

Remarkable Highgate Women

A joint project between the HLSI and photographer Ruth Corney

This exhibition has developed from a project begun in the HLSI Archives to document the many Highgate women, aged 80 or more, who have made their mark on their community or further afield. They all deserve our notice, have done remarkable things and have lived life to the full. Working women, refugees, social activists, scientists, mothers, teachers, actors or writers – we want to know about them and to celebrate them.

Hilary Laurie, HLSI

I have long been fascinated by the faces of older women and have loved photographing them. Over the last 2 years, I have photographed 18 wonderful women. It has been a joy to meet them, to talk to them and to find out about their lives. I have found their positivity, resilience, vivacity, wisdom and generosity of spirit inspiring.

Ruth Corney

Eva Alberman



Eva was born in Berlin in August 1929. When her father, a doctor, lost his job in 1933 the family left for London. Their house in Golders Green quickly became home to other family members. Eva was evacuated with a cousin to Bath to live with her father's sister and her husband, the writer Stefan Zweig.

In 1943 she was brought back home – ‘just in time for the rockets, but this didn’t worry me.’ At St Paul’s Girls’ School she took up the cello and ‘had lots of music and good friends’. She studied medicine at Newnham College, Cambridge and continued her training at the London Hospital, qualifying in 1955 with a first-class degree. ‘I knew early on that clinical work was not for me’. She was interested in why people were ill.

She married Ken Alberman in 1952. They chose to have a big family – a reaction, Eva feels, to her being an only child. When her parents were killed in a car crash in 1954, she inherited the executorship of Stefan Zweig’s estate. She retained his library and donated manuscripts from his collection to the British Library.

In 1960 she was awarded a doctorate in public health followed by an MD in 1965. She worked at Guy’s Hospital, researching and teaching, and at the London School of Hygiene. She retired – reluctantly – in 1991 when Professor of Clinical Epidemiology at the Royal London.

Now she has more time for music. The Strings Club, founded in 1902, meets weekly in her house in Highgate and young musicians fill what were once her children’s bedrooms.

Mary Baylis



Mary was born in 1925 in a nursing home in Broadlands Road. Her parents separated when she was 6 and, with her mother and sister, she went to live with her grandparents in Haddon Court, a large house at the top of Southwood Avenue. Her grandfather, a doctor, ran his practice from the house, where he also had an x-ray room and dispensary. Mary marvels that 'we haven't all died of cancer' for the children were not isolated from the x-rays and they handled the small phial of radium which he kept on his desk.

Mary left school aged 16, 'half-educated'. She was 'hell-bent on joining the WRNS' and spent the war in air/sea rescue. During the run up to the invasion and the preparation of the Mulberry harbour she was based in Fareham, working in Fort Southwick and living in the tunnels below. Later, at the National Institute for Medical Research, she worked for Frank Hawking (father of Stephen), and with physiologists testing equipment and clothing in a wind-tunnel in preparation for the Everest expedition in 1953.

She married Michael Baylis in 1951. Once her three daughters were older, for 10 years she ran the tea bar in the Outpatients Clinic at St. Mary's Hospital, Paddington. In spite of the war, no money, and all the hardships endured, Mary feels she has been very fortunate to have spent her whole life in Highgate, and to have had such a happy life with a large, supportive family.

Ruth Benton



Ruth likes to remember that she was born in Nairobi in 1936 ‘in the reign of Edward VIII’. At the end of the 1914 -18 war, her father had gone to Kenya in search of work. Jobs were hard to find and at first he resorted to panning for gold. In time he became a District Commissioner. Her parents met in Nairobi: her mother was working for the Church Missionary Society. In 1949 the family returned to England and Ruth spent her 6th form year at Headington School, Oxford.

She wanted to be a physiotherapist but first did a nursing course at the Nuffield orthopaedic hospital in Oxford. Working in the baby ward, she realised how much she loved children. She greatly enjoyed her two student years at St Thomas’ Hospital in London, although at first she had difficulty negotiating English social codes. Challenged by the ticket collector on the train from Oxford where she was seated (wrongly) in first class, she protested that of course she had bought the correct ticket. ‘In Kenya one would not ever have travelled anywhere but in first class.’

She married Peter in 1959. Their first child was born a year later. In 1965, now with four children, they moved to Highgate, to a town house in Jackson’s Lane with a large shared garden. It was, Ruth felt ‘a miracle’. The unexpected arrival of a 5th child necessitated the move to a larger house on Highgate Hill.

Ruth saw her main job as ‘coping with the family’. But ‘I had no feeling I should guide my children. I gave them unconditional love.’

Averil Burgess



Averil was born into a Welsh-speaking family in Allerton, Liverpool in 1938. She proudly claims to have 'not a drop of English blood'. When she learned Welsh in her 50s, she found it helpful to have heard it spoken as a child.

Her family lived in Woburn when her father, a surveyor, was an estate manager for the Duke of Bedford. The Duke 'was a lovely man', and taught her to ride a bike. Aged 18, she went to Queen Mary, London to do a degree in history. Before graduating she became engaged to Cliff Burgess and they married when she was 21. They would divorce amicably in 1973: they had married too young.

'I have taught in every type of school - Secondary Modern, comprehensive and grammar'. Once, between teaching jobs, she drove a van for the government document shifting service. In 1974 she went to South Hampstead High School where she became headmistress, aged 36.

'I'm very political on education. Education made me a Conservative'. When the assisted places scheme was abolished by the Labour government, many parents struggled to keep their daughters at the school. Averil's first task was to raise money for bursaries. She was headmistress for 18 years – it was 'very very interesting' but hard work. She was also President of The Girls' School Association and sat on various education committees.

She retired at the age of 54 and continued to serve on public bodies including Camden and Islington Family Health Services Authority. For 20 years she had a house in north Wales, and she has lived in Highgate for over 40 years in an 1820s cottage on North Hill.

Anne Burley



Anne was born on the North Island of New Zealand in 1936. Having trained as a librarian, she left for Australia where she worked for the City of Sydney Public Library, delivering books in a little van. In September 1959 she set sail for England. She knew no one but soon she was sharing a flat in Hampstead and had found work as an editorial assistant at publishers Hodder & Stoughton. In March 1961 she married Anthony Burley whom she describes as 'an unreconstructed man'. They had two sons, Roland and Leo. 'Bowlby reigned', the children were not to be left unattended, but Anne continued working for Hodder and two days a week she volunteered with Amnesty International.

From 1971 she worked full time with Amnesty and, from 1981 until her retirement in 2002, was Director of their European Regional Programme, which included the Soviet Union and central Asian states. Over the years her job changed many times: she prepared case sheets for 'draft deserters' during the Vietnam War; she worked on the Soviet Union, on Greece under the Junta, on Cyprus, Iran and Turkey. Researchers were not allowed to work on their own country, but Anne still had a New Zealand passport so was able to investigate the treatment of detainees in Northern Ireland. Hers was the first report on the subject and led to changes. She lived for six months with a Serbian family in Vukuvvar, working in conjunction with the UN and responsible to Mary Robinson.

Anne moved to Highgate in 1980. In 1990, 'to get away from Thatcherism', she bought a small house in the south of France near Montelimar. For many years she has swum, winter and summer, in the Kenwood Ladies Pond. She has long been a pescatarian. She is a very active member of the HLSI, a member of Transition Highgate and a founder member of the Highgate Climate Action Group.

Ann Chaumeton



Ann was born in August 1935 in Worcester Park, Surrey and grew up in Epsom Downs. She went to Sutton High School and would have loved to have gone to art school, but knew her parents would have disapproved. ‘In those days you did what was expected of you.’ She was offered the choice of becoming a teacher, a nurse or a secretary. She chose nursing and began training at St Thomas’ Hospital. When she saw physiotherapists at work on the wards, she decided to change direction. She qualified as a physiotherapist in 1958 and went to work at Fulham, now Charing Cross Hospital.

After she married in 1960 she worked at the Whittington Hospital, her ‘first introduction to Highgate’. In 1965, now with two children, she and John moved to the Holly Lodge estate. She worked part-time at Hill Homes and continued to do so for many years, with a pause after the birth of her third child.

A lover of music, particularly opera, she attended the first music appreciation class at the HLSI, and in the painting classes discovered a love of watercolour painting. She sells cards of her watercolours to raise money for a breast cancer charity. For her family, she has created tapestries illustrating their houses and interests. She is a keen gardener. She is writing a life of her mother (who was born in 1901 and lived to the age of 104) based on her diaries, photographs, papers and poems. ‘I have enjoyed reliving her life’.

Rita Delavigne



Rita was born in July 1924 in Guy's Hospital. Her father and mother had met during the war in Folkestone where he was stationed with the Royal Air Corps. Rita describes her mother as 'the business one' and her father as 'the quiet one'. He spent all his working life with the Crown Cork Company.

Rita left school in 1940, aged 16, and became a secretary at Radio Rentals. When she became 18, she was obliged to choose between joining one of the armed services and doing war work. She chose war work and, for long hours, six days a week, she worked in the office of a factory in White City which made exterior panels for Halifax bombers. 'It's where I grew up.' When the war ended she applied for a position at Foyle's bookshop. For 8 years she was secretary to William and Christina Foyle, earning £8 per week.

She met painter Ron Delavigne in a café in Soho. Shortly after they were married they moved to the family home in Causton Road. In the late 1950s, when her son started school, she worked part-time at Hinton's drapers in the High Street. Miss Hinton would dress the window in a manner Rita describes as 'a jumble'. Her window displays were so much admired that everything sold and the window emptied.

Aged 50, 'I learned to drive, climbed Snowdon and changed to social work.' She worked for Camden Council, dealing with problem families. She particularly remembers 2 of her ladies who had a frequent visitor, writer Doris Lessing, who was researching for a book. 'Doris was very easy to get on with.' She, Ron and Rita became good friends.

Carol Donoughue



Carol was born in north London in December 1935. Her family spent the war years in Wales where her father worked for the Ministry of Food. She went from Hendon County Grammar School to St Hugh's College, Oxford to read for a degree in Italian and Russian. She decided to train as a primary school teacher. In the summer of 1958 she moved to the USA to join Bernard Donoughue, now a research Fellow at Harvard.

Carol and Bernard married in London in 1960. She worked at the BBC on TV programmes for primary schools but stopped full-time work to have a family. After the first of her 4 children was born in 1965, the family moved to Brookfield Park, Highgate. Carol signed on to the Dip. Ed. in Administration course at the Institute of Education. Bernard was working with Harold Wilson at Number 10. He was a very sociable man and held frequent dinners which they were expected to attend. 'It was an exhausting routine.'

Carol went on to work at the NUT, with PNEU and at the Open University where she lectured on reading development. At Middlesex Polytechnic, she wrote a report on the use of specialist teachers of reading. At this time 'no one was taught how to teach reading; it was not much discussed'. In 1989 she moved to Highgate. She was now working 'very full time' at HMI (Her Majesty's Inspectorate), inspecting primary schools in London and throughout the country and running summer schools and in-service courses. She also became a trustee of the Indian charity Vidya which funds projects directed at the poor living mainly in Mumbai.

She retired fully in 2000 and spends much of her time writing, drawing and painting.

Gretel Hinrichsen



Gretel was born in October 1919 in Polzin, a small Pomeranian town now in Poland where her family had a large farm. Her father was devout and theirs was a kosher household.

Aged 16 she was sent to England, to a boarding school in Hampstead run by a German couple. She had for some time been aware of the rise of anti-Semitism in her own community. Her best friend had stopped talking to her, and when she skated alongside other children, they drew swastikas in the ice with their skates.

She never returned to Germany. In November 1938, on Kristallnacht, her father was murdered by the Nazis and her family took refuge in Israel. She had to leave school. She worked as a hospital cook at the Royal Free, in a fire station, as a dresser for actors - she went from a position of wealth to possessing nothing.

Happily, she met Klaus Hinrichsen who would be interned for a year on the Isle of Man. They married in May 1942 and had two children. In 1958 they bought, off plan, a town house in Hillside Gardens. Klaus moved his office to the Archway Road, to a building which included a small shop. They opened The Little Shop, stocking traditional and educational toys, many hand made. Gretel ran the shop for 20 years. It was a much-loved focal point for the community, selling tickets for Jacksons Lane Community Centre and UNICEF charity cards, organisations dear to Gretel's and Klaus's hearts.

Agi Katz



Agi (Agnes) was born in Budapest in November 1937. Hungary was occupied by the Germans in 1944. Her father, a surgeon, went into hiding and worked secretly in a medical unit treating communist Jews. The family fled to Transylvania the day before all the occupants of their block of flats were shot and their bodies thrown into the Danube.

Agi decided to study medicine – ‘a safe thing to do’, but she studied for only 6 weeks. On 23 October 1956 she took part in the huge demonstration at the university which brought Russian tanks from the frontier into Budapest. She decided to leave. Her father very reluctantly arranged for her to be smuggled across the frontier into Austria. ‘It broke his heart.’ The British Embassy in Vienna arranged for her to be flown to England where, she remembers, ‘the welcome was terrific’. A World University Service award (and the help of Dame Evelyn Sharp, Under Secretary at the Ministry of Housing) enabled her to study international relations at the LSE. Here she met Peter Katz: they married in 1962. Very happily settled on the Holly Lodge estate, they had three children in quick succession.

After an art course at Camden Arts Centre, Agi enrolled at Hammersmith School of Art. For 6 years she was the director of the Ben Uri Gallery, specialising in artists of Jewish origin. It was ‘a very exciting time.’ She ran her own gallery, the Boundary Gallery, for 25 years. One of her great pleasures is swimming with one of her daughters, summer and winter, at Kenwood Ladies Pond.

Myrna Lazarus



Myrna was born in February 1935 in London. Her family lived in Stamford Hill, but during the war they were evacuated to Letchworth. Her parents were Orthodox Jews and very religious. ‘I was very practising until into my teens, but then started asking awkward questions.’ Hers was ‘a slow rebellion’ which has brought her to membership of the liberal synagogue in Finchley.

She attended North London Collegiate School where she ‘didn’t get a very good education’. But it was assumed that the girls would go to university. With no strong idea of what she wanted, she chose to study sociology and economics at the LSE. After graduation she did research for a year before moving to Israel. She planned to leave after 6 months but ended up staying for 4 years, doing statistical and economic research for the government and the Bank of Israel.

Myrna married in the early 60s. Her husband did not allow her to work. She had a son and a daughter. Both have predeceased her. ‘The most significant thing about me is that somehow I have managed to survive my children’s passing and forge a life for myself.’ Friendship has ‘kept me going. I have a gift for friendship. I care about people and people care about me.’

In the later years of her marriage Myrna trained as a social worker. Subsequently she trained in family and individual therapy and in divorce mediation. ‘I met wonderful people, I loved my clients; it was a fascinating job.’ She retired 10 years ago.

In 1987 she moved into a town house in Jacksons Lane which she loves and greatly enjoys its large shared garden.

Doreen Mantle



Doreen was born in Johannesburg in June 1926 to English parents. She took part in plays at school, and she joined the dramatic society at the University of Witwatersrand where she studied social studies. She worked during the vacations in legal aid, sometimes in Soweto, often taking children from their families and placing them in care. She left after a year: 'I was too young.' After graduating she became a case worker for the equivalent of the NSPCC.

When Doreen married in 1954, she and her husband decided to leave South Africa – not wishing to bring up children there – and settle in the UK. She worked at Colchester Rep, but was at home for 11 years after her 2 children were born. In 1972 her agent found her work at the King's Head Theatre in 'a wonderful play', *Going Home* by William Trevor. The young Alan Rickman was stage manager. It ended with a scene in a railway carriage. A door is slammed, whereupon a piece of luggage fell on Doreen's head. She spoke her last lines through tears. Theatre critic Harold Hobson wrote: 'All London should see this play but all London won't get in.' In 1979 she was awarded the Lawrence Olivier Award for her performance in *Death of a Salesman* at the National Theatre. She is probably best known for her role as Mrs Warboys in the 1990s sitcom *One Foot in the Grave*.

Doreen has lived in Highgate for 23 years. She is still working, making short films and performing on TV. She loves the theatre. 'I am at my happiest there. Actors are jolly people to be with, they are good company.'

Catherine Mulgan



Catherine was born in Bristol in May 1931. Her family moved to Oxford where her father, a historian, took up a teaching post at Oriel College. In 1949 she went to Newnham College, Cambridge to read history. She loved her time there – ‘There were 10 men to every 1 girl!’ She met Anthony, a PhD student, and they married shortly after she graduated. She was 21 years old.

‘By sheer chance’ they moved to Highgate in 1955. They were keen to have children but this proved problematic. ‘I spent most of my 20s in bed.’ In 1958 they adopted a baby girl. A year later she gave birth to a daughter and, not long afterwards, her son was born. At home with her children, she wrote *Boyhoods of Great Composers*, published in 2 volumes and illustrated by Edward Ardizzone.

Feeling she was ‘getting very boring’, she studied for a Postgraduate Certificate in Education and for 10 years taught history, part-time, at Henrietta Barnett School. In 1978 she moved to South Hampstead School and became head of the history department. She remained there until she retired in 1992.

She and Anthony were then able to spend more time at their house in the Dordogne. She also taught at the University of the Third Age, served as Chair of Governors at Hornsey School for Girls and sat on the board of the 300 Group which worked to get more women into parliament.

‘Music takes up most of my time now.’ She is a member of the Highgate Choral Society, plays the viola in the Strings Club and greatly enjoys playing on her clavinova.

Beate Planskoy



'I have had quite an adventurous life. It was not my choice of adventure, but life made it like that'.

Beate was born in Berlin in October 1927. On Kristallnacht, 9 November 1938, her father was warned not to go home; he stayed away for some time until the Gestapo lost interest in him. He succeeded in getting visas for England for his children. Felix, 13, Beata, 11, and Eva, 9, left Berlin for Hamburg where they found themselves with children on the Kindertransport. They were to spend some months in a school near Haslemere for Jewish refugee children.

Reunited, the family lived for some time in a refugee house off the Finchley Road. Beate and Eva were given free places at South Hampstead High School. Beate left school in 1944. A photography course led to a job in a lab researching improvements in colour printing. She attended evening classes in physics at Birkbeck and was awarded a BSc in 1948. A research assistant with Professor Joseph Rotblat at St Bartholomew's Hospital, she worked on the use of a linear accelerator for radiation treatments. She submitted her work for an MSc and returned to Birkbeck as a Junior Lecturer, teaching in the evening and doing research for a PhD during the day.

She then applied for a job at the Middlesex Hospital to work on radiation. She became head of medical radiation physics, both in charge of a department and lecturing students. Much of her work involved the behaviour of electrons; in her department she was known as the 'Electron Queen'.

Isabel Raphael



Isabel was born in Oxford in 1938. During the war she spent 4 happy years in the USA with her mother and sister. In Oxford, her family lived 'cocooned, in a kind of shell'. Consequently, she feels she is happiest and does her best work in small places.

She felt 'utterly at home' at Cheltenham Ladies' College and she loved her time at New Hall, Cambridge, also very small and 'blessedly unregulated'. Before graduating she applied for the post of classics teacher at Channing School. At Channing 'I learned my trade'.

In London she met Adam Raphael. They married in a Thai registry office and, in 1964, began living together in Saigon where she taught English and her first son was born. In 1967 they moved to New York where she taught Latin - 'I went back into something I knew'. They spent time in Paris before returning to London and settling in Hammersmith. Thereafter, 'things just fell apart.'

Very involved with a national campaign for more nursery schools, and teaching at Putney High School, 'I got my mojo back'. She became head of the classics department at the City of London School for Girls, but 'I didn't love it as I thought I would'. When she returned to Channing as headmistress in September 1984, 'I felt I had come home.' She retired in 1998 after 14 years.

Isabel has always involved herself fully in Highgate life. In 2002 she was elected the first woman President of the HLSI and she lectures and teaches there still.

Gabriel Ryder



Gabriel was born in April 1929. After her parents divorced, she and her sister moved with their mother to Sennen in Cornwall. She was sent to board at the School of St Clare, Penzance, one of a number established by Nathaniel Woodard in the early 19th century along Christian lines. She had to be christened before starting at St Clare's. She looks back at this with some amusement - 'Unusually, I can remember my own christening'.

She left school with the ambition to be a theatre director: for 3 years she studied at the Central School of Speech and Drama (then on one floor of the Albert Hall). After graduation she worked as stage manager at the Arts Theatre and on a number of shows in the commercial theatre. Later she joined a production company and worked on radio shows including the original 'Candid Camera'.

She married in 1957 and went on to have three children. In 1961 she moved to a house on Highgate West Hill, her home for 45 years. In 1974 she married Chris Ryder. His work took them to Japan, and they spent nearly 5 years in Tokyo, very busy and 'wonderful, very exciting' years. Gabriel became chair of the England-Japan Friendship Group.

Once again in Highgate, they both involved themselves in village life. 'Join things, do things, you will make friends.' They were both active members of the Highgate Society, and Gabriel started the Highgate branch of NADFAS (now known as The Arts Society).

Mary Shurman



Mary was born in Chicago in 1937. Her mother's Quaker family had come to New England from East Anglia; her father's staunchly Protestant family had emigrated from County Antrim.

She studied for an English degree at the University of Michigan and did a teaching qualification. She hugely enjoyed taking part in an English Speaking Union summer school in Oxford in 1958. 'Yes,' she thought, 'I'll have more of this.' Intent on getting a work permit for the UK, she worked in the relatively new field of market research and was offered a job in a London ad agency. She was introduced to Laurence Shurman who invited her to supper. 'Poor and hungry', she gladly accepted.

In spite of the strong disapproval of both sets of parents, Mary and Laurence married in St Pancras Town Hall in November 1962. They had 2 sons; when their daughter was born in 1970, they moved to Southwood Avenue, to a house that was 'literally a wreck', requiring a lot of work.

Finding that her teaching qualification was not recognised, Mary enrolled in a sociology course at the North London Polytechnic. She taught in a very tough secondary school in Barnet, then moved to South Hampstead High School, 'the other end of the spectrum'. She also taught part-time at Channing for several years.

A very active member of the HLSI, she chaired the Highgate Gallery committee. Holidays were spent walking or at the family's cottage in Wenhampton, Suffolk, close to the village from which Mary's mother's family had emigrated to the New World.

Jeanne Sutherland



Jeanne was born in December 1927 in Hay-on-Wye where her father was a pharmacist. Aged 17, she went to University College London to study for a degree in French, Spanish and Russian. Her first job was at the British Embassy in Paris. In 1952 she was posted to the Moscow embassy where she met Iain Sutherland. They married in London in 1955.

Jeanne was obliged to give up work and from now on she followed wherever Iain's career took him - Yugoslavia, Cuba, Washington, Indonesia and Athens. They did three tours in Moscow. The highlight of the first was the death of Stalin in March 1953. The embassy staff went to pay their respects but were ushered so quickly past the coffin in Moscow's Hall of Columns that one of them missed Stalin altogether.

Jeanne had three children. In Moscow for a second time, she did voluntary teaching in the English department of Moscow University. In 1999 she published 'Schooling in the New Russia: Innovation and Change, 1984-95', in which she traced the changes in education in the last years of the Soviet Union and afterwards in the Russian Federation.

Jeanne and Iain returned to their house in Highgate when they retired in 1985. They also had a house on the Greek island of Evia (Euboea). Jeanne's book 'Karystian Cipollino Marble: Its export from Euboea and Distribution' tells the story of how thousands of tons of the marble were transported across the Roman Empire. She also published 'From Moscow to Cuba and Beyond: A Diplomatic Memoir of the Cold War' using letters she and Iain had written home, stitched together with a thread of political and personal commentary.

Copies of the photographs and longer interviews with these
Remarkable Women are held in the HLSI Archives.



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