



# The Poly Rambler

Members' Newsletter of the Polytechnic Rambling Club

[www.polyramblers.org.uk](http://www.polyramblers.org.uk)

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### Chairs Message March 2025

Welcome to our 2025 edition of the Poly Ramblers Newsletter.

One of the most essential functions of this newsletter is to ensure that we reach out to club members who have over the years enjoyed a more active participation on our walks and trips away. I hope that everyone will enjoy reading this edition for 2025.

Over the past year, despite all the challenges of extreme weather and travel disruption, we have achieved a full programme of walks to suit all abilities. We have enjoyed some events which included a visit to the World War II bunker in Uxbridge, a tour of the British museum by one of their guides and a visit to the London Canal Museum. On our trips away we have now established a middle walk group which has worked well.

This year we are celebrating the 140th anniversary of the Poly Ramblers walking club. We are organising events to mark this very special occasion.

Material for this edition collated by the committee.

Printing and production by Kim Chowns

Gillian has organised a cream tea at Missenden Abbey following a morning walk in the locality. We are also arranging a boat trip on the Grand Union Canal starting from Hemel Hempstead. Some of our members may be keen to have a go at opening and closing some of the locks.

Geoffrey wrote an article for the anniversary edition of the Newsletter with details of the last thirty years of the Poly Ramblers. A nostalgic reminder of how the club has developed and grown in numbers over the years.

This newsletter includes obituaries of two of our Honorary Members who we lost in 2024. Christine Bignold worked tirelessly for the club over many years.

Shirley Hafey was also very involved in club activities organising panto and theatre trips and an immensely popular club trip to Jersey.

We were also saddened to hear of the deaths of ex-member Mike Hilton and Gail Sanderson who had recently joined the club.

I will be stepping down as Club Chair this year. I have enormously enjoyed my ten years on the committee and seven as club Chair. We have maintained our membership and continued with our ever-popular trips away, varied events and a comprehensive walk programme, this included the unprecedented times of Covid restrictions.

I am very proud of how our committee work hard to ensure the efficient running of the club. I do feel that the club will now benefit with another member of the committee to take on the role as Chair of the Poly Ramblers with renewed enthusiasm and fresh impetus.

Best Wishes

**Hilary**

## The Polytechnic Rambling Club

(in association with the University of Westminster)

Founded 1885

Affiliated to the Ramblers' Association (Inner London Area)  
Affiliated to HF Holidays

### OFFICERS AND COMMITTEE

#### Honorary members

Rosie Binnie  
Peter Bonfield  
Rosemary MacLoughlin  
David Stevens  
Mary Stevens  
Lucy Wee  
Peter Wee

#### COMMITTEE

#### CLUB OFFICERS

**Chair**  
Hilary Abbey  
**Secretary**  
Gillian Swan  
**Treasurer**  
Daniel Duffy

#### COMMITTEE MEMBERS

Pam Beach  
Kim Chowns  
Susan James  
Jennifer MacKenzie  
Christopher Maslen  
Sunita Shah  
Geoffrey Waters

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**Club's Facebook page:**

<https://tinyurl.com/2p8fzk7n>

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\*Articles for inclusion in the newsletter are welcome from all members. They should be walk related, but do not necessarily have to be about a club walk, e.g. walking holiday or past memories of the club.

## Northumbria weekend August 2024

Bank holiday weekend would usually be Notting Hill carnival for me but this year I broke with tradition and left Neil to enjoy the parade so that I could explore Northumbria with the Polys. It was a decision well made!

The university accommodation bore little resemblance to my time in halls of residence – the size of the fridge! Two sofas! Very comfortable and not at all scary once we got used to crossing the double motorway to get into town. Gillian welcomed us to the city with an excellent city tour and it was a lovely evening, the bridges and Victorian buildings looking so



elegant in the northern light.

I chose the Middle walks for the first two days, to ease my body into the trip and then went for the long walk on Bank Holiday Monday. Tuesday, I allowed myself a free afternoon to sketch and paint on Lindisfarne and that regime worked perfectly for me. It was such a nice balance of options, terrain and sights to see, I was extremely impressed with all the hard work that had gone into crafting our trip to the north.

My favourite day I think was the first day. We took the train to Alnmouth (taking care not to jump on the non-stop LNER direct to Edinburgh, same platform!) and then cut inland. I don't think I have ever walked through fields of broad beans before. Corn fields were all around, dark brooding skies overhead and it was very beautiful. I love to see the rolled haybales, golden in the sporadic bursts of sunshine. We passed a potato farm and had fun weighing ourselves on the giant weighing pallets. Stuart enjoyed seeing a signpost pointing the way to 'Crisps'. We emerged onto the coast just in time for lunch and that was a real highlight, sitting on a driftwood log looking at the endless sand stretching in each direction.

Once restored, we took the coast path up along the dunes (Stuart rescuing his famous hat that had been blown deep into the bracken along the way). We cut inland round some very upmarket chalet caravans with enviable views and then emerged into the village of Alnmouth where Geoffrey recommended Nanny Pat's tea and cake shop. She had closed but obligingly reopened her courtyard just for us. Ida had done research on the attractions of the village and so we popped into the excellent gift shop and historic church (beautiful stained glass), some paddled and a group stayed on for a pub dinner.

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## Northumbria weekend (continued)

I enjoyed sharing a flat with other polys and on Saturday evening after our adventures in Hexham, Ida and I got out our watercolours and showed each other the different techniques between Chinese and Western traditions. We stuck our resulting artworks on the giant fridge and had a mini exhibition, it was a lovely thing to do together.

The walk from Seaburn up to North Shields was a treat, we saw sea birds on rocks, some great lighthouses and heard a foghorn (luckily, we were well past it before it blew its test blast). We saw lots of locals on this day, out enjoying the bank holiday and the seaside atmosphere. There was even an African club having a BBQ with music on the beach at one point, I was tempted to join in. We reached North Shields in time to take the ferry across the Tyne on an old fashioned boat, and we could see the mouth of the river going into the sea, another highlight. Then home, the long way round, on the Metro, like a toy train but very efficient and taking us right back into the heart of Newcastle.

Tuesday morning Susan took us on a fine tour of Berwick on Tweed, we saw bridges, castle ruins, ramparts and fine sea views before ending in the lovely old town. Stephen recommended a particularly fine cheese scone (with feta and apricot) so the cafe lady quickly wrapped it in clingfilm for me to take across the causeway to Holy Island. The fleet of taxis took us through driving rain onto the island, very atmospheric, but luckily the rain clouds soon cleared in time for the circular walk (and my plein air session, although not easy in high winds!).

Thanks to everyone who made this such a memorable and enjoyable break away.

### Jill Forgham



## Christine Bignold – an appreciation



Christine joined the Club in the 1970s with her husband Peter. I first met her in the early 1990s and got to know her better when I first joined the Committee. Looking back through old programmes and Newsletters to write this appreciation there is no doubt of the huge contribution she made to the life of the Club over many years.

Christine was a teacher by profession and was a great organiser. The Club really benefited from her enthusiasm for organising walks and weekends away all over the country but especially in the southwest and she enjoyed introducing us to new areas that she had visited as a child, such as the Isle of Portland. Trips she organised that I particularly remember were to Beer and Lulworth Cove in the late 1990s and then Torquay, Hadrian's Wall, Bradford-on-Avon, Ironbridge and Sidmouth in the 2000s (amongst many others). She was also a lover of canals and I remember we walked the Kennet and Avon canal with her, ending in Bristol. Christine never got into email or the internet and all her research and accommodation bookings were done by phone with instructions handwritten and given to someone to type up. Looking back, I marvel at the work she must have put in. By the time we came to walk the Wessex Ridgeway in 2012, Christine was no longer able to manage long hikes but we remember her meeting us at the end of the trail in Lyme Regis with badges and chocolate bars!



Christine was a staunch supporter of the Youth Hostel Association. A 1996 edition of the Newsletter includes her report of a Youth Hostel trip to Bridport (only 8 participants). She was instrumental in introducing our rent-a-hostel weekends which ran for many years. Even in her later years Christine joined in with group tasks on these weekends, including stints in the hostel kitchen. Unfortunately she was not always familiar with the latest gadgets and managed to set fire to the food in the microwave on one occasion! Christine's last YHA trip with us was to Street in Somerset. She still managed to enjoy herself in spite of her increasing frailty.

Dogs were another love of Christine's. Many of us remember her little dog, Leah, that she used to bring on walks and sadly suffered a broken leg on one walk. She then used to bring her in a buggy for some walks, much to our amusement.

We also remember Christine's love of travel. Increasing mobility problems over the years did not deter her from visiting exotic and challenging destinations including Chile and the Falkland Islands. She wrote an article for the Newsletter on this trip and her enthusiasm for the wildlife she saw is evident. Her determination and sense of adventure is a lesson to many of us.

Christine served on the Committee for many years including as Chair when first Stuart and then I was Secretary. She could be quite a hard task master at times and Stuart remembers her telling him off when she considered he was insufficiently diligent! She stepped down from the Committee and was appointed Club President in 2011. This role involved chairing the AGM which she continued until 2018 when her poor hearing made it too difficult.

Many of us have happy memories of Christine and the Club was very lucky to benefit from her organisational skills and dedication for so long. We miss her very much but are delighted that her daughter Wendy has decided to join and hope to see her on walks and events in future.

**Gillian Swan**

## Memories of Shirley Hafey

After I graduated from a three-year acting course in Birmingham in 1985, I spent several years touring the UK in various plays, keeping Brum as my base. When I was offered a six-month contract to tour in two plays around Germany, I gave up the rented flat and put my things in storage. The plan was to move to London when I got back to the UK, but I then secured another three-month tour of the UK basically with a car packed up moving on to the next digs each week! Following that, in early 1989, I was offered another role in Germany, but this time it was at The English Theatre in Hamburg, which at least meant staying in one place for the duration!

Returning to London, I moved into a flat with an actress I'd met in Hamburg and her boyfriend (not an ideal set-up I can assure you!). Within a week, the landlord had died and his brothers wanted to sell up, so I searched again for accommodation. Another actress I'd met in Hamburg, Shelagh, told me of a friend of hers, Shirley Hafey, who sub-let rooms in Belsize Park. Anyone who visited 81a Haverstock Hill will remember that the vast flat had no heating and was on numerous levels, so I declined that one, eventually moving to a shared house above a cab office in Caledonian Road.

I knew very few people in London and so Shelagh, Shirley and I started to meet up regularly to see films, or go for a meal or occasionally visit the theatre, when funds allowed. Despite the generational gap between us, we got on well talking about the 'business', our useless agents and the lack of castings etc., etc. as actors always do.

Shirley was born in Jersey in 1936 and at the age of 16, moved to London with her friend Muriel to pursue her dreams of being a dancer. Around the late 1950s she achieved her goals and became a regular dancer on Sunday Night at the London Palladium starring Bruce Forsyth. After completing a three-year contract, Shirley went to Rome to film alongside Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton in Cleopatra.

After re-training as an actress, Shirley toured the UK in several plays before moving into cabaret. With her partner, Ron, they created a double act called Hafey & Riley and toured the globe with a fast-paced tap-dancing routine. Shirley went on to appear in Noises Off at the Savoy Theatre and The Wombles at the Shaftesbury Theatre, as well as further national tours. Her TV appearances include Steptoe and Son, On The Fiddle and Funny Man. She also featured in 14 commercials, most notably for Fairy Liquid.

When I had toured Germany, I suffered a back injury after a nasty road traffic accident, which has plagued me ever since. This meant that theatre tours became more difficult, driving around the country and sleeping on a lumpy mattress in dodgy digs! I decided to utilise my acting skills to help business people with presentation skills training and had to step away from acting at that time. After securing two big contracts to train directors and senior managers at British Airways and DHL, I was able to finally buy my own flat in Upper Holloway, which I moved into on New Year's Eve to start off 1994.

It was later that year that I went to the library in Archway and spotted a notice about The Polytechnic Rambling Club. Having grown up on a small farm in the foothills of the Black Mountains near Hay-on-Wye, to now find myself living in the big city, I missed the countryside and fresh air and longed to get out. My first walk was in the September led by Rosemary MacLoughlin and I met Gillian Swan, Anna Mayer, Christine Bignold, Rosie Binnie and Maureen Tabbhaki. Everyone was very friendly, and I remember it was a lovely early autumnal day and we scumped some apples. A perfect day out and a great way to escape the hustle and bustle of London.

**(Continued on next page)**

## **MEMORIES OF SHIRLEY HAFEY (continued)**

When I next met up with Shirley I told her all about it, but she wasn't interested. Shirley loved the city life and going into the West End and professed to not have any desire to get out into the countryside!

The Club was small at the time, but with Peter Gould's persistence it grew and grew. I was an active member then, attending many of the weekend walks, leading walks and going on the occasional weekend trip that Peter organised. I was the Secretary for one year, before I handed over to Stuart, who then handed the baton to Gillian who still has it! Being self-employed the contracts are short and you don't tend to make friends as you're always moving on to the next job, so the Club helped me to form some lasting friendships.

Working in the theatre on a show you often become very close to the rest of the cast creating something unique and sharing experiences. Sometimes those friendships last a lifetime, but others dissipate as everyone moves on to their next role. Shirley really missed the theatre and the connection with others, so after I'd been a member of the Poly Ramblers for around 7 years, she agreed to give it a try. She professed that she didn't think she'd manage a walk of 7 miles and although she initially struggled with the length of the walks, she did start to enjoy her days out of London.

Shirley was at a stage in her life when there was very little work for a glamorous lady with bags of energy and vitality. It's sad, but it hasn't changed much since that time and once you're over 55 you're put into the 'old lady' bracket being offered castings for funeral plans or stair lifts! In 2001 though Shirley was back in the West End in the chorus of the musical 'Peggy Sue Got Married' starring Ruthie Henshall. I went to the opening night and the after-show party with Shirley, where she was in her element, dancing with Su Pollard and Leo Sayer, who definitely did 'feel like dancing' that night. Sadly, the show closed after about six weeks, which was attributed to the events of 9/11, but at least Shirley had another taste of success.

It was around that time that I moved out of London, settling in Amersham in 2002 in a house just around the corner from Stuart and Gillian. Being surrounded by the Chiltern countryside and not wanting to spend 3-4 hours travelling to/from a walk, I became less involved with the Club. However, Shirley found she was enjoying being part of the Club and made some very good friends including Anna Mayer, who she went to Canada with. Mike 'Trainers' suggested they set up a regular dining club and along with Danny and Esther the group became firm friends.

Shirley organised visits to the theatre for the Club members and even a weekend trip to Jersey, with help from Danny and Susan. Shirley hosted some New Year's Eve parties from her flat where we could all troop up to Primrose Hill and watch the fireworks.

Sadly, Shirley was diagnosed with cancer, but after an operation and treatment she bounced back, though with perhaps a little less vitality than before. It was a few years after this that Shirley was diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease. She masked the symptoms very well for the first few years, but eventually as the disease progressed it became apparent that she could no longer live in London. Shirley went to live in Jersey in the bungalow her parents had bequeathed to her.

As I had returned to the acting profession, I was working regularly as a 'business actor' playing roles in the corporate sector, such as directors, managers, underperforming employees, irate customers etc., to help in the assessment process for recruitment, training and development. I also play witnesses for trainee barristers taking their Bar exams and have been fortunate to have been cross-examined at the Old Bailey in mock trials.

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## MEMORIES OF SHIRLEY HAFEY (continued)

In January 2018 I was given a job for a law school that involved me going to Jersey for 3 days and being 'tried' at the Magistrate's Court in Jersey . This enabled me to visit Shirley and spent an evening with her in her home. It was very sad to see how she had deteriorated, but she still had that radiant smile that lit up the room. She was able to live there with the help of her regular carer, Carla, for some time but the disease progressed.

Shirley desperately missed living in London and seeing all her friends. Not being able to do the things she wanted to do any longer made her very depressed and it was difficult to cheer her up in a phone call. In early 2020 we'd arranged that I would go over and see her and although she'd wanted me to stay with her, I booked myself into a hotel as I felt it would have been too much for her. The trip was booked for 19<sup>th</sup> March, but to our horror, because of Covid, non-essential travel

was banned and the flight was cancelled.

As we all know, it took a few years for travel restrictions to be relaxed, by which time Shirley had spent a lot of time in hospital and had then been moved into a care home. Danny was able to literally do a 'flying visit' of one day a few years ago, but sadly because of the nature of my irregular and unpredictable work, I was unable to make it over.

Shirley died peacefully at the age of 87, having lived a very full, active and interesting life following her dreams, until she succumbed to the illness. She is fondly remembered by everyone and I have visions of her meeting up with all her old showgirl friends, perhaps even with Brucie himself and high-kicking around the clouds!

**Yvonne Delahaye**



Some photos from walks over the last year



Snow walking in January 2025



Fungi in the New Forest October 2024



Bluebells on Banstead walk April 2024



Icicles on snow walk 2025

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