

# Eileen M Bowlt

18 May 1937 – 1 September 2023

## An appreciation of the Society's President

Ask almost any member of our Society how they first became involved in local history, and they will respond that it was due to Eileen. No one has had such a profound effect or such a pivotal role in fostering interest in local history and conservation, in her own adopted area of Ruislip, in adjacent towns and villages, and throughout London.



Eileen promoted these interests in a multitude of ways. Many members remember attending one of her local history courses, run either under the auspices of the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) or of her alma mater, Birkbeck College (now known as Birkbeck, University of London). These were held in various local venues, including libraries, and involved project work for the participants, getting them used to examining original sources and writing up their findings, which in many cases were published as booklets or in the Society's Bulletin and Journal. She also ran courses in Hampstead and central London, sometimes as often as three times a week.

Eileen led local history walks for various organisations, gave a multitude of talks to them and at Society meetings, and helped everyone from journalists to restaurateurs with their needs for historical information. She facilitated and supported archaeological digs and did a large amount of original research of her own, publishing a dozen books and contributing over 80 articles to the Society's Journal.

In addition, Eileen supported and promoted the Society by being on its committee for many decades, editing several of its journals, and acting as its Chairman from 1991 onwards and President from 2017. In these roles, Eileen supported the conservation and preservation of the locality, by serving on borough committees, liaising with their officers and ensuring that the Society made persuasive and well-informed representations regarding planning matters.

Born in the Pennine town of Sowerby Bridge, Eileen moved to London in 1956 to train as a teacher. Although she left teaching after a few years to study for a degree in history, the skills she acquired served her well later in providing formal and informal adult education. She supported her part-time course by proof reading for a publisher, an area of experience that doubtless contributed to her later success as an author.

Having met and married her husband Colin, another long-standing and much-valued member of the Society, whilst living in Cockfosters, the family moved to Croft Gardens, Ruislip in 1966.

Initially Eileen concerned herself mostly with raising her four children and supporting the National Association for the Welfare of Children in Hospital, which involved visiting St Vincent's Hospital and resulted in her and Colin fostering another child for several years.

Eileen then resumed her focus on history, immersing herself more into Society activities and preparing to deliver the WEA and Birkbeck courses mentioned. She also embarked upon the monumental amount of research needed for what is still the definitive reference for all aspects of the history and development of our area: *The Goodliest Place in Middlesex* (Hillingdon Borough Libraries, 1989), and which won the Alan Ball Author Award for Local History. The Public Record Office (now National Archives), the London Metropolitan Archives and other record offices saw her diligently studying rarely seen original documents for many hours on end.



*Eileen in 1980s explaining  
the John Doharty map of Ruislip of 1750*

Archaeology was not neglected, and Eileen and Colin facilitated and participated in several digs, including in 1976, with the help of their whole family, examining the large earthwork to the north of Manor Farm. Analysis of the shards found suggested it could have been an extension of Grim's Dyke. An investigation of Bury Farm in mid 1980s uncovered evidence of a 15th century or earlier hall and cross-wing in the 17th century building. They also undertook many

archaeological watching briefs, looking for evidence and minimising the disturbance when major work was being done at historical sites.

In addition to her interest in the Ruislip area, Eileen found time to take a pivotal role in the London and Middlesex Archaeology Society (LAMAS), being on its Council from 1988 and chairing it for two separate periods: 1991-95 and 2006-10. She chaired its local history committee until 2016, and both edited and contributed to its Transactions and newsletter, as well as speaking at some of its local history conferences.

Aside from history, Eileen sat as a Justice of the Peace for 18 years and was involved in the governance of local worthwhile causes, such as the Ruislip Manor Cottage Society. Both these bodies, of course, warranted her writing books on their history. She was a governor at Douay Martyrs School for several years.

Between 1972 and 2020 Eileen contributed around 80 original papers to the Society's publications on an enormous range of subjects ranging from the Iron Age to modern times. Most of these involved significant original research and have contributed a wealth of knowledge to the annals of history. Her last piece was the whimsical *White Footprint Mystery*, wondering what future archaeologists would make of any evidence they found of the painted markings put outside shops to encourage social distancing during the pandemic. Her first article very fittingly commemorated the golden jubilee of the Sacred Heart Church, of which she has been a faithful member for her entire time in Ruislip. Her mortal remains returned to this church for a Requiem Mass in celebration of her life on 17 October.

Eileen has made a lasting contribution to scholarship and to the appreciation and conservation of our area. Her published output and, even more importantly, the enthusiasm for local history that she has engendered in so many people will be cherished and remembered. She will be greatly missed as a friend and as an historian, but her enormous legacy lives on.