

# Margaret Durbridge OBE, JP (1911-1999)

## ‘A grassroots voice amongst professional planners’



Margaret Durbridge was born in 1911 in London into a professional, but ‘bohemian’ family. Her father was an eminent immunologist in St Mary’s hospital, where she was born. Margaret had an early interest in science and as a young woman she helped her father in his laboratory, and was in the elite science group at her girls’ school. However, unlike her brothers, she could not get into Oxford University because she had no education in classical Greek; not unusual even for a well-educated girl of her generation. She was a multi-talented young woman and her aptitude in fine arts saw her going instead to the Kunstgewerbeschule in Vienna, and after graduating from there practising briefly as a commercial artist.



Like many women of the time Margaret’s career was cut short when she married. Her husband, a friend of one of her brothers, was a young solicitor and in 1936 she moved with him to Gayhurst to take up the role of the wife of a country solicitor.

Margaret was shy but dynamic. Despite having four children and continuing to practise the various arts and crafts that she had studied, she wanted to contribute to her community. Domestic life on its own frustrated her and

over the years she involved herself extensively in her community in many ways. She believed in the importance of education and worthwhile community activity in people’s lives. She was a strong believer that the environment young people lived in helped them become happy and useful adults. She was not interested only in the social aspects of community, she began to engage with and develop a technical understanding of infrastructure issues.

When she moved with her growing family to Mill House in Newport Pagnell in 1939 her love of the river as a place for leisure expanded to encompass the river as a resource that needed managing to control the regular flooding which disrupted new developments like the M1 motorway and improve sewerage for the local population.



Margaret's first engagement with campaigning for better local infrastructure was for improvements in the toilets at her children's school. From such a small beginning, and one very directly related to being a mother, Margaret, like many other women, found she could be effective in the wider community and in wider issues. She took evacuees into her home during World War 2. In the 1950s and 1960s she was a school governor, a Justice of the Peace (JP) a County Councillor and Chair of the local Education Committee.

When the central government of the mid-1960s decided that a new town would be built in the North Buckinghamshire country-side Margaret's activities in her community made her an obvious choice to be invited to join the strategic Planning Board for the development of the new

city of Milton Keynes. In 1966 she attended the first public meeting of the Planning Board in London and from then on copies of the minutes of meetings show her handwritten annotations as she engaged with this enormous new project.



By 1967 she was an official member of the Planning Board (which became the Milton Keynes Development Corporation). Margaret threw herself into the work of the Transportation Group. She attended meetings and went with the group on trips to Finland and the Netherlands to see how other countries were planning the transport systems of new cities. She brought her knowledge of the needs of young families for good safe pedestrian routes and transport systems. One particular novel aspect of Milton Keynes that she was always proud of

was the network of pedestrian and cycle routes: 'the Redways', and she continued to cycle on them herself, well into her 80s.

Margaret's active engagement with the development of Milton Keynes was not limited to the Transport Group, she also became Chair of Social Policy Committee, and never gave up her educational projects. She was a school governor of several Milton Keynes schools and involved herself with the establishment of the Open University and in 1970 was invited to become a member of the University's Council. In 1975 she was awarded an honorary degree by the University. Her nomination address made reference to both her public engagement and the work she had carried out within the University in helping set up staff promotion and grading systems. It made reference to the fact that:

*"[she] undertook this work without any reward, always demonstrated great judgement and discretion, and always retained a strong sense of humour"* (from nomination address by Professor James P. Barber)

With her usual modesty Margaret replied in her acceptance speech, *"I wondered who you were talking about, it didn't sound like me at all"*.



She was awarded an OBE (Officer of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire) in 1977. A national recognition of a life of community service.

In the 1970s Margaret moved to live in the old centre of the new city: 'Milton Keynes Village'. She continued to be involved with community building projects, education and the visual arts. She was a member of Milton Keynes historical society. In the last few years of her life she became an expert quilter, creating large individual and group quilting works, some of which still hang in local churches.

Many people remember her as someone who was always busy, dynamic when she felt that was needed to get the job done, but at heart a shy person who believed that work was its own reward. Margaret never put herself forward for roles and positions but always accepted an invitation from others to be active in her community.

When she was alive Margaret Durbridge was well known and respected for her abilities and her hard work for the new city of Milton Keynes, and the honorary degree and OBE she received indicate the extent of her reputation. In a different era, she might have qualified as a professional and joined a planning office as a senior member of a professional team. Instead she was a woman of her time; an educated upper middle-class wife who could have settled for a comfortable family and personal life with her children and her art. Instead this shy woman accepted every request to bring her experience and intellect to bear on a variety of issues that have determined the physical and educational infrastructure of Milton Keynes as we know it, because she thought she could help make the city a better place for us all to live in.



**Acknowledgements:** With thanks to Nicola Durbridge for sharing information about and insights on her mother's life and achievements, and to other members of the Durbridge family who commented on an earlier draft of this text.

All photographs are permission of the Durbridge family.

The Living Archive has an interview with Margaret given in 2000, see archive ref

[http://www.communitycatalogues.co.uk/view\\_a\\_21\\_or\\_3215.aspx](http://www.communitycatalogues.co.uk/view_a_21_or_3215.aspx)

Prepared by Gill Kirkup for



miltonkeynesfawcettgroup@gmail.com