

Jane and Prudence and Barbara and Hazel: The Women Friends of Barbara Pym and How They Influenced Her Work

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It is nearly a hundred years since Barbara Pym was born. Next year we will be celebrating her centenary. There are few left to tell us what she was like. Of those who were close to her, knew her intimately, and wrote about her, there is just one, her friend of thirty years and literary executor, Hazel Holt. Holt's biography of Barbara *A Lot To Ask* was published in 1990, twenty two years ago. Even since then relationships between men and women, and women and their friends have changed a great deal.

Most women who live without men in 2012 do so by choice. Barbara's generation, and mine that followed, were strongly affected by two world wars and a shortage of men. When I was a child women of my mother's and Barbara's generation who lived alone or with other women, were assumed to have lost the great loves of their lives in a war, or to be lesbians. We didn't say that word of course, and we didn't say "gay" either. Today millions of women live alone or with other women, without anyone blinking an eye. When Barbara was writing her novels the world really was a very different place.

Barbara was clearly heterosexual. Her father was a key part of her happy family in her childhood. No lover of hers, or potential husband was killed in a war. Barbara certainly lost lovers, but there had been definite possibilities of marriage. Yet she remained single all her life. Did she make the mistake all smart girls feared in their youth, and put men off because of her scholarship? Or was it her oddly over-enthusiastic behaviour which turned men away?

She wrote in her diary on 25 January 1933:

This diary seems to be turning into the Saga of Lorenzo. In P. Simpson he sat next but one to me so that I was able to observe him. He has beautiful hands—rather too beautiful but eminently the right thing for him. He has twinkling (but not pleasantly twinkling) hazel brown eyes, like a duck's I think. And what a mouth. He is able to curl it in the most fascinatingly repulsive sneering smile.

And then on the 11th February:

Lorenzo was at the Christchurch play. So was I.

And two days later:

I love Lorenzo. I mean love in my peculiar way. And I had thought I was getting over it.

Lorenzo was of course Henry Harvey, and Barbara followed him and watched him all over Oxford. He gave in and became an on and off lover and friend for the rest of their lives. He was married three times. Barbara also wrote to his wives .

Barbara enjoyed following people and finding out about them. Characters in her books did it too. Wilmet Forsyth thought nothing of spending an evening travelling across London to see where

someone lived. Some of Barbara's obsessive tracking of men she fancied would probably be called stalking today.

Pym was writing at a time when securing a relationship with a man was most heterosexual women's top priority. Women soon learned which parts of their single sisterhood needed to be packed away if they were going to get a man. Close women friends often found themselves abandoned when prospective husbands appeared. The older married amongst us will know what I am talking about here. In our youth, and when Barbara Pym was writing, getting a man and then caring for his needs dominated most women's lives.

I discovered Barbara Pym's novels thirty years ago when I moved to Brooksville Avenue in North West London with my husband and four noisy and demanding teenage children. Number 40 where she had lived for almost a decade with her sister Hilary was just across the road. One day a plaque appeared on the front wall. Barbara Pym Novelist, lived here.

I was curious. I went to the Queen's Park library and borrowed as it happens, *Jane and Prudence* and like so many before me, I fell in love with the work of Barbara Pym. It was a wonderful discovery at a time when my life was dominated by a husband and children at home and a great number of ambitious men at work. Working in television documentaries and current affairs, I was usually the only woman in the film crew and often working abroad in foreign and hostile environments. Barbara Pym's world was deliciously female and witty, but I also found it comforting (to use her description of her work) and I have been carrying it round in my heart ever since.

Working as I do with facts and not with fiction (fiction has always been my secret passion) I have become more and more curious over the years about Barbara Pym, the woman. Why was she the way she was with men? Could Henry Harvey really have been such a catch? Did she have no womanly wiles at all? When she was in her fifties she met an antique dealer in his thirties, Richard Roberts, nicknamed Skipper. Roberts was gay, and yet she persisted in being hurt by the way he treated her when she indulged in inappropriate romantic feelings.

20 February 1965. A sad day. Rang R in the evening and he felt guilty which I hate. He came to tea on Sunday in his very spoilt little Bahamian mood, full of euphoria money and sex talk. Teasing me and being unkind to the cat. I get irritated with him.

Pym's books were a delight but Pym the woman was a mystery to me.

When I joined the Barbara Pym Society in 2007 I found that Hazel Holt was still alive and working. I was very keen to see if she could answer some of my questions. I began to try to arrange a meeting. Hazel had been recently widowed after a long and happy marriage. I talked to her on the phone but she said her life was so unsettled that there was no way she could see me. Then she moved from her family home in Devon to a small bungalow in Somerset to be near her son Tom and his family. Last summer she finally agreed that I could make the trip down to Chard. We immediately hit it off and she was happy to talk to me about her relationship with Barbara. Like Jane Cleveland and Prudence Bates there was about fifteen years between the two women. Barbara was a mature novelist and Hazel a new graduate when they met at the International Africa Institute. How did they get together? Why did they become so close? How did their friendship survive when Hazel had a husband to care for and a son to bring up?

I kept on asking my demanding questions and Hazel smiled and said that Barbara would have liked me. So I asked if I could film an interview. I have recorded about three hours of material. What

you are going to see today are some extracts which answer some of my questions and probably pose quite a few more.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Barbara Pym's biographer best friend and Literary Executor, Hazel Holt.

HH: Well I was born in Birmingham in 1928 and I went to school at King Edwards High School for Girls and we were evacuated for the first year of the war and then came back just in time for the blitz on Birmingham. Then I was very lucky to get a scholarship to go to Cambridge so I went to Newnham for three years, and after that I really I suppose reading English, you are not really prepared for any sort of a career. I wanted to be a journalist but nobody wanted me so I got a job at the International African Institute which was the first place I found who wanted to employ me and I worked in the library first of all, like the heroine of *An Academic Question*. My first day was spent in sticking labels on books. I sort of graduated through the various echelons of the institute and finally I found myself downstairs in the Editorial Room working with Barbara. I had met her briefly when I was working upstairs and someone had told me she was a novelist and had written this book called *Some Tame Gazelle* and the edition I saw had a picture of a gazelle on the cover and because we worked at the African Institute I assumed it was all about Africa which was didn't really interest me, so I thought no! but I thought I had better read it, because after all she was on the staff and to my utter delight I found it was a "Barbara" novel not about Africa at all. So that was a great treat and eventually we became great friends. We worked together. I helped her to get her books through the institute and we were just almost friends from the moment we got together.

She was tall. That's the first impression one ever gets of Barbara she was tall and she was a little bit remote. She was kind and friendly but reserved. I really got to know her.

I really knew Barbara in so far as anybody really did know Barbara apart from Hilary.

LM: *Was she beautifully dressed?*

HH: Beautifully dressed? No. What my dear husband used to call respectably dressed. Oh she loves clothes. She always loved clothes, oh absolutely. She was always buying clothes and always planning what she was going to wear. In her notebook she would always make lists of what clothes she had just bought and what clothes she wanted to buy, but she dressed, I suppose if you are going to be really sort of old fashioned about it, like an English gentlewoman.

But Barbara was also thrifty. Living through the war meant that she was thrifty about her wardrobe and her domestic life. She altered clothes to suit the fashions and she used up leftovers in her cooking. She probably turned worn sheets to the middle like my mother. Hazel believes that Barbara was equally thrifty with her writing. She used up her experiences. She used and reused characters. Unlike the Bronte sisters who lived together in a tiny vicarage and wrote their novels entirely from their imaginations, Barbara was a careful collector of facts, people and behaviour. Her range of experiences was narrow but she made use of everything. She was very good at finding appropriate quotes from poems she had learned and she was very influenced by the books she had read. But her notebooks full of observations of others and their behaviour formed the core of her work.

HH: We both liked the same books which was a very good starting point. We both adored EM Delafield - *Diary of a Provincial Lady*. We both adored Benson. We both adored: We both of course absolutely adored Charlotte Yonge.

LM: *And did you start spending time together?*

HH: Yes indeed we did and Barbara and Henry became friends of the of the family and we would all go out to the theatre or dinner together. We would visit each other's houses and so forth and no they were part of the family more or less.

Most of all Barbara used up her experiences at her work. Her boss Professor Forde and the anthropologists whose work she edited at the International African Institute all earned their place in Pym's world, as did the experiences she and Hazel began to share in the office. Women drink tea and make tea in every Pym novel. I asked Hazel if she and Barbara got together in the kitchen, watching the kettle boil?

HH: No because we were down stairs in the Editorial Office and we had tea brought to us. Tea approached us and like in *Jane and Prudence* you could hear the cups coming you know and we would pay so much for our tea again like *Jane and Prudence* and I regret to say first thing we arrived I arrived before Barbara because I was a little lowlier than Barbara. Barbara didn't get in till 10 and I was there at nine I would bring in the *Daily Express* and Barbara would bring in the *Daily Mirror* and we would swap papers and sit reading the paper for a while we would then catch up on what we had done the night before and you know what we had had for supper and you know if someone had been out...what did you have and that sort of thing and then eventually we would get down to work. That happened every morning and we would usually have lunch together

LM: *Where did you lunch?*

HH: Well a great place to have lunch was Lyons or the Kardomah of course the Kardomah was still there terribly important in everybody's lives of my generation, the Kardomah.

LM: *So when you read Barbara's books so many parts of your life are immortalised in those books?*

HH: Oh yes I mean I have lived through many of the books. No I don't read them now because they are all in my head

LM: *It's never occurred to me before but do you think you are in any of the books?*

HH: I am only one of the characters in a very minor role

LM: *Which is that?*

HH: Well, in *No Fond Return of Love* Laurel the niece, her mother always rather longed to live in a bed sit and I once expressed the thought that I would like to have lived in a bed sit. That is the only time I actually make a personal appearance.

LM: *But other people you knew did?*

HH: Oh many people. Apart from Henry Harvey of course and Julian Glover and of course lots and lots of anthropologists and of course Professor Forde in *Jane and Prudence* was there.

Absolutely all the anthropologists we dealt with appeared at one point or another. I mean for example Everard Bone is physically based on one of the anthropologists, although not actually, but of course Rocky is the young man she met in Naples. My favourite character in *Less than Angels* is the little man with the suitcases filled with lead. He was one of our leading linguists at the time. Actually he always walked round with two little suitcases in his hands and no one ever knew what was in them. I am so glad she immortalised him.

Life at the African Institute which would seem to many of us today such unpromising and dry as dust material, was immortalised by Barbara in her novels. In their shared office Barbara and Hazel gossiped and dreamed and inflated reality with their imaginations. So complex were the tales they wove, and the lives they enhanced with their imaginations that they sometimes had trouble with remembering where truth ended and fiction took over. "I couldn't ask W if his mother was better because I couldn't remember if we had invented her" wrote Barbara in her diary. But they got on with their work as well.

Hh: Of course. Yes we wrote all our own letters, we didn't have secretaries or anything so we laboriously wrote all our own letters with two fingers you know.

She wrote on a typewriter she had bought from the Institute for a pound because when they changed the typewriters we were allowed to buy the old ones for a pound which was jolly good. If we could manage to get them home because they were so heavy I think Geoffrey came in and transported hers and mine at the same time.

LM: *So you both bought one for a pound?*

HH: Oh yes, rather!

LM: *And did she write in a book first and then?*

HH: No she made notes in her notebook and then she went straight to her typewriter.

LM: *And did she make copies or did she just type one copy?*

HH: Only one copy.

LM: *So when she brought it in for you to read...*

HH: Apart from the carbon copy

LM: *Oh, she did keep a copy.*

HH: All good girls make carbon copies. We were told we had three dictats from Professor Forde:

- 1 All good girls make carbon copies,
- 2 Thanks can never be too fulsome, and
- 3 Get something down on paper, my dear.

Good girls these days would be mystified if they were shown a piece of carbon paper. Fulsome thanks are sadly no longer so fulsome in England or anywhere else, but Professor Forde's wise advice to get something down on paper holds good in every modern office including mine!

But the comforting world Barbara and Hazel inhabited in their office at the International African Institute from ten to five on weekdays was suddenly invaded by reality. Barbara was dealt a savage blow.

HH: Well, she had this letter saying well you know rejecting “ An Unsuitable Attachment “and saying it was not a book they thought they could publish and they didn’t think it would make enough money to cover publication and all the rest of it.

LM: *And how did she feel?*

HH: Devastated, of course. I mean I know it is an overused word but it was perfectly true in her case.

LM: *And what did you feel?*

HH: Well, desolated. I mean but we thought well, somebody else will want them. But of course it was the period when nobody wanted books like that.

She had fourteen years when no one would publish her. She tried every publisher in London. Sometimes she posted it, sometimes she went around in her lunch hour and left it at the office.

LM: *That must have been awful.*

HH: It was terrible, and she would come and sometimes say “Back again!” It had been rejected and the script had been returned.

LM: *So did you still think of her as a novelist?*

HH: Oh yes.

LM: *And you never gave up hope?*

HH: Oh. Goodness, no. I mean to write was to live and to live was to write as far as Barbara was concerned. And she would write even if she wasn’t being published.

Miss Pym’s quiet middle class English life went on. She wrote about it, improved upon it, and recorded it brilliantly in her novels. But for seventeen years no one would publish her work. Her wilderness years were largely spent living in Brooksville Avenue.

The present owners of Number 40 Luke Gertler and John Guilfoyle bought the house from Hilary and Barbara in 1972. Luke worked with Hilary Pym at the BBC in the Archives department, and when she told him she was going to retire, and she and her sister might sell their house, he was immediately interested.

In those days Queens Park was quiet and peaceful, but not very expensive. It was a bit of an oasis with its park and bandstand but surrounded by fairly rough working class housing and blocks of council flats in Kilburn and Kensal Rise. Today some houses in Brooksville Avenue have sold for more than a million pounds and next door to Barbara’s old home lives a banker who has dug out a huge basement games area as well as adding an extension on his roof. His house was worth 2 million pounds before he did the improvements. Barbara who had been so unhappy there would have been delighted to watch the gentrification of Queens Park. Luke Gertler showed me round his home. It is very warm and comfortable and full of valuable art work. Gertler’s father was Mark Gertler, a successful painter and member of the Bloomsbury group.

Luke and John told me that the house had been chilly, dull, and sparsely furnished when they went to visit Barbara and Hilary. The Pym sisters were living carefully on very little money. Hilary at the BBC, Barbara at the African Institute.

Outside what had been the Pym living room on the first floor (the better for Barbara to watch who came and went) is a tall narrow cupboard. Known still as the Manuscript Cupboard because this was where Barbara had kept her unpublished books.

The Brooksville Avenue years were the most unfulfilling of Barbara's life. She had nothing published in all her time there. In May 1971 she found she had cancer and one of her breasts was removed. I stared out her bedroom window across the brick terraces of Queen's Park and felt her frustration and despair.

The downstairs rooms are still very much as they were in Barbara's day and I was shown the Oswestry jam cupboard, a pine sideboard the sisters had brought to London from their family home and too big to take with them when they moved to the cottage in Finstock.

Because 40 Brooksville Avenue is mentioned in biographies of Barbara, Luke and John get quite a few American visitors who turn up at the door and ask to be shown round. They are always delighted to oblige and told me that one American gentleman had thrown his arms round the manuscript cupboard with delight at the thought of Barbara's books having been stored there.

Barbara was never published in America during her lifetime but her popularity has increased over the years.

HH: Well it was basically the Anglophile American who first took to her work as you know it was so very English and of course then she was taken up by Shirley Hazzard and other important American writers and of course she became known as a writer to read but of course she wasn't published in America till after her death and I think that things really got underway after *A Very Private Eye* came out.

LM: That is the book of letters and papers that you edited?

HH: Diaries and notebooks. But it was a Barbara that no one really knew about. I always remember Philip Larkin writing to me and saying, 'I am not sure what you have really done with this. I think you may have destroyed the legend.'

I said 'No, I haven't. I have destroyed the myth.'

And that is what it was. Well, she was thought of as a typical English spinster, and of course she was not a typical English spinster as we now know.

So that's the Barbara mystery. Here was a woman who obviously wanted a life full of sex and romance. Reality never matched up to what was going on inside her head. We all know that life suddenly became good again for Barbara when Philip Larkin and Lord David Cecil got her the attention she deserved as one of the most underrated novelists of the twentieth century. Suddenly her work began to be published again and she was shortlisted for the Booker prize for *Quartet* in Autumn but she only had a couple of years left because her cancer returned.

HH: Well, she said before she died she wanted me to be her literary executor. Since I was younger than she was she was assured I would survive her.

LM: *Do you ever feel that you and Barbara are so interlinked in a way that it is difficult to think where you end and Barbara begins?*

HH: Not really because I have had a good life of my own. I have written books on my own inspired I might say by Barbara.

LM: *Oh, were you?*

HH: My heroine is of course an Excellent Woman

LM: *Your heroine is a west country detective?*

HH: Yes but not really a detective. She just investigates things. She is curious which is how excellent women are. She is very curious about people.

LM: *So whenever Mrs Malory goes she investigates...in the manner of Miss Marple?*

HH: It has been compared with Miss Marple

LM: *When did you write your first book?*

HH: After Barbara died.

LM: *So you hadn't written anything while Barbara was alive?*

HH: No. First of all I edited *A Very Private Eye* and then I had an idea for a book and I published my first book when I was sixty.

LM: *Sixty? There's hope for all of us then? What was your first book that you published when you were 60?*

HH: It was called *Gone Away* and it was a detective story.

LM: *That was the first one where Mrs Malory accidentally solved a problem?*

HH: And she has gone on for twenty years, twenty more volumes and I hope 21 this year.

It wasn't easy to ask Hazel Holt the key questions I still wanted answering. She had been quite firm with me in her disapproval of the way people conducted their lives now. She was unhappy about Facebook and other social media. She felt that people revealed everything about themselves and wanted to know everything about everyone else. Back in the fifties at the end of their time at the African Institute, people didn't know everything about each other. It was up to Barbara Pym to take the bare facts and reveal the detail with her imagination.

So I had left the most difficult questions to the end. Of course I wanted to know why Barbara had never married.

LM: *So you think with Henry the great love of her life...?*

HH: There's an entry in one of her notebooks and I think it was Jock came home unexpectedly and found Henry and me with nothing on reading Shakespeare or something like that.

LM: *Tell me about Henry and her relationship with him. Why was he the great love of her life? Did she just fall for this*

HH: Well he was just absolutely fascinating Very attractive. Very intelligent. Everybody's ideal really I suppose.

LM: *Do you think other women fell for him too?*

HH: Oh Yes, to the end of his days people fell for Henry Harvey Including me I think probably in a way. I could certainly see the attraction

LM: *Tell me what did he look like?*

HH: He was small and dark and had regular features and a very good voice which is always very important but it was his mind and intellect and wit.

LM: *He was sort of good looking?*

HH: Well, not obviously good looking but looks that Barbara liked, she liked small dark people.

LM: *How did he treat women?*

HH: Oh, not very well.

LM: *He was very self centred, he accepted homage as his right.*

HH: Oh yes I think. She never forgot him She used him frequently as we know.

LM: *Do you think because she didn't marry him she didn't want to marry anybody else or do you think there weren't any other possibilities later on?*

HH: Well there were other people, certainly but they usually married other people

LM: *Why do you think that was?*

HH: I don't know really. I really don't know that. I think perhaps they were just not interested enough....in Barbara as she was in them.

LM: *Was she sometimes a little too hard to bear because she was so overenthusiastic?*

HH: No, no. She was never that...well, at the very beginning with Henry she was until Jock (Robert Liddell) had a word with her.

LM: *Calm down dear?*

HH: Absolutely, and they were good friends, they really were good friends. Especially towards the end of their lives.

I think Barbara Pym was disadvantaged by living at a time when "getting a man" regulated most women's lives. Barbara wanted so much more than any ordinary man seemed able to give her. To me as a modern woman Henry Harvey sounds just ghastly. Opinionated, self centred. I have known too many men like that in my working life.

I wish I had known Miss Pym. Her early death mean that she missed out on great changes in society which would have fascinated her and provided us with more of her delightful observations of English life.

HH: When she left the Institute they gave her a Greater Oxford Dictionary, and a sum of money, and with the sum of money she bought this topaz ring. She always loved topazes. I went with her to get it. There was a little jewellers in St James that sold antique jewellery and she had her eye on it for a while, and she couldn't afford it. So it was her leaving present from the Institute . One lunch hour we just nipped along and got it. It was as simple as that.

LM: *You must be delighted to have it?*

HH: Yes, she left it me in her will. It's very much a part of Barbara.

Linda McDougall is a British television producer and writer. She worked as a Producer/Director for both Granada Television's World in Action and Thames Television's This Week and TV Eye for two decades, twice winning the Royal Television Society Award for best documentary. Since 1990 she has been managing director of McDougall Craig North, making documentaries and current affairs programs for BBC, ITV, and Channel 4.

In the mid-1980s Linda and her family moved their London home to 19 Brooksville Avenue NW6. Just across the road No. 40 had a plaque, "Barbara Pym, novelist, lived here." Linda shares Barbara's vigorous curiosity, so she did some research, bought Jane and Prudence, and was delighted. For the last year she has been travelling to Somerset to visit Hazel Holt and her cat Flip and to talk with Hazel about her memories of Barbara.