Tributes to Barbara Harvey, Sunday 22nd March 2026

Thoughts about Barbara Harvey
Alice Prochaska

I came up to Somerville in 1965, like everyone else scared and excited and not knowing what to expect. Miss Harvey (as she was to us undergraduates then) was moral tutor for our year, alternating years with Miss Ramm. She had not interviewed us because, I think, she must have been on sabbatical at the time of our entrance interviews. So this tall, plainly dressed and tweedy woman who introduced herself to us all was an unknown quantity. We, mainly radical-minded, mini-skirted students of the mid 1960s came from a different world. But that was fine, because what we needed was just the guidance and discipline that she provided.

She explained everything to us very clearly, and once prelims were out of the way, tutored us herself in medieval English history. I have only hazy memories of those early tutorials, but the overriding memory is of good long discussions about the reading we'd been set, and of taking the subject not earnestly but seriously. Barbara was far too conscientious to ask her students to read out their essays during the tutorials and then comment on them, a practice I encountered among some other tutors to whom we were later "farmed out". She insisted on receiving our work in advance, read it carefully and wrote her comments on it. During the tutorial itself, always with just one other student, there was a good discussion, or at least there was if we'd done enough work to have any idea of what we were talking about. Sometimes there'd be laughter, too.

I realise in retrospect that it was from Barbara's tutorials that I first learned about respect for the evidence, and to scorn the unsupported assertion. My friends and I enjoyed her own delight in uncovering the evidence of medieval lives, and I recall one friend talking about how Barbara told her she had "met a medieval monk doing something unexpected …"; and admiring her engagement with the real living people who made up that centuries-old world. We did not then know of the important research she was doing – to bear fruit years after we had passed through her hands. Speaking for myself, it was only years later and after I had spent a fair amount of my own career working with archives and historical evidence, albeit of a far more modern period and not producing distinguished original works of academic history as she did, that I learned how deeply respected Barbara Harvey was in the community of academic historians – and I felt very proud to have been tutored by her.

At an early stage in our rather heedless undergraduate careers, my friends and I became aware of a deep, understated kindness in our tutor. She invited us back for tea to the house in Jericho that she shared at that stage with her mother. And she took a friendly interest in our student lives. I was not diligent about asking permission, as I ought to have done, to take on an acting role at New College in my first summer. But Barbara, far from chiding me, came along to the performance and sent me a lovely note afterwards congratulating me on it. When I broke my wrist in the icy winter of my first Hilary term, she was sympathetic about my inability to write essays (and visibly amused at my excuses, too). As time went on, and I moved away from medieval history, Barbara's end-of-term meetings with each of

her pupils were still important and helpful. She was good at encouraging us, and always, unfailingly, interested in us.

In my later career, Barbara took a benign interest, as I think she did in the careers of all her former pupils. She noticed and congratulated me when I joined the Historical Manuscripts Commission, for instance, and took a real pride in having pupils like me who were involved in archives and other history --related pursuits. Eventually, I turned up as Principal of Somerville in 2010, and Barbara's encouragement meant a lot to me. In the early years of my principalship, before she became too frail to come into college, it was like having an affectionate parent there. Not that she agreed uncritically with my approach – I remember her giving a talk in chapel about the importance of its Christian foundations, which was a I think a gentle rebuke to my own ecumenical and multi-faith tendencies. But above all, she made me feel that she approved, and supported, and took pride in me; and that was an incomparable blessing to me.

Here is just a small sample of tributes from Barbara's pupils in other years:

- "Barbara was endlessly encouraging. After school this took a bit of getting used to!" …"The outer door to her room in Darbishire was always open for half an hour first thing in the morning on weekdays during term time, when she encouraged 'drop-ins' on any topic, personal or academic"
- She was gifted in remembering links with people to put them at their ease. In my case this was a shared Methodist background and her having taught for a while in Edinburgh, where my family lived. I think she worked really hard to be approachable.
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And from a graduate in English who joined the college as a mature student: "It was always a pleasure to sit next to [Barbara] on Guest Nights. She was my role model as a woman academic: a rigorous thinker and a provider of friendship and encouragement. When, as a proud JRF at Balliol, I invited her to lunch, she bowled everyone over with her wit. I think of her as one of the great Somervillians."

Barbara Harvey will live on as a very special presence in the memories of her many pupils, as she does in mine and among her colleagues and the many scholars whose work she influenced.

Barbara Harvey
John Blair

Some kinds of genius seem to spring from nowhere. Maybe Barbara's meticulous analysis of data from medieval records was simply what one expects of a good scholar. But then she worked a unique magic with them, bringing individuals and their communities to life in a way that was not just founded on a bedrock of solid fact, but also suffused with humanity, emotional understanding and solid practical sense. Where did it all come from?

One place that it came from was Devon, where Barbara was born and grew up in a world of sturdy reality. The teas of Devonian magnificence which she lavished on her friends would have satisfied even a monk of Westminster. Her education at Teignmouth Grammar School gave her a love of mathematics that would make quantification central to her work: ask what a loaf of bread weighed and cost in 1342, and Barbara could tell you. Her cousin recalls that 'on visits to our farm in Essex, she would quiz us on types of crops grown at the period she was researching, yields, animal breeds and carcass weights. We imagined she was calculating how long it would take a monk to consume a sheep' – which indeed she probably was.

As an undergraduate at Somerville from 1946, her medieval interests were fostered by her greatly loved tutor May McKisack. But then – in one of those twists of fate that look so momentous in retrospect – she went to Howard Colvin, recently appointed as medieval history tutor at St John's, to supervise her B.Litt. thesis. It was presumably because Colvin knew the Westminster Abbey archive through his architectural interests that he proposed two well-documented Westminster manors for Barbara's topic. So it was that in 1950 she first climbed the stair to the Westminster Abbey muniment room, which was to be her main place of research for the next sixty years. She became an institution: alone among all readers, she was allowed to work in the store, and to take out and replace her own documents.

A dialogue between Westminster and the world outside it was at the heart of Barbara's intellectual career. From a single institution (admittedly an exceptionally important and well-documented one), she drew major and transformative conclusions about medieval England in general. An early example was her extremely important paper of 1966, 'The population trend in England between 1300 and 1348', which successfully attacked the hypothesis of a Malthusian crisis and population collapse around 1300. For a relatively young scholar to take on such formidable heavyweights as M.M. Postan illustrates the hidden steeliness that would be a feature of her later life and work.

The monks of Westminster, with their lives, diets, squabbles, illnesses and deaths, were to be her permanent academic companions. In one way or another they provided material for publications over six decades, including some important edited texts: The Customal and Bye-Laws of the Manor of Islip (1959), The Westminster Chronicle (edited with L.C. Hector, 1984), and The States of the Manors of Westminster Abbey, published thanks to Christopher Woolgar's collaboration in 2020. The first phase of her career also produced one major book: Westminster Abbey and its Estates (1977), which breathed new life into what was in some ways a familiar kind of estate history.

What took her work to a new level was the invitation to give the Ford Lectures in English History for 1989. Characteristically, Barbara told me with amusement rather than annoyance how the then Regius Professor, walking beside her in that nerve-racking opening procession endured by all Ford Lecturers, surveyed the room and whispered to her, rather tactlessly, 'Oh, I didn't expect all these people to come!'. But they came, and they stayed: it was remarkable how a subject so ostensibly dry

as the lives of medieval monks kept an undergraduate audience engaged. Published in 1993 as Living and Dying in England 1100-1540: the Monastic Experience, the lectures achieved the remarkable distinction of being joint winner of the Wolfson Prize.

And that's what I mean by the unique magic. Somehow, from all that detail about weights and measures, wages and prices, dinners and ailments, she drew out a compelling and utterly convincing picture of what it was like to be living at that time in that kind of community. It mattered, of course, that Barbara herself belonged to a community. As Jennifer Loach put it, 'Underlying much of her study of Westminster is a shrewd sense of how people behave when they spend a great deal of time together, and a realisation that normally sensible people may, when put together, behave foolishly.' Anyone who has been a member of an Oxford governing body knows what she meant.

Here I should mention Barbara's own Christian faith, so undemonstrative that pupils and even colleagues may often have missed it. I recall two enthusiastically evangelical Somerville undergraduates being told briskly to 'keep God out of essays', which of course was a matter of professional discipline. In fact, God was central to Barbara's life. She was a faithful member of the congregation of the University Church, and churchwarden for four years in the 1970s. As the vicar there said at her funeral, Barbara's writings about monastic life are informed by a very practical kind of Benedictine spirituality, about 'caring for the people you live with, [and] attending to the extraordinary dynamics of a community, whether it be a monastery, a College or a parish church'.

Barbara also gave her time and attention very freely to collaborative projects. She was an inspirational Consultant Editor for the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography: Henry Summerson says that 'she commanded a remarkable combination of respect and affection, so that people would do things for her which they would probably not have done for anyone else'. As I know from my own experience, she had a flair for allocating the right entries to the right authors. Her contributions as a General Editor of Oxford Medieval Texts were equally respected, and indeed she was beloved by the community of medieval latinists generally, including some stern judges. For twenty years she convened the Medieval Diet Group, an informal but highly effective gathering of historians and archaeologists with interests ranging across nutrition, crop-yields, feasting, gardening, hunting and fishing. Barbara paid for the splendid lunches, leaving the Somerville kitchen staff puzzled that a 'diet group' should feast so lavishly.

Appropriate honours came: Fellowship of the British Academy in 1982, a CBE in 1997. What I suspect she relished most of all was the St Edward's Cross, presented to her by the Dean of Westminster in 2013.

My theme has been Barbara the scholar, but I must include a tribute on behalf of her graduate students and faculty colleagues. I first met Barbara in an undergraduate class exactly fifty years ago, and at the end of that term I asked if she would supervise my doctoral work. I shall never forget her horror-struck face as she said 'But I don't know anything about it!' But of course she did, and whatever she didn't know, she soon made it her business to find out. That was the best academic choice I made in my life. Her care and attention were exemplary, and her support rock-solid. Others have spoken of her warm encouragement and generous kindness towards younger colleagues. Her graduate students can say the same, but will recall affectionately how often they heard the refrain 'it wasn't quite like that at Westminster …'.

In time, I became her colleague in the History Faculty and on several academic bodies. Her modesty could be disconcerting, as when she would respond to some inaccurate or silly comment with 'Oh, I'm sorry, I always thought it was X but I must have got that wrong'. (Though one suspects that her

sly sense of humour was sometimes at work there!). As for her pupils, so for her colleagues: Barbara exuded a self-deprecating generosity, but was formidably tough with anything that really mattered: the kind of toughness that is all the more daunting and impregnable because it lacks any trace of self-importance or special pleading. In tricky situations she was often one of the most resolute, and the most willing to grasp the nettle. With one memorably difficult Faculty problem, involving a colleague who was incapable of the crucial job he had accepted, I panicked, but it was Barbara who volunteered to deliver the necessary ultimatum. She had no time for pomposity. Just after succeeding her on the editorial board of Oxford Medieval Texts, I had to deal with an author (who at that point was one of the world's most prominent medievalists) who indicated that he was too grand to read the proofs of his own book. The bluntness of Barbara's reaction to that is a permanently hilarious memory.

Correct modes of dress, and of address, mattered to her: certainly not because of self-importance, but I think because she valued a world articulated by civilised structures showing us where we stand in relation to other people. (Thunder from heaven would be falling on me now I weren't wearing tie, suit and gown to give this address!) Her diffident manner and superficial formality could give strangers the wrong idea. Here is one diarist's comment on the party to celebrate the publication of Westminster Abbey and its Estates in 1977: 'Barbara Harvey, a quiet blue-stocking …, confessed that today was the first occasion on which she had addressed the librarian, Howard Nixon, by his Christian name'. How little he knew – not least Barbara's detestation of the term 'blue-stocking'.

As a close friend through many years, I grew familiar with her exacting standards and her no-nonsense reactions to carelessness, as well as her rich capacity to see the funny side. One comical episode sticks in my mind. We had a much-esteemed colleague, remembered by many here, who was not a good answerer of messages. Barbara, meticulous in that as in all else, finally had enough and sent him a furious rebuke. A few days of silence: then a large package of offprints arrived in Somerville lodge, a kind of peace-offering and white flag. Barbara found it hilarious, and relished recounting the story. In a difficult phase of my own life, she was everything that a good friend should be: clear-sighted, realistic and practical. Her resources of common-sense and emotional intelligence would have astonished many who only knew her superficially.

When I think of Barbara, I inescapably think of that strong, brilliant generation of women who spearheaded the seventh-century English Church. And one parallel is irresistible: St Hild of Whitby, that great teacher whose pupils had such a powerful impact on Bede. We could well remember Barbara in the moving words with which he described her. In this passage we might want to substitute 'lectureships' and 'professors' for 'holy orders' and 'bishops', but many of us here would have no quarrel with Bede's choice of the word 'mother':

'All who knew Hild, the handmaiden of Christ and abbess, used to call her mother because of her outstanding devotion and grace.' 'So great was her prudence that not only ordinary people but also kings and princes sometimes sought and received her counsel when in difficulties. … She compelled those under her direction to devote so much time to the study of the holy Scriptures, and so much time to the performance of good works, that many could very easily be found there who were fitted for holy orders … In fact we have seen five from this monastery who afterwards became bishops.' 'After having done many heavenly deeds on earth, she departed to receive the rewards of the heavenly life.'

Address for Barbara Harvey memorial service
Joanna Innes

I first met Barbara when I came to be interviewed for a fellowship at Somerville early in 1982. I sat next to her at dinner, where we had rack of lamb, which she told me was her favourite dish. Because I got the job, she became my senior colleague for the next 12 years. When I first met her, she was 27 years into her 38-year career at Somerville, and serving as Vice Principal, not for the first time.

As most if not all of those here today will know, Barbara had great presence. Her posture was often bracingly upright, though she would slump demonstratively when she was playing up her unofficial, all too human self. My mind's eye presents Barbara to me in a series of her modes. The upright person who would look you right in the eye and deliver forthright points of view – though these were generally open to correction. Then there was the diffident person who would smile shyly and offer tentative suggestions in a deferential tone. Somewhere in between was the essentially self-confident but knowingly fallible and sometimes rueful person, who might slap her forehead to mark some blunder, her own or others', and laugh at the waywardness of people and things. Barbara would cycle readily and theatrically between these different modes. She was never afraid to pass judgment (not always presented as such); she had a strong sense in many different contexts of what was right and proper -- but she was extremely kind.

Somerville provided the setting for much of Barbara's adult life. She gave some indication of what the college meant to her she when specified that her coffin should start its journey to the University Church from here, where a number of us gathered to see her off last summer, before following her towards the University Church. She came up on a scholarship immediately after the end of the war, in 1946, stayed on for two years after graduation to write a BLitt thesis – the DPhil was not then the gold standard it later became. Leaving in 1951, she then spent four years teaching in Edinburgh and London before in 1955 returning to Somerville as a tutorial fellow.

Her teaching duties were onerous. She gave tutorials on topics ranging from the Anglo-Saxons to the fifteenth century, and across Britain and Europe, for twelve hours a week – the figure doesn't include preparation and marking time. History students then wrote on average three essays in two weeks, so the course involved a headlong scamper through the syllabus, for both students and dons. I remember Barbara once ruefully at lunch saying she had stayed up late at night refreshing her memory of the Third Crusade for a tutorial, only to find when the student came that she had written about the Fourth Crusade. I was heartened to hear that such a senior academic might still have to stay up late to prepare, very much my experience at that time – but of course also depressed to think I might still be doing that several decades on.

The duties of a fellow also included sitting on Governing Body, and its committees as required, and holding college office. It's chiefly in those settings, I realised while writing this, that one sees one's colleagues in action: the historians didn't teach any college classes together at that time. So my most vivid memories of Barbara in her role are of her in those committee settings, where she was formidable. She was very clear that one's role in such settings was not to push one's own case, rather to assist in making sure that good decisions were taken. She generally had a point of view, and often supposed that it was in fact right; among the many advice notes from her to the first principal of Somerville that I knew, Daphne Park, in Barbara's file is one which remarks to her 'as you will now know, it is a failing of senior fellows of Oxford colleges to think that their advice has a particularly luminous quality denied to that of lesser people, but (she continued) as I sink into decrepitude (she was then 55), I seek to avoid that fate'. So she also sought to respond constructively to others, and in more challenging discussions would often intervene with the aim of

making the collective functional. Her interventions provided an education in the balletics of committee life.

Earlier in her professional life, her mix of personas seems to have struck people differently. Her referees when she applied for the Somerville post stressed and clearly worried a little about her shyness, though saw signs that she was gaining confidence. They noted (and this shows that they did know her) her dry wit. Very plausibly she did gain confidence, but also perhaps they were over-impressed by some aspects of her self-presentation. Principals and fellows of Somerville certainly recognised her qualities. In 1968, they chose her to be Assessor for the University. The role had been created just eight years before to allow fellows of women's and graduate colleges to have the chance to take a turn sitting on the University's major governing bodies, after the fashion of the Proctors (neither women's nor graduate colleges were admitted to the rota of colleges electing Proctors till 1980). Having served myself as Somerville's first proctor, I know what a great learning experience this provided: a crash course in the structures of the University, in the people who run it at the top, and in holding one's own as a relatively junior and inexperienced person in university councils. Barbara held the post in turbulent times – 1968 remember – and among other things sat on the famous Hart Committee on relations with junior members. She must have enjoyed and appreciated the experience, because later she was keen for me to have the equivalent. Though I was somewhat bemused to learn from her file that, though she encouraged both her Somerville history colleagues to serve in major university roles, she herself twice turned down encouragement from principals to stand for election to the university Council, on the grounds that she would 'be a DUD' (which I don't entirely believe she thought) but also that she preferred to prioritise her research.

By the time I knew her, Barbara was also greatly respected in the History Faculty. For most of her career, the place of women both in the university and in the faculty was ambiguous. Women were never quite people: they were always women, though the more formidable among them might be individually much respected. Barbara was among those respected: in my time she was one of six historians chosen to serve on an epochal 'syllabus reform' committee; also, to be one of a team who reviewed faculty members' self-assessments in the first such externally imposed exercise. Barbara led the way in seizing the chance to turn the exercise back on the university, arguing that what it revealed was that tutorial fellows were seriously overworked and under-supported. She wasn't the only one making the case, and higher bodies in the University did then give serious attention to improving on this. Barbara had self-confidence and self-respect – but was also well aware that women had to work harder to earn that respect than men. Self-respect led her to view various aspects of the university's culture with a jaundiced eye.

Probably the most difficult issue the college had to face during Barbara's time as a fellow was the question of whether to admit men, both as fellows and as students. The issue was put to a Governing Body vote every few years from the late 70s until their admission in 1994. Barbara consistently favoured the mixing of the college, in a highly pragmatic spirit. She watched with dismay as it became increasingly difficult to attract both fellows and students to what – as other colleges admitted women – shifted from being a bastion securing women's presence in Oxford to becoming a mere 'single sex college'. I remember both a potential fellow and an entrance candidate being considered for a scholarship saying they would rather not come to Oxford than be consigned to a mere women's college. Barbara never expressed the view that mixed colleges were in some sense better: her case was always that, things being as they are, it was only by admitting men that the college could secure its future as what she always thought it must be, for her own sake and others, a respected site of scholarship. It was to the ideal of the college as a site of scholarship that Barbara dedicated her life.