

## The Musical Mews

by

Maurice Powell



It was a piece in the Woman's Sphere feature, *Isle of Man Times*, 4<sup>th</sup> April 1936, under the heading 'An Envable Life', that aroused my curiosity and ultimately led to this article. The writer - Femina - wrote that she had recently renewed 'a friendship of many years standing' with Miss Jeremy Carter, 'who is engaged these days in modern journalism' and was paying a brief visit to the Island. 'She spends as much of her time as possible in Paris' and until the recent death of her partner, wrote for the foreign press there in three languages. Miss Carter was clearly a very versatile lady as four of her songs were due to be heard in various concert parties. It was the last line of the piece, however, that really caught my attention: 'She is a fully qualified music teacher, and years ago taught music in Douglas under her own name - Miss Blanche Mew'.

The three Mew sisters - Amy, Nella and Blanche - were already known to me through my research into Harry Wood and his Students' Orchestra as young musicians who, in various ways, contributed to the musical life of the Island. The eldest, Amy Mew, later Mrs H. Rushworth, most significantly as a highly respected piano teacher and accompanist; Nella Mew, later Nella Clague, as a young violinist in the 1890s and later as a respected local music teacher, and Blanche Mew, a very accomplished young violinist who left the Island before World War I to pursue a career in journalism.

Their father Henry Mew\* was born in 1841 or 1842 in the City of London and was a military man, a Sargent in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion/8<sup>th</sup> Regiment of Foot,\*\* who married Jessie Mira\*\*\* Hodson then residing in Matlock in Derbyshire, at All Saints Church, Elton, Bury, Lancashire, in 1869.

\* The name Mew first appears in the East Riding of Yorkshire at Meux, today the village of Meaux, a township in the parish of Waghen (Wagene in the Domesday Book; today the village of Wawne), six-and-a-half miles north of Hull.

\*\* 1881 Census; later the King's (Liverpool) Regiment.

\*\*\* A name pronounced 'Meerah', of Latin, Slavic and Hindu origins, meaning 'admirable'. Jessie Mira Hodson was born in 1843 Woolwich, Southeast London, and died 5<sup>th</sup> December 1929 in Broadstairs, Kent.

Their eldest daughter **Amy Mira Mew** was born in Salford, Manchester, in 1871. Nella Mira Mew was born in Aldershot, Hampshire, in 1877, and the youngest daughter Blanche Harriet Mew was born on 7<sup>th</sup> March 1879 at the Orford (Peninsula) Barracks in Warrington, Cheshire,

By 1887 the Mew family had settled in Douglas. Henry Mew, his military career over, was the proprietor of the Chatsworth House Hotel on Loch Promenade.\* He died in 1889.

\* According to Brown's Directory the family were living at the Chatsworth Private Hotel at number 3 Loch Promenade when Henry Mew died.

The family were still living at the Chatsworth House Hotel in 1891 according to the census of that year together with a housemaid, a waitress ('a widow living on her own means') and a hotel guest, a cotton salesman. In October 1893 Amy Mew married the theatre manager Harry Rushworth;\* a daughter, Amy Mira Doris\*\* (known as Doris) was born in August 1894. The 1901 census reveals that Amy, described as a teacher of music and the designated head of the family, was living at number 6 Eastfield, Douglas, with six-year-old Doris and a housemaid. Harry Rushworth was probably working in England at the time of the census, as he was again at the time of the 1911 census. Amy was again described as a teacher of music, working 'on her own account, from home' with daughter Doris but sadly, with 'one child dead'.

\* Harry Rushworth, born 1869, had been the manager of the Theatre Royal, Birmingham, and held other similar appointments in Leeds and Manchester, and at the Adelphi Theatre, London.

\*\* Doris Rushworth married Albert Duncan Kenna, Secretary to Mr Goldie Taubman at the Nunnery Estate, Secretary of the World Manx Association, the Cruinnaght and the United Services Fund, in October 1930. Like her mother, Doris was a well-known music and dance teacher.

Amy Rushworth was a contemporary of some of the most illustrious musicians, musical directors and musical educators on the Island: Miss M. L. Wood, Noah Moore, J. D. Looney, F. C. Poulter and Harry Wood,\* and for half a century, one of the most prominent and highly regarded music teachers on the Island, and a gifted, sympathetic and resourceful accompanist, who, for twenty years, was the official accompanist at Harry Wood's famous Sunday Concerts at the Palace, and accompanied for some the finest singers of the inter-war years, including John McCormack.

\* See Maurice Powell, *Manxland's King of Music, the Life and Times of Harry Wood*, Lily Publications, Ramsey, 2018.

We first hear of twelve-year-old Amy Mew in the *Isle of Man Times* of 17<sup>th</sup> March 1883, after she had been presented with 'a handsomely bound' copy of Beethoven's piano sonatas by members of the Excelsior Glee Club 'as a memento of their esteem, and in recognition of their appreciation of her services (as accompanist) rendered at the concert in the Gaiety Theatre Prospect Hill, on Wednesday 28<sup>th</sup> February 1883'. In March the following year she was again the accompanist at the Glee Club's Grand Concert at the Gaiety Theatre when the eighty-strong choir was assisted by Mr Frederick Watson, organ, and conducted by Mr J. D. Looney in a programme of sacred music by Rossini, Mendelssohn, Mozart and Gounod.

She is said to have studied the piano under Septimus Webbe (see below) of the Royal College of Music, but it is not certain when this period of tuition took place. By 1911 Amy was the organist and choir mistress at All Saint's Church, Douglas, and conductor of the Acacia Girls' Choir. During World War I she saw service on the Home Front as a nurse in the Queen Charlotte Maternity Hospital, Marylebone, London, and later became the accompanist for the Ruby Ginner School of Dancing in Earl's Court. She returned to the Island in 1928 and established the St. Aubyn School of Music and Dance in Selbourne Road, Douglas, and in Ramsey; she was also the accompanist for several Douglas Choral Union productions.

Amy returned to Warrington, where she owned property, just before World War II, but returned to the Island in 1944 where, at the age of 76, she was appointed conductor of the Lhergy Songsters; in 1947 she became the conductor of the newly formed Ramsey Choral Society. She died at her home, 'Rose Lea', May Hill, Ramsey, in the early hours of Wednesday October 27<sup>th</sup>, 1949, aged 78. The previous Monday evening she had attended a rehearsal of the Ramsey Choral Society but was suddenly taken ill Tuesday evening shortly after teaching some of her pupils. Her obituary summed up her career and character perfectly: she was '... a gracious lady with a pleasing personality' and a revered link with the past when the Island displayed 'a wealth of talent' and the Manx Music Festival was formed. She was buried at Kirk Braddan; her daughter Doris, her sister Nella and many local musicians were present.\*

\* At her death her estate was valued at £4405 5s 2d

**Nella Elise Mew** married Thomas Bold Clague of Bolton, Lancashire, in October 1907; he ran a glass and china business with his brother in Strand Street, Douglas. The 1911 census reveals that the Clagues were living in Onchan with their two-year-old daughter Muriel Blanche and that Nella was 'teaching music at home'. Nella Clague LRAM, became a highly respected violin and piano teacher, as did her daughter Muriel. In her capacity as an accompanist she was associated for many years with the Manx Music Festival and Douglas Choral Union. Thomas Clague died in 1949; Nella died in June 1954 at her home, Highways, Castletown Road, Port Erin. Her obituary\* sums up her career and achievements thus: 'Mrs Clague was for many years one of the outstanding figures in the formation of young Manx pianists and violinists and was regarded as one of the Island's finest pianists and accompanists'. Her daughter Muriel Clague LRAM carried on the family tradition of music teaching on the Island.

\* *Isle of Man Examiner* 02.07.1954

The youngest member of the Mew family, **Blanche Harriet Mew**, was a most talented young violinist and, for the point of view of the researcher, an intriguing character. The 1901 census reveals that aged 22, Blanche was living at number 1 Wrottesley Road, Southeast London, near Barrack Field, Woolwich, and Plumstead Common, the home of James Lawson, an uncle and retired bandmaster, and his family. She was resident on the Island between 1902-07, but by the time of the 1911 census was living at Castellain Mansions, number 7 Castellain Road, Paddington, northwest London with her mother Jessie, and described as 'single' and living on a 'private income'.

An undated photograph of one of the Mew sisters - whom I firmly believe to be Blanche - holding a violin, is extant in the Haydn Wood Music Library and Archive.\* A brief note attached to the photograph contains the following information: 'The fiddle has been in the Mew family for 150 years! Our fiddle is the Andreas Guarnerius which my father (when a little boy) used to carry about for his uncle (the Yorkshire conductor) the father of Septimus Webb(e), (my cousin).\*\* I used this fiddle throughout my studies with Sauret, but Sep(timus) would not allow me to bring it to the Island, nor would he sell it to mother'.\*\*\* On the reverse of the photograph is the enigmatic comment: '. . . still have to write it up . . . rushing about . . .' The faint name 'Broadstairs' can be just read at the bottom of the photograph.

\* The Haydn Wood Music Library and Archive, Victoria, British Columbia, Canada. The custodian and curator, the violinist and researcher Marjorie Cullerne, is the great-niece of the composer, and may be contacted via [haydnwoodmusic@yahoo.ca](mailto:haydnwoodmusic@yahoo.ca)

\*\* Septimus Beckwith Webbe ARCM (1867-1943) was the son of John Webb and Eliza Mew. In August 1882 he was the joint winner of the Heathcote Long Pianoforte Prize at the Royal Academy of Music (London), and in 1893 was described in the *Musical Times* as 'a most efficient and energetic accompanist' at a lecture at the College. He was a piano professor there for many years and his name appears on a list of members of the College committee in the 1920s.

\*\*\* Emile Sauret (1852-1920), a distinguished pupil of Vieuxtemps and Wieniawski, was the composer of over 100 works for the violin. He was professor of violin at the Royal Academy of Music from 1890, and at Trinity College London between 1908-19.

Blanche Mew stayed in England but did not follow the career of a professional violinist and turned to journalism; her name is absent from the local newspapers between 1910 and 1932. In January 1933 she surfaces once more in the *Mona's Herald* when she was visiting the Island to assist Amy in the production of the pantomime *The Old Woman in a Shoe* at the Gaiety Theatre, for which she (Amy) had written the story, music and lyrics. 'Miss B. H. Mew (who) wrote the book for the recent pantomime is the well-known music critic Jeremy Carter'. Later that month in a letter from her home at 20 Dumpton Park Broadstairs, Kent, Blanche reveals something of her philosophy as a critic: 'I know that if one does one's duty as a sound critic, one has to strike out, no matter who one may hit!'

Whilst we know the broad outlines of the careers of the Mew sisters, we know almost nothing about their personalities. One reminiscence of Blanche, though, may indicate that she may have been the extrovert among them and something of a live wire. Fogbound on the *Mona* on one of her rare journeys home, she had apparently helped to keep the passengers' spirits up during the long, becalmed hours by organising a series of impromptu entertainments.

Blanche's name appears in the *Isle of Man Times* in February 1936 when she included a poem upon the death of King George V of her own and included many impressions of a day during which she waited six-and-a-half hours at the lying-in state, with no access to food or drink. Few words were spoken by the waiting crowds, she recalled, but her overwhelming impression was that the people were 'so proud' of their late King. The following year she included the following brief observation in a letter to *Femina* in the *Isle*

of *Man Times*: 'London today is very crowded . . . it took 45 mins to drive down Bond Street in a car! Men and women were dressed colourfully (and) the whole Capital of the Empire seems to have had a wash and brush up'. In November that year Femina reported on a recent visit to London where she had an opportunity to view a television programme. She was not impressed with the quality of the picture but revealed that the set was the property of Miss Blanche Mew, 'who will be well-remembered in Douglas'.

An intriguing extract from an affectionate typed letter dated Saturday April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1938, to Adeline Wood, from Blanche's home in Broadstairs, has recently come to light in the Haydn Wood Library and Archive:

'I'm home again – I'm always flying & rushing about – and have just read your nice letter.

You dear little soul!! No! I am not at all annoyed over those Pagani (?) prints. I don't do ANY clumping . . . and have a fool-proof temper. Believe me! I NEED it in my job!

Must write you later. I am still working at high-pressure. It has taken a fortnight to GET the stuff; I still have to write it up'.

In November 1939 Blanche sent a sample of tea to Femina, apparently retrieved from a wreck off the Goodwin Sands following a U-boat attack. Femina remarked: 'Smells of the briny but is quite good to the taste'.

Blanche's name appears for the last time in the local newspapers, in the *Isle of Man Times* of 22<sup>nd</sup> July 1955 in a letter to Editor's Postbag under the heading: 'Noble's is Tops'. After fourteen weeks suffering from a serious illness, she had been discharged from Noble's Hospital having been fed on little else but 'boiled fish without any salt'. The variety of the daily hospital menus nevertheless surprised her: 'I have fared worse in restaurants in London, Paris and Rome' and the nurses were unfailingly 'comforting, conscientious and capable'. Blanche concluded by conveying ' . . . the humble thanks of an old, lame donkey with an elephant's memory. I will never forget them'.

Blanche Mew died on Christmas Day, 25<sup>th</sup> December 1959 at her home in Broadstairs, Kent.\* She never married and the extract of the letter from April 1936 at the beginning of this article poses more questions about her personal life and journalistic career than it answers, but to delve any further into these matters is beyond the scope of this modest piece. Her death was not reported in the local Manx newspapers.

\* Her estate was valued at the not inconsiderable sum of £15,942 8s 9d.

### **A Talented and Versatile Trio**

The Mew sisters took part in many musical events as children, but their debut in the *Isle of Man* newspapers came in February 1889 when they participated in a 'Children's Entertainment' at the Masonic Hall, Douglas, in aid of the Poor School Children's Free Dinners Fund. Blanche appeared in a tableau entitled 'Quite Ready', and all three sisters in a trio, 'The Court of Love'. In May 1891 Blanche played the violin in a small orchestra organised by Harry Wood at a Farewell Concert for the curate of Braddan Church, the Rev. B. C. de Boinville, members of which included Master Haydn Wood,\* Master Lawrence

Rushworth\*\* and Adeline Wood (a sister of Harry and Haydn Wood); Amy Mew accompanied the songs 'with her usual skill'.

\* Haydn Wood (1882-1959), the youngest brother of Harry Wood – see *Manxland's King of Music*, *ibid* – initially studied at the Royal College of Music, London, and in Brussels, as a young violin virtuoso before turning to composition. A leading composer of British Light Music, he wrote the iconic World War I song *Roses of Picardy*, several fine orchestral works based on traditional Manx melodies, and concertos for piano and violin.

\*\* Master Lawrence Rushworth, born c. 1882, was the younger brother of Joseph Rushworth, publican, of the Black Lion Hotel, North Quay, Douglas, the former home of the Wood family! His elder brother Harry, described as 'a musician' in the 1891 Census, married Amy Mew in October 1893.

In February 1892 the sisters took part in a further concert in aid of the Free Dinners Fund at the Salisbury Hall. This is the first occasion at which we learn of the Juvenile Orchestral Society, founded and organised by Harry Rushworth. The orchestra consisted of the familiar young musicians: Nella and Blanche, Masters Haydn Wood and Lawrence Rushworth and Haydn Wood's sisters Adeline and Elise. Nella, Blanche, Haydn and Lawrence performed a quartet for four violins entitled *Scenes That Are the Brightest*. There were also novelty items in the programme: Nella played *Home Sweet Home* on a Japanese fiddle;\* Blanche played *The Death of Nelson* on a tin whistle, gave a recitation *Mary, Queen of Scots* 'in a very praiseworthy manner', took part in a skipping rope dance and sang a song *Oh, How Delightful*, which attracted special praise 'although she was suffering from a cold'. Nella and Blanche joined together in a 'clever piano duet' *Golden Bells*, whilst Amy Mew accompanied on the organ and Harry Rushworth – who arranged all the music – played the piano. Two similar musical events organised by Harry Rushworth in March and April also featured the Juvenile Orchestral Society and its regular members performing for the patients of Noble's Hospital. Nella reprised her Japanese fiddle solo from the February concert and Blanche played a piano solo.

\* The Japanese or Jap fiddle was a one stringed bowed instrument popular with street musicians and popularised during the music hall era by G. H. Chirgwin, 'The White-Eyed Kaffir', who appeared in Douglas on several occasions singing his affecting song *The Blind Boy*.

In addition to Harry Rushworth's Juvenile Orchestral Society, the sisters appeared regularly with Harry Wood's famous Students' Orchestra which was formed in 1890. Blanche and Nella played with the orchestra for the first time at the Third Annual Orchestral and Choral concert in April 1892, by which time they were both Harry Wood's violin pupils. Other young players included Masters Haydn Wood and Lawrence Rushworth, violins, Harry and Haydn's brother Daniel, flute, Harry Rushworth, organ and Amy Mew, piano, together with the Philharmonic Society (a choir formed by Harry Wood specially to take part in his concerts) and local vocal soloists.\*

\* See Musical Flash-back in the *Isle of Man Examiner*, 04.08.1944, a reminiscence of Harry Wood's Students' Concert at the Grand Theatre of January 1893, after an original programme turned up in a collection.

Between 1893 and 1897 the Mew and Rushworth families became a significant force in the musical life of the Island. The Mew sisters continued to participate in the Juvenile Orchestral Society concerts and Harry Wood's Annual Orchestral, Choral and Operatic Concerts. Amy Mew became Mrs Harry Rushworth in October 1893 and continued to

appear at innumerable church events such as the St. Barnabas Christmas Tree Sale of Work and Concert in December 1893.

The Mew girls were certainly versatile when it came to musical entertainment, and performed songs, duets and instrumental solos as well as playing in the various orchestras. Blanche also gave occasional recitations, which she displayed a certain flair for, such as *The Frenchman and the Rat* at a House of Industry Concert, which were invariably well received. A significant musical event on the Island took place on May 7<sup>th</sup> 1896: a sumptuous fiftieth anniversary performance of Mendelssohn's oratorio *Elijah* at the Grand Theatre with the Douglas Choral Union and the large orchestra conducted by Harry Wood. Blanche and Haydn Wood played in the first violins and Amy accompanied on the piano. Harry Wood's 7<sup>th</sup> Annual Students' Concert in February 1897 saw the debut of another of his most talented violin pupils, Miss Kathleen Rydings of Laxey,\* who after studying at the Royal College of Music, London, and following her professional career in England, returned to the Island and became a well-known violin teacher and conductor. One of the more unusual musical events the sisters participated in took place in February 1898: the Misses Rowe's Banjo Concert at the Grand Theatre with the Ladies Amateur Banjo and Mandoline Orchestra of thirty players including Blanche Mew, banjo, and Amy Rushworth, organ.

\* See Maurice Powell, *A Very Gifted Manx Lady*, Wibble Publishing, 2014.

It was in 1898 that Mr and Mrs H. Rushworth first advertised for piano pupils at their home, 17, Eastfield, and made it known that they were available for balls, evening parties and other occasions and celebrations that required music.

In 1899 Blanche, then aged nineteen years, was placed third in the violin solo class at the Manx Music Festival, and Nella, a pupil of Miss M. L. Wood, the revered Mother of Manx music, passed a Trinity College London organ examination. Amy, a 'clever piano soloist and accompanist' took part in a Douglas Choral Union concert. In May Blanche played in Harry Wood's 'capital little orchestra' for a production of the comic opera *The Mandarin* given by the Local Volunteers at their concert at the Grand Theatre.

During 1901 Blanche Mew was living in Southeast London, and we learn nothing of her activities there, musical or otherwise, from the local newspapers. The following year Nella Mew was awarded her LRAM performing and teaching diploma from the Royal Academy of Music, London. In April both Blanche and Nella took part in one of the Hon. Alice Henniker's concerts\* for the Douglas Town Nurse Fund. In December that year, Miss Doris Rushworth - 'a tiny dot of seven' - made her concert debut at a Finch Hill Congregational Church concert when she performed 'a charming dance with scenery'.

\* A daughter of the then Lieutenant Governor of the Island; she was a capable amateur singer and a great supporter of the Island's cultural life.

Nella appeared as a soloist in Rubenstein's *Melody in F* at Harry Wood's Grand Orchestral Concert at the Gaiety Theatre in March 1903, whilst Amy assumed her familiar role as piano accompanist. The orchestral players included a young violinist, Sam Robinson, a pupil of Harry Wood's and the first Baume Scholar on the Island, who studied at the Royal Academy of Music and pursued a successful career as a conductor under the name Orry Corjeag.

Later that month Nella took part in a lecture-recital centred on the music of Mendelssohn given by Harry Wood.

In May 1903 Amy, Blanche and Nella presented a concert of their pupils at Acacia Cottage, Mount Bradda, Douglas. In September that year Blanche placed an advertisement in the local newspapers announcing that she was resuming teaching the violin that month at Acacia Cottage. The following month some of her pupils were prepared for the Trinity College London Examinations.

The years 1904-10 were busy ones for the Mew sisters as they took part in many musical events and developed their teaching schedules considerably. There were violin, piano and organ recitals; a ladies Golf Club Conversazione; hospital concerts; concerts with St. George's Glee Club; a Boys' Brigade concert; innumerable parochial teas and Temperance meetings, and in 1906 Blanche led the orchestra in the Manx Choir's performance of Haydn's *Creation* at the Gaiety Theatre, conducted by Miss Cannell. In February 1907 Blanche Mew's own newly formed student orchestra made their debut at the New Public Hall, Princes Street, Douglas, assisted by some of Amy's pupils.

In 1907 Blanche Mew extended her violin teaching commitments to include a weekly visit to Ramsey. In October that year the Ladies Parlour conveyed their best wishes to Miss Nella Mew and Mr T. C. Clague following their recent wedding at which Blanche and Amy had been bridesmaids. Amy was thanked for her years of service as organist at Victoria Street Wesleyan Church during which time she led the services on Sundays and directed the music on numerous other occasions. The music she 'brought out of the old box upstairs was really wonderful'. She was presented with a purse of gold but being shy and modest by nature asked the Chairman to respond with a few words of appreciation. The last reference to Blanche Mew in the local newspapers for some years was in June 1910 when her name appeared in a list of those giving a wedding present to a Mr John Cubbon and Miss Jean Engels.

Amy Rushworth and her daughter Doris took part in a concert at the London Manx Society Concert in October 1927, and again in February and March 1928, when the concert party was trained by Miss Doris Rushworth. In December 1928 the following advertisement appeared in the local newspapers:

The St. Aubyn School of Music and Dancing, Selbourne Drive, Douglas.

Under the Direction of Miss Doris Rushworth.

Classes in Greek and National and Ballroom Dancing, Mime and Eurythmics. Every Saturday. Pupils concerts and displays. Shows etc

The Mew and Rushworth families were well known and highly respected as instrumental musicians, accompanists, teachers and musical directors, and contributed significantly to the richness and diversity of the Island of Man's cultural life for more than half a century.

Ramsey, October 2021