



A TALE OF TWO SISTERS



Torilla

Two sisters who lived in Great Nast Hyde House in Hatfield prior to WW2 had memorable lives.

They were the daughters of a wealthy Anglo-Irish family, the Burtons. Their father Percy was a businessman, while their mother Christabel Rose Harmsworth had three famous brothers who were ennobled because of success in publishing – Lords Harsworth, Northcliffe and Rothermere. The family moved from Totteridge to Hatfield after Great Nast Hyde was auctioned in 1923.

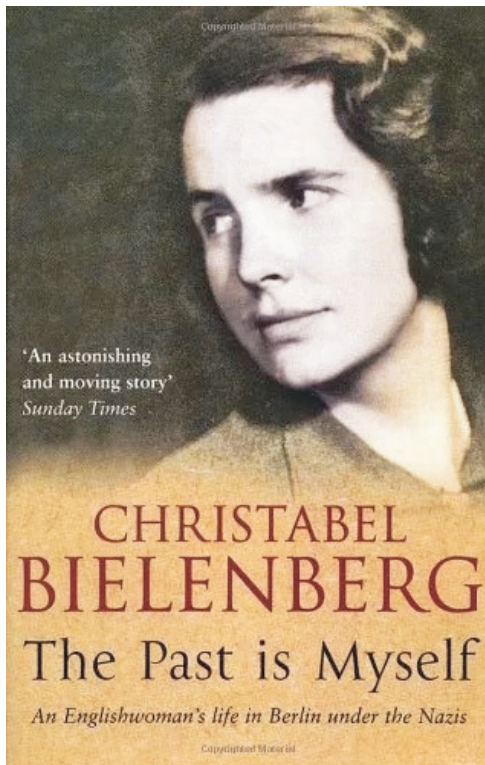
Their oldest daughter, born in 1909, was christened Cristabel Mary. After school she won a scholarship to Somerville College, Oxford, but being a debutante and going to finishing school got in the way. She settled on training as an opera singer in Hamburg with Elisabeth Schumann and Lotte Lehmann. There she met a tall, aristocratic-looking young lawyer who was being groomed to take over his father's successful law practice. Christabel was tall and elegant too, and she and Peter made an extraordinarily dashing couple on the dance floor.

Despite misgivings by both families the young couple were determined to marry – and did so when Peter was carrying out part of his legal training in London. The wedding was on 29 September 1934 at the German Embassy in London. She had to relinquish her British passport to do so and was told by the German embassy official that she had not made a good exchange.

They returned to Germany just as Hitler was taking power, and had three sons. Peter was deeply opposed to fascism. They tried to shelter Jews, but towards the end of the war

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Peter ended up as a political prisoner in Ravensbrück. Undaunted, Christabel pulled strings to get him sent to an army punishment camp. Because of an administrative slip-up he was able to escape by taking a train to the Black Forest.

After the Second World War Christabel worked for a while as a correspondent for *The Observer* in Germany. She and Peter were active in supporting the orphaned children of parents who were executed for opposing Hitler.

A few years later the Bielenbergs came to rest in Ireland; they settled at Tullow, in Co Carlow, in 1948 with their children. Peter taught himself to be a farmer and they prospered – gradually being surrounded by an ever-increasing extended family of grandchildren, and playing an important role in the local community.

In 1968 Christabel wrote the story of her life in Hitler's Germany: *The Past is Myself*. The book caught the public

imagination, eventually selling half a million copies worldwide. She became even more famous when it was dramatised for television by Dennis Potter with Elizabeth Hurley in the title role *Christabel*.

In her book she records that she was interrogated by the Gestapo but survived the ordeal by memories of her family home in Hatfield: "...indefinable horrors seemed too close to be dealt with. Think of something else. Come now, it is easy, the garden at Nast Hyde and the path through the orchard... it is spring, and the orchard is carpeted with daffodils, let's watch them nod and bend in the wind...".

Peter died, aged 89, in 2001 and Christabel aged 94, in 2003.

Christabel's younger sister was Barbara, born in 1912. She came out as a debutante in 1930 and in 1933 married in Queensland to a Scot, Charles MacDonald, whose occupation was given as grazier. They travelled back to England to live with Barbara's parents. In 1934 Charles obtained a pilot's licence after training on a DH Major Moth at the nearby London Aeroplane Club. That same year Barbara's mother commissioned an architect, FRS Yorke, whom she had met on a skiing holiday, to build a house for her daughter next door to the family home.

Yorke was one of the primary promoters of modernist architecture in Britain in the 1930s. Starting in 1934, he wrote



a series of books on *The Modern House*, mixing examples of the finest examples from Europe and America, with some from Britain, which was late to the party. By 1937, this had improved enough to be able to publish *The Modern House in England*, featuring an array of modernist dwellings, divided into four categories: brick and stone, timber frame and concrete. One of the houses in the concrete section was the one for the MacDonalds at Hatfield, which had been christened Torilla, after a farming region of Queensland (possibly where Barbara and Charles had met).

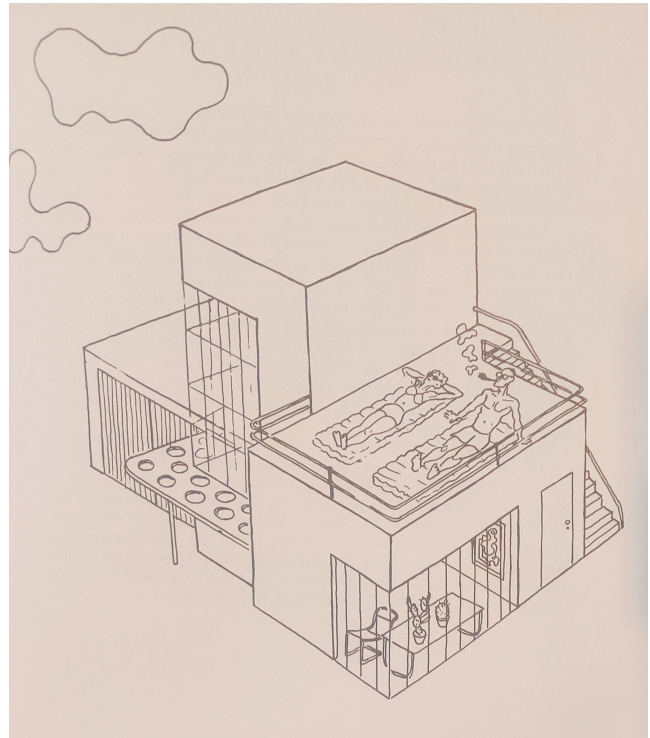
The house was well received, and even got a page in *Country Life*, being one of the first built here in monolithic concrete. Yorke was asked to add an extension to Torilla a year later.

There were dissenting views though, particularly of cartoonist Osbert Lancaster who was also an architectural critic with a classical bent. He described modernist houses as Twentieth Century Functional, majoring on “a ruthless abandonment of all ornamentation”. Lancaster felt that they “presupposed a barrenness of spirit to which ... we have not yet quite attained”. His accompanying sketch was clearly based on Torilla, showing a couple sunbathing on a flat roof “which the English climate and environment render impossible of achievement”.

Barbara had a son in 1937. At the outbreak of war in 1939 she moved away, Great Nast Hyde was requisitioned by the RAF, and her mother moved into Torilla. She too decanted, to Codicote, after Hatfield Airfield began to be bombed, and the house began to decay.

As with many early concrete houses in Britain, the construction of Torilla was faulty and water ingress caused structural damage. Because of its historical importance it was listed in 1983 but then delisted a year later when an application to demolish it was made. It was allowed to deteriorate further until in the mid 1990s, when a developer bought the house and again proposed to demolish it. It was instantly relisted by English Heritage and a campaign to save it was launched. Barbara wrote to a national newspaper saying “We lived in Torilla for five years before the war, and it was lovely.... I’m only terribly sorry that this lovely house has been reduced to a pathetic looking wreck.” Happily, the campaign was successful, and a new owner restored Torilla back to its original glory.

English Heritage gave a grant towards this restoration, on condition that the house should be opened to the public at least one day every year. Some years ago, I took advantage of one of these open days to visit Torilla. It was quite an experience. The house, all white both inside and out, glistened, and the airy interior was entirely free



Osbert Lancaster's cartoon

of clutter. The owner is a distinguished modern artist who specialises in paintings which are completely grey, which he produces in a garden studio adjacent to the main house, and which decorate his walls.

To be honest, I found this overwhelming minimalism a bit depressing, because it contrasted so markedly with my home which is full of clutter and, well, Stuff. However, my mood was lifted immensely when a door to a side room, not on the tour, accidentally fell open to reveal that it was completely filled with – Stuff. Clearly the owner had tidied up in advance of our visit. Phew!

Barbara died in Devon in 2003 aged 90; her husband predeceased her in 1993 aged 86.

We should celebrate these two sisters who have left the world a better place.

Geoffrey Hollis

“THE GHOST OF THE GREAT NORTHERN ENGINE DRIVER”

This story was retold in The Folklore of Hertfordshire by Doris Jones-Baker.

‘Three years ago, sir,’ said the retired railwayman toward the end of the last century, ‘I was driving the 8:30 train to the North, and left King’s Cross four minutes behind time. I can’t tell you what it was, but I never felt nervousness but once on an engine, and that was the night I’m talking about.

‘Now, sir, I don’t know nothing about ghosts or spirit, or apparitions – call ’em what you like – but I’m ready to swear before any judge today that I saw something of the kind that night, and no amount of argument will change my belief. I was just passing through Hatfield when, I would take my oath for all I am worth that a man stepped from the platform to the footplate, just as easily as though we weren’t travelling about fifty-five miles an hour. Ay, I can see his face and dress to this day. It was the saddest face I ever come across. The eyes seemed to look you through and through; and when on top of that I saw that he was all in black. I never was so afraid in my life.

‘The curious thing is that Dick, my fireman, saw nothing of it. He coaled up for the



hill by Welwyn just as natural as though all was fair sailing, and when I tried to shout to him, I felt a great lump in my throat, and not a word could I speak. I soon noticed that the strange-comer never went to any other part of the footplate except to the spot whereon I stood, and he even hedged up so close to me that I went cold all over, and my feet were like blocks of ice. I think I must

have acted mechanically, for I watched the man put his hand on the regulator, and I put mine on with him. The touch of it was like the touch of snow, but I couldn't loose it, and before I knew what I'd done, the steam was cut off and the train was slowing.

'Dick, I know, thought I was mad. He'd been away on the tender, breaking up the coal, but he came down and craned his neck when the steam was off, and he saw, as I saw, that the distant signal was off, and after that the home signal stood clear. You won't believe, perhaps, but it's Gospel truth, that though I knew the way was right, I was compelled to stop that express, and stop her I did outside Hitchin Station.

'For nothing you say, well, Heaven alone knows how but it proved to be for a great deal. There were two trucks across the main line, and although the signals were off, the way was blocked, so that me and the passengers behind me, wouldn't be living to tell the story if I hadn't been compelled to pull up as I did'.

* * *

Notes: The Folklore of Hertfordshire by Doris Jones-Baker, Batsford B. T. Batsford Ltd. 1977, p. 89/90. Retold from the Hertfordshire Express (a Hitchin paper) 14 March 1974, p.3, reprinted from the Hertfordshire Express of 17 March 1894.

SOCIETY NEWS

Diary Dates

The following meetings have been booked with Hatfield Social Club (76 Great North Rd, Hatfield AL9 5ER) for the rest of 2024:

- Monday, 9 Sept. 2024 (7-9 p.m.): "The Architecture of Hatfield New Town: Success or Failure?" – a talk by Geoffrey Hollis
- Monday, 9 Dec. 2024 (3-5 p.m.): Christmas social meeting

Admission: £2 for members, £3 for non-members

Annual General Meeting (AGM) held Monday 10 June 2024

Committee members re-elected for another year

The present committee was elected for another year, viz: Chris Martindale (Secretary), Terry Cull (Treasurer & Membership Secretary), Jane Teather (Publications Officer), Phil Marris (Webmaster & Publications Editor), Alastair Cameron, Margaret Stephens, Paul Cooper and Terry Pankhurst.

Chairmanship

Following Phil Marris's regretful resignation as Chairman due to his other time-consuming roles, the Chairmanship is being handled on a rotational basis.

Committee changes ahead

After many years of stellar service, Chris Martindale will be resigning at the 2025 AGM. Also, after much appreciated service, Terry Cull will also be resigning as Treasurer and Membership Secretary. Terry would like to hand over the Treasurer role earlier if possible.

After many years, Derek Martindale has decided to stand down as Accounts Examiner (i.e. checking the Treasurer's annual accounts). Happily, we have a new Accounts Examiner in Adam Edwards who will take over Derek's role in 2024/25.

Hatfield Local History Society Newsletter

**** Note to members: ****

**** *Unless we can find replacements for the roles of Chairman, Secretary, Treasurer and Membership Secretary (see above), it is likely that Hatfield Local History Society will be unable to continue after the next AGM (June 2025).* ****

Membership and Entrance Fees

Due to increased costs, our assets have reduced by £451.74 in the last financial year, representing around 12% of our funds. The AGM agreed by a majority vote to increase the annual membership fee from £6 to £8 and our meeting-entrance fees from £1 to £2 (members) and £2 to £3 (non-members).

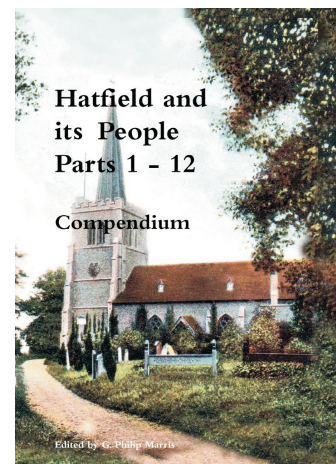
Local History Month at Hatfield Library

The library holds the occasional monthly local-history event, the most recent being in May this year. The committee set up a display (see right) for the whole month. Committee members were in attendance on Saturday 11 May to answer questions from visitors.



New Publication – *Hatfield and its People Compendium*

The original *Hatfield and its People* booklets were individually published well over sixty years ago. The committee published a facsimile edition of the booklets in 2014. But at four or five pounds per booklet, it was always quite expensive to purchase the complete set. We have therefore concatenated the booklets into a single A5 volume that runs to a whopping 588 pages, which can be purchased for a modest £17.50.



To buy a copy, visit our website at

<https://www.hatfieldhistory.uk/publications/hatfield-and-its-people-2/>

Phil Marris

Hatfield Local History Society NEWSLETTER

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