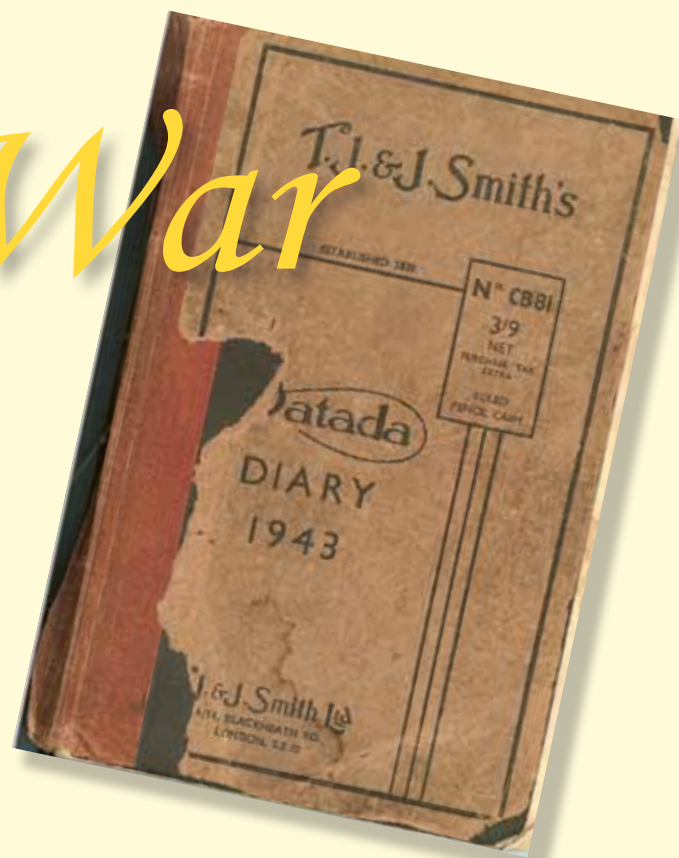


Evelyn's War

The newly discovered canal diary of Evelyn Hunt, an 'Idle Woman', edited by Tim Coghlan and serialised exclusively in Canals Rivers + Boats



◀ **Time off for tea** Evelyn (R) with Frankie Cambell-Martin awaiting orders at Bulls Bridge, West London. The Department of War Transport called for 'only women of robust constitution and good health' to become *Idle Women*. These two were certainly 'fit for purpose'! (*Waterways Trust*)

▲ **'This is the diary of Evelyn Hunt for the year 1943'** The *Datada* (*Day to day!*) Diary for 1943 used by Evelyn from 1st January until it just suddenly stopped in October of that year.

Part 1: A Canal Winter's Tale


During the summer of 1942 the 28-year-old Evelyn Hunt, who had trained as an artist at the Royal College of Art, was working at in the Camouflage Department of the War Ministry, which was based in the requisitioned Regent Hotel in Leamington Spa. She was personal assistant to the distinguished war artist, and later President of the Royal Academy, Tom Monnington who was one of many artists enrolled. He was away much of the time, busy working on the concealment of the large Midlands factories making munitions and aircraft components. Sometimes she went with him, which led to a romantic attachment to this older married man, and after the death of his wife in 1946, to marriage in 1947. Otherwise she was left behind with her duties somewhat light.

So during these lunch hours, she would wander down to the bottom of the town to the canal, where Regency elegance had long ceased, and eat her sandwiches, whilst watching in fascination, the working boatmen going by, or loading and unloading at the gas works on the other side from the towpath, where in time she too would load and unload.

One day she read Kitty Gayford's famous advertisement in *The Times*. It was placed under the name of the Department of War Transport, calling

for women volunteers to become boatmen for a minimum weekly wage of £3 - £2 during training - with the caution that 'only women of robust constitution and good health should enter this employment.' The need arose because the canal fleet operators - Grand Union Canal Carrying Company and Fellows Morton & Clayton were laying up boats for lack of crews, due to the men being called up.

Evelyn applied, and sometime during the autumn of 1942 she joined Kitty who trained the new crews herself for a couple of round trips from London to the Midlands, before setting them up on a pair of boats.

On 1st January 1943, Evelyn began writing a diary, which ambitiously began *This is the diary of Evelyn Hunt for the year of 1943...* This she kept up religiously until October of that year, when it suddenly and mysteriously ceased – although she was to continue working the boats for another 18 months. It begins at Braunston Turn, after the boats had unloaded supplies in Birmingham post Christmas and they were now on their way to load coal north of Coventry. It is the last part of her training with her friend Audrey under Kitty. On the way south, they are joined at Buckby Locks by Ann, another recruit who was nicknamed *Nanny*, as she was married with children. The three recruits would then be given a pair of boats to work once back at Bulls Bridge, West London, which they worked together for the next two years. The trio became known simply as 'Annie, Audrey, Evelyn'. 

Friday, 1st January 1943

Braunston - 8.15 pm

What a day! Quite the worst we have yet had! And what a night to start writing this diary! The wind is howling outside – I should think it is as wild a gale as I have ever heard. We are tied up at Braunston and the straps seem to be holding so far. Audrey has a shocking 'flu cold and is asleep in bed.

We left Leamington at 8.12 am and not far from the Radford Brewery the water ceased to pump out of the engine – it took us about 1 hour to clear the grit out of the pump – we had been in the mud twice and the filters were choked. From there through the Radford Locks and on to Itchington, where the gale started to rise and it rained appallingly. The boats, being empty, were blown in every direction – it was hell coming out of the locks – I left the butty behind and had to go back and fetch it! I talked with 2 girls from a pair of Fellows's boats half way up Itchington. It is marvellous to be indoors now, though the fug in the cabin is terrific.



John Monnington, Evelyn's stepson with his wife Delia, after generously presenting Evelyn's diary to the Stoke Breurne Canal Museum in October 2008 during the first *Stoke Breurne at War* weekend. John grew to share Evelyn's love of the canals and has a narrowboat on the Kennet & Avon, which houses a few of his mother's wartime watercolours. (Tim Coghlan)



The Regent Hotel, Leamington Spa in 1932 During the War it was commandeered by the War Ministry to become the headquarters of its Camouflage Department, where for a time Evelyn worked before becoming an *Idle Woman*. The hotel survives well into the present day. It is now a Travelodge Inn. (Copyright The Francis Firth Collection)



Apsley Mill in its wartime camouflage. One of the mills to which the all-female crew delivered regularly during the war. (Waterways Trust)

Saturday, 2nd January 1943

Hawkesbury

After a raging night, a cold clear morning. We had run out of bread and water, so I called at a house on the other side of the cut and asked for water. A most kind woman gave me some, though she had to draw it from a well with a bucket to fill my can.

Braunston Church, with its frilly spire and the 'folly' nearby looked beautiful silhouetted against the glow which tells of sunrise, as we turned the bend for Hawkesbury. A hawk was hovering over the canal bank. Audrey is better, though she still has a fearful cold and is staying in bed. I started the motor, but Kitty took over while I cooked 'risotto' for lunch. There were few bridge holes so we left the butty to its own devices. (ED: i.e. towed unmanned, with all three girls in the motor) The wind rose again at midday and the afternoon was extremely cold and unpleasant with blinding squalls of sleet at times. How I hate empty boats in a wind – they become uncontrollable demons. Kitty and I managed the Hillmorton locks 2-handed, but of course I put the motor in the mud outside the second! I was glad to get to Hawkesbury. Tomorrow we move on slowly to Longford where we will load on Tuesday. It was good to have several letters and an excellent photo of Ellie.

Sunday, 3rd January 1943

Longford

A nice day. We lazed in bed till about 9.30am. Audrey is better today but is still in bed. At about 11 o'clock we attempted to start the engine and were helped by a kind lad from a Barlow boat which was tied up ahead of us. He had helped us to tie up yesterday and told me he had never been ill in his life and had only once seen a doctor, when he sprained a wrist! He thought boating was a good life. We went gently up the cut towards Longford – it was a beautiful sunny, frosty morning. A boater, whose boats were tied up at the Bridge, told Kitty we could breast up and turn. We do so eventually with his help – another most kind person – his mother-in-law lives by the bridge so they tie there when possible. We came up here backwards tied abreast and discovered that we must go gently and one person must shaft the butty from the start to prevent her pulling over onto the mud. Some tough little boys were playing with the ice and enjoyed pushing our bows off from the bank. Audrey watched all these manoeuvres from her bed! There is plenty of water here and I have washed my hair. Kitty shared an enormous dinner of pork chops with us.



A postcard of Braunston Turn in the summer 1952, where Evelyn's 1943 diary began in mid-winter. She moored around to the left of the Junction at the start of the North Oxford Canal. Braunston church's 'frilly spire' as she described it is clearly visible. (Ian Wright Collection)



Idle Women loading at Longford Wharf. Thanks to the hoppers, two pairs of narrowboats could be loaded quickly at the same time, as seen here. The females are no longer identifiable but the one on the left could possibly be Evelyn. (Waterways Trust)

Monday, 4th January 1943

Longford

Started to get up at about 7.15am. Very cold. While still dark I threw sordid contents of a bucket overboard as usual and was surprised to hear a sharp splash – the cut was frozen over with ice about a quarter inch thick. The ice started whistling excitedly when the boats loading further up started their engines. It remained cold all day. After doing various household jobs I went to Coventry and being cold and tired could find nothing that I wanted in the shops, nor could I see a single pillar box. Kitty, on the other hand, went in the afternoon and found the shops full of things whilst pillar boxes sprang up on every side. Oh well! I did at least have a glorious hot bath.

In the afternoon I settled down for a pleasant sleep, but was roused up by an insistent knocking. On thrusting a tousled head out of the hatch, I found Bill, the foreman, who asked me to move the motor up to load. We had been told we weren't to load until tomorrow. On seeing me alone and rather helpless, he kindly shafted the motor up for me, and it was part filled. Oh joy! To have the boats low in the water again. He then offered to bring the butty up, which he did and on being thanked by me said, "I would do anything to help you girls". A staunch ally. I wonder why Bill Allcott quarrelled with him?

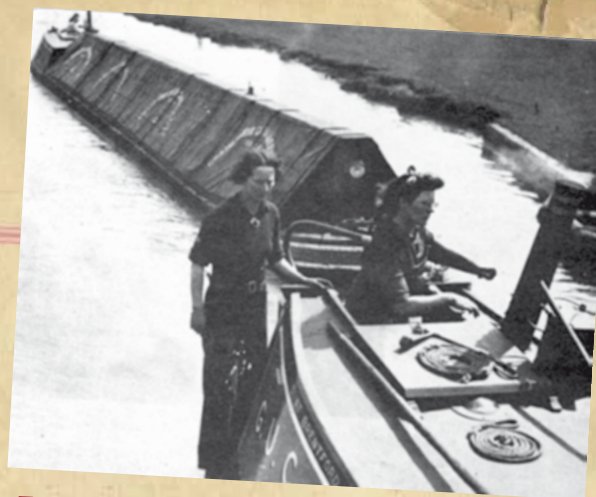


Tuesday, 5th January 1943

Newbold

Bill finished loading the motor and loaded the butty (48 tons 3 cwt in all) with D S Nuts (*Ed: a type of coal used at the paper mills*).

Ben Nixon, aged about 11, was the great feature of the day. His uncle's boats were tied up behind us and Ben appeared and helped us sweep the snow off the top planks and was really most useful and worked hard. We left the side cloths rolled up and laid the top planks down on the cross planks – so much less trouble. Kitty gave Ben a cup of cocoa and he came to visit Audrey who had just got up. He kept telling her she didn't look very well and ought to go back to bed! He knows everything there is to know about boats and he loved bossing Kitty and me around, but although he is a cheeky kid, he is so friendly and genuine and as such has a curiously grown up manner. He insisted on taking the motor from Hawkesbury and pretended to know all about it but confessed afterwards he had never taken the bad bend at Hawkesbury before: I heard him tell a man on the lock side that he had 2 trainees on board! We said goodbye to him and I took the motor. It was cold and snowed most of the time. We came across a Bobby and 2 men dragging the cut for the body of a man – thank heaven we didn't see him – 2 corpses in one trip would be too much. Kitty and I had a pint in the Boat with Joe Grantham.



Trainees entering a lock with Kitty Gayford (L) overseeing This is just the training Evelyn would have received from Kitty, who was the driving force in setting up the *Idle Women* for which she was awarded an MBE. It was estimated that Kitty and her trainers trained some 120 young middle class 'gals', but only a few survived for long, and at best she only had eleven pairs of boats operational. (*Waterways Trust*)



Buckby Locks in the mid 1930s. In her diary entry of 7th January, Evelyn described them as 'such a pleasure after those fiendish ones at Hillmorton'. She also refers to her recent Christmas moored in Buckby Locks – a dramatic contrast to previous Christmases in her life. (*Waterways Trust*)

Top of Buckby

We left Newbold at about 8.15 am and had a slight awkwardness when starting as the boats behind started up at the same moment and we were undecided whether to let them through before the bridge or after – they passed us after the bridge and I made rather a muddle of it and let the butty run up on my stern. I am not very good at letting boats pass! The Hillmorton locks were a shattering experience. Boats were queuing to go through and we had two pairs in front of us and two pairs of Barlow boats behind us. We did the first one well and the second not so badly but at the third the motor got on the mud and it took us some time to get off. Those single locks are fearfully confusing and it was a nightmare paddling about in oilskins and sodden shoes in the pouring rain, with the tops of the locks covered in damp ice. The girl from the boats behind was most gentle and helpful.

We tied up for a few moments at Braunston, while Kitty phoned to find out where Daphne's boats were – she was told she was waiting at the bottom of Braunston tunnel and would be coming through at 3pm. After navigating the Braunston locks successfully we waited for Daphne at the top, but, as she didn't come through the tunnel, we risked it and went through to find them at the bottom. Nanny came to join us. Fresh milk and cake at Buckby!

Wednesday, 6th January 1943

Thursday, 7th January 1943

Cosgrove

Left Buckby at 8.45am. A bit drizzly, but not nearly such a bad day as yesterday.

Kitty started the motor, I on the butty and Nanny went ahead lockwheeling. She seems nice and will be good at the job, but Audrey and I can't imagine how she can have left a 7 months old child to be looked after by friends.

We managed the Buckby locks well – they are such a pleasure after those fiendish ones at Hillmorton – and enjoyed the long pound, past Stowe Hill and Blisworth and through the tunnel to Stoke. We hooted loud and long as we went gently past the Allcott home – a crowd of people poured out of the little house; Bill and Mrs Bill, dignified and handsome as ever, and many others, friends and relations. Poor Bill returned to his boats after Christmas to find the cabin of the butty had been burnt out in his absence, and as Mrs Bill called to us from the bank, "Everything was lost; plates and all". A sad return after such a wonderful Christmas. We shall not easily forget the time we had with them all.

After Stoke locks I had a pleasant gentle time on the butty and as dusk came on the birds started to call. A flock of long tailed tits flew across the cut in front of me. I was amused by 4 grown up looking swans, who still had baby voices! We tied up at about 6 pm and it was very cold.

Friday, 8th January 1943

Leighton Buzzard

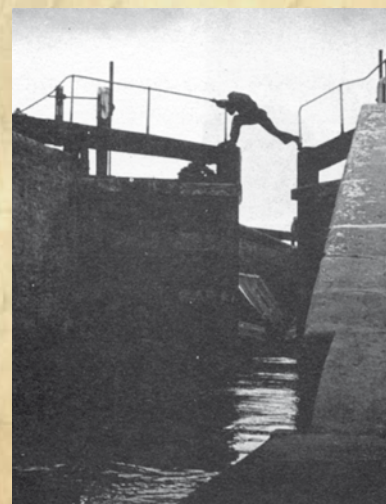
Awoke feeling tired and wretched after a bad night. Had been woken by Kitty and Nanny who had been to the local and come back to find the shore plank had slipped off the butty. It is not much fun having to dress and go out into the icy cold night to pull in a still icier and very heavy shore plank out of the cut!

Kitty was sweet and told me to stay below with Audrey while she took the motor and Nanny stayed on the butty.

It was a lovely morning, clear and frosty. We had to cut our way through the ice, which was rather fun. We met the old woman who takes the motor and the funny old man who stays on the butty. The old woman yelled at the old man to tell him it was Kitty he was about to pass. He held up a monstrous fur glove and said he had made it himself.

We stopped for about 1 hour at Fenny and did some shopping and ate our lunch. A nice girl in the chemist gave me a tip about face cloths! I had unfortunately tipped mine overboard the night before!

We managed the Stoke 3 locks without incident – no undue reversing, as on the journey up! Then the Jackdaw pound, again looking beautiful in the evening sunlight. In the bottleneck outside Leighton Lock we met Ben Nixon's father, with Ben's brother on the motor. They let the butty run right up on the motor while they chatted to Kitty, but it didn't seem to worry them. It is a good tie up here. A & N & I went to the flicks and Kitty gave us a good meal of sausage and mash!



An Idle Woman kicking the gates open of an emptied lock to avoid a journey round the lock – a trick the girls would have soon learnt from the boatmen. (Waterways Trust)

Saturday, 9th January 1943

Berkhampsted

This has been the coldest day so far. It was truly lovely in the early morning with the sunrise glowing red behind the willows, making a pink glow in the frosty fields and a pink pathway down the broken icy surface of the cut. The ice was pretty thick – a boater I talked to in one of the locks said it was an inch thick in places. I rather enjoyed the frosty day at first, but it became agonisingly cold as we were doing the locks before Tring Summit – a bitter wind had got up and was lashing the cut into waves. We broke the snubber, *(Ed: A towing rope used on long pounds with loaded boats – per Margaret Cornish, another Idle Woman)* the short strap and a cotton line today. The strap was broken when we came across a strange naval looking craft, on which was a naval officer and some soldiers – the officer asked Kitty for a tow and she handed him the strap, which broke when he tied it round his stud. The snubber broke as we were trying to come out of a lock fairly quickly so as not to hold up some boats ahead of us – it is getting very weak and I am afraid it is nearing its end, poor thing!

There was quite a hold up in Gas 2 locks. *(Ed: The two locks between Cowroast and Berkhampstead, named after the gas works which once stood beside the canal, to which coal was delivered to make town gas, and the resulting coke collected. Today the narrow-gauge train lines can still be seen amongst the brambles, which besides the lock-names, is all that survives.)* A pair of boats in one lock found their prop jammed against their 'ellum. *(Ed: Boatman corruption of 'helm')* and were stuck. It was good to tie up tonight and to have rum and ginger wine at the friendly Crystal Palace. *(Ed: The pub of that name, which still survives at Berkhampstead, and remains as friendly as then.)* After a good meal of fish and chips we returned to the pub for a good wash. They are most kind and friendly there.

Croxley Green

Sunday, 10th January 1943

Let go at about 8.30am. We found the shore plank so slippery that we daren't avail ourselves of the landlord of the C P's *(Ed: The aforementioned Crystal Palace.)* kind offer to let us have water from their tap. We thought we should never get back with the cans. Unfortunately the tap, which we were relying on, at the next lock was frozen, so there was rather a shortage of water on board. It had been raining hard all night, and in the morning there was a thickish mist and it was almost impossible to stand on the locks and towing path. Everything was glassy with the ice and rain. We fell often – I always fell onto the same spot on my thigh. At one moment it almost became more than we could bear and Kitty and I thought we would give in and tie up – but Audrey offered to battle with the motor through the now thick fog. She did marvellously and when we had about reached Albert's 2 locks, the fog thinned a bit and the ground had thawed a bit and things generally became happier and easier. We reached Croxley Green in record time for us and tied up at about 4 o'clock. The only real mishaps of the whole day were both with the snubber, which first of all broke coming out of the lock, and then managed to tie itself up in a paddle at another. I dislike that hairy caterpillar.

There was nearly another accident when I crossed from the stern of the motor with a bound onto the butty, my feet shot up in front of me and I landed gracefully, sitting on the bow with my feet dangling in the water. I spent a pleasant evening with Marcus and Mashka and had a lovely bath. *(Ed: Unlike the working boatmen, the Idle Women could go ashore where they had friends and use their facilities.)*

Monday, 11th January 1943

Croxley Green

Mashka gave me a wonderful breakfast of porridge, real egg, scrambled, and toast and marmalade. I left their house to catch the 9 o'clock bus and got back to Croxley Mills at about 9.30 am. I felt a bit self-conscious climbing over the barbed wire fence via the tree in broad daylight, but it is the only way I know of getting into this place and nobody seemed to worry. Kitty came back after I did with the good news that they had oil stoves, Beatrice pattern, in Watford. So Audrey, Nanny and I went off post haste and found them in a wonderful bargain-store shop. Audrey and I bought a double one and Nanny bought a single one. We used ours this evening and it seems fine, though the paint burns at present and smells rather, which rather nauseates poor Audrey who is still not feeling too good. We found Watford a fine shopping town, and spent far too much money on oddments. I had a fair to big, but very good lunch.

On returning here we found Kitty had moved the boats up alone and the butty was being unloaded. We spent the afternoon cleaning up the butty, the lazy devils on the elevator wouldn't start unloading the motor though it was only 4 o'clock. They said they wouldn't have time to finish, though they weren't due to go till 5! How hard some people do work. Kitty went home again and we 3 stopped in charge of the boats. I dropped the top of the engine room lamp into the bilges!

Southall

Tuesday, 12th January 1943

We are lying in the lay-by! We reached here about 5.45 this evening having left Croxley at midday. They started to unload the motor at about 8.30am and meanwhile we sluiced down the butty and made her look fearfully spick and span. Audrey and I paid a visit to the 'Cathedral' – the great warehouse full of bales of rags and pieces, where the innumerable little faces had looked down gargoyle-wise at us as we had come into Croxley last night. It was quite fantastic climbing up there, so high on the bales, and it was wonderful to find such a collection of useful rags, bias binding, khaki bags of webbing and innumerable other odds bits.

The journey to Southall was uneventful – we tidied up the motor en route, had a lovely lunch of steak, onions and two veg cooked by Nanny and as we came down breasted up, were able to do quite a lot of odd jobs.

As we were about to leave Croxley, little Ben Nixon passed, taking the motor. We were all pleased to meet again. Sid, the lock keeper at Cowley lock, came out and greeted us as we passed through. He wondered whether we had reversed from the Bull's Bridge Party.

We arrived here too late to oil up, but parked ourselves and turned quite neatly. We got our letters and Rodney has sent me the Zulu drawings.

I want to find out why boaters don't like tying up above Denham Deep Lock. Nanny is inclined to think someone deliberately pushed somebody else onto the 'blades' in that lock. *(Ed: Several of the Grand Unions locks were, over time, scene of suspicious deaths involving drownings - more lately involving engine-entanglement. The boatmen would avoid tying up for the night near these 'ghostie' locks).*

We managed the Stoke 3 locks without incident – no undue reversing, as on the journey up! The scene in about 1950 with a pair of BWB boats on their journey 'up'. (Copyright The Francis Firth Collection)



Wednesday, 15th January 1943

Southall

Kitty went to the office early to find out all the latest news and came back with much that was interesting. Most interesting to Audrey and me was the announcement that we were to have Sun as our motor, and our butty was to be the one which we had just been examining called Dipper. They are both little boats, but they look nice and we like the names. How lovely it will be to have our own – how proud I shall be of them!

We are to have a week's leave, and are able to return to Bull's Bridge next Wednesday to get our boats ready preparatory to leaving the following weekend. Molly hobbled down to the boats to see us – she did break a bone in her foot as we had previously heard from passing boats but it doesn't seem to incapacitate her much. She came to lunch with us all, bringing her own bacon!

Audrey went home at about 3 o'clock after we had collected our sugar and tea rations and our badges. I am very pleased with my badge and will wear it everywhere. Nanny and I left later and travelled on the 105 bus together as far as the station. It is good to be home for a bit – I have had a beautiful bath and am being completely spoilt, as usual, by Mum. This bed seems wonderfully comfortable, too.



The lazy devils on the elevator wouldn't start unloading the motor though it was only 4 o'clock....How hard some people do work. Croxley Mill in the mid 1930s with their elevators. These removed the need for hand-unloading of coal, which the Idle Women had to do at some of the mills. (Waterways Trust)



I bought a beautiful skiing cap for 14/6 from a very snooty girl, who thought I was a little mad. Lillywhites of Piccadilly is still there today and selling up-market range of sportswear. Only the service has changed for the better!

Thursday, 14th January 1943

Addison Road

It felt odd but rather pleasant to dress as a lady once more, but it struck chill about the legs – I have got too used to my comfortable long pants, and silk stockings seem a meagre covering.

I spent the entire morning washing my unbelievably filthy clothes. I believe I washed each thing 3 times.

In the afternoon I walked to Barker's to buy some bread, and then took a bus to Knightsbridge to search for a skiing hat in Lillywhites. The Knightsbridge branch was shut, much to my annoyance, so I went by tube to the Piccadilly branch, as they so kindly suggested on their window. There I bought a beautiful skiing cap for 14/6 from a very snooty girl, who thought I was a little mad, I think. She would have thought me still madder if I had told her why I wanted it, so I didn't! I prefer the Cut people to those in the West End of London, I think.

I started a dazzling pair of gloves tonight, knitting them out of all the scraps of wool I can find.

To a comfortable bed, with a cup of Allenbury's to drink. Very nice.

In Part II, 'Annie, Audrey' Evelyn' take over a pair of boats on their own for their 'Maidens' Trip'. But it is far from plain sailing...