

# Mary Ellis



One of the last surviving British female pilots from the Second World War, Mary Ellis was a ferry pilot who lived to be 101 years old.

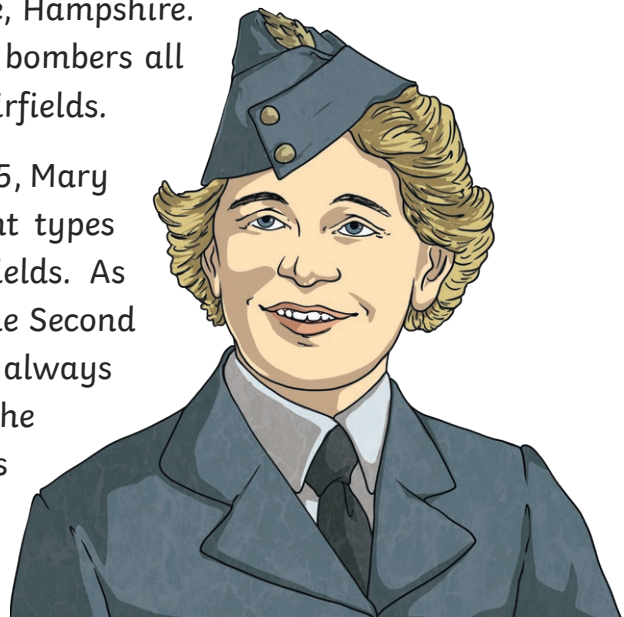
## Early Life

Born into an Oxfordshire farming family as the third of five children, Mary was named Mary Wilkins when she was born on 2<sup>nd</sup> February 1917. Mary was fascinated with flying from an early age due to the family's proximity to several Royal Air Force (RAF) bases. As a young girl, her father paid for her to have a pleasure flight in a biplane at a flying circus and it was at this point that Mary decided that she wanted to learn how to fly. At the age of 16 and with her enthusiasm still high, Mary attended flying lessons at a nearby Witney airfield, successfully gaining her licence at the age of 22. She flew for pleasure until the beginning of the Second World War in 1939 when all civilian flying was banned.

## Second World War

Following the destructive Battle of Britain in 1940, Mary heard an advert on the radio for qualified pilots to help the war effort. The Air Transport Auxiliary (ATA) requested that qualified women should join the ranks for the first time as many qualified men were now fighting abroad. Pilots with the ATA would help the war effort by transporting planes and supplies from factories to RAF and Royal Navy bases. In October 1941, Mary joined the ATA and became part of a group of female flyers based in Hamble, Hampshire. Mary was soon flying aeroplanes and bombers all over the country, delivering them to airfields.

From 1942 to the end of the war in 1945, Mary flew over 1,000 planes of 76 different types between more than 200 British airfields. As was typical for female pilots during the Second World War, Mary usually flew solo and always flew without a radio connection. She would guide herself using a compass and maps while following rivers or railway lines.



Mary was only five feet and two inches tall – a very small stature to be flying large bombers. Despite the risks involved, Mary never wore a helmet to contain her curly, blonde hair. When she emerged from the cockpit of a mighty bomber at an RAF base, the bemused ground crew didn't believe that she had flown it in and even checked the plane for a hiding pilot!



### Lucky Escapes

Mary had lucky escapes while flying on numerous occasions. She was shot at over Bournemouth, reportedly by friendly fire, and had a near-miss with another plane as they landed at the same time on a foggy runway. She also skilfully and competently survived a crash landing when the engine of her plane overheated due to the undercarriage jamming.

### After the War

After the war, the ATA (which had first promoted equal pay for male and female pilots) was disbanded but Mary joined the RAF and continued to ferry aircraft. She became one of the first women to fly Britain's first jet fighter.

Later, Mary returned to her family's farm. She kept busy but missed the thrill of speed so she became a rally driver. At the wheel of her black sports car, Mary won many competitions.

In 1950, Mary moved to the Isle of Wight to become the manager of an airport. She managed the airport for 20 years and is thought to have been Europe's first female air commandant (officer in charge). While in charge, Mary completed any necessary tasks, including operating the control tower and waving in aircraft. Mary also spent time shooing sheep off the runway yet held a reputation for being glamorous and elegant. While living in the Isle of Wight, Mary met and married fellow pilot Don Ellis.

### Recognition

In 2017, a plaque was unveiled at RAF Brize Norton, recognising Mary's contribution to the ATA. In 2018, Mary was granted the Freedom of the Isle of Wight and a film was made which featured her achievements.

# Questions

1. ...**due to the family's proximity to several Royal Air Force (RAF) bases.**

What does the word **proximity** mean in this sentence? Tick one.

- ☐ about
- ☐ nearness
- ☐ remoteness
- ☐ passion

2. Where did Mary take flying lessons? Tick one.

- ☐ Oxfordshire
- ☐ Lancashire
- ☐ Hampshire
- ☐ Isle of Wight

3. **Following the destructive Battle of Britain...**

What does the word **destructive** mean?

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4. List **two** facts from the text about Mary's appearance.

1. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

5. Find and copy one word from the **Lucky Escapes** section which tells you that Mary was a skilful pilot.

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6. Why do you think that female pilots flew without a radio connection?

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7. Summarise what you have read about Mary's lucky escapes using fewer than 30 words.

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8. What was unusual about what Mary did in 1950?

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9. Why did the ground crew not believe that Mary had flown the bomber?

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10. Why is it important to remember people like Mary Ellis? Explain your answer.

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