

MARY MONTES

MA-1 4007

'Mary of Earlsdon' died unexpectedly at home on 30 March 2007, aged 83 years. Mary had spent many years studying the history of Earlsdon particularly that of the original eight streets - Earlsdon Street, Berkeley Road South, Warwick Street, Clarendon Street, Arden Street, Moor Street, Providence Street and Earlsdon Terrace (the roundabout end of Earlsdon Avenue South). She knew the history of almost every house and its occupants in those eight streets, and had acquired a great understanding of the intricacies of the watchmaking industry. Mary knew more about the history of Earlsdon than most of us can ever hope to learn.

Mary was an ambassador for Earlsdon, putting Earlsdon 'on the map' as she was consulted by many historians, archivists, writers and others studying the development of Coventry and/or the watchmaking industry. For many people inside and outside Earlsdon, Mary was Earlsdon. She wrote many booklets and her work was an important resource for many other authors. Mary loved and understood the history of people, not the history of facts and figures; for her the Earlsdon residents of the past were alive and responding to their life circumstances. Perhaps that was why she understood and accepted change today and did not want to see Earlsdon and its buildings preserved in aspic.

Her writings are too numerous to mention here, but perhaps the most well known in Earlsdon is the 'Heritage Trail' which can still be purchased at Gibberd's, the Library or through the Earlsdon Society. Mary was, it seemed, always researching or working on an article or booklet. Her latest work, not yet published, was a history of Sir Harry Harley, who was an Earlsdon resident and founder of Coventry Gauge & Tool on the site being redeveloped as Warwick Court. Some readers may remember Mary leading a walk along the Heritage Trail or giving a talk and being fascinated as she brought history alive. Mary had an impressive and extensive archive of Earlsdon's history which will pass into the safekeeping of the Earlsdon Society before being given to the city's archives when the new extension to the Herbert Museum and Art Gallery is completed in a few years time.

Mary went to Earlsdon Infants and Junior schools (later attending their reunions) before going to Barr's Hill. She was an active member of the Historical Association, the Earlsdon Society, the Govind Lifestyle Circle and the committee organising the annual J B Sheldon Memorial Lecture. She enjoyed reading, especially history books of all shapes and sizes; for light relief she turned to Alexander McCall Smith and his accounts of the No.1 Ladies

Detective Agency. She also enjoyed sewing cross stitch tapestry and gardening.

Mary will be greatly missed by her family first of all, and then by all her friends in Earlsdon and Coventry and those further afield. The writer will miss her smile, sitting at her table enjoying a cup of tea, 'talking history', her sympathetic ear and her sense of humour.



Photo courtesy of Paul Fernandez-Montes

MARY MONTES IN ECHO

Mary Montes was never a member of the ECHO team but her contributions run like a rich vein through more than 20 years of this newspaper's history. This brief account of her involvement with us cannot do justice to all the times she assisted, pointed us in the right direction or inspired us to look at the area's history in her distinctive way, but it will give an idea of the breadth and depth of her knowledge and expertise.

Mary's first official contribution to ECHO was in February 1986 when she supplied a history of the Albany Social Club, which was founded in 1911 in a disused coffee house. The article was reprised in a slightly different form in May and June 1998.

(Continued on page 5)

(Continued from page 4)

Our review of her 1986 book on the history of the Earlsdon Cottage was the first relating to her published work outside of ECHO. In that book Mary told the extraordinary story of the watchmaker's cottage in one of the original 1852 streets at the heart of Earlsdon. Its watchmaker owner, Joseph Atkins, in what was described as a 'momentous and historic change of career' turned it into a major social centre, despite opposition from the established City Arms and Royal Oak pubs, not to mention the area's strongly teetotal Methodist community.

In July and August 1987 ECHO ran a 2-part history by Mary on the life of Mary Jane 'Ma' Cooper. 'Ma' was born in the Butts in 1837, before Earlsdon existed, and eventually became the legendary landlady of the City Arms from 1897 until her death in 1921. For many ECHO readers and contributors, this was probably their first exposure to Mary Montes' unique style. Twenty years later it still reads as a fresh and fascinating account of the life of a working class woman in the second half of the 19th century and the early part of the 20th, one of the most moving and evocative pieces of original writing ever to appear in ECHO.

ECHO's 100th issue in April 1988 showed Mary's grasp of detail to perfection. It featured a 4-page supplement, on sepia paper, of an entirely imaginary newspaper called the *Earlsdon Independent* from April 1888. The imagination was of course Mary's, and the content entirely realistic as she provided apparently contemporary eye witness accounts of public meetings, planned developments and a crisis with the local water supply, all based on historical events. Add in authentic period advertisements and photographs, and the result was a small masterpiece.

From then on Mary's name crops up constantly in the pages of ECHO. This was partly through reviews of, and excerpts from, her many books such as 'Brown Boots in Earlsdon' (1989), 'Earlsdon Schooldays Remembered' (1990), 'St Barbara's, The Story of Earlsdon Parish Church' (1994), 'The Church on the Corner, A History of Earlsdon Methodist Church' (1998) and 'Earlsdon Heritage Trail' (2000). There were also numerous articles written especially for ECHO such as her obituary of artist Robert Overy (1989), the life of philanthropist and businessman James Walker (1990), the Story of Albany Road and the Origins of Earlsdon (both 1991), and the Earlsdon Nuisance (1993).

The October 1997 issue described the first of Mary's Earlsdon Historical Walks, a guided tour of places of interest in the area for the public. This concept would lead eventually to the creation of the Earlsdon Heritage Trail as part of the Earlsdon 2000 initiative, along with Mary's accompanying book.

In August 1998 Mary took a look at the life of one of the area's perhaps less well known and acknowledged historical figures, David Spencer, who in the 1880s funded the creation of the park which still bears his name and also

played a part in the founding of what later became the Technical College and today is known as City College.

At the dawn of a new millennium, in June 2000 we saw the forward looking side of Mary when, in the context of the launch of ECHO's website, we featured her on the front page demonstrating the growing use of internet technology by older people. The following month Mary was in print again, this time looking at the area's artistic legacy, through local artists such as Sidney Bunney, Robert Overy again and, from a more recent era, Nancy Upshall.

In addition to her published work, Mary gave numerous talks on local history to organisations like the Earlsdon Society and played a major role in commemorating the Earlsdon 150th Anniversary in 2002.

Two more major pieces were featured in 2003, on Centaur Road School's famous open air classes and on the Mayo and Rugg soft drinks factory. Mary last appeared in ECHO in November 2006, in a report of her talk to the Earlsdon Society in which she returned to an earlier theme of the development of the area's water and sewerage systems.

We return finally to her first major contribution to ECHO, in which Mary wrote *"None of those who went to pay their last respects that day could ever have dreamed that her name would live on as it has. Over the decades it has become the most familiar and often repeated name in Earlsdon: 'Ma' Cooper of the City Arms"*. Whatever digital medium has replaced ECHO by the early part of the 22nd century, we hope the name of Mary Montes will similarly endure in its pages.

ALL SOULS SENIORS' CLUB

The All Souls Seniors' Club has been going for just a year now. Patrick Lister was asked by the Parish Priest, Father Michael Brandon, to start the club as a place for older members of the parish to meet socially and share their experience and neighbourliness. It is needed to encourage community - a sense of belonging - working and sharing much together - rather than living isolated lives. Although based on a Roman Catholic Parish, the club is ready to welcome any who may find it interesting and easy to join.

The club meets fortnightly on Tuesday afternoons at 2pm. There is usually a talk: if no talk is arranged, members will have a social meeting, play Bingo, hold a raffle, and enjoy a cup of tea or coffee with a chat. The following are some of the topics covered in the talks: Osteoporosis, Recycling of Waste, Embarrassing Moments, A Clear View of Coventry, Coventry City Farm, Cystic Fibrosis and the History of Ribbon Weaving. The club will not meet during the summer vacation: meetings will recommence on 4 September.