



Wheathampstead History Society

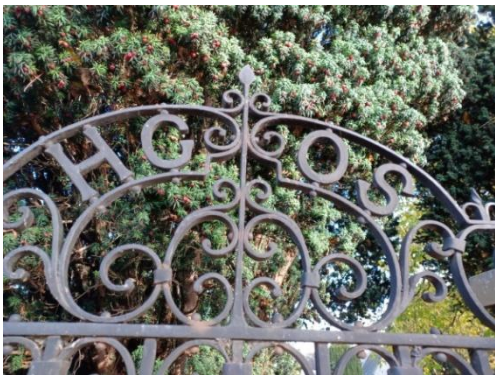
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News and events

- **HALS Free event**, Wednesday 10 December at 11.00 am. '**Getting Started at Hertfordshire Archives & Local Studies**'. A tour and workshop on how to access records. For details, go to <https://tinyurl.com/39uxspm6>
- Our **next meeting** will be on **Wednesday 17 December**. Pat Walker and Anne Atton will recall Vida Field's memories of Christmas as an evacuee in Wheathampstead during the war and talk about the origins of some of our Christmas traditions. Mince pies and mulled wine!

A social historian from Wheathampstead

In Church Street, near Old Rectory Gardens, a wrought-iron gate leading into the churchyard bears the initials HGOS, standing for Hilda Gordon Ogilvy Sleigh. With her husband James, who was a GP, and their three daughters, Hilda



Sleigh moved to *Hither Jacques*, a house in Pipers Lane, in the late 1940s. When she died in 1952 at the age of 58, Dr Sleigh presented the gate to the churchyard. Their youngest daughter, Elizabeth, re-painted it each year while she lived in the village.

Elizabeth Sleigh (known as Liza) read law at the London School of Economics. She was called to the bar by Gray's Inn in 1949 but did not serve as a barrister, working instead for the Inland Revenue for over two decades. In Wheathampstead she served on the PCC at St Helen's and took part in Shakespeare plays on the lawn of the rectory during the incumbency of Rev George Roe. Her performances were well reviewed in the local press.

In the late 1950s, unhappy in love, she headed to East Africa, where she worked as a Colonial Office lawyer in Dar es Salaam. After six years she returned home and in 1963 married Marcel Philip Picard, a barrister, at St Helen's church. Liza was 36 and Marcel, who was born in Switzerland, was 59, an age gap of 23 years.

They moved to London and their son, John, was born there in 1964. Liza's father died the following year, still resident in Pipers Lane.

Liza and her husband were married for 20 years and when he died in 1984, at the age of 80, he was buried in St Helen's churchyard near the gate in Church Street. Three years later Liza retired and moved to Oxford, where she fulfilled a long-standing ambition.

Liza Picard said of herself, 'I am not a properly trained historian. I am a lawyer by trade, and I have an inquisitive, practical mind. I have always been interested in how people in the past lived but the practical details are rarely found in history books. The only answer appeared to be to write a book myself'.

Restoration London was published in 1997, when she was 70 and immediately became a best-seller. Critics described her, 'delicious sense of humour, insatiable curiosity and acute eye for detail'. Four more books followed: *Dr. Johnson's London*, *Elizabeth's London* and *Victorian London*. Her final book, *Chaucer's People* was published in 2017, when she was 90. Well-known historians reviewed her books, regarded as 'marvellous source books for historical novelists and film-makers seeking authenticity, and near-perfect bedside books for almost anyone else'. Despite her success Liza Picard remained appreciative of academic support, convivial and unassuming.

She died in London in 2022 at the age of 94. Her *Times* obituary makes no reference to the years she spent in Wheathampstead but she continued to contribute to the Friends of St Helen's for many years. As she tidied up her affairs, she asked the Rector if the gate in memory of her mother was still there and, 'as a matter of courtesy', informed him that she might not require the grave reserved for her with her husband, as her son might wish to dispose of her ashes elsewhere and, at her request, 'with the minimum of fuss'.

Dianne Payne