

Barbara Pearce 1925-2007

Barbara Pearce (nee Parker) was born in Birmingham into a privileged family whose wealth came from the wholesale butchery business owned by her father. The depression of the 1930s brought financial ruin, and the family were forced to move into the deeply contrasting life of Great Lister Street in the heart of Birmingham's slums. She was fortunate to gain a place at King Edward's Grammar School where she stayed until the outbreak of the second world war, and at the age of 15 she opted to drive butchers' vans around the blitzed Coventry. In 1950 she married John and produced the most loving of families: Rosemary, Alison, Simon and Peter, for whom she was both model and mentor, and all who survive her.

It may be that Barbara's early experiences of working-class life in Birmingham gave her the lifelong commitment to the work and social life of working peoples which was to guide her subsequent career. She developed a deep passion for vernacular furniture, treen and pottery, which she both collected and sold from the premises in her garden at Ombersley in Worcestershire. Barbara did everything with energy and enthusiasm, combined with great compassion and an enduring Christian faith.

During the 1960s, while her children were growing up, she became a freelance journalist with the Birmingham Post and Mail. Her weekly articles were intended to enthuse and interest the average reader, rather than the academic, in the design and social background of antiques, at a time when collecting was enjoying a surge of interest. She appeared on Midlands Television programmes with

Arthur Negus, and enjoyed the contact with people that this brought. She continued to develop her communication skills in running courses on antiques and giving lectures in America, which she did with humour and a genuine interest in people.

It was from such a background that she became, quite naturally, one of the founder members of the study group which was the precursor of the Regional Furniture Society. She attended the first meeting held in an attic above the High Wycombe Museum, with half a dozen like-minded people, to discuss the formation of a supportive study group. Later, when this group became a society open to all, Barbara became the first membership secretary and treasurer, in what became a wholehearted attempt to bring recognition to furniture made by and for working people.

At a time when the RFS is a well-established part of the furniture history landscape, it is easy to forget what a radical move forming the society was, in an environment of established furniture studies which largely reflected the tastes of the wealthy. Barbara brought to the new venture that deep sense of the worth and skills of the often anonymous craftsmen and women who fashioned objects in answer to people's material needs. She recognised, as all those who joined the cause did, that these traditions were based on a regional basis, and that finding provenanced items from the different regions was of utmost importance.

Barbara's early contributions to newsletters provided insights into such diverse furniture as the boarded Orkney chairs (1989), a maker-stamped Welsh settle (1988) and an unusual oak cupboard chair (1991). She also organised



RFS council members at the 1988 AGM at Claverton Manor, Bath.

Left to right: Luke Millar, Bill Cotton, Susan Bourne, Gerry Cotton, Barbara Pearce, Christopher Claxton-Stevens, Andy Gunn, John Boram, Victor Chinnery, Cliff Streeter, James Ayres, Treve Rosoman, David Bennett.

events for the society, and her Worcestershire weekend in May 1988 was a highlight, showing that the society could provide group events to visit farmhouses and cottages to see buildings and furniture in context. From such early sociable beginnings our current annual conference weekend evolved.

Twelve years ago she and John retired to east Devon. She closed her antiques business and took up landscape painting with her usual zest, walking on Dartmoor, sketchbook and camera in hand. At the same time she maintained her interest in vernacular architecture and furniture, scouring the weekly newspapers for details of farm sales, and attending those which captured her curiosity (see below). Her increasingly active life as a member of her local Catholic church was further evidence of Barbara's sense of fellowship and her love of humanity.

Barbara's character and beliefs, for me, are summarised in an event which I learnt about by accident. On visiting the Miami Antiques Fair to give a lecture, Barbara found a rare harvest jug made by the west country potters, the Fishleys of Fremington. Feeling that the jug was not 'at home', she bought it, and on her return to England she quietly and without fuss donated it to the Taunton Museum where it forms part of their collection of west country pottery.

Barbara's death is a great loss. She leaves her legacy as an early pioneer of regional furniture studies, and as a valued friend, to many people in different walks of life. Our condolences go to John, her children and grandchildren, and all her extended family at this time.

Dr. B. D. Cotton

Notes on a pre-sale viewing of Hoppins Farm, Devon Husseys (agent), 23 June 2005

A remarkably untouched example of an old Devon farmstead, owned by Mr K. Drake, comprising a traditional thatched farmhouse with an attached large barn, original furnishings still in situ, surrounded by traditional cob, timber and brick barns as well as stables facing each other across a narrow single track lane.

The evening before the sale, I was able to view part of the farmhouse interior, the rooms full of dark dusty furniture and a host of bygones from another age. Of note in one of the smallish rooms to the front of the house was an antique elm bow-backed bacon settle, of a useful smaller size than most, with deep wings at each side ending in typical west country boldly curved sides. Also of interest was a pair of small benches with thick solid elm seats (still retaining some traditional red paint) above chamfered ash legs - all in good condition, unlike the settle which, although sound, was dirty, dull, packed with woodworm and in need of complete cleaning and restoration. Another front room had a built-in wooden bench running the length of the front wall and one short wall.

Of further note was the old dairy. Behind its door, bearing a row of vertical narrow openings to admit air, it was full of all the customary equipment and tools for the dairy products, butter, cheese and so on.

This was an absolute time-warp, providing an opportunity for a fascinating hour to look round the old house and buildings on a gloriously warm sunny June evening. But sad, of course, because it was the end of many generations of farmers working this most beautifully situated old farm.

*Barbara Pearce
(courtesy of John
Boram)*



Interior view of Hoppins Farm, Devon