

MISS CLARICE CHAPMAN, 1926-2004

by Trevor W. Hearl

St Helena has lost one of its most dedicated supporters with the death, on 1 March, of Miss Clarice Chapman at her home in Colchester. She would have been 78 on 21 April.

'Auntie Clarice', as she liked to be known by the children of St Helena, became interested in the Island through her regard for Colchester's patron saint, the Saint Helena who was beatified as mother of Constantine the Great and discoverer of "the True Cross", having become deeply involved in voluntary work for charities bearing her name. Thus she 'adopted' St Helena as one of those charities, giving unstintingly of her time and slender means by donating books and toys to the children's library in Jamestown, raising funds for its good causes, and championing its interests through her voluminous correspondence. Notwithstanding her gentle, retiring manner, she was a persistent and persuasive advocate, even urging her MP, Bob Russell, so earnestly to promote the Island's case in Parliament that he found himself being criticised for it by his constituents in the local press! As he reminded her, "It was because of you that I took up this crusade in the first place."

Among founder-members of the Friends of St Helena, Clarice quickly made her mark. At the first AGM in 1990 she gave £58.50 "for use on the Island" and invited members to join a party at Colchester to represent St Helena at the Borough's 800th anniversary celebrations on 18 August 1990, Saint Helena Day, Anglican style. Her arrangements included an open-deck bus tour of the town and a Mayoral Reception! In June 1996 she organised for the Friends a guided tour of the Old Royal Observatory, where she had worked half a century earlier, with special reference to those Astronomers Royal who had visited St Helena.

Few meetings of the Friends did not see Clarice arriving laden with gifts in cash and kind, the results of her ingenious, if often laborious, fund-raising schemes. That others seldom adopted them was a disappointment she became resigned to accept. Probably her greatest regret was that, from her own meagre resources, she was unable to visit St Helena herself, but through her "faithful correspondent", Mrs Gay Denbow, she maintained a personal contact with the Island. To mark this valued friendship she painted a meticulous copy of Pocock's historic panorama of St Helena for Gay to hang in her Island home. This remarkable artistic talent, natural and untaught, was put to good use in fund-raising, her favourite subjects being animal portraits and floral studies.

Many of her charities were connected with the Essex County Hospital where, she was delighted to learn, Dr Philip Gosse, author of *St Helena 1502-1938*, had been a houseman in his early medical career. As a hospital visitor there she was known to patients as "the strawberry lady" from her custom of bringing them a 'strawberry treat' from time to time. Through her talents and selfless labours, sus-

tained by a firm Christian faith, she raised many thousands of pounds for hospital, hospice and air ambulance funds, and in 1992, following her 'Raise a Laser' campaign, she was voted "Essex Woman of the Year".

Clarice was proud of her Essex roots. The daughter of a country policeman, she had lived in most parts of the county, and had been a pupil of Halstead Grammar School and Romford County High School before joining the staff of the Royal Observatory at Greenwich. This gave her a lifelong fascination with the mysteries of the universe and the endeavours of eminent astronomers, past and present, about whom she held some very decided views! She wrote several papers for the Royal Observatory and even later in life, seldom missed getting the most favourable view of an eclipse, her last from Alderney in 1999. The death of her parents resulted in her move to Colchester where she worked in the town library until her retirement. This experience was reflected in her familiarity with English literature, especially children's literature, in her love of writing, and in the composition of three unpublished novels. Her presence will clearly be missed - and not only at meetings of the Friends.

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