

Jane & Prudence: A Novel of Contrasts

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Over the past few years I have written a number of papers on the background to Barbara Pym's novels – how the plots and characters arose, how incidents in them related to her own experience, how she developed her themes, and how the public received them, all as evinced by her papers which were deposited in the Bodleian Library after her death.

The Bodleian archive consists of literary papers and notebooks, diaries, and correspondence, and over the years I have been able to extract from these a good deal of material which you would not otherwise be able to access easily. As well as constant reference to Hazel Holt's biography of Barbara Pym, *A Lot to Ask*, the source of much of the material for my talks has been Barbara's literary notebooks which she kept from 1948 to 1979. Partial and complete drafts of her novels were also hugely important. However, when starting to research this paper, I found the only entry for *Jane and Prudence* in the index to the Bodleian manuscripts is 'Correspondence relating to the novel and radio broadcast'. Without drafts I could not at first see how I could proceed, but the contents of Barbara's literary notebooks are not analysed in the index, so there was a chance that I could find something there.

From 1948 until shortly before her death Barbara kept notebooks – 43 in all. They contain all sorts of jottings. Many are ideas for possible novels, but sometimes she writes accounts of holidays, extracts from some book she has read, or a poem she has found – and always at the back are lists – shopping lists, Christmas card lists, details of her winter or summer wardrobe, lists of books she has read during the period.

There are indeed fairly extensive notes for *Jane & Prudence* in the notebooks covering 1950-1953. They are largely about characters and events which eventually appear in the book; unlike some of her novels' notes, there is little which was later discarded. She seems to have had a rather clear idea of her plot before she started.

In a summary of *Jane & Prudence* that Barbara later wrote as a publisher's blurb, she said

Jane and Prudence, friends from Oxford days, may be said to represent the married and the unmarried, the country and the town. Two contrasting environments are shown – the country village where Jane's husband is vicar, and that part of London where Prudence works at her rather indefinite job. Village and office provide a variety of characters. Prudence works for the ineffectual Dr Grampian and with that irritating pair Miss Trapnell and Miss Clothier, while Jane, with her vague and charming husband, becomes involved in the lives of Miss Doggett and her poor relation Jessie Morrow, and the affected Fabian Driver, who fancies himself in the role of an inconsolable widower.

It is Jane who provides the link between the two worlds, both by her friendship with Prudence and by her strong sense of the ridiculous which helps her to see people with a certain amount of detachment, for neither woman is entirely successful in her life. Prudence romanticises herself and her love affairs, which do not seem to be very successful ones, while Jane imagines herself as an efficient vicar's wife and the provider of a suitable husband for her friend. But things do not turn out quite the way she had hoped. Church people in the country are no easier to deal with than those in the suburbs, and eligible men are not always willing to have their lives arranged for them.

According to Hazel Holt (p.165), ‘Jane Cleveland is a loving celebration of Irena Pym (with academic overtones)’, but I don’t feel that this really does Barbara’s mother justice. Admittedly she was a little careless in her dress, was unable to draw or paint, and never learnt to sew (Holt, p.8), but she did most of the family cooking, fed the chickens (wearing an old tweed coat like Jane’s), looked after Mogus the pony who pulled the governess cart that she drove, was usually the car driver, rather than her husband, and she herself rode a motor cycle, even as far as Pwellheli. She was also musical, athletic, being good at most games, especially golf.

Jane, on the other hand has singularly few abilities, housewifely or otherwise. ‘You know how indifferent I am to domestic arrangements’, she says, and the kitchen was a part of the house in which she took little interest. She does confess that she ‘should have liked the kind of life where one ate food flavoured with garlic, but it was not to be’. She simply is not sufficiently interested in cooking. The only kitchen utensil with which she is familiar is the tin-opener, her washing up method leaves much to be desired, and her husband can rarely find a clean shirt. She even pours tea badly. ‘The ability to pour tea gracefully didn’t come to me automatically when I married.’

Jane also concedes that she is no good at parish work – she can’t arrange flowers, or interest herself much to the Mothers’ Union, and lacks tact at the Parochial Church Council meetings. Even when she decides to resume her abandoned literary studies, she soon gets bored. It is a bit difficult to find anything she *is* good at. In spite of this, she comes across as a loveable and sympathetic character, and in this one aspect surely resembles Irena.

Prudence, with her predilection for unsatisfactory love affairs, is only a slightly distorted mirror image of Barbara herself, Hazel tells us (Holt, p.165), and Barbara herself used to say that of all her heroines, in many ways the one she resembled most was Prudence (Holt, p.26). She told Philip Larkin too that Prudence, and Wilmet from AGOB, were her own favourite characters.

Barbara’s notes are just that—odd jottings, often poorly punctuated, sometimes almost illegible, so never easy to follow. It is not always clear what is fact and what fiction.

Her first entry on the subject, after the completion of *Excellent Women*, is:

Next Novel – a small country town – perhaps the chief character a nice vicar’s wife. Her husband is the son of an old Rationalist – he had probably probed too deeply and got suddenly and disconcertedly at the truth. A daughter preparing the house for the bank clerk lay reader, with whom she is in love, to come to tea. But surely he won’t want a bath. The wife sits on committees. Is literary, but no time for that now – perhaps had even wanted to do research (‘The influence of Somebody on Something’). Missed opportunities. Jane felt she has not been really successful – but a happy marriage and a child, people might say rather reproachfully, wasn’t that something?

The wife has a sister (unmarried) who lives in a flat in London and has a career. It is taken for granted that she has always been in love with a certain man.

The novel, she says firmly, contrasts the married and the unmarried.

Of the village characters, the first Barbara mentions is Fabian Driver, and sums up in few words ‘his Gordonish character’. Gordon was, of course, Barbara’s real life lover in Bristol in the early 1940s, an extremely charming but fickle man who caused Barbara much heartache. However, Hazel tells us, Gordon was ‘intellectually far above’ Fabian, and had none of the vulgarity which Robert Liddell so rightly finds in him. (Holt, p.112)

Fabian’s wife, to whom he had been consistently unfaithful, died – now that he has lost her there seems to be no point in being unfaithful. He visits her grave frequently,

and although he has work it doesn't seem to require his attendance every day of the week.

In a passage which also sums up Jane – her appearance anyway – she writes,

Fabian liked Jane really – but it was an insult, an outrage almost, how unconscious she was of his charm, how little effort she made with her clothes – galoshes, old mackintosh, shapeless hat, the strap of her sandal pinned with a safety pin. But she feels the same about him – in his overcoat on a fine spring day – probably woollen underwear too.

Next Barbara introduces some minor characters: Mr Mortlake, piano tuner and member of the PCC [Parochial Church Council].

Oh dear, I'm humming again, she thought, recognising a nervous habit that kind friends had often pointed out to her. Something from *Rigoletto* – suitable for Mr. Mortlake or not? Perhaps too violent – she wanted to gesticulate, bowing low and saying 'Buon giorno, Rigoletto' with the irony of the mocking courtiers. Then, in her relief at finding that he has only come to tune the piano, she puts on his bowler and sings *O Donna Clara*.

In fact, this is exactly what her mother had done on one occasion Barbara remembered when their piano tuner, Mr Passmore, had called (Holt, p.12.)

Next, Mr Whiting, also on the PCC, who resembles 'Some old fish with his tail stuck in his mouth.' If there is one thing generally known about this otherwise unremarkable fish it is that it is served with its tail in its mouth. Mrs Beeton's recipe for fried whiting states 'Wash, clean, and dry the fish, and remove their skins, and fasten the tail in the mouth by means of a small skewer.'

Mrs Glaze gets a mention.

In the old days, thought Jane, one asked of a servant 'Is she a good riser?' It would be impertinent to think of Mrs. Glaze as being capable of such ordinary occupations as going to bed and getting up – impertinent even to think of her without her hat and flowered apron. She had 'done' for the last vicar – a formidable interview Jane has had with her – she was always talking about the old days and the entertaining.

The Lyalls do not appear in the notes, though are thought to be based on Julian Amery and his mother (Holt, p.76).

The far more important village characters, Miss Doggett and Miss Morrow, are never formally introduced, probably because Barbara had them firmly in her mind as they had already appeared in an earlier, as yet unpublished, novel, *Crampton Hodnet*. They are briefly mentioned in the notes, where we first encounter Miss Doggett's timeless words Men only want one thing.

Of the London characters, Barbara decided that the main one should be a friend of Jane's rather than a sister:

The clergyman's wife has an old college friend, Prudence, who works in London (at a place like the International African Institute). She is in love with her boss. All her love affairs are unrequited. The surprise when Jane sees the object of Prudence's affections – a grey-haired man, quite insignificant.

Her boss, Dr Grampian, an economist, has a wife Lucy and children, Susan and Barnabas. Prudence had once had the idea of fidelity as a very fine thing. Loving a person always, but if they changed, where were you? Then faithfulness became a chilly, dreary thing ... Like a great renunciation for the wrong reasons. She might have a great renunciation with Gramp, making it much more noble than it really is, and he not

understanding. ‘Ah, Prudence’, he had once said, laying his hand on hers, perhaps even kissing her. Whatever had made him do it? There had been Lucy at home as usual. ‘Rather late tonight dear, aren’t you?’ so mildly, and then talking of other things.

Incidentally, there is no suggestion that that Grampian, Director of the ‘vague cultural organisation’ where Prudence worked, is at all like Daryll Forde, Barbara’s boss at the IAI, who was a far more forceful and decisive man. Hazel Holt thinks that Grampian is ‘too grey and nebulous a creature to bear any resemblance to him.’ (Holt, p.142)

At this point, Barbara considers the possibility that Prudence might end up with the Gordon man (Fabian).

There is another man on the staff [Mr.Manifold] – the only one except for Gramp. He goes furtively to his lunch – perhaps to a pub or more manly place. But one day our heroine sees him in the queue of Lyons’ Help Yourself. The mantle falls. She averts her eyes.

In the office Miss Trapnell and Miss Clothier in their shrunken cardigans, specially kept for the office. But when did they blossom out in their best clothes?

Mr. Manifold and the typists discuss Prudence. ‘Do you suppose Miss Bates has any love life?’

Both Prudence in the country and Jane in the town often find themselves uncomfortably out of place.

The single woman finds the vicarage bare and untidy, comfortless and noisy, and is so much more at home with her uncomfortable but very pretty little Regency sofa, planning a dinner by candlelight, exquisitely cooked, perhaps by herself in a velvet dress with antique garnet jewellery.

Jane looks forward to her visits to London, though she often finds them vaguely disappointing, and sometimes feels at a loss, as when she was too early for her lunch appointment with Prudence, and wanders into the unaccustomed luxury of Fortnum and Mason’s, where she stares at some jars of *foie gras*, something a clergyman’s wife could never afford.

She is, however, slightly more at ease at a Literary Society in London, ‘where she sees people like herself talking together and then going off afterwards – alone – to the bus, the underground, the taxi ... She finds herself interested in one, a tall woman with prominent teeth, nervous looking – her book “Some Tame something”.’ This oblique reference to Barbara the writer, is omitted in the novel. You may remember that she used a similar device at the Anchorage Hotel in NFRL.

Having decided upon her characters, Barbara considers her plot, and gives herself some instructions on how to proceed.

At the beginning you must describe how Jane had imagined her life as a clergyman’s wife and how it had turned out in reality. Well, it has all turned to mild kindly looks and spectacles – he put them on to eat now, to dissect kippers – and perhaps being a clergyman didn’t really make any difference – it would have been the same in the Senior Common Room at the London School of Economics ... His large nose was more pronounced now.

Other ‘things to be brought out’, as Barbara puts it, are:

1. *Prudence’s mother in Herefordshire* – However, she only gets a passing mention

2. *Prudence ought to have more women friends in London – ones upon whom she can fall back when Fabian has abandoned her.* However, it was a man, Mr. Manifold, whom she chiefly fell back upon.
3. *Her women friends. Especially Eleanor, the dull civil servant.* But there was only Eleanor, and she wasn't all that dull.
4. *The relationship between Jane and Prudence and their respective ages – I don't think the age difference was stressed particularly.*
5. *The end of Prudence – sitting in a railway carriage on her way to Spain, reading Coventry Patmore. And the man thinks 'Who is that interesting-looking woman reading Coventry Patmore?' In the novel, this comes, less romantically in Chapter 4, over lunch in a cheap restaurant.*
6. *Read some of Miss Austen's last chapters and find out how she manages all the loose ends.*

Now for the two characters who sprang into *Jane & Prudence* almost fully formed – Miss Doggett and Miss Morrow. These are among the main characters in *Crampton Hodnet*, chronologically Barbara's second full-length novel, written in 1938-9, but unpublished until well after her death. When reviewing her writings after the war, Barbara decided that *Crampton Hodnet* was very dated, and would not be acceptable to a publisher, so she put it aside. But Barbara never liked to waste any of her work, so she must have considered that these two ladies would fit well into the country aspect of *Jane & Prudence*. They appear to be about the same age in both novels, and, in both, Miss Doggett is dressed in purple with gold neck chains. But it is interesting to see the changes Barbara made to their personalities. In *Crampton Hodnet* Miss Doggett is more dictatorial generally, and very dismissive of her companion's appearance and opinions. In *Jane & Prudence* she seems to have mellowed just a little and to be slightly less inclined to browbeat Jessie. This may be because in this book Jessie is her kinswoman, and therefore requiring a little more respect, so much so that when Jessie finally finds a husband, Miss Doggett is keen to support her.

Miss Morrow has developed from the very put-upon employee of *Crampton Hodnet*, grateful to have a comfortable home even though her job is menial, to a more assertive woman. She is more scheming and self-seeking than heretofore, and rather more inclined to speak openly. It would be difficult to imagine the Jessie of *Crampton Hodnet* saying, when discussing a woman's right to wear a white wedding dress after the age of thirty. 'There can be something shameful about flaunting one's lack of experience.'

Another important character from *Crampton Hodnet* who also appears in *Jane & Prudence*, though in a minor role, is Barbara Bird. Barbara has aged rather more quickly than Miss Doggett and Miss Morrow. In *Crampton Hodnet* she is a dewy-eyed undergraduate romantically in love with her tutor; ten or so years on, her abortive elopement with Francis Cleveland seems to have driven romance, and the metaphysical poets, from her life, to be replaced by heavy smoking, dog ownership, and seventeen published novels. 'Miss Bird's readers know what to expect now, and they will not be disappointed.'

It is amusing to meet again Dora's brother from *Excellent Women*, for indeed it is William Caldicote, that *bon viveur*, who, in a Soho restaurant, gives unsolicited advice to Prudence and Geoffrey Manifold:

'I do *not* recommend the paté here tonight, but the bouillabaisse is excellent'.

And from that same novel we hear that Miss Lathbury has married Mr. Bone.

On 18th February 1953 Barbara wrote to Daniel George, at Cape's,

Dear Daniel

Tomorrow I shall be posting the manuscript of my novel *Jane and Prudence* to you... I hope you are not too much all agog to see it or you will surely be disappointed ... Naturally it has not turned out quite as I had hoped. I had wanted the contrasting lives of Jane and Prudence, in town and country, to stand out more. As it is they are perhaps just two rather tiresome and unsuccessful women, though there is hope for them in the end. I hope you will not find Chapter 12 too shocking...

This is the chapter in which Jane quizzes Prudence about her relationship with Fabian. "I suppose everything is all right between you and Fabian? I mean, there's nothing wrong between you?" Jane laboured, using an expression she had sometimes seen in the cheaper women's papers when girls asked how they should behave when their boy-friends wanted them to "do wrong".

Daniel replied a week later

I've now recovered *Jane & Prudence* and am enjoying it enormously. But (just between ourselves) don't you think that far too many lines of dialogue begin with 'Oh', 'Oh dear', or 'Oh well'? Please look at your carbon copy and steel yourself to sacrifice some of them.

On 4th March, Daniel wrote again:

I refrained from saying anything about your novel when we met, but I can now announce that William Plomer is as pleased with it as I am. [William Plomer, the South African novelist, was literary adviser to Cape at that time.]

Very shortly after publication in September, Barbara received a bombshell in the form of a letter from the Legal Department of Marks and Spencer's.

It has been brought to our notice that on p.125 of the edition of the novel *Jane and Prudence* there appears a reference to this Company in the following terms:

'I am going to send most of these things to the Society for the Care of Aged Gentlemen', said Miss Doggett. 'Not that Constance was aged herself, but one does feel that they need good clothes, the elderly ones.' 'Oh, yes,' Jane agreed; 'when we become distressed we shall be glad of an old dress from Marks and Spencer's as we've never been used to anything better'. Miss Doggett did not answer, and Jane remembered that of course she went to her dressmaker for fittings and ordered hats from Marshall's and Debenham's'.

This reference is clearly derogatory of the Company as both in terms and by implication it suggests that dresses sold by this Company are of inferior quality and unfit for wear by persons of the class who buy their hats from Marshall's or Debenham's.

We are proud of the quality of the goods sold by us, and take great exception to this passage in a book which, being a Book Society's recommendation, and being written by an author whose work, according to the Publisher's 'blurb' on the dustcover, is at times 'worthy of Jane Austen', no doubt enjoys a large circulation.

We must therefore ask you to inform us at once what steps you propose to take to correct the harm done by the publication of this matter and to prevent further publication.

Wren Howard advised Barbara not to reply to this 'somewhat threatening letter' and said that he would consult his solicitors. They pointed out to M&S that the allusion referred to was not derogatory of their goods.

We suggest that if you will reconsider the passage in the light of the general atmosphere and characterisation of Miss Pym's novel, you will appreciate an ironical note underlying the dialogue and the implication of snobbishness by Miss Doggett, arising precisely out of the fact that the name of your firm is a 'household word' for goods remarkable no less for their inexpensiveness than for their high quality.

He added in a PS, that he had received a letter from Miss Barbara Pym, in which she says:-

I need hardly tell you that I certainly never intended anything derogatory to Marks and Spencer's, for whom I have the greatest respect. The ironical thing is that I regularly buy and wear their clothes and think them excellent.

However, M&S would not accept Cape's interpretation and pressed for 'adequate action to be taken to ensure that this reference to our name is cut out of copies of the book placed before the public in future.'

Cape agreed to alter the passage in future printings. Barbara's amendment was thus:

'Oh, yes', Jane agreed; 'When we become distressed we shan't expect to receive anything very grand, considering the sort of clothes we're wearing now'.

I hope this will do. If you think that Marshall's and Debenham's should be taken out too, we could substitute 'expensive shops in London'.

M & S next complained that a reprint still included the offending words, but Wren Howard explained that this reprint had been ordered before M&S's first letter:

I was finally compelled, as I feared, to cause our solicitor to write to these tiresome people and attempt to quieten them. I am glad now to report that he has today received a letter saying that, in view of the information we have supplied, and an undertaking to change the passage in any reprint, they are pacified and pleased to accept our assurance that nothing derogatory to them was ever intended. I hope the matter is thus ended and that all is well.

Personally, I think that M&S had a good case against Cape, and am surprised that they caved in without much of a struggle. The odd thing is that I don't think the passage was ever changed in subsequent editions – certainly it is unchanged in the Pan 1993 edition which I have been using. Nor is it omitted from either Sterling's audiobook, or Elizabeth Proud's dramatic adaptation for the BBC in 1993.

On 16th September Barbara received another interesting letter which I should have thought she would have found very exciting. It was from Derrick de Marney, a well known British actor of that time, and Director of a company called Concanen Stage Plays.

Dear Miss Pym,

I have just read your new book *Jane & Prudence* which has deeply interested me. Primarily the reason is that I feel that you understand post-war human beings.

Have you by any chance considered this new subject in play form? Your dialogue suggests that you may have some experience of writing for the theatre. If you have not considered a play on this subject, have you in play form, any stories which you would permit me to read?

Although my name has been associated for so long with the successful production of Peter Cheyney's "Meet Mr Callaghan", I do not particularly want anything of the thriller or detective type. I am looking for any subject dealing with post-war problems.

Forgive me for writing to you so abruptly, but I know of no other way in which I can approach you. I do sincerely congratulate you upon your new publication, which I have thoroughly enjoyed in book form, and am looking forward to hearing from you.

Amazingly, there is no follow up to this among Barbara's papers. One would have thought that she would have jumped at such an opportunity.

Barbara's friends were quick to congratulate her. An anthropologist friend from Philadelphia, H D Gunn, wrote on behalf of himself and his wife Virginia

We've had *Jane and Prudence*, the dears! ... We think you're getting beautifully into stride, now ... I had really only one rather small criticism, or rather comment, to make. It seems to me ... well, this character Manifold is a fine type, but somehow I had the feeling all along that you weren't making the most of him, that he had unused depth ... a kind of potential nobility that you should have exploited to the advantage of your scheme as a whole...

A clergyman friend, Father Luxmoore Ball, wrote from Hastings, Sussex:

In my opinion this is your best book so far. If you asked me why I think that I would say because there is more action and incidents in this story, more variety in the characters, and their 'fun' is more 'human'...

and a friend at the British Consulate, Florence, 19 Dec 1953, said

I am writing on the spur of the moment having just put down "J & P". I think it is excellent – I like it better than *Excellent Women*, though most people I've met do not agree. The characters seem so much more real – Prudence particularly. I feel as though I've seen something very clear and polished; no disturbance of details; nothing that takes your mind from the whole. I am left with a positive feeling as though I had 'caught' some of the clarity, seen life as a whole again. Surely this is the test of a work of art. I did not have this feeling after EW.

Another friend Jean Telford, wrote from Paris

...I enjoyed it even more than your other books. I keep repeating bits to myself on the Métro, things like 'Just the very best, that is what a man needs', and then smiling, and all those cold clear intelligent French faces look at me pretty sharply...

A fan, Catherine Goodacre, from Reading, Berks wrote to say:

It was with such a feeling of sadness and loss that I took back to the library today J&P, which has held me enthralled literally from beginning to end ... I can't pretend to compete with the critics, who with their professional understanding of the perfection of your own particular style of writing, have praised your work. All I can say is that through your novels I have experienced a joy only comparable with that which came to me at the age of 14 or so when I first 'discovered' Jane Austen

In a letter to Bob Smith dated 22 April 1954, Barbara says:

I had a letter from Jock recently. He liked J&P very much. [In fact he found it 'so witty, kind and sharp'.] But the Americans and Continentals most definitely don't and now I am feeling a little bruised.

Strangely, I was not able to find in the Pym MSS. any reviews from the time the book was published. However, Hazel Holt notes in *A Lot To Ask* (p.164) that it 'was a Book Society Recommendation, and was well received, though some critics were uncertain about the more flexible structure.'

In fact, *The Observer* found the book ‘too loose and rambling not to disappoint after *Excellent Women*’. The *Manchester Guardian* was quite hostile:

It is a horrid disappointment after *Excellent Women*. God and the Devil would never make over even the smallest English village, let alone suburb, to a set of miseducated nincompoops like the people in this tale.

The *TLS* wrote ‘more in sorrow than in anger’ as Hazel put it (Holt, p164)

Some incidents occur; they are not easy to recall after one has closed the book. Miss Pym writes very well, and this chronicle of [Jane’s] doings is really very small beer indeed to have come from a brewery in which Oxford, a taste for Jane Austen, and an observant eye have all played their parts.

But the *News Chronicle* found it ‘a brilliant and charming novel, which you will not easily forget’, and Lord David Cecil, in the first of a number of letters he wrote to Barbara, said

Forgive a total stranger writing to tell you how very much he enjoys your books...You have so much sense of reality and sense of comedy, and the people in your books are living and credible and likeable. I find this rare in modern fiction. Thank you very much.

The only American review I found was by Stephen Harvey in *The Village Voice* in December 1981, when it was first published in the US.

J&P is a nearly perfect specimen of the lapidary fiction which can reveal more about the essence of things than can books with big thumping ambitions. Pym’s subject may be out-moded, but her observations of homely human detail are as potent as ever.

Several times in her notes and diary, Barbara expressed dissatisfaction with this novel. She felt she had not emphasised the contrasts between country and town, and the married and unmarried states, as clearly as she had wished. And she thought it was ‘ill-fated, what with the M&S business, and it wasn’t really very good anyway, though a surprising number of people like it better than *Excellent Women*’. Perhaps that is why she did not leave behind much evidence of the development of this novel.

By 1955 J&P was out of print. It was not re-issued until 1978, when Barbara’s reputation was rising again, and all her work was about to be re-appraised – and indeed to be highly praised as it deserved.

References

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MSS.Pym, Bodleian Library, Oxford

Yvonne Cocking is a founding member of the Barbara Pym Society, was formerly its secretary and now serves as its archivist and historian. A retired librarian, she worked for more than two years in the early 1960s at the International African Institute in London, where she made the acquaintance of Barbara Pym and Hazel Holt. She lives in Oxfordshire and spends countless hours sifting through the richness of the Pym archives at the Bodleian library.