

JOAN SINAR (1925–2015)

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The death of Joan Sinar (in later years Mrs John Ferguson), a few months short of her ninetieth birthday, marks the passing of one of the last of the founders of modern local authority record keeping. Joan's achievement in establishing from scratch two county record offices, and playing an important part in the creation of a third, makes her an important figure in the recent history of the profession. At the same time, longstanding members of the Derbyshire Archaeological Society will remember Joan chiefly as the first county archivist at Matlock, as the editor for a number of years of both this *Journal* and *Derbyshire Miscellany*, and as a great supporter of all aspects of local history in the county.

Joan Collier Sinar was born on 1 May 1925 at 110 Holden Road, Leigh (Lancs.), the daughter of Frank Sinar, a mining surveyor,¹ and the former Ruth Collier, who were married at Leigh in 1924. Ruth was the daughter of Thomas Collier, a wine and spirit merchant. The house on Holden Road was her family home; Frank lived next door.² Joan was educated at Leigh girls' grammar school, which she entered in 1935 on a Lancashire county council junior scholarship,³ and from where she went up to Somerville College, Oxford, in 1943 on another county scholarship to read Modern History. After initially taking Part I of the shortened war-time degree course, she was able to stay on for a third year and graduated in 1946.⁴ She later recalled with pleasure that this extra year meant that she was able to take two special subjects, at a time when even one was still an option. After graduating, Joan studied at Manchester University for two years for an M.A., completing a dissertation on 'Ecclesiastical patronage in the diocese of York, 1258–1316' in 1949.⁵ It is important to appreciate that in those days what would now be called a 'research Masters' entailed a good deal more work than its modern counterpart, and that very few graduate students had the time or resources to read for a doctorate.

From Manchester Joan was appointed in July 1948 as an assistant archivist at the Staffordshire Record Office, established the year before with Marguerite Gollancz as the first county archivist. Although Joan was one of two assistants, in 1950 she was promoted in recognition of the fact that she had acted as Miss Gollancz's deputy. Much of the early work at Staffordshire on the quarter sessions records and for exhibitions, as well as establishing principles on which the later development of the office was to be based, were her doing.⁶

Joan resigned from Staffordshire in December 1951, following her appointment as 'Assistant Records Officer' of Devon — the first county archivist in all but name — where she began work in March the following year. She stayed at Devon for ten years, during which she and a small staff did a great deal of development work in the new office: arranging the older official records, managing the modern records of the county council (not at the time a common feature of the work of a county archivist), supervising the transfer of the diocesan records (which had been severely damaged during the Second World War), surveying and collecting parish records, and encouraging private deposits from landowners and others. Exhibitions were organised, talks given, and publications issued. In 1960 the Devon office secured recognition from the Lord Chancellor and in 1963 moved to the new County Hall, after suffering for some years from problems of poor accommodation.⁷



Plate 1: Joan Sinar in the Derbyshire Record Office in the 1960s. (Derbyshire Record Office)

By this time Joan had moved north, to become the first county archivist of Derbyshire, where in effect she did all the pioneer work she had done in Devon over again. Derbyshire was the last county in England to establish a record office before local government reorganisation in 1974. By the time it was founded in April 1962 much private material that might have gone to the office had it been set up earlier had either been lost or deposited in Sheffield City Library, John Rylands Library in Manchester, the university library and county record office in Nottingham, and Derby borough library. In addition, the muniments of two of the largest landowners in the county, the Cavendishes of Chatsworth and the Manners family of Belvoir Castle (Leics.) and Haddon Hall, remained (and indeed remain) in the custody of their owners, and the historic diocesan records for Derbyshire are at Lichfield. Nonetheless, Joan, again with limited accommodation and a small staff (notably Dudley Fowkes, her exceptionally able and hardworking senior assistant from 1968), worked energetically to make the office known in the county, collect material from depositors, and safeguard the official records, which had suffered badly at the hands of the antiquary J.C. Cox in the late nineteenth century. Recognition from the Lord Chancellor for the strongrooms at Matlock was obtained at the outset, and in 1969 the office secured appointment by the bishop of Derby as the diocesan record office.

Derbyshire built up holdings that were particularly strong in business records (especially for individuals and companies engaged in the lead, coal and iron industries, including a large quantity of pre-vesting records transferred by the National Coal Board), as well as the muniments of local estates. In addition, Joan oversaw the influx of both the district council records in 1972–4 and ecclesiastical parish records after 1979. All this was achieved against a background of inadequate accommodation for documents, staff and readers at what was then County Offices, and the enforced use of very unsatisfactory outstores as far away as Derby. Both attracted severe criticism from the Public Record Office and the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts,⁸ whose officers then formed the nearest Britain has ever had to an inspectorate charged with maintaining minimum standards of provision by local authority record offices. After many years of searching, a new home for the record office was found close to County Hall in a former grammar school. In her later years, Joan devoted much time and effort to planning the conversion of this building, to which the office moved shortly after she retired in 1988. In 2006 Joan published an account of her work at Matlock.⁹

Throughout her time in Derbyshire, Joan was closely involved in the work of the Archaeological Society, as editor of its *Journal* between 1970 and 1976 and of *Derbyshire Miscellany* from 1970 to 1982. She was elected a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society in 1974.¹⁰ Joan was a founding committee member of the Derbyshire Record Society, established in 1977 after an earlier attempt by the Archaeological Society to establish record publishing in the county had succumbed to the hyper-inflation of that decade. She also helped to set up the Derbyshire Historic Gardens Trust in 1989, which she described as the first such body ‘north of Watford Gap’. She lectured extensively on the work of the record office and other topics to local groups and for Sheffield University extramural department, in which she was an honorary lecturer.¹¹

Joan’s professional duties and editorial commitments left little time to write much on either local history or archives, but she contributed a series of annual reports, of growing length, to this *Journal* on the work of the office between 1963 and 1970;¹² published several village studies which originated as background briefs to assist the county planning department in designating conservation areas (others remained in typescript);¹³ and wrote a short county

history and other booklets for the county council.¹⁴ She also contributed a very thoughtful and perceptive memoir of a slightly older contemporary and close friend, John Bestall (1921–73), like Joan an Oxford history graduate, who became the deputy director of the Sheffield extramural department and was a pioneer of the modern approach to local history in adult education.¹⁵ Bestall was Joan's predecessor as editor of the *Journal* (as well as the founder of both *Derbyshire Miscellany* and the Archaeological Society's record series, which filled two major gaps in local history publishing in the county) and his early death was a great blow to the scholarly study of Derbyshire history. This was perhaps her best piece of published writing and properly illustrates her formidable intellect.

Outside her official work, Joan's main interest was the Church. In 1991 she was admitted a lay reader in the diocese of Derby and served on the council of the Modern Churchpeople's Union for about five years around the same time.¹⁶ In 1992 she described herself as 'fairly busy with Church things'.¹⁷ Joan was also both an excellent cook and needlewoman, and had wide literary and musical interests.¹⁸

In 2002 Joan married John Ferguson, a retired nurse, and the couple later settled near Newtownards in County Down. She died in Northern Ireland on 18 January 2015¹⁹ and is survived by her husband.

REFERENCES

- ¹ Birth certificate, Leigh (Lancs.) RD, June quarter 1925. Joan's date of birth is wrongly recorded as 1 June 1925 in the Somerville College register and in an obituary notice which appeared in *The Daily Telegraph*, 25 April 2015. The latter, understood to be the work of Adrian Woodhouse of Teversal (Notts.), contains other statements of questionable accuracy and poor taste. The help of the Derbyshire Record Office (including the county local studies library) in the preparation of this notice is gratefully acknowledged. This article is similar in content to another, written jointly by myself and Adam Green, which will appear in *Archives and Records*, 35 (2015) and I am grateful to the Archives and Records Association for allowing the material also to be used here.
- ² Marriage certificate, Leigh (Lancs.) RD, June quarter 1924. Frank's surname was wrongly indexed as 'Sinor' in the GRO index and a request was made in April 2015 to the Registrar General for England and Wales for this error to be corrected.
- ³ Information kindly supplied by Mr Alex Miller of Wigan Archives.
- ⁴ Information kindly supplied by the assistant archivist, Somerville College, Oxford, from the college register.
- ⁵ Information kindly supplied by the University of Manchester.
- ⁶ Information kindly supplied by Mr Andrew George of the Staffordshire Record Office, from the minutes of the records committee of the county council; and see also [D.V. Fowkes], *The First Forty Years: a history of the Staffordshire Record Office 1947–1987* (Staffordshire CC, [1987]), 3.
- ⁷ Brian Carpenter (ed.), *Ten Centuries of Devon Archives* (Friends of Devon's Archives, 2002), 9–11, 16–25.
- ⁸ Derbyshire Record Office, D1971 (an unlisted accumulation of 'accommodation' files from the office's own records).
- ⁹ J. Ferguson, 'The early days of the Derbyshire Record Office', in P. Riden and D.G. Edwards (eds.), *Essays in Derbyshire History presented to Gladwyn Turbutt* (Derbyshire Record Society, 30, 2006), 266–80.
- ¹⁰ Information kindly supplied by the executive secretary of the RHS.
- ¹¹ Information from a cv written in 1992, now in the archives at Somerville College.
- ¹² 'The Derbyshire Record Office in 1963', *Derbyshire Archaeological Journal*, 83 (1962), 90–3 was the first; the last in the series was 'Derbyshire Record Office and Diocesan Record Office, 1970',

ibid., 90 (1970), 94–100. See also ‘The Derbyshire Record Office’, *Bulletin of Local History: East Midlands Region*, 8 (1973), 3–11, and short notes on the office in other issues of this periodical (latterly *East Midlands Historian*).

- ¹³ ‘Ockbrook’, *Derbyshire Miscellany*, 8 (1) (1977), 29–38; ‘Elmton’, ibid. 8 (3) (1978), 97–102 (and a separately published booklet, *Elmton: a short history* (1976)); ‘Calke and Ticknall’, ibid., 8 (5) (1979), 148–73; ‘Calke Abbey: its setting and working estate’, ibid., 10 (6) (1985), 169–75; ‘Derbyshire conservation areas: Newton Solney’, *Derbyshire Life & Countryside*, April 1981, 50–1. Similar material for other places is available in typescript in the county local studies library at Matlock.
- ¹⁴ *Derbyshire: an illustrated history* (1979); *The Grants of Arms to Derbyshire County Council* (1985); see also *Pentrich Revolution, 1817* (a catalogue for one of the office’s first large exhibitions, mounted in 1967 to mark the 150th anniversary of the rising), and *Derbyshire Historic Buildings Trust: the first twenty years* (1994).
- ¹⁵ ‘John Morton Bestall 1921–1973: a memoir’, *Derbyshire Archaeological Journal*, 93 (1973), 5–8; the whole of this special issue of the *Journal*, which Joan edited, was dedicated to Bestall’s memory.
- ¹⁶ As note 11.
- ¹⁷ As note 11.
- ¹⁸ Recollections contributed by Mrs Miriam Wood, who worked with Joan at both Devon and Derbyshire, and Adam Green, also a former archivist at Matlock.
- ¹⁹ Death certificate, Ard (Co. Down) RD.