The Rosemundy House of Shame

Introduction

"I*n those days,*" I explained recently to my inquisitive six-year old grand-daughter, "*people didn't approve of women having babies if they weren't married. My mum was a teacher and would have lost her job if people knew about me, so she put me in a children's home*."

Sofia, in her flared floral skirt, stopped jigging around on the spot and fiddled with her cornrows as she frowned, replying with a heavy hint of disapproval:

"*She could have got another job*,"

She has reached the age when we become conscious of human relations, of beginning to work out what it means to be loved, respected and cared for.

I allowed our conversation to drift elsewhere.

Now I worry that I have left her with a negative view of my late mother, Mavis Frampton. That is the problem with simplistic explanations, no matter how well meant. We can inflict potentially long lasting confusion, even damage when we deal family half truths to young people.

I reflected on the similarities to the manner in which I, as a 14 year old boy, had been presented with the same tale about Mavis following her death. The half truths didn't all add up, so much so that, at 15, I wrote to one of my godmothers asking: "*Was she a prostitute?*"

It would be many questions, queries and years later that I would piece together a more understanding picture of the circumstances by which she had abandoned me to the orphanages (http://philframpton.co.uk/golly).
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I have promised myself to return to the subject matter of my mother with Sofia as soon as the next opportunity arises. In particular I will try to explain what abuse, shame, discrimination and pain unmarried mothers like Mavis suffered in the 1950s and 1960s.

"Moral Welfare? They were evil bastards and as bad as the laundries in Ireland."

Even after the publication of my childhood memoir, *The Golly in the Cupboard*, in 2004, I had only a slight inkling of what my mother had endured at an unmarried mothers' refuge in the 1950s.

Fortunately, in 2011, I had the opportunity to research and interview other mothers who had given birth at the refuge for a BBC documentary (http://philframpton.co.uk/crying). Listening to their anecdotes, was for me, like taking a tour through a grim horror story characterised by sanctimonious yet ignorant brutality.

In the memoir, I recounted how my English mother, Mavis, had discovered she was pregnant to her Nigerian lover, Isaac Ene. As fate would have it, Mavis's mother had complained to government officials at the Home Office and the Colonial Office about their relationship on account of Isaac being Black. A research engineer for the Nigerian Coal Corporation, he was sent back to Nigeria but unaware of Mavis' condition.

Mavis wished to keep her baby and later marry Isaac but, as a young music teacher in a Birmingham grammar school, she realised she would lose her job if it were known to the authorities that she was due to have a child out of wedlock.

Her friends, a headmistress (whom I refer to as Dollars) and Pixie, a teacher, advised her to hide her pregnancy, feign illness and have her child in secret two hundred miles away in one of the country's many refuges for unmarried mothers. In March 1953, my mother arrived at the Cornwall Moral Welfare Society's Rosemundy House in St Agnes, Cornwall.

I have heard and read the sad, some times horrifying testimonies of many Rosemundy mothers. What follows is the picture I have gleaned. Some who passed through the home insist that their time at Rosemundy "wasn't too bad," and for them that may have been the case. Nevertheless anyone dismissing the testimonies that follow, blinds themselves to scenes which were taking place across the British Isles in those years, and not least the pain and sense of shame which scars so many women and families to this day.

Rosemundy House

"*This place was like a prison camp. Evil nasty heartless people ran it. It should never have been allowed. I feel sorry for anyone that was put there. You wouldn't treat an animal the way these women were treated.*"

Cathy Barnett is just one of the former mothers who sought refuge in Rosemundy during the post war years that came forward with their testimonies. I quote from several of them because their voices are a key to understanding the position my mother and many others found themselves when they sought refuge in the homes for women about to give birth out of wedlock.

It was in the Girls' Room that the women at Rosemundy would gather after completing the day's chores. Housework at Rosemundy, a sprawling two story Queen Anne house, was far from being a quick dust followed by a 20 minute gloss over the floors with the hoover. Instead they faced hours of back-breaking scrubbing and polishing.

if that was not enough, their day ended with the compulsory visit to the home's chapel where they were expected. Each evening, to kneel and repent before God and the chubby, bespectacled Father Barnicoat, the priest for the nearby High Anglican church. His austere scowl appeared sandwiched between the black skull cap on his head and his equally black and forbidding cassock.

The Crying Shame

Father Barnicoat would each evening remind the girls, in no uncertain terms, that they had sinned gravely. He joined with the Matron in these verbal beatings designed to ensure that the fallen angels understood that they were worthless and had only the remotest possibility of salvation if they were prepared to give their all, and their child to God.

And duly chastened they left in their various attire, loose bulging sweaters and smocks to hide their condition, wrap around skirts, let out and fastened with large safety pins, loosened flower patterned skirts held up by elastic to accommodate their bump or a variety of home made maternity clothes. Only the better off would be wearing off-the-shelf maternity wear as the women huddled together around the fireplace

"We all learned very quickly how to live together, peacefully and friendly - you did not make enemies of your fellow inmates because you never knew when you would need their help."

The treatment of the Rosemundy interns was harsh. Many women, during my research and feedback on the programme, gave me stories reflecting the humiliating, cruel and sometimes brutal regime they and my mother were subjected to.

Seated on the wooden chairs and benches were girls as young as twelve made pregnant by their own father, young women jilted by their lovers, victims of rape by strangers and others forced there by disapproving parents. Alongside them were women as old as forty about to give birth to a secret lover's child.

Whatever their crime against God and whether they were brought up in bare hovels or grand manor houses they were all equally packed off to bed to shiver through the cold nights.

"I was 21 when I found out I was pregnant. It was 1962. I had gone out one night and got drunk after I had just finished a long term relationship with a guy. That night I was so drunk I slept with a man I met. For a long time after I learnt that I was pregnant, I was stunned. It was something not happening to me. I was frightened of my dad and too scared to tell my parents. Instead, eventually I went to social services and told them. I also lied that I had no parents. They didn't know, so the woman agreed to help me and sent me to Rosemundy House.

"I was there for 6 months with the other women. One was just 12 years old and carrying her father's baby. The oldest I knew was around 25. The Matron treated us like we were dirty and in an offhand manner. She never showed us any sympathy.

"They put us in dormitories, four or six to a room. There was a chapel and a maternity ward in the House. Every day at 8 o'clock we had to go to the chapel for half an hour where the vicar would tell us that we had to repent of our sins."

For the radio documentary, Jan, from the end of the Girls' Room, led us deeper into the house along a narrow passage with a grey flagged coarse slate floor that led to the kitchen. Scrubbing that floor and the wooden floors around the rest of the house on their hands and knees was one of the more back breaking daily chores given to heavily pregnant women to undertake until their waters broke. As we moved slowly down the corridor, Jan stopped and recalled how, one night, anguished screams had sent her rushing out of her dormitory to find a terribly distressed woman writhing on

the slate floor. "*She had just given birth*."

The women were required to work in the kitchens but one recalled how they were never left too close to the food, except to serve it to the staff. Meals were sparse. The women had to rise at 6.30am to carry out certain chores before their breakfast. Breakfast, recalled Jan, was cereal and bread.

"The staff had toast and some would cut off the crusts and give them to the girls that had just given birth."

Many other women quoted bread and jam as being the staple diet and how they went hungry. One woman, Margaret rang in after the BBC radio documentary and told me how, sent to Rosemundy at 16, she had begged her boyfriend and his parents to bring her food.

"It was the most terrible time of my life. To me I was in prison and being punished. I was frightened. I was treated like a slave. I was so desperate for food that I wrote to my boyfriend begging him to bring me food and his mother brought me some sandwiches. I ate the sandwiches so quickly that I was sick. And the next day I was really told off by the Matron because I had asked for food. She said 'I was glad you were so sick. Don't ever ask for food again'."

This woman was lucky because others whose actions or rebellions were disapproved of faced punishments, which went from being given extra chores to being locked in a room.

"I quickly learned not to ask questions. If you did you'd most likely be sent to your dormitory and the other girls were told not to talk to you. If you did anything at all wrong they would punish you, giving you extra chores and even locking you up in a room."

Beyond the kitchen, we passed into what was once the washing room, now highlighted by the women as being the scene for some of the most back-breaking of their chores. The mothers were expected to hand wash and rinse all the clothes, bed linen, curtains, towels and tablecloths in the home, and that included the clothes of the staff and the Matron.

"There wasn't much food, mainly just bread and margarine and jam. Some girls were lucky because if their parents knew, they might send them treats. We had to do hard work cleaning the place and scrubbing the floors. The slate floors are still there in the hotel. We had to do the laundry of the whole place, including that of the staff, by hand."

By way of possible contrast, before and after the BBC Devon documentary and phone-in, a handful of women who had spent time in Rosemundy got in touch and said that life was not too bad there. However, these included a former Matron of the home who considered the "girls" very well looked after given the time, and a woman who had spent her early years there. The latter, who was illegitimate and whose mother was employed as a cook at Rosemundy observed among other things:

"The meals I remember were nutritious. We all had meals together three times a day in the dining room - long tables with benches - breakfast, lunch and tea. I do

remember too that meal times were chatty and there was laughter. In the summer we all picnicked in the garden with a typical English tea - bread, butter and jam and a variety of buns: butterfly cakes, buns with jam and coconut sprinkled on top, currant buns - all made of course by my mother, who would of course have been working to a budget.

"The house in those days was sited in beautiful and extensive woodland so it was not difficult to collect wood there but, of course, it must have been difficult for those very pregnant.

"There were wonderful events held there: the floral dance was held for the whole village there with stalls and entertainment. There was a stage built in the garden, which is still there now. Sometimes dances and plays were held on it. There was also a lovely candlelit event held there at Christmas with a nativity play, in which I took part."

At the end of her note, the woman informed us that she was six years old when she and her mother left Rosemundy, casting a huge amount of doubt over the veracity of her childhood memory. (In The Golly I recalled the occasional fêtes and parties and the fun and games in our children's homes but it is the nature of people to extricate whatever joy they can out of their misery). And why should a child not carry fond memories of her early years of relative privilege compared to the poor women who served her mother?

Doubtless, with the need for Rosemundy to be funded, the fêtes took place. These may have served a successful PR purpose. However, for the mothers it was far from a time to party.

Of course, every mother's experience of their treatment at Rosemundy would have differed in some degree or other depending on not only its changes in personnel but also their sensitivities, based on the lives they had come from and their feeling of vulnerability. My sense of disgust when as a child I would return to the children's homes in Southport was particularly fostered by my temporary sojourns in the material home comforts provided by the vicar and his wife who had fostered me. It did not take away from the reality of my experience and, no doubt, my mother's lower middle class background would have led her to describe the experience just as negatively as the majority of mothers that have contacted me.

Now in her seventies, sprightly Lyn Rodden, from Preston was another mother who proffered a grim portrait of Rosemundy life. She heard a follow up programme, which I featured in for BBC Radio Lancashire. Lynn contacted me via the BBC to tell me her story and went on to tell it on BBC Radio and TV. She echoed others' testimonies.

"1956 was a year that I will never ever forget. I was going to get married to my then fiancée, but after a lot of rows and pretend heart attacks from my future mother-in-law, I walked away and left mother and son to get on with their lives without me and the baby I was expecting.

"I went to Rosemundy House in St Agnes to have the baby with the knowledge that it would have to be adopted when born as I thought there was no help for single mums. So bags packed I made my way to Rosemundy. I had no idea what was to come in

the future there, I was not expecting a holiday camp but also I was not prepared for Rosemundy and its regime.

"Rules and more rules, break them at your peril, the impression one got was that you had committed the worst sin in the world and YOU were going to pay!!

"This was the place where you learned what work was and how hard it would be. Everyone was issued with a list of jobs to be completed for the day and the only way to be excused from them was to go into labour. The job everyone hated was the Laundry with the huge coppers where all the linen was plunged and then boiled, rinsed and rinsed again then put through the mangles. Some of these girls were only 13 years old (age was no excuse)- and the Laundry involved really heavy work for pregnant girls.

"That was the hardest job of all because, no matter what stage of you pregnancy, you still had to put the washing into old fashioned coppers and boil the bed and table linen, and all the babies nappies, then reach in and fish the sheets out of these coppers with a pair of wooden tongs. This was a very hot and difficult task for women eight and nine months pregnant. If you had labour pains – 'tough!' the job would have to be completed. No washing machines or tumble dryers there. No Health and Safety either, just very hot, steamy and dangerous conditions, with the fear of being scalded as you pulled the washing out of the very hot water.

"Scrubbing floors on your knees was a doddle compared to the Laundry! The heat and steam there was awful. Health and Safety would never stand for it today!"

The most disturbing aspect of the harsh Rosemundy experience was the concerted attempts by the Matron, the priest and staff to force the unmarried mothers into bending to their will. This was justified on the grounds of morality' of securing the moral welfare of the women. However, no matter how they are dressed up, as with the more notorious Magdalene Laundries in Ireland, the women's stories tell of slave labour, abuse, humiliation and denial of basic human rights.

Lyn Rodden told me how my mother, Mavis, fresh from her job as a music teacher in the Birmingham grammar school would nevertheless have had to attend slavishly to the Rosemundy staff's appearance.

"Another task was you had to wait upon the staff and make sure that they were presentable, to polish their shoes and wash, dry and iron their clothes, which all had to be done to a high standard and if the finished item did not suit, you had to do it all over again; and all of this done by hand."

Their Crown of Thorns

The demoralising nadir of the humiliation of my mother took place each Sunday in scenes more reminiscent of mediaeval Italy when the Jews, imprisoned in their walled ghettoes were force marched through the city streets to attend the Christian church services. Never mind that it was five centuries on with women having the vote and "equal rights", St Agnes witnessed these pregnant women dressed in green tunics as they were marched up the steep hill and through the village to the 500 years old parish church of St Agnes. They might well have been Jews scarred with the Star of

David as they arrived at the church, there once again to act out their repentance but now before the settlement's congregation.

“Every Sunday we lined up at the home and were marched in crocodile file through the village to the local church where we were told to repent.”

These women had broken none of the country's laws, they had committed no crime but had simply placed themselves in the hands of fellow Christians for their own protection. They were not aware that they had placed their heads in the proverbial lion's mouth. In this sad ecclesiastical weekly parade of shame, the tunics became their crown of thorns and their bulging bellies and prams were their crosses as they climbed the hill of Calvary all the while mocked by those not even fit to cast the first stone.

It seems that the green tunics were dispensed with by the time my mother arrived. Instead, the women would climb their hill wearing flat shoes beneath loose full length worsted, wool or gabardine coats, some featuring the padded shoulders and three-quarter length sleeves that were the fashion of the fifties. Kangol hats, knitted woollen and felt beanie hats, shawls and occasionally the head hugging Baker Boy berets would cover their heads, which were bowed low to avoid staring adults and their children.

The feelings of utter degradation as young and old villagers alike stood and stared at the “fallen women”, must have been intense, especially for the more mature of Rosemundy's inmates. And, as the sorry parade passed, sanctimonious parents would tell their daughters to look away as they espied girls sometimes younger than their own children yet heavily pregnant. It would give their daughters’ ideas. Later that day the parents would decry the pregnant child as evil and one who would go to prison once her baby was born. Only the most forthright of the village girls would empathise with the pregnant young woman’s tears and remark that she didn't look evil. Their brothers would insist that the women were pros, as was the slang for prostitute, yet with little understanding of what the word meant.

“Every Sunday, we were marched to Church in crocodile file, where we were put on display to the local villagers. We would have to sit at the back and be the last of the congregation to arrive. Church attendance was compulsory. The only girls excused were those who had just given birth or were in labour. The vicar would make a point of saying: 'I would like to thank the Rosemundy girls for their attendance today.'

“The local congregation would turn around to look at us. A few would smile but then there were the others who really did not want 'your type' in their Church. At the end of the service everyone walked past our pews. Some would turn to abuse us, calling us sluts, prostitutes, evil temptresses and the like.”

“Only when everyone else had left were we allowed to march out, keeping in our crocodile file, past the milling church goers down the hill straight back to Rosemundy and our jobs. I used to think to myself, how many of those who were disapproving of us should think 'There but for the grace of God go we'. You marched past them thinking to yourself 'Hypocrites!'”

The young boys watched them enter the church. They looked so sad, the youngest wondered if the women were going to be fed to Bolster, the legendary wicked giant

that roamed the St Agnes cliffs eating all the men, women and children he could find. Their mother said Bolster was dead, but at school one of the prefects said he only played dead when Agnes, the villager he loved, tricked him. Now he was really mad and wanted to eat pregnant young women, which is why the pros had to be sacrificed. Two witches lived near Skinner's Bottom and they alerted Bolster when the pros were in the village, then some of the women and their babies would never be seen again.

The young boys didn't blink when they heard one of their uncles being called a ladies' man by their fathers. The fathers said it with a sly smile and a wink, so the boys decided to admire their philandering uncles. They didn't know that one of the pros entering the church head bowed had been made pregnant by a “ladies man” sat in the congregation, but then ladies' men did not have to wear green tunics or carry bumps in their bellies. These men were not pitied by their peers but envied for their trophies, the fallen angels. Their victories were not their calamities.

When we filmed the TV trailer for our documentary, a telling moment arrived. The programme's producer wanted to film Jan, the unmarried mother, entering the church. Jan appeared apprehensive but consented and approached the entrance head bowed. However, just as she reached the atrium, she came to a quivering halt, shook her head and wiped a tear.

“I can't do it. I can't go in there,” she whimpered, *“I can't go in.”*

She felt shame and horror curdling into a numbness. Shame because she was still a practising Christian fearful of entering her Lord's house; horror at the memories of the suffering and mortification associated with what had lain within.

Producer and cameraman reassured her and offered the brave returning grandmother a few moments. She wiped more tears from her crimson cheeks then passed through into her “place of humiliation” and spiritual torment.

Inside Jan's tearful eyes passed over the wooden pews of shame and across to the pulpit of castigation. A few moments of stunned silence passed before we could continue recording. Jan explained: *“I am a Christian and this is a beautiful church but it meant something different to me. When we used to come here every week, we were treated like naughty schoolchildren. Those memories never fade. You’re in God's House but it was how we were brought here. We were here under duress, not our free will.”*

The presiding vicar, a Reverend Alan Bashford, had taken over at the parish relatively recently and long after Rosemundy had ceased being a “haven” for unmarried mothers. A former Police Officer in the South Yorkshire Constabulary, he listened to her story and then visibly shocked by tales of Rosemundy and the parish clerics, he apologised on behalf of the church for what the women had been put through.

The Father was confronted with the hypocritical of the church and religious orders that would take in vulnerable women and proceed to exploit their calamity. Their suffering, for disobeying “the will of the Lord*”,* was brutally paraded before the public in a manner all too evocative of Jesus Christ being forced to drag his cross through the streets of Jerusalem on the road to Calvary. Not content with threatening their worshippers with an afterlife in Hades inferno, his priests now demonstrated their

ability and willingness to condemn sinners to Hell on Earth.

Not all Father Barnicoat's parishioners would be unsympathetic to the Rosemundy women. The “girls” found some villagers humble enough to understand their own human frailty. Rather than sneering and jeering, these residents expressed sympathy for them and made polite, if brief, conversation. Some of them even found ways to make life more bearable for the “fallen women”. Then there were the occasional kind shopkeepers who offered discounts when the women ventured out of the home to buy personal effects with whatever money they had. Lyn Rodden recalls the ignominy of their plight.

“When we were allowed to go into the village to do some shopping, we always had to be accompanied by another girl. We were never allowed out on our own. Even on the rare occasions, when family were allowed to visit and wanted to take you out somewhere, you had to take another girl with you, so they would make sure you would not run away.

“Most of the villagers were nice to us but there were others who would sneer, pass comment and call you names and very loudly say what they thought of you, because in their eyes we had committed a terrible sin.

“The first time you encountered this attitude was horrible but after a while you learned to put it down to ignorance. Sometimes I would retaliate with remarks like: 'There but for the grace of God go you –perhaps?' Then I was reprimanded: 'You do not react to the taunts of any villagers. This village is their home and you are intruders and lucky to be here in the first place.'

“Some shopkeepers would not allow 'those terrible girls' into their premises but there was a couple of shopkeepers who would go out of their way to be nice to us. Sometimes they would give us a bit extra for free or a 'little treat', knowing that we did not have much cash to spend.

“There was a cinema in St Agnes (it is now a meadery) and on rare occasions we were allowed to go to see a film. There we were placed in the special seats reserved for 'Rosemundy girls'. You would be watching it when suddenly a local cat would jump up onto your lap. The shock was nearly enough to make you have a premature birth!!

Lyn's comments illustrate that not all the public supported the grotesque treatment of these women. It is also clear from social workers' guidance on pregnancy and child development that these practices were not recommended. Indeed, even an elementary investigation would have demonstrated that many of the practices, such as the forced labour punishable by confinement, were illegal.

Baby Snatching

When pressed, ministers in the 2010 Conservative/Liberal Coalition government tried to explain the latter away by excessive religious zealousness reflecting the public's moral indignation in post war Britain towards extra-marital sex. However, the testimonies of many of the mothers was that those who ran the unmarried mothers' homes and those in charge at Rosemundy may have been driven by an aim far more cynical and definitely more cruel. They believe the aim was to demoralise these vulnerable women into surrendering their babies for adoption and the adoption

market.

“They were always at you: ‘Get it adopted!!’”

“We were told we were selfish to even think of keeping our babies and that we should think of the baby and the good homes that 'poor people who can't have their own children' could give our babies. The place where I had my baby even arranged private adoptions.”

One mother picturesquely described how Rosemundy was regularly turned into a veritable market place for their new born.

“The days at Rosemundy when prospective parents visited the home were really awful. We would be shut in our dormitory. All we could do was to look out of the windows and watch these people wandering around the big tree in the grounds where the prams, all spruced up and clean for the inspection, were neatly placed around it. Inside were our babies dressed in the best clothes that each mother could find. After a while the visitors would go back indoors. We were locked in the dormitories until all the visitors had gone.

“Then we were told we could come out again and later you were told whose baby was going to be the next to be taken away. Some girls could not cope very well with these days but they did not get any sympathy from the staff. It was left to us girls to console our friends.”

This humiliation and demoralisation was only part of a process. Several mothers reported how they were not only told that they were the lowest of the low and beneath contempt but also they were unfit to keep their babies and should hand them over to those who could ensure the infants went to a good home. To the mothers, who believed that one of the home's matrons during that period was living in a lesbian relationship, there was a moralising mismatch.

“I was at Rosemundy in 1955 aged 18. My mother would not let me stay at home in case the neighbours found out. It was a very very sad place. The matron was in a partnership with another woman of doubtful gender who dressed like a man and whose bungalow I was made to clean including the bath and loo.”

“I was made to feel very bad because I intended to keep my son. There was never an issue there as far as I was concerned. I kept my son and got married whilst I was there. I met my fiancée secretly at the back gate and remember being very very afraid of being found out. He wasn't allowed to visit me more than once a fortnight and not at all for several days after our son was born “

For some, the pressure to sign over their unborn children drove them to illness.

“They made me do hard work and kept on saying that this was what life would be like if I kept my baby. Finally it all made me ill and, thankfully the doctor told them to lay off me.”
Others were driven to hysteria.

“*I remember a little 13 year old girl had a baby and desperately wanted to keep it. She*

was in hysterics, screaming and shouting. She carried the baby everywhere she went and wouldn't even put him in a pram in case he was taken away. Her parents finally said they would look after the baby."

After 1945, legislative changes made adoption easier. In 1944, Rosemundy had recorded zero adoptions. Nevertheless, with the war leading to many childless couples, adoption was now commonly talked about as one of the solutions for unmarried mothers. Matron, Miss Barbara Ackroyd, was naively blind to the pressures that new legislation would generate to have the Rosemundy mothers' babies adopted. In 1946, the matron had written:

"It is interesting to see how the majority of girls come to the home with fixed ideas about the necessity of adoption for their children, and how nearly all of them find that mother love is stronger than their fixed ideas and that therefore adoption or even separation from their babies is impossible."
(*The Secrets of Rosemundy House* Clive Benney: Wheal Hawke Publications 2014)

However, the testimonies of the mothers and the figures below, demonstrate that whatever the matron's views, brutal processes were at work to achieve the impossible and separate many of the mothers from their infants. By the time my mother arrived at Rosemundy, a quarter of the mothers' babies were being sent to adoption, and from the mid-1950s this figure rose so much that babies born at Rosemundy were much more likely to be adopted than to be kept by their mothers.

Rosemundy Adoptions 1944-63

	Total		**As % Babies**	
	Babies Kept By Mothers	**Babies Adopted**	**Babies Kept By Mothers**	**Babies Adopted**
1944-45	24	0	98.00%	0.00%
1946-47	16	5	38.00%	19.00%
1947-48	26	6	74.00%	17.00%
1948-49	30	8	68.00%	18.00%
1949-50	33	10	63.00%	19.00%
1950-51	25	8	63.00%	20.00%
1952-53	24	14	52.00%	30.00%
1953-54	27	13	53.00%	25.00%
1956-57	13	19	38.00%	56.00%
1958-59	11	15	33.00%	45.00%
1961-62	11	18	37.00%	60.00%
1962-63	14	28	31.00%	62.00%

(approximate figures gleaned from The Secrets of Rosemundy House Clive Benney: Wheal Hawke Publications 2014)

Mavis's Conundrum

Only the strong resisted the intense pressure to sign over their babies. Mavis was one of the “luckier” mothers. Her baby was not seen as fit for the adoption market because she said that the father was a black African from Nigeria.

“I fear a Nigerian half caste is almost impossible to find adopters for. So sorry.”
Barnardo’s letter, 26th May, 1955

It is clear that when Mavis Frampton had first gone to Rosemundy she was hoping to keep both her lover's child and her employability as a schoolteacher . The Victorian-Edwardian voice of her headmistress friend, Dollars, urged the teacher to abandon me to serendipity. She poured scorn on Mavis's “fanciful” idea of marrying across the “colour bar”, as it was known.

British society had already been outraged by the scandals of the African, Seretse Kharma, from Bechuanaland marrying a typist from London and Sir Stafford Cripps’s daughter, Peggy, marrying Joe Appiah from Ghana. Yet these dramas only heightened my young mother's romantic fervour. She refused to give up her lover or his child simply because of the nonsense that was racism. She did nevertheless concede to Dollars' fall back plan of placing me in Barnardo's care until that time when the music teacher and Isaac had resolved how they would be reunited.

Dollars probably expected that Mavis would ‘come to her senses’, accept the futility of her behaviour and recognise the impossibility of her ever being reunited with my father, Isaac Ene, the Nigerian prince from Enugu. Mavis's mother was not in a position to object because Mavis had stopped all communication with her and certainly did not dare risk her mother finding out about the pregnancy in case it threatened a successful reunion with Isaac. In The Golly, I recorded how, not hearing from Mavis, her mother, Winifred Church, had suspected misdoings and contacted the Birmingham Police, reporting that her daughter was missing. The Police then contacted Dollars. The headmistress told the constables of Mavis's plight and that she had gone to Cornwall to have her baby in secret. Nevertheless, Dollars successfully secured the Police's agreement not to inform Mrs Church of any details of Mavis's whereabouts.

Whatever her suspicions, Mavis’s mother was kept unaware of my birth and within a month of my being born she would die of cancer. Mavis didn't attend the funeral. Instead, my mother slept soundly in the knowledge that she had a plan and could hold onto her dreams, and this without pressure from the Rosemundy staff or her mother to give up her “coloured” child.

The regime was much crueller than I had ever imagined when writing The Golly. The impact of the Rosemundy women's revelations would be to tip the balance of my judicial scales in my mother's favour. It dawned on me how much hardship and humiliation she had endured in order to bring her Isaac's son into the world. Yet another option she could have considered was to have a hospital birth, face humiliation but also risk the poverty that may ensue from never again being able to work in teaching. It can be argued that neither option was more palatable. The teacher chose to protect her job.

She, of course, also had the option of abortion. However it was illegal and dangerous. In those years, almost every week a mother would die on account of illegally aborting her baby. In addition, given Mavis was still convinced that she and the baby's father would be successfully reunited, that drastic action probably never entered her head. even though it would have eliminated the cause of the crisis - my embryo.

Indeed, when I was interviewed on BBC Radio Manchester following publication of The Golly in 2004, this possibility was raised with me. Discussing my childhood memoir, Black presenter, Mike Shaft, a former radio DJ, asked me straight out: “You seem very bitter about what your mother did. How would you feel if she had aborted you instead?”

I didn't fall off my chair. Instead, used to the occasional inane question from radio presenters, I was initially more surprised that he found my tale to be full of bitterness. I explained that because my mother wanted her lover's child a termination was not an issue for her.

On reflection, I can only assume, giving him the benefit of doubt, that Mr Shaft was of a religious persuasion and believed not only in the conscious state of my foetus but also in the afterlife. The other possibility is that he was running with my poetic licence in The Golly where I stated that we live, as “thought”, long after we have materially departed this earth. However, my reference to thought was that it would continue as a property of others rather than my corpse.

Running with the radio presenter's line of enquiry and assuming that I, as foetus, had passed into the afterlife, perhaps it would have been reasonable of me to forgive my mother aborting me as a means of escaping her terrible predicament. There again, as foetus or ghost, I may have feared for her dying in the process or facing the full force of British law for destroying me. Even were she to avoid death or imprisonment, she may still have had to spend the rest of her life riddled with guilt and regret about my premature demise.

Though, if the Catholic priests are right that we enter the world as sinners, then I would have been justifiably resentful that my mother had prevented me from atoning for my sins whence condemning me to hell without a fair crack of the whip to achieve my redemption. On the other hand, were I a believer in reincarnation, then I would have speculated as to whether my mother had done me a favour by throwing me back into the karmic mix to give me a chance of returning to earth blessed as a member of a more favoured species or class. However, knowing me as I do now, I would probably have been cross and frustrated at my mother for messing with and delaying my earthly fate.

In the radio interview, I chose to swerve his personal religious conundrum, preferring to use my few minutes on air to focus on the facts. “The matter did not arise,” I replied, “because my mother was intent on bearing her lover's child.”

Surrendering the Baby

Not all the women entered Rosemundy intent on keeping their newborn. To many the problems of bringing up an illegitimate child appeared overwhelming. They were in little doubt that they would face public humiliation as often as might their infant. Moreover, should they have to bring up the child on their own, before them was the grim prospect of trying to provide both for themselves and the child. There were those who had already agreed to the demands of their parents or lovers to have their babies adopted. There were others, the victims of rape or caught out by a casual, drunken fling with a relative stranger, who arrived at the home having already decided that their pregnancy was a temporary inconvenience to be endured before they could return to their routine lives.

Yet, despite public and family pressures, only a few of the pregnant women could insulate themselves from the natural bonding process; their body protecting and nurturing the embryo as it turned to foetus inside their womb. The demands of parents and lovers could hardly match the authority of the growing child within. Then there were the other psychological effects of preparing for their baby's arrival, since the mothers were expected to themselves supply their infant's clothes and nappies and meet the rest of their baby's needs. Hence even the majority of these women became torn by the prospect of losing their baby.

“Some women did leave their babies there and there were awful scenes as they always left in tears, especially when you'd see a car come and take the babies away.”

Those women who did succumb to the demands of their parents or lovers, or who relented to the demands of those in charge at Rosemundy, faced a terrible final ordeal. When the day came for their baby to be taken away, the mothers were expected to wash and prepare their infant. They were ushered into the upstairs room directly above the front entrance to the home. There the baby was taken off the mother who would be locked inside. The mother was left to decide whether or not to watch whilst strangers departed with her baby, whom she might catch a glimpse of for the last time.

“There is nothing worse than seeing someone being locked up in a room and see someone drive away with their child. I saw it so many times I was determined to keep my baby.

“On the day, the girls who were having their babies adopted were told that someone was coming to take away their baby that day. So the mother had to wash, dress, feed and look after her baby until an hour before. She had to prepare a layette of clothes for the baby. Then she was given a chance to say goodbye to her child before she was taken upstairs and locked in a room with the window looking down on the trees outside where she could see the baby in a pram. The adopters would place their baby in a car and drive away.”

When local adopters were not easily found, there were always adoption agencies ready to take the babies and ply them in the adoption market. Lyn Rodden had agreed to give up her baby and, six weeks after her child was born, adopters were found by an agency but they were unwilling to travel to Rosemundy to collect the baby. So the young mother was told to take her baby to the adoption agency in

Bath. The process was to prove no less heart rendering. Despite the journey from St Agnes to Bath being almost 200 miles, Lyn was handed a day-return ticket, told to take the train from Truro and not to waste any time dropping off her infant because otherwise she would miss her train back home.

“It was the most horrible day of my life. I had to take my six week old son to Bath to the adoption agency there to hand him over for new parents. You were given your rail ticket, a bag to carry baby’s belongings and feeds. You were then driven to the station and after that you were on your own.

“I arrived at the office –what a bleak place that was! Bare wooden floorboards and hard chairs in the waiting room. There was no one to be seen, so I waited a while, then a stony faced woman appeared. All I got from her was: 'Name and baby’s name'. She looked at a piece of paper on the desk and then said in a very sharp tone: 'Give me the baby and his belongings, and sign here.'

“Then she disappeared into the next room, I could hear voices but not what was being said, then she re-entered and asked me to sign the paperwork that she just thrust in front of me and she took my son into the next room. She came back again alone and said: 'You can go now – if you hurry you will catch the return train to Cornwall.'

“She vigorously ushered me out, holding the door open to make sure I was leaving and said: 'Goodbye!'

“The door slammed behind me. And that was that – not an ounce of feeling or care from her. She was just doing a job. I cried all the way back to St Agnes, and I had to stay there for several days until everything was settled. It was awful. I had left my baby behind but was there with all the other mums and their babies. I couldn't look after the babies and when I was in the same room as them I wanted to run out.

“That was the last I saw of my son I tried and tried to trace him over the years that followed but kept being told I was not allowed to try and find my son; he was not mine any more so I should give up trying because it might never happen.”

Keeping the Baby

Those mothers intent on keeping their babies, often found that the pressure to surrender them continued even after they had brought their infant into the world. The mothers were still given jobs to do, and only slightly less demanding than in the days before they had given birth. The midwife in her navy blue skirt, white shirt and white medical coat was for many a haven of sympathy, responsible as she was for coaxing the new mothers to give their infants the best possible care. Otherwise the Rosemundy staff appeared to take the attitude that, since the women had entered their care, they had surrendered all their human rights and those of the child.

When we visited the St Agnes parish church and discussed Rosemundy with the Reverend Alan Bashforth, Bev who was, like me, born at the home, told of how the home had her christened behind her mother's back. Christening was never supposed to occur without the parents' or legal guardian's permission. So why this baptism went ahead is uncertain but it certainly would have left the young Beverley with godparents who were strangers to her mother. Lyn Rodden, to this day says she does not know the names of her child's assigned godparents.

In those days, godparents were traditionally responsible for their godchild's education and religious development, so the godparents appointed the Cornwall Moral Welfare Society, which ran Rosemundy. The Society would doubtless have been more inclined to see the child raised in line with its views rather than those of Beverley's mother.

“My mum said she wanted to keep me but didn’t think she would be allowed. As a punishment to my mum, for a few days after I was born my gran was not allowed to see me. I was supposed to be adopted but luckily my grandparents said my mum could keep me.

“Staff kept saying to my mum what are you going to call her and she said Beverley Lyn, but they kept on asking her. A few days after I was born. She was called into the matron's office and told: 'Beverly Lyn was christened yesterday.' My mum was shocked and angry. She had not even been allowed at my christening nor had they discussed it with her. So my mum had me christened again when she got me home.”

One woman, Ida, related how only a doctor's intervention had alleviated the intense pressure at Rosemundy to give up her child.

“I was just 15 years old and I wasn’t feeling well. Sister B...said that I was probably in the early stages of labour. I was then given a job to do. I had to scrub all the polish off the upstairs landing then wait for it to dry, then put the polish back on and buff it until it shone. In the evening I couldn’t bear it any more and Sister B took me to the Delivery Room. After two and a half hours, my lovely daughter was born.

“Life wasn’t a bed of roses. I still had to work in the kitchen and had other jobs to do. Every night I was told she was awake and hungry and needed feeding and changing. I would go down and be told: 'This is what it will be like for the next five years. Why don’t you let us adopt her. There’s a lovely couple who will provide a lovely home for her.'

“'I would reply: 'I don’t care. She is all mine and I don’t care what or where I go, she goes with me.' In the end I was having nightmares and Doctor Smith told them to leave me alone.”

Other mothers, even though determined to leave their babies at Rosemundy, soon found themselves fighting not to be separated from their newborn.

“My baby was born in the maternity ward. More complicated births were rushed to Truro hospital. Before I gave birth I kept thinking of running away and leaving the baby there. It wasn't anything to do with me. I remember one baby was still born but I never wished that. I don't know what other terrible things happened as it was all cloak and dagger.

“But when my boy was born I couldn't leave him. Eventually I told my parents and my dad sort of forgave me. I got married two years later and had another son. I told my first what had happened when he was old enough to know.”

Whether they kept or surrendered their babies, eventually the day came when they would be released from Rosemundy. With or without their offspring, the mothers

would shed huge tears of relief and of sadness for the women they left behind to suffer. They had their freedom back but the upshot of all the torment would never go away for those who passed through Rosemundy. Many mothers still find themselves, like salmon and seals, drawn to the place where they gave birth, as if to make sense of what they endured and why. Ida went on to write:

"Rosemundy was a terrible place really...so many bad memories but I visit there almost every year. For some reason I am drawn there. Apart from the slate floors, the front rooms are the same as before but the restaurant area was the laundry room where we worked so hard. A few years ago we stayed the night in St Agnes. I kept waking up in the night thinking I could hear babies crying. In the morning I found out that the noise was from peacocks"

My mother was at least spared the pressures that faced the other girls beset by visits and letters from their families. Mavis's father had long since divorced her mother on the grounds of infidelity. Estranged from her mother and with her father kept in the dark, Mavis also had a lover who was several thousand miles away who had almost disenfranchised himself from a say in my immediate future. Her friends, Dollars and co-conspirator, Pixie, having extracted a promise from the Police that they would not inform the young teacher's mother of her whereabouts, had kept themselves as her only counsellors. Despite their rigid Victorian/Edwardian attitudes, the two women were quite ready to lie and deceive others (and later myself included) in order to secure what they had decided was the best outcome for Mavis.

Those Rosemundy scenes would continue, in varying shapes and forms dependent on the staff passing through, until the trustees of the Cornwall Moral Welfare Society decided to sell off the house and, eleven years after my mother's confinement, move the refuge to a new house in the county.

When it closed in 1964, Rosemundy had been a home for unmarried mothers and "fallen women" for 43 of Britain's most socially turbulent years. It is well recorded how, when the twentieth century began, women were, as a gender, expected to be politically and socially subservient to men. Women were not allowed to vote unless they owned property, and even so they were still denied that right in local elections. By 1964, all women had the vote but abortion was still illegal, the harsh discrimination against unmarried mothers continued and it would be many years before the Equal Pay Act,

Rosemundy House still stands but today's visitor are guaranteed a much pleasanter stay...it is a three star hotel.

The BBC Radio documentary, The Crying Shame can be heard at
http://philframpton.co.uk/crying

and the BBC TV trailer is at
ttp://philframpton.co.uk/rosemundy

The BBC Radio documentary, Golly in the Cupboard is at
http://philframpton.co.uk/golly

The Golly in the Cupboard can be purchased at
https://www.amazon.co.uk/Golly-Cupboard-Phil-Frampton/dp/0954764900