GREEN LEAVES

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The Barbara Pym Society Founder Members. Back row: Dora Thornton, Kathy Ackley, Michael Wilson, Lorraine Mepham, Jean Harker, Christine Shuttleworth, Maggie Parsons. Front row: Maureen Woolley, Yvonne Cocking, Devon Allison. Photo: Ed Nix

The Barbara Pym Society 30th Anniversary Conference

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AGM Conference Report 30 August–1 September 2024

by Jane Loughman

As I walked over Magdalen Bridge towards St Hilda's, I thought back to my first encounter with the Pym Society on a similarly sunny and warm Saturday just one year ago. I was nervous, knowing little of the community I was about to join other than the fact that several members had previously sent amiable, helpful emails regarding my Master's essay research. I was immediately met with the same congeniality at this year's AGM.

Now I was arriving at my third Pym weekend – I attended and spoke (!) at the Conference of the North American Chapter of the Society earlier this year – and I was delighted to see some new faces among the familiar ones. I picked up my Society-branded lanyard, and Louise Griffiths struck up a conversation with me right away about all things Pym and Oxbridge. Soon, I found myself walking to Blackwell's to attend the first event of the weekend with Tara Kelly chatting about the US and Ireland.

In the Blackwell's Rare Books department, we were surrounded by objects of great history, including first editions of Jane Austen lining the shelves, but we all had our eyes on the first edition Pyms on the table. What particularly piqued my interest was a first edition of *Crampton Hodnet* on display, as the cover sets the impression that the novel is a gothic tale. Perhaps it's a new angle from which to read the novel the next time I pick it up.

Next door in the Weston Library, we toured the 'Write, Cut, Rewrite' exhibition, which features a manuscript of *Excellent Women*. In it, you can see Pym's pencil edits; she originally named Helena Napier 'Mrs Daliers', meaning Rocky could have been Rocky Daliers. I think 'Napier' reads better. I had seen the exhibition a few months before and so I enjoyed pointing out to other members where Pym was.

After tea and scones at the Vaults and Garden Cafe with Tara and Louise, we headed back to St Hilda's for the launch of the fantastic 30th Anniversary book on the rooftop of the College, where there was sun, prosecco, and thank yous aplenty.

Later that night, Ruth Nissim was to speak of her wonderful friendship with Hilary Pym Walton 'in 7 objects'. I sadly missed it, but I heard that the talk went down a treat, as did Lucia Costanzo's wartime cake!

Saturday began with the Annual General Meeting; a possible Pym film adaptation was hinted at, some members joined the Committee, and Chair Devon Allison called for assistance with the archive and social media. Afterwards, Jean Harker took us back thirty or so years to a time before social media and the very beginnings of the Society. Jean had organised the very first Pym Conference in 1986, where none other than the infamous ex of Pym, Henry Harvey, attended. He would go on to become a humorous subject across the weekend.

Unfortunately, Barbara Everett could not make it for her talk, so a friend of hers came and read out her thoughts on *So Very Secret*, Pym's one attempt at a thriller novel. The work is often considered to be Pym's weakest. I'm not surprised by this opinion, as Pym herself felt she couldn't 'do plot'.

Barbara Pym's time in the WRNS, or 'Wrens' (Women's Royal Naval Service), was the focus of the weekend's lectures. Devon informed us in her talk how the Wrens were the cool girls of the British war effort, as the uniforms of the ATS (Auxiliary Territorial Service) and WAAF (Women's Auxiliary Air Force) were not nearly as stylish as the Wrens' uniform. Devon also shared photos of beautiful Naples, where Pym was stationed in 1944 and where she was serenaded by a Navy officer. Devon played 'Long Ago and Far Away' during the slideshow, the song sung to her. How romantic! But I later found out she became bored with the officer a month after meeting; that's my Pym.

I can't blame Pym for finding the Wrens' uniform 'every bit as fetching as [she'd] hoped', especially after Dr Jo Horton's talk on war service fashion. Beauty was seen as a duty, and the Wrens had a feminine, sophisticated authority to them. After Jo showed us the intricacies of the uniform, from the undergarments – the 'boy bafflers' and 'passion killers' – to the arm and cap badges, Claire Smith explained that the gaps in knowledge about Pym's work while in the Wrens was due to the necessary secrecy of her task. Claire argued that Pym was likely a special examiner during the war as she worked in censorship, a job often tied up with intelligence. This theory is fascinating to me, as I've spent so much time reading Pym's diaries and biographies that I feel as though I know everything about her life. I think that's the magic of the Society's literary weekends: there's always more to learn, and for me, more to read. I picked up a few books from the Society's merch stand, including *A Few Green Leaves*, making my collection of Pym's fiction complete!

For dinner in the Pavilion, I was pleasantly surprised to be seated at table one with the speakers. I relished the conversation. I sat between Effie Burns, the designer of the gorgeous 30th Anniversary book cover, who told me about her time studying in Ireland, and Jo Horton, who I talked to about film after mulling over what was playing on the room's TV screen ('The Big Broadcast of 1938', I later discovered).

After some food, some wine, and at least one Bloody Mary shot each, the Pymbola began – my first Pym-themed raffle! The most sought-after prize seemed to be the Nun doll; I laughed at the gasp Jo let out when Lucia Costanzo grabbed it first. Thankfully, Jo got to pick up a vintage raspberry jelly coaster. I was also a lucky winner, and I chose the vintage

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The Pym Players. Photo: Jutta Schiller

advertisement for Max Factor featuring Judy Garland, a prize inspired by Mildred buying the 'Hawaiian Fire' lipstick in *Excellent Women*. Congratulations to Paul Howard for organising such a fun event, which raised £550 for Cancer Research UK!

I ran slightly late the next morning, organising my taxi so that I could bring my luggage with me to the College (I had been staying with friends in Summertown for the weekend). After I trudged my little suitcase across the college grounds, I walked in just in time to hear a most astonishing statistic: over 300,000 women were involved in the D-Day planning and landings! In her talk, Julie Summers told us all about some extraordinary women involved in the war effort, including photographer Lee Miller and Audrey Withers, the editor of *Vogue* who stars in Julie's biography *Dressed for War.*

The focus went back to Pym with a panel featuring Jean Harker, Dora Thornton, and Alison Shell, telling us all about the inaugural Barbara Pym Literary Weekend held in St Hilda's in August 1993. We listened to an excerpt of the BBC Radio 4 broadcast 'A Very Suitable Occasion', the half-hour documentary about the Literary Weekend. I particularly enjoyed listening to the interviewer being shocked at the young, male PhD student in attendance: 'I suppose I'm not the typical Pym fan,' he said. Henry Harvey was also interviewed, and it was a laugh to hear him get confused over the mysterious tea that had appeared by his bedside that morning. Alison Shell even had her own Harvey anecdote: she was 'lured' onto the Cherwell by his charisma, and she ended up punting their boat. Dora and Alison reminisced on the early Society days and their time at St Hilda's. They ended the panel with what I thought was a very difficult Pym quiz, yet the audience around me knew almost every answer. I only knew one answer: 'Hawaiian Fire'!

Devon closed the Conference announcing that Jutta Schiller is currently doing some research on Pym's German lover, Friedbert Glück. Up to now she hasn't found any proof that he was a member of the SS, the Schutzstaffel of the Nazi

Left to right, Lucia Costanzo, Keith Armstrong and Pat Chambers in the Rare Books section of Blackwell's. Photo: Devon Allison

Party (NSDAP), a paramilitary organisation that was founded for the protection of Adolf Hitler. I think it is important that the Society tells as much of Pym's truth as possible, and I admire the tenacity of the Society's members in this type of research.

Patricia Robinson won the signed copy of the *À La Pym* cookbook in an auction undertaken by Keith Armstrong. Even if the recipes in the cookbook are not the most appealing, all the food talk made me hungry. I grabbed a quick bite in the Covered Market before returning for the dramatised reading of *So Very Secret*. The Pym Players just shone; Jill Gossling did impressive accent work, while Triona Adams amused the audience greatly. As I said my goodbyes to new and old friends to catch my train to the airport, I wondered whether I should finally read *So Very Secret* on my journey home. I concluded there was no rush; the dramatised reading brought the Pymmian humour to life and elevated the somewhat convoluted plot. I wanted to let it sink in.

Minutes of the Annual General Meeting of the Barbara Pym Society Saturday 31 August 2024, 10.30 am

Committee Members present: Devon Allison (Chair), Kathy Ackley (NA Representative), Keith Armstrong, Susan Armstrong, Anita Etheridge (Treasurer), Maggie Parsons (Secretary), Jutta Schiller (Editor *Green Leaves*), Ruth Taylor.

Apologies for absence: Christopher Nankivell, Sheila Kane, Iona Roberts, Tom Sopko, Ronald Wates, Sioned Wiliam, Clemence Schultze.

Minutes of 2023 AGM: Minutes from last year's AGM had been printed in *Green Leaves* and copies were available at the meeting. The Minutes were accepted by those present as a true record.

Matters Arising: There were no matters arising.

Chair's Report: The Chair welcomed all to the 30th Anniversary AGM, and thanked the Committee, the staff of the Bodleian, and Jean Harker, who edited the Anniversary book. Keith Armstrong and new Treasurer Anita Etheridge were particularly thanked for their work on conference organisation. Jutta Schiller, Lloyd Miller and Christine Shuttleworth were thanked for their work on *Green Leaves*. Tom Sopko and the North American Board were thanked. Hermione Middleton and Ron Wates, who both had to step down from the Committee and Membership Secretary duties this year, for reasons of work and health respectively, were thanked for their contributions.

The Chair noted that research for the Anniversary had shown that the Society is dedicated to an author about whom the future holds new discoveries. New avenues of research have been opened, and the rich archives left by the Pym sisters will be freshly valuable. The Society will continue to seek out people with knowledge and material that, when available to scholars, will contribute to fuller and more accurate portrayals of Barbara Pym's life and work. One of the new connections made was with the daughters of an important friend of Barbara's employed at the War Office throughout the Second World War.

The future also holds new horizons for this author's work, which should soon include the first film based on one of her novels.

The Chair reflected on an enlightening year, which included a London Spring Meeting featuring Julie Summers, currently working on a book about the women of D-Day. Barbara Pym was one of these women, though her war record has been little studied.

The Society would welcome more volunteers and has a particular need for people interested in archival work, in outreach (eg to libraries and book groups), and in events and publicity – particularly online. In 2025 the Society will need a new secretary and newsletter editor, as well as other committee members, so people in attendance at the AGM were urged to consider putting themselves forward.

Members were thanked for their 31 donations to conference funds, which help keep conference costs low. Significant book donations were gratefully received from Hazel Bell, Laura Morris, Ruth Nissim, and Clemence Schultze. Founder Member Iona Roberts, unable to attend the Conference, sent a delightful card with a photograph and stamp of codebreaker women 'Deciphering Enemy Messages' – perfect for this year's 30th Anniversary theme.

In conclusion, the Chair hoped all would enjoy the Anniversary Conference, full of fresh material designed to give new insight into Barbara Pym, her life and work.

Financial Report 2023–24: Anita Etheridge highlighted that this year's financial report looks slightly different from the last few years. This is because instead of splitting out the expenses and income for the various events they are now shown as net amounts. Additionally, she has included the amount in the Society's PayPal account as at year end (it is not possible to recreate this number for the prior year within the PayPal account, but it is likely to have been a small amount).

Cash in hand has increased during the year by £12,827.45 to £49,763.19 and as in previous years is high because more 2024 conference income (£23,685.01) is included, whereas we have only paid out expenses of £1,760.06.

Points to note in the income section are:

1) Donations – which do not include donations made with conference bookings.
2) Anthology – this is the short story collaboration between the US and UK.
3) For the 2023 Conference we ended up with a profit of £2,680.91 which is largely due to members of the Society managing conference bookings.

Points to note in the expenditure section are:

1) *Green Leaves* – only one invoice was received during the year, the second was received post year end.
2) PayPal fees – we are charged between 5% to 6% on each transaction. The amount shown is not for the full year as it was only possible to record the fees separately from January 2024.
3) Internship payment was paid to Xanthe Richardson, the first Literary Intern.

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Anita also thanked Devon for her help during the Treasurer handover process, Devon and Keith for their assistance on the Finance sub-committee, Lorraine for her help on the PayPal handover and the St Hilda's finance team for providing the relevant information.

Membership Report: Due to circumstances beyond anyone's control, this year three different people have handled membership secretary duties. Devon Allison acting as Membership Secretary for the final months of the year, reported that the UK and Europe membership currently stands at 208. This compares with 249 at this time last year, a decrease which is almost entirely accounted for by the elimination from the count of most of the 87 non-payers. Of the 87 non-payers, 16 are active in the Society, and these are counted in the total above. It is likely that these people wish to remain members, so those attending the Conference have been given a paper reminder with their conference packs; others will receive communication from the new Membership Secretary. The Society will be working to simplify the renewal process and counting of members.

Report of the North American Chapter
Submitted by Tom Sopko; read by Kathy Ackley:

As of 31 July 2024, the North American Chapter has 227 paid members and is carrying 119 members who paid dues in 2023 but have not yet renewed, for a total of 346; seven fewer than one year ago. 34 new members have been gained so far this year. The membership is distributed as follows: 290 individuals, 48 family members, seven life members, and one student. 28 members live in Canada, seven are from Australia, and two live in New Zealand, with the remainder in the US.

Finances: Cash on hand was $16,722 as of 31 July 2024, a decrease of $6,886 from one year ago. The expenses for the North American Chapter came up to $32,462 for the costs of the NA Conference, the conference speakers' honoraria, the short story contest prizes, printing and mailing *Green Leaves*, merchandise purchase and shipping, website fees, Zoom license, bank fees, software etc. The income of $25,576 is composed of the membership dues, conference fees, member donations and the merchandise sale.

The North American Conference: The 25th North American Conference, focusing on *Jane and Prudence*, was held in March at the Sheraton Commander Hotel in Harvard Square, Cambridge, MA. Summaries of the talks and a report on the conference weekend appeared in the Spring/Summer issue of *Green Leaves*, and the complete texts of the talks will be added to our online archives. Attendance was 76, with 17 first-time attendees; this was the lowest attendance in fifteen years, and resulted in a deficit of $6,417, including honoraria and complimentary meals for the speakers. While the North American Chapter has adequate cash reserves to cover such a deficit for one or two years, if attendance doesn't rebound to pre-COVID levels (110 to 120 people) the event in its present form will not be sustainable.

The dates for the 2025 Conference, which will focus on *A Few Green Leaves*, have been confirmed as 21–23 March, at the Sheraton Commander Hotel again. The Call for Papers is posted on the BPS website.

Short Story Anthology: In July 2024 the Society published *All This Richness: Short Stories by Barbara Pym and Her Readers*, a 224-page anthology containing three previously unpublished stories by Barbara Pym, three from the 2013 centenary competition written in her style, and 22 from the annual Ellen J. Miller Memorial competitions featuring characters from Pym novels. The project was conceived and promoted by Deb Fisher (who is handling printing and distribution in the UK), with Kathy Ackley serving as editor, Lloyd Miller as designer, and Tom Sopko as typesetter. The initial US printing of 90 copies was gone in two weeks. A second printing was quickly procured, and 115 copies were sold in the US as of 10 August.

Other Matters: The sixth annual Ellen J. Miller Memorial Short Story Competition had nine entries. The top three were printed in the Spring/Summer issue of *Green Leaves*. Tom Sopko thanked Kathy Ackley, Isabel Stanley, and Denise Marois-Wolf, who served once again as judges. Entries for next year must be received by 29 November 2024; complete rules are posted on the BPS website.

Changes to the North American Board: Gabriel Caras is the new Membership Secretary after 'the very excellent' Judy Horn retired after fifteen years of devoted service. North American Treasurer Jordan Bach has been training Assistant Treasurer Myla Fiesterman to take over his responsibilities. After the resignation of longtime Board Member Denise Marois-Wolf, Mary Person was welcomed to replace her. Donna Safreed has continued to serve admirably as North American Conference Registrar, and Lloyd Miller and Tom Croft continue to undertake the 'arduous and thankless task' of printing and mailing more than 300 copies of *Green Leaves* to members in the United States and abroad twice a year.

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Report of the Editor of *Green Leaves*: Jutta Schiller informed about the additional costs for the increase in pages from 20 to 24 for the Autumn/Winter newsletter. They came up to approximately £25 for printing the usual 220 issues. The rise in the mailing costs is the result of the general increase of the postage by the Royal Mail. She thanked the authors for submitting their texts for the newsletter and for their understanding of the cuts and changes to their texts. Jutta Schiller and Christine Shuttleworth are editing every text with great respect for the work involved. Jutta Schiller thanked her wonderful international 'production team' – Christine Shuttleworth and Lloyd Miller – for their cooperation and ideas.

Election of new Committee Members:
Treasurer: Anita Etheridge, proposed by Devon Allison, seconded by Michael Wilson.

Membership Secretary: Keith Armstrong, proposed by Devon Allison, seconded by Louise Griffiths.

Committee Member: Jean Harker, proposed by Devon Allison, seconded by Rita Phillips.

All were agreed unanimously by members present at the meeting.

Devon thanked Lucia Costanzo, Deb Fisher and Ron Wates, who had finished their time on the Committee, for all their hard work, which was greatly appreciated.

There would be an Election Slate for next year's AGM as we need to keep replacing key roles on the Committee. Julie Shrimpton has volunteered to take up work on Facebook.

32 BPS members had signed up for the event at St Paul's Cathedral on 4 September, where Dr Alison Shell would be speaking.

AOB: Rita Phillips asked about the possibility of the Society organizing a 'Tour to Rome' based on Barbara Pym's novels and life. Libby Tempest had recommended a guide who organized a tour of Rome for the Gaskell Society. Lucia Costanzo, who had spoken about her visit to Pym's Rome at a previous conference, said she would look at a low-cost simple approach and she agreed to write out her self-guided itinerary from her trip to be shared with members.

Maggie reminded members that they are also members of the Alliance of Literary Societies (ALS) and that the ALS Annual Gathering will be hosted by the Kipling Society 16–18 May 2025 at the University of Sussex. Full details are on the ALS website.

Next meeting: AGM at St Hilda's College on 30 August 2025, 10.30am.

From the Editor

by Jutta Schiller

Jutta Schiller, left, and Christine Shuttleworth. Photo: Keith Armstrong

In preparations for this year's AGM, I discussed Barbara Pym's connections to Germany, especially to German men, with my husband. I remembered the research I had done in 2009 about Friedbert Glück (see *GL*, Autumn 2009) and its outcome then: I could not find a single proof that Friedbert Glück had been a member of the SS, the paramilitary organisation of the Nazi Party that was formed originally to protect Hitler, but which later became one of the most powerful organisations in Nazi Germany, responsible for war crimes and crimes against humanity that led to millions of deaths during the Second World War. Is the mentioning of his black uniform in Barbara Pym's diaries proof enough that Friedbert Glück had been a member of the SS? My husband, who had done his PhD in political sciences, encouraged me to take up the research again.

New inquiries have been made, some information about Friedbert Glück and his whereabouts after the war have come to light, and I hope very much that I can give you a fuller picture of Friedbert Glück – and of Hanns Woischnick, the other German BP met in Cologne – in the next issue of *Green Leaves.* Let me dig a bit further.

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From the Chair

by Devon Allison

With days closing in and rain pouring, it is lovely to reflect on happy memories from our 30th Anniversary celebration at St Hilda's. There are so many.

In a joyful echo of the mother/daughter pairs among our Founder Members, a mother and daughter pair joined the very first Anniversary event, at Blackwell's Rare Books. Another precious echo from our first Pym Conference came from our special guest, Dr Barbara Everett. Between Dr Everett's Anniversary paper, 'Barbara Pym at War', and her first, 'Barbara Pym, the Writer', lie our full 30 years as a Society.

It was wonderful to see a lively contingent of new members and first-time attenders joining people who first met at the Conference 30 years ago. In a long-standing tradition, North America was beautifully represented by old friends and new.

And for 'the cream on top of the icing', the sun shone brilliantly on the launch party for our 30th Anniversary book, as we toasted our Society and our brilliant author, enchanted by the views of Oxford from St Hilda's rooftop.

At Saturday's AGM a graceful note was rung by a Founder Member sending best wishes in a card featuring code-breaking women during the Second World War – a charming tipping of her hat to Barbara Pym's war service.

Another pleasant note was rung later, at the auction of a valuable book donated to the Society. This signed edition of *À La Pym*, *The Barbara Pym Cookery Book*, was purchased for an aunt whose health does not permit travel. Her niece, a first-time conference attender, says her aunt 'is a great Pym fan…[and] a great cook, [who] studies cooking and the war and rationing and used to teach frugal cooking in 4H' (an American youth organisation). I'm told the book is bringing much pleasure to its new owner and suspect we would all enjoy knowing more about 'frugal cooking' 4H style.

Thirty is a significant age, for our Society as it was for our author. For most of us, this milestone inspires poignant reflections on the past as well as hopeful plans for the future. This has certainly been true for me this year, after so much time spent in the Pym archives and on Pym Society history while also welcoming new members to the Society and thinking about how to prepare us for another excellent 30 years.

Two comments overheard about our Anniversary book encouraged me and have become my favourites: first, a pair of old friends exclaiming delightedly over 'unknown unknowns', ie, the things they didn't know they didn't know about the young Barbara Pym (whom they thought they knew);

Devon Allison, right, and Jean Harker at the book launch party on St Hilda's rooftop. Photo: Ed Nix

and second, a young member saying the Anniversary book provided 'a completely new way to see Barbara Pym'. For me these reader comments hold the promise of a lively future that respects the past – very encouraging, and very suitable for a 30th year.

Happy memories of an excellent Conference are now giving way to planning for our 2025 London Spring Meeting. This event will feature the unveiling of Barbara's English Heritage blue plaque at the address in Pimlico where she wrote *Excellent Women* after being demobbed from the WRNS. Some time soon, you will be notified of the specific date in April. This should be another unforgettable event, and I hope to see you there.

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Conference Paper

Ruth Nissim: An Unforgettable Friendship – Ruth, Peter, and 'Hils'

by Devon Allison

Everyone left alone in old age should have funny, loving, kind and essentially delightful neighbours. And Hilary Pym Walton did. They were Ruth Nissim and her husband Peter, who moved to Finstock not long after Barbara's death.

So it was that Hilary, who used to duet with Barbara, was welcomed into a lively trio, right up until her last days.

Ruth, who very kindly lent the Society her photograph of a young Hilary for publication in our 30th Anniversary book, joined the Barbara Pym Society for the book's launch party at this year's AGM. Later that evening she provided us with an entertaining and heartfelt after-dinner talk titled 'Hilary Pym Walton: An Unforgettable Friendship in 7 Objects'.

Ruth Nissim, left, Paul Howard and Alison Felstead. Photo: Ed Nix

Inevitably, one feels, a naughty cat first brought the new neighbours together. The big new cat in town was not perfect in Hilary's eyes; he belonged to Ruth. Hence object one was a stuffed grey cat representing 'He Who Would Not Behave'. Was Hilary surprised when her solution for keeping the new grey cat out of her kitchen left him locked in rather than locked out? History does not record the answer, but an unforgettable friendship involving music, trips to her beloved Greece and convivial pub evenings playing bagatelle had begun.

Ruth's stories, as she proceeded through the remaining objects, brought Hilary back to those of us who knew her, and provided a delightful introduction for everyone else. We agreed that Hilary herself would have been happy to know she has not been forgotten by the Society.

The other six objects were: sheet music for the Berceuse from Fauré's *Dolly Suite* (played by Hilary live on the famous BBC radio show 'Listen with Mother'), the Old Fallopians Bagatelle Trophy, the Pym sisters' recipe book, family history documents, the *Songs of Greece* book written by Hilary and published in 1968, and a picture of Barn Cottage. Ruth has kindly donated the books to the Pym Society.

Conference Paper

The Origins of the Barbara Pym Society

by Jean Harker

The Barbara Pym Society was founded in 1994, with seven Honorary Life Members and 159 Founder Members. Its origins go back a further eight years, to the Conference 'Barbara Pym: her Life and Work', held at St Hilda's College, Oxford, on Saturday 5 July 1986.

The idea for this Conference about St Hilda's most celebrated writer was the idea of the College's then Principal, Mrs Mary Moore, an ex-diplomat and professional writer. I was asked to help, because I was a part-time conference organiser.

We realised that, before any plans were made, we had to request permission to go ahead from Barbara Pym's literary executors, her sister Hilary Walton and her great friend Hazel Holt.

I was given the very pleasant task of taking these two ladies to tea at the Randolph Hotel in Oxford, and putting the proposal to them. Fortunately they were in favour, and were also keen to take part. We recruited other speakers, as well as some 'guests of the Conference' (old friends and colleagues of Barbara). An advertisement was placed (appropriately) in the *Times Literary Supplement*, and flyers were printed.

The plan expanded to include a celebratory dinner on the previous evening, preceded by a reception at the Bodleian Library hosted by Bodley's Librarian, David Vaisey, as a gesture of thanks for the donation of the Barbara Pym Archive.

There were about 40 bookings for the Conference, plus ten or so speakers and guests, who comfortably filled St Hilda's Vernon Harcourt Room, directly above the dining hall, overlooking the river (the Jacqueline du Pré Music Building was not yet built).

On Saturday 5 July the proceedings were chaired by St Hilda's alumna Dr Barbara Everett, who was an English Fellow at Somerville College. Papers were given on 'The Pym Man' and 'The Pym Woman' by distinguished biographers Victoria Glendinning and Hilary Spurling, both Somervillians. Their appreciative audience constantly broke into ripples of laughter, until Hilary Spurling brought the house down with her examination of 'the knitted sock as sexual currency'.

In the afternoon social anthropologist and Fellow of St John's College, Edwin Ardener, erstwhile colleague of Barbara's at the International African Institute, shared some memories. ('My friend Miss Pym', an article based on his talk, appeared in *The Sunday Telegraph* on the following day.) And, lastly, Hilary Walton and Hazel Holt read extracts from Barbara's unpublished wartime diaries.

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Founder and Honorary Life Member Yvonne Cocking with Chair Devon Allison. Photo: Ed Nix

An account of the Conference by journalist Jenny Campbell appeared in *The Sunday Times* on 27 July, accompanying a review of *An Academic Question*. The article was headed, 'She would sit in the library having passionate thoughts about the colour of young men's socks...'

The 1986 Conference was generally reckoned a success, and, seven years later, recently-arrived Alumnae Relations Officer Eileen Roberts and I organised the Barbara Pym Literary Weekend, as part of St Hilda's Centenary celebrations in 1993.

Held over the weekend of 20–22 August, the BP Literary Weekend began with an early-evening reception on Friday at the Bodleian Library, again hosted by Bodley's Librarian, David Vaisey. Then there was the Conference dinner at St Hilda's, followed by an informal Q&A session with Hilary Walton, Hazel Holt, and Henry Harvey.

On the Saturday we began with a short introduction by St Hilda's English Fellow Dr Lyndall Gordon, followed by 'Barbara Pym's St Hilda's', a talk by retired maths Fellow Dr Margaret Rayner, author of *The Centenary History of St Hilda's College, Oxford*. Then Dr Barbara Everett gave her much-praised paper, 'Barbara Pym, the Writer', and Professor Peter Lloyd spoke about social anthropologists and Barbara Pym. After lunch, Hilary Walton talked about her family history research after she had discovered that no father's name was given on her and Barbara's father's birth certificate. Professor Robert Smith spoke about Barbara and her old Oxford friend, the writer Robert Liddell, and, after tea, Father Gerard Irvine held a discussion/Q&A session on Barbara Pym and the Church of England.

On Sunday the final event and crowning glory of the Literary Weekend was a rehearsed reading of *No Fond Return of Love*, adapted by Oxford alumna and journalist

The entrance to St Hilda's College. Photo: Jutta Schiller

Georgia Powell, and directed by her father, distinguished TV and film director (and Oxford alumnus) Tristram Powell. In the cast were three well-known actors, Stephanie Cole, Susan Jameson, and Benjamin Whitrow – and St Hilda's undergraduate actress Kerry Corcoran.

BBC Radio 4 producer Sioned Wiliam and her actress-and-writer colleague Elizabeth Proud, who had already collaborated on acclaimed radio dramatisations of some of Barbara's novels, spent the Literary Weekend with recorder and microphone in hand, collecting material for their Radio 4 documentary 'A Very Suitable Occasion', which was broadcast on 11 December.

After the programme there was a short announcement about plans to form a Barbara Pym Society, asking those interested to contact Eileen Roberts at St Hilda's. Enthusiastic letters flowed into the Development Office, and Eileen set about formally founding the Barbara Pym Society...

Jean Harker, a St Hilda's alumna and a Founder Member of the BPS, writes fiction and television and radio scripts under her original name, Jean Buchanan. Her biggest TV success is the BBC children's sitcom The Wild House. *She used to work for Oxford University Press, and has contributed extensively to Oxford Dictionaries of Quotations.*

Conference Paper

She Can Keep a Secret: Third Officer B M C Pym

by Devon Allison

Barbara Pym had an important and glamorous war career that she largely chose not to feature in her novels or discuss. As an officer in the elite Women's Royal Naval Service (the WRNS) she signed the Official Secrets Act, received post at an MI5 address (Box 500, Southampton) during D-Day preparation, and proved she knew how to keep a secret.

When Barbara Pym joined the WRNS in 1943 she made a complete break from the life she had planned. In the first years of the war neither the Royal Navy nor the Royal Air Force was prepared to recruit women into operational roles. Heart-burnings included worries that military service could render women permanently 'unfeminine'. The War Office fretted that women could not physically or emotionally endure the hardship and pressure of war work, or handle difficult technical or mechanical work. An absolute prohibition on women using lethal weapons was decreed. And everyone knew women couldn't keep secrets.

Called the 'Senior Service', the Royal Navy was the pride of Britain, and it was an honour to be selected for the 'Wrens', which had a queue of hopeful applicants throughout the war, unlike the other women's services. The WRNS had status. After the war a favourable review of Barbara's first novel *Some Tame Gazelle* would tell readers she 'served in WRNS', and ignore her Oxford degree.

Barbara Pym's decision to join the WRNS was the last in a long chain of escalation of involvement in war work. Initially as a civilian she was doing traditional women's work: learning first aid, keeping house for evacuees, serving food at camps etc. Later on she did skilled war work as a cypher-trained censor in Bristol, concluding as a uniformed officer, working in intelligence. Honor Wyatt, with whom Barbara and her sister Hilary shared a house in Bristol, noted in her talk – which is reproduced in the 30th Anniversary book of the Barbara Pym Society – that Barbara felt a duty to maintain silence. Women who had signed the Official Secrets Act were not free to share their stories of the war, even with each other. Many WWII era Wrens who signed the Act took their secrets to the grave – as did Barbara.

Barbara Pym's service as an officer began at a terrifying point in the war. She was stationed at the 'stone frigate' HMS *Mastodon* (as Exbury House was officially designated) on the south coast of England during the final secret planning of D-Day. Barbara worked hard in the months leading up to the invasion. Less than a week before the landings she wrote to Henry Harvey, her Oxford ex sitting the war out in Stockholm: 'I am vaguely depressed, waiting for things to happen as we all are now, I wish it could be over and done with – we shall know so many people in it and I suppose a good many of them won't come back.' A few weeks later, Barbara's close friend Donald Liddell would be dead and buried in Normandy. Part of his story is told in our Anniversary book: 'The Tragedy of Donald Liddell'.

The Wrens officer ranks were filled with well-connected, accomplished, and often brilliant and tough women. When Barbara Pym became an officer in 1943, she joined an elite corps: she was one of only 3,888 women wearing stripes on their navy-blue sleeves – 6% of the total number of 66,500 Wrens then in uniform. After serving on the south coast of England, at the centre of D-Day preparations, Barbara was posted to Italy – putting her into another elite group, the 8% of Wrens sent overseas. Photo: Barbara Pym Society

After the Normandy invasion Barbara was posted to Naples, Italy. The city had been heavily bombed, and bitter fighting continued in Italy for another year.

Barbara's response to the semi-tropical semi-paradise Naples was both ecstatic (to the flowers, music, food, and light) and frustrated (there was still no space or time to write). In her diaries she noted the brittleness of the incessant, frantic

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social life, and while there were quantities of the tall and handsome men Barbara liked so much, very few had the cleverness and culture she valued. The invitations poured in, and her diary entries of cocktails, dinners, parties and dances are exhausting, even to read. She discovered the joy of opera and *Tosca*, heard first at Teatro San Carlo, the jewel box opera house of Naples, became a lifelong favourite, chosen for her 'Desert Island Discs' appearance on BBC Radio 4 in 1978.

Barbara's WRNS friendships certainly influenced her novels. The Anniversary book includes the story of her romantic New Year's Eve 1944, as it is so important to the creation of 'Rocky' in *Excellent Women*. The medley of photos shown here give a flavour of Barbara's life in Naples, where 'Rocky', aka Edward Astley-Jones, sang 'Long Ago and Far Away' to her 'oh so cheek-to-cheek' on that last New Year's Eve 1944.

The WRNS experience inspired Barbara Pym's most famous novel, *Excellent Women*. The experience permeates *A Glass of Blessings* and probably informs Pym's creation of Catherine Oliphant (who lost someone in the war) in *Less Than Angels*.

Barbara Pym imagined at least three books involving the war that she didn't write. For her, as for so many other women, it must have been a strange, disorienting experience to shed her uniform, like a carapace, after the war and be treated as if her war service had never happened. A few women remained in the WRNS after 1945, but most women were told to go home and resume normal service.

Barbara's war career involved sacrifice, while also broadening her perspective, and helping her shake off the misery of rejection by publisher Jonathan Cape and two irresponsible men. Nearly three years in the WRNS conferred status, brought her exciting new friends and lovers, and prepared her for the career she had always wanted.

Understanding the fascinating and fresh story of Barbara's life during WWII can help us appreciate her literary achievement.

In 2023 a rare full WRNS uniform went to auction with all its nametags intact. The 'Miss A Butler' was probably Barbara's great friend, fellow Third Officer Auriol Butler, and the carefully preserved uniform, stripes on sleeves, is a touching reminder of Barbara Pym's vanished Wrens' world.

Devon Allison is a Founder Member of the Barbara Pym Society who served on the first Committee and began her term as Chair in 2023. She has spent many happy hours in the Bodleian Libraries, proudly making extensive use of a library card marked with the 'A' that allows access to the archives, including those of Barbara Pym and her sister Hilary Pym Walton.

Conference Paper

'I joined for the hat.' Liberation, Bravery and Glamour in a Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS) Uniform

by Dr Jo Horton

In the words of newly passed-out, no longer Pro-Wren but Wren Pym: 'My hat is lovely, every bit as fetching as I'd hoped, but my suit is rather large, though it's easier to alter that way.' This diary entry from 20 July 1943 reflects the significance of Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS) uniforms and the mid-century wearer's expertise in altering silhouette, hem and sleeve lengths and a myriad of dressmaking and mending skills.

For many women the call to join the Wrens was a natural progression from the fine example of the 438 officers and 5,054 ratings who served in the First World War – of mothers, aunts, older sisters, mentors and friends with connections to the sea or from Royal Navy families. For others bored with mundane jobs, desperate for independence, or those who had encountered life-changing experiences in the early part of the renewed hostilities, the Wrens offered exciting, increasingly varied non-combative roles – all in a fashionable couture-designed no 1 or best uniform, in a time when not everyone had a new pair of shoes or even underwear to their name.

The 'fore and aft rig' cut in neat straight lines in a becoming navy, with the hat that was worn at a rakish angle, was celebrated as the smartest of the women's service uniforms. But how was the uniform kept smart, and how was it made to fit? The way body and garment interact is one of the key aspects of tailoring and therefore crucial to the uniform's impact, alongside considered design fundamentals, colour, silhouette, shape, and material qualities.

And how did beauty, duty and bravery co-exist in a uniform that inspired devotion and respect, as the essence of military service, and live up to their redoubtable reputation, as one Royal Naval Officer remarked he wouldn't be without his Wren, having been a little unsure at first.

Of all the uniforms that Wrens wore in supporting the war effort, in auxiliary service roles, stores management, as dispatch riders, drivers, decoders, decipherers, map makers, technical trainers, sailmakers, garage workers, and in weapons maintenance, to name but a few of the 90 categories a Second World War Wren could be engaged in, not only was the variety of uniforms surprisingly large, but there are several areas that are unusual.

First, the importance of professional appearance and glamour in a uniform pattern, whether it was made on a shoestring or made to measure in Savile Row, and the significance of material. Second, the personal tricks and

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Dr Jo Horton. Photo courtesy of Jo Horton

tools of the trade that helped or hindered the reputation of the Wren's uniform. Third, the roles that demanded women wear the same clothing as men, overalls and other forms of workwear, and how these overalls, suits and trousers were adapted by women to step into and more than fill men's shoes, in some cases excelling due to their increased dexterity and initially underrated strength and stamina. By 1942 advertisements were being placed for 'Tough Guy Girls' to do ship repairs!

Unsurprisingly, though, one aspect that attracted huge publicity was the wearing of men's matelot bell-bottom trousers seen swinging impressively in unison when marching, and this influenced women's clothing in peacetime and post-war, with long lasting effect. As Fleet Air Arm Wren Sybil, who served between 1953–57 as a range assessor, says, in the past 30 years she has only bought one dress. The rest of her wardrobe are trousers – all 30 plus of them.

Less public an aspect were the challenges Wrens found in comfort and wear, in tales of uncomfortable collars, restrictive skirts, hats that did not always encourage the same delight as those issued to Christian Lamb or Barbara Pym and provoked the ire of officers, and rough serge trousers that demanded layers of underwear, including the reviled standard issue bloomers or, in Barbara's words, 'trollies', in order to reduce excruciating rub.

Despite a slow beginning, the women of the WRNS were as celebrated as their uniform, which emphasised a feminine sophisticated authority, driven by the directors, commandants and receptive members of the Admiralty, the aesthetic of the renowned couturiers Edward Molyneux and Victor Stiebel, and the expertise of skilled tailors.

Keeping smart in a clean lined uniform that embodied glamour and duty is reflected on by Wren ratings, who also served. The standard issue loan ratings uniform stood out as it came in different sizes, at least approaching somewhere near the size you were, which individuals and hard-pressed tailors could alter, unlike the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS), who had only small, medium and large to work with.

Many Wrens saved for a 'tiddly suit', a replacement regulation uniform in barathea or superfine wool rather than the reviled serge version. A tiddly made-to-measure uniform influenced the way they walked, being made to feel smarter, professional and yet still unified by their personalised clothing and wearable fabrics.

The Second World War fashion influenced best uniform, boat crew, greatcoat, officers service dress and mess undress, work wear, tropical dress, and Queen Alexandra's Royal Naval Nursing Service ward or service dress, reminds us that uniforms matter, whether suited to action, technical, clerical, tailored and hierarchical, protective, offering a hygienic or emotional barrier, hidden or visible.

In researching this paper, I was granted special access at Royal Museums Greenwich, drawing on original sources in the Caird Library at the National Maritime Museum, original objects and subsidiary ephemera in the Prince Philip Maritime Collections Centre, and contemporary and modern sources and literature. I have been fortunate to interview ex-Wrens who served in and immediately after the Second World War, examining lived worn experiences of the WRNS uniform, confronting and overcoming wartime stereotypes, and furthermore both the opportunities and renewed barriers that many women met with post-war.

Dr Jo Horton is a material culture historian, maker and heritage consultant. Her research focuses on textile materials, fashion and uniform with special interest in the tailoring, embroidery, regalia and ubiquitous 'tiddly suit' of the wartime Women's Royal Naval Service.

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Conference Paper

Barbara Pym: Author, Officer, Spy?

by Devon Allison

On 9 January 2024, two quiet and respectable women (one might almost say two excellent women) met for tea in a shop near the Bodleian Library in Oxford.

Who would guess they were discussing the British intelligence services and Barbara Pym, the famously mild-mannered spinster novelist, and that the taking of these harmless cups of tea would lead directly to a riveting 30th Anniversary Conference presentation innocuously titled 'Possibilities and Problems: Barbara Pym's Wartime Service' by its deceptively mild-mannered author, Claire Smith?

Claire Smith. Photo courtesy of Claire Smith

Claire Smith was a UK diplomat for 27 years, serving in China, Germany, Pakistan and the UK. She worked in the Cabinet Office in London and was a member of the Joint Intelligence Committee.

Claire's meticulous research and expertise in security and intelligence matters enabled her to make a fascinating discovery about Barbara Pym: as a Third Officer in the Women's Royal Naval Service during Operation Overlord, Barbara's address was the one used by MI5.

In a happy coincidence, an independent research project being pursued by Claire had led her to Barbara Pym's war career just as this career was being researched by the Pym Society for our 30th Anniversary. Barbara's startlingly intense career as a WRNS officer, so long virtually ignored, was being seriously investigated, with tantalising results.

Invited to present her work-in-progress at the Anniversary Conference, Claire's presentation was completely unlike anything we have heard before and had people on the edge of their seats. This anniversary year is the first time that Barbara Pym's intelligence work has been probed and recognised, and it is very suitable that Claire Smith has led the way. Her long career in the Foreign and Cabinet Offices encompassed diplomacy, membership of the Joint Intelligence Committee, security vetting and even advice to Prime Ministers. She may be the only person in the world who would instantly recognise 'Box 500' as an address used by the United Kingdom's domestic counterintelligence and security agency.

There is much more research to be done, but evidence supports the judgement that Barbara was a Special Examiner, engaged in very secret work, using sophisticated training to identify security risks at the height of the war.

Claire notes that intelligence work is more like archaeology than like treasure-hunting and is careful to emphasise what she doesn't know and hasn't yet been able to find. Women's contribution to intelligence work during the war is only now being revealed, and the contribution of naval censorship has long been undervalued. In another paper, 'Wartime intelligence experience in the works of Barbara Pym and Muriel Spark', Claire wrote that censorship was key to 'preventative security' and 'fulfilled a counterespionage and defensive security role'. Further, the 'Cabinet Office Overlord Committee meeting of 18 February 1944 devoted 90 per cent of its time to censorship questions.' A month later, the experienced and highly trained Barbara would be on the south coast of England, immersed in the preparations for D-Day that were code named Overlord.

A Pym reader since 1981, Claire has written about the way censorship work is treated in the most famous of her novels:

> Barbara Pym's fictional female examiner, Mildred Lathbury, the narrator of *Excellent Women* reduced the role to one 'for which, very fortunately, no high qualifications appeared to be necessary...' All Mildred gleans from this work, according to the novel, is insights into the vagaries of human relationships. Mildred conforms to the prevailing contemporary view of the Examiners. It is consistent with other self-denigrating episodes in the novel, including washing up other people's dishes...It is also consistent with concealing an intelligence function, maintaining a cover story that depicts a dull, boring role too dreary to merit further discussion.

Claire's work provides more evidence that Barbara Pym not only kept secrets but was able to smile at society's assumption that a mild-mannered spinster would have none worth excavating.

Note: Claire invited all in the audience to follow on from her research – there is much more to learn.

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Conference Paper

The Women of D-Day

by Julie Summers

In 2019 I was asked to make the keynote speech at a D-Day '75 conference in Portsmouth. The delegates were predominantly men in suits and all white. They were gathered to celebrate and share the incredible story of the largest seaborne invasion in history that led to the end of the Second World War. My question to those men, and to my audience at the 30th Anniversary of the Barbara Pym Society, was: 'how many women were involved in D-Day?' The answer depends on the interpretation of the question. We know that only one woman, American journalist Martha Gellhorn, managed to smuggle her way onto a ship and get to Normandy. That answer ignored over 348,000 women, including Barbara Pym, who were directly involved in the planning for D-Day.

This talk looked at the various roles that women took over the course of late 1943 and the first six months and five days of 1944. Women had proved themselves to be brave, resourceful and uncomplaining during the First World War. The changes wrought to dress as a result of necessity – you could not bend over to attend a wounded man while wearing a corset, or fix an ambulance while wearing a hobble skirt – had liberated women and shown men how valuable a contribution they could and did make.

It was therefore unsurprising that the government had women at the forefront of various aspects of war planning in 1938 and 1939. The Women's Voluntary Service (WVS), led by Lady Reading, was set up in April 1938. Women's branches of the Army, Royal Air Force and Royal Navy were reformed, as was the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry (FANY), while other new roles, such as the care of evacuated children, called upon women to support them. Conscription for women was introduced in December 1941, and by 1944 there were more than seven million women in war work. Nearly two million women worked in the metal and chemical industries, while 212,500 joined the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS), 180,000 were in the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF) and 74,000 in the Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS).

Behind the scenes, women were active in Special Operations Executive (SOE) and in crucial roles relating directly to the D-Day landings: radar, meteorology, photographic interpretation (CIU), map creating, parachute and camouflage manufacture and in the D-Day Deception: Operation Fortitude South. One of the most crucial roles played by the CIU (Central Interpretation Unit) was to study not only the beaches for landing but the topography and geology of Normandy so that the Royal Engineers would know precisely where they could drill wells for water in order to feed the men who landed on the beaches. The CIU, based at RAF Medmenham in Buckinghamshire, had an exceptional unit leader: Dorothy Garrod, the Disney Professor of Archaeology at Cambridge and the first woman to hold an Oxbridge professorial chair. In 1941 she had taken leave of absence from her post to join the WAAF and she remained deeply involved in photographic interpretation for the rest of the war. 150 women worked for her and other unit leaders as photographic interpreters.

Photo: Ed Nix

The 'Women of D-Day' is the subject of my next book, and I took the audience through the process of starting a book from scratch. As usual, I will add about four metres of books to my shelves over the course of the research, as well as travelling widely to visit archives and museum collections all over the country and in Normandy. I finished with a short piece about my latest book, due out on 4 October 2024, called *British Vogue: The Biography of an Icon*. We know that Barbara Pym read *Vogue* and had dresses made to *Vogue* patterns. I explained the key role that war reporting played in the magazine in both world wars, and in this century, in the war against terror.

Julie Summers has written 14 works of non-fiction, including Jambusters, *which inspired the ITV drama series* Home Fires. *She was listed in* The Sunday Times *as one of only four women in the top 50 historians in Britain. Julie was the Royal Literary Fund Fellow at St Hilda's from 2019 to 2022 and has just completed a year in the same role at Kellogg College, Oxford. Since October 2024 she has been a Writer in Residence at Kellogg.*

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Barbara Pym at War

by Barbara Everett

The Barbara Pym Society is celebrating its thirtieth year – and with it, the writer's own thirtieth birthday in 1943. For the first few years of the Second World War Pym worked at home; she then became one of the Civil Service Censors in Bristol, and joined the Wrens. Service with the Wrens in particular brought riches of new experience, both in England and in Italy. But it of course left little time for writing fiction. Such wartime writing as Barbara Pym managed derived mainly from the earlier years. It includes one novel, a spy story entitled *So Very Secret*; published only much later, and then in a reduced form. This is a simple tale with a certain charm, but one never in general thought strong or of great interest.

Perhaps the war itself encouraged her to try writing a thriller. Certainly this genre (detective story, mystery, spy fiction, murder yarn and others) had huge success in the twentieth century, from Sherlock Holmes onwards, and some importance too. But the form made its own demands on both writer and reader. It reflects in itself a world made of power and violence and creates in the right reader a complex of tension, the sense of danger, even desperation. Its major term is death. These are conditions all alien to Pym's style, character and even morality. It is not surprising that the form resisted her gifts, even her capacity.

But if she could not master the thriller, or hardly wanted to, she did something extremely interesting with the whole mode. She learned one element from it and made use of it in a strikingly original way. She sees the public or social world as holding inside itself a more private one, and that more private world of relationships – chiefly but not only between men and women – is also a war, with an essential distance and even enmity between human beings. Of any pair, the 'more loving one' is almost always a woman, one diminished thereby to unimportance, insignificance, invisibility by her feeling; she can do little but look and follow, deeply attentive and deeply disregarded – become, in fact, very like a spy in war. And so, because Pym's fictions are the work of an artist, and her stories highly literate and poetry-loving constructs, all the elements fuse: good lovers are not only good spies, but good readers and writers, all coming together at last through war into harmony.

Barbara Everett is a Canadian-born British academic and literary critic. She is a graduate of St Hilda's College, Oxford and a retired Fellow of Somerville College, Oxford. She has spoken several times at the conferences of the BPS.

(Publication by permission of Professor Seamus Perry, editor of Essays in Criticism.*)*

Gleanings

compiled by Yvonne Cocking

Last year the College of Librarianship Wales published 'CLW Memories...Staff reminiscences...1964–1989'. One of the staff, Diana Dixon, remembers discussions during coffee breaks in 1973:

> A typical morning break could cover topics as diverse as sheep dipping, Barbara Pym, the inadequacy of the train service, football and Wallasey Public Library.

Susie Goldsbrough's article in *The Times*, 23 March 2024, 'All hail Persephone, rescuer of lost literary treasures', was about Nicola Beauman, Persephone's founder, not usually an admirer of Barbara Pym, who thinks that

> some mid-century women writers are anointed by the academic community – Barbara Pym and Rebecca West – while others...are left to gather dust.

Secret Voices: A Year of Women's Diaries was reviewed by Ysenda Maxtone Graham in *The Mail on Sunday*, 14 April 2024:

> In her fabulous collection of women's diary entries from the 17th century until today, Sarah Gristwood presents a vast array of private feelings...Barbara Pym is in a hospital waiting room on 26 May 1977. 'Why nothing to read in the outpatients at the Radcliffe? Must we be content with our thoughts?'

A blog by *Clothes in Books*, posted on 7 July 2024, dealt with *A Glass of Blessings*, Wilmet in particular, 'who is very good on her clothes'.

> I always take trouble with my clothes, and being tall and dark, I usually manage to achieve some kind of distinction. Today I was in pale coffee brown with touches of black and coral jewellery.

In *Country Life* on 10 July 2024, Flora Watkins lauded the sponge cake, the first known recipe for which appeared in *The English Husewife*, by Gervase Markham in 1615. Apparently

> some people think that sponge cakes should be sandwiched with cream and jam, others jam only. For me, sponge cake sandwiched with jam only feels a bit post-war, reminiscent of the meagre fare of Barbara Pym's novels.

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Peter Parker, discussing his anthology *Some Men in London*, in *Literary Review,* August 2024, paints a picture of queer life in the capital from the end of the Second World War to the partial decriminalisation of homosexuality in 1967.

> I wanted to have an extract from Barbara Pym's 1958 novel *A Glass of Blessings* in which the narrator discovers that a 'vaguely unsatisfactory' man with whom she has become infatuated does not share his flat with a mere work colleague, as she has imagined, but with a knitwear model called Keith.

The reasons the publisher gave for the exclusion of this and other extracts were the refusal of permission by copyright holders, and agents' excessive charges.

In Clare Chambers' latest novel, *Shy Creatures*, reviewed in *The Daily Telegraph* on 17 August 2024, the protagonists are a pair of lovers, Gil and Helen, colleagues at a psychiatric hospital. Just as their relationship seems to be running out, Gil comes across an exciting new patient…and the affair takes on a new life as Gil and Helen work together to find out what's wrong with him. 'This is the kind of set-up that belongs in a Pym novel.'

The Sunday Times also reviewed this book on 25 August 2024:

> Her [Clare Chambers's] fictional worlds feel safe and cosy, conjuring up a lost England of Barbara Pym and Philip Larkin, of candlewick counterpanes and church spires…

Rachel Cooke wrote about women's friendships in *The Guardian* on 11 August 2024, with special reference to *Excellent Women*.

> Shopping trips may be the occasion of massive passive aggression between close friends, and so it proves in *Excellent Women*, when Dora and Mildred visit a department store in search of new frocks: 'I've come to the conclusion that we should avoid brown…'

A little feature 'On Kate [Atkinson]'s Bookshelf' in *Good Housekeeping* in September 2024, included the following note:

> I recently reread a lot of Penelope Fitzgerald, Barbara Pym and Elizabeth Taylor. They're not showy and that's what I like about them.

In *The Persephone Letter,* 17 September 2024, a monthly newsletter about the world of Persephone Books, we read:

> And the Barbara Pym Society has just had its annual conference in Oxford, if there is a Pym devotee who is not a member of the Society we highly recommend joining.

Surprising, since Nicola Beauman, as noted above, is not known to be an admirer of Pym.

Yvonne Cocking, centre, with Kathy Ackley, left and Nicky Foy, right. Photo: Ed Nix

Madeline Grant wrote in *The Daily Telegraph* on 11 September 2024, 'Management gobbledegook is a threat to democracy':

> Oxford is the latest institution to come under attack from the plague of corporate newspeak. *The Times* diarist Patrick Kidd drew attention to the mess of verbiage exhibited in the statement announcing Baroness Royall's candidacy [for the University of Oxford's Chancellor] – a masterstroke of newspeak consultant language. Royall speaks of Oxford's 'dynamic future as a nexus for transformational research', and the 'precious futures our university creates'. None of it means much, and yet the grey, managerial vision it expresses for education is unfortunately very clear. Of all areas of national life, academia ought to be the place where language is treated with most respect. If Oxford – the home of such great deployers of English as C S Lewis, Tolkien, Samuel Johnson, Barbara Pym – has gone from being a seat of learning to a nexus of transformation, then we are in trouble.

Private Eye might seem an unlikely publication in which to find a reference to Barbara Pym, but in its issue of 13–26 September 2024 'Bookworm' quoted from *The Spectator*, 31 August 2024:

> 'We want more angst and fewer adjectives,' said Joan Collins's literary agent, according to her recent diary in *The Spectator*.
>
> He was explaining why the dame's books were not to 'modern' tastes, and it seems fair to infer that, as a novelist, the 91-year-old former *Dynasty* and *The Stud* star… is enduring the Barbara Pym-like ordeal of rejection by publishers due to falling out of fashion.

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During the Marlborough LitFest in September 2024, I listened to Ysenda Maxtone Graham talking about her latest book *Jobs for the Girls: How We Set Out to Work in the Typewriter Age.* She mentions Barbara Pym twice:

> Barbara Pym was writing from experience when she portrayed Marcia and Letty in her 1977 novel *Quartet in Autumn*: emotionally dried-up, ageing single women, for whom life had never quite taken off. There they still were, calcified in their obsolescent office clerking jobs, counting down the days to retirement...
>
> Unusually, gratifyingly, the office or work lunch hour was exactly that: a whole hour in which you did no work at all, and either wandered about in the vicinity of the office browsing in shops, or sat in a restaurant or café, or on a bench reading or chatting. For a lonely person, an hour could seem long: too long. Barbara Pym described one of her solitary female characters buying her *Evening Standard* at lunch time and reading it from cover to cover there and then, thus 'spoiling her treat for later'.

Thanks to Nicky Foy, Sheila Kane, Norma Munson, Iona Roberts, Ruth Taylor, Sue Willets, and Michael Wilson.

Items may be sent to Yvonne at yvcocking@gmail.com

In the days of Hengist and Horsa
Underwear was very much coarser
But for the men who stormed the coast of France
Wolsey made finer vests and pants.

Yvonne Cocking, Honorary Life Member of the BPS, remembered this newspaper advertisement from WWII. The legendary brothers Hengist and Horsa were leaders of the first Anglo-Saxon settlers in Britain. Wolsey, established 1755, is the oldest British menswear brand.

A Very Special Occasion

by Jane Bezant

I always feel a bit sad at the close of the wonderful Barbara Pym Conference at St Hilda's. However, this year it was good to know that many of us would be meeting up once again at St Paul's Cathedral on Wednesday of the same week for a very special event.

I arrived at the Cathedral in good time and made my way down to the Crypt, and soon recognised some familiar faces browsing in the gift shop. Was that Paul buying a suitable item for next year's Pymbola?

At 1pm a good number of BPS members gathered in the Wren Suite, where we were welcomed by St Paul's Librarian Anna James and Barbara Pym Society Chair Devon Allison. Dr Alison Shell, a Founder Member of our Society, then spoke with great enthusiasm on '"Close and secret, as our souls, we've been": Barbara Pym's Donne'.

In talking about Barbara's lifelong passion for Donne's poetry, Alison Shell gave many examples that appear in the novels, including a favourite exchange in *Jane and Prudence* which always makes me laugh:

> '*O my America! My new-found-land*,' said Prudence.
> 'I wonder if he quoted that to her?'
> 'Oh, geographers don't read poetry,' said Jane confidently.

Little did she know what would shortly take place in the 'earwig-infested summerhouse' where Paul, the young geographer, 'put his arms around Flora and began quoting Donne...as Prudence has suggested that he might.'

We were then treated to a behind the scenes tour. The first stop was the extraordinary white marble statue of John Donne which stands upright in an alcove in the Dean's Aisle. When he knew he was dying Donne designed his own memorial and had himself wrapped in a shroud for the artist to sketch. It was quite startling to stand in front of the poet rising from his funeral urn. His monument is one of the few to survive the Great Fire of London and the scorch marks are still visible at the bottom of the sculpture.

A climb of 141 steps (or 13 floors as my phone informed me) brought us to the huge attic-like space of the Triforium, not usually open to the public. We were led to a narrow walkway high above the Great West Doors which gave us the most spectacular view down the nave – the sort of bird's-eye view the TV cameras give you on great state occasions.

The next surprise, having walked through a sort of graveyard for old pulpits, was a room containing the appropriately named 'Great Model', Sir Christopher Wren's 1:25 scale model of one of his original designs. This enormous model (roughly 6m long by 3.5m and 4m tall) was made

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The 'Great Model', Sir Christopher Wren's 1:25 scale model of St Paul's, 1674. The present building does not follow this model exactly. Photo: Charles Gilbert

in 1674 as 'sales pitch' to Charles II. The King was able to experience a 17th-century version of Virtual Reality as he stepped underneath and, with his head inside the model, got an eye-level view of the interior. The King was clearly impressed, and Wren had the job of building the new Cathedral.

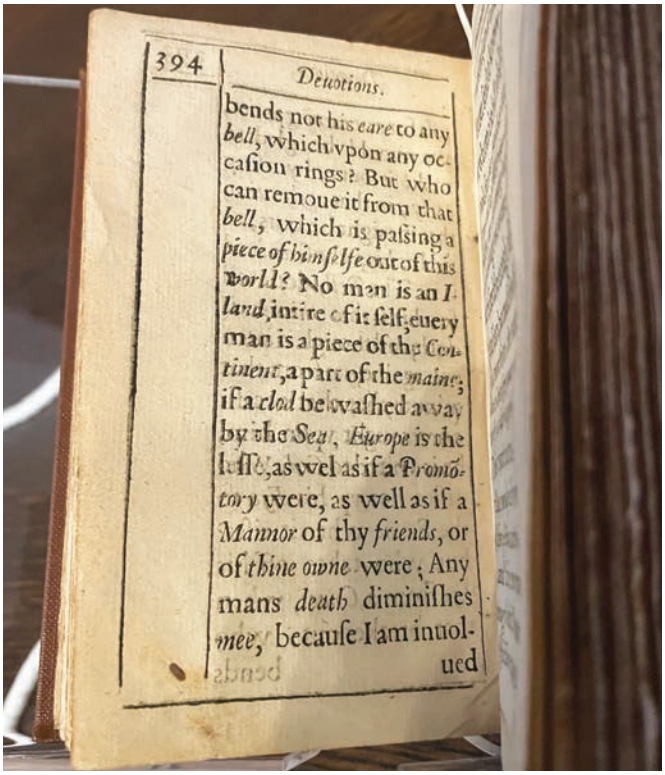
Next was the Library – a beautiful, galleried room with the most distinctive 'bookish' smell! We admired the shelves full of magnificent old texts, and a selection of books the Librarian Anna made for us. The one I enjoyed most was a formal 17th-century volume which someone had turned upside down and used as a commonplace book. There were a number of pages of neat, handwritten notes and observations dated 1696.

Those who were able to stay for Evensong were given reserved seats at the front under the dome – a real privilege. The service included the commissioning of three Directors in the Cathedral Executive Leadership Team.

If you would like the chance to see for yourself some of the backstage highlights of the Cathedral next time you are in London, do check out their website where you can book 'The Triforium tour'. There is also an excellent YouTube video which has recently been uploaded by BBC Global 'Inside the giant 350-year-old model of St Paul's Cathedral', introduced by Simon Carter, Head of Collections, whom we were lucky enough to have as one of our guides.

After a varied career in education and tourism, Jane Bezant spent the 10 years before her retirement as PA to an Archdeacon who was a joy to work with. Jane attended her first Barbara Pym Conference in 2020, and since then the AGM has already become an annual highlight for her.

St Mary le Strand, since 1982 the official church of the Women's Royal Naval Service at the east end of the Strand, near Somerset House. The dedication took place on 28 October 1984 when the WRNS Book of Remembrance was moved to the church from the Royal Naval College, Greenwich. Photo: Charles Gilbert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bends not his eare to any bell, which vpon any occasion rings? But who can remoue it from that bell, which is passing a piece of himselfe out of this world? No man is an Iland intire of it selfe; euery man is a piece of the Continent, a part of the maine; if a clod be washed away by the Sea, Europe is the lesse, as well as if a Promontory were, as well as if a Mannor of thy friends, or of thine owne were; Any mans death diminishes mee, because I am involued

First edition of John Donne's Devotions Upon Emergent Occasions, *1624, showing the page of Meditation XVII with the phrase 'No man is an Iland' ('no man is an island'). Photo: Charles Gilbert*

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Barbara Pym Literary Internship

Ruby Bailey-Proe. Photo courtesy of Ruby Bailey-Proe

The Barbara Pym Society supports an internship programme for St Hilda's undergraduates who are at the end of their second year of an English Literature course. The internship is aimed at students who are interested in a career in the publishing industry, and it provides the candidate with an introduction to the many aspects of publishing.

Read below the report by Ruby Bailey-Proe, the second recipient of the award.

2024 Barbara Pym Literary Internship | St Hilda's College Oxford

This September, I was delighted to be given the opportunity of a work placement at Felicity Bryant Associates for two weeks. I was the second person to participate in this programme which was set up by St Hilda's and the Barbara Pym Society.

I have always wanted to pursue a career in publishing but did not know the ins and outs of the industry, so this placement gave me insight into how the publishing world works. I was mainly assisting the agents' assistants in reading submissions. I was astounded by how many people submitted manuscripts to the agency and the breadth of subjects they covered.

For the first week, I focused mainly on fantasy submissions, writing reader reports detailing which submissions I thought should be sent to the agent. It was a different reading experience from what I am used to: I had to focus not only on what I thought was good but also on what the agent and publishers were looking for. I loved being able to read all day and delve into new worlds with exciting characters. I found it interesting to see what trends and tropes were cropping up in the market as well as learning more about how the submission and proposal process works.

I also sat in on meetings with publishers and scouts which gave me insight into how agents work within the publishing world. I did not realise how important networking and building relationships with different people were. It is also important to know who to pitch your project to and when is best to do so.

My favourite part of the placement was talking with the agents and other members of staff. Throughout the two weeks, I sat down with each person to talk through their role. Not only did this expand my reading palate and awareness of the markets, but I learnt so much about the different aspects of publishing a book. I became fascinated by contracts and royalties (unusual for an English student, I know!) and found myself constantly asking questions about different rights and clauses. This deepened my knowledge of how book deals are conducted behind the scenes and how contracts are refined.

Everybody at FBA was incredibly friendly and happy to take time out of their day to talk to me and answer my questions. The team dynamic felt like a family, and it was such a supportive working environment. These two weeks taught me so much about the publishing world and I feel confident in my knowledge of the inner workings of the industry which I can carry forward into my future career. I am so thankful to Felicity Bryant Associates and the Barbara Pym Society for this opportunity.

Ruby Bailey-Proe

A Few Green Leaves

2025 North American Conference

21–23 March 2025

Sheraton Commander Hotel

Harvard Square, Cambridge, MA

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30th Anniversary Booklet

by Devon Allison

As work began on the 30th Anniversary Conference, I thought it would be nice to create a souvenir booklet. We could showcase photographs of young Barbara from the Society's newly digitised archive and photographs of the young Barbara Pym Society from the St Hilda's College archive. Jean Harker agreed to edit and write a Society history, and Paul Nash had a little time available from his busy professional life as a book designer to design it. I prepared a timetable, and we met to agree a basic outline for 46 pages of Pymiana.

After months of fruitless searching for artefacts, photographs and people, fascinating material started to pour in. Beautifully preserved Women's Royal Naval Service uniform, including the unicorn (otherwise known as the dashing hat), suddenly appeared. Long-lost people got in touch.

Above all, the Bodleian archives kept revealing new facts and artefacts, and with the library's help many photographs were made.

The little booklet burgeoned to 96 pages, enclosed in vibrant covers designed by Effie Burns, and we now required and deserved a spine that sports a thread of golden letters: Barbara Pym Society Thirtieth Anniversary 2024.

To purchase a copy, please send an email to chair@barbara-pym.org.

Paul Nash. Photo: Alison Felstead

Jam Cake – As Served in World War II

by Lucia Costanzo

15g boiled potatoes
225g self-raising flour or plain flour with 2 teaspoons baking powder
1 teaspoon bicarbonate of soda
1 teaspoon mixed spices
50g lard or margarine
2 tablespoons jam
2 eggs
50g sultanas
milk if necessary

Preheat the oven to 180 degrees C (170 degrees for a fan oven). Grease and line a 20cm round tin. Sieve the potatoes and sift all the dry ingredients together. Rub the lard or margarine into the flour mixture. Add the potatoes, jam, well-beaten eggs and sultanas. Mix well together, adding a little milk to give a soft dropping consistency. Spoon into the cake tin and bake for about 50 minutes. Turn out on to a wire cooling tray and leave until cold.

Lucia Costanzo baked this cake for the 2024 AGM and offered it to the members of the BP Society. The recipe comes from Marguerite Patten's A Century of British Cooking. *Marguerite Patten (1915–2015) worked for the Ministry of Food in WWII. In the wartime weekday radio programme 'Kitchen Front' she told the country how to make the most of its rations and gave them the latest information from the Ministry of Food.*

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How I Discovered Barbara Pym

by Catrin Lorch

Photo courtesy of Catrin Lorch

It must have been the classic, *Excellent Women*, that started our acquaintance when I was a teenager. I had bought the book in Brighton some time in the 1990s, in an Oxfam shop near the bus station, exhausted after a rave on the beach. I did then read all Barbara Pym's novels over the years. A solemn task in Germany, where she is not popular among my generation.

It was this summer that I felt I needed more of Barbara Pym in my life. Since I had quit my job at a newspaper and opened a weaving school, things had come to a head. The activities in the weaving school had led to heated disputes among the students, and a tangle of conjecture, aesthetic misjudgements and miscalculated economics made it difficult for me to maintain the attitude of a detached observer. It was precisely this formula of 'detachment' that reminded me of the soothing coldness with which Barbara Pym does not simply reflect on similar constellations, but dissects them.

Almost by chance, I discovered the date of the Barbara Pym Society's Annual General Meeting in Oxford – which was to take place over the weekend on which the students at the weaving school had planned to exhibit their products at a street festival. But with the difficulties described above, I felt I should say goodbye to their plans and should instead experience how Barbara Pym, of all people, was commemorated in the context of festive lectures, a gala dinner, a Festschrift, a second-hand book stand and a raffle. All of this promised to rebalance my shaky self. And it succeeded. As a German, the fact that I now use the author's first name is a big deal for me. Thank you, Barbara!

Catrin Lorch is a weaver and writer. She lives in Königswinter above the river Rhein where Barbara 'had a drink called bohle [German: Bowle]' in a café on 2 April 1934 with Friedbert Glück, whom she met during her travels in Germany. Catrin Lorch joined the Barbara Pym Society for the 30th Anniversary celebrations.

The Questionnaire

by Julie Shrimpton

A questionnaire distributed at the AGM of the Barbara Pym Society 2024 has provided useful insights into what the members value about their Society.

Some 88 delegates attended the 2024 Conference at St Hilda's College; a further ten were speakers or other contributors.

Although only 25 people responded to the questionnaire, we thought the results would be of interest. More than a quarter of these were first-time attendees. One half had attended between two and ten times. Four had been to more than ten, and one person had been to every single conference. Respondents had backgrounds in teaching, law, media, writing, medicine, research, archives, social work, librarianship and management in both the private and public sectors.

Some respondents told us that they value both the learning and social side of the Barbara Pym Society community, saying that they had made long-standing friends. Five had joined the Society on the recommendation of friends and families while others came through sources such as the internet, newspapers and radio.

Most thought the Conference good value for money – both in terms of speakers, the accommodation and the food provided by St Hilda's. However, a few queried the cost of the food.

Topics suggested for future conferences and the London Spring Meeting ranged from Pym's childhood and emergence as a published novelist to close readings of the novels in the light of feminism. The role of the Church of England and Barbara Pym's Christian faith, her personal library, and her friendships with other writers such as Philip Larkin and Elizabeth Taylor were also mentioned.

Excellent Women topped the poll as the first Pym novel read with more than half the votes. *Jane and Prudence* is the favourite novel of the people who had filled in the questionnaire, followed by *No Fond Return of Love*. In all, eight different titles were named showing the broad appeal of Pym's novels.

The favourite character is Mildred Lathbury, with over one third of the votes, followed by Dulcie Mainwaring and Jane Cleveland, but plenty voted for minor characters, naming Sister Blatt, Keith, and Teddy Lemon. Jane Austen led the poll among members' other favourite writers, followed by many greats of the English canon. In total 76 writers were named.

So much food for thought!

More Conference Photos

Shown from top: Effie Burns and Devon Allison.
middle: Catherine De Vito, Terri Nickel, Margaret Thompson
above: Betty Zausner and Perri Klass.
All photos: Ed Nix

Shown from top: Deb Fisher. Photo: Ed Nix
middle: Lorraine Mepham. Photo: Ed Nix
above: Macsen Brown, Nicky Foy, Triona Adams.
Photo: Jutta Schiller

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Obituary: Jean Shell, née Naylor (1930–2024)

by Clemence Schultze

Jean Shell, a Founder Member of the Barbara Pym Society, died on 6 July 2024, aged 94. She and her late husband Stephen often attended Barbara Pym Society conferences; members will recall Stephen's various performances in Pym dramatisations, and his keenness in discussion. Jean will be remembered above all for her warmth of personality and the goodwill which flowed from her, and her enthusiastic engagement with all her many interests. Her family and the Church were naturally foremost among these; literature, drama, Guiding, cooking, needlecrafts, and pets (especially cats, and the guinea pigs which she bred) also played a large role. She had catholic tastes in art, ranging from Jan van Eyck to Andrew Wyeth, while in music (despite only 'goldfishing' in the school choir) she enjoyed folk songs, musical comedy, Gilbert and Sullivan, and of course hymns. She was a born reader, remembering acutely the utter tedium when as a seven-year-old she spent ten days in hospital without any books: 'I got through the time by counting. I reached many thousands by the end...Ever since, I have always carried a book with me, and an absolute horror of boredom.'

Born in 1930, Jean later reflected upon the distinctive experience of her age-cohort: 'We were old enough even at the Munich crisis to know what was going on, yet never obtained the catharsis of being "called up"...we were the worst off for food as we got no extras as the babies did, nor qualified for any of the "luxuries" given to serving men and women.' As an evacuee in Cornwall she wondered at the local children's unfamiliarity with the natural world: 'they ran screaming from a little lizard, [but] I knew that only the adder was dangerous. My father charitably explained that probably the parents made them afraid of everything, so as to make sure that they were not hurt; but to me it seemed criminal waste of opportunities, like living in an art gallery and only looking at the floor that surrounded them.'

Despite the danger of bombs (the family house was hit by two incendiaries), Jean returned home to Kent, and won a scholarship to Chislehurst and Sidcup Grammar School for Girls. History and English were her best subjects, and the teaching of literature was inspirational. Jean began to write poems and plays, took part in amateur dramatics, and hoped to become a playwright 'but I did not have the staying power'. Attending secretarial college in London meant wonderful opportunities for theatre-going: she saw Sybil Thorndike, Ralph Richardson and Laurence Olivier.

After a short spell in commerce, Jean (who had by this time become a committed High Anglican) found her niche in various church-related administrative jobs: the Council for Women's Church Work, the London Diocesan Education Council, and the Religious Drama Society. Her typical working day sounds remarkably Pymmian: 'Breakfast; bus to Holborn; work – opening post and telling the younger girls in the office what to do; lunch; return to workplace; similar duties in the afternoon; back to the settlement house ...' for Jean was by then living in St Hilda's East Settlement, Bethnal Green. It was there that she met Stephen Shell; they married in 1963.

Jean Shell. Photo courtesy of Alison Shell

The couple soon moved to a house in Hendon and had three children: Alison, Christopher and Bridget. Jean was a wonderful cook; like Barbara and Hilary, she was a keen jam-maker. She herself deemed her 'Eat and Come Again' stews her most successful dish, while others remember her Trinity Sunday cake, where chocolate, vanilla and strawberry express 'Three in One and One in Three'.

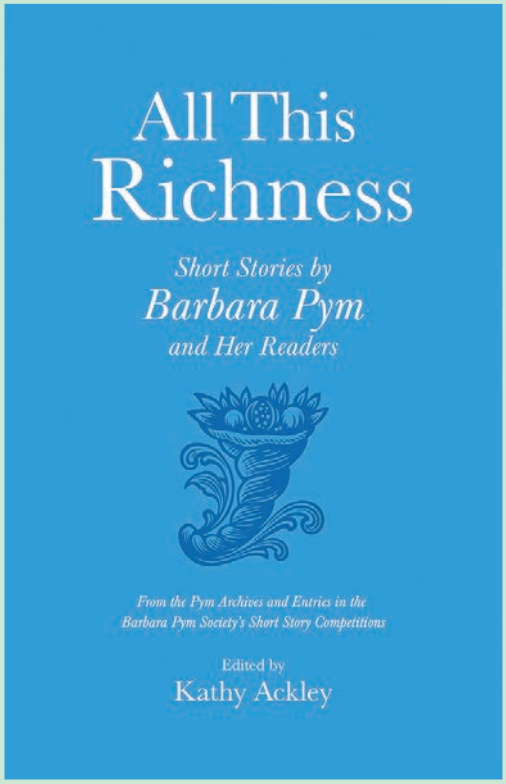
In this home Jean cared devotedly for Stephen in his decline, and, thankfully, was able to spend her years of widowhood there. Her funeral took place at St Mary's Hendon, where she had worshipped for almost sixty years. She was buried with a copy of Charlotte M Yonge's *The Heir of Redclyffe* – fittingly, for Yonge was among her favourite authors. And the Charlotte M Yonge Fellowship owes its inception to an early meeting of the Barbara Pym Society. Jean recalled how, after a discussion of Yonge–Pym links, which Janet Clarke had nervously raised, Jean said to Janet, 'We should have a society for CMY'. Janet was enthusiastic, saying, 'Yes! Go and do it!' So Jean dragged Janet in as a willing collaborator and they did it together – a notably happy outcome for the readers of both authors. The words applied to Yonge in Robert Moberly's funeral sermon may fittingly be used of Jean: 'a mother in Israel', indeed.

With thanks to Alison, Christopher and Bridget for the quotations from Jean's autobiographical reminiscences.

Clemence Schultze is a Roman historian and a devotee of the works of both Pym and Yonge. She was Chair of the BPS from 2007 to 2013, and of the Charlotte M Yonge Fellowship from 2011 to 2021. She is co-editor, with Julia Courtney and Clare Walker Gore, of a collection of scholarly essays, Charlotte Mary Yonge: Writing the Victorian Age*, Palgrave Macmillan Springer, November 2023.*

Nun doll - the most sought-after prize of the Pymbola.
Photo: Jutta Schiller

New Anthology Available at barbara-pym.org/all-this-richness



The Barbara Pym Society 2024–2025

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The Aims of the Barbara Pym Society
To foster the appreciation and wider knowledge of the life and works of Barbara Pym; to secure the preservation of the manuscripts, letters and memorabilia of Barbara Pym in conjunction with the Bodleian Library; to provide a programme of literary events and regular communications concerning the work of Barbara Pym; and to encourage and support publications and theses on Barbara Pym, her life and work.

Coming Events

Please visit https://barbara-pym.org for details

2025 North American Conference
21–23 March 2025
Sheraton Commander Hotel, Harvard Square
Cambridge, MA
A Few Green Leaves

2025 Spring Meeting
Date and theme to be announced later.

2025 AGM & Conference
29–31 August 2025
St Hilda's College, Oxford, UK
Theme to be announced later.

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