



**Intrepid explorer, author  
and camel conservationist**  
**John Hare**  
Page 52

# Register

## Obituaries

# Tessa Gaisman

Long-serving diary secretary to Mrs Thatcher who was by her side during the Falklands, the Brighton bombing and Anyone for Denis?

Tessa Gaisman was present at a lunch with Margaret Thatcher in June 1982 when John Nott, the defence secretary, came running in breathlessly to announce a successful British action in the Falklands, clearing the path to Port Stanley and eventually the conclusion of the military campaign. It was one of many occasions during the 1980s when Gaisman had a ringside seat at the making of history. Having accompanied Thatcher to Downing Street in 1979, she remained at the prime minister's side for most of her time in office, eventually assuming charge of her diary.

She was assiduous in her work. Carol Thatcher, the prime minister's daughter, recalled that during the 1983 election campaign they arrived at Leeds-Bradford airport and transferred to the campaign "battle bus", where Gaisman got going on retyping a speech that Thatcher had been working on during the flight. "Typing against the clock on a moving bus must rank along with playing a trumpet on horseback," Carol remarked admiringly in her diary.

In Charles Moore's authorised biography of Thatcher, Gaisman described the mood in No 10 in June 1987, after her third general election win, adding that civil servants appeared to share the same pleasure as those who were political appointments. "It was lovely how pleased the Garden Room girls [Downing Street's exalted version of the typing pool] were," she told Moore. "It was because she was always kind to them. They queued up to shake her hand."

This was a time of fewer garden parties in No 10 than today and less drinking, although Gaisman and her colleagues saw it as part of their jobs to rustle up drinks and even meals for the prime minister. They felt happy doing so, she said, because the Iron Lady was always ready to help, often plunging her hands into the sink to do the washing-up saying: "It's much easier to do it yourself."

Gaisman particularly enjoyed working with Ian Gow, Thatcher's first parliamentary private secretary. Having met her suitor for the first time, Gow quaintly advised her in writing to marry him on the slender ground that he wore a waistcoat with his suit. Gow's murder in 1990 was one of the four times that Gaisman's life was touched by Irish republican terrorism. She was summoned home from a holiday in 1979 when the MP Airey Neave was killed; she was at Harrods when a car bomb exploded outside a week before Christmas in 1983, killing three police officers; and she was working in the Grand Hotel in Brighton when an IRA bomb detonated in 1984 killing five people, recalling that shortly after the blast Thatcher remarked: "That was meant for me."

Yet there were also lighter moments, including being on hand to correct the prime minister's more ingenious remarks. Gaisman recalled that one such occasion was when Thatcher was about to repeat an expression she had mis-



Tessa Gaisman with Margaret Thatcher on her "battle bus" in 1983; after being appointed MBE in 1991; and in a photoshoot for Country Life magazine in 1982



heard a few days earlier, almost saying of a colleague: "He couldn't organise a pussy-cat in a brewery."

Teresa Mignon Jardine Paterson was

## When Thatcher, an early riser, stayed Gaisman put breakfast out before bed

born in Calcutta in 1954, one of the last generation of children of the Raj. Her Scottish-born father, Sir John Jardine Paterson, was a trader (and later chairman) at Jardine Henderson; in 1966 he served as chairman of the Bengal Chamber of Commerce, a position that carried one of the more easily acquired knighthoods of the day. Her mother Priscilla (née Nicolson), the daughter of another knighted East India merchant from Scotland, was a successful amateur jockey on the Calcutta racing scene with a permanent retinue of male admirers, while her maternal great-grandfather, Alan Shuttleworth, had inaugurated the Bombay lifeboat service.

Young Tessa retained a vivid recall of her enchanted Indian childhood, later

saying that it was most closely evoked by Rumer Godden's novel *The River* (1946). As was customary at the time, she attended an English boarding school from the age of eight, a transition that helped to foster her impregnable self-reliance. Her parents returned to Britain not long afterwards, settling in Wiltshire, but for the rest of her life Tessa remained happier in India than anywhere else. Just before the Covid pandemic she returned for the last of many visits, attending a Sufi music festival in Nagaur.

At St Mary's School, Wantage, an Anglican convent for the education of "nice girls", as she described it self-deprecatingly, Tessa claimed to have been taught little except that "the deeps were the deepest part of the ocean" and that "apples grow on apple trees". However, she acquired a lifelong love of music from a sympathetic teacher. There was no suggestion of university for "nice girls" of her class, but she made up for her lack of higher education with a keen intelligence and a brand of formal logic so idiosyncratic that her family complained of never being able to defeat her in an argument. To her mother's disappointment she declined to "do the Season", but instead attended what she always referred to as "Typing College, Oxford".

After more travel, including driving through Iran and Afghanistan to India and a spell working in Hong Kong, she sought employment closer to home. It was 1977 and Thatcher had become leader of the Conservative Party two years earlier. Tessa was put in touch

with Richard Ryder (now Lord Ryder of Wensum, who served as chief whip under John Major), who was looking to fill a vacancy in the leader of the opposition's office. They met over breakfast in the Hyde Park Hotel, both nursing hangovers. As he wrote recently: "Instincts belloyed at me almost at once that Tessa was a perfect fit for the role."

Her waistcoat-wearing suitor was Jonathan Gaisman, a commercial barrister who is now a QC, and they were married in Heytesbury, Wiltshire, in 1982, three weeks after the start of the Falklands conflict. He survives her with their three children, who were taken to India from an early age: Clementine is a literary agent; Imogen works in the voluntary sector; and Nicholas is a company director. When Imogen fell victim to medical negligence and suffered acute brain damage at the age of two, Tessa addressed the situation in a characteristically positive spirit, administering daily physiotherapy, enabling her to make a far better recovery than seemed possible, and later accompanying her to no fewer than eight complete Wagner Ring cycles including one at Bayreuth.

She left No 10 in 1989, a departure that according to family folklore

precipitated Thatcher's downfall in November the following year. She remained supportive of her old boss, even though political friends had moved on and the former prime minister, who was widowed in 2003, had fewer engagements in her diary. Gaisman called in for coffee in London or invited Thatcher to stay at her home in Dorset, recalling that she had to leave breakfast out the previous night because her guest was an early riser. When Thatcher's memoir, *The Downing Street Years*, was published in 1993, Gaisman was credited with having "brought her own special blend of good taste and common sense to the selection of photographs".

Meanwhile, her love of music had found the ideal outlet. In 1972 a friend told her that Sándor Végh, the Hungarian violinist and conductor, was starting the International Musicians Seminar (IMS), an advanced chamber music course, in unspoilt Prussia Cove on the south Cornwall coast and inquired if she would work in the kitchen. The only catch was that there was no money and food had to be foraged from the local cliffs, beaches and markets.

Thereafter Gaisman attended the IMS nearly every year and in 1997 became chairman (her preferred title), a position she held until her death. It is now a secure and successful organisation, attracting musicians of the calibre of György Kurtág, Thomas Adès, Sir András Schiff and Steven Isserlis, the current artistic director. "I do it because I love IMS," she said. "You become a trustee because you want to be involved."

Dividing her time between London, in particular the Wigmore Hall or the theatre, and Dorset, she enjoyed gardening and birdwatching but disliked domestic animals. Her cancer was diagnosed in 2014 but it did not deflect her and she made light of the chemotherapy, continuing with her work at Prussia Cove and as a school governor. She spent seven weeks in the South Pacific in 2016 on a small catamaran, watching and swimming with whales. The following year she walked the 160 miles from Siena to Rome in ten days, while a few weeks ago she chose to attend a speed awareness course rather than accept three points on her driving licence. The day before she died, she entertained friends to tea in Dorset.

Recalling her time in No 10, Gaisman related how in 1981 she accompanied Margaret and Denis Thatcher to a performance at the Whitehall Theatre of *Anyone for Denis?* by John Wells, a dramatised version of the *Dear Bill* letters in *Private Eye*, in which the prime minister's husband was lampooned. It was, she said with typical discretion, "a delicate occasion".

Tessa Gaisman, MBE, diary secretary to Margaret Thatcher, was born on September 12, 1954. She died of breast cancer on January 25, 2022, aged 67.

