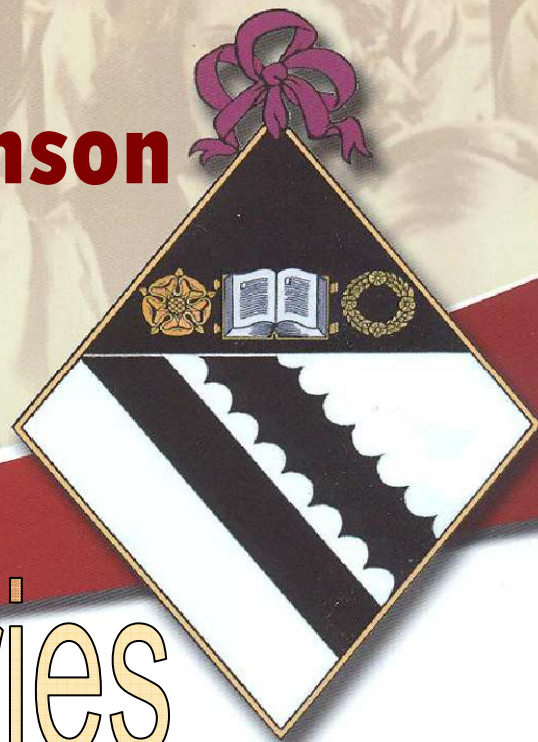


# Margaret Dora Higginson

## 1918—2009



# Shared Memories



**And Crispin Crispian shall ne'er go by  
From this day to the ending of the world,  
But we in it shall be remembered;  
We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;**



A memoir of the woman we knew as Margaret Dora Higginson, aka Hig, the Hig, Higgy, MDH and eventually, simply Margaret to those of us who were blessed with her lifelong friendship. We hope to publish the “Margaret Memoir” in quarterly


instalments beginning in October 2010 through to June 2011.

These pages have been put together by a small team of Old Girls, mostly drawn from her personal papers, some unpublished. There are letters, poems, public speeches, essays and journalism to dip into, all flavoured with her characteristic humour and generosity. And also reminiscences and tributes from those who appreciated her as a person, as much as a teacher who made us the women we are today.

Elaine Lever (nee Kelsey)

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# **Baroness Shirley Williams - A tribute from a former pupil and friend**

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I went to eight schools and had many wonderful teachers, but two stand out: Miss Jenkinson and Margaret Higginson.

Both taught English at St Paul's Girls School in London, which I went to in 1943. Miss Jenkinson was an expert on all things Chaucer: early English literature was her empire. She was a quiet, mild, sympathetic and sweet teacher.

The influence she had on me was one of scholarship; her love of literature. I was used to authority in its more raw forms: my parents were on the Gestapo blacklist during the war. The books my mother (author and campaigner Vera Brittain) wrote were burnt at Nuremberg (by the Nazis). If Britain was invaded, they were two of about 200 people who were to be put to death immediately. My brother and I were evacuated to America for three years when I was nine and he was 12.

So I was less used to Miss Jenkinson's quiet sort of authority, but my respect for her grew as I matured.

My second English teacher, Margaret Higginson, loved poetry. She knew so much by heart: from 17th-century poets such as John Donne and John Dryden to Samuel Johnson and William Wordsworth.

I can still recount reams of poetry by heart. In tranquil moments, it comes flooding back into my head.

Ms Higginson may have been quiet and shy, but she had a rod of steel at her core.

She would not put up with any silliness in the classroom. She did not show any overt sympathy, but she was understanding if we were dealing with heartbreak or tragedy.

Like almost all the women at that school, Ms Higginson was single. In the 1940s there were simply not enough men to go round. If you were not married at 30, it was unlikely you would ever marry or have children. As a result, almost a whole generation of female teachers were incredibly dedicated: their emotional lives were played out in the classroom.

Margaret followed my career with great interest. Every couple of months, she would send me a postcard with a poetry quotation on it. It was always totally apt.

When I set up the Social Democratic Party, she sent a postcard with a quote from Dryden on it, about starting a new world. The postcards came to mark the highs and lows of my life.

Ms Higginson became high mistress of Bolton Girls' School, where she was greatly loved. All those Bolton girls from that era - (former Labour chief whip) Ann Taylor and (former Conservative vice-chairman) Baroness Morris - are very much "her girls". Ms Higginson kept in touch with all the girls who were intellectually interesting: she lit a fire in us.

Last year, I got some sense that she was dying. I went up to visit her and read her a couple of poems. She died the next day.

She left a fantastic legacy. I had always been deeply fond of poetry - my mother was a writer and my father was a professor - but Miss Higginson poured fertiliser over a planted field.

*"The purpose of education is not to fill a container but kindle a fire" Shirley Williams,*

*quoted by MDH*

I'm not sure pupils get those sorts of deep routes into poetry any more. I was incredibly lucky to come into contact with such a treasure trove of knowledge.

- Baroness Williams, education secretary in the 1970s, broke with the Labour party to become a co-founder of the Social Democratic Party in 1981. She was talking to Hannah Frankel.

First published in TES Magazine on 10 September, 2010 | **By: Hannah Frankel**

# Early Life and Education

Margaret was born in Harrow on October 25<sup>th</sup> 1918 and often referred to herself as a 'war baby'. Although she had no memory of the First World War it did in many ways have an influence on her life and outlook. She felt that the women who influenced her education and set her on the academic path were in some sense victims of the 'Great War' since countless young men had been lost to it who might have become husbands and fathers.



Miss Higginson 's parents

In 1921 the Higginson family moved to Sutton, Surrey reinforcing the family's slant towards the south, which Margaret was later to replace by a fierce love for and defence of the north of England. Margaret's father had come from Preston, Lancashire and had worked his way up as a civil servant in Customs and Excise. He was able to provide his family (Margaret had an older sister, Ruth) with the comforts of a solidly middle-class respectable life, whilst her mother saw to it that her daughters were brought up to be young ladies. Margaret said in later life that she regretted not having been allowed to play on the street with other children. She and her sister were restricted to house and garden and their main pleasure was to be taken for a daily walk towards the Downs. This in fact led to an encounter which was later to bring about a lifelong friendship and this friendship had a profound effect on Margaret's life. En route to the Downs Margaret and her family passed a lovely house where two little girls were swinging on the gate. This proved to be the home of Ceridwen Cotes, who later became Margaret's bosom friend at Sutton High School.



Margaret got to know Ceridwen's family well and found the atmosphere in the home most congenial. She was very fond of Mrs Cotes, who at the age of 21 had left her home in Heptonstall and gone south to marry. She was a graduate of Manchester University, possessed of a lively, enquiring mind, and rather different from other Sutton matrons. She brought up her four daughters on what would be regarded nowadays as an excellent diet – no luxury food, an apple a day and sweets absolutely forbidden. Margaret's mother probably kept to a similar regime – to the end of her life Margaret had very good teeth and lost only two in her late 80s, which were extracted at home by a dentist friend!

One of Ceridwen's childhood memories was of toasting strips of bread in the oven and chewing on them – a great treat! One of Margaret's memories of the Cotes household was of constantly open windows, whatever the weather. Was this where the insistence on opening windows to let in the fresh air at Bolton School had its roots?



Sutton High School

Margaret regarded her friendship with Ceridwen as “ the best good fortune” which lasted throughout their lives. She knew that childhood influences have an enormous effect and set the course of one's life and felt that the “immediate natural friendship” with Ceridwen had been decisive. In later life she said she couldn't really remember a time before Ceridwen.

The two young girls had intellectually much in common. Both came from families where books were important and Margaret's love of



literature was thus laid down from a very early age. The two girls used to walk home from school, discussing the happenings of the school day and of course what they had been reading. Those of us who might remember Margaret's constant admonitions to walk rather than take the bus (and certainly not the car!) might reflect that those early homeward walks also set the habits of a lifetime!

Margaret and Ceridwen were at the school for thirteen years, with no exams or tests taken on entry and none when they moved up into the main school. Margaret herself said this would be 'inconceivable' these days.

She was always grateful for the excellent education she received at Sutton High School, one of the Girls' Public Day Schools Trust schools which were founded in the 1870s and which were pioneers in girls' education, running on the same principles as the boys' public schools, and instilling in their pupils a sense of public responsibility.

The period in which Margaret was at Sutton, which was of course not long after World War I, was marked by the absence of countless young men - the 'lost generation'. This meant, of course, that many women who might have married remained single. Margaret was keenly aware of the debt owed to these women, many of whom might have chosen marriage and motherhood, but who instead embraced teaching as a career and made a very good job indeed of it. They were referred to at the time as 'surplus women' but this less than kind description gives no hint of their service to society. According to Margaret they created 'the highest possible standards' and inspired their pupils with lofty ideals and a sense of what they owed in public service. At Sutton High School the dominant figure was that of Emily Lees, who

Head in Margaret's time. Miss Lees was six feet tall and was dressed in green (always?!- but then in my memory, Miss Varley, Margaret's predecessor at Bolton School was always dressed in a blue suit!) Miss Lees had an intimidating presence, the highest principles and strong Christian values. She knelt on the school platform for School Prayers. (In the days of the rush-bottomed chairs at Bolton School we too knelt for Prayers.) Miss Lees also was a woman of unparalleled dignity. She was able to demonstrate from the school platform exactly where a lady should not keep her handkerchief, without raising the glimmer of a smile. She was 'straight as a ramrod and to see her pick up toffee papers was awe-inspiring, not that many were dropped, as nobody really dared.' Margaret was enormously impressed by Miss Lees, perhaps a little more so than Ceridwen, but then according to Margaret she herself had 'a larger bump of deference'!

There were of course, no boys at the school and none in the immediate families, but Margaret and Ceridwen concentrated hard on their school work and enjoyed taking different sides in discussions about historical and other personages, for example, Ceridwen was always on the side of Cromwell and Margaret supported the Royalist camp. They vied with each other too in the reading of the classics, and Dickens and Scott were the order of the day, obtained from their respective parents' libraries. They also made use of the 'circulating libraries' where for three pennies (not pence!) a book could be borrowed which had to be taken back within three days in order to have the sum returned. Margaret managed to read Vera Brittain's 'Testament of Youth' – quite a hefty piece of writing – within the prescribed time.

Margaret was always convinced of the vital importance of reading and the planting of 'great ideas' in young peoples minds, and she was certain that if this were left too late it might

She always regretted not having been a very sporty girl and having always been the last to be picked, when teams were required. She spoke of hanging round the notice board hoping against hope that her name would be on a team list, but it never was.



Examination success - Schools

However her qualities which lay in other directions were duly acknowledged and rewarded when she was made Captain of School. She finally crowned her school successes with the much desired offer of a place at Somerville College, Oxford. In fact, Somerville missed a trick there; she entered as a “Commoner” in 1937, i.e. in the archaic Oxbridge dialect at that time, she was neither a Scholar nor an Exhibitioner. The tables were turned in 1940 when she was awarded a First, something her typical modesty never made much reference to.

But Margaret at Oxford is another story- to be continued in January 2011.

Elsie Peel (nee Addison)

*“ We all went. It was impossible to say no to Margaret. ”*



# Reminiscences of Sutton High School 1923-37

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*The following account draws on the lively descriptive essay Margaret wrote in 1964, thirty years later, "Reminiscences of Sutton High School," which bears reading in full, given how much time and thought she was to give throughout her life, to the subject of girls' education. She knew it was a lost world both more ladylike and more heroic than ours of 1954. But to those with fond memories of that blend of dignity and kindness received from Miss Drury, Miss Jepps or indeed Miss Varley, its echoes still faintly resounded through the Girls' Division in the late '40s, when we were exhorted not to sit with our legs crossed, and hair had to be plaited or bobbed. And oh, those scratchy serge gym-slips! No garment more unkind to the contours of the growing girl has ever been devised.*

Elaine Lever

I was at Sutton High School from 1923-37, in fact I never knew any other school. Contemplating the educational neuroses of today I feel a sense of guilt at my own smooth and sunlit progress from kind, comfortable Fernwood to the Big School, unthreatened by the Eleven Plus. Life in those days was not a hurdle race (nor did we think of ourselves as rats) but a steady upward climb - strenuous, certainly, but not alarming. The world was not waiting to catch us out, but nor, on the other hand, were we tempted to entertain a very great opinion of ourselves if we succeeded.

Academic success, though not unpleasant, (even when it involved creaking across that palm-fronted Adult School platform in white from top to toe), simply did not compare in

with the athletic kind. At the age of sixteen I would have given any prize I ever won for a place in the Third Hockey team, while my best friend nonchalantly adorned the First. With what pathetic aspiration my podgy little figure, its girdle drawn far too tightly around the box-pleats, used to dawdle in front of those noticeboards in the Hall, hoping against hope that measles might miraculously have decimated Team Practice and they might - just might – call on me! (They did – once.) Were games really as important as they seemed to me then? Was I the only one who felt like this? The only dark streak – and it is a dark streak – across my schooldays was the twice-weekly awakening to the thought of “Drill today.” And then the agony of always being the last to be picked for the rounders side – and yet always the unconquerable hope that one day one would show them – one would actually connect with that ball, and what’s more, shatter the staffroom window!

As I write that I smell again the hot new-mown grass of the garden in summer, and then other smells come back – the secret earthy dankness of the forbidden lane behind the pavilion, the misty Autumn dusk as we waited for the bus after hockey at the field, the exotic Parisian fragrance that glamorised the common air wherever Mlle. Charles had been. French conversation with her was a liberal education indeed, and I have since found her hints on Graphology useful in a variety of situations.

We were very lucky in the variety and distinction of our teachers – Miss Tayton, born to be a duchess; dark Miss Pickstone, who looked like a youth in a Renaissance painting; Miss Hardman, whose library lists astonished us – (“And still we gazed, and still the wonder grew That one small head could carry all she knew”);

Miss Sillem, the woman of the world; the Serious Set, who went out to lunch at the Scotch Cake Shop and obviously talked deeply of philosophy and politics – I wonder what they really talked about? Among them were Miss Wilkins (alias Pallas Athene), and Miss Thomas, who ran the League of Nations Union, and Miss Humphreys-Edwards, who seemed a good deal older in those days when she justly reproved me for my pertness in the Upper Fourth than she does now when I meet her at N.W. Branch Meetings of the Association of Headmistresses.

But none of these memories would have any significance for me without Miss Lees. She was the school, its spine, its spirit. At every point the prospect of memory is dominated by that immense column, sometimes upright, sometimes stupendously inclined to pick up a toffee paper (to this day I cannot pass a toffee paper on the floor) sometimes arrested in an attitude that would be ludicrous if it were not so awesome. (Could any modern headmistress show her girls from the platform the things that “ladies don’t do” and get away with it without a flicker or a titter?)

I wonder whether I was a particularly impressionable, even an obsequious child? Did others not feel my terror of that all-seeing eye? Many and many a time walking down a deserted street have I looked anxiously to right and left before popping a wine-gum (twenty for a penny) into my mouth, and still had misgivings that somehow Miss Lees was observing my wickedness – eating sweets in school uniform being strictly forbidden. Yet what I felt was admiration as well as terror; I had no doubt that she was as wise as she was powerful and I would have done anything rather than forfeit her good opinion. She had an aura of greatness. She seemed to come from some Valhalla, vaguely in the North, inhabited by noble brothers, all seven feet high and all engaged in commanding

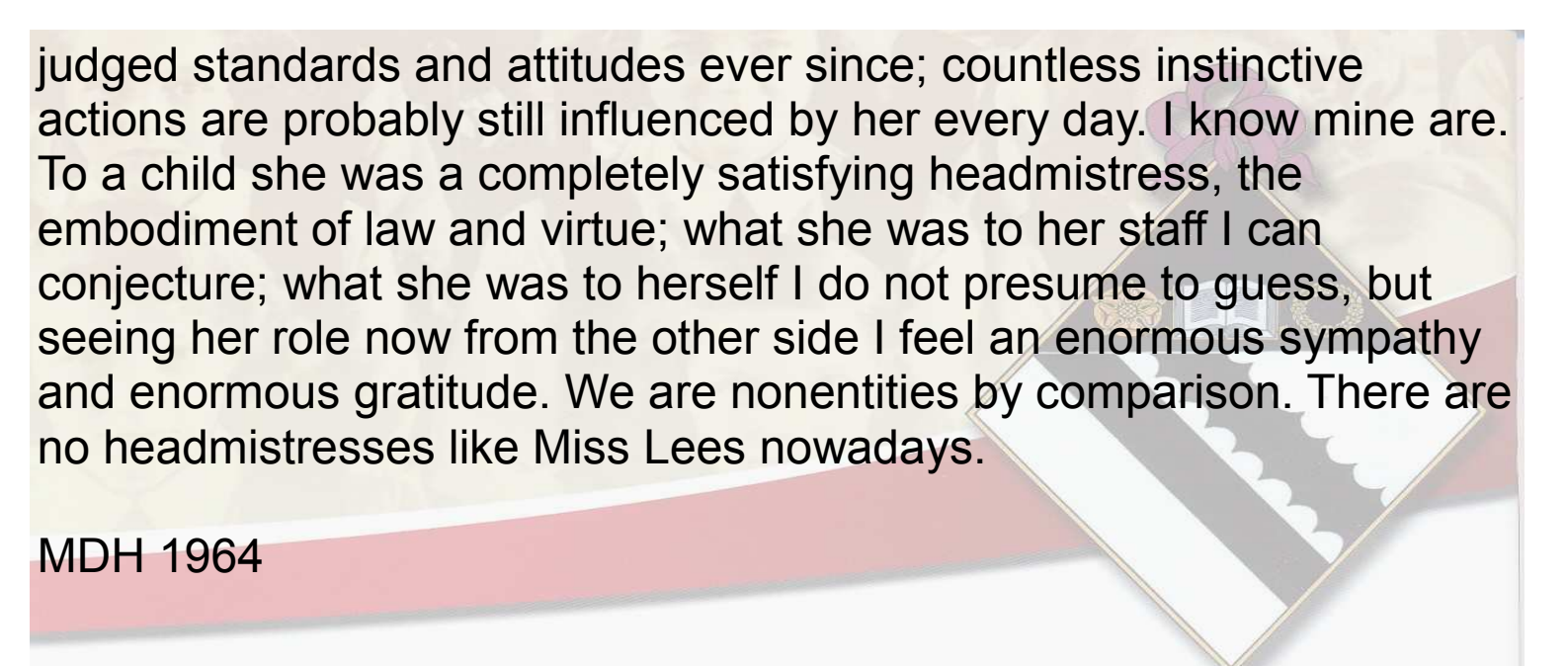


Though aristocratic by nature and instinct, and consumed by a passion for the best which never allowed her to relax into triviality, Miss Lees had great generosity of heart, especially towards the poor and afflicted. Deptford and Jarrow really meant something to us in the 1930s through her. Her fine brown eyes used to blaze as she castigated those who said that the poor, if rehoused, would only keep coal in the bath, and how impressed we were when she told us there were actually girls who could find privacy to say their prayers only in the lavatory; Miss Lees had a fine aristocratic contempt for those who would not call a spade a spade.

She was deeply kind and affectionate to individuals. I shall never forget her bringing hot-water-bottles and tea when two of us took Oxford Entrance at half-term; without her I should certainly never have thought of Oxford, much less actually got there. But even her kindness was awesome; long after I left, when I used to visit Miss Lees and kind amusing Miss Dobbs at Cecil Road, even though I was greeted with a kiss, even after I became a headmistress myself, it still made no difference, I still felt the same frisson of awe. One cannot talk as an equal to a native of Valhalla.

I know now, and I really knew then, that Miss Lees wanted to be accepted as an ordinary human being, and I feel the pathos of it with a stab of guilt to this day. She sacrificed so much for us. She was of the generation that put duty first and she saw her duty as the setting of immutably high standards and endlessly thorough labour which disdained to delegate the least task to others. She would be Atlas, even if someone else tried to share the weight of the world with her. She was content to be a great example, a plumb-line by which many of us have

*“ I recall Margaret with affection, gratitude and still (after more than 40 years!) awe! ”*



judged standards and attitudes ever since; countless instinctive actions are probably still influenced by her every day. I know mine are. To a child she was a completely satisfying headmistress, the embodiment of law and virtue; what she was to her staff I can conjecture; what she was to herself I do not presume to guess, but seeing her role now from the other side I feel an enormous sympathy and enormous gratitude. We are nonentities by comparison. There are no headmistresses like Miss Lees nowadays.

MDH 1964

When her turn came to be on “the other side”, the world had moved on, as Margaret knew very well, but it’s fascinating to see how much of her own education still informed her approach at Bolton School. One of her favourite books was “South Riding” by another Somervillian, Winifred Holtby. A young headmistress, newly-appointed to a rather staid school, gives the girls a day off to play in the snow, while resolving to make changes.

“She must fortify her children, equip them with knowledge and confidence and ambition, arm them with weapons to fight the deadening monotony of life, arm them with joy, with memories, with passion. She would challenge them to make something better of their lives...she would inoculate them with her own gospel of resolution and intelligence “Go therefore and do that which is within you to do. Take no heed of gestures that beckon you aside. Ask of no man permission to perform.” That was the motto she gave to the girls who left her care to become housewives, typists, children’s nurses, shop assistants. She laughed at her own extravagance of vision. That wasn’t what she meant. It was something unexpected and spontaneous, an afternoon snatched from the fixed routine of timetables, a chance of joy, a burst of music, an insistence on beauty, or pleasure , or daring.”

Elaine Lever

## **Elements of Margaret's personal philosophy that emerge from her speeches - the qualities required in a teacher:**

Her ideal teacher "should have, not only lively interests and relationships, but strong convictions, even if some of them are rather unorthodox." Such independence was vital as Margaret held that the teacher "operates from a unique position of power and influence."

The second quality Margaret was looking for was vulnerability. By this, she meant "the faculty of responding sensitively to other people, of not being, or affecting to be, hard and unalterable." She was aware of the occupational hazard of being always right, something she considered a "most corrupting and uglifying thing for the character" and advocated the practice of the deliberate mistake, with confession to follow.

The third thing Margaret wanted in her ideal teacher, after independence and vulnerability, was: "quite simply that she should like the girls."

One of the chief values one must transmit as a teacher is that of "free thought, free speech". This element is stressed when Margaret presents a speech on Independent Schools at Salford University in 1978. She refers to the fact that the maintained sector of education at that time still preserved some freedom and variety, but qualifies her statement by adding, presciently, "but this might not last long".

In her talk to the W.E.A. Conference in March, 1977, Margaret demonstrates a visionary and remarkably firm grasp of the constituents of a good timetable. In writing her speech,

*"Her influence on my life was profound. "*



is the raw material of thought", Margaret stresses the vital need for the teaching of the skills of reading and writing as an essential foundation for the grasp of a foreign language.

Listing English, Maths and Science as the basis for a curricular structure, Margaret uncompromisingly underlines the need for the inclusion of History. It is, she writes "the perpendicular which intersects with then and now". In a nutshell, children "need perspective and they love stories". History should be a separate entity - not as part of 'integrated studies'. Listing and providing substantiation for Geography, Music, Physical Education, she emphasises the fact that General Knowledge should be a requirement as well as stating firmly "every child's education must include some creative pleasure".

The school, Margaret holds, has a primary responsibility to transmit not only information but values.

Children need to have confidence in their own society, a clear understanding of why law is essential as a protection for the weak, of a sense of obligation to the community... The embedded notion of service is also echoed in Margaret's philosophy and practice. This is something she sees as integral to the independent school. The independent school is "good for the whole nation; without them, girls in particular would offer much less service and leadership".

Margaret's firm, repeated conviction that women must receive an education on equal terms with men provides the bedrock of her philosophy.

In her article about the victory of the suffragette movement in the 'Bolton Evening News', 17th May, 1963 in which Margaret deals with the question surrounding the role of women in the future, we read of the "relish" with which Margaret had herself

read the first of the series of three articles written by Mrs. Cicely Lucas, a retired headmistress. Margaret writes: "The emancipation of women is probably the greatest and certainly the most rapid social change in the history of mankind". With characteristic foresight and vision, she also says, "It is only a matter of time now until women become as acceptable as men as judges, prime ministers and even priests". She further asserts that the qualities of love, fortitude, common sense, gentleness and understanding of people that women used to give their families can now be given to the world at large.

It is worthy of note that Margaret sees such qualities as being complementary to what she terms the "especially masculine" gifts of daring, energy, ambition, cool judgement and logic. "Neither can do so well alone what both can do together."

Margaret's concern for the active, continuing involvement of people as individuals and as belonging to and functioning in groups and communities is also a recurrent theme in her personal philosophy. "No system can work without people." This, in her letter to Old Girls in July, 1994, is a concept endemic in what she writes, speaks about and believes. She retained a remarkably close interest in her former pupils from all the schools in which she had taught, as evidenced in the newsletter.

A perusal of Margaret's speeches and writings intended for the listener and the reader clearly highlights the personal philosophy undergirding her professional life. Her personal convictions supported by her sharp reasoning, with characteristically well developed argument as evidence, are the sure foundation for what she put into practice.

Janet Hathaway

# **Margaret Higginson's Writings:**

## ***Some significant statements***

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'I think I'd better put it firmly on record that I think being HM of BS is quite the most satisfying and enviable job the world has to offer. I won't say that I think that absolutely every minute e.g. when I'm falling over lacrosse sticks in the quad after nightfall - but in general that's my point of view & I think it's a great pity that the N.U.T. concentrates on the hours of supervising school meals & never mentions the enormous personal rewards of teaching - the joy of feeling that your work is worth doing and the immeasurable friendships that build up over the years.'

The Parents' Association Dinner: 01.12.67    Quotes Lady Pakenham:

'Whereas all agree that boys should be educated as people, girls are regarded as "little women" before they are human beings.'

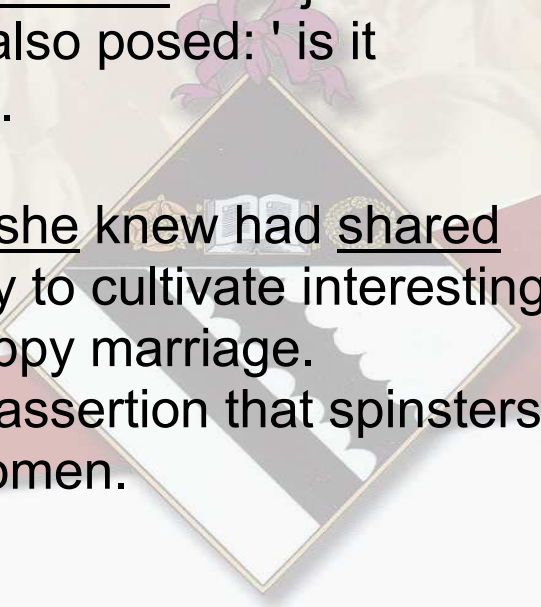
Talk to Unitarian Women: 13.04.61

More than once, with reference to a woman having decided on a husband, Margaret quotes Marlene Dietrich interviewed in 'Woman' magazine:

'You chose him. He must be wonderful. If you chose him for any other reason, if your brain instead of your heart pilots your emotions, these must be equal. You cannot trust your brain: you can trust your heart. If you follow your heart, there can be no regrets, because yours was an intuition, not a studied choice.'

'Men can get away with pomposity --- women can't!'



Talk to the Westhoughton Townswomen's Guild - subject: What is an education for? - with the question also posed: 'is it possible to be intelligent and attractive?'.  


Margaret said the happiest matches she knew had shared work. 'People of that sort are more likely to cultivate interesting friends and friends are essential to a happy marriage.'

To the same group, she also put the assertion that spinsters often remain more alive than married women.

Talk to the Bolton Rotary Club: c. 1960

'Every time I trudge up the near-vertical slopes of High Dummocks I am haunted by Pope's couplet -

"The increasing prospect tries our wandering eyes  
Hills peep o'er hills and Alps on Alps arise..." and

- 'I have often thought that a respectable thesis cd. be constructed on "The Influence of English rhyme on Anglican theology from the circumstance that the only available rhymes for love are above and dove.'

To the Friday Group well after Margaret had retired.

'I was one of those earnest girls who always turned up at lectures (even P.Wilde's lectures on English pronunciation at Merton at 9 a.m. where I rapidly came to comprise 50% of the audience) .'



Margaret and Ceridwen at Oxford

'But the greatest pleasure of all to me, and those like me, was just being alive. To wake up in the morning and see your own books on the shelves in your own room and your own

pictures on the walls. ( yes, of course it was V.G.'s cornfield) and to think "I'm here! I'm in Oxford' and then just to walk down St. Giles's in a cold, grey, October morning, is indeed in any weather – fog or rain or snow made no difference - and to feel 'I belong here!' - and all that gave is a thrill that I don't think any man, however susceptible to tradition and atmosphere, could quite enter into. It's the experience you have to wait for, that seems quite beyond you, that you love. We will not possibly take Oxford for granted. Beneath our quiet, dowdy, laughable naive exteriors we lived in a state almost like a mescaline trance. Everything seemed twice as real and intense as the things at home.'

Delivered at the Oxford Society Dinner c. 1960 - at which Margaret also said that she had accepted the invitation to speak because she appreciated the compliment to her sex in having been invited and because she liked wearing her best frock...

### General Summary and Reflections on the Writings.

The speeches made at various schools - state and independent - demonstrate Margaret's aptitude for engaging her audience. They are characterised by a distinctive ability to draw in the audience. There are topical and local references, showing clearly that she had done her homework and researched into characters and themes connected with a particular school or area. When speaking to an audience in Bolton, Margaret made use of contemporary examples, quoting 'The Bolton Evening News', The Wanderers and remarking on people - not always now easy to identify or to recall - who had, quite obviously, said or written something of note. Her awareness of the sense of any community was always in evidence.

She addressed the pupils directly and did not talk down to them. In very considered ways, Margaret encouraged her young

They were exhorted to be themselves: 'Be your own self and not an imitation.' She told them to be a part of a whole. Absolutely no-one, she said, could stand on their own feet. They were not to underestimate themselves: 'Whatever you are going to do you will be important. Don't think you don't matter.' Also: 'Belong to other people, be glad to be part of something bigger than you are.'

Her speeches, too, are peppered with direct references to and quotations from friends of hers - frequently well-known individuals - whose words and way of life had made a direct impression on Margaret herself and about whom she wanted to share. She never lost an opportunity to comment on the remarkable, noteworthy aspects of the lives of those who had influenced her or whom she had taught.

When speaking at Abbotsholme in 1962, Margaret highlighted a sentiment expressed by a friend. The piece is referred to as a 'sermon', the chosen text being taken from Matthew chapter 16, verse 25:

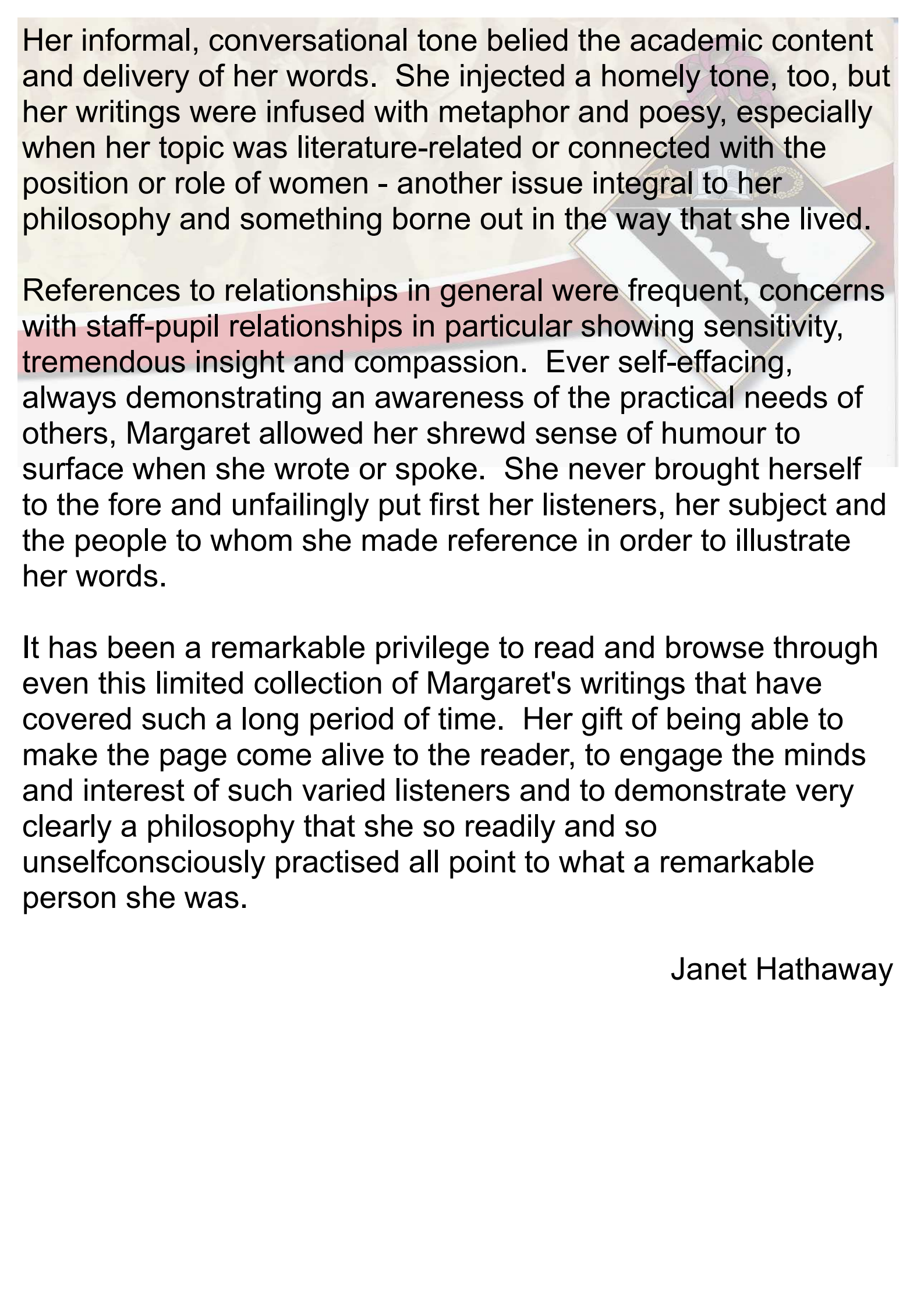
'Whosoever cares for his own safety is lost; but if a man will let himself be lost for my sake, he will find his true self.'

She was telling her congregation that certain people may seem to be 'failures' but if one met with them, one would have an instant sensation of happiness'. She went on to quote her friend's words: 'They never preach, but you can't be with them without feeling their contact with something beyond themselves. When you touch a live electric wire you don't have to be told the current is on.'

In the pieces written or delivered on the subject of literature-related topics, Margaret was in her element; it is clear that this was her forte. She gave a detailed analysis of poetic form supported by numerous examples that demonstrate the breadth of her reading and appreciation. What is notable, however, is that she even quoted television advertisements to provide illustrations of metre.

*"She sowed seeds which were later harvested by her students in abundance."*



The background of the text is a light-colored image of a book with a decorative bookmark. The bookmark is white with a gold-colored border and a small gold-colored emblem. The book is open, showing its pages and spine. The text is overlaid on this image.

Her informal, conversational tone belied the academic content and delivery of her words. She injected a homely tone, too, but her writings were infused with metaphor and poesy, especially when her topic was literature-related or connected with the position or role of women - another issue integral to her philosophy and something borne out in the way that she lived.

References to relationships in general were frequent, concerns with staff-pupil relationships in particular showing sensitivity, tremendous insight and compassion. Ever self-effacing, always demonstrating an awareness of the practical needs of others, Margaret allowed her shrewd sense of humour to surface when she wrote or spoke. She never brought herself to the fore and unfailingly put first her listeners, her subject and the people to whom she made reference in order to illustrate her words.

It has been a remarkable privilege to read and browse through even this limited collection of Margaret's writings that have covered such a long period of time. Her gift of being able to make the page come alive to the reader, to engage the minds and interest of such varied listeners and to demonstrate very clearly a philosophy that she so readily and so unselfconsciously practised all point to what a remarkable person she was.

Janet Hathaway

# Selected writings by Margaret Higginson:

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*Margaret's unique flair for literature is well-illustrated by her original poems, all of which are accomplished enough to be published, though some were never intended for a wider audience than the recipients themselves. She excelled at parody and encouraged her pupils to try it, believing it increased understanding of the original. Here is one she wrote for the Sixth Form in 1954. ("Much Binding in the Marsh" was a very funny radio programme with Kenneth Horne and Richard Murdoch. Effie Marshall was Head Girl. Full-length stockings were a Sixth Form privilege. Every week there was a "Beauty and Order" assessment of each form-room by the Prefects. Only the really zealous ones looked inside desks, wherein the ambient clutter had hastily been stowed, when the lookouts tipped us off that "They" were coming!)*

Elaine Lever

At Much Grinding on the Green  
The Prefects' legs are always sheathed in nylon.  
At Much Grinding on the Green  
They're never seen with rayon, wool or lisle on.  
For Beauty, Law and Order they display a special flair,  
They can even wear a beret with an intellectual air,  
But Effie thinks a gym tunic is still the only wear  
At Much Grinding on the Green.

At Much Grinding on the Green  
Their Mathematics sure are supersonic;  
At Much Grinding on the Green  
Their General Essays tend to be laconic.  
"Why bother about paragraphs? It really is absurd!"  
"You needn't write in sentences; at least that's what I've heard-  
Well if we mind our ps and qs, why integrate a word?"  
At Much Grinding on the Green.

At Much Grinding on the Green  
To call oneself MD is one ambition;  
At Much Grinding on the Green  
Some others want a literary position.

"They asked us up at Oxford what Shakespeare owed to Kyd-  
We said we weren't quite certain but we thought it was a quid-  
"And what's your favourite reading?" "Well, we love 'What Katy  
Did'"

At Much Grinding on the Green.

MDH

*In the context of school dinners are the two following poems. These were published c. 1951 and were amongst Margaret's papers. She was teaching at St. Paul's Girls' School at that time, having previously taught at Bemrose School for Boys. Whilst that authorship of the poems is uncertain they evidently reflect and echo her own experiences.*

*This one, subtitled with the immortal quote "Come, let me taste my horse", takes a swipe at Goldsmith's inflated "poetic diction."*

Around the festive board the numerous band  
With spoon in pocket and with knife in hand  
Await with eager eye the destin'd plate,  
Anxious and trembling for the birth of Fate.  
Meanwhile they fill the tedious hungry gap  
With various sports; some flip the bottle-cap  
And some, when Prefects rise, the chair displace-  
(Such falls too oft attend the Human Race.)  
Others that seem more studious now engage  
With "Aircraft Spotter" or the Comic page.  
At length there comes the laden trolley round;  
Then for a while subsides the deaf'ning sound.  
Munching alone is heard throughout the Hall,  
And one is indistinguishable from all.  
Observe that Youth, his knife and fork in air;  
His parents hope, his Pedagogue's despair;  
Obliged to speak the moment that he feels,  
His open mouth the half-chew'd mass reveals-  
Thus ever striving to combine in one  
Two operations, neither well-begun.



*Margaret believed that respect for the lofty lapidary purity of the august T.S.Eliot was quite compatible with an occasional send-up, such as this one.*

High Table (or Burnt Mutton.)

I have been here before, in fact for a very long time,  
Every Tuesday I have known that mutton,  
the same and not the same,  
(The essence endures, the onions are accidental.)  
I have seen all these faces, and there is nothing Jones  
can say that will surprise me;  
Once more he demands, embarrassing his colleagues,  
The missing word in the "Hamlet" quotation.  
(O indispensable "Times" crossword,  
Producing so kind an illusion of achievement,  
Partitioning Time into neat diurnal plots,  
Deferring the contemplation of Eternity!)  
How weary, stale, flat and unprofitable  
This suet roll! Not unlike Jones' face.  
I should have been a famous PhD  
And passed the mellow paradisal port  
Talking of Plato, first among my peers,  
In some warm, timeless Oxford Common Room.  
But at my back I always hear  
The loud guffaw, the whispered sneer.  
My mind's back aches with stooping.  
Whatever the day brings, it brings nothing new-  
The weekly averages, the Speech Day platitudes,  
The Burnham Scale denounced in the staffroom,  
And always the red ink rusting in the blood-stream.  
I have read all the essays they will write this evening.  
I have written several essays that no-one will ever read,  
And this time next week I shall be eating boiled mutton.

*Among Margaret's letters is one from Sir John Betjeman in his own hand, politely refusing a request to give the prizes on Speech Day, but promising to come and see "the dear girls" on some other occasion. Perhaps this was the inspiration for*

Mr Betjeman takes his Bath.

In the firelight on the hearthrug  
(Leopard-skin Lord Lumley shot)  
Squats the gleaming brazen bath-tub  
Filled with water piping hot.

Brought by six obsequious housemaids,  
Each with steaming copper-can  
Cuffed and capped with starch and streamers,  
Trained to wait on regal Man.

In the bath in rapture seated,  
With a cake of soap by Pears,  
Like a cherub carved by Chantry,  
Undisturbed by worldly cares,

Mr Betjeman is chanting  
Strains from Keble's Sacred Muse,  
And perusing, (propped before him)  
The St.Oswald's Parish News.

Marble clock and Morris paper  
Catch the candle's flickering;  
Through the casement moonlight glitters  
On his prized new Gothic Wing.....

Rest you there, contented Phantom!  
(Loved and lovely doubtless, he)  
All too soon the Age of Chromium!-  
Would the housemaids disagree?

*Margaret was also a force to be reckoned with on radio.*

TRIBUTES to MDH from listeners to Brian Redhead's programme "A Word in Edgeways".

*The programme was regularly broadcast on the BBC. It was something of a current affairs programme where special guests were invited to discuss topical issues of that time. Miss Higginson was one such guest at the end of April in 1966; the following are extracts from letters she received as a result of her appearance on the programme. It is only from these letters that we may deduce the subject under discussion – could it have been the place of women in modern society? Below are extracts from the letters.*

"Listening to "A Word in Edgeways" on the 30<sup>th</sup> of April, I was delighted to hear your common sense explanation for the reason why women were forced to show aggression : thrown out from their proper place as holders of Wisdom and true love. Women could not regain any rightful position without first trying to establish equality with men in the ordinary affairs of life. Only after this is established can she begin to show and to use her true worth"

"It is such a pleasure to hear a balanced woman's opinion, devoid of archness and over-intensity. I am almost sorry we don't live in Bolton so that my daughters could have profited from the attitude to life you obviously must give to your Prefects"

"What a joy to hear a truly feminine attitude as opposed to feminists' tiresome truculence and also for the truth you spoke concerning the conscious pampering by advertisers to all the modern traits of envy and discontent; for your feminine protectiveness for the North!"

*" She was right for her time and her influence lives on "*



“I felt I must drop you a line to say how enormously impressed I was with your performance on the radio on Saturday night. It all came over very well indeed and was a joy to listen to.” (From another eminent Headmistress!)

“I was listening to you on the wireless last night and I agreed so intensely with what you said and the way you said it. I know how lonely it can be to take a stand and it is for this reason that I write to congratulate you on what you said the way you said it and above all for thinking in a direction which I am sure is a right one to influence not only the young but the middle aged and the old.”

“Everything that you so fluently expressed, your complete grasp of present day moral issues and your willingness to defend that which is right, will no doubt have made a great impression on many listeners. Would that we could hear you more often but that, it seems, is the privilege of those in Bolton. Most of us despair in the ever present battle against 20<sup>th</sup> century monetary corruption but after hearing you and your panel colleagues, one feels that one isn't alone”

*An MDH response to one of her correspondents.*

“Thank you very much for your kind letter about my part in “A Word in Edgeways” – I can see you are a great champion of our sex! All you say is true but I do think things are improving nowadays and modern girls get the best of both worlds. Certainly the ones I know intend to keep their own personalities and I know some very nice, reasonable men as well!”

Gladys Sidebottom

# In the next issue....

In January 2011

- ◆ More of the newspaper articles, some sparkling, some trenchant, some restrained, some controversial, especially on the demise of Direct Grant status and its effect on girls' education.
- ◆ More tributes, more biography.
- ◆ The Cautley Connection— Pam Adams, former Head of Geography reminisces about the much-loved outdoor pursuits centre in Yorkshire.
- ◆ The Secret Life of Margaret Higginson— With characteristic energy and much affection, Ceridwen Higginson, Margaret's dear and lifelong friend, companion at Oxford and cousin by marriage to Basil Higginson, commemorated Margaret's 80th birthday in words and pictures. Here is one gem from the hand-written, illustrated record.



The archive working committee from the Old Girls' Association gratefully acknowledges the numerous contributions from a wide variety of sources connected with the family, life and work of MDH.

Every effort has been made to preserve the integrity of the extracts used, to ensure accuracy and to respect anonymity where applicable.

If any Old Girl (or indeed anyone else) would like to offer reminiscences or anecdotes about Margaret we should be very glad to receive them. Please send them to: Carol Haslam at Bolton School or email them to: [CHaslam@girls.bolton.sch.uk](mailto:CHaslam@girls.bolton.sch.uk)