

A Personal Memory of Jenny Paxman from Roger Judd, Master of the Music at St Michael's College 1973-85

Jenny Paxman, who died on August 29th 2022 at the age of 91 was, as members of the Society will know, the wife of Denis Paxman who was Warden of St Michael's College from 1965-77.

As the wife of the Warden, her role went largely unseen by the majority of the College. That role, though, was absolutely crucial for the day-to-day smooth running of the institution. Without her keen eye for detail and no-nonsense approach to life, the College would have been a far less efficient operation than in fact it was. Put at its simplest, her role was overseeing the domestic arrangements and helping to create a caring environment for boys as young as 8 living away from home. Crucially, she had oversight of the catering arrangements, and if, as Napoleon asserted, an army marches on its stomach, much the same can be said of a school. Keeping eighty growing boys well fed was an absolute pre-requisite, and this Jenny did splendidly. The wonderful Mrs Friend (I don't think I ever discovered her first name – she was always 'Mrs Friend') and her team below stairs, with whom Jenny had a great relationship, kept grumbling stomachs at bay. Perhaps this is the moment to mention Mrs Friend's husband, Bill, who kept a benign eye on mealtimes up in the Dining Hall, and whose first name we did all know.

Jenny's field of influence also extended to the health and physical well-being of the boys. The appointing of Matrons and their assistants were all a part of her role too, and a huge responsibility to bear, but one that she shouldered willingly, not infrequently lending her shoulder to the wheel when extra hands were needed.

She was wonderfully supportive of the music at St Michael's, and her love of all the choir did in the church came from a more general love of music that went back to her early life. By the time Jenny left St Michael's I had built up a list of around two dozen pieces that had so impressed her that she wanted them all sung or played at her funeral. That service was in danger of equalling the length of a Wagner opera!

I remember being impressed that she counted Dame Ruth Railton, who founded the National Youth Orchestra of Great Britain, as a friend. I also enjoyed her personal stories of the Tolkien family, friends of her family.

Jenny was introduced to hill-walking by Denis early on in their marriage, and this exercise came to be a valuable way to recharge their batteries on days-off. I don't know whether Denis was also responsible for Jenny's love of 'real' ale, but I recall many an evening driving out to Bishop's Castle to sample the private brewery at the Three Tuns, and excellent beer it was too, and still is, I'm happy to report!

Denis relied heavily on her for support in his demanding work as Warden and parish priest, and in that she was unstinting. Together they were a splendid team and they left a large void in the life of the College and the Church when they decided that it was time to move on.

Happily our friendship lasted beyond their time at SMC, and I had many a happy time visiting them as they moved around the UK. First to Denbigh in North

Wales, where Denis was chaplain at Howells School. Next to Lakenheath in Suffolk where he was parish priest and able to indulge his interest in the RAF at the nearby base. An enormous move then took them to Tain, north of Inverness, and home of a fine whisky! By now Jenny had expanded the family to include a couple of highly characterful miniature dachshunds, who my spaniel found very difficult to cope with - I seem to recall that they had 'Hobbit' inspired names! They came back south to live in Kirby Stephen in Cumbria, and it was around that time that both Denis and Jenny converted to the Catholic Church. It was also around the time that Denis started to show signs of dementia, and Jenny added the role of carer to that of wife. They moved to Derbyshire to be nearer two of their children, and Denis died in 2009. Some years later, Jenny moved to join her daughter Tory near Sheffield, who became her carer in her last years.

Jenny was great fun to be with – she was well-read, highly articulate, and wonderfully hospitable. As the matriarch of the family she enjoyed her three children and guardian, a grandmother of five and a great grandmother of six. It is our hope that she may Rest in Peace and Rise in Glory.

Her funeral was held at the Hutcliffe Wood Crematorium, Sheffield, on Monday, September 19th. I suspect that she would have derived much pleasure from the fact that she shared the day with the funeral obsequies of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.



*A bed of cyclamen, started by Jenny at St Michael's in the 1970s,
in full bloom at Michaelmas 2022.*