

30 pence



BARBARA TOY FRGS.

When researching the 1920s Women's Settlements at Wiremill reference was found on various occasions to a "Lady Explorer". As she came into a different period only a note for future use was made. However, it was later discovered her name was Barbara Toy and she was an interesting person in her own right.

She came from Australia, born in Sydney on the 11th August, 1908. She died in Banbury, Oxfordshire in July 2001. In 1930 she married Ewing Rixson, from a New York Quaker family and a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society, as Barbara was also to become. He provided her with her first taste of exploration but by 1935 the couple had separated and Barbara moved to London. According to the 1939 Register she was living at 88 Lichfield Court, Richmond, Surrey, listed as Barbara Toy (Rixson) and shown as married. At some time they were divorced and on subsequent documents she is shown as Barbara Toy.

In 1939 she was a volunteer ambulance driver/air raid warden, but also closely involved with the theatre, starting as a not particularly good actress but then finding greater interest working behind the scenes at Richmond Theatre as assistant stage manager and then stage director.

When the theatre was bombed in 1941 she changed direction again and went to the Welwyn Film Studios. Here she met the screenwriter/film director Norman Lee which in 1943 led to her first published work – a play entitled *Lifeline*, which under the pseudonym Norman Armstrong, she had co-authored with Lee.

She joined ENSA (Entertainments National Service Association) and travelled to Germany and the Netherlands on their behalf to compile a report on the state of the theatre in liberated Europe. Subsequently she returned to England and formed a new theatre production company with her friend Moie Charles and there followed a series of dramatisations of novels plus in 1948 another screenplay with Norman Lee of the W.W. Jacobs' 1901 horror story *The Monkey's Paw*. She had also taken over the management

of the Worthing Repertory Company at the Connaught Theatre. She resigned from this in 1950 when she started a series of long journeys using a Land Rover, reverting to the travelling she had experienced when married and was where her real interest lay. Before describing these long tours here are the details of Toy's local association with Wire Mill.

According to the telephone directory records in 1967 she was living at Ben Ezra which, in view of her fascination for the Middle East she may have named herself because it was previously called the Old Cottage. It is now Mill End House and is at the eastern end of the pond bay (i.e. the dam holding back the waters of Wiremill lake). The series of telephone books have not been checked to see how long she lived there.

Toy was recognised as a pioneer of long-distance overland tours. Other such tours were made later but Toy was the first to undertake them and was different insofar as she did them solo without any help or support – and was the first woman to do so.

Toy decided to travel by jeep by virtue of its reputation for dealing with all types of ground cover but she made the vehicle very personal and gave it a name – Pollyanna. The first tour was in 1950/1, Gibraltar to Baghdad and back to London. She recorded the trip and took photographs and published a book - *A Fool on Wheels: Tangier to Baghdad by Land Rover* – so called because a brigadier told her in Gibraltar that she was mad to contemplate such a journey. She crossed to Africa over the Straits and journeyed along the coast. While in Iraq she visited several archaeological sites including, in May 1951, that of Agatha Christie's husband Sir Max Mallow. Agatha was cataloguing the finds.

The second expedition was in 1952 for a seven month journey round Libya. On this trip she spent time with Herman Schultze-Dewitz, Rommel's former ADC and in charge of Germany's equivalent to our War Graves Commission. She helped him look for bodies. The book for this expedition was *A Fool in the Desert: Journey in Libya*. She travelled 11,000 miles on this trip.

Number three in 1953 was to Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Told that as a woman alone she would not get access she sent a polite request to the King and received a polite invitation in reply, meeting the king in person. The book: *A Fool Strikes Oil: Across Saudi Arabia*.

The fourth journey – 1956-7. Her “boldest feat” – around the world, through Europe and Turkey to Pakistan, through Asia to Australia, across to Sydney, then to San Francisco. Book: *Columbus Was Right*.

On these journeys, to save money, she would sometimes sleep in the open beside the Jeep or in the back of the vehicle, using a sleeping bag. She cooked on a petrol stove and used a dictaphone to record her notes for her books.

Toy regarded the fifth journey as the time she was a “real” explorer. She went from Libya to the Central African Republic, then to the Congo, then Lake Victoria, north along the Nile to the Sudan and east to Ethiopia, then finally to Kenya.

The fascinating episode in this tour was visiting Wehni where she was winched down by helicopter, spending a night alone on the mountain.

Wehni is a mountain in Ethiopia with an extraordinary history where all male heirs of the Emperor were imprisoned to prevent any uprising. The one chosen to be the next Emperor would be freed at the appropriate time but being the ruler was not the most healthy of occupations and the chosen one would not necessarily be the happy one. It is not certain when the practice started and it probably ended in the 18th century.

While there Toy explored the remains of the church, the guard house and looked for other signs of habitation. She was the first European to visit the site. Her book published in 1961 was *In Search of Sheba: Across the Sahara to Ethiopia*.

Sixth expedition – 1961 – Timbuktu/ Tripoli, described in her 1964 book *The Way of the Chariots*. The aim was to investigate hundreds of rock drawings in the Tassili n'Ajjer mountains in southern Algeria, discovered in 1933 by a French Officer.

In 1990 at the age of 81 as Vice President of the Land Rover Register 1948-1953, she made her second world tour, which was successful and brought her home in time for Christmas.

She made some more trips and published three more books – 1968. *The Highway of the Three Kings*; *Rendezvous in Cyprus (1970)* and, posthumously, *Travelling the Incense Route*; *From Arabia to the Levant in the Footsteps of the Magi*. Sadly of all her books this is the only one in print.

From seemingly a quiet unremarkable background Barbara Toy emerges as a very formidable and brave woman.

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Sources:

Find my Past

British Newspaper Archives

Illustrated London News

Alchetron: The Free Social Encyclopedia

Barbara Toy: *Travelling the Incense Route*