hospitalisation for all the Camp One inmates.'

One of those medical students was Ian McArthur Jackson whose student days at St. Bartholomew's Hospital, London were interrupted by the call for immediate help needed at Belsen. One of nine volunteers from Bart's his story is told in *Suffolk Memories* compiled by David Shirreff and Arthur Sharman, published by The Yard Press (out of print, copy available in WLHG archives). He later became a consultant anaesthetist at Bart's and, after many years of holidays in Walberswick, came to live here with his wife Cynthia in 1980.

Ian Jackson arrived in Belsen in early May 1945 just a few days before Mea Allan; like her, he found the smell overwhelming: 'When we were a quarter of a mile from the camp, we smelt the stench of death'. Anne and Margot Frank had died in the camp some two months before its liberation. Jackson comments on the emaciated people, crying out, frightened, and 'oblivious of our presence.'. In a letter written on 6th May he describes what he saw in one of the women's huts which he was responsible for:

'It has approximately 350 women in it – at the very least. Of those 150 are too ill to look after themselves. The floor of the hut had 2 inches of dirt – faeces and urine mixed up. They slept on the floor. The sick just lay when they became too ill to struggle for food and remained there lying in their excreta until they died.' He confirms Mea's observations of cannibalism.

The British medical volunteers were relieved on 28th May and flown back to England. Jackson notes that nine of them had contracted typhus, five TB and 23 had dysentery; he says that he had no physical ill effects and felt pleased to have done something. 'My ill effect was in the mind and came later, with nightmares.'

An accolade in The Times of 2nd June 1945 notes:

'No other group of people could have done the job which the medical students – with their initiative, energy, enthusiasm, team spirit, and medical knowledge – did. After their arrival the whole atmosphere changed. They introduced hope into the scene and among internees previously without hope.'



**Seven of the nine volunteers from St. Bartholomew's. Ian Jackson seated far right.
(copyright www.belsen.co.uk)**

Mea Allan's final words on her visit to Belsen in her letter to Jean are reflective: 'And all this happening in the midst of the Luneburger [Heath], with its clear pine-fresh air and wide miles of beautiful country. And all this happening in what we think is a Civilised World.'

There's no evidence that Mea and Ian met during her visit to Belsen, but it may be that they discovered that coincidence during the years when they were both in Walberswick. Ian Jackson died in March 2012, pre-deceasing his wife Cynthia. His obituary notes that the experience of Belsen 'had left him with disturbing memories, although this was eased by a visit in later life when he met former inmates'.

Mea Allan was despatched back to Luneburg to cover the Belsen trial a little over four months after her visit to the concentration camp. Her first report to the *Daily Herald* on 17th September includes details of the preparations for the trial: 'For days Luneburg has been echoing to the hammer blows of German carpenters converting the gymnasium hall into a courthouse.' A day later she is reporting the prosecution's case, the indictments including details of the conditions and starvation she had witnessed.

She writes to Jean again, typing her own letterhead: **Mea Allan, War Correspondent, 5PRS., BAOR.** [5PRS probably refers to the 5th Regiment Royal Artillery. BAOR refers to the British Army of the Rhine, a garrison stationed in West Germany from 1945 until 1994].

‘The faces of these SS gave me nightmares: in some ways the experience was worse than Belsen itself, for there was the embodiment of all the evil that was practised, there in the faces of those who had committed the crimes. And what hard and merciless mouths, a slit of cruelty. All the evil, the bestiality, the heartless principle of every type of badness – most of them subhuman, stupid, criminal types.’

What she had in the court were her reporter’s notebooks, and in page upon page of notes she records phrases, observations: *‘incarnation of evil’, ‘Kramer – brutal stupid subhuman face, the face of a thug’*. Her reports appear in the *Herald* daily; she notes changes in mood, that at one moment Joseph Kramer, ‘The Beast of Belsen’, seemed to be dozing off; that Irma Grese *‘titivated her blonde curls’*, and Prisoner No. 8, Herta Ehlert, *‘even smiled once or twice.’*

Mea began drafting her wartime experience in *Reporting for Duty*, providing a synopsis and two sample chapters to potential publishers. She had by then ten years’ experience of Fleet Street under her belt. Her fiction writing had begun during the war: her first novel, *Lonely* was published in 1942, her second *Change of Heart* in 1943. Later in the 1940s her drafts for short stories appeared, some reflecting her wartime experiences: *Willi Kopenick’s Half-Track*, and *Private Koko, Public Soldier Number 1*, along with *Target 31* - a suggestion for a TV film. Not all found favour and many remain in draft form. Her autobiographical *Reporting for Duty. The chronicle of one woman’s war*, is re-written and submitted to publishers but without success. Some of these manuscripts have the address of Westwood Studio and are preserved in her archive at the Imperial War Museum. Her letters have her stamp.



Penny Fox