

Rebecca West’s years on the Suburb



Rebecca West, feminist, author and journalist, moved to 5 Chatham Close in 1912 when she was 20 years old. She lived with her mother, who bought the house, and sisters until the family moved away eight years later.

Rebecca was born in London on 21 December 1892 and was the third and youngest daughter of Charles Fairfield, journalist, war correspondent and pamphleteer, of Irish extraction. Her mother was Scottish.

She was christened Cicily Isabel Fairfield, but at 19, she assumed the name of Rebecca West taken from the passionate self-willed heroine in Ibsen’s ‘Rosmersholm’, a role she had once played to an empty theatre.

She lived her first 10 years in South London but after her father died, moved to Edinburgh and was educated at George Watson’s Ladies College. She then moved back to London.

In 1911 aged 19 she joined the staff of The Freewoman and the following year became political writer on The Clarion. She also wrote for The Star, The Daily News and The New Statesman. In a letter sent from Chatham Close to the Editor of The Freewoman, Dora Marsden, Rebecca wrote: ‘The Daily Herald has seduced me into editing their Woman’s Page. They are tired of baby-clothes they say and want ‘non-Gospel’ talks to women. I fear this means trials for sedition’.

Attractive in appearance, with a quick mind, biting wit and an outlook which demolished established thoughts and beliefs, she drew the amorous attention of H G Wells. She first met him when she was sent to interview him. The attraction between them was immediate despite their difference in ages. He was 44.

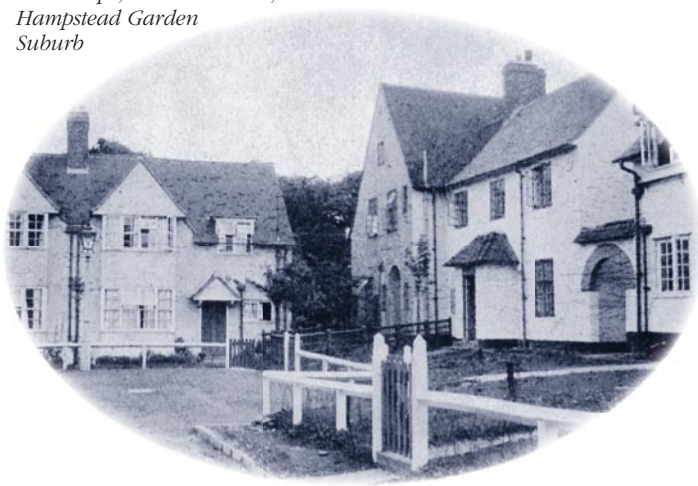
On 2 October 1912 in a letter to Harold Rubinstein, a young solicitor who became a renowned literary lawyer, she wrote: ‘As you prophesied H G Wells wrote

to me and asked me to go and see him. I found him one of the most interesting men I have ever met. He talked straight on from 1.15 till 6.30 with immense vitality and a kind of hunger for ideas. His wife is charming but a little effaced’. This was Wells’ second wife Jane who acted as his literary secretary and seemed to suffered his many love affairs in silence.

Rebecca’s mother disapproved of her daughter’s acquaintance with Wells even before they became lovers and it turns out with justification. Around March 1913, Rebecca wrote to Wells desperately unhappy at his treatment of her including the words: ‘I don’t understand why you wanted me three months ago and don’t want me now. You have only a passion for excitement and for comfort. You don’t want any more excitement and I do not give people comfort. I always knew you would hurt me to death some day but I hoped to choose the time and place’. However, the affair continued and Rebecca gave birth to their son Anthony Panther West on 4 August 1914.

On 22 October 1914, Rebecca wrote to Harold Rubinstein from Ware in Hertfordshire saying: ‘I have settled here till April or May of next year – when I have

Fairliehope, Chatham Close, Hampstead Garden Suburb



anybody amooosing (sic) down you must come too. I am just better but not very fit. As a new course of treatment I am trying to get sent out to the front as a war correspondent’. She appeared to keep the birth of her son secret.

She probably wrote her first novel The Return of the Soldier at Chatham Close which describes three women who strive to cure a soldier of shell-shock induced amnesia. The book was published in 1918.

Rebecca’s relationship with Wells lasted another nine years but in 1930 she married Henry Maxwell Andrews, a private banker. She died on 15 March 1983 aged 90.

Karen Stuart now lives in Rebecca West’s home at 5 Chatham Close. She moved in exactly one month after Rebecca’s death on 15 April 1983 and then found out she had lived here.

“It is a small world,” says Karen. “A colleague of mine, Justin, who used to sit near me at work was an executor of Rebecca’s estate. Justin had been like a son to her. I loved the location and the house even before I saw inside it. I knew I wanted to live there and kept asking local estate agents to find me a house in Chatham Close until they did. I have been very happy here.

“The house was called Fairliehope, after a farmhouse with a view over the Forth which the family had liked in the Pentland Hills.

“I have always been amused by a sentence in Victoria Glendinning’s book called ‘Rebecca West – A Life’ which reads, “They found a small semi detached house in Chatham Close in the Hampstead Garden Suburb, on the extreme northern edge of the capital. It was a brand new development of cheap, cottage style housing.”

SUSAN LEWIS

Letters to the Editor

Church Street
Dorset SP7 0NY

Sir,
As an active participant in the 1957 Jubilee of the Suburb, I much appreciated Michael Darke’s evocative article in the last issue of Suburb News recalling the events on the day of the visit of Princess Margaret which will long live in my memory.

The radiant and charming Princess was escorted to Bigwood House to be introduced to Kate Burchell’s young and excited junior school class. It was a glorious, hot June day and one small tot had the temerity to ask the elegant Princess why she was not wearing a crown. “I thought it was too hot today,” was the smiling reply.

Then there was the question of tea. The late Gordon Griffiths had made, at the Institute pottery, a beautifully embellished and delicate cup and saucer from which she could drink welcome refreshment. It was only briefly prior to serving tea that I learnt in conversation with her Lady in Waiting, Iris Peake who accompanied her, that the Princess only drank Earl Grey tea, whereas ordinary Indian leaf tea was at the ready. While someone was dispatched frantically to a shop in the Market Place to rectify the matter, the opportunity was taken to amuse the Princess by telling her about ‘Hetty Wog’, a furry creature, half rabbit, half squirrel, adopted by the kindergarten whose daily saga from Miss Burchell will never be forgotten by those fortunate enough to attend her class. With Earl Grey prepared, tea was not only enjoyed but the Princess showed appreciation of the design of the cup and saucer. Turning to Iris Peake she enquired if she had anything in which to wrap them up. A copy of the London Evening News was produced! I have often wondered where the cup and saucer are today!

Before leaving Bigwood House it had been arranged for my young daughter (the great niece of the Jubilee’s president, Sir John Braithwaite), a pupil at the school, to present a bouquet to the Princess. Unfortunately, my daughter was at home with measles. When this was explained to Princess Margaret, she kindly asked that

her good wishes should be sent to Susan. A great moment in a great day.

Yours,
John Enderby

PS. Congratulations on the continued high standard of Suburb News which I read avidly from page to page.

Devon Rise
N2 0AA

Sir,
I read with interest Oliver Blond’s article in the autumn issue of Suburb News (Suburb welcomes new School Head). I am delighted that the school is opening its doors to the local community. One wonders though, how strong those links can be, when the population of the school itself has no direct links with the local community.

The Suburb area is fortunate to have excellent local primary schools which serve the local population. We are, however, poorly served by secondary schools. There is no local secondary school that the pupils of Brookland, Garden Suburb, Akiva, St Theresa’s, Holy Trinity or Chalgrove may attend. Boys do at least have the option of Christs College but there is no such possibility for girls.

Until one has experienced at first hand the stress of the secondary transfer process and the unjust manner in which places at the local girls’ school are allocated, I doubt whether an Head Teacher would truly appreciate how resentful many local residents are that local able girls are denied a place at his school.

Yours,
Mrs A Sklar

IN RESPONSE TO MRS SKLAR

Henrietta Barnett School
NW 11 7BN

Sir
Thank you for the opportunity to respond to Mrs Sklar’s letter and address some of her concerns.

At the heart of the letter is the issue of secondary school transfer. As parents and teachers ourselves, we fully understand

the stresses of school transfer for all involved. We also know that parents living on the Suburb must feel frustrated if they are unable to get their daughters into the local girls’ school.

The unique character of our school is inseparable from its status as one of the very few grammar schools remaining in London and this means our admission arrangements are based on academic criteria.

The result of this is that those who live locally and sit the entrance exam follow exactly the same procedure and have an equal chance of success as those who live further from the school. Although this provides a fair and open selection procedure in an academic sense, I do appreciate that it does not favour girls geographically.

I do hope, however, that The Henrietta Barnett School can still be a central part of the local community. I realise that there is much more we can do as a school to develop links and partnerships with local schools, local pupils and residents but I hope that this is something we have already begun.

The School is proud of its heritage and proud to be part of the Suburb. We continue to contribute to Suburb life in a variety of ways, either as a venue for lectures, charity events, local theatre groups and musical organisations or to host annual meetings for Suburb associations.

We have built good relationships with St Jude’s Church, the Free Church, Fellowship House and are fully involved in the forthcoming centenary celebrations. Our Choral Society is open to all residents to participate or to enjoy the concert, and this year we are actively working with the other Suburb schools and developing our links with Toynbee Hall as part of our ongoing commitment to our mutual founder’s vision.

The School will continue to look positively on ways in which we can play our part in the Suburb.

I hope that we will find more ways in which we can contribute in the future.

Yours
Oliver Blond, Head Teacher

Straw sun-bonnets for horses

One hundred years ago the Suburb was founded. What were its new inhabitants buying at that time? Well, it is easier to find out than one would think. Even today it is possible to obtain a facsimile copy of the ‘Army and Navy Stores Catalogue’ of 1907, consisting of over 1,500 pages

with about 30,000 engraved illustrations, listing all the items available to buy and for delivery.

This catalogue is a great reflection of British life at that time, listing everything that a family could ever need in the UK or Empire: clothing, including such delights as cycling knickers

for ladies and ‘Electra’ corsets for the extra stout; floor polish for your ballroom; straw sun-bonnets for your horses; muzzles for your ferrets.

Reflecting the home itself, very prevalent were such surprises as beetle traps, vacuum cleaning machines – requiring a man to work the mechanism whilst a maid guided the nozzle, over 50 designs of bedroom ‘Toilet Services’, together with

washing, wringing, and mangling machines rejoicing in such names as ‘Bradford’s Ye Tudor’.

Amongst the 49 pages of drugs, medicines and surgical instruments, ear trumpets and trusses are in abundance, along with more expensive items such as artificial limbs: ‘arms, for amputations, complete with hands’ at a price of £16 10s, if you were prepared to pay for superior quality (remember that a pound in 1907 would now be worth around £70.

On the brighter side, however, an 80lb three-tier wedding cake with period decoration would cost 157 shillings and 66 would buy you six bottles of 27-year-old Ben Nevis whiskey for your party.

A vanished age, but very worth looking back at in this Suburb Centenary Year!

CAROL KEMP



Barbara Honeyball married Nick Young, superintendent minister of the Buckingham, Bicester and Brackley circuit of Methodist churches, on 30th September at St Jude’s church.

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