Obituaries

Margaret Elizabeth Dacombe
(1921-5)

Peggy Dacombe, who died on New Year’s Day 1997, in her 96th year, could be described as ‘indomitable’. A few days before the fall which led to her final illness, she was still coming to the little church where she had worshipped for most of her life, for the 8 am Celebration, and was to be seen speeding up the path with her wheelie-walker.

Peggy was a very special person, she represented a tradition which is sadly dying out. After her mother’s death she came home to keep house for her father. In her own words, “I became involved in the usual activities of an ‘unmarried’ in the country, running the Sunday School, helping with the WI and gardening etc. When war broke out, to these occupations were added looking after evacuees.” After the war and her father’s death, she and her sister Marianne (1914-7) turned their beautiful home at Winkle into a retreat house, and Peggy looked after the catering and their beautiful garden, as well as keeping up with her other activities.

In 1976 Marianne died very suddenly, and Peggy moved into a tiny cottage next door to her friend Muriel Mandeville (1921-4) and immediately set about transforming the garden. She continued with her many activities and interests, which included holding the post of Treasurer to the PCC for 35 years. She also kept in touch with her old school, originally Bournemouth High, now Talbot Heath, of which she became a Governor, as she was also of the local Almshouses.

Very well read, and with many different interests, Peggy never lost her grip, she could at times seem severe, but she followed the activities of her nephew and nieces with deep affection. She seemed to embody an attitude to society which appears to be vanishing as the elder generation dies out. An attitude which took it for granted that, coming from a certain background, and with small but adequate means, one would undertake all kinds of voluntary work unhesitatingly, taking particular care of those who have helped them in the past, and carrying many burdens which are not to her taste, in order to keep another lonely resident company on Sunday evenings; perhaps a little thing but a significant pointer.

Peggy was a faithful member of the Third Order of St Francis, and conscientiously attended their meetings. Perhaps ‘conscientious’ was the keynote of Peggy’s life, only that sounds a little dreary. Peggy was not dreary, serious, yes, but with resources that made her the interesting, cultivated and much missed person that she was.

Joan Hill (1946-9 and 1964-5)

Rosalind Hill
(1928-32)

Professor Rosalind Hill died on January 11, 1997, aged 88. Obituaries in The Times and other papers gave prominence to her work as a medieval scholar and to her long career as, successively, lecturer, Reader and Professor at Westfield College. Here Mary Moore contributes a personal memoir of a Scholar and teacher whose varied interests and wide sympathies made a lasting impression on all those fortunate enough to have been taught by her.

My own experience of Rosalind Hill as a teacher was brief - far too brief. In the autumn of 1947 I had just left school and was living at home in Loudon, preparing for the Oxford entrance exams. Dons both, my parents never ceased to impress on me the enormous amount of work that would be necessary if I was to have even a faint hope of getting in; and when they spoke of the general paper and the essay their anxiety was painful to witness. Fortunately, they said, Rosalind Hill - an outstanding medievalist and an old friend - had kindly agreed to give me a couple of tutorials...

I had met quite a few of their ‘outstanding medievalists’ and my heart sank. I needn’t have worried. In a large sunny room I encountered a neat, smiling young woman with what I have always thought of as ‘nut-brown’ colouring and particularly lively eyes. We chatted and argued and laughed about some of the
issues that were being discussed in the newspapers and we laughed
so much about one of them that Rosalind suggested I should write
down what we had been saying, so that we could go on talking
about it the next week. I honestly thought she hadn’t managed to
gain ardour to starting the ‘tutorial’ that morning, and was careful
not to give her away to my parents. I cottoned on, in the end, to
what she was doing, but my enjoyment was undiminished and for
what she was doing, but my enjoyment was undiminished and for
the rest of the autumn I went up to the hall to Westfield each week
with real eagerness. This sort of ‘teaching’ was a revelation to me,
and its first impact is still vivid: the instant liking and admiration
that I felt for her, the excitement of the new ideas that seemed to
materialise out of the air between us, the (judicious) conviction
that at some level she was in need of my help and protection.

Rosalind’s own introduction to tutorial teaching had come at St
Hilda’s, where she arrived as a scholar in 1928 from the Downs
Hilda’s, where she arrived as a scholar in 1928 from the Downs
School in Seaford. It was a good time to be reading history; the
School in Seaford. It was a good time to be reading history; the
generation that included Kathleen Major and Beryl Smalley were
still up, and St Hilda’s undergraduates were taught by tutors from
still up, and St Hilda’s undergraduates were taught by tutors from
many different colleges of the university. Rosalind herself was
many different colleges of the university. Rosalind herself was
a generation that included Kathleen Major and Beryl Smalley were
a generation that included Kathleen Major and Beryl Smalley were
not taught by two or more different tutors (including my father, V.H.
ot taught by two or more different tutors (including my father, V.H.
Galbraith, then a tutor at Balliol), but it was in St Hilda’s that she
Galbraith, then a tutor at Balliol), but it was in St Hilda’s that she
found the teaching that fired her historical imagination. ‘One of my
found the teaching that fired her historical imagination. ‘One of my
chief memories of College’ - Rosalind wrote in 1992 - ‘is of the
chief memories of College’ - Rosalind wrote in 1992 - ‘is of the
incomparable teaching of Agnes Sandys (the College’s tutor in
incomparable teaching of Agnes Sandys (the College’s tutor in
medieval history) - a scholar who actually published very little.
medieval history) - a scholar who actually published very little.
Her work, which has been a lasting influence in my life, seems to
Her work, which has been a lasting influence in my life, seems to
remind me to indicate the folly of the modern habit of assessing a teacher’s
remind me to indicate the folly of the modern habit of assessing a teacher’s
remembrance of the great fun of College life... and the singing of the
remembrance of the great fun of College life... and the singing of the
nightingales in Christ Church Meadow, heard across the river.’ In
nightingales in Christ Church Meadow, heard across the river.’ In
1990, Rosalind wrote to the Principal, ‘My heart is, and always has
1990, Rosalind wrote to the Principal, ‘My heart is, and always has
been, with St Hilda’s.’
been, with St Hilda’s.’

The transition to academic life followed naturally. After a First,
The transition to academic life followed naturally. After a First,
and a B.Litt, she was appointed a lecturer at University
and a B.Litt, she was appointed a lecturer at University
College, Leicester (as Leicester University then was), and five years
College, Leicester (as Leicester University then was), and five years
later moved to Westfield - where she remained until her retirement
later moved to Westfield - where she remained until her retirement
39 years later.
39 years later.

Westfield in 1937 was still a small college for women within
Westfield in 1937 was still a small college for women within
London University. Perhaps reminded of St Hilda’s, Rosalind found
London University. Perhaps reminded of St Hilda’s, Rosalind found
it thoroughly congenial and continued throughout her life to believe
it thoroughly congenial and continued throughout her life to believe
that comparatively small units of this kind provided the most
efficacious academic environment, both for students and faculty.
efficacious academic environment, both for students and faculty.
She resisted the later expansion of Westfield and (after her
She resisted the later expansion of Westfield and (after her
retirement) its fusion with Queen Mary College, but once the
retirement) its fusion with Queen Mary College, but once the
decisions had been taken was active in seeking to smooth out
decisions had been taken was active in seeking to smooth out
difficulties arising from the changes.
difficulties arising from the changes.

The middle ages may seem a natural choice of field for a high
The middle ages may seem a natural choice of field for a high
Anglican with a profound religious faith and sensibility, but the
Anglican with a profound religious faith and sensibility, but the
spiritual life of the medieval church does not seem to have been her
spiritual life of the medieval church does not seem to have been her
primary interest. Like many members of the Oxford history school
primary interest. Like many members of the Oxford history school
of that period, Rosalind was fascinated by the intricacies of
of that period, Rosalind was fascinated by the intricacies of
medieval administrative practice and found deep satisfaction in
medieval administrative practice and found deep satisfaction in
unravelling them: it was one of the few ways of making direct
unravelling them: it was one of the few ways of making direct
contact with the mind of an ordinary medieval individual facing
contact with the mind of an ordinary medieval individual facing
problems that are still recognisable - and that was important
problems that are still recognisable - and that was important
because, at the end of the day, individuals were always more
because, at the end of the day, individuals were always more
important than ‘trends’ or ‘forces’. She held stoutly to these views
important than ‘trends’ or ‘forces’. She held stoutly to these views
throughout her life, and signalled the fact by giving to her
throughout her life, and signalled the fact by giving to her
inaugural lecture as Professor at Westfield in 1971 the title
inaugural lecture as Professor at Westfield in 1971 the title
‘Unfashionable History’ - a tiny, characteristically gentle jibe at a
‘Unfashionable History’ - a tiny, characteristically gentle jibe at a
younger school of historians.
younger school of historians.

Her edition of the registers of Bishop Oliver Sutton of Lincoln
Her edition of the registers of Bishop Oliver Sutton of Lincoln
(1280 - 99), published in eight volumes between 1948 and 1986,
(1280 - 99), published in eight volumes between 1948 and 1986,
might, for another historian, have constituted a life work; Rosalind
might, for another historian, have constituted a life work; Rosalind
also produced an edition and brilliant translation of the Gesta
also produced an edition and brilliant translation of the Gesta
Francorum, an account of the first crusade, and lectured and wrote
Francorum, an account of the first crusade, and lectured and wrote
articles about the world of the Venerable Bede. She was also
tables about the world of the Venerable Bede. She was also
generous with her time in helping younger scholars and in
generous with her time in helping younger scholars and in
supporting research in her field through organisations such as the
supporting research in her field through organisations such as the
Ecclesiastical History Society and the Canterbury and York Society.
Ecclesiastical History Society and the Canterbury and York Society.

Rosalind believed passionately that teaching and research
Rosalind believed passionately that teaching and research
nourished one another and should not - could not - be separated. I
nourished one another and should not - could not - be separated. I
had of course no idea when I visited her at Westfield that her
had of course no idea when I visited her at Westfield that her
teaching was already famous and would become legendary. Sir
teaching was already famous and would become legendary. Sir
John Plumb has described the impact of her first lectures at
John Plumb has described the impact of her first lectures at
Leicester, where he was then a student: ‘...the argument clear,
Leicester, where he was then a student: ‘...the argument clear,
crystal clear... Medieval history sprang to life and I became, and
crystal clear... Medieval history sprang to life and I became, and
remained, an addict’. At Westfield her teaching was so much
remained, an addict’. At Westfield her teaching was so much
valued that when she retired a group of students petitioned the
called that when she retired a group of students petitioned the
college, asking that Rosalind should be allowed to go on teaching
college, asking that Rosalind should be allowed to go on teaching
which she did, and continued to give occasional classes until she
which she did, and continued to give occasional classes until she
was over eighty. ‘I don’t think the method of teaching matters in
was over eighty. ‘I don’t think the method of teaching matters in
the least’ Rosalind said in an interview in 1976, ‘the people who
the least’ Rosalind said in an interview in 1976, ‘the people who
have taught me most are obviously good in their own subject and
have taught me most are obviously good in their own subject and
find it absorbing, and I caught it from them like measles!’ Judging
find it absorbing, and I caught it from them like measles!’ Judging
from my own experience, Rosalind allowed ‘method’ to flow from the
from my own experience, Rosalind allowed ‘method’ to flow from the
subject-matter and the needs of the individual pupil - and the
subject-matter and the needs of the individual pupil - and the
genial infection that we all caught from her enthusiasm and her
This moral courage was matched by considerable physical toughness. Hill-walking was a life-long passion (perhaps inherited from her mother, who came from a Lakeland family), and until well into her eighties she drove every year, with her friends Christina Barrett and Gwen Chambers, to Austria, to enjoy the freedom and freshness of the mountains; at nearly seventy she went on a walking tour in Nepal (‘Some of the younger ones seemed to find it rather taxing’). Once, walking in winter on Scafell, she and Christina Barrett came across a party of climbers who had slipped on snow-covered rocks and had been swept down into a gully. Three were dead, the other two still alive but unconscious. While other climbers went for help Rosalind and Christina remained with the bodies and tried - for three hours, in a snow-storm and icy wind - to shield the unconscious from the bitter weather.

Bishop Sutton’s register and her edition of the Gesta Francorum will stand as Rosalind’s scholarly monuments, but it is in some of her shorter and less formal historical publications that we encounter the crisp wit - coupled with a determination always to think the best of people, if at all possible - that was so much a characteristic of her teaching and her personality. In a brief History of Stockbridge, published in 1976, after describing ‘the cheerful corruption’ of Stockbridge elections during the 17th and 18th centuries, she goes on ‘The Reform Act of 1832 disenfranchised a number of boroughs stigmatised as rotten, Stockbridge, not surprisingly, among them. It had indeed provided as remarkable an example of bribery as any place in the country, but the part played by its inhabitants was never simply a passive one. If they behaved as rascals (a fact which they would never have admitted) they were at least lively in their rascality.’

A subject even closer to Rosalind’s heart than Stockbridge was that of animals. Cats always played an important role in her domestic life and the contradictions inherent in man’s relationship to animals interested her greatly. In Both Small and Great Beasts, illustrated by the inimitable Fouasse and published in 1955 by the University Federation for Animal Welfare, Rosalind turned her scholar’s eye onto the attitude to animals of the medieval church.

Fouasse drawing from Both Small and Great Beasts reproduced by kind permission of UFAW
One of the most peculiar features of ecclesiastical jurisprudence in the later Middle Ages, she explains - that a man could make a serious legal compact with an animal, and cite it to appear before the ecclesiastical courts if he broke it - arose because the church had the power to ex-communicate murderers and robbers if their names were not known. By a perfectly reasonable extension of this idea, the ecclesiastical courts could be called upon to pronounce a similar sentence upon wild animals, birds and even insects, all of which could cause serious damage to persons and property while remaining strictly anonymous...They were allowed legal representation, but if their advocates could not put up a convincing case for their clients, the creatures could be excommunicated or banished from the district...It was necessary, however, to keep a proper sense of proportion between the rights of man and beast, and not to act with arbitrary tyranny...For example, in proceeding against a swarm of locusts, the plaintiffs could claim only that the insects had damaged particular crops... They could not insist upon the destruction of all locusts as such.'

Re-reading these sections of this brief, delightful pamphlet, I hear again the exact tone of Rosalind's voice, gravely setting out the pros and cons of some important and interesting argument - and always insisting on complete fairness to all parties.

(I am deeply grateful to Professor Christopher N.L. Brooke, C.B.E., a colleague and friend of Rosalind at Westfield for many years, who has allowed me to draw freely on his moving tribute to her, delivered at her memorial service in April 1997.)

Mary Moore

**Ethel Irene Gilpin**

(1929-32)

Irene Gilpin came up to St Hilda's as a Scholar in 1929 to read History. Her family lived in Smethwick and she had been a pupil at King Edward's High School for Girls. On leaving St Hilda's, she took a Dip. Ed. in Birmingham before going to her first teaching post at St Margaret's School in Harrow. After a couple of years, she moved back to Smethwick to the Holly Lodge High School and combined teaching with war work, for which she received a Civil Defence Certificate.

In 1946 she became history teacher at Godolphin School in Salisbury and remained there for twenty-four years. At her retirement in 1970 she had been Deputy Head for ten years. Under Irene Gilpin's thoughtful and kindly influence, Godolphin sent many historians up to St Hilda's to be taught by Mrs Menna Prestwich.

Her interest in education was very deep and was not diminished by her retirement to Ludlow. She became a Governor of Ludlow School and was a member of Governors for ten or more years in the 1970s and 1980s. She was very much involved in the well-being of the School, and established a prize for short-story writing and took a good close interest in entries and entrants right up to the time of her death.

She died on 3 January 1997, and her funeral service was held in St Laurence's Church, Ludlow, at which she had worshipped regularly for twenty-six years.

(This obituary is based on the funeral address given by the Rev. Brian Curney.)

M. E. R.

**Mrs Borgars**

(Shelia Keeble Curtis, 1932-5)

Sheila was born on 7 March 1914, and grew up in north London; she attended Queen Elizabeth's Grammar School in Barnet at which she won a State Scholarship and came up to St Hilda's in 1932 to read French. As well as studying hard she took an active part in college life, playing for the college hockey team in winter and elected Captain of Boats in her third summer. In the 30s rowing was considered unladylike and St Hilda's restricted itself to the more (usually!) decorous and social activity of punting but the college fleet notably included a racing punt requiring considerable effort and great skill.

At Oxford she met 'Mick' (Douglas) Borgars, who played hockey for Merton, and they jointly revived the annual Merton-St Hilda's match which had lapsed. When they married in 1939 she settled on Tees-side where they remained, apart from two brief job-related intervals, for the rest of their lives. In the 1940s Sheila played hockey for Norton-on-Tees Ladies while Mick captained the club, and county, men's team.

Even while bringing up her three children she took a lively interest in the local community, driving a WRVS Meals-on-Wheels van and serving as Hon. Secretary of the Tees-side Association of University Women for seven years and as a local Councillor. Despite, or perhaps because of, its isolation from the centres of academic life, Tees-side was one of the largest and liveliest branches of the British Federation of University Women (recently renamed the British Federation of Women Graduates). In all she