

Dame Elizabeth Ackroyd, MA, BLitt, DBE
(Philosophy, Politics and Economics, 1930)

1910-1987

Profile written by Dr Gianetta Corley (Modern Languages, 1958)



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Director of the Consumer Council (1963-1971), Civil Servant and Customer Rights Campaigner. ‘Public Protector No.1’.

Elizabeth Ackroyd, daughter of an army officer, was, with her sister Beryl, privately educated by a number of governesses. Her family enjoyed Suffolk county life and this is where Betty, we imagine, gained her lifelong love of horses. At St Hugh’s she read Politics, Philosophy and Economics and was said much later by her friend and PPE contemporary, a Somerville Politics Tutor, to have been passionate about Economics. The subject of her BLitt thesis, awarded in 1936, was *The Economic Policy of Trades Unions in Britain in the post-war period as illustrated by the proceedings of the Trades Union Congress*. Already Elizabeth’s uniqueness at St Hugh’s was beginning to be apparent. Her private education would have fitted her for a different way of life. Progress in her study of Economics demanded a knowledge of Statistics and this was a sphere of education notoriously neglected in the education of girls. Her diligence as a student and joy in receiving additional tuition enabled her to overcome this gap in her skills set.

Betty joined the Civil Service in 1940 and rose swiftly to become a statistician in the Ministry of Supply and then a decade later reached the grade of Under-Secretary. She is reported to have chosen deliberately to specialize in heavy industry. She was Director of the Steel and Power Division of the Economic Commission for Europe 1950-1951 and a member of the UK delegation to the high authority of the European Coal and Steel Community 1952-1957. Small wonder that her Somerville friend in her obituary described Dame Betty ‘as a very splendid and unusual member of her College’.

At the Consumer Council Betty’s firm view was evident that the British public was far too servile in so readily accepting poor service and quality. ‘They don’t mind enough’ she said. She fought to overcome this attitude and was successful, for example, in banning dangerous toys and flammable material used for children’s nightclothes. She was honoured with a DBE in 1970 and at the time of her retirement from this post said that she regarded her main achievement as: ‘An acceptance by manufacturers and by the service industries that consumers do have some organised voice at last’.

To the end of her life she remained the champion of many consumer groups. From 1971 until her death she was President and Chairman of the Patients’ Association, an independent pressure group, and she was on the executive board of the Pedestrians’

Association for Road Safety. She was also from 1970 onwards Vice President of the Consumers' Association.

Looking through the St Hugh's College *Chronicles* from the post-war years until her death in 1987 it is clear that Betty kept in contact with the College by sending her news for publication – not every year but often enough to let her College friends know in 1949/50 that she was in the USA for a year on a Commonwealth Scholarship for members of the Home Civil Service, or after her award of a DBE in the *Chronicle* for 1971/72 that she had been Director of the National Innovations Centre: Member of the Eggs Authority or in 1973/74 that she was one of the Committee appointed to investigate rising beef prices! Her name was also published each year in the list of major College Benefactors of her era.

One further aspect of Betty Ackroyd's life which made her unusual amongst her Oxford and Civil Service contemporaries was her love of horses. From 1965 she was a race horse owner, then in 1975 she was appointed to the Tote Board, its first woman member; from 1977-1978 she also served, controversially, as Chairman of the Bloodstock and Racehorse Industries Confederation and was one of a small number of elected women members of the Jockey Club.

In her *Daily Telegraph* obituary Dame Elizabeth is described as: 'a woman of formidable intellect and competence ... impishly articulate with a deep husky voice, merry grey eyes and an engagingly open air appearance.' An illuminating insight into her years at St Hugh's in the Thirties is provided in the Obituary in the St Hugh's College *Chronicle* for 1987/88 written by her friend from those years.

The outstanding career and personality of this eminent, remarkable St Hugh's Alumna and generous College Benefactor was summarised at the time of her death by Dame Jennifer Jenkins, Head of the National Trust:

'Betty Ackroyd brought a refreshing blend of acumen and plain speech to consumer affairs. As the Director of the Consumer Council she was a firm and formidable ally, provided always that she was convinced of the justice of the case.'

Her wide interests, great sense of humour and wise judgement made her an unusual personality. 'Who would expect a retired civil servant to live in St James's and own racehorses?'

Dame Betty Ackroyd was a fighter, a Consumers' Rights Campaigner, who used her intellect and forceful energy to battle for changes in the face of obdurate resistance and pervasive reluctance. Now so many decades later it is not possible to tell how difficult had been her career progression as a woman in the mainly male environment of the Home Civil Service. Yet she succeeded on that path and was honoured in her lifetime for her tireless and generous campaigning. This year St Hugh's honours her again as one of their most eminent trailblazing graduates.

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Dame (Dorothy) Elizabeth ('Betty') Ackroyd by Bassano Ltd, half-plate film negative, 28
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