

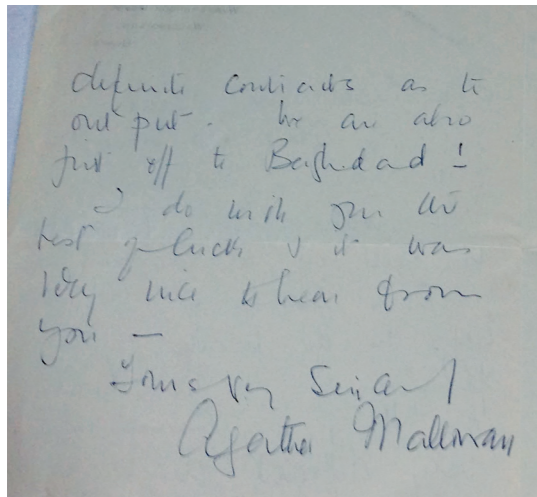


THE MUNIMENT ROOM

Nuns, nuptials and knickers

Kirstead Hall in Norfolk is home to Dermot and Judy Murphy, who bought it in the 1970s. The house contains fascinating archival material handed down by Dermot's ancestors.

Dermot and Judy shared a small selection of the extraordinary collection with *Historic House*.



Dermot's aunt, Ida van Cutsem – at the time a nun and teacher at the Sacred Heart Convent School – asked her childhood acquaintance Agatha Mallowan for a couple of favours: to open a school fete, and write a play (for charity, we assume). Mallowan is better known by her first married name, Agatha Christie (she remarried, to the archaeologist Max Mallowan, in 1930), and Dermot has her handwritten responses. Sadly, Christie politely but firmly refused both requests. On the question of the fete, she says, 'I never do anything of that kind; [I have made] a rigid rule about it.' As to the play, she demurs, surely with false modesty, that it is, 'the sort of thing I should find very difficult.'

Image left: Agatha Christie's replies to Sister Ida van Cutsem.

Kirstead Hall is open for Invitation to View tours, bookable exclusively on historichouses.org

Places were still available, at the time of writing, for tours on 20 June, 23 July, 7 August and 1 September. Visitors are shown around by Dermot and Judy in person, who introduce many more extraordinary artefacts from their collection and share their remarkable stories.

The school in which Ida taught was established in 1850 in Elm Grove, a house in Roehampton (and whose grounds can be visited – see the Historic Houses Free to Members handbook) bequeathed by Catholic convert William Law. It is apparently pure coincidence that Ida was related to Law, from the marriage of Edmund Law, Bishop of Carlisle, to Mary Christian, sister of Fletcher Christian, *HMS Bounty's* mutinous first mate. Mary made seven rules for herself when she married, beginning with, 'I resolve never to contradict my dear husband,' which have been passed, along with her name, to every subsequent generation of her descendants. Dermot's mother, Mary Christian (May) van Cutsem, while not in possession of the original exhortations, was entrusted with a copy, and a painting of the Bishop whose word was law still hangs in Kirstead Hall.

Image right: Edmund Law, Bishop of Carlisle, brother-in-law of Fletcher Christian



Image above: Tiny bloomers and blouse sent to entice William van Cutsem to buy the full-size version for his new wife

Ida's cousin, Brigadier William van Cutsem, was Deputy Director of Military Intelligence during the Second World War (despite, remarkably, having a German father – he took van Cutsem from his Belgian mother). In 1921 his fiancée, at least, appears to have been living in the Dardanelles, so recently the scene of the ill-fated Allied invasion of the Ottoman Empire. The archive contains a sample of miniature honeymoon underwear sent to William for his perusal, shortly before his marriage, by a Turkish lingerie supplier from their establishment on one of Istanbul's finest shopping streets. They explain that if his fiancée is unable to visit them, 'en ville', they will send a representative to her at Yeni Keui – a small town on the way to Gallipoli, more than 150 miles away. Were the samples perhaps sent on the request of his best man, Harold Alexander – who later became Field Marshall Earl Alexander of Tunis and Commander-in-Chief in the Middle East during the Second World War?

A much later note from General Alexander (who signs 'Alex') to William includes a wonderfully humorous sketch of a frazzled administrator, surrounded by disorganised paperwork, with the caption, 'When I come to the W.O. [War Office] I hope I shall NOT find this sort of thing going on.'

Image right: The back of Harold Alexander's letter to William van Cutsem

