



Penelope Betjeman
(nee Chetwode)
1910-1986

The daughter of the 1st Baron Chetwode and 7th Baronet of Oakley, Penelope Chetwode was born in England in 1910.

In 1928 aged 18, Penelope's parents moved her to India, partially due to her father's role in the Indian Army and partially to move her away from her first dalliance Johnnie Spencer (nephew of Winston). Little did the reluctant Penelope know, that India would be her lifelong love.

From a young age Penelope stood out from other girls of her age, her father Sir Philip Chetwode Bart, became British Commander in Chief of the Indian Army in 1930, so Penelope as daughter of Sir Philip and family friend of the Viceroy was invited to many high ranking events. At the age 21 she attended the inauguration of the new Indian capital of New Delhi in 1931. Penelope being confident and remarkable was often asked to escort visiting guests and dignitaries on tours around the city.

Penelope had a special interest in Indian art and architecture learnt to read Devanagari script. Her love of horses and architecture brought about another unsuitable relationship, this time with a married father.

In 1931, Penelope was sent back to England. Here she had several of her articles published in the 'Archie' - the Architectural Review - complete with her own illustrations and photos from her own personal archive. It was through her work with the 'Archie' that she met John Betjeman (a then struggling poor poet).

John and Penelope eloped (married) in secret in 1933. Her parents did not approve, as they wished her to marry 'old money'.



Within a year of marriage, Penelope had moved to Berlin where she continued her studies in Indology. Meanwhile John (who hated being abroad) remained in the UK, renting a home in Uffington.

Upon returning to England, they eventually bought 'The Mead' in Wantage in 1951. Here they remained until 1972 Penelope and John had two children, a son named Paul and a daughter named Candida (author Candida Lycett Green).

Penelope thrived on country life and enjoyed the company of animals (especially horses). Both she and John were High Anglican's (worshipping in the church across the road from the museum), with Penelope playing the church organ badly. The building which we are now in, used to be the Betjeman family doctors surgery.

In order to raise funds to maintain her family's lifestyle, Penelope ran a chicken-rearing venture, wrote a cookery column for the *Express* newspaper (until she was sacked for a elderflower wine recipe which caused havoc across the country) and ran a popular tea shop in the town called the 'King Alfred's Kitchen'.

Candida (their daughter) was educated in the town at St Mary's, a short walk from the tea shop.



8 The Mead
Home of the Betjeman family between 1951 and 1972

9 Betjeman Millennium Park

This peaceful, small woodland area was established as a Park in 1997 by a local Charitable Trust to celebrate both the Millennium and the work of John Betjeman. Lines from his poems feature on six stones, inscribed by the sculptor Alec Peever.



4 The Old Vicarage

According to the Rev. John Schaufelberger 'John' would shuffle down here on a Saturday morning and say 'Boys! I've brought a bottle of sherry. Just to have a little drink before lunch.'



6 Parish Church

The Church of St. Peter & St. Paul. Inspiration for 'Wantage Bells' in the ringing chamber of the tower is a copy of 'Wantage Bells' written in his own hand. It is said that he wrote it for the wedding of his daughter Candida, during which the bells were rung.



5 Vale and Downland Museum

Formerly the doctor's surgery from the mid-19th until 1974. Doctor Squires and his family were close friends of the Betjemans.



Betjeman's Wantage

This pictorial map has been designed to provide a pleasant, gentle walk around the town of Wantage and places associated with Sir John Betjeman. It should only take around 1 hour. Please note that it is intended only as a general guide and more information can be obtained from the Vale and Downland Museum.

Other Literary Figures with local connections are Thomas Hardy, Thomas Hughes, John Masefield, Jonathan Swift, Compton Mackenzie and others.
Produced in conjunction with the Wantage Betjeman Festival 2011 www.wantagebetjeman.com
Contact: For more information about the Festival or guided tours please contact Jim Mitchell on Wantage 01235 767975 or email: jamesmitchell@onevoice.freemove.co.uk

10 The Shears Public house

Where John Betjeman was reputed to have regularly played darts in the early evening.



1 King Alfred Statue

Sculpted by Count Greichen 1876. John Betjeman and his family moved to Wantage in 1951. In John Betjeman's book, 'Archie and the Strict Baptists', Archie is shown flying over the Market Square and Statue. Grove and Farnborough are also featured.



3 King Alfred's Kitchen

Penelope Betjeman's 'King Alfred's Kitchen' a tea shop which became popular with Oxford undergraduates.



2 St. Mary's School Chapel

John Betjeman's daughter Candida was educated at St. Mary's School founded in 1873



Penelope had several famous friends, including the eccentric Lord Berners (who painted Moti, Penelope's horse in his drawing room) and lived at nearby Faringdon House. Also Evelyn Waugh who dedicated his novel *Helena* to her.



The marriage eventually broke down after Penelope and John had been living separate lives for sometime. John loved the dazzling glitz of London, while Penelope loved the countryside. Penelope converted to Roman Catholicism, whilst John was a devote Anglican. The couple never divorced.

After the marriage dissolved, Penelope decided to reuse her maiden name of Chetwode. It was under the name Penelope Chetwode that she later published her book *Two Middle-aged Ladies in Andalusia* about her travels on horseback throughout areas of Spain (her horse was the other lady).

Following the success of her book, Penelope returned to her beloved India in 1961 and wrote her book *Kulu: The End of the Habitable World*.

It was during another trip through India in April 1986, whilst leading a trek through the Himalayas, that Penelope eventually died.

Where next?

Find out more about Penelope's husband Sir John Betjeman?

Explore Wantage to see where Penelope lived, worshipped and ran her tea shop (a map of Betjeman's Wantage can be found by the main desk).

References and Glossary

Mrs Betjeman, by Mary Alexander

The Spectator Archive

The Independent

The Telegraph

The Guardian

www.johnbetjeman.com

www.wantagebetjeman.com