

Remembering loved ones

Determined co-founder of a waterways museum

Dinah Hutchinson, 90

When Dinah Hutchinson and her husband bought a house that backed on to the Regent's Canal in north London, it triggered more than a passing interest in the waterway that ran at the bottom of their garden.

First up was the canal's towpath that had been left to go to rack and ruin, a situation she helped to remedy when she joined the Regent's Canal Group. She became honorary secretary of the group, and by the mid-1970s the 8.6-mile walking and cycle path between Little Venice and Limehouse Basin was cleaned up and made accessible to the public. It was an achievement that won the group a Civic Trust Award.

Spurred on by the success, and something of a tour de force when she wanted to get things done, Dinah moved on to the notion of establishing a waterways museum. It was an idea she had had since the great freeze of 1962-63 when she saw the canal boat culture come into its own as their owners danced on the ice.

While canal museums had started to spring up around Britain — in Manchester, Northamptonshire and Devizes — there was as yet a vacant spot in London.

After helping to register the Canal Museum Trust, Dinah was among those looking for a canal-side building to house the new museum. A handful of properties came up, but attempts to secure them were frustrated: a

Georgian warehouse was demolished a few days after the Regent's Canal Group had paid it a visit, a granary building they liked went on to catch fire and burn down, and an interchange building next to Camden Lock with an inlet known locally as Dead Dog Tunnel had the offer reneged by the developers.

Just as a level of despair was settling on the group, the GLC offered them a pair of buildings near King's Cross station. It was the late 1980s and the dying days of the council, and the urgency from councillors to draw up the leases on the properties was diminishing. Taking the view that the only way to seal the matter was to threaten exposure to the press, Dinah

had the lease hastily arranged — arriving, signed, by taxi — where she was attending one of the GLC leaving parties.

It was progress of sorts, yet the lease was for only 20 years.

Out of the blue,

the developers of a former Victorian ice house stepped in to suggest they swap it for the two buildings. What would become the London Canal Museum was originally the premises of a Swiss-born entrepreneur called Carlo Gatti who helped to popularise ice cream in London in the 1850s. His ice, which he imported from Norway, was stored in two 40ft-deep wells.

A 35-year lease was negotiated, a grant from Islington council was awarded, seven years' free rent was promised and by 1992 the London Canal Museum was officially opened, at the invitation of Dinah, by



Dinah was among the first intake of women graduates at Cambridge's New Hall. Left, with Princess Anne in 1992 at the opening of the London Canal Museum

the Princess Royal who continued as patron. Dinah went on to study for a postgraduate diploma in museum studies.

Dinah Gillian Jenepher Martyn Burford was born in 1935 in Wimbledon. Her father, Leon, was a confectioner who would retire as a director of Cadbury's, and her mother, Joan (née Bishop) would go on to run a pre-preparatory school known as Mrs Burford's from the family home, once the bishop of Southwark's house in Wimbledon.

To escape the Blitz, Joan took Dinah and her two younger brothers, David and Dion, to Henley-on-Thames, Oxfordshire, along with her aunt, grandmother and in-laws. There she bred chickens and used the milk from a goat she had transported in the passenger seat of her car.

When convoys of trucks filled with soldiers passed through the town, Joan, a heavy smoker, was known to grab all the cigarettes she could find in the house and hand them to Dinah to pass up to the soldiers.

It was important to Joan that

Dinah learn Latin at secondary school as a prerequisite for her applying for Oxford or Cambridge, so with the war barely over Dinah was hurried back to London with the rest of the family to start the autumn term. The house they rented had not fully recovered from bomb damage.

She passed the 11-plus to Wimbledon High School and in 1953 applied to Cambridge when the ratio of men to women was one to eleven. A new women's college, New Hall, now renamed Murray Edwards College, was founded in the same year, and she was included among its first intake of 16 women to read history. The college had just two tutors.

In her second year, part of a cohort keen to set up a Cambridge University Women's Union, she spoke to debate the motion that "Woman's Place is in This House". Up until then the Cambridge Union Society had voted to exclude women. One of the male speakers had earlier denounced New Hall as "that new boarding house in Silver Street with leftover luggage lying around outside" and her

speech started with "I stand here before you part of the leftover luggage ..." When she finished, a former union president came up to her and said: "That was a good speech you made. Who wrote it?"

Dinah went on to be the second president of the Cambridge University Women's Union, and it befell her to find new premises for it. After an article appeared in the press, she was approached by an elderly male Cambridge resident prepared to leave to the union in his will his shares plus his house, the equivalent of about £3.3 million today. In 1963 the Cambridge Union Society finally voted to allow women in.

After Cambridge Dinah read for the Bar at Gray's Inn, supporting herself with work as a market research and statistical executive. She won a Rotary International scholarship to study international relations at Harvard and back in Britain joined an advertising company as a marketing executive. There she met Piers Hutchinson, the son of the novelist RC Hutchinson who was a writer of the King's speeches. They married in 1961 and had four children: Oriol, a property manager who was named after her father's Oxford college; Scarlet, an orthopaedic surgeon; Roma, who was born deaf, dumb and blind and died at the age of nine; and Sheldon, a portrait painter.

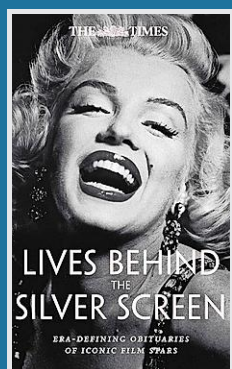
Dinah passed the Finals of the Bar exam when she was eight and a half months pregnant but decided to go into property management, buying and renovating houses and then letting out flats to students, so that she could work around her family. In 1971 the marriage was dissolved and she moved to the house overlooking Regent's Canal where she remained.

There was a resilience, spiritedness and intelligence to Dinah. She was a devoted mother, grandmother and daughter, once scurrying to the care home that her mother had been placed in without her knowledge, and getting her out of it and into the car. "What a relief to be out of that place," she heard her mother say in the back.

Education continued to be of paramount importance, and the cause of much of her expenditure.

If Dinah was otherwise frugal, wearing handmade or secondhand clothing and carrying her handbag around in a plastic bag for fear of being mugged, she made sure she never left the house without applying lipstick.

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