

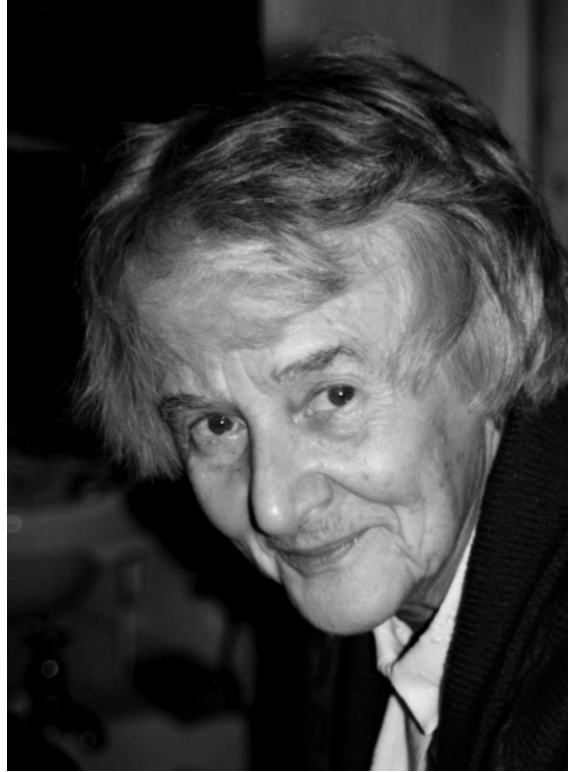
Joan Thirsk, FBA, 1922–2013

Joan Thirsk, FBA, died on 3 October as a result of a fall at home. She was 91, and is survived by husband, Jimmy, a sprightly 99, and her children, Martin and Jane. For more than 50 years she was the single most significant figure in the British Agricultural History Society, and was recognized internationally as Britain's principal rural historian.

Like so many of her generation, Joan's career was profoundly influenced by the Second World War. She was in Berne at the outbreak of war, living with a family on a London County Council language scholarship, and struggled to return through France. She rejoined her schoolfellows from Camden School to complete her studies, in its evacuation successively to Uppingham, Grantham and Stamford, perhaps the first links with the county that would assume such significance in her later career. She went on to study French and German at Westfield College, London, which was then, in turn, evacuated to St Peter's Hall (later College), Oxford. After completing her first year, she was given the choice between completing the course to become a teacher, or signing up for national service. Choosing the latter, she was selected for the Intelligence Corps, and served from 1942 in the Fusion Room, later linked with Huts 3 and 6 in Sixta, at Bletchley Park, where she met her future husband. Also serving at Bletchley was John Habakkuk, a future Oxford colleague, but neither was aware of the other's presence there until revealed by a lunchtime conversation at a conference in the mid-1980s. She married Jimmy in September 1945, and returned to Westfield. She changed course to History directly as a result of the war: she felt impelled to study causation, but also felt that languages would be more difficult to study as a newly married woman because she thought it necessary to go and live abroad to achieve a near-native mastery.

On graduation she studied for a Ph.D. under R. H. Tawney, on sales of royalist lands during the Interregnum, which established the challenges of specificity of place and landownership to grander narratives. A lectureship in Sociology at LSE was followed in 1951 by the first of her major posts, as research fellow at Leicester, where many of her characteristic approaches to the past were developed. She remained at Leicester until 1965, when she succeeded W. G. Hoskins as Reader in Economic History at the University of Oxford, with a professorial fellowship at St Hilda's.

There Joan taught undergraduates (of whom I was one of the first) giving a memorable source-based class on Defoe's *Tour*, and introducing very different perspectives on the past. In collaboration with J. P. Cooper, she edited a wonderful new collection of *Seventeenth-century economic documents* (1972), to replace the old collection by Bland, Brown and Tawney, used as the set text in the single course in economic history then offered among 'further subjects' at second-year level. This was a collection of immense value, and still represents an extraordinary foundation for study in the period. Her principal contributions in Oxford were, however at



Joan Thirsk, c. 1992
Photo courtesy of Jane Robinson.

postgraduate level, as doctoral supervisor, and as the convenor of a memorable early modern seminar. She was a meticulous and enthusiastic supervisor of a large number of doctoral students, to the extent that one of her St Hilda's colleagues advised her not to see them too often. Disenchanted by the first major wave of cuts in university funding in 1981–2, she took early retirement in 1983.

Despite this critical contribution to advanced teaching and supervision, Joan's real strengths lay in original and wide-ranging research. Two papers published in 1953 demonstrated the rationale of traditional farming systems and were developed in contributions to the *VCH Leicestershire*. Deep analysis of unpublished primary sources, notably probate inventories and the records of the courts of Equity, was applied to demonstrate the complex patterns of past agrarian landscapes, seen in her monograph *English Peasant Farming* (1957). This direct approach was married to her reading of comparable evidence from elsewhere in Western Europe, and led her to question the conventional historiography of open fields, and to argue that these were not necessarily farmed in common, and that neither cultural nor technological factors were sufficient explanations of communalism.

Springing directly from these observations of practice from the bottom up was her conviction of the place of the whole family in farm enterprises, the central place of women in mixed farm economies and the complex associations of agriculture and industry. Together these generated important publications on women and the family, and the fundamental study, 'Industries in the Countryside', in the Tawney *festschrift* in 1961, which did so much to lay the analytical

foundations of protoindustrialization. These themes recurred in her survey of plurality and peasant innovation in farming, *Alternative agriculture: a history* (1997), and in the deepening interest in textiles, seen in her chapter on the 'Fantastical folly of fashion' in the Julia Mann *festschrift* (1973). Typically of Joan's curiosity about the practicalities of her subjects, she had spun and knitted mixed fibre yarns in exploring knitting more widely.

Many of these themes, and the links of early modern governments with industrial change and patterns of consumption were revisited and extended in her Ford lectures of 1975, published as *Economic Policy and Projects* in 1978. Here Joan explored patents, ideas for change, new tastes and processes, dualism in occupation, and the work-creating impact of 'projects', to revise our views of occupational structures and the development of consumer demand before the 1750s. Expanding the models for change she had expounded in studies of tobacco-growing and stocking-knitting, this work inspired a large number of followers, and was, in the words of one, 'a subtle critique and clarion call to explore the everyday lives of women and men for patterns of historic material practices'. As in all her work, people, often from humble stations in society, were central to her analysis of innovation and change.

In retirement from 1983 onwards she took great pleasure in her arrangements for boxes of books to be despatched to Hadlow Castle from the London Library to feed her continuing researches, and two main areas of work emerged. Food, again marrying her practical and scholarly interests, formed the subject of her last main book, *Food in Early Modern England* (2007). For Joan, food history gave a fresh dimension to her thoughts whilst cooking in her kitchen, reflecting the research and hospitality that characterized her 30 years in her Kentish home. Many of her essays on crops had explored the process of transmission of innovations, through the study of the libraries of gentlemen to more direct contagious spread from farmer to farmer, and time spent in Spain sparked ideas about the ultimate sources of horticultural progress. Reading widely, Joan became aware of the extent to which Islamic horticulture had developed crops and techniques that diffused later to the Low Countries, one of the principal sources of gardening innovation in England, potentially a very large research project, and not one to begin, as did Joan in her eighties, even when so powerfully supported by husband Jimmy in his great role as bibliographer.

Early in her career, Joan had been part of the institutional beginnings of agrarian history, both in the formation of the British Agricultural History Society in 1952 and the establishment of the Cambridge Agrarian History of England & Wales project from 1956.

Joan succeeded Herbert Finberg to become the second editor of the *Agricultural History Review* (1965–72), maintaining its very high typographical standards, having contributed from its first edition in 1953 with articles, reviews, and annual lists of publication in the field. As editor, she promoted the wider subject of British agrarian history, applying many insights drawn from comparative European studies, and often made less visible contributions in her improving of authors' drafts to produce better-published results. As in her role as general editor of the History of Lincolnshire series, many authors were unwitting beneficiaries of these improvements. She served two terms as President of BAHS (1983–86 and 1995–98), a distinctive mark of the esteem in which she was held by her colleagues, and a measure of her significance to the Society. Her distinction led to her election as Fellow of the British Academy in 1974, and the award of CBE in 1994.



Joan Thirsk, c. 1993

Photo courtesy of Jane Robinson.

She was also a long-standing member of the Council of the Economic History Society, and a central figure in the editorial board of *Past & Present* (1957–92), and appears in the portrait of the seven founders of the journal in the National Portrait Gallery, a picture she did not personally admire. She was very active in wider local and regional history, producing several articles in the *Amateur Historian*, guides to sources and approaches, two later reprinted as pamphlets.

She was a member of the committee called together by Finberg to launch the Cambridge Agrarian History project, and was the first designated volume editor, directing its small Acton research office from 1957, where two distinguished research officers Alan Everitt and Margaret Midgley worked on the materials for volume IV, 1500–1640, published in 1967. From the outset, strongly influenced by Joan, the project was committed to undertaking a vast amount of new research, intended to preclude a synthesis of existing knowledge that would lead only to the revelation of equally large tracts of ignorance. Her own chapters in volume IV, published in 1967, fully vindicated this approach, even in Chapter III, 'Farming Techniques', which she undertook late in the project when the original contributor withdrew. It was in this volume that her considered thoughts on local and regional patterns of farming were first presented, and regions featured strongly as chapters in the two volumes of the *Agrarian History* that she edited. Her perspectives on regions had been presented as pencil-outlined maps to her first undergraduate classes in Oxford, clearly linking teaching with research in the mid-1960s.

Puritanical in her views of the use of scarce resources, she had been disapproving of the planning lunch held under Finberg's direction at Simpson's.

Finberg saw volume I part II into print in 1972, but at his death in 1974, Joan succeeded as General Editor of the series, contributing the editing and writing of much of volume V, parts I and II, 1984–5, and directing the project to completion with volume VII, 1850–1914, in 2000. As volume editor, she was a strong director, but was intimately involved also with every draft text as General Editor, and most contributors received her comments, queries and suggestions as well as those of their formal volume editor. The achievement has been immense: eight volumes, published between 1967 and 2000, in eleven bound books; 103 authors and editors; and over 9100 pages of published text. Unusually, in comparison with other agrarian history projects in Western Europe, the approach of the *Agrarian History* was strongly oriented to primary research. A decade or more on, much of that content has yet to be fully incorporated into wider scholarship, and, sadly, the reprinting of selected thematic volumes, as with some chapters of volumes IV and V, which might well have diffused this scholarship more widely, proved a less attractive project than Joan anticipated. She was also disappointed that the series was not extended in its chronological coverage into the later twentieth century.

Joan supervised a large number of research students, and freely offered support and advice to many others, making the group once described as 'the friends of Joan' very numerous and international. There were two *festschritfs*, in 1990 and 2004, and on her ninetieth birthday 40 or more wrote letters of tribute as individuals or on behalf of learned societies. She received many honorary degrees, the Fellowship of the British Academy in 1974, and a CBE in 1994 for her contributions to local and regional history. Her work, her welcoming personality, and her forceful if not strident feminism made her a major role model for younger women, but also a friend and support to all younger scholars, and a major British figure in the wider world of history. All this was attained with a keen sense of fun, and an open house to visitors. Hers was a life of major achievements, and she will be widely missed.

John Chartres

Here we publish, with the generous permission of their authors, two memoirs of Joan, the first by her husband, Jimmy Thirsk, the second by her daughter, Jane Robinson, both read at the memorial meeting for Joan held on 11 January 2014.

I

Thank you, Richard, for organising this tribute to my wife Joan. And thank you also to all those who have come today – her old students, many of them now retired professors, family, colleagues, friends and neighbours. Joan would have been astonished, just as she was overwhelmed on her ninetieth birthday in 2012 when she received a leather-bound dossier of letters from old colleagues and students.

In the videoed interview we have just seen,¹ Joan spoke of her gratitude to Professor Tawney

¹ The meeting began with the interview of Joan by Anna Kussmann made c. 1990 as part of the Institute of Historical Research's *Interviews with Historians* series.

for the help he gave her when he supervised her PhD thesis. I remember the day that, several years after the end of World War II, Joan came back from Westfield College, London, with the news that she had been awarded a grant for further studies to enable her to take a higher degree. Mrs Mary Bennett, Principal of Westfield College (a daughter of H. A. L. Fisher the historian) and herself an economic historian, advised Joan to go to the Institute of Historical Research and consult Alexander Taylor Milne, the Secretary and Librarian. ‘I know him!’ I said. For in 1941, serving in the Royal Artillery Maritime Regiment, I had met a fellow librarian, Gunner Milne, who was awaiting transfer to the Education Corps. So, as Joan did not know him, I went along with her. The last time I had seen him, about five years earlier, he was in the cookhouse at Southport, awaiting transfer to the Education Corps. He was the one who added gravy to your plate after you had collected the meat and veg. It was a great joy to see him again. He was kind and helpful to Joan, suggesting subjects for her thesis and raising the possibility that Professor Tawney might agree to be her supervisor.

Tawney had a tremendous influence on Joan. She had read his *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* in her spare time at Bletchley Park in the Penguin edition and was now to be supervised by the great man himself. For Tawney was one of the greatest historians of the first half of the twentieth century, and, in my opinion, one of the greatest men of that century. We were once invited to a party at his flat in London but I never saw his study, which, according to Joan, was in a state of chaos. As the years went by Joan’s study began to resemble Tawney’s and though Joan claimed that she knew where every book was, I found her system of classification unlike anything I had ever come across in the seven different libraries in which I had worked.

Not many would associate Joan with Shakespearian studies. Yet three times she found time to write long essays on Shakespearian themes. The first was a 10,000-word chapter entitled ‘Forest, field and garden, landscapes and economies in Shakespeare’s England’, which appeared in Volume 1 of an enormous three-volume work of nearly 1000 pages, edited by J. F. Andrews and published by Scribners in America in 1985.

After Joan retired from her post as Reader in Economic History at Oxford, she was invited to conduct a month-long series of seminars at the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington DC. A flat near the Library was provided and I went with her. We were met at the airport and transported to our flat by Jon Bush (no relation!), an American student who had been supervised by Joan many years earlier. He is here with us today. At the same time as the seminars, the Folger Library had put on an exhibition with the strange title *Fooles and Fricasseees*. The sub-title *Food in Shakespeare’s England* was the title of a 10,000-word essay by Joan, which appears in the exhibition catalogue (Folger Library, 1999). During our stay in Washington DC I was allowed to use the library. You can imagine what a paradise it was for me, a retired librarian with a lifelong interest in Shakespeare, to roam around the shelves. One day, one of the Folger librarians took me down to the holy of holies in the basement, where they kept, safe from flood and fire, their collection of First Folios and many other rare books of the period.

Joan’s third contribution to Shakespearian studies appears in *Shakespeare, an Oxford guide*, published in 2003 by Oxford University Press and edited by Stanley Wells and Lena Orlin. Joan’s chapter in this book is entitled ‘Daily life in town and country’.

My time is up, but I would like to end by quoting lines from Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*, which Joan knew by heart. She had probably learned them at Camden School in London in the 1930s, where she enjoyed acting in plays, and once appeared as Marie Antoinette. The lines are spoken by Caliban to two drunken sailors who have just heard strange music.

Be not afeard; the isle is full of noises,
 Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight, and hurt not.
 Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
 Will hum about mine ears; and sometimes voices,
 That, if I then had wak'd after long sleep,
 Will make me sleep again: and then, in dreaming,
 The clouds methought would open, and show riches
 Ready to drop upon me; that when I wak'd,
 I cried to dream again.

Jimmy Thirsk

II

This article will give you a glimpse into the domesticated world of my mother, Joan Thirsk. I will tell you something about Mum as a wife, mother and housekeeper.

Mum always seemed to be there even when she wasn't. I'm not sure quite how she managed that. Although she commuted by train to Leicester, and then later to Oxford, and stayed over for a night or two during each week of term, she always left behind a casserole and jacket potatoes in the oven for us all, so her presence was felt even in her absence. My brother Martin and I have discussed it and both recall that she seemed to be at home more often than she wasn't.

She was a guardian of the English language. There were no split infinitives in our house, nor use of the word 'hopefully' at the beginning of a sentence. She was a stickler for etiquette and manners. I recall sitting at the lunch table ages after the others had gone to play till I said thank you for something our guests had brought. She took a dim view of poor manners, or as she would call it, 'boorish' behaviour.

She was certainly a feminist, probably right in so many ways, yet she could sometimes make inappropriate anti-men comments, for instance, an awkward-to-clean cooker top 'must have been designed by a man'. I knew my eventual husband would have to cut the mustard with her. Fortunately, his interest in such things as weaving, bread making and designing knitted jumpers wooed her over!

She was interested in everyone and everything, large and small. A new rose on the bush, a new recipe, a sour-dough culture for baking bread, a piece of knitting or a trip to a new place, a chance encounter with an interesting person, all these things were as interesting to her as the much bigger things in life. She had a keen interest in wanting to do things, hands on. It wasn't enough for her just to learn about them or research them. I have lost count of how many times, since October when she died, I have thought to myself 'oh I must tell Mum about that, she would be interested ...'.

She was always busy, only ever at rest for a short spell in the evening perhaps, when she might read *The Times*. She would be constantly cooking, baking, cleaning, shopping for food, sewing, gardening, working in her study. She was multitasking years before the phrase was even thought of! She made virtually all our clothes when we were children, and all her own too. She took up machine knitting in her retirement for all her children, their spouses and her four grandchildren and I recall how crestfallen she was when, at 38 knitted jumpers each, we all said we had enough, and she was left with no one to knit for!

The only time I remember her really relaxing and doing nothing was occasionally a short sunbathe on the roof top of our maisonette in Swiss Cottage. Bikini on, she would climb up the ladder through the skylight and soak up the rays for half an hour or so. But thinking back, I don't suppose she was doing nothing – she was probably writing the next chapter of her book, in her head. As a historical note aside, we could see the Royal Free Hospital being built from that roof top, it must have been between 1965 and 1974.

She occasionally lost her temper, for example when she found Martin and me as children sliding down steep stairs towards a hard, tiled floor in cardboard boxes. I wouldn't recommend you do this at home – it was such great fun but I do recall her anger at the time! On another occasion, we were aged about 8 and 10 yrs and had left the hot tap running in the bathroom, Martin on the basis that I was the last to use it, and I on the basis that Martin had turned it on in the first place. Annoyed with us, Mum ran up from her study to turn it off, saying as she went 'Children, why do you *vex* me so?' I don't think either of us had any idea what that meant, but her body language said it all. This was a prime example of how beautiful her use of the English language was, even in a state of high emotion!

When doing her academic work at home, my recollections of her are always in a rather cluttered study (she hated to throw anything out), pencil in hand, marking work, usually with the pressure cooker sizzling in the kitchen, or some bread baking in the oven. If interrupted at her desk in the study, she would put her pencil down and listen, give us time, not be cross for the interruption. I'm sorry if it was *your* thesis she was marking at the time!

We were awash with so many words and names from her academic life, which we accepted as normal, even if we didn't know what they meant! Words and phrases like 'I'm just popping to the PRO or the BM or the Bodley'. It wasn't till I was much older that I understood what or where these places were. 'Subfusc' – that was another mystery – we had no idea it was linked to the black witch's cloak we saw hanging in her bedroom wardrobe or in her room at the History faculty. People's names – Billy Hoskins, Alan Everett, Herbert Finberg, Professor Habakkuk, Trevor Roper – we were so familiar with these people even though we may not have met them all. We also grew up so used to parents who had literally thousands of books lining their walls, and couldn't understand why no one else did, when we visited our friends' houses.

She was a very attentive mum, always there at school parents' evenings, always supportive regarding school-work, exams, revision, everything really. She was always interested in things we were doing and gave wise counsel if we were in difficulty. I recall what I used to call 'Ghostly talks' at bedtime. She would come and lie on my bed in the dark, me inside the bed, and she on top of the blankets, and we would mull over the day together. Those chats were really important to me. We talked about all sorts. She was always happy to come out for a bike ride, or play tennis in the garden, if that's what we wanted to do. She was inexhaustible really.

Although she showed definite cognitive decline over the last few years, she was still translating a German book into English, for Dad, three months before she died, and helping correct the punctuation and grammar of my son Tim's university essays during early 2013. She may not have known much about the subject – Global Health – but her editing skills were unhindered by this, and the red ink ran freely across his pages! She was still baking her own bread a year ago, and not in a bread-maker as you or I might. She would regard that as cheating! She did it in the traditional way with two risings, three loaves at a time, one to eat and two for the freezer. She was still able to enjoy life into her last year, even though she was physically and mentally slowing. She and Dad enjoyed ten days of glorious hot summer staying with us in North Yorkshire in July of last year, basking in the sun in the garden, and many trips out, to an outdoor Shakespeare play and to Beverley for the day, with a picnic in sunshine on Beverley Westwood. We also had a trip to see a working limestone quarry, a new experience for us all.

Only four days before she died, she was out with seven of us family for lunch at Hever Castle in Kent, albeit having to resort to a wheelchair to be pushed around the grounds. That is the first and last time I am aware of her needing a wheelchair for a trip out. There is no doubt that she would not have welcomed a slow and long decline, or to be kept alive by too much doctoring. She would have hated to have not been able to live in her own home. So when she collapsed and died suddenly on 3 October, after 2 months of deteriorating health, it is I am sure the death she would have chosen.

We family will all miss her more than words can say. She was a truly incredible woman and I am very proud to have been her daughter.

Jane Robinson