

The true story
of the last woman
executed in Britain



A FINE DAY FOR A HANGING

THE Ruth Ellis STORY

CAROL ANN LEE

Bestselling author of *One of Your Own*

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The Ruth Ellis Story

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Preface and Acknowledgements

At the age of 16, I was mesmerised by Miranda Richardson's portrayal of Ruth Ellis in *Dance with a Stranger*. Named after Ruth's favourite song, the film was directed by Mike Newell, with a screenplay by *A Taste of Honey* author Shelagh Delaney, and focused on the relationship between Ruth Ellis and David Blakely (played by Rupert Everett). Released in 1985, it made far more of an impact on people of my generation than any of the books about the case, despite the narrative ending with David's shooting in Hampstead. The dramatic story of Ruth's arrest, trial and execution remained untold, together with her troubled childhood and life before she became manageress of the Little Club. Although sublimely acted and beautifully shot, with Delaney's trademark incisive dialogue bringing the script shimmering to life, *Dance with a Stranger* unfortunately fixed the character of Ruth Ellis in the public mind as a screeching mass of neuroses.

In the quarter century since then, and for the past 35 years, there has been no in-depth, objective study of this infamous but distinctly oversimplified case. Its central themes - passion, class, gender and politics - are as relevant now as they were at the time of Ruth's execution. In addition, capital punishment has recently been fiercely debated again in the UK, with most broadcast discussions referring specifically to Ruth. Yet, unlike Derek Bentley and Timothy Evans, who were executed in 1953 and 1950 respectively for crimes they did not commit (and for which both have been posthumously pardoned), Ruth *was* guilty of

shooting David Blakely that Easter Sunday evening in 1955. Nonetheless, it was her death on the scaffold that gave the campaign for abolition its greatest emotional spur. 'By their decision to execute Ruth Ellis,' wrote Rupert Furneaux within a short while of her hanging, 'the Home Office have abolished the death penalty.'¹ There were other legal ramifications besides: the defence of diminished responsibility was introduced in the Homicide Act of 1957, a plea which might have saved Ruth from her appointment with the hangman. Thus this most notorious of British crimes of passion had the effect of bringing compassion into murder law.

A Fine Day for a Hanging explores Ruth Ellis's life and death from a new perspective, aiming to describe all the tumultuous twists and turns of a short but very intensely lived life without making value judgements; it is, as ever, for the reader to make up his or her own mind about the events of almost 60 years ago. When Ruth stood in the dock to answer for her crime, the manifold prejudices of the period were as discernible as the fresh peroxide in her hair. From a modern viewpoint, this makes her case extremely poignant and challenging to evaluate, acting as a mirror to that era, in whose reflection we see our own ethics and moralities. Past studies have concentrated, like *Dance with a Stranger*, on the affair between Ruth and David, but *A Fine Day for a Hanging* is a biography which seeks to illuminate Ruth's life and the time in which she lived; it also aspires to provide a much fuller picture of the aftermath of her arrest, to look at what happened to the other protagonists, and to explain the wider implications her execution had on our society.

In a recent private email to Laurence Marks, co-author of *Ruth Ellis: A Case of Diminished Responsibility?*, criminal barrister Edward Henry posited:

It was an open and shut case, you are right; but there is an enduring sense of injustice because of the background of profound physical abuse, and the

unexplained acquisition of the gun. There remains the suspicion that Ruth was hanged on moral grounds, because she was 'undeserving' (hostess/escort at the Little Club) or partly to do with class. Could you see a deranged daughter of the shires being hanged for this? Convicted, yes, but reprieved surely? So what is acceptable after a decanter of whisky on a grouse moor is outrageous in a city . . . Ruth's case is all too easy to explain but the society in which she lived was not ready to hear it.²

Are we ready now?

*

A great many people helped in the research for this book. I must first of all thank author and historian Keith Skinner, whose assistance in areas too numerous to mention enriched my experience of writing about Ruth and without which the book would be much poorer. Keith also facilitated a visit to the Crime Museum, whose curator Paul Bickley I would also like to thank, and to Hampstead Police Station and the now defunct Hampstead Magistrates' Court, where we were shown around by Sergeant Philip Hewetson, an extremely knowledgeable and patient guide.

I am grateful to Francesca Findlater for answering my questions about her parents, and to John Riley, who introduced me to Georgina Ellis's widower, Mike Blackburn, in my quest to learn more about Ruth's daughter. I learned much about Ruth's son Andre by speaking to his fellow pupils at St Michael's College, Hitchin, some of whom have very painful memories of their time there. I would like to single out for particular thanks Andre's best friend, Brian Jacobs, for his insight and suggestions for further research. The following Old Michaelians provided vital information about Andre and school life in general: Tony Caruana, Michael Craigen, Nic Szeremeta, Tony Stansfield, Peter Bodle, Michael McCartney, Bob Ashurst, Terry Simpson, Jim Hoare and Christopher Hoefkens. I am extremely grateful to all of them and also to Simon Curtis, who runs the St Michael's College website. The school photograph of Andre

was passed to me by Mr C. de la Salle and I thank him for that.

Next I should like to thank Laurence Marks for his considerable knowledge about Ruth Ellis, and for his kindness, good humour and endless patience. I thank too writer Peta Steel, daughter of Laurence's co-author Tony Van den Bergh, and would like to take this opportunity to set straight a matter raised in *Ruth Ellis: My Sister's Secret Life*. In her book, Ruth's elder sister, Muriel Jakubait, claims that Tony passed Ruth's very distinctive compact and handbag to his daughter and that he had something of a vendetta against Ruth after she rebuffed his advances. Unaware of these comments at the time, Peta explains that this was not so:

My father was an award-winning journalist with an excellent reputation. He was a brilliant raconteur who would have enjoyed telling everyone that Ruth had rejected him because he could always take a joke against himself. He certainly never owned any of her possessions and therefore I would never have seen - and never did see - Ruth's compact or her handbag at any point. Both Laurence and my father were very protective of Muriel and did their best by her - and Ruth.

Dr Mike Morrogh, Shrewsbury School archivist and historian, helpfully provided David Blakely's school reports; Tony Cox, former headmaster at Sherborne St John Primary School was able to add to my knowledge of Ruth's school years; Paul Sullivan, who runs Diana Dors's official website, answered my questions patiently and expertly; author Michelangelo Capua was equally helpful regarding Deborah Kerr; and author Douglas Thompson very kindly put several questions to Christine Keeler on my behalf - I am grateful to both him and to Miss Keeler, as I am to Olivia Temple, whose aunt Gwen Nockolds managed the Steering Wheel Club during its heyday.

I am indebted to the staff of several archives, including the National Archives in Kew; Sheffield historian Chris Hobbs, who runs a website under his own name dedicated

to unearthing Sheffield's forgotten past; the Tameside Local Studies and Archives Centre; Janet Warr at the Fairfield Moravian Church in Manchester; Robin Wiltshire at the Sheffield City Archives; Manchester City Library; Colin S. Gale at the archives and museum at Bethlehem Royal Hospital; the South London and Maudsley Trust; Alison Gill at the Manchester Room and County Record Office; Adam Shaw at the Co-operative College; June Wailing at the Centre for Buckinghamshire Studies; Andrew Stoodley at Hampshire Archives and Local Studies; Helen Roberts at the Royal Northern College of Music; Buckinghamshire County Council; Colonel Bobby Steele, Regimental Secretary of the Royal Highland Fusiliers Museum; Jim Devine, Secretary of the Highland Light Infantry Association; Andrew Hudson of Folkestone Library; Michael G. Speers, Smith & Wesson Collectors' Association administrator; Smith & Wesson historian Roy Jinks; Phil Barnes-Warden of the Metropolitan Police Heritage Centre; Neil Paterson of the Metropolitan Police Heritage Centre; and Sioban Clark, chairman of the Friends of the Metropolitan Police Historical Collection. I am grateful too to the staff of the Magdala in Hampstead, for answering my questions. I would like to single out for particular thanks author Margaret Drinkall, an expert on Yorkshire history, who took time out from her own work to conduct research into the Blakely family for me. I extend the same gratitude to author and crime historian Stewart P. Evans, who very kindly clarified a number of facts concerning the execution process.

Thanks too, to Corinne Wiseman at the *Jersey Evening Post*, and a special thank you to Alex Henwood of Fremantle Media for promptly sending me a copy of the terrific Thames Television documentary *The Story of Ruth Ellis*, produced by Peter Williams in 1977. It is a lost gem and deserves to be broadcast again; I found it incredibly useful during the writing of this book and returned to it many times. I would also like to thank Nigel Hulme in the UK and Julian Messent

of LMB Racing in Belgium for information on David Blakely's beloved Emperor, which now resides in Belgium, having been expertly restored.

I must also thank the following: Bruce Robinson, Martin Fido, Sean O'Connor, solicitor Bruce MacGregor, Chief Superintendent Simon Ovens and Aysha St Giles. There are several other people who do not wish to be named but whose memories and suggestions for further research were extremely helpful. I thank them all and apologise if I have forgotten anyone here, but am truly grateful to everyone whom I contacted during the writing of this book.

My agent Jan Michael and all the staff at Mainstream Publishing have given staunch support to this book from its inception to its end and I owe them a huge debt of gratitude for that. As always, the support of my partner Alan, my son River and that of my other family and friends has meant everything to me.

*

There are two previous biographies of Ruth Ellis: Robert Hancock's *Ruth Ellis: The Last Woman to be Hanged* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1963; an updated edition was published by Orion in 2000) and Laurence Marks and Tony Van den Bergh's *Ruth Ellis: A Case of Diminished Responsibility?* (Penguin, 1977). Hancock's biography occasionally tips into misogyny but, nonetheless, his interviews with those involved in the case who are no longer living are a useful source. Marks and Van den Bergh's impeccably researched book likewise provides much that is invaluable for anyone either interested in reading or writing about the case. Muriel Jakubait's *Ruth Ellis: My Sister's Secret Life* (Constable & Robinson, 2005), ghostwritten by Monica Weller, is a fascinating memoir which presented a new theory about the death of David Blakely; I refer to this specifically in Appendix I. Georgie Ellis's *Ruth Ellis: My*

Mother (Smith Gryphon, 1995) is a personal account from a very different but equally interesting viewpoint. Jonathan Goodman and Patrick Pringle's *The Trial of Ruth Ellis* (David & Charles, 1974) is an excellent reference book, and Victoria Blake's *Ruth Ellis* (National Archives, 2008) in the Crime Archive series is a superb compact biography.

*

I always felt that the horror of David Blakely's death was frequently skimmed over in discussions about the case, and he is too often seen as someone who may well have deserved what happened to him. Similarly, very little was known about David Blakely, and one of my aims with this book was to restore his character to him. In a letter to the *Evening Standard* shortly before Ruth's execution, crime writer F. Tennyson Jesse remarked that we are 'too apt to forget the first corpse' - that is, the victim. I hope that *A Fine Day for a Hanging* will go some way towards correcting that.

I

La Vie en rose

Holloway Gaol N7, the Thirteenth Day of July in the Year of
Our Lord Nineteen Hundred and Fifty-Five

1

'Today Ruth Ellis was hanged,' began a letter sent in to the *Islington Gazette* by a teacher at a school close to Holloway Gaol:

Not only myself, but many of my colleagues were faced with the effect of this upon the boys and girls we teach. The school was in a ferment. There were some children who had waited outside the prison gates; some claimed to have seen the execution from their windows; others spoke with a fascinated horror about the technique of hanging a female. My colleagues and I agree that if there is any argument which weighs above all others for the abolition of capital punishment, then it is this . . . For not only was Ruth Ellis hanged today, hundreds of children were a little corrupted.¹

But the children did not see what happened to Ruth Ellis that hot, sooty morning. Nor did Gladys Langford, another local teacher and keen diarist, who recorded: 'There are still agitations to obtain a reprieve for Ruth Ellis. She has been in my mind all day; worthless as she is, it is a grim thought that she is to be hurled into eternity in this gold weather.'² Neither did celebrated journalist William Connor, whose 'Cassandra' column in the *Daily Mirror* raged against the Home Secretary's decision to refuse a pardon:

It's a fine day for haymaking. A fine day for fishing. A fine day for lolling in the sunshine. And if you feel that way - and I mourn to say that millions of you do - it's a fine day for a hanging . . . In this case I have been reviled as being a sucker for a pretty face. Well, I am a sucker for all human faces because I am a sucker for all humanity, good or bad. But I prefer them not to be lolling because of a judicially broken neck.³

And nor did the crowds who gathered, bare-headed and perspiring, outside the prison gates to give vent to their feelings about what was being done in their name.

No one saw and no one heard, apart from a select few. For while England sweltered, a thick veil of secrecy was drawn over the end of 28-year-old Ruth Ellis's life. Deep within the prison walls, past the stone griffins with their keys and shackles held aloft the massive gatehouse, and beyond the foundation stone inscribed '*May God preserve the City of London and make this place a terror to evil doers*', the circumstances of her death were as measured and suppressed as the rules that had governed her last three weeks of life.

On a winter morning more than 30 years before, another young woman had stirred inside Holloway and risen to meet an identical fate. Edith Thompson, executed in January 1923, had resigned herself to the shadow of the rope: 'It is an existence, that's all, just a "passing through" . . . eventually being submerged and facing Death, that thing there is no escaping - no hope of defeating.'⁴

*

At 6 a.m. on that summer's day, the executioner and his assistant awoke in a room near the condemned cell. Their arrival the previous afternoon had caused great unrest among the assembled protestors but passed without incident, giving them no reason to suspect that their long-established routine should go awry. A warder brought them hot tea, which tasted like straw, and left them to prepare.

The older man was tall and spruce, smoothing his salt-and-pepper hair with a manicured hand, the picture of efficiency in his trademark double-breasted suit. Born in 1905 in Clayton, Bradford, Albert Pierrepoint was the son of a hangman and the nephew of one. Between them, the three Pierrepoints put to death more than eight hundred people.

Albert's assistant that morning was 36-year-old Royston Lawrence Rickard of Maidstone, Kent. Royston's first

assignment had been with Albert in 1953 at Armley Gaol in Leeds, when they hanged 25-year-old Philip Henry for the rape, battery and murder of 76-year-old spinster Flora Gilligan. The two men found further common ground by virtue of the fact that they each worked as pub landlords to earn a regular income.

Tea supped, they made their way to the execution chamber. The entrance doors were in a narrow cell separating the chamber from the room where the condemned prisoner awoke to the strange torment of knowing the precise hour and means by which she would die that day. Albert and Royston worked with practised aptitude. The sandbag they had attached to the noose the evening before to remove any stretch on the rope was drawn up, detached and lowered into the pit below the gallows. Royston went quietly down the stairs and cast the sandbag into a corner of the dark space; it was empty but for a stretcher to one side, placed there in readiness for the expelled body. He then secured the trapdoors and climbed the stairs.

In the execution chamber, Albert turned his attention to the lever that would activate the process of death. He slid the bolt and plugged in the cotter pin and its guard at the base of the lever, which acted as a safety catch. Then, with a ladder against the upper beam and Royston holding a tape-measure, Albert adjusted the fall of the rope to the last half-inch of his rigorous calculations, allowing for the overnight stretch. The two men spoke only when necessary and then very softly, aware that their 'client' moved about her cell a mere fifteen feet away.

Albert measured the rope and made an official note of it. The noose lay on the trapdoors. He coiled the spare rope until the noose was at shoulder height and held the coil where he judged it best, above the noose. Royston wrapped a piece of twine around the coil and the rope, then passed the ends of the twine to Albert, who tied it, securing the

loops to the rope itself. When the time came, the sharp strain of the woman's plunging body would break the twine and cause the rope to unroll for the length of the drop.

Albert glanced about the execution chamber, checking there was nothing untoward. Using a stub of chalk he went over the 'T' mark under the noose on the front drop where the prisoner's toes would be aligned, the arches of her feet directly over the shallow gap in the trapdoors. Albert shifted the cross-planks slightly on either side of the 'T' and made another adjustment before crossing to the lever and releasing a split pin that held the cotter pin fast. He eased out the cotter pin for half its length; while resisting an untimely push, the end of it was now flush with the side of the lever, poised for action.

He straightened up and gave Royston the nod. Together they left the execution chamber and returned to their room for breakfast.

*

Along Camden Road, traffic was beginning to build. There were more motorcars than on an ordinary day, and the red buses turning in at the junction with Parkhurst Road trundled at a slower pace, as if allowing passengers time to look out at the scenes by the prison walls.

A huge press of people lined the wide pavement: women in twinsets and cotton dresses, men in light suits or shirtsleeves, some with their thumbs tucked into their braces, and children with school satchels slung and forgotten at their shoulders. Young men on bicycles weaved in and out of the throng, bells ringing. In the hot, gritty draught of the passing traffic, policemen braced themselves against the crowd, eyeing those who waited impatiently at the road crossing.

The horde was at its deepest near the secured entrance to the prison, where mounted police kept order. Occasionally

there was a surge as newcomers strained for a glimpse of yesterday's notice pinned to the gates; it announced that Ruth Ellis, found guilty of murder, 'will be carried into execution at 9 a.m. tomorrow'.⁵ The first signature below the proclamation belonged to the acting Under Sheriff of London, Harold Gedge, who was at that moment preparing to leave his mews home on Philpot Lane in order to witness the execution.

The notice was also signed by Dr Charity Taylor, in her tenth year as Holloway's first female Governor. A former medical officer at the prison, Dr Taylor had declared upon her appointment in 1945 that she intended 'to give some of these people the hope that they will become decent citizens again. Severe punishment is not always the way to prevent an individual doing something wrong.'⁶ In a handful of cases, such as that of Ruth Ellis, the law overrode the Governor's beliefs and the 'terrible responsibility' of overseeing a judicial death weighed heavily upon her.⁷ She had read the detailed memorandum sent in by the Establishment Officer ('prisoners will be scattered over the prison at their respective tasks . . . Their minds will be occupied, any noise caused by the trap doors should pass unnoticed'), but wrote for further guidance, determined that the event would be as swift and straightforward as possible.⁸ The prison commissioners replied a fortnight before the date set, clarifying a number of points: 'If the execution is to take place at 09.00 a.m. . . . the prison clock chime should be disconnected for the hour of nine . . . the executioners should be lodged so that they neither have to enter the prison or cross the yards . . .' and so on.⁹ Each detail, from the stopped clocks to the copra mats laid outside the condemned cell to muffle the approach of the execution party, encapsulated an almost theatrical need to conceal this most final of acts.

Outside the prison, in the oppressive air between crowd and high wall, a group of schoolboys squeezed into a gap,

earning a restricted view of the castellated gatehouse. 'Gruesome curiosity about what they were doing just up the road prompted a small gang of us to visit the prison on our way to school,' one boy admitted years later.

When we arrived at about eight o'clock, apprehensive and unsure about what we were doing there, about 1,000 people were standing outside the main gate at Holloway, some praying, some holding up placards protesting the execution and some just curious as we were. There was a muted fury in the air and a dreadful awareness that an awful thing was about to happen and there was absolutely nothing that could be done about it. There was a lot of jostling as journalists and photographers arrived to join the crowd. In the middle of this grim frenzy a policeman came across and asked us what we were doing. As we 'ummed' and 'aaahed' an answer, he squatted down to our eye level. 'Back to school, lads,' he said. 'There's nothing for you here. Go on. Hop it!'¹⁰

Griping about their dismissal, the schoolboys dawdled on in the sunlight, speculating about what might be happening inside the condemned cell. Their imaginations ran riot, but the truth was somewhat less melodramatic.

*

The long corridors inside Holloway were painted in shades of cream and green. They radiated out from the central tower, a London landmark whose purpose was to ventilate and heat the entire prison complex. A constant thrum of activity echoed about the labyrinth: clanking pails, shoes clattering on iron staircases, the low vibrations of speech pierced by screams and shouts, and a ceaseless jangle of keys. Then there was the peculiarity of light within the prison: a permanent bright yellow fog bathed the edifice from ceiling to floor.

But the condemned cell was a place apart. Down the corridors with their distinctive smell of boiled food, disinfectant and despair, through the blurred artificial glow into CC wing and then up a flight of stairs worn semi-hollow by decades of tramping feet, the cell stank of its own segregation. In that 15 ft by 14 ft room, with its pink and

brown walls and long window fitted with glass that allowed the occupant to look out without being seen, the last vestiges of normal life vanished. Isolated and yet never alone, the condemned woman moved between the bed, wardrobe, table and chairs of the main room and the wash basin, bath and lavatory of the adjoining room. Another door led from the bathroom to the visitor cell, where a partition precluded physical contact.

A Home Office memorandum set out Ruth Ellis's existence in stark terms:

Immediately a prisoner sentenced to death returns from court, she is placed in a cell for condemned prisoners and is watched night and day by two officers. Amenities such as cards, chess, dominoes etc., are provided in the cell . . . Newspapers and books are also provided. Food is supplied from the main prison kitchen, the prisoner being placed on hospital diet . . . ten cigarettes or half an ounce of pipe tobacco are allowed . . . The prisoner may smoke in her cell as well as at exercise. It is the practice for the Governor, medical officer and chief officer to visit a prisoner under sentence of death twice daily, and the chaplain or minister of any other denomination has free access . . . She may be visited by such of her relations, friends and legal advisers as she desires to see and as are authorised to visit her by the Visiting Committee and the commissioners, and she is given special facilities to write and receive letters.¹¹

The wardresses working shifts in the condemned cell expected their charge to be a hard, vulgar young woman, deceitful and brassy; that was how the popular press had portrayed her, after all. Durham-born Evelyn Galilee, employed at Holloway since 1951, was surprised by the reality:

In came this fragile girl, a Dresden doll. She was my age and tiny - no more than 5 ft - and so very slim. Her skin was like porcelain. They had taken away her false nails, eyelashes and glamorous clothes and put her in baggy prison issue clothes. But they could not strip her of her dignity. Not once did she break down, scream or cry. Ruth had this acceptance of what she'd done and felt the punishment fitted the crime. Her eyes . . . were bewitching, the most beautiful violet-blue, the colour of forget-me-nots.¹²

Officer Galilee and Principal Officer Griffin were the two wardresses who came to know Ruth best. She did not ask

for any of the 'special privileges' granted to the condemned prisoner, other than cigarettes. Her sole complaint was that she could not sleep: the naked bulb overhead had to remain lit day and night. The two officers fashioned a cardboard lampshade to dim the glare - a small gesture, against prison rules, but the Governor said nothing about it. Each day, they witnessed Ruth submerging her fears about the execution by reading, writing letters, doing jigsaws and making dolls from the materials brought in by her mother. Even then, she was inexorably drawn to the green, 6 ft-high screen that almost ran the length of one wall.¹³ 'She kept asking me what was behind the screen,' Officer Galilee recalled. 'I think she knew what it was, but she kept badgering me to have a look.'¹⁴

Officer Galilee had checked the roster for that last morning, praying her name would not be on it. When she saw that it was, an overwhelming guilt descended; shortly before her own death half a century later, she still spoke of it.

Slowly, Ruth rose from the iron bed with its creaking springs. Officer Galilee helped her dress: prisoners wore their own clothing on the day of execution, and Ruth abandoned the regulation blue smock with its tiny bows, choosing instead a skirt and blouse. She cleaned her face, brushed out her hair and used the lavatory. Then she applied a minimum of make-up, clicking open the powder compact that played a faint, tinkling tune: 'La Vie en rose'. The music seemed to come from afar, drifting up from a barrel organ on the glittering, dusty streets. When she lit a cigarette, Officer Galilee held the flame steady on the small, expensive gas lighter that Ruth had brought in to the prison; it was a running joke among Ruth's friends that she never could light a cigarette first time.

Before breakfast, Revd John Williams visited. Ruth knew and liked the deeply compassionate Welshman in his mid-30s who had arrived at his post as chaplain in Holloway in

1951. After his departure, she asked to write a letter. Putting on her spectacles, she adjusted the blue diamante frames with a quick push of her index fingers, and accepted the pen and paper passed to her. In a neat, looping hand she addressed her solicitor:

Dear Mr Simmons

Just to let you know I am still feeling all right.

The time is 7 o'clock am - everyone (staff) is simply wonderful in Holloway. This is just for you to console my family with the thought that I did not change my way of thinking at the last moment.

Or break my promise to David's mother.

Well, Mr Simmons, I have told you the truth and that's all I can do.

Thanks once again,

Goodbye.

Ruth Ellis.[15](#)

At the top of the sheet were printed instructions: 'In replying to this letter, please write on the envelope' followed by blank spaces for the name, number and prison whereabouts of the correspondent. This time there would be no reply.

The cell door opened at eight o'clock and four male prison officers entered. The wardresses who had worked the night shift departed, leaving only Officer Galilee to remain until the hour of execution. The law dictated that women might hang, but only a female Governor or deputy Governor was to witness the death.

The door opened again, admitting a warder with Ruth's breakfast. She ate the scrambled egg delicately, observed by the guards and her only other constant companions in the cell: a pair of goldfish in a bowl. Outrage rose in Officer Galilee's chest: 'Even on that last day she wasn't allowed the dignity of eating with proper cutlery or plates. She had to use plastic because they thought she might use the crockery as a weapon. The breakfast tray was taken away.'[16](#)

The wardress steeled herself for the coming necessity: she was to escort her charge to the lavatory and exchange Ruth's own underwear for the padded calico knickers that all condemned women were required to wear. The edict

followed Edith Thompson's execution in 1923, when rumours of how 'her insides fell out' caused revulsion among the populace.¹⁷ The evident trauma of those who witnessed Mrs Thompson's death and the doctor's failure to fill in the internal examination section of the post-mortem report did little to expunge the story, which was never resolved. She was thought to have suffered a severe haemorrhage or miscarriage on the scaffold, and shortly thereafter it became mandatory for women facing the gallows to wear thick, wadded underwear.

In the cramped bathroom, Officer Galilee presented Ruth with the garment. 'I'm sorry, Ruth, but I've got to do this,' she said, looking away.¹⁸

Ruth put on the unsightly knickers, fumbling with the tapes attached to the front and back of the fabric to keep them firmly in place. 'Is that all right?' she asked. 'Would you pull these tapes, Evelyn, I'll pull the others.'¹⁹ The wardress secured the tapes tightly, as she had been told to do, but when Ruth asked what the change of underwear was for she couldn't bring herself to answer.

They returned to the stifling main room. Sun on the sealed window revealed a thick cake of dirt. The noise of the crowd at the gates penetrated faintly: a low, persistent hum of outrage. Officer Galilee stood by the door, gripping the redundant heating pipes. Ruth sat silently at the table. Behind her, just inches away, loomed the high green screen.

At quarter to nine, the door to the corridor opened. The deputy Governor entered with Revd John Williams and they took a seat at either end of the table. While they spoke quietly with Ruth, the door opened again. A nursing sister walked in, carrying a kidney tray on which stood a small bottle and a phial. She set the tray down on the table, poured some liquid into the phial and passed it to Ruth, who refused it. The sister hesitated, then said, 'It will calm you,' but again Ruth politely declined the sedative. The sister tried one more time before giving up. Balancing the tray

with its unused medication in the crook of her arm, she left the cell.[20](#)

For a moment no one spoke. Then Ruth slowly removed her glasses, the diamante flecks catching the sunlight, and handed them to the deputy Governor. 'I won't need these any more,' she said. 'Thank you.'[21](#)

The silence fell again and no one seemed able to break it. The hour was almost upon them.

*

Some distance away in the prison, a telephone rang with loud, insistent peals. It startled several people, resonating as it did in the Governor's office, just as Dr Taylor was about to lead the Under Sheriff and Principal Medical Officer on the final journey to Ruth's cell.

The Governor took the call, listening in astonishment to the voice on the other end of the receiver: a Miss Holmes, private secretary to Major Lloyd George, was ringing to inform her that a stay of execution was on its way for Ruth Ellis. Temporarily thrown, Dr Taylor replied that she would have to verify the matter and call back to confirm the message. She cut short their conversation, then dialled the Home Office number. She spoke urgently to a number of people, but no one was able to trace a Miss or Mrs Holmes, no one could corroborate the information she had offered. Dr Taylor persisted, dialling the number of the private secretary whose assistant told her that he was not yet in the office. Hope rapidly diminishing, she then telephoned Mrs Forbes, the other private secretary, but she was not available either.

Defeated, the Governor replaced the receiver. She looked at Harold Gedge, the Under Sheriff, and asked what he thought they should do. Later she recalled grimly how 'in view of the unsatisfactory source of the message . . . it was decided to carry on with the execution'.[22](#)

Outside, the sun shone brighter than ever. The temperature on the Air Ministry roof in London read 75 degrees and the crowds gathered along Camden Road wilted like unwatered plants as they struggled to keep up the chant of '*Evans-Bentley-Ellis!*' But in Holloway prison there was a deed to be done, and no amount of bellowing, broiling heat or hoax calls could stop it.

Along the cream and green corridors they walked: the Governor, the Under Sheriff and the Principal Medical Officer. Dr Mervyn Ralph Penry Williams knew Ruth best, having examined her physical and mental health on many occasions. She had impressed him with her rationality and pleasant manner, and shocked him by declaring that she felt no remorse for her crime, which she said was a result of being 'unfairly treated by the deceased to whom she had shown much kindness in the past'.²³ There was far more to it than that, as the doctor well knew.

They climbed the stone stairwell to the corridor where Albert and Royston were waiting with the warders who had been detailed to conduct Ruth to her death. An overpowering sense of finality struck them all as the Governor entered the condemned cell. Harold Gedge and Dr Penry Williams followed her in, shutting the door on the group in the corridor. 'The next minutes of waiting were the worst, not only then but on every occasion,' Albert recalled afterwards. 'It is impossible not to feel apprehension and even fear at the prospect of the responsibility of the moment, but with me the frailty passed as soon as there was action.'²⁴

It came in the form of a signal: Harold Gedge opened the door and silently raised a finger, letting Albert Pierrepoint and his assistant pass like ghosts into the condemned cell.

*

Upon her first sight of the executioner, Ruth sprang to her feet, knocking over the chair. From her position against the wall, Officer Galilee gripped the heating pipes so tightly that her arms were rigid. The tall, dapper man's confidence both repelled and relieved her: 'Pierrepoint was very reassuring, if you can say that of a hangman. He said to her, "It's all right, lass. It's all right." He kept to the back of her so she wouldn't see his face, picked up the chair and told her to sit down again. He said, "Put your arms behind the chair."' [25](#)

Deftly, Albert bound Ruth's wrists with the soft leather calf strap he kept for certain prisoners. A warder pushed the screen away from the wall and the door to the execution chamber slid into view. Albert straightened and Ruth stood; he walked in front and she followed, a warder at each elbow, holding her firmly. She turned swiftly to glance at Officer Galilee, who remembered, 'It was a look of pity - she felt sorry for me. She looked at me and mouthed, "Thank you", and she went out.' [26](#)

Through the door and straight ahead, suspended at chest height above the trap, was the noose.

Ruth walked calmly with Albert, not even flinching at the apparatus of execution. In that stark yet claustrophobic chamber, Charity Taylor, Revd John Williams, Harold Gedge and Dr Penry Williams stood with their backs to a wall. The escorting officers mounted the cross-planks beneath the great beam, guiding Ruth to the 'T' mark Albert had chalked there at daybreak. She stepped in her black court shoes onto the fissure in the trapdoors.

Royston stooped behind Ruth, fastening her legs together with the ankle strap. Albert moved nimbly into position, extracting the white hood from his breast pocket, where it was tucked in meticulous folds. The hood had to be put in place before the noose to prevent the sudden draught caused by the drop lifting it from her face. Albert shook out the white cowl like a gentleman flourishing a silk handkerchief. When his fingers reached for Ruth's long,

loosely combed hair, she looked at him and lifted the corners of her mouth in a faint smile.[27](#)

He drew the hood down until it covered her face.

Averting his eyes from the small square of white cloth convulsing against Ruth's mouth, he reached for the rope. In a seamless movement he lowered the noose over her head, tightened it to one side of her chin and pulled a rubber washer along the rope to secure it. Then he darted to his left. Crouching like an athlete at the start of a race, with one hand he pulled the cotter pin and with the other he pushed the lever, hard.

The trapdoors banged open and Ruth's body plummeted through the cavity into eternal darkness. The length of twine used to keep the noose in place spiralled down after her. A brief eddy of dust gusted up from below and then all was silent, save for the soft creak of the rope in the pit.

*

All over London, people stood to reflect upon what had taken place in the name of British justice that morning. The *Evening News* reported outside Holloway:

As the chimes of Big Ben striking nine o'clock echoed from a radio in a house nearby, the crowd of more than eight hundred stood bareheaded. The only sound came from the moving traffic and from a violinist playing in a side street. It was Bach's *Be Thou With Me When I Die*.[28](#)

The Times observed:

The crowd remained silent, with some people praying, as the execution hour of 9 a.m. passed. Eighteen minutes later the notices of execution were posted and the crowd rushed forward, blocking the road and halting the traffic. Police moved them back into two orderly queues and they filed past the notices on the prison gates.[29](#)

At the same hour in a school in Middlesex, the headmaster noticed four boys standing utterly still in the playground. He frowned, curious and then appalled, as one boy held up a

watch: 'Only four more minutes,' the child said in a hush, 'One . . . two . . . three . . . four - she's had it, boys!'³⁰ Elsewhere another teacher noted: 'The entire episode had a profound effect on the children. Their initial curiosity became a morbid and fearful obsession . . . It is something they will never forget.'³¹

*

In Holloway, Albert descended the stairs to the pit. Ruth's body turned imperceptibly on the rope, but there was no movement of breath now to make the white hood twitch. He undid the first buttons of her blouse for the immediate medical inspection. Then he returned to the execution chamber and nodded at Dr Penry Williams.

The medical officer went below. It was cool and fairly dark in the pit as he placed the stethoscope against Ruth's heart. He knew what to expect: after hanging, the palpitations would speed, then fall and, within a few minutes, weaken to nothing. When he was satisfied he could hear only his own heart beating as it should in the gloom, he removed his stethoscope and climbed the stairs. The prison staff dispersed from the execution chamber while Albert and Royston went about the last stages of their work.

In the condemned cell the overhead bulb was extinguished for the first time in three weeks.

It would never be lit again.

II

West End Girl

Rhyl, 9 October 1926 - Knightsbridge, summer 1953

2

I was born in Rhyl, Wales, in the same circumstances as millions of you. I came from a happy home, with a sister and brother, and my parents were loving and understanding. My father was a musician with all the loveable qualities that music gives a man . . . My father travelled a lot and mother was the greater influence in my upbringing.¹

This apparently autobiographical account of Ruth's early years appeared in the *Woman's Sunday Mirror* shortly before her execution. Serialised across four issues, it was ghostwritten by reporter Robert Hancock, whose editor had struck the usual deal under the circumstances: in return for exclusive rights to her story, the newspaper paid for Ruth's defence. There was no question of the money reaching her ten-year-old son as Ruth had intended; the ink on the negotiations was already dry. In 1963 Hancock admitted that 'like all newspaper stories of this kind it was an occasionally obscure and sometimes misleading account [but] also contained enough truth to make it interesting'.²

There was little reality in those opening sentences. Ruth's background was not the demonstrative and vaguely bohemian childhood portrayed in the press. The facts of her upbringing were obscured for the purpose of a less controversial, libel-free read. Like most seemingly well-known stories, it had been manipulated, fictionalised and suppressed - by Ruth herself, among others. Retrieving the truth even now is a matter of unpicking infinite strands from the material of a short but calamitous life.

Contrary to popular belief, Ruth's background was not poverty stricken. Her paternal great-grandfather, Charles Hornby, was a prosperous boot and shoemaker who

employed several men in his business and could afford to have his children privately educated. The family home was in Droylsden, then 'a township-chapelry in Manchester parish, Lancashire, on the Rochdale canal and the Manchester and Sheffield railway, four miles east of Manchester'.³ During the latter half of the Industrial Revolution, Droylsden thrived as people left the farmsteads of the countryside to labour in the large factories and cotton mills; one of the major employers in the district was Robertson's jam factory on the banks of Ashton Canal. Schools sprang up, churches flourished and sport became a common pastime. Ruth's grandfather, Walter William Hornby, was a professor of music and much-respected lecturer on singing. He became organist at Droylsden parish church in 1888, at the age of 21; his older sister Jane Elizabeth was a teacher. Walter listed his hobbies in a guidebook to organists as literature and tennis, but he never took his privileged position for granted. In addition to his duties at the local church, he was equally involved in the community elsewhere, serving as conductor of the Droylsden and District Philharmonic Society and Droylsden Co-operative Society.

In 1893, Walter married Jane Louise Davies. Their son Douglas Geiah was born a year later, quickly followed by a daughter, Marjorie Mariel. In 1897, Jane gave birth to twin boys: Charles Granville and Arthur Nelson - Ruth's father. The 1901 census shows the family living at 304 Fairfield Street in Droylsden with their young domestic servant, Agnes. The close-knit township dispersed as more people moved to the nearby city, although one section continued to expand: the Moravian community (a Protestant denomination which began in Eastern Europe), who lived by the maxim: 'In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; and in all things, love.' The Moravians settled in the area in 1785 and built their own inn, shop, bakery, farm and other amenities. The heart of this self-contained village was at