

## NEWSLETTER NUMBER FORTY-EIGHT

### Spring 2025



*A sketch by Denise Dutton of her winning proposal for a statue of Sylvia Townsend Warner, with one of her cats, to be erected in Dorchester, was unveiled in October 2024.*

In 2024 the charity Visible Women UK campaigned for a new statue of a Dorset woman for Dorchester, calling for more representation of non-royal women in public art. Dorchester currently has statues of six men, one dog, one queen and a horse.

The charity says: ‘We aim to honour Townsend Warner’s legacy by introducing her physical presence into Dorchester with a beautiful work of art. This public artwork will serve as a focal point of remembrance and respect, celebrating Dorchester's rich and diverse heritage while ensuring that her personal and literary story continues to inspire. Especially in rural communities, where LGBTQ+ heritage can often be lost or overlooked, such a tribute would provide visibility and connection, offering the next generation a chance to see themselves reflected in their town’s history. By

championing Townsend Warner's legacy, we aim to introduce her work to new readers, inspire further scholarly debate, and pave the way for greater acceptance and equality.'

The crowdfunding campaign for commissioning the statue has raised over £56,000 to date, which includes £300 from the Society; you can still contribute at their fundraising page: <https://www.crowdfunder.co.uk/p/help-raise-a-statue-for-sylvia-townsend-warner>.

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### *Society notes for your diary*

The 2024 issue of the *Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society* is out! It has been posted to members and is freely available online at <https://journals.uclpress.co.uk/stw/issue/612/info/>.

The next online Reading Group will be on **Friday 4<sup>th</sup> April** from 6-7.30pm UK time, with readings from six of Sylvia's stories about animals. The Zoom link will be sent to all members by email.

The Society's Annual General Meeting, on **Saturday 10<sup>th</sup> May**, 4-6pm UK time, by Zoom: the link and agenda will be emailed to all members.

The Alliance of Literary Societies AGM, at University of Sussex, Brighton, **Friday 16<sup>th</sup> to Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> May**. Some Society members will be there and our Chair Jan Montefiore is on the organising committee. We won't be taking a stall, but we will have the new STW Society leaflet to distribute.

The biennial Warner Society Lecture will be given by Harriet Baker, author of *Rural Hours*, on **Wednesday 22<sup>nd</sup> October** at the Institute of Advanced Studies, University College London, Gower Street, London WC1E 6BT, 5.30-8.30pm.

The Society's Conference will be on **Friday 29<sup>th</sup> May to Saturday 30<sup>th</sup> May 2026** (dates to be confirmed), at University College London. The keynote speaker will be the acclaimed novelist and critic Adam Mars-Jones. The theme of the Mary Jacobs Essay Prize and the Call for Papers will be circulated in due course.

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## *A Norfolk outing*

There is no date attached to this yet, but we are also making enquiries to plan a Society outing in Norfolk, on a weekend in July or August. We haven't been there for several years, so for newer members this will be a nice way to explore Sylvia and Valentine's time in that county.

Full details of the outing, with accommodation options for each person to book themselves, will be emailed to all members in a month or two. We hope to make this a Drive Yourself outing rather than hiring a minibus, and hope to have enough cars available to collect those who will travel to Norfolk by train. Please email Kate at [kemacdonald83@gmail.com](mailto:kemacdonald83@gmail.com) if you want to make sure you get sent all details, and to make suggestions for other visits etc.

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## *Mastermind*

Jeff Davies, described on the BBC as a former social worker and member of the Society, appeared on the UK's long-standing TV quiz show *Mastermind* on 9<sup>th</sup> December 2024, answering questions on 'the unconventional life of author and musicologist Sylvia Townsend Warner'. He had no passes and answered all questions correctly, and he ended the specialist first round tied for first place with the contestant who eventually won. This was a very good performance: our congratulations to Jeff!

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## *Chintz Turbot*

Judith Stinton writes: On one STW Society weekend in Dorchester members gathered for lunch at Eileen Johnson's house in Fordington. Food was provided by Jenny Wildblood, using weird and wonderful recipes she'd harvested from Sylvia's writings. It made for an entertaining meal.

Now another recipe has come to light, in a book called *Sylvia Plath's Tomato Soup Cake. A compendium of classic authors' favourite recipes*, published in 2024 by Faber.

### *Sylvia Townsend Warner's Chintz Turbot*

Fillet a small turbot (halibut will do).

Simmer the bones. Cook the fillets slowly in butter and a little milk then put to one side in a warmed dish.

Make a bechamel sauce using the fish stock; flavour with a little tarragon vinegar. Add to this sauce a good handful of shelled shrimps and, if you can get it, a spot or two of spinach essence to colour the sauce lightly green.

Cover the turbot fillets with the sauce and sprinkle with tarragon.

I serve this with an endive salad with a special dressing of two-thirds cream, one third sherry, freshly ground pepper and salt.

(There's no date given for this recipe, but it certainly wasn't wartime!)

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### *B W Huebsch*

Jay Barksdale sent this extract from a letter from Sylvia on the death of Ben Huebsch, her editor at the Viking Press, who had died in 1964. He appears in her diaries and letters in 1931 and in 1954. Her remarks appear in a privately printed collection entitled *B W Huebsch. A record of a meeting of his friends at the Grolier Club, New York City, on December 9, 1964.*

‘When I first met Ben, I couldn’t account for him. For here was a man of unwavering integrity who was as lovable as a scoundrel – who didn’t intimidate, or rasp, or wound feelings, or make one feel one’s inferiority. Then, seeing him at his various works, and seeing that he was always patient, considerate and self-critical, I realized that while he valued integrity above all else he was modest about his own. It was an extraordinary balance, like a feat of musicianship. Dear Ben! At the time of his death a friend in New York wrote to me, saying: “It will be a long time before the rest of the world catches up with him.” Still, we should try; we owe it to him.’

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*Harrow in Prose and Verse*, edited with a preface by George Townsend  
Warner  
by Hilary Ely

As a member of the team of Heritage Volunteers working on the restoration of the library at West Horsley Place in Surrey, I have had the opportunity to spend some time with a copy of *Harrow in Prose and Verse* that belonged to Robert Offley Ashburton Crewe-Milnes, 1<sup>st</sup> Marquess of Crewe (1858-1945), a Liberal parliamentarian, statesman and diplomat.

George Townsend Warner (1865-1916), father of Sylvia Townsend Warner and a beloved History Master and influential author of textbooks, was also a chronicler of Harrow School and its life. In 1898, with fellow Harrow Master E W Howson, he edited a history of the school. In 1913 he did the same with this anthology, *Harrow in Prose and Verse*, designed to illuminate school life and culture at various periods of its history.

*Harrow in Prose and Verse* is a substantial quarto volume published by Hodder and Stoughton in 1913, in two versions, both luxury productions: the basic edition bound in vellum-coloured cloth, and a limited edition of 125 copies bound in vellum with silk ties, numbered and signed by the publisher. Both versions have the title stamped in gold on the spine, and a bold blue band around a gilt stamp of the Harrow school badge and crest in a central panel on each of the boards. The book is illustrated with full-colour reproductions of portraits and landscapes of people and places associated with Harrow School. The text was printed by T & A Constable of Edinburgh, and the colour plates, which are tipped in, by Henry Stoke and Son Ltd of Banbury.

It appears, and GTW's preface seems to bear this out, that the book was aimed squarely at a market of Old Harrovians. This copy, numbered 60 of the limited edition of 125, belonged to Lord Crewe, educated at Harrow and Trinity College Cambridge. It has his bookplate as Robert Earl of Crewe (even though in 1911 he had been made a Marquess). Older than GTW, Lord Crewe would not have been taught by him, but by 1913 he can hardly have been unaware of GTW's status and influence, both in the school and the wider world. Lord Crewe also owned a copy of *Harrow School* (1898) by Howson and Warner.

The contents begin with a preface and end with a poem by George Townsend Warner. Between them we find:

1. Introduction
2. The Pictures: [12 reproductions of paintings of Harrow School and surroundings by Arthur Garrett; 13 reproductions of portraits from Harrow School's collection and from the National Portrait Gallery]
3. The Statutes of John Lyon [putative founder or re-founder of the school]
4. Harrow in Prose:
  - From the Verney Papers
  - The Boyhood of Samuel Parr
  - Letter from the School to the Governors
  - Byron at School
  - A Palmerston Letter
  - William Trevelyan's Diary
  - The Autobiography of Dean Merivale [Charles Merivale 1808-1885, Dean of Ely, instigator of the Oxford and Cambridge Boat race in 1829.]
  - The Autobiography of Anthony Trollope
  - From Bishop Wordsworth's Annals [Christopher Wordsworth, nephew of the poet; Headmaster of Harrow from 1836-44; later Bishop of Lincoln.]
  - John Addington Symonds
  - L'Entente Cordiale
5. Harrow in Verse:
  - 'Savillon' ['Adieu to Harrow', from *Savillon's Elegies, or Poems*, Written By A Gentleman, A B, Late of the University of Cambridge [ie James Wallace], 1795. This book is sought after for its illustrations, including a print of Harrow School, with pupils dressed for sports.]
  - Lord Byron
  - From *The Triumvirate* [title of *The Harrovian* from 1859-63]
  - From *The Tyro* [title of *The Harrovian* from 1863-69]
  - Brooke Foss Westcott
  - Edward Ernest Bowen

James Robertson  
Edmund Whytehead Howson  
Eric Milner-White  
George Townsend Warner

Harrow has a unique tradition of school songs and massed events to sing them. The current Harrow Song Book contains over fifty songs in Latin and English, mostly from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the 'Harrow in Verse' section, the works by Westcott, Bowen, Robertson, Howson and Townsend Warner, all Harrow Masters, also appear in the Harrow Songs collection. Bowen is responsible for the song best known outside the Harrow School community, 'Forty Years On'. The songs are performed at the House singings for which they were intended and Songs concerts on Speech Day. They are sung at Old Harrovian reunion dinners and House dinners. There is also the (more recent) tradition of Churchill Songs which takes place every five years at the Royal Albert Hall.

GTW's poem, 'You?' (1903), which ends the book, is inspired by the heroism of Harrovians in the Boer War. Set to music in 1904 by Percy C Buck, Head of Music at the school from 1901, it is currently in the Harrow School Songs collection (2011) and in the 1938 edition and reprints. It is, unusually for a Harrow Song, a solo, and its status is summed up by the present Director of Music at Harrow, David Woodcock: 'It is specified as a solo song by PCB. It is sung infrequently because I need a star tenor to do it justice (and it is very moving, so I don't like it to be overexposed!). [It was sung] at Churchill Songs this year (November 2023). I think it has been sung 4 times in the last 19 years.'

'You?' gives the modern reader a jolt of prescience of lives lost in the Great War (rather like reading *A Shropshire Lad*).

You?

I

You come here where your brothers came,  
    To the old School years ago,  
A new young face, and a Harrow name

'Mid a crowd of strangers? No!  
You may not fancy yourself alone  
You who are memory's heir,  
When even the names in the carven stone  
Will greet you with 'Who goes there –  
You? –  
Pass, Friend – All's well.'

## II

You stand there where your brothers stood,  
And pray where your brothers prayed,  
Who fought with Death as brave men should  
Not boasting and not afraid.  
For the blood and the lives that your brothers gave,  
For the glory that you share,  
The message comes from beyond the grave,  
The challenge 'Who goes there –  
You? –  
Pass, Friend – All's well.'

## III

You go forth where your brothers went,  
And the shadows gather round  
With last lights out, and the camp-fires spent,  
From the veldt dead voices sound,  
Voices that ask 'Is it well with the Hill,  
Now as in days that were?  
Is it well?' And phantom sentries still  
Challenge you 'Who goes there –  
You? –  
Pass, Friend – All's well.'

The sense of foreshadowing in the final stanza is strengthened by the words from GTW's refrain, 'Pass, Friend', which are carved on the doors to the Alex Fitch Room in Harrow School's War Memorial Building. The Room was furnished by his parents in memory of 2<sup>nd</sup> Lieutenant Alex Fitch, who was killed in September 1918 in Northern France, aged 19.



In 1915, the year before GTW died, Lord Crewe wrote ‘A Harrow Grave in Flanders’.

Here in the marshland, past the battered bridge,  
— One of a hundred grains untimely sown,  
Here, with his comrades of the hard-won ridge,  
— He rests, unknown.

His horoscope had seemed so plainly drawn:  
— School triumphs earned apace in work and play;  
Friendships at will; then love’s delightful dawn  
— And mellowing day.

Home fostering hope; some service to the State;  
— Benignant age; then the long tryst to keep  
Where in the yew-tree shadow congregate  
— His fathers sleep.

Was here the one thing needful to distil  
— From life’s alembic, through this holier fate,  
The man’s essential soul, the hero-will?  
— We ask: and wait.

This poem was published in *The Harrovian* in 1915 as ‘A Grave In Flanders’. *Country Life* included the text of the poem in its column ‘Country Notes’ on 30<sup>th</sup> October 1915, with the title changed to ‘A Harrow Grave ...’, and under this title it was republished in numerous anthologies, starting with General Sir Horace Smith-Dorrien GCB, GCMG, DSO, *Harrow’s Epic of War* (1916), then *A Treasury of War Poetry. British and American Poems of the World War 1914-1917* (1917; expanded edition 1919), and later in The English Association’s collection *Poems of Today: Second Series* (1922 with numerous reprints to 1945).

GTW’s poem ‘You?’ has a similar structure to Henry Newbolt’s ‘Vitaï Lampada’ from 1892 (‘There’s a breathless hush in the Close tonight’), but without the same energy and aura of triumphant certainty; it has an altogether sadder and more elegiac mood. Even more so, ‘A Harrow Grave ...’ strikes a tone that is bereft of hope and glory. Could it be thought of as a riposte or rejoinder to ‘You?’ Its starting-point has a similar sentiment, but

in a very different frame of mind. We can now be sure that Lord Crewe possessed a book that contained GTW's poem, which might give this speculation some merit. It is possible to trace in the journey from Newbolt to Crewe via GTW an evolving response to youthful heroism infused with a growing pathos and regret, a line of enquiry that may be worth deeper study.

Harrow in Prose & Verse. Edited by G T Warner ... With 25 plates in colour reproduced from sketches by Arthur Garratt, and from portraits in the Vaughan Library and in the National Portrait Gallery.

[London]: Hodder & Stoughton, [1913]

Limited Edition: number 60/125. Signed: Hodder & Stoughton.

Bookplate: E LIBRIS ROBERTI COMITIS DE CREWE

With grateful thanks to:

Moira Briggs, for her formidable network and her kindness in activating it.

Timothy Bentinck MBE, President of the Harrow Association, for information on the Harrow School Songs tradition.

Marie Staunton, Archivist, Harrow School for information about GTW's poem 'You?' and its setting to music by Percy C Buck.

David Woodcock, Director of Music, Harrow School, for setting GTW's poem 'You?' into context as a Harrow Song.

Kate Macdonald for her encouragement and invaluable help in bringing this paper together.

The Alex Fitch Room may be seen at

<https://www.iwm.org.uk/memorials/item/memorial/11215>.

West Horsley Place, the country home of Lord Crewe from 1931 to his death in 1945, is an estate of great charm and historic importance. After 600 years of private ownership, it is now open for events, including Open Days and guided tours. For details of visits, events and activities: <https://www.westhorsleyplace.org>.

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## *What they're saying about Sylvia*

Here is a round-up of interesting mentions on the social media channel Bluesky of Sylvia and Valentine. Sightings included:

Editor Simon Spanton quoted Sylvia on Valentine: 'She has the stillest face I have ever known. Amusement sharpens it slightly into that fox's smile ... The loveliest thing of all is how, with bowed head embracing me, her arms and neck pour from those narrow shoulders, like a smooth torrent of water limbed as it falls over a rock.'

American novelist Alix E Harrow gloated: 'a very cool thing i got to do to: write an introduction for the new edition of sylvia townsend warner's LOLLY WILLOWES; OR THE LOVING HUNTSMAN, out this july.'

English novelist Tom Cox posted a photo of himself hugging a cat, with this quotation from Sylvia: 'Cats admit us to their godless, hedonistic Eden. And when they die we are cast out of it.' This came from an August 2024 post on his Substack in which he mourned the deaths of his cats.

American writer Thomas Hogglestock described a novel by Patrick Gale, *Facing the Tank*, as 'One part Pym, one part Murdoch, and one part Sylvia Townsend Warner'. (For the curious, this is the Waterstones' description of *Facing the Tank*: 'American Professor Evan Kirby, author of a successful book on Hell, moves to Barrowcester in the south England expecting to find the very epitome of a cathedral society of gentle clergymen and coffee mornings. What he encounters instead is a small city thrown into chaos by scandalous pregnancies, a Satanic summoning of a young feral girl and strange, supernatural events that threaten to rock the hitherto genteel, church going community.' It was first published in 1988.)

Author Melanie Jackson also quoted Sylvia: 'Slowly, with a look of intense concentration, [her cat] got up and advanced on me ... put out a front paw, and stroked my cheek as I used to stoke his chops. A human caress from a cat. I felt very meagre and ill-educated that I could not purr.'

Chris Cusack, an assistant professor at Radboud University in The Netherlands, wailed: 'Once I finish the Moomin article I don't have time to write I'm going to write the Barbara Comyns article I don't have time to write and then I'll write the Sylvia Townsend Warner article I don't have time to write. At some point I'll also have to finish my overdue monograph.'

Prominent American journalist and critic Kate Wagner wrote: 'there should

be more novels about nuns written by avowed communists.’

In a post from 2023 that somehow got thrown up by algorithm to 2025, the American novelist (this is becoming repetitive) Caleb Crain suggested reading ‘*The Corner That Held Them* by Sylvia Townsend Warner. You didn't know you wanted to read about several centuries in the life of a nunnery, but you really really do’.

And finally, American poet and academic Paul Robichaud posted this for International Women’s Day: ‘One doesn’t become a witch to run around being harmful, or to run around being helpful either, a district visitor on a broomstick. It’s to escape all that — to have a life of one’s own, not an existence doled out to one by others.’

Many other posts featured photos of cats and Sylvia’s words about them. She is the literary cat person’s cat lady.

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Those members receiving this newsletter by post will find a few copies of the new Society publicity leaflet. Please put them up (one for each side) in a suitable public space (library, bookshop, coffeeshop etc) where potential new members might see it and be encouraged to join. If those members receiving the pdf version of this newsletter would like a print copy, please email Kate at the address on the back page.

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### ***Treasurer needed urgently***

The role of Treasurer to the Society is very light, but without it the Society may be forced to close, and we urgently need someone to take on this role.

The Society’s modest finances only require occasional attention, and the Treasurer doesn’t need to be an accountant, just someone broadly competent with numbers and able to pay bills with Paypal.

## Regular tasks:

- Check the bank and Paypal statements every two or three months. Most membership payments arrive during December and January with little or no activity at other times.
- Make payments on behalf of the Society via the bank or Paypal. The main outgoings are 2 or 3 printers' invoices a year.
- Deal with member queries about membership payments, and deposit any cheques received with the bank. Most members pay by direct debit or Payal subscription.
- Provide a list of membership payments to the membership secretary, around early spring.
- Prepare simple income and expense accounts for the AGM (normally around May), based on money received and expenses paid during the year. Transactions during the year can be downloaded in a spreadsheet from the bank and from Paypal.
- Prepare a one-page report for the AGM commenting on the financial position.
- Contribute to decisions that have an impact on the Society's financial situation, for example setting the level of subscriptions, or deciding whether there are sufficient funds for a proposed payment. These kinds of discussions might take place once or twice a year.

If you feel you could do this essential work for the Society, please email Jan Montefiore at [jem1@kent.ac.uk](mailto:jem1@kent.ac.uk).

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The Society's Facebook page administrator Karina reports that the page currently has 500 followers, which is a sturdy fandom. If anyone would like to help Karina with managing the page, and posting occasionally, please get in touch with her at her address on the back page.

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*The Sylvia Townsend Warner Society*

*Chair: Janet Montefiore*  
36 St Dunstan's Street  
Canterbury, Kent CT2 8BZ, UK  
jem1@kent.ac.uk

*Hon. Secretary: vacant*

*Treasurer: vacant*

*Membership Secretary: Sarah Jane Pattison*  
Sarahjanepattison1@gmail.com

*Events Organiser: vacant*

*Journal Editor: Peter Swaab*  
Department of English, University College London,  
Gower Street, London WC1E 6BT, UK  
p.swaab@ucl.ac.uk

*Newsletter Editor: Kate Macdonald*  
16 Peachfield Road, Malvern WR14 4AP  
kmacdonald@brookes.ac.uk

*Web Administrator: Hannah Berry*  
hanberuk@yahoo.co.uk

*Facebook Administrator: Karina Taubert*  
kt@jetaido.com  
<https://www.facebook.com/sylviatownsendwarnersociety/>

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The Society's website is townsendwarner.com

The Estates of Sylvia and Valentine are at sylviatownsendwarnerestate.com  
and that email is estatestw@gmail.com

Printed by Creeds Design & Print, Mountfield, Bridport, Dorset DT6 3JP  
[www.creedsuk.com](http://www.creedsuk.com)