

## IT'S SHOWBUSINESS!

Dorney has long been a favoured place to live for people in the entertainment industry. I was intrigued to come across an American staying in Dorney Reach in 1935. Investigating the story behind this took me into a whole different world, of celebrity and glamour underpinned by real talent.

The American I started with was Reginald (Reg) Montgomery, a pianist and composer. I discovered that throughout the 1930s he had made frequent sea crossings between the US and England, in company with a woman whose stage name was Marion Harris. Marion was a singing star, and she would undoubtedly have been staying at the house in Dorney Reach with Reg, as guests of West End theatre agent Leonard (Len) Urry whose house it was. The following year, it became Marion's home for a brief time after she married Len.

It's been hard to track down the truth of Marion's life, amid the many myths about her origins, how she began her performing career and even how many husbands she had! Bit by bit, however, research has revealed the real woman. She was born Mary Ellen Harrison, probably in 1898 in Indiana. Her father died when she was young, and her mother worked as a stenographer to support her only child. There are many stories about how Marion became a singer which may or may not be true, but what is indisputable is that her recording career began in 1916. In the same year she was said to have been a featured singer in Ziegfeld's Midnight Frolic, a late night rooftop venue in New York where scantily clad chorus girls danced on a glass floor above the audience who enjoyed various comedy, singing and dancing acts while drinking and dining.

The recording studios issued several of Marion's records most years through the 1920s and she was said to have made far more recordings than other female singers of the time. She achieved considerable success in the American music charts; it was claimed that she earned £20,000 for sales of one and a half million copies of one of her songs. Her records were sold in England, too. Her style included jazz and pop and in particular blues; she was credited as being the first white singer to sing works by black composers, even adopting a Southern dialect. Later she claimed to have invented crooning, a popular style in the 1930s – Frank Sinatra and Bing Crosby are better known crooners. You can still listen to the sound of her voice at

[https://adp.library.ucsb.edu/index.php/mastertalent/detail/106624/Harris\\_Marion](https://adp.library.ucsb.edu/index.php/mastertalent/detail/106624/Harris_Marion) .

In August 1919, Marion married Robert Williams, a film actor and theatre promoter a few years older than her. Their daughter was born in New York the following year. Having a baby barely interrupted Marion's career and she continued to record songs and to tour the US



appearing in vaudeville shows. Her love life was less successful. Marion and Robert were divorced around 1922 and she then married Rush Bissell Hughes, stepson of writer and film director Rupert Hughes, the uncle of billionaire Howard Hughes. Rush was a few years younger than Marion and worked in radio. They had a son born in 1924 in New York, but this marriage too ended in divorce, in 1927. Meanwhile Marion appeared at the Palace Theatre in New York – the pinnacle of vaudeville theatres – between 1926 and 1931, as well as in Broadway shows. She did a little film acting, too, and radio work. In 1930, Marion was living in Beverley Hills with her two children.

Marion now turned her attention towards England. Throughout the 1930s she travelled across the Atlantic by ship, usually with her children in tow as well as Reg Montgomery who

had taken over as her accompanist. She featured at various London venues but especially in cabaret at the Café de Paris where she became a regular performer. It was here that she probably got to know Len Urry, who was said at the time to have been employed there to dance with female customers without partners. By the beginning of 1935, Len had signed the American duo up with the Wright Orchestral Club, which provided subscribers with sheet music for the latest dances. They promoted a comic song written by Marion and Reg called “My Kid’s a Crooner”, even holding singing contests for it in dance halls.

By 1931, Marion was reportedly one of the highest paid women entertainers in the world. As well as cabaret, she began to feature on British radio, alongside Reg. Together they wrote a foxtrot entitled “I’ll B.B.C-ing you (In town tonight)”, capitalising on the growing popularity of the BBC. She was to become an established radio artist in the UK.



On 1 April 1935, Reg Montgomery was staying at Len Urry’s house, Little Holme in Dorney Reach, and no doubt Marion was also there. By this time, she would have been well known to the English public from her records and radio appearances. The residents of Dorney would have been aware that she was a singing star. In early April 1936, Marion sailed back to New York with her two children and Reg. She returned to England on 11 June with just her daughter, leaving her son to make his home with his father and stepmother. Two weeks later Marion and Len were married at Eton Register Office and settled into life at Little Holme. The house was one of those on the bank of the Thames, now known as Gable End. It would be nice to think that Marion was able to enjoy the peace and beauty of her surroundings.

After her marriage, Marion seems to have given up live performances, although she and Reg were still working together in 1938. An unpaid bill for dental treatment landed her in Windsor Bankruptcy Court early in 1938. Despite having been one of the highest earners in her profession, paid £600 a week by the Café de Paris, she said she had spent virtually all her salary on maintaining her celebrity lifestyle and now had nothing left. Perhaps finance was the reason that she and Len gave up the house in Dorney Reach; by the outbreak of war they were living in Knightsbridge. But their London house was hit by a bomb. Shaken, Marion made her way over to New York and checked into a clinic. She had left the clinic and was staying in a hotel, catching up with old friends, when a lighted cigarette in bed caused a fire which killed her, on 23 April 1944. Her death was widely reported in the British press so her Dorney neighbours would have heard of her sad end.

Trying to discover the truth about Marion’s story has led me on a trans-Atlantic journey of my own, by email rather than ship! The American author of a website celebrating jazz age singers has a page about Marion and was looking to understand more of her background. It has been a rewarding experience to collaborate in our research. If you go to the website at <http://www.jazzage1920s.com/marionharris/marionharris.php> you can even see a video clip of her. It is many years since she left Dorney, but her voice can still be heard. Her recordings continue to be used in the soundtrack to such blockbusters as Downton Abbey and Boardwalk Empire. Marion is not forgotten.

**Virginia Silvester**