

Patricia Gilbert (1929–1999)

The death of Patricia Gilbert on 28 December 1999 will have left many members of the Society with a sharp sense of loss. For twenty-nine years she had been the continuing presence at Gordon Square, making everyone who put a head round her door feel that no visit could be more welcome. Hers was the face that we all knew.

Of course, to those who worked with her she was much more than that. The warmth and gaiety that soothed the edgy and disarmed the cross were underpinned by an unobtrusive professional competence that made everything work. When Patricia became Secretary in 1960, two years after the Society's move from Bedford Square, the reins were still very much in the hands of Miss Taylor, who had been both Secretary and Editor of the *JRS* since 1923 and had only recently decided that the time had come to divest herself of the Secretaryship. Money was very tight. The *Journal*, the Library, the lectures and the slides collection needed every penny. There could be no question of any other activity. The duties of the Secretary, though exacting, were thus limited, and in case of doubt Miss Taylor was there to ask. Within two years she was dead and everything started to change. The editorship, from being a life's work, became a fixed stint with successive editors needing to pick up the threads. Two substantial legacies gave room for manoeuvre. *Britannia* was launched in 1970 and the monographs in 1981. The Annual General Meeting was transformed by a preceding lunch — on the first occasion Patricia and her friends produced all the food — that made the occasion something of a festival and drew in a wide variety of members. Between 1960 and 1989 membership rose from 1,100 to over 2,000. Grants were made for research, and relations with schools opened up: committees increased. In the background were the years of rapid inflation, the introduction of VAT, and periodic agitations over the respective liabilities of the various occupants of the top floor of Gordon Square. In the long run, and oftener than not in the short, everything that occurred made more work for the office. I never remember Patricia wilting under these pressures. She did occasionally have crises of diffidence — how would she ever manage with this President or that — but in no time all was once more harmony. She remained undimmed, her appearance as elegant and her smile as brilliant when she left as when she came.

There are some devoted and efficient secretaries of whom it can plausibly be said that their job was their life; and it might have been supposed that this was true of Patricia. But it was not so. She was married to a research chemist; and, although Ian Gilbert kept a discreet distance from Gordon Square, Patricia's friends there all understood that it was round her marriage that her life was built. There were reports of exploring the London waterways in *Roma*, of birdwatching, of fly fishing in Wales. It was to Wales — Patricia's home ground — that the Gilberts retired and it was there that in 1998 she attended her last AGM, much to her own enjoyment and to that of many of her old friends. She had been looking forward to the London meeting in 1999, but her husband was struck down by serious illness not long before and everything was set aside. He had recovered sufficiently to see her through her own last weeks, dying himself three months later.

M.B.