

Lady
SUE RYDER
of Warsaw

Single-minded philanthropist

TESSA WEST



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*To those who are suffering,
and to those who work to
relieve that suffering*

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FOREWORD

Małgorzata Skórzewska-Amberg

Chair of the Sue Ryder Foundation in Poland

WHEN I WAS ASKED to write a foreword for the biography you're holding in your hands now, I hesitated. I thought that maybe it was not the best idea. After all, there are many people who knew Lady Ryder better and for a longer time ... Then, I had a thought. You'll get to know Sue Ryder from this book, and I – the child of the Untamed City, who was born and raised in Warsaw will try, dear friends, to explain why it's my city where there's the world's only museum that commemorates that extraordinary woman.

I met Sue Ryder near the end of her life, in the second half of the 1990s. I can still see that petite and very slim woman. She was shy and she always tried to stand on the sidelines, never to be the centre of attention. She gave the impression that being the centre of other people's attention was embarrassing for her. As a keen observer, she had a gift of noticing people who needed help – even if that need wasn't voiced. When she interacted with those in need, she became a different person, she exuded inner warmth and won them with genuine concern for them. She even tried to look for ad hoc ways of helping them immediately.

Despite all her shyness or, I'd even say, a kind of reserve, she was gifted with unusually strong will which manifested itself immediately when it was time to act for the good of others. Determined, even stubborn when she pursued her goal, she was completely helpless when it came to herself. She couldn't quite fight for her own business. As a person who was loyal to others, she couldn't understand it when someone was disloyal to her.

She came back to the times of the war several times during our conversations. She reminisced about the Silent Unseen,* those brave Poles who faced death unflinchingly, for despite the passage of time she was still fascinated by their attitude. She emphasised that she had met young people who laughed and were cheerful and ready to sacrifice their lives “for our freedom and yours”. She understood that, but she always said while thinking back on those times that she – and not only she – had been amazed by the fact that those people viewed the even murderous training which they had to undergo, only as a way to winning a private fight of each of them. It was a private fight against all those who wanted to snatch their freedom, which they had regained painfully and not such a long time before, as well as their right to dignity and to life. Each of them took pride in being a Pole, each was full of desire for revenge for the wrongs and harm suffered by the ones left at home. She was fascinated by their ardent faith which helped them to get on a plane with a smile on their faces. Then, they were to jump off the plane into the unknown, somewhere in Polish forests. When she escorted someone to the plane, she was sure she saw them for the last time. Against all odds, she managed to meet a few of them after the war.

When she stood on Warsaw’s rubble – in the place where, as she said, there was no city, no houses, no streets, where there was nothing as far as the eye could see except the field of rubble – she understood a lot. Looking at the city sentenced to death, wiped from existence, the city which decided to live against everything, the city whose stronger and stronger human tissue grew on the rubble, she understood that the Silent Unseen couldn’t have been other than they had been. They had grown up from the same tradition, history, culture and roots which allowed the Polish to build everything from nothing for yet another time.

As it turned out later, the war wasn’t her biggest nightmare. What haunted her most was leaving behind people who, as the Polish poet Stanisław Baliński wrote, “enter a new hell, with their fists clenched, Reaching the bottom of human humiliation in

*The *Cichociemni*, usually translated as the “Silent Unseen”, were those men and women who volunteered to be parachuted into occupied Poland in order to support the Resistance.

German camps". Visiting the liberated concentration camps, and seeing the people who got out of that hell, she followed a simple rule: don't think what to do, do what you can do here and now – just help. And she helped. Many ex-prisoners from the concentration camps and so-called DPs (displaced persons) – or stateless persons who, placed in special camps, remained on German territory* after the war – fondly remember Sue Ryder, who kept helping them unceasingly for many years after the war, inviting them to Cavendish for holidays.

Then, the Sue Ryder Foundation – “a monument of millions of people who sacrificed and sacrifice their lives during wars to defend human values and those who suffer and die as a result of persecution”** – was established. As the symbol of the Foundation, Sue Ryder chose a branch of rosemary. Its shape is astoundingly similar to the Home Army's Parachuting Sign – the symbol of soldiers from the Polish Armed Forces, the Silent Unseen paratroopers – and she must have recalled the quotation from Shakespeare: “There's rose-mary, that's for remembrance; pray, love, remember” (*Hamlet*, Act IV).

Sue Ryder Houses were founded, also in Poland – against the dull communist reality. In 1992, Sue Ryder, who defined herself as a Pole by choice, established the Sue Ryder Foundation in Poland to emphasise her devotion and sentiment for this country. Not long before she died, she decided to completely separate the Polish Foundation from other entities. When she was severely ill, she bombarded us with questions several times a day, “Children, have the changes in the statute already been approved? Is the Foundation already safe?” When I saw her for the last time shortly before her death, reassured about the fate of the Polish Foundation she said, with a roguish glint in her eye, “It's only us Poles who are stubborn and crazy enough to go against the current, against the world.” She went on: “Promise me that my dream will survive in the shape that I tried to give it.” She put a heavy burden and a great responsibility on our shoulders. That's why rosemary is still the

*Over 95% of them found themselves on German territory against their will – they had been deported as forced labour to prisoner-of-war camps and concentration camps.

**Preamble of the Statute of the Sue Ryder Foundation.

symbol of the Polish Sue Ryder Foundation and we still act against the common sentiment – against the current.

The last words I heard from Sue Ryder were unusual and even painfully touching for me: “You know, I am very happy. Today I dreamed in Polish for the first time.”

Margaret Susan Ryder, a woman who had the courage to remind others about the forgotten country in the middle of Europe, somewhere behind the Iron Curtain. A woman who could recall forgotten allies when it was easier not to remember them. A woman who, after she had been made a life peer, chose the Untamed City where there’s the heart and soul of the rebellious Nation as her noble residence, as a tribute to those who died and those who survived. A woman who shared our faith and devotion to the Black Madonna that has been protecting us, our identity, faith and freedom from the Jasna Góra Monastery for hundreds of years.

The Poles are loyal and remember their friends. The time has come for us to start to pay off our debt. That’s why Warsaw, a proud city in the heart of Europe, bustling with life today, gave away its historic Toll House – one of those which once protected its gates – to commemorate its special, faithful and loyal friend, a Briton to the backbone and a Pole at heart, the Honorary Citizen of the Capital City of Warsaw.

The slightly modified quotation from *Hamlet*: “Rosemary for remembrance – pray and love and remember”, reflects Sue Ryder’s life motto most accurately. Dear Sue, we will pray and love, and remember.

I hope that thanks to this biography it is also you, dear friends, who will get to know the modest woman whom we proudly call Lady Ryder of Warsaw.

MAŁGORZATA SKÓRZEWSKA-AMBERG
Chair of the Sue Ryder Foundation in Poland
Warsaw, June 2017

INTRODUCTION

MANY MEN AND WOMEN have heard Sue Ryder's name, and some perhaps know something substantial about her, for she died less than twenty years ago, in 2000. Numerous people have worked for her, have perhaps a friend or relative who was in one of the homes she founded, have participated in a fund-raising event for her Foundation, or are familiar with the charity shops that carry her name. So what image does someone have in their mind when they think of her? What sort of a person was she? What did she do? Why? Where and how did she do it? This book attempts, among other things, to answer questions like these, but a start can be made by dealing with an different one: What did Sue Ryder's appearance and clothing say about her?

Those who knew her will have more than a few pictures in their minds, but even those who did not, or who are relying on their imagination, may have several, for over the years she spent time in uniform (first her school uniform, then her First Aid Nursing Yeomanry uniform, then the uniform of a post-war relief worker), in second-hand clothes, in a blue check outfit with a blue headscarf and open-toe shoes, in formal evening wear, in trousers and hard hat suitable for climbing up builder's ladders, in the clothes of a nurse when visiting patients, in academic dress when receiving honorary doctorates, in dark glasses, in the rich robes of a Peer of the Realm, in warm coat and boots for when driving in freezing winters, and, in India, wearing garlands of exotic flowers.

There are many people who, on hearing the name Sue Ryder, connect it not with a person but with a building, either a shop or a care home.

These varied images could indicate that Sue Ryder was a woman of many parts who did many different things at different

stages of her life. However, almost her entire life was centred on one main purpose: relieving suffering, specifically the suffering of profoundly ill people such as lepers, as well as those with disabilities, or those who had been in appalling situations, such as concentration camp victims. This was a huge task, and everything she did was either subsidiary to that purpose, a contribution towards it, or connected to it in some way – she threw her all into it for about sixty years, virtually non-stop.

Sue Ryder wrote an autobiography entitled *And the Morrow is Theirs*. It was published in 1975, when she was just over fifty years old. Ten years later she wrote another one, *Child of My Love*. The first book is of modest size, while the second, a far more substantial work of over six hundred pages, begins by repeating most of *And the Morrow is Theirs* before continuing from where that first book ends. The second of these books reads less like an autobiography than a series of memoirs with a great deal of extraneous information. But most of Sue Ryder's life of seventy-seven years was full of action and drama and energy. It deserves to be recorded, acknowledged and celebrated, which is what this book attempts to do.

This is the first biography of Sue Ryder, although, as will be seen later, another was undertaken but never completed or published. It is based on information from her autobiographies, from many individuals (or their books) and organisations, from letters and newspapers, from the Sue Ryder magazine *Remembrance*, from films and photographs.

My research was also informed by my visit to Poland which enabled me to focus on Sue Ryder's early WW2 contact with, and resulting admiration and sympathy for, the persecuted Poles who had worked so hard for Britain but whom Britain later failed to support. Those circumstances led to her life-long and strong connection to Poland and the Polish people.

In Britain, when, early in my research, I asked whether there was a Sue Ryder archive, I was told by one of her well-informed supporters that there was no archive in existence, while someone from the Leonard Cheshire Disability Archive told me that access to Sue Ryder's papers was closed. Later, I learned that sometime

Introduction

after Sue's death, copious material was sent to Poland, where it was archived. These many boxes of archives are not yet available to researchers, but when they are, they will be of great service to scholars and future biographers, as will the Foundation's new Sue Ryder Museum in Warsaw, which presents well-displayed artifacts and photos in an iconic building.

The Polish Sue Ryder Foundation was a great source of help in arranging my visits to places and people connected to Sue Ryder and her work. The Warsaw Uprising Museum also has a wealth of relevant information.

This story starts with Sue Ryder's childhood in Yorkshire and Suffolk some years before WW2. It continues through her school-days as she becomes Miss Ryder, then just Ryder and then Corporal Ryder. She remained Sue Ryder for much of the rest of her life, for though she had other job titles, such as Director, or Founder, most people called her Sue, Miss Ryder or Miss Sue for most of the time. In Poland she was Pani Ryder (Mrs or Miss Ryder) to adults and Mamusia to children. After becoming a peer and gaining the title "Lady Ryder of Warsaw and Cavendish", she was called Lady Ryder, which she often used when writing her signature. Informally, she was also referred to as LR. She was both Baroness Ryder and Baroness Cheshire, and at times she was simply Mrs Ryder-Cheshire or Mrs Cheshire. She received letters in which she was addressed as sister, and while her own children must have called her Mummy, Indian children did so too. In this book she will usually be called Sue Ryder, but just Sue when it makes grammatical or stylistic sense to do so.

She was quite a paradox. Personal testimonies evidence her varied mood changes and subsequent contrasting attitudes to people, ranging from warm and friendly to perfunctory and dismissive. There is no doubt at all, however, about her motivation and her energy, and what those qualities, allied to her faith, enabled her to achieve. In essence, she founded a charity whose main activity was to establish homes where people who were seriously ill or damaged could receive treatment and care. Over time, she created many homes in many countries and several continents.

Lady Sue Ryder of Warsaw – Single-minded philanthropist

She led an unorthodox life. Its achievements earned her praise from a range of military, civic, religious and academic organisations. The primary beneficiaries of her work in the field were the patients, and the secondary ones were the hundreds of paid and volunteer staff.

Though the narrative of this book moves from a small, rural village in Yorkshire to a small, rural village in Suffolk by way of Italy, Germany, France, Poland, India, Malawi, Czechoslovakia, Albania, Australia and many more countries, much of it takes place in or at least against the grim territory of WW2 and its aftermath.

This book is intended both to extend the knowledge of people who know something of Sue Ryder, but also to introduce her to those who have only seen her name above a charity shop on a high street. Researching her life has been quite an adventure, but obviously nothing like any of the adventures that this single-minded philanthropist undertook.

CHAPTER 1

CHILDHOOD

THERE IS SOME discrepancy as to the date of Margaret Susan Ryder's birth in Belmont Nursing Home, Leeds, West Yorkshire. While her birth and death certificates give it as July 3 1924, she herself claimed it was July 3 1923. The difference appears to be due to her desire at the start of WW2 to join the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry while still a year below the required age. In order to be accepted she chose to give the authorities incorrect information. No one could count this action as revolutionary – other keen volunteers have also adopted this ruse – and it does not seem to have mattered to her parents, though they may never have known. Nevertheless, she was a schoolgirl at the time and brought up to speak the truth, so her undetected deception – if that's what it was – can certainly be seen as an early indicator of her lively spirit, her ability to find ways of doing what she wanted, and her determination to contribute her energy to an important cause.

Those qualities of independence and resolve are key factors governing what Sue Ryder achieved, as did her formidable physical energy, staying power and willingness to work. Furthermore, for most of her life she was supported by a strong Catholic faith, the importance of which cannot be over-estimated.

It may be that even if she had grown up in different circumstances she would have put others first and done what she could to relieve suffering, but in her autobiography, *Child of My Love*, she acknowledged the vital influence of her charitable, intelligent and wealthy mother and father.

She never forgot that being born to such parents was her greatest fortune. Her father Charles Foster Ryder had wide-ranging

interests which included politics, fine art and fox hunting. By the time his youngest daughter Sue was born, he had been a partner in a brewery which became so successful that he had turned himself into a gentleman farmer. He bought elegant residences with many acres of land and sent at least some of his children to expensive private schools. He read widely, enjoyed discussion with dinner guests, rode round his farms and took on responsibilities in his community such as serving on committees and being a Justice of the Peace.

Born in 1856 he grew up in Headingley, Leeds, and later read maths at Trinity College, Cambridge. Sue Ryder wrote that he would have preferred to have read history, and perhaps he should have done so, for although he was awarded a degree he also had the dubious honour of winning the Wooden Spoon. In Cambridge, this was given to the student who passed the Maths. tripos with the lowest marks. Charles Ryder was also a keen rower who became a Blue. It was after university that he worked in the Tetley Brewery and was made a director. Sue's birth certificate gives his occupation as a brewer, and Tetley's was one of the biggest employers in Leeds. Ryder's highly successful employment with the company came through a family connection.

Charles Ryder married twice. His first wife was Anna Potter (born 1863), who, when she and Charles married in 1888, was living with her widowed mother Agnes in Cleveland Square, London. Her father had been a merchant, possibly with the East India Company.

The Ryders' principal home was The Grange, a large house in the village of Scarcroft between Leeds and Wetherby in Yorkshire, but they spent four months of each year in Suffolk. Charles Ryder's desire to buy more land and property is quite understandable given the fact that he could easily afford to do so. (His father, also named Charles, left a huge fortune in 1902. So, over a period of many years Charles (the son) came to own various properties in and around the villages of Carlton-cum-Willingham in Cambridgeshire, and Great Bradley and Little and Great and Thurlow in Suffolk. By far the most significant of these to the

family – and of course to Sue – was The Hall in Great Thurlow, almost on the Cambridgeshire border.

Each of Sue's two childhood homes provided space, stability and classic beauty. The Grange in Scarcroft, first recorded in the late 1600s, had twenty rooms, excluding sculleries, lobbies, landings and so forth. Charles Ryder bought it in about 1905 from the W.H. Smith family who had built up a highly successful business in selling books and stationery. Ryder already owned the Little Thurlow estate, which had belonged to the Soames family who were amongst the several benefactors in that village.

Every year the Ryders de-camped from Yorkshire and moved south to Suffolk by train. At considerable expense they travelled in their own private carriages, probably boarding at a station whose name at that time was Scarcroft and Thorner. Their huge amounts of luggage were specially bound with red tape for the long journey to Haverhill North. Presumably some of the servants accompanied them and worked in both households.

Anna bore her husband five children: Daniel, Rosamund, Stephen, Agnes and William. Anna died in 1907, leaving Charles, then in his fifties, with a family of growing children.

The 1911 census shows Charles, a widower, as being at Scarcroft with two of his daughters (Agnes, aged 16 and Rosamund aged 12) and seven servants, all of whom were women. This was just a few months before he re-married. His second wife was a young widow, Mabel Elizabeth Sims. Her deceased husband, Herbert Marsh Sims, had studied at Cambridge. A keen cricketer, he had played cricket for the university and, later on, for Yorkshire. He was ordained and, though born in Tavistock in Devon, moved to Yorkshire at some point. He died at the age of only thirty-two, when vicar of St Cuthbert's Church in Hunslet, Leeds.

Mabel's mother, also named Agnes, brought Mabel up on her own because of her husband's early death. She gave her daughter as broad and rich an education as she could. She took her to the continent, encouraged her to learn French and Italian, and – most importantly – made her value her own good fortune, drew her attention to those who were poor and ill, and showed her how they could and should be helped.

This second marriage produced another three children (and perhaps even a fourth who did not survive) before Mrs Ryder gave birth to Sue six years later in 1924. Sue was therefore virtually a generation away from her oldest half-brothers and sisters, and though she grew up in the same two houses as they did, her childhood must have differed markedly from theirs.

At one point Mrs Ryder employed not only a nanny for Sue but an under-nanny, a girl named Lily Stones. It is possible that she met Lily through the Armley Babies' Welcome Association, of which she was a committee member from 1923 to 1924. This was a valuable Leeds-based organisation that supported and educated young women who lacked adequate skills and resources to cope with their babies. A notice in the *Yorkshire Post* announced some of what was happening as part of Leeds Baby Week:

“Do you want your baby to thrive? Bring it to the Babies' Welcome.” This is the injunction to working class mothers at the Model Babies' Welcome in Trinity Schools, Boar Lane, Leeds; and those who have not time to visit the many institutions which are open for inspection this week will do well to look in at so convenient a specimen centre, and see the whole system demonstrated, from the registration and weighing of the child to the medical examination and nursing provision.

And here are further details about the talks at the Welcome:

The talks included practical demonstrations on how to make a cot from a banana crate so that a baby need not be exposed to infection, particularly TB, by sharing a bed, and how to make the linseed poultices and pneumonia jackets that were recommended for coughs, colds and bronchitis.

Baylis, I. *Leeds Babies' Welcome Association*, p.7

Lily's daughter, Sue Freck, can still recall her mother saying that Mrs Ryder, while buying good quality clothes for her family, was very keen that out-grown garments should not be wasted but passed on to younger children – a habit that Sue would always adopt.

It was only at Lily's funeral in 2012 that her daughter realised, with delight, that she had been named Margaret Susan

after Margaret Susan Ryder whom her mother had cared for when she (Sue) was still usually known as "Baby". Moreover, both Mrs Ryder's daughter and the undernanny's daughter were always known by their second given name, not their first.

Although the life of the second family had much in common with that of the one which preceded it, it also had significant differences for the children. In addition to having a different mother, their inter-familial relationships, home and not least, their father's status and age, were also all different. By the time Sue Ryder was born Charles was at least seventy and quite probably a grandfather, but although he was a man who dressed conservatively and brought his children up formally he was by no means stuffy. Indeed, his outlook was modern for the time in that he insisted that Sue became competent at practical tasks on the farms, and made it clear that she should be able to earn her own living. He also used to take her and some of her siblings with him when he went into bookshops in Cambridge.

A crucial feature of Sue's early years was her very close relationship with her mother. The two spent hours together. While Sue, who had her own small dairy herd, was encouraged to learn many domestic skills such as milking, butter-making and cooking, it was the visits she made with her mother to people who lived in squalor, disease and hopelessness that mattered most to her and strongly influenced her later life. The pair ventured into the most deprived parts of Leeds and other similar cities where living conditions were appalling, and they went to the almshouses in the local villages at Scarcroft and Thurlow. Mrs Ryder, like her own mother, clearly did this not only to make Sue aware of how poor people lived but to instill in her a belief that it was her duty and responsibility to do something about it. Did Mrs Ryder take her other children to such places? There are no reports of it, so it seems that Sue, the youngest of the family by far, developed a special relationship with her mother both because of their shared altruistic activities and because of their warm pleasure in each other's company.

During Sue's childhood the shadow of World War I was still present, and in the years between the wars life in cities like Leeds was, for the thousands of people who lived in the slums, miserable,

dangerous and painful. Accommodation was unfit for habitation. There was inadequate access to clean water or to proper sewage disposal. Though charitable societies and individuals provided help where they could, they could do little to prevent or treat diseases such as typhus, cholera, consumption and TB. Nor could they do anything about the smoke from mills and factories and domestic fires in homes. It polluted everyone's lungs.

It must have been a huge relief to return to the countryside, breathe clean air and enjoy the comfort of a privileged home. Sue could not but have been struck by the difference between her life and that of children in Leeds. On the first page of her autobiography she wrote:

The bad housing conditions appalled me. It was usual to find only one bedroom in a house which meant that children had to sleep with their parents and sometimes a sick person too. Several children would share the same bed. The dreariness of their surroundings with no lavatory, often no tap, little to eat and frequently no change of clothes or shoes horrified me.

Ryder, S. Child of My Love, p.17

One thing which she learned to do early was to pray. Christian belief and prayer were very important to the Ryders. When in Scarcroft, it seems as if they attended the churches in the neighbouring villages of Shadwell and Bardsey more often than the nearest church which was in Thorner. When in Suffolk they alternated between the church at Great Thurlow, right next door to The Hall, and the one at Little Thurlow, a mile or so up the road. The family was high Anglican, and though Sue reports that her father sometimes fell asleep during sermons, her mother made a point of going to Holy Communion almost every day. Later Sue converted to Catholicism, the faith which became a key feature of her life.

It was in the mid 1930s, when the country was in depression, that Charles Ryder realised he could no longer avoid the impact of the dire financial crisis. He decided to sell the house at Scarcroft and move his entire household to Thurlow permanently.

It was a dramatic decision and the family's contact with Yorkshire obviously diminished greatly, although Mrs Ryder drove

herself back there every Christmas with the presents she had prepared for people she knew would otherwise receive none. But she soon involved herself in Thurlow village life, focusing her attention on the local area where unemployment was increasing and there were many needy people. There were also some very eccentric characters whose activities Sue described in her autobiography, and whom Mrs Ryder just took in her stride with her natural good humour. She also threw herself into organising cultural and social events, and it is said that she was on over thirty committees. Clearly, Sue's mother was a woman who rarely stayed still.

The following extract is from the *South West Suffolk Echo*, published after a fete whose sports events included a swing pole pillow fight, women's potato races and blindfold cutting at the ham. Though it was written in July 1914, ten years before Sue was born, it illustrates the good regard in which the Ryders were held. Prizes for Sports Events distributed by Mrs Ryder July 18 1914:

The prizes were afterwards distributed by Mrs Ryder following which Mr George Bedford said it was a great pleasure to propose a hearty vote of thanks to Mrs Ryder for being present to distribute the prizes to the winners. It needed no words of his, he was sure, to tell Mrs Ryder how grateful they were to have her whenever she came to the parish. They all had proof of the great interest she took in sport and in the welfare of the poor and of all who lived in the parish. They only wished they could see more of her. She gave as much time as she could to the benefit of the parish when she visited it for about three months each year, but they all wished she could live amongst them altogether. [Applause]

Hearty cheers having been given for Mrs Ryder, Mr Charles Foster Ryder said he desired to thank those present very sincerely for the cordial way in which they had received the remarks made by Mr Bedford. It had been a most successful show and he hoped it would quite equal the highest expectations. In his opinion, what they all wanted to cultivate in these days was neighbourliness. Newspapers told them of what was happening in all parts of the world but he thought they wanted to cultivate the sense that their first duty lay with their neighbours. He trusted that Mrs Ryder and himself would always endeavour to remember that. [Applause]

A similar article could have been written about the Ryders when they were in Yorkshire, for they were equally respected and liked there.

The Ryder household was clearly a place with plenty going on. For a start, there would have been comings and goings of young people of different ages. Sue had some full siblings (three of whom were brothers she particularly liked), and another group of half-siblings. Some of them would have spent much of the year away at school or university, and others would have already left home, but there must have been a fairly constant stream of visitors including Sue's piano teacher, businessmen, dinner guests (such as the artist Alfred Munnings), tramps (who were always given a decent meal, and sometimes even a bed, a gesture that Sue was known to make later on) and a large number of servants. In addition, Mrs Ryder invited the Girls' Friendly Society – and probably other societies – to hold their meetings in Great Thurlow Hall.

Charles Ryder employed numerous men and boys to work on his land and when he was 80 he was presented with a list of his employees. Totalling 205, it consisted mainly of farm workers (140) and general estate workers (43) and gamekeepers, blacksmiths and stable workers. In addition, the house must have had a large number of maids and man-servants, cooks and cleaners. Such figures help give a modern reader some idea of the size of the operation required to run a large estate.*

Another member of the Ryder household was Mabel's mother, known as Simmie. She too was a positive influence on Sue who described her as strict, alert and tidy. (She was also an authority on Bradshaw's railway timetables). Yet another important person was Miss Bainbridge, known in the family as Bay. Though she was officially employed as head housemaid, that title does not reflect the close companionship which existed between her and Mrs Ryder for more than four decades.

Mrs Ryder's appetite for enjoying and helping people appears to have been many-faceted. In 1938 she planned and directed the Thurlow Fete whose proceeds were to be divided between the

**Memoirs of Thurlow between the wars, Stephen Ryder thethurlows.org.uk*

Chinese Red Cross and the Village Hall Fund. This is how the *South West Suffolk Echo* whetted the public's appetite:

Practically all Thurlow – by which is meant all Great and Little Thurlow – is frightfully busy at the moment preparing for the very ambitious venture which is to be presented on Saturday July 9th at Little Thurlow Park. What is referred to, of course, is the presentation of "The Pageant". All the women and girls of the two parishes of Thurlow are actively engaged in making costumes, and some idea of the extent of the work may be gauged when it is stated that in the pageant there will be something like 200 performers, all of whom will appear in period costumes.

Printed at the foot of the article are the words:

Seats can be booked in advance, applications to be made to the Hon. Secretary, Great Thurlow Hall.

This Hon. Secretary is not named in the advertisement or the programme (price 4 pence) but the address is the Ryders', and few local people other than Mrs. Ryder would have had the resources, influence, desire and skill to create and manage such an event. Nor, probably, would anyone else have had the interests of the Chinese Red Cross at heart.

Amongst an extravaganza of entertainment the fete featured Sir Malcolm Campbell and his Bluebird racing car, Miss Chili Bouchier (a Warner Bros. popular film star) and the Newmarket and Thurlow Hounds. In addition, there were seventeen cups to be won, with special prizes for the Ladies' darts competition.

The Ryder family were very much in evidence: Miss Susan Ryder, aged 15, acted the part of a bridesmaid, her sister Mary spoke the Prologue and was the Property Master, her brother Stephen took the roles of Sir Stephen Soame and a Gentleman of the Court, Margaret Ryder acted the part of a grandchild and a Mr M.H. Ryder had a role.

Captain Frink was in charge of the soft drinks as well as being on the stage, and this double responsibility may be evidence of his generosity of spirit or of Mrs. Ryder's powers of persuasion. Probably both. He was a well-regarded gentleman who was Chairman

of the Thurlow Parish Council for many years and his daughter, born in 1930, went on to study art and become the well-known sculptor Dame Elisabeth Frink.

Charles Ryder was obviously a willing participant and benefactor of such local celebrations. For example, from time to time he invited the public in for Whist Drives followed by dancing; he was president of the Thurlow and District Poultry and Dog Show Association; and in an earlier period – it was 1911, the year he married Mabel – Tetley's challenged the Hungarian-born escapologist Harry Houdini to escape from a padlocked barrel of ale at the Empire Theatre in Leeds. Even if Ryder was no longer a director of the brewery at that time, he must surely have known about and enjoyed this innovative publicity. Houdini did not escape, but had to be rescued after being overcome by carbon dioxide fumes. He was barely conscious and rather drunk.

Until she was nine Sue Ryder was taught "all the elementary subjects" at home by her mother, with tutors coming to the Hall to teach her French, dancing (which she adored) and the piano. Then she was sent to a school where she was a very unhappy weekly boarder who cried herself to sleep at night and wanted to run away, but didn't because she thought that her father might not accept her back. Either her enjoyment of practical jokes or her dislike of the place may have been the reason why she and a friend set out to shock a couple being shown round in order to decide if the school would suit their daughter. The pair of girls arranged some stuffed pillowcases on a bed, covered them with a counterpane, and topped "the body" with flowers and a prayerbook. Sue's punishment was a fine from her pocket money, and took two terms to pay.

Nevertheless, her headmistress wrote of her: "Sue has worked well throughout the term and really knew her work for the examinations. She is cheerful and gay by nature and most reliable in both form and in the house."*

When she was 12 she was sent to Benenden, an independent school for girls which had been established only a decade or so

*Ryder, S. *Child of My Love*, p. 43.

earlier. The positive, constructive principles established by the three co-founders made a strong impact on Sue and she writes about it in detail in her autobiography. One of her contemporaries recalls the talks on current affairs:

At Benenden every Saturday morning we repaired to the Entrance Hall for Birdie's Current Affairs. We sat on the floor, or on the stairs and there was usually a bumble-bee droning against the diamond panes and amongst the pots of gloxinia. Birdie gave us a crisp summary of the week's events and read bits of the papers, particularly what Wickham Steed had said in *The Spectator* the day before and the Stephen King-Hall Newsletter. I do not remember anything specific she said, just as I fear I have forgotten all the sermons of schooldays. But week by week lucidly she dissected world affairs for us. Munich was at the end of the summer holidays after taking school cert. By autumn 1938 war was in the air like thunder, a black blank at the end of every prospect. There was talk of conscription, so that a university career, being presented at court, or indeed any sort of plan for the future was uncertain. People spoke of "when" not "if" war comes, and "the last war" was now an everyday phrase.

Birdie was Miss Bird, one of the heads. Years later, she wrote to Sue:

We wanted it to be a friendly, normal, happy place where learning to live life as a whole went side by side with a sound academic training. We hoped that you would all find a philosophy which would help you in meeting difficulty, trouble and opportunity, and that in planning your lives you would always be aware of the needs of others and serve them with compassion and understanding.

Ryder, S. *Child of My Love*, p.44

Again in 1976 Sue wrote to Miss Bird about another of the co-founders. The Thanksgiving Service for Miss Hindle, she said, would live on, and the prayers, singing, and words would remind them of the very many gifts she showed and gave the girls both at school and for their path in life.

Clearly, the ethos that Sue was familiar with from home was echoed by that at Benenden. As well as having formal lessons, the

school was visited by a varied range of people such as missionaries, musicians and disadvantaged children from London.

The Requirements List reproduced here shows in fine detail the things needed by Benenden girls. There are notes too about how plimsolls and lacrosse boots were to be marked on the tongue with tapes showing the house number. A further clothing list includes an afternoon frock in velveteen, a Panama hat, and numerous pairs of different sorts of knickers. There is no mention of clothes rationing because that did not start till 1941, and this list is dated March 1940. However, the message to mothers (one can safely assume it would be mothers rather than fathers who took charge of the provision of clothes) is clear: There is no need to buy new clothes when old ones will do.

In her autobiography *Child of My Love*, Sue Ryder makes special mention of the Hobbies Day which encouraged creativity, of the course on public speaking and of committee procedures, (highly relevant for the future roles that many Benenden girls were likely to play in their communities). She also mentions the choir, the discussions about current affairs – particularly the events leading up to the war – and her friends. She certainly seems to have been a model student in that she studied well, joined in socially and showed every sign that she would use much of what she had learned when the time came for her to leave school.

Another feature of her life at Benenden was the large amount of letters she exchanged with her mother at The Hall at Great Thurlow. In one letter she wrote how she had made complete fool of herself in French that morning, but that getting 10 out of 10 for English made up for it a wee bit, and, “of all things, I somehow managed to shoot 3 goals in lacrosse that afternoon”. And she began another, in June 1938 with the words:

Darlingest Mum

When I was out walking through the woods and past the rhododendron bushes, ablaze with different, gorgeous colours, many thoughts went through my mind. I wonder how much longer we will enjoy peace and poetry? – probably only a short time now – shorter than many realise or want to hear.

Ryder, S. *Child of My Love*, p.49