

# GREEN LEAVES

The Journal of the Barbara Pym Society

Vol 4, No 1, March 1998

## The 1997 Conference - a personal view



When I was an undergraduate at St Hilda's in the 1970s, Barbara Pym was alive and writing - and I was totally unaware of her existence. Although I can't turn back time, I've been grateful for the opportunity of visiting my former College which the Barbara Pym Society conferences have given me over the last three years. (Maybe this shared experience is the secret of her appeal for me.) The cancellation of the September meeting was a real disappointment. Re-scheduling it for January could have affected attendance, so I was pleased to see a healthy list of names on the Porter's desk, and a throng of now-familiar faces in the lobby of South Building. Even the weather was on our side.

The change of timetable which saw the AGM convening at 11am on Saturday may have tempted one or two members to arrive late. If so, they missed an interesting debate on the question of whether the Society should offer a literary prize. The idea seems a good way of attracting publicity, as long as the choice of recipient can be kept within the control of the membership; I hope something will come of it. The main theme of the conference being food, the appropriate choice of opening speaker was the

crime writer, Amy Myers, whose use of a Victorian chef as her 'detective' well qualifies her to talk on the subject of 'Food and the novel'. Her entertaining talk identified various ways in which novelists use food, under Pym-esque headings such as 'Visiting the curate' and 'Recollections of the Bishop'.

The second session of the afternoon was another of Elizabeth Proud's series of dramatised readings from the novels - passages about food, obviously - which once again proved hugely successful. The highlight, for me, was to see one of my favourite actresses, Joanna David, in the role of Wilmet Forsyth, encountering Mr Basin (Hugh Walters) in the cereals department of her local grocery store and confronting him over the case of the Faberge egg. But I mustn't forget Josie Kidd and David Holt, whose contributions were equally essential to our enjoyment.

Saturday evening's conference dinner was based on a menu of genuine Barbara Pym dishes, starting with a rather gelatinous avocado mousse (am I the only person in the world who finds avocado tasteless?) and moving on to a delicious main course of 'Poulet Minerva' accompanied by potatoes Anna and 'French' beans. I'm not sure why the dessert was called 'poires

religieuses', but it went down particularly well with our table. We were just tossing up to decide who should do an Oliver Twist when Dr Margaret Rayner got up to speak on the subject of domestic arrangements at St Hilda's in the time of Barbara Pym. Dr Rayner, being the author of the *Centenary History*, is the expert on the College.

The late start on Sunday mornings gives me a chance to nip down to Blackwell's Paperback Shop before the first session. (There are always a few new authors to look for, recommended by other Society members.) This year, I had the additional task of finding *Excellent Women*, the book selected by a ballot of members for more intensive study at next September's conference. It's my all-time favourite Pym novel, and I'm pleased to find I'm not alone.

Sunday's talks were no anti-climax. At breakfast, I had chatted briefly with Nancy Ellen Talburt, who flew over from Arkansas especially to recount a lunch she had with Barbara Pym at the Randolph Hotel in 1979. She turned out to be one of our most amusing and unpretentious speakers ever. Later, Hilary Walton and Louise Ross described their experiences in preparing the *A la Pym* cookbook for publication. As a bonus, we all got free copies of the St Hilda's cookbook.

As a working woman, I tend to make excuses for my own lack of culinary skills, even with all the advantages of microwave, dishwasher and giant supermarkets. I search in vain for sympathy from Barbara. She would probably have dismissed my protests as Mildred Lathbury does those of Helena Napier: 'Surely wives shouldn't be too busy to cook for their husbands?' I can only defend myself by echoing Mildred's other comment that, 'men do not usually do things unless they like doing them'.

Deborah Fisher, SHC 1974-7

**REPORT OF THE FOURTH A.G.M. OF THE BARBARA PYM SOCIETY HELD AT ST HILDA'S COLLEGE, OXFORD, ON SATURDAY 10TH JANUARY 1998.**

*1. Chairman's Opening Remarks*

The Chairman, Elizabeth Proud, opened the meeting by welcoming members and expressed regret that the meeting had had to be rescheduled from its original date in September 1997, because of the Princess of Wales's funeral. There was general consensus that postponing the meeting was the only thing we could have done. Committee members present were: Miss Elizabeth Proud (Chairman), Mrs Hilary Walton, Mrs Eileen Roberts (Membership Secretary) Mrs Jean Harker (Secretary), Ms Devon Allison, Ms Kate Charles, Mrs Yvonne Cocking, Ms Rita Phillips, Mrs Louise Ross, and Mr Michael Wilson.

*2. Apologies*

Apologies for absence from today's meeting had been received from Hazel Holt, Muriel Watson, Peggy Hawthorne, Jane James, and Dr Rachel Bowlby (the Barbara Pym Fellow).

*3. Minutes of Previous A.G.M.*

The minutes of the previous A.G.M. were accepted and signed by the Chairman.

*4. Matters arising from the Minutes*

(i) Para. 6: the questionnaire which members had been asked to complete had produced ideas etc. for the current year, but it would be a good idea to recruit subcommittees as necessary.

(ii) AOB: a Pym presence on the Internet had already been suggested, notably by ex-Committee member Antonia Balacz, but an Italian Unofficial Pym site had now been discovered, set up by one, Claudia di Giorgio. It was decided to make this the official site if Ms Giorgio agreed.

There was no display in Blackwell's relating to this meeting of the Society (as Blackwell's had led us to believe might be possible), but it was probably our fault for not getting in touch with them. Perhaps something could be organised for next September. There were questions about dramatisations of Barbara Pym's novels on radio/cassette. 'Some Tame Gazelle' is available on cassette, but Elizabeth Proud and Sioned Wiliam were very pessimistic about the possibility of future dramatisations for Radio 4, with the changes in schedule promised for April 1998. The only possibility seemed to be for single dramatisations lasting one hour, which is not long enough to do a Pym novel justice. Elizabeth described the situation as 'disastrous'. The possibility of selling readings/dramatisations on cassette at meetings will be investigated.

Questions were asked about souvenirs. Eileen Roberts noted that our potter, Barbara Payne had retired and no replacement had been found. (Note at Feb. 1998: we think another potter has been found.) She reported that she was looking

into other possibilities (tea-towels post-its, etc.) although these seem expensive. Further suggestions would be welcomed.

*5. Constitution*

The Chairman recommended that the Constitution should be brief, simple and flexible, for the very good reason that the main purpose of the Society is to enable its members to enjoy themselves while appreciating the works of Barbara Pym. One member commended the conciseness of the draft constitution and recommended accepting it. The Chairman, however, pointed out that the Committee had suggested changing two points on the draft constitution. First, it was suggested that there should be an official position of Editor of 'Green Leaves', instead of (as at present) the duties of Editor being carried out by the Secretary. This was approved. Secondly, there was the question of what should happen to any money held by the Society in the (unlikely) event of its folding. The Committee had suggested that in such an event any money remaining should go to St Hilda's College, and the membership further specified that such money should go specifically towards the funding of the Barbara Pym Fellowship, which was founded through the generosity of Hilary Walton. Members put questions regarding the possibility of paying membership dues by covenant; Eileen Roberts said she would investigate.

*6. Elections*

The Committee's proposal that an Editor should be appointed was accepted, and Jean Harker, who stood down as Secretary after her three-year term, was elected to serve as Editor (proposed by Elizabeth Proud, seconded by Hilda Kees). Yvonne Cocking was elected Secretary (proposed by Eileen Roberts, seconded by several hands). Committee members Devon Allison and Kate Charles terms were over but they could stand for re-election for a further 3 year term. They agreed so to do. Because Yvonne Cocking had moved from an ordinary Committee member to Secretary, there was a vacancy for a Committee member (to serve for two years, as Yvonne's replacement). Deidre Bryan-Brown (who had offered on her questionnaire to serve on the Committee) was proposed by Elizabeth Proud, seconded by many hands, and elected.

*7. Financial & Membership Report*

Eileen Roberts reported that there were now 259 members, all of whom were on the St Hilda's database, making mailings easier. Re finances: the current balance was £4277.46 (last year's balance had been £4479.96). The drop was due to speaker's expenses at the 1996 Conference (there had been rather a lot of speakers) and this would be watched in the future. Expenditure was usually mostly the cost of the production and mailing of the newsletter, meeting notices and booking forms. The year's income was £1520.35 and expenditure £1888.99.

*8. Editor's Report*

Jean Harker expressed the hope that members had enjoyed the most recent issue of 'Green Leaves', the 'cookery issue' which was larger than usual. She requested items for the next issue of 'Green Leaves', and Eileen Roberts asked for a volunteer to cover the present meeting and provide a summary with a personal slant.

For the 1998 September meeting, it was decided to have as the subject, one particular novel, and a (brief) questionnaire to establish which novel was most popular was circulated. Questionnaires were to be filled in as soon as possible; the result would be announced at dinner. (It was 'Excellent Women'.)

*9. Report on the Questionnaires*

Yvonne Cocking provided a summary of the results of the lengthy questionnaire which members had filled in in 1997, from which it was clear that there was a distinct wish to study one particular text (hence the topic for the 1998 meeting).

*10. Any Other Business*

It was agreed to hold the Spring meeting once again in St Alban's Church, Holborn, which had proved a very popular venue. The date would be Sunday 17th May. The order of the day would be: service at St Alban's (for those who wish to attend), lunch at St Alban's Centre, a speaker, questions, then perhaps an outing. The dates of the Annual Meeting would be 5th and 6th September.

Eileen Roberts read out the letter received from member Mr Phil Bacon, in which he put forward a proposal for a modest literary prize to be established in Barbara Pym's name with the intention of continuing her literary tradition, and Mr Bacon spoke about his proposal from the floor. Elizabeth Proud pointed out the existence of the Betty Trask Prize for traditional fiction (prize money about £30,000), and Hilary Walton mentioned the Barbara Pym Travel Award for staff at the Bodleian Library. The most important question to bear in mind was what Barbara Pym herself would have liked. Elizabeth Proud suggested that a working-party including Mr Bacon should look into the matter. (The working-party, chaired by Deidre Bryan-Brown, met on the following Sunday morning, and agreed that further consideration was necessary.)

Further to the wording of the Constitution, a suggestion was made that the wording should include 'educational' in Para. 1, to re-enforce the worthiness of the Society's aims in regard to charitable status.

Hilary Walton conveyed the news that Honor Wyatt was unwell, and produced a card to wish her well, which members signed later. Eileen Roberts delivered some verbal housekeeping notes. Members' attention was drawn to notices from the Charlotte M. Yonge Society. Elizabeth Proud closed the meeting at 12.43 p.m.

*Jean Harker*



## FOOD AND THE NOVEL



*Amy Myers*

Firstly, I have two disclaimers. You are all experts in the works of Barbara Pym, whereas although I am a great admirer, I am no expert. So if I foolishly rush in with comments with which you violently disagree, please hold back the rotten tomatoes. What I do know is what a marvellous tool food can be for the writer, chiefly because it is a universal common denominator. We all, if you will excuse the pun, have a stake in it.

My second disclaimer is that I am not good at computers; mine is well aware of this and likes to take advantage. When I came to print out these notes just before I left, it obligingly omitted every single 'p', which for a talk in which Barbara Pym and recipes feature prominently is a severe drawback. If I say some odd things therefore, please forgive me.

It was a great delight to come across a writer as distinguished as Barbara Pym, who employs food with such evident enjoyment to convey her point to the reader, writes from her own observation and experience, and without professional kitchen training. I was extremely grateful for this, because although I have now written ten novels about Auguste Didier, a master chef in Victorian and Edwardian times, I've always harboured a slight feeling of guilt about doing so, for I have no professional training in cookery either; I write from my own experience and a collection of eighteenth and nineteenth century cookery books.

'I spent most of the morning' Barbara Pym writes in her diary for April 1943, 'scrubbing potatoes and making salad, but I enjoyed it. Surely my spiritual home is in the Coppice back kitchen.' Her choice of room is not even the kitchen, but the back kitchen, where she can find satisfaction in routine tasks. Auguste Didier, please note. He is all too apt to seek perfection in the main kitchen, and forget the backup in the scullery.

I'll explain first how I came to write crime novels about food. My husband is American and by our wedding day I had met very few of his relations. I was but a few moments married when I was tapped on the

shoulder and a grim American voice hissed in my ear: 'I hope you can cook. Jim's rather a gourmet, you know.'

Panic. Especially since we were going to live part of the time in Paris, his paradise on earth. My mother was an excellent plain cook, but I didn't take nearly enough notice of what she was doing, as I discovered to my cost when I came to cook for myself. My first acquaintance with restaurant cuisine was at a hotel in Cornwall called the Lobster Pot, where I was a temporary waitress in my student days. I did not cover myself with glory in this role, although I learned a great deal about the emotions generated in hot kitchens, and discovered a lot of what were then exotic foods. Scampi, for example, was then the *crème de la crème*, and one's estimation of a diner who could afford to choose that, went up many notches. I met wine for the first time too, and learned the hard way that when a gentleman glares at you over the menu and orders you to fetch a *Beaune*, he is not requesting anything unusual in the way of a meat course, as I unfortunately thought at the time.

When I decided that I wanted to write crime novels in my spare time, food seemed the natural background for them, partly because in France it is difficult to get away from food and partly because in my daytime publishing job in London I had recently edited the Victorian cookbook of Charles Elmé Francatelli. He was the cook to Queen Victoria and Prince Albert during their early married days, and I think his splendid recipes inspired me. I don't know what he did to the royal stomach, or whether Queen Victoria grew too attached to the handsome Italian, but he only lasted a couple of years in their employ. It is said that Prince Albert rebelled at the heaviness of the diet. I can't understand why. After all, this is what Francatelli deemed fitting for one simple dinner served to them alone in their apartments: (I spare you my atrocious French accent) two soups, four fish dishes, including John Dory in lobster sauce, two meat dishes, a cold board, two flans (which were ornate dishes to decorate the corners of

the table), one of which was mutton, and the other of chicken, and eight entrees. Then came the main course, the roasts, and there followed more subsidiary dishes, and there were still a dozen vegetable and dessert dishes to follow them. In case the royal couple felt peckish in the middle of the night a side board of cold roast meats was provided.

Having decided to write about food, I found there were excellent reasons for doing so. Barbara Pym uses food to such good purposes in her novels that it becomes almost a character in its own right, and takes centre stage. The very sound of recipes can conjure up images in our minds, whether it is Miss Pym's gooseberry pie and cream or Auguste Didier's crawfish à la provençale. The sensuousness of the words can not only create atmosphere but illuminate the whole story by a precise choice of words, bringing characters and motivation to life. I felt completely differently about Julius Caesar after I found out that he took the trouble on his travels to bring back and introduce the pork sausage to the Romans. Not only was Gaul divided into three parts, but Julius, I now know, was enjoying the delights of French charcuterie while he carved it up. And I believe it is no accident that in *The Old Vicarage, Grantchester*, Rupert Brooke, after a lyrical dreamy rhapsody of nostalgia, concludes the poem with the most vivid and precise image of all: *Yet stands the Church clock at ten to three, And is there honey still for tea?*

How does Barbara Pym achieve such effects, I asked myself? I came to the conclusion that there are four ways of employing food as a writer's tool, and that it is particularly effective in comedy. I can't imagine Heathcliff sitting down to a plum pie and custard before going out to stride the moors, for instance.

The first method I've called *Visiting the Curate*, by which food is used to advance the plot. The theme of *Some Tame Gazelle* is set up on the second page with Harriet's visits to new curates. *There was naturally nothing scandalous about these visits as she always took with her some*

*newly baked cake, some fresh eggs or fruit, for the poor young men always looked half starved.* Situation and characters are immediately suggested. The oxtail taken by Sister Dew to Rupert in *An Unsuitable Attachment* furthers the plot when Penelope assumes it is Ianthe who has made this offering of love and comfort. In *Excellent Women* the dilemma of whether Mildred should or should not cook the meat for Everard is a turning point of their relationship. Shakespeare too uses this ploy - in *Hamlet* for example: *'Thrift, thrift, Horatio, the funeral baked meats did coldly furnish forth the marriage tables.'*

In my own case of course, since Auguste is a chef, food automatically helps the plot because he can carry out his job and his detective work in various exotic locations. Auguste starts off in a ducal resident in Kent, goes on to the old Gaiety theatre, then a gentleman's club, then Cannes, next a stately home in Yorkshire and an East End Music Hall. The latter is hardly exotic, but that fact provides a running joke throughout the novel.

I have also used the **Visiting the Curate** ploy in my crime novels in that Auguste sees detection as akin to cookery; both, he considers, are an art form - unlike Sherlock Holmes who considers detection a science of deduction. In Auguste's view, in order to solve the crime, you must assemble the ingredients, arrange them in the right order and then add the spice of inspiration necessary for great cooking and for detection. In one novel it is a prawn garnish that makes Auguste realise who the murderer must be.

With crime novels, there is one obvious way to use food to further the plot and that is by making poison the means of death. However, this seems to me to lack subtlety in a series of novels with food as a predominant theme and I have only used it twice in the ten novels. In my first book *Murder in Pug's Parlour*, the butler dies of poison, and - though I don't want you to worry about what may happen tonight - in *Murder Makes an Entrée* the victim dies just after a literary society banquet.

I had enormous fun with this novel. Auguste is asked to cook for the Society of Literary Lionisers, a select group who do not, like yourselves, specialise in one writer, but elect a different writer of the year, then repair

for a week's tour of locations connected with the Lion, which begins with a grand banquet based on the food mentioned in his or her writings. In *Murder makes an Entrée* the writer is Dickens, and Sir Thomas, the chairman, expires during an after dinner rendition of the murder scene from *Oliver Twist*.

Unfortunately, I hit a snag, though it worked to my advantage in the end. Dickens appears to have had very little interest in food although his wife - whom I'd always thought of as rather shadowy - once wrote a cookery book with the surprisingly modern title of *What Shall we Have for Dinner?* and published it under the gorgeous pseudonym of Lady Clutterbuck.. I sat down with a pile of Dickens novels, and whizzed through them for any mention of food. Dishes are indeed mentioned but not with Barbara Pym's enthusiasm, and the list I ended up with is far from her mouth-watering menus. For an August banquet, Auguste was asked to work to a menu of mutton broth dimpled with fat, a barrel of oysters, a roast goose, raspberry jam tarts and ginger beer. He refused.

The obvious way of applying poison in the plot would have been for someone to add poison to the food or wine, but an odd thing happens when you are writing about the same character for some time. You can remain detached for a while, but in a series you begin to feel part of your main characters. I am not in love with Auguste, but I did feel I was marching arm in arm with him down Broadstairs High Street, which is where *Murder makes an Entrée* is set, and I simply could not bear by this stage to imply that any villain could have been so crass as to drop poison into his food or into the wine adorning his tables. And yet poison had to be used, so I had to discover some very subtle way of poisoning my victim appearing to use the food but not actually doing so. I did it by scouring some of the old bound copies of Victorian magazines that one used to find very cheaply in second-hand bookshops. They are marvellous collections of fiction, helpful hints and Victorian curiosities, for magazines then saw it as their duty to inform their readers about the oddities of the rest of the world. One ancient Chinese method of poisoning came in very handy. The murder could still take place at the meal but without

contaminating Auguste's wonderful creations. And I still have a poisoned glove up my sleeve - so to speak - for a future book.

I've only used food once since as a means of violent death - and that was in a short story for the German market, which currently has a great interest in old English crime. I decided I wanted food to be the weapon of murder, but not to be poisoned. My first idea was to set it in one of those wonderful Edwardian vegetable gardens, and to kill the victim with a vegetable marrow, - and I'm sorry to say this, since we are all digesting our lunch - then to dispose of the said weapon in the vegetable stockpot always kept simmering on Victorian stoves.

Then I remembered the famous Roald Dahl story about the frozen leg of lamb used as a weapon and popped into the oven. Mine was too close, so I decided I must think again. I watched my video of the *Victorian Kitchen* all through, and found my weapon for 'Murder at the Picnic'. It was a Victorian bombe - with an e on the end, - one of those lovely metal fruit-shaped moulds in which ice creams were set. If only I could contrive to place an icebox full of bombes in my picnic site by the river's edge, I would be in business.

This I did. Then I hit a snag. Would it work? It would have to be thrown to avoid the victim seeing what was about to happen. I sometimes experiment with such matters in our garden, but I draw the line at heaving frozen bombes of ice-cream at my long suffering husband's head. Moreover would the victim not notice if someone removed a bombe from the ice-box? To get the velocity the murderer must be some way away, which would make it a most uncertain method of disposal and the victim might well notice and dodge. There had to be an answer. Of course. The murderer was a cricketer, a fast bowler.

Now cricket is a subject taken even more seriously than food. I wrote to a friend who is a very serious cricketer indeed and put the problem to him. In an earlier book I had had the temerity to poke a little fun at a cricket game, and had submitted the text to him once it was written. He told me he fainted away on the spot at my inaccurate jargon, but he put it all right and sent it off to me with a severe warning never to do it again. This time I played for safety by sending the idea to

him before I wrote it. It came back, scuppered. It would not be possible. Unless, he added offhandedly, the murderer was higher than the victim so that gravity played a role, and was near enough not to miss - but as he didn't see how that could possibly be achieved, the idea was not on.

I cheered up immediately, being set a challenge in a field I love - that of making the improbable appear possible. I solved it, and the short story was written.

Back to Miss Pym and her skilful use of food in her novels. The second method I've called **Recollections of the Bishop**, or how food can illuminate character. In *Some Tame Gazelle*, Harriet's recollections of the bishop as a curate 'had included cream buns and hot buttered toast with licking of the fingers'. We instantly have an image of that young curate which is sadly reversed when the bishop arrives. Mr Cherry and his chocolate biscuit in *Crampton Hodnet* give another nutshell character study.

Brillat Savarin, the French philosopher who wrote so charmingly on food and its place in life, told the story of a gentleman summing up the potential of a candidate for political election with *I don't think much of him - he has never eaten black pudding à la Richelieu*. End of one political career no doubt. Mention James Bond and *shaken, not stirred* comes to mind. And remember Harold Wilson and the HP sauce? Political correspondents could damn a career in one sentence without rooting out their target's sexual secrets, if they chose Barbara Pym's methods. Her diary for April 1958: *How would she eat when alone? Half a lobster and a glass of Chablis at Scott's - or baked beans on toast and coca cola in the Kenbar at Barkers?*

I employ this method for Auguste when he is summing up suspects, by the kind of dish they would choose to eat in his restaurant or to eat at home. In my most recent crime novel *Murder in the Motor Stable* he sums up the suspects' motor cars, which in turn reflect their owners' characters. This is 1905 and Auguste goes to the motor stable after dark and alone: *For those who loved motor cars he supposed this pungent smell was alive and evocative. He preferred his kitchen where every saucepan, every scrubbing brush, every potato heralded the excitements to come on the morrow. He supposed*

*to motorcar enthusiasts each motorcar had its own personality reflecting that of its owners. Here alone at night they spoke most vividly. Lady Bullinger's Napier was a mighty roast sirloin of beef: Isabel's new Royce was a subtle blend of spices from the Orient, Agatha's Horbick a daintily arranged noisette of lamb on a puree of peas.*

Food is also a useful tool when facing the problem of series characters, which means in a crime novel not only the detective, but his family and his colleagues. Once upon a time in what is called the Golden Age of the Whodunit, families were kept decently in the background, now they can be said to sell the novel as the series develops. That means that with your amateur detective and his cop you have to sort out their home lives and their development if you are running a series which is chronological. Mine runs from 1891 to 1906. Are they married, and if so what are their wives like? How can food help? Auguste finally marries a Russian princess whose cook he was in her childhood. What is her attitude to food now she has married the chef? Obviously they have staff, how do they react to Auguste? Badly I decided. They tend to walk out at his well meaning interference. Eventually he finds Mrs Jolly and her son Charlie at an East End pie shop, the first making mouth-watering pies, the second an expert in eating them. Auguste's colleague Chief Inspector Rose is morose and with a delicate stomach: Nothing too rich, he cries, until he tastes Auguste's sole au Chablis. He is happily married to Edith and living in Highbury, but the reason he is morose is that Edith insists on using the meat of Mr Pinpole, the local butcher, and then adding her own far from perfect culinary touches to it, and therefore he suffers from perpetual indigestion.

Barbara Pym always has an expert eye open for the opportunity to bring her characters alive by reference to the food in their lives - Mildred in *Excellent Women*, Harriet in *Some Tame Gazelle*, Miss Doggett's tea parties, Mark Ainger's fish and chips and so on. I try to do the same, and am helped by the fact that chefs are often eccentric - perhaps I subconsciously remember the colourful characters from the Lobster Pot. Television today brims over with TV cooks trying to be eccentric, it seems to me. This is nothing new if you think

of their predecessors. There was a Frenchman called Grimod de La Reynière at the turn of the 18th and 19th centuries, a great gourmet, but also a great practical joker who put his guests in the stocks before his house as an aperitif, followed it up by squirting water at his guests at the table and concluded by switching ladies' and gentlemen's clothes while they were peacefully sleeping it off. And there is Auguste's rival whom he can never quite emulate, Alexis Soyer, in the mid nineteenth century, who was tremendously successful yet always had time to think of new ideas for helping people, setting up soup kitchens, helping in the Irish potato famine, and designing a special stove for soldiers to have hot food in the Crimean battlefields; he also started a grandiose scheme for an enormous restaurant to provide all the cuisines in the world. Each visitor from foreign parts should find a room decorated with his own country's art and serving his native cuisine - except that Soyer drew the line at New Zealand, because he said they might demand 'cold boiled missionary'.

The third method of employing food I've called **Pymming Down**, pinpointing the time or day or event by what was eaten - that sounds very dull, but in Barbara Pym's hands it is never that. At the beginning of *Quartet in Autumn* we learn a lot about the characters in the office as they eat their lunch. Edwin has an Earl Grey teabag lowered into a mug. Marcia has instant coffee and an untidy sandwich. In *Some Tame Gazelle* Connie relates how the bishop took her to a Fuller's teashop - which at least to those of us who remember them sums up the ambience, the relationship between the characters, and the slightly heady possibility of romance. Harriet immediately wants to know if they ate the lovely walnut cake - which instantly rises up in front of my mind's eye in all its majestic white, crowned with golden walnuts. In *Jane and Prudence* Miss Morrow's purloining of the oyster patties in a doggy bag pinpoints her own role and character beautifully, and I'm sure we all use this device frequently in our conversation, memories and letters. That was the day when Great-aunt Ermytrude danced the can-can, and so on. We have some great friends whom we first met in Paris and they take great delight in recalling the old days by the telling



of the occasion on which I served them uncooked shellfish by mistake, crayfish and prawns I believe - I hadn't realised that in France these are sold uncooked. The best meals I have produced before or since go unrecorded. This one is never to be forgotten.

There is one aspect of writing about food which would never have troubled Barbara Pym and didn't trouble me until quite recently. Last year I was asked to speak on a panel in America about using food in crime books and the question popped up: How do you test your recipes? This is very pertinent in the States of course because of their much stricter laws whereby you can be sued if a recipe gives you mild indigestion, it seems to me. Miss Pym doesn't include recipes and even if she had, she was an expert cook, and so would not have had any problem, though I expect she was breathing over your shoulders when *à la Pym* was in preparation.

I don't have the problem either - so far - because I mainly restrict my description of food to the names of the recipes, sometimes the ingredients and occasionally a general description of how a dish is made if that helps the plot along. So far as I am concerned, the recipes I read about and adapt to be Auguste Didier's are rather like Mills and Boon heroes, great to read about but would you want to be married to them - or in my case cook them? Then my German publishers asked me to consider writing an Auguste Didier cookbook, and so I have had to give the matter some thought.

Oh how easy it sounds and how difficult in practice. Ingredients have changed in the last hundred years. Isinglass is no more, we use gelatine - now that may be on the way out too. Truffles are not so easily come by in our corner shop! More importantly our whole way of eating has changed.

If you look at a Victorian recipe book you will see that vegetables make their chief appearance as a garnish, because up to about 1870 the style of formal eating was completely different, and the meal Francatelli served to the Queen would have conformed to this pattern. Meals were served in two courses, but each course would consist of, say, twenty or thirty different dishes, of which some would be soup, some fish, some meat, some vegetables etc. The second course would not only include desserts but savoury dishes and meat dishes as well. Very confusing.

The drawback of this method is that dishes got very chilly on the table while you were working your way through them. Some dishes, called flying dishes, were therefore specially rushed in from the kitchen by the waiters in order to keep hot.

This began to be replaced by a style called *A La Russe*, in which one course followed another, and there was a sideboard for cold dishes and for serving roast meats. However, it took some time for the vegetables to catch up and join the meat and fish in importance. In middle class households of course, without so many servants, the eating style was different, and Mrs Gaskell's *Cranford*, gives a wonderful picture of mid-nineteenth century habits. It is a sort of *Excellent Women* of the 1850s. There is one chapter in which the ladies visit an old bachelor who bemoans the passing of the old ways of eating, in which pudding came before the meat, and I don't think anyone who has read the book would ever forget Miss Matty and Miss Jenkyns retiring to their rooms to suck oranges, for this was the only polite way of eating them.

I have a manuscript cookery book kept over two generations from 1830 to 1860 of, I imagine, a lower middle class household and I found this fascinating in that there were no main course dishes like stews or roasts included at all; there were a few soups, lots of cakes, home-made wine recipes, and lots of lovely steam puddings. Also recipes for sick-room cookery - a big thing in those days.

Some ingredients which we use all the time never appeared in Victorian and Edwardian menus. Garlic for instance, and very, very few tomatoes, stemming from the Victorian belief that they caused cancer.

The fourth method of using food in novels I've called **Thickening the Soup**, food used as a defining factor in relationships, both personal and social, a means of communication. How Barbara Pym asks in *Some Tame Gazelle*, can any real contact be established between two persons where one is eating and the other merely watching. But being Barbara Pym the food must be right - it was right that curates invited to dinner for the first time should be given the best white meat of the chicken. New curates are invited to dinner to establish a relationship, but it must be a controlled one. Thus Belinda decides boiled

chicken seemed entirely right to serve. *The coldness, the whiteness, the muffling in sauce, perhaps even the sharpness added by the slices of lemon, there was something appropriate here, even if Belinda could not see what exactly it was.* Food can provide bonds in all sorts of ways. The kitchen at the Lobster Pot was a great place for forming bonds - as I found out. I was serving two women in the restaurant who were making my life very difficult, and finally I burst into tears in the kitchen. The staff promptly left their stations and gathered round me in support. 'Don't take any notice of those two Lesbians,' one advised. 'Lesbians?' I sobbed in my innocence. 'I thought they were Belgians'. No one said a word, and they are still my friends.

Food can be consolation to us all, and this too is helpful as a writer's tool for it helps bond the reader to the character. Winnie the Pooh felt like all of us, that every so often it was time for a little something, and finds his consolation in counting his pots of honey. Auguste Didier finds his consolation in food also. In *Murder in the Limelight* his beloved Maisie walks out on him at the end of the novel. *He turned back into the empty restaurant. He was cold, he was alone, and something seemed to be blurring his eyes. When they could see again, they fell on the rejected cod. Who could make a dish out of grilled cod? Maisie, his Maisie was gone. One could add French wine sauce - not sherry - and oyster - and he felt excitement rise in him, a dash of cream - and - he would serve it tomorrow. He would call it cod au crème d'écrevisses Maisie.*

And of course Barbara Pym: From her diary of September 1965: *After the dentist went to the Wimpole Buttery. A delicious creamy cake tasting of walnuts. Now Skipperless, one begins to understand 'compensatory eating'. Better surely now to write the kind of novel that tells of one day in the life of such a woman.'*

It always seems to me that Jane Austen must have had Barbara Pym in her prophetic mind when she wrote: *it is only a novel .... or in short only some work in which the most thorough knowledge of human nature, the happiest delineation of its varieties, the liveliest effusions of wit and humour are conveyed to the world in the best chosen language.*

## † Dramatised Pym †

Those attending the Barbara Pym Literary Weekend in August 1993 much enjoyed a dramatised reading of scenes from *No Fond Return of Love*, directed by Tristram Powell and adapted by his daughter Georgia. This version had a cast of four: Aylwin Forbes, author and editor; Viola Dace, his discarded lover and indexer of his last book; Dulcie Mainwaring, 'a competent indexer and proof-corrector' whom he asks to index his next book and to whom he seems likely to propose marriage; and Dulcie's niece, Laurel.

There is another dramatised version of this novel. Adrian Benjamin, Vicar of All Saints Church, Whetstone, North London, prepared and directed an adaptation performed there in 1988, in Chelsea in 1992, Australia 1994, and again in its birthplace in November 1997. This is a more elaborately staged version, with 19 scenes involving four changes of setting. The cast is again of four, but this time playing Viola, a silent Laurel, Dulcie and Miss Lord who 'comes to help her in the house'. All other characters are greeted off-stage (and listed on the programme 'in order of non-appearance').

The Reverend Mr Benjamin provided a programme note for the first, 1988 production of his version of the novel, as follows:

'I have been unlucky with the baked beans recently.'

That's a line typical of a Barbara Pym character; and so is the explanation: as Miss Lord takes her turn in the cafeteria queue she's told they're out of baked beans, but a man after her, who laughs and jokes with the girl serving, gets them. In such a casual incident a Pym novel captures with no militant drum-banging, the way women betray women while men unthinkingly use them. Nor do the novels confine themselves to a stance on social issues: they gently probe our unconscious motives, our little cruelties, and their major moral consequences - and all with that humour and humanity that allow talk of ethics without vilifying villains.

'As a clergyman I have always attempted to remember when mounting

the pulpit the dictum that Jane Austen comes closer than Dostoevsky to depicting the bulk of sinful behaviour. And so as a dramatist I was very much drawn to the idea of adapting one of Barbara Pym's novels for the stage, letting the sharp dialogue and delightful twists of plot reveal the trivial ethical trip-wires of our suburban century.

'... Discussions with actors about the necessary economies of the current theatre scene - small casts and sparing sets - led to the idea of adapting Barbara Pym, who uses her small canvas so carefully and accurately to delineate her characters and their quandaries ... We set about staging *No Fond Return Of Love*. Towards its close a parallel is mischievously drawn with Greek tragedy; there is an inevitability about the sequence of events - and as in the Greek drama, the chief action happens off-stage: no spectacle distracts our attention from the protagonists.

'In this again, the parallel is with Jane Austen. *No Fond Return* concludes with its main character, Dulcie, meditating on the happy ending of *Mansfield Park* - an ironic touch, for all the way through the technique employed is that used in *Emma*. Like Emma, Dulcie observes and arranges the affairs of others, unconscious of the fact that the role of detached commentator and wire-puller is a dangerous one. From the wings she is drawn centre-stage. She is the one to whom things happen. Transposing novel to play means that the audience is caught in the same web. Seeing events through Dulcie's eyes, our emotions are engaged and drawn into the unfolding action's vortex - and this communal experience

is, after all, what a play, as distinct from a novel, is about.'

The 'Adaptor's note' on the 1997 programme quotes Dulcie and Viola's dialogue about the 'thankless task' of indexing, and the 'Prayer for indifference' by the 18th-century poet, Fanny Greville, from which the novel's title is taken (or adapted). It concludes:

'The Christian subtext of the novel may thus be found in another prayer - that of St Ignatius Loyola:

'Teach us, Good Lord, to serve these as thou deservest; to give and not to count the cost; to fight and not to heed the wounds; to toil and not to seek for rest; to labour and to seek for no reward save that of knowing that we do thy will, through Christ our Lord.

'The thankless task of an indexer, the pain and equanimity of one whose love is unrequited ... they are thus not far removed from the errand of the incarnate Christ who comes to his own regardless of whether they "receive him" or not.'

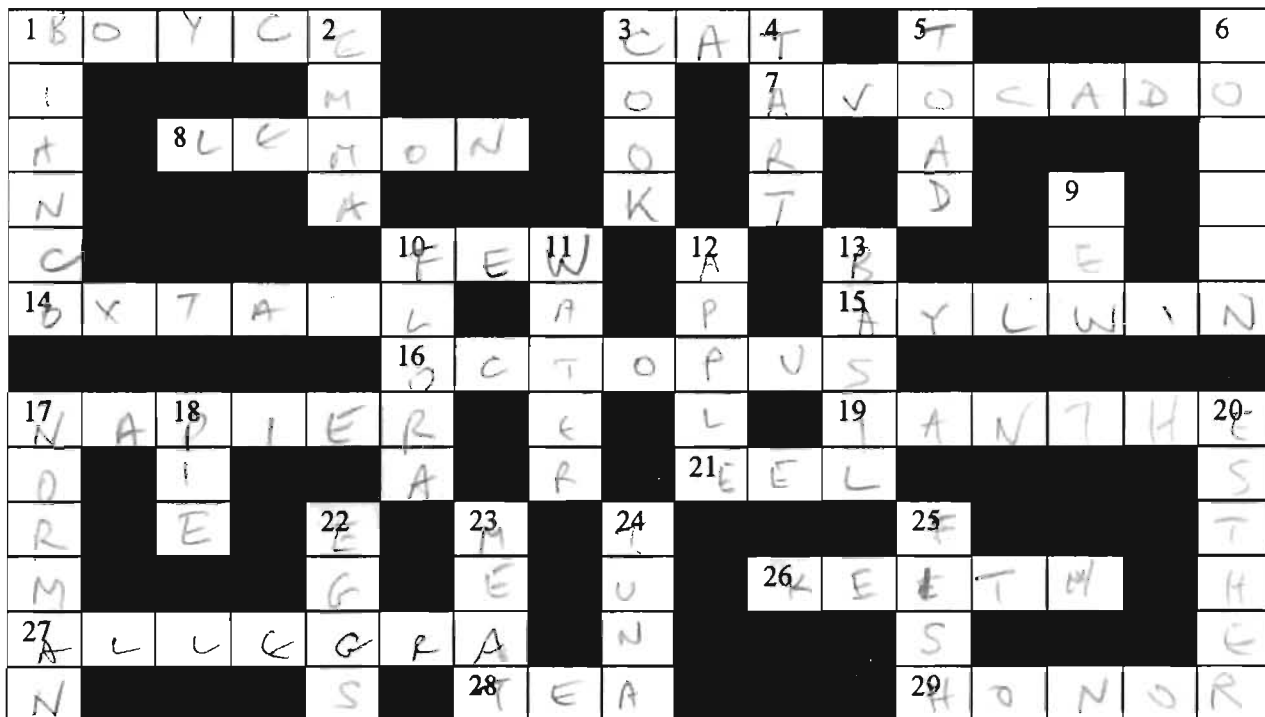
I attended the performance of 'No Fond Return of Love' on 29 November in Whetstone, and found it a truly Pymian occasion. A wet night; we arrived in the church hall to find a small audience including two nuns, their habits glistening with raindrops. Chocolate biscuits and various, mostly soft, drinks were being sold on a table - no, not sold, but giving opportunity for donations, because of the parish licensing system. We felt the appropriate Pymian spirit pervading not only the stage, but the entire hall.

Hazel Bell



## CROSSWORD compiled by 'The Archdeacon'

The main theme of this crossword is food. The solution is on page 7.



## ACROSS

1. Humphrey \_\_\_\_\_, with a preference for 'good hot soup' (5).
3. Faustina was one (3).
7. Favoured by Leonora as a starter (7).
8. A fruit you can have in your 28 across (5).
10. 'A \_\_\_\_\_ green leaves' (3).
14. An unusual present for Rupert Stonebird (6).
15. \_\_\_\_\_ Forbes; he didn't like tomatoes (6).
16. Possible exotic meal for priests during Lent (7).
17. Surname of Rocky and Helena (7).
19. \_\_\_\_\_ Broome, known for her 'light hand' with pastry (6).
21. Type of 25 down you could put in 18 down (3).
26. Friend of Piers and lover of custard (5).
27. \_\_\_\_\_ Gray, Pym character (7).
28. Meal and drink, essential to all Pym novels (3).
29. \_\_\_\_\_ Wyatt, co-author of 'A la Pym' (5).
3. Wilf Bason was not a 'good, plain' one (4).
4. Daphne made one from gooseberries; Belinda made one from plums (4).
5. What Nicholas Cleveland 'can't take' (4).
6. Proprietor of North Oxford teashop visited in 'Crampton Hodnet' (6).
9. Sister \_\_\_\_\_, companion of 19 across (3).
10. Could be margarine, or Gervase's friend (5).
11. Pym's characters seldom drink this (5).
12. Fruit, eaten baked by Penelope (5).
13. Clergyman, saint and herb (5).
17. One of the quartet; he enjoyed Aunt Betsy's 18 down (6).
18. Wilf often made one from 25 down; could equally well be made from 12 down (3).
20. Miss Clovis, who served up 'shop cake' (6).
22. Deirdre Swan tires of eating these (4).
23. What old people *need*, according to Mary Beamish (4).
24. Yet another kind of 25 down, made into a mousse by 2 down (4).
25. What old people often get, instead of 23 down (4).

## DOWN

1. Titled friend of Harriet; or maybe a wine (6).
2. Jane Austen *and* Barbara Pym heroine (4).

## Editorial Notes

This larger issue allows for Amy Myers' talk to be published uncut. We hope you enjoy it as much as we did. We also hope you like the crossword - if we can persuade the compiler, this will be a regular addition.

Claudia Di Giorgio is very pleased to have the official Pym site (thanks to your decision); you can reach her at:

E-mail: [claudiadg@spore.it](mailto:claudiadg@spore.it)

Internet: <http://www.spore.it/claudiadg/index.html>

Our retired potter, Barbara Payne, has put us in touch with an old friend who is happy to continue making mugs for us using the 'plaques' which she designed. So we hope to have Pym mugs, similar but not identical to Barbara's, in a different range of colours, at the September meeting.

Sorry, but we haven't sorted membership by covenant for this year, but it does look promising.

## GREEN LEAVES

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