

Margaret Holt: Reminiscences from Mrs Joan Dutton

I first met Margaret when she was introduced to me by a friend, Jean Shelley. I was married to the farmer at Bowders Farm, Balcombe, which is a timber-framed smoke blackened, crown post house with a slightly later timber-framed crossing. I became increasingly interested in the house but knew nothing about timber framing. A friend, Jean Shelley, with whom I trained to be a nurse at Guy's Hospital, lived at Charlwood, Surrey and she had recorded the many timber framed houses there, so she came to Bowdens with great enthusiasm, but was puzzled by its structural sequence. She advised that Margaret would be able to help and so a visit was duly arranged.

Margaret was president of the Wealden Buildings Study Group at that time and invited us to the AGM to be held at her home at Cuckfield Park as an introduction. So Jean and I went together and sat in a corner to be away from potential questions from the obviously extremely learned members. We were invited to attend field meetings, where Margaret and many others, including Roy Armstrong and Reg Mason were only too happy to teach us.

Mr Mason's book 'Framed Buildings of the Weald' became my 'bible' and bed time reading and I was lucky that he was holding evening classes in Haywards Heath. Margaret was always happy to give me a lift to meetings but as her car was literally held together with string to close the door, I preferred to give her a lift in our car. Margaret was a very patient teacher and I learned so much about all aspects of the Weald. Margaret had a wide circle of friends, experts in their own field and I was extremely lucky to hear about the Open Air Museum at Singleton, the Wealden Iron Group, Milling, churches and churchyards, Houses in Normandy and Brittany (through Kay Coutin) and much else besides.

She was a very skilled cook, thinking nothing of producing a large saucepan of delicious beef stew for a celebratory lunch for our study group.

I had become secretary by then and learned how to feed the 5 000 from her. Margaret was always happy teaching and I have mentioned her knowledge of churches and churchyards which extended to visits by Balcombe WI (of which I was president). She organised these visits all over Sussex each year.

Margaret happily taught the WI about the great variety of churches and their glorious architecture. Margaret helped me to record all the older timber framed buildings in Balcombe parish and later the barns and farm buildings. We managed, often with great difficulty, to access roofs to measure and photograph hidden timbers, often crawling on all fours around chimney stacks and emerging covered in soot and cobwebs. Margaret would occasionally scribble some notes but she preferred that I did the written recording as she carried the knowledge in her head. Excepting for one printed walk that I know of, that was a tribute to Reg Mason by members of the study group.

Margaret never missed an opportunity to learn and I remember a study visit to Tewksbury, where we stayed at a hotel by the River Severn. Repairs were being done on the exterior with scaffolding giving access through our bedroom window, so what greater challenge than that! I was horrified to see her disappearing through the window. However, within half an hour we had our breakfast and were over the road in the beautiful abbey, where she taught me to appreciate encaustic tiles.

On another occasion, when Margaret was staying with my husband and I at his brother-in-law's house in Norfolk, she saw a house in a village which puzzled her. So, she knocked on the door and asked if she could go up to the attic. The slightly surprised house owners agreed and the next thing I knew, we were waving to my husband and brother-in-law from the roof. By that time they had a glass of beer from the nearby pub and were somewhat embarrassed by us attracting attention in the village.

Kay has written about our expeditions to Normandy, but, I think, did not mention Margaret's delight in French cheese one of which, particularly pungent, was bought at a French cheese shop.

Our car smelled of cheese for months!

My next memorable Margaret related embarrassment was when she gained permission to see spectacular wall paintings in a large house in East Sussex. In the absence of the owner, the housekeeper showed us the room which was cluttered with large furniture obscuring parts of the paintings. Nothing daunted, Margaret waited until we heard the housekeeper going downstairs and instructed me with her to move a huge wardrobe to reveal the picture. The chief problem was putting it back in exactly the original position. But Margaret wasn't bothered and soon the furniture was back where it belonged.

Another very special afternoon was at Withyham. Margaret had been invited to have tea by Lady de la Warr (I think her official name was) at her nearby house on the terrace and in return could we please clean the quite beautiful Sackville Monument in the church. I expect you have been there to see it, but of course these days the churches are locked and you have to chase up the keys, but it is well worth seeing as it is so perfect. We took buckets of water and cloths and set to and it was a great pleasure and privilege to be in touch with such a marble sculpture. There are other monuments on the wall nearby which we reached with a long handled broom but not so exciting as 'hands-on' with the sculpture. We did have tea on the terrace and Margaret saw what she wanted to from outside the house (although I am sure she was itching to have an invitation inside!!).

These are just some of my many happy memories of your past president. She was a remarkable lady and I missed her sorely.

Joan Dutton January 2021

Chap 7. 'Brick & Tile in the Weald' and Chap 10, a joint contribution with Kay Coutin, a joint contribution 'Barns in the High Weald' (& a modest contribution by myself of a photo of Naylands Farm & barn. Also an acknowledgement of my discovery of Ryelands Farmhouse, with an isometric drawing by John Warren who edited the book.