

Dilys Davies

As reported in the spring edition of *The Hardy Plant*, Dilys Davies sadly died in January this year. She was a stalwart and much loved member of the Society, having joined in the mid-1970s.

Dilys Katharine Davies was born in September 1930 in Preston to David and Gladys Davies. Her father, a doctor, established his practice as a GP in Penwortham, Lancashire. Shortly after Dilys was born, he built a house on Liverpool Road, and this house remained her main home for most of her life. Her younger sister Enid was born in 1935. Dilys's childhood was a happy one but shortly before her 10th birthday, at the height of the Battle of Britain, she was sent as a precaution to Rydal Hall in Cumbria, where the junior school of Huyton College for Girls in Liverpool had just been evacuated. As it was the beginning of the summer holidays, there was only a handful of girls at the school, and Dilys often said that it was a harsh introduction to a boarding school education. However, she soon adapted, and the years she spent at Huyton were by her own admission some of the happiest of her life.

She had wanted to enter her father's profession from an early age, and she won a place at Middlesex Hospital Medical School, from which her father had graduated. It was there that she met Tudor Peter Davies, who was to become her husband. They had two children together, and in due course both Tudor and Dilys became partners in her father's practice.

In 1971, Dilys and Tudor bought Greyrigg, a cottage high on the fells in Patterdale just above the village of Hartsop. Here they spent their weekends and holidays and, with some help from Tudor in the early days, Dilys created a haven of beauty in the ¾-acre garden. The planting was beautiful, and perfectly suited

the rugged Lake District landscape. Her methods of gardening there became legendary.

Dilys joined the HPS in 1975 and remained at the Society's heart for the next thirty years (fig. 1). She was an enthusiastic member of the North West Group, organised one

of the first Autumn Weekends, and was Chairman of the Society from 1993 to 1996 (fig. 2 shows her with four other former HPS chairmen). Somehow in the midst of all this activity, she managed to write a book on *Allium* which is still a standard reference book for the genus. She was also a very entertaining and informative lecturer.

Roy Lancaster writes:

"Among the many happy memories I have of Dilys there are two that are particularly memorable. The first was in the summer of 1986 when, having previously visited her garden, Greyrigg, on a mountainside above the village of Hartsop in Patterdale to write an article, I returned with a film crew to record



Fig. 1 Dilys with Barbara White

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Fig. 2 Five former HPS chairmen. Left to right: Judy Harry, Dilys Davies, David Barker, Gwladys Tonge, Jane Sterndale-Bennett. HPS President's Day at Bressingham, 9 August 2003

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a programme for BBC TV *Gardeners' World*. The rodgersias in the 'Runnet' were in full flower, and drifts of *Phygelius aequalis* 'Yellow Trumpet' and *Penstemon barbatus* were just two of the many plant combinations which caught my eye, and the camera's too. Dilys was in her element and bubbling with stories and information, but her 'pièce de résistance' was a demonstration on how to plant the rock outcrop she had christened Gibraltar, which dominated the heart of the garden. I can see her now, in my mind's eye, kitted out with climbing boots, ropes and a small collection of plastic buckets suspended from her belt containing compost, rock wedges, hand tools and a selection of plants which she proceeded to insert into suitable crevices (fig. 3). When aired, the resulting programme made Dilys and her garden famous to garden lovers throughout the Lake District and the rest of the country.

My second memory, from 1988, was accompanying her on a trip to Seattle where we had been invited to give slide presentations at a meeting of The North West Perennial Alliance. Typically, our hosts gave us a great welcome and equally generous hospitality resulting in long-lasting friendships. Following the meeting, we were taken by a very keen group of members on

a 'plant-hunting' trip by car, south along the Oregon coast to the border with California, stopping regularly to see and photograph the local plants. On one of the days, we left our vehicles in a car park and set off to look for *Dudleya farinosa*, a bloomy, grey-leaved succulent related to sempervivum, growing on a famous and formidable rock stack protruding from the sea, quite close to the coastal cliffs. To reach the site which we had studied through our binoculars, we had to push our way through a wide area of waist-high scrub. So eager were we to get there that we paid little attention to the nature of the scrub until, on our return, someone pointed out that one of its main constituents was a poison oak, *Rhus trilobata*, known locally as squaw bush.

On hearing this Dilys (a GP by profession), instructed us to remove our outer garments to store in the car boot before boarding our vehicle. We then continued our journey to the night stop, where we located a local launderette to have our clothes washed overnight, and only then did we head for our hotel. Someone I believe took a photograph of us standing in our underclothes, looking bewildered and a little embarrassed, but we all had a good laugh that night over supper, and Dilys entered the NWPA pantheon of legendary characters."

Anne Jenner writes:

"I remember that I first met Dilys at the Preston Autumn Weekend – how long ago? – in about 1988, I think. It was the first Autumn Weekend I had attended and it was a revelation. I was fairly new to the Society then, and the whole thing was a very heady mix of enthusiastic members, wonderful gardens and interesting lectures, and Dilys fizzing with enthusiasm at the centre of it all. I believe that she enjoyed it even more than the rest of us did. In the way of HPS events, it rained the whole time but no one seemed to mind. During a conversation as we walked down the hotel corridor, I made a mild complaint about the incessant dribble of piped music.

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Fig. 3 Dilys Davies at Greyrigg

“Well” said Dilys, “I couldn’t persuade them to turn off the music, but I did manage to make them turn off the ‘fragrance!’” ”

Judy Harry writes:

“I have many memories of the redoubtable Dilys Davies, of which two stand out. Our Group heard her speak of her mountaineering exploits as she developed, and then maintained, her vertical rock garden in the Lake District, which unsurprisingly left us flat-Lincolnshire gardeners quite amazed. And on a very personal level, I had the pleasure of staying the night with her after having spoken to her Group. We talked and talked, long into the night, on topics that appropriately scaled the heights of one’s intellect and which I still recall, many years later. A wonderful woman.”

Sandra Hartley writes:

“One of Dilys’s great passions was opera. She told me that during every meal at home she watched one act of an opera, which struck me as an excellent organisation of one’s time. Art was another enthusiasm: she travelled to cities all over the world to visit their galleries. One of the most memorable lectures I heard her give was about plants featured in art. Whenever I see a painting with flowers tucked away in a corner, or spangling a meadow in the foreground, I think of Dilys.

Over the years she attended numerous HPS events, and her presence never failed to liven things up. On Autumn Weekends, and other occasions involving residential accommodation, she was always the last to leave the party in the evening; in fact, the party usually decamped to her room where the revelry would continue.

When Dilys was featured in an exhibition at the Garden Museum on well-

known female gardeners and was unable to make it to London, she asked me to take photographs of the display for her. One of these was the iconic rappelling photograph at Grayrigg. When the North West Group hosted the HPS AGM and Annual Lecture Day in 2009, Dee Folkard and I were thrilled to be invited to stay with Dilys, and to be able to visit the famous scene.”

In recent years, ill-health prevented Dilys from attending HPS meetings, and she was much missed. My own memories of her are of constant laughter. I particularly remember sessions late on Friday evenings, after the Autumn Weekend lecture, when Dilys and Gwladys Tonge vied with each other as to who could tell the most outrageous story of their respective gardening activities.

Once, when she was giving a lecture on the History of Gardens in Art, which depended entirely on her slides, we had a power cut within ten minutes of her starting. Not in the least bit fazed, Dilys delivered the rest of her lecture in total darkness. It still stays in my memory as one of the best lectures I ever heard. With all the other HPS members who were lucky enough to know Dilys, I have so many happy memories of her companionship. Dilys was a very special lady (fig. 4).

I am indebted to Gareth Davies, Dilys’s son, for the information about her personal life and particularly her childhood. 🌸



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Fig. 4 Dilys at an HPS meeting in Yorkshire

Put together by Jennifer Harmer, former historian of the HPS and member of the Hampshire Group.