

Marjorie Alexander

A Heswall Film Pioneer

by Roger Lane and Jenny McDonald



Marjorie with her camera

Marjorie Alexander was a remarkable Heswall resident who used her privileged and wealthy background to help both her family and the wider community. As an ardent cine photographer, she captured on film fascinating glimpses of the life of her wealthy Heswall family and some key historic events of the twentieth century. Due to a fortunate set of circumstances, this unique film archive was rescued in the nick of time after its value was not initially recognised after her death.

She was born in 1893 in the Woodhey district of Higher Bebington, the daughter of William Harrison Alexander, a senior partner in the Liverpool accountancy firm of Harwood Banner & Sons (now part of Deloitte). Her father died in Lancelyn, Bromborough, in 1914 at the age of 59. It seems Marjorie moved with her mother, Mary Sophia Alexander, to Ashlea in Thurstaston Road, Heswall, as this was the address she recorded in March 1919. This record related to the work she provided as a nurse in the Voluntary Aid Detachment during the First World War in hospitals in Hooton, Prescott, and Bromborough, in all a service totalling 1,384 hours. Her fiancé was killed in the war and she was never to marry.

After the war she acquired a Cine Kodak B-B Junior 16mm clockwork camera, which provided 29 seconds of shooting time before needing to be rewound. She filmed extensively from the 1920s to the 1960s, first using black and white film, and then using colour from 1937. The 13,000 feet of film she shot highlights many events from the 20th century at home and abroad, including Hitler and the Nazis in Nuremberg in 1934, George V's Silver Jubilee celebrations in 1935, young Queen Elizabeth's visit to New Zealand in 1953, and the film location and set in Wales for Ingrid Bergman's 1958 movie *The Inn of the Sixth Happiness*. Many readers will have memories of the Royal Navy training ship HMS *Conway*, which she filmed both in the Mersey and after it floundered in the Menai Strait. She also took many films of her family at both Ashlea and, later when she moved, at Gayton Croft, Baskerville Road. These family reels show the life of an affluent family, with servants and gardeners, smart cars, tea on the lawns and games in the garden involving different generations of the family. Both Ashlea

and Gayton Croft still exist today, but two houses have been built on the extensive lawns shown at Gayton Croft. The quality of the films are remarkable given the short time the film ran and also that Marjorie always held the camera by hand, rather than a tripod which modern photographers invariably use.



In the Snow at Ashlea

Her family responsibilities increased dramatically when Winifred, the wife of her brother Harold Gemmell Alexander, died in 1930 from Hodgkin's disease. Her brother, who was a partner in the same firm as his father, and his four children, Gemmell, Stuart, Donald and Hilary, came to stay with Marjorie and her mother, firstly in Ashlea and then in Gayton Croft. Marjorie acted as a mother to the four children. It is an interesting footnote that when Winifred was studying at Oxford University in 1914, she had become very friendly with the Prince of Wales, the future King Edward VIII, who was also studying there. They picnicked and went partying together, with Edward coming to pick her up in his Bentley. The friendship ended when Edward went off to war, but the family still retains a signed photograph the future king gave to Winifred. Winifred returned to the Wirral where she married Harold, a childhood admirer who had been wounded in the war. Had this early romance with a future king flourished, how different history may have been as Edward abdicated twelve years later for the love of another woman.

The wealth of the Alexander family allowed the employment of a retinue of domestic support, including cook, maids, gardener, chauffeur and three governesses: Olga and Erica from Switzerland, and Anne-Marie from France. One of the workers, Marion Hopley, became Marjorie's housekeeper and companion, eventually staying with her for over 40 years. The family had a holiday home and kept a sailing boat in Trearddur Bay in Anglesey where Marjorie filmed idyllic holidays in which the children sailed, swam and pursued outdoor activities.

A poignant film taken in the garden of Gayton Croft in 1939 shows Harold and his four children together for the last time before the Second World War dispersed the family. Marjorie and Harold's mother, Mary Sophia, had died in 1937. The eldest son, William Gemmell, known as Gemmell after his mother's maiden name, served in the 51st Highland Division, but failed to make it to Dunkirk after the German invasion of France. With some difficulty he made his way to Nantes, where he contacted his old governess Anne-Marie who was living there with her husband and child. At huge risk to her family, she hid him in her attic for two months before he could be smuggled back to England on a Polish trawler. He rose to the rank of major whilst on the staff of General Montgomery, received the MBE and was twice mentioned in dispatches. In 1945 he married Janet Elias, a nurse from West Kirby,