

## **Dame Joan Evans DBE FSA FRHistS (Archaeology, 1914)**

**1893-1977**

**Dame Joan Evans enjoyed a long and distinguished career as an author and historian and was renowned for her remarkable collection of gems and jewels. In 1959 she was appointed the President of the Society of Antiquaries, the first woman to hold this position.**

Born in 1893 to archaeologist and numismatist Sir John Evans, and Maria Millington Lathbury, Joan Evans came up to St Hugh's in 1914, where she took a diploma in archaeology (with distinction) in 1916, a certificate of letters in 1919, and a BLitt in 1920. From 1917-1922 she served as the Librarian at St Hugh's. Her close association with St Hugh's continued throughout her life, as an active member of the College Council 1922-1958, an Honorary Fellow from 1936 to her death, and a Supernumerary Fellow 1951-1958.

Joan Evans left quite an impression on those who encountered her as students, being described by one contemporary, who also recalled her medieval gowns and remarkable jewellery, as 'the most dramatic member of the college'.<sup>1</sup>

Her first book *English Jewellery from the 5<sup>th</sup> Century BC to 1800* was published in 1921, and from this time she began to publish articles on jewellery and medieval artefacts, and to edit French medieval texts. Over the course of her life, she studied and published on a wide variety of topics, from ornament in Western Europe 1180-1900 to John Ruskin's diaries.

She became dedicated to the study of medieval France, publishing numerous volumes on the life, art and dress of the period. Such was her devotion to the preservation of France's historical treasures that she purchased and presented to the municipality of Mâcon the Cluniac Chappelle des Moines de Berzé in 1948.

From 1948 to 1951, Joan Evans served as President of the Royal Archaeological Institute. She then became the first woman to be appointed President of the Society of Antiquities in 1959, serving until 1964. She received the Society's gold medal in 1973.

Joan Evans was honoured with a host of honorary degrees and fellowships, as well as fellowships of the Royal Historical Society and the Royal Society of Literature. She was a Chevalier of the Légion d'Honneur, and she was appointed a Dame of the British Empire in 1976.

She served as a trustee of the London Museum and the British Museum, and as a member of the advisory council of the Victoria and Albert Museum (to which she bequeathed much of her collection of gems and jewels on her death).

Dame Joan was an immensely influential figure in the development of St Hugh's, not least as one of the College's most significant and generous historical benefactors. In *St Hugh's: One Hundred Years of Women's Education in Oxford*, Priscilla West (English Language and

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<sup>1</sup> Priscilla West, 'Reminiscences of Seven Decades', in *St Hugh's: One Hundred Years of Women's Education in Oxford*, ed. by Penny Griffin (Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press, 1986), pp.62-243 (p.72).

Literature, 1970) highlights many of her contributions: ‘...she secured the early purchase of 82 Woodstock Road and gave it to the College, and in 1951, she enabled the College to buy freeholds which completed the acquisition of “the island site”. She (anonymously) originated and later munificently augmented the Endowment Fund – and, in a characteristic gesture (after sleeping on a hard mattress), made a covenant providing new beds for the entire Main Building in 1953.’<sup>2</sup>

At her memorial service in College in 1977, she was described by the Principal, Rachel Trickett, as ‘one of the most distinguished and influential figures of the century in art and antiquarian scholarship who was at the same time a devoted and intensely loyal member of this society’.<sup>3</sup>

A portrait of Dame Joan in her later years by Peter Greenham RA (see below) hangs in the Senior Common Room at St Hugh’s, which was named in her honour in the late 1960s. The portrait was commissioned and presented to the College by Mr and Mrs P Scarisbrook.



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<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p.205

<sup>3</sup> See Principal’s Address from Dame Joan Evan’s Memorial Service in College reprinted in *St Hugh’s College Chronicle 1977-87*, no. 50, pp.32-34 (p.32)

## Sources

Garlick, Kenneth, 'Evans, Dame Joan', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004)

Griffin, Penny, ed. *St Hugh's: One Hundred Years of Women's Education in Oxford* (Basingstoke: The Macmillan Press, 1986)

Soutter, Ann, and Mary Clapinson, eds, *St Hugh's College Register 1886-1959* (Oxford: St Hugh's College, 2011)

Corley, BMG *St Hugh's College Benefactors 1886-2011* (Private publication for St Hugh's College Library)

Papers relating to Joan Evans in the St Hugh's College Archive