

Stephanie Higham (1920–2023)

A dutiful daughter, a woman of strong Christian faith and community spirit, a good friend and, above all, a devoted wife and matriarch.

Stephanie, born in London on 29 October 1920, was the eldest child of Sir Berkeley Pigott, an officer in the 17th/21st Lancers and his wife, Christabel, youngest daughter of an Anglican dean. Both parents grew up in Brockenhurst, Hants and were married in India in 1919. When Stephanie was only a month old, her father had to return to his regiment and his wife chose to accompany him, leaving their daughter in England under the care of two nurses for two and a half years.



Despite this inauspicious start, Stephanie's childhood was largely the stuff of a best-selling children's novel, being full of travel and adventures, from four years in Ceylon where she had rides on an elephant, to 10 years in Europe, spending summers by Lake Worthersee (Vurtersay) Austria and winters in Rome. This peripatetic lifestyle was mainly due to her mother's poor health. Lady Pigott suffered from severe migraines as well as a back injury sustained in an accident in Ceylon, and believed Austria's doctors could help her. Since Sir Berkeley had resigned his commission in 1929, they were free to live where they pleased. The Worthersee provided opportunities for swimming, fishing and boating, as well as skating in the first winters there. Stephanie and her two siblings were each given a portion of garden to cultivate, hence her lifelong interest in gardening. Apart from a few mercifully brief sojourns at convent schools, reminiscent of Jane Eyre's experiences in Lowood, Stephanie did not receive a formal education until she was 14 and blamed her poor spelling on this. Instead she spent the mornings on lessons at home with tutors hired to teach German and later Italian and French.

Her parents separated in 1935, her father returning to England and a farm near Shobley in the New Forest, while her mother built a house in Dellach on the lake shore. Stephanie now divided her holidays between England and Austria, but was with friends in Hungary when, on 31 August 1939, she received a telegram from her father saying: 'Return at Once.' That was easier said than done. To avoid Austria and Germany she had to go by train to Yugoslavia, then Italy, then Switzerland, but was stopped at the French border because of the fear that there might be German spies on board. Stephanie had to spend the rest of her money on accommodation and needed to borrow more from the British Consulate. Finally, a week later, a special train was laid on to take the refugees to Calais and she got home penniless. When the Foreign Office contacted her for repayment, she was obliged to ask her father, who was furious and told her never to ask him

for money again. She never did. Her mother had also returned to England so Stephanie helped her to find and furnish a new house in Sussex. She also studied for her Matriculation which she passed but was forbidden to join up until conscription for women was introduced in 1941. She chose the WRNS as they were recruiting German speakers. Thus began one of her most memorable experiences in life.

After a brief training at the Naval College, Greenwich, WRNS Petty Officer Pigott was sent to a listening post at Winterton, near Great Yarmouth. Her job was to listen to German radio chatter, and translate and report potential attacks to Naval HQ at Harwich. While there she picked up German conversation with lots of swearing, interspersed with Russian names. This strange information was passed on to Bletchley Park and eventually she was told that she had been listening to German tank crews on the Russian Front!



Next she was sent to Kent and many years later could still recall her nervousness in walking alone in the dark to an isolated tower on the cliff edge. Night duty there meant that if the wireless room picked up a signal, they phoned to ask her to swivel the aerial to get the strongest signal and thus pinpoint the location of the enemy vessel. In May 1942 she was moved on again, this time to Dover HQ, where she translated coded messages for naval operations next door. She was also expected like the other Petty Officers to take squad drill, which she described as 'a farce as we never learned what commands to give to stop the squad walking into a wall!'. However, there was a good social life though swimming was risky due to the mines. While at Dover she found herself allocated three weeks of 'compassionate leave', as her mother wanted her to help her move house yet again, this time to Walsingham in Norfolk.

On her return she was posted to Portsmouth HQ, where her office was 50 feet underground overlooking the harbour. There they could intercept German signals in the Channel Isles and warn of attacks by E-boats. When the ventilation system broke down, the atmosphere was unbearable, especially as 75% of the Wrens smoked. They were determined to enjoy themselves, e.g. when all leave was cancelled the Wrens just changed into civvies and went to London anyway. Being relatively close to her father's farm, Stephanie could hitch hike home with impunity and go riding or

participate in local pony shows as well as help on the farm. She was recommended for a commission in July 1943 but was not allowed to leave Portsmouth until after the invasion and was lucky enough to be on duty on D-Day. The plotting room next door was a hive of activity that night and next morning Portsmouth harbour, which had been crammed with ships of every shape and size lay empty. Now the Wrens relayed messages from the German garrison in the Channel Islands, pleading for help from Berlin as they were cut off, but instead were told by Hitler not to surrender.

Stephanie got her commission in September 1944 and was sent to Greenock to assist with allocating berths to ships from the Atlantic and Murmansk convoys. Then came a stint at Western Approaches C in C HQ, in Derby House, Liverpool. In 1945 she was briefly employed in Wimbledon to translate captured German documents on a variety of topics, from the effects of frostbite to rocket propulsion and was able to stay with her sister Veronica and her husband Stefan and baby daughter, Sabina. In June she was accepted as an interpreter and after inoculation against typhoid, typhus, tetanus and diphtheria, flew to Hamburg. She was expected to prepare weekly reports based on German newspapers from all four Occupied Zones. However, the social life was outstanding, as naval officers outnumbered the Wrens by 10 to one, and champagne and caviar became a regular treat for the Wrens wearing evening dresses made from parachute silk. They even ventured a few times to the Russian Zone but found the Russian officers did not speak either English or German and were rather smelly, yet one could not refuse to dance with them and upset inter-Allied relations! Stephanie returned home on a destroyer in 1946 and though she had only been an interpreter for six months, considered that time as among the best in her life.

Once again a civilian, she found her language skills an asset and became a tour representative for companies like Thomas Cook and Inghams. Initially based in Switzerland for the summer holidays, she was free in winter to see friends, attend theatre and opera which she enjoyed, as well as go skiing. However, she also had to visit her mother's home in Dellach each autumn to clean and redecorate it if necessary. In 1957 she was sent to San Remo, where she had her own flat and independence. Life as a tour rep could be challenging in unexpected ways, e.g. she once had to crawl under a train to rescue a client's false teeth and she even had to organise a funeral.

It was while organising an evening activity for his coach party that Stephanie met Walter Higham, a widower, in 1959. It was a whirlwind romance as they had shared interests including the navy, as Walter was a retired submarine commander. Their first date was dinner in San Remo's

best restaurant in July. In November he proposed and bought her an engagement ring in Nice. They were married on 21 December 1959 and Stephanie walked up the aisle to the National Anthem as 'God Save the Queen' was the only English tune the organist knew! The newly weds had decided to live in San Remo and open an English tea shop. Fortunately, though the venture meant hard work and long hours, it was a success. 1960 was memorable for another reason as their son, Stephen, was born in October.

Though they both loved San Remo, Walter wanted Stephen to be educated in England, so in 1966 they sold the tea room and moved to Verwood, Dorset. Stephanie was soon involved in the Royal British Legion, WI and Catholic Women's League. She suggested the WRVS start a lunch club for the elderly in Verwood in 1969, and its success led to other clubs. By 1988 there were ten WRVS lunch clubs founded by Stephanie Higham. She also proposed forming a club for the disabled in 1973, with actress Jessie Mathews as President. In 1974 Walter and she moved to Petersfield to be within walking distance of shops and she became involved in raising funds for a Sue Ryder hospice there and also organised a WRVS shopping service for its residents. In 1989 Stephanie started a support group for carers, having looked after her own aunt, Yvonne, for many years.

Sadly, Walter died in March 1990 following a fall at home, so Stephanie decided to move to a smaller house. She continued to travel, whether with friends, relatives like her stepdaughter Jill, or son Stephen. She and Walter had enjoyed their holidays in the Canary Islands and she became an annual visitor, as well as going back to see old friends in Italy and Austria. Always open to new experiences, Stephanie went with a friend on a canal boat trip in France in 1995. She had to jump ashore with the rope to tie up, but the task required some athleticism thanks to the proliferation of stinging nettles on the canal bank. Not bad for 75.

After her son Stephen's marriage to Janet in 1999, Stephanie decided to move again to be closer to them and bought a house in Deddington. She joined a local bridge club and, as a member of Banbury U3A, started an Italian and Spanish language group and made new friends.

Stephanie retained her interest in people and current events until the end. Always hospitable, she was kind to those who might be as lonely as she had sometimes been, especially when she was young. Consequently she invited her greatniece, Alix, newly arrived at Oxford, to come to stay

for weekends and took her to National Trust properties as well as Bletchley Park. She was interested in all family members and enormously fond and proud of her granddaughters, Louisa and Penny. Stephanie had a strong sense of duty, whether to her country, her less fortunate neighbours or her family. She was dutiful to her mother who expected her to cook, clean, paint and decorate, yet was not always kind to her. She did not complain about her mother's decision that Stephanie should study science rather than Latin, though that decision cost her a university place. She looked after her aunt Yvonne and then her husband as his health deteriorated, yet still found the time and energy to serve the local community.

Life's experiences transformed Stephanie Higham from a shy teenager into a formidable and much respected lady, who will be remembered fondly by the many, whose lives she touched and be greatly missed by those to whom she was dear.

Laura Kwasniewska on behalf of the Higham family