

# Helen Major, 1927-2013

Elizabeth Trout & Mildred Cookson

Helen Major, nee Lawrence, was born on 8 June 1927 at Blackhill, Co Durham, the only child of Rev and Mrs Cyril Lawrence. During WWI her father was involved in driver training. He became a Presbyterian minister and Chaplain at the Shotley Bridge Hospital where some of the Dunkirk troops were sent when they were rescued.

Helen met her late husband, J Kenneth Major, when they were 21 and Helen was a newly qualified teacher. A family friend, Mrs Allen, gave Helen singing lessons in exchange for Helen helping Master Allen with his History and English tuition. One afternoon Helen was visiting when an architect student, Ken, arrived to help the boy with his Maths. Helen and Ken got on very well and she hoped that he would take her home. When Ken was away on his course they corresponded but she remembers her father insisted on reading the letters. Helen taught at two secondary schools in Newcastle before moving to Bledlington Station to be near her parents who had moved to Walkworth.

On 14 April 1954 Ken and Helen were married.

After teaching at several schools, Helen worked in the Civil Service Examinations Office. She was interested in local history and recorded all the water pumps along the Bath Road in Reading. They moved out to Reading in 1961 and bought a large Georgian house in Eldon Road. In 2006 they downsized just round the corner to a small Victorian cottage in St John's Road, which is part of a conservation area.

Helen helped Ken with all his recording and measurements during surveys of old buildings, often getting the mucky jobs of clearing out rubbish and cleaning bricks, but also typing up all Ken's reports. They travelled by scooter, and many will remember them riding around Reading with Ken up front and Helen clinging on behind. Accompanied by Ken, Helen was always seen supporting all our meetings and on our tours.

She was bookshop manager for the Section for many years, running up the 80+ steps to the top floor of Spital Square like a teenager! She was also a qualified proof reader, and many Mills Section publications, and in the last few years the Mills Archive publications, all benefited from her scrutiny.

Helen was an active volunteer at the Mills Archive from 2003, learning to use spreadsheets at the age of 80, adding over 20,000 names to the Mill People Database. She took particular interest in the hopes and aspirations of the young work-experience volunteers.

Helen had a wry sense of humour and sharp, witty observations of people she had met and places that she had visited; she will be remembered for her amusing poetry to mark particular people or occasions.

On the right is just one of her many poems.

Helen died peacefully on Sunday, March 24<sup>th</sup>.

Elizabeth and Mildred



## A Meeting of Minds

Poem by Helen Major written in 2001

*When Ernest-Sylvain Bollee met  
John Wallis Titt  
It was a remarkable day.  
Though one was a Frenchman and  
one was a Brit.,  
They both had a great deal to say.*

*They talked about stators and  
rotors and such,  
Their knowledge of wind power  
immense.  
And though to the layman it  
sounds double-Dutch,  
To them it made excellent sense.*

*Bollee mentioned stair treads  
and cardinal points  
And what it would cost overall;  
While Titt spoke of fantails and  
flexible joints,  
And pump rods which rise and  
which fall.*

*And did this make a difference to  
Bollees? You ask,  
Were they wider or shorter at all?  
And did John Wallis Titt give his  
workers the task  
Of making his wind engines tall?*

*No nothing was altered in either  
design,  
In work at the lathe or the bench;  
Because John Wallis Titt spoke in  
English,  
And Ernest-Sylvain Bollee spoke  
French!*