

Telegraph Obituary:

Sadie Barnett

1911 - 1991

Jeremy's landlady 1969/70

'SADIE' BARNETT, a Cambridge legend, who has died aged 80, was one of the last of the great Dickensian landladies - and certainly the sole surviving private landlady in King's Parade.

She presided over the most splendid digs in the University at No 9 King's Parade, overlooking King's College Chapel and the Gibbs Building.

Mrs Barnett's social expectations of her lodgers were as traditional as the ambience of her rooms - and in this respect she was perhaps more of a Trollopian than a Dickensian figure.

She would frequently ask Gonville and Caius College, from which she held the leasehold, to supply her with 'proper young gentlemen'. When Caius undergraduates became too bourgeois for her liking, she turned to Magdalene and Pembroke.

She greeted the representative of one noble family with the words: 'The last time we had a lord here, he hanged himself in room four.'

To another, upon receipt of his Coutts' cheque at the end of his first term, she declared: 'You're very modest, aren't you? You didn't say you was an Hon.'

In later years Mrs Barnett took in undergraduates from less exalted backgrounds, but she took a dim view of their career prospects when compared with their landed co-evals'.

'Nah, he's labour,' she would say dismissively - though it was unclear whether by this she meant that he was destined for manual labour or was merely perceived as a supporter of the Labour party.

Mrs Barnett never entertained doubts about the rectitude of her grander residents. 'He was such a gent,' she once said. 'When he was sick he was always sick out of the window.'

One recent resident, Simon Sebag-Montefiore, set much of his fictional university memoir *King's Parade* (1991) at her house; but the publishers are said to have found the character based on Mrs Barnett beyond belief, and she was duly excised.

Mrs Barnett was always very proud of the achievements of her 'boys', who latterly had included the historians Andrew Roberts and Michael Bloch. She regularly corresponded with her alumni all over the world, and would sometimes stay with them on her travels.

She was born Sarah Wolfschaut on Jan 3 1911 at Stepney, east London, the daughter of a Jewish fruit and vegetable trader in Aldgate.

Young Sadie was the seventh of 10 children and began life in the rag trade, as a dressmaker. At the age of 15 she met a waiter, Michael Barnett, whom she married in 1932.

They moved to Cambridge where Mrs Barnett began her career as a landlady.

They separated during the Second World War but their childless union was never dissolved.

From the late 1940s Mrs Barnett enjoyed the leasehold at King's Parade.

Although kosher herself, she cooked breakfast of eggs and bacon for her lodgers, and had strict rules about women and hours of residence.

She regretted the passing of the more deferential undergraduates and after the upheavals of the 1960s felt sorely tried by her more high-spirited lodgers, who preferred an unsupervised existence.

Some claimed that Mrs Barnett was an unconscious exemplar of enlightened despotism, but in reality she was a maternal neo-feudalist who exercised great care over her wards. She could display an almost Plantagenet '*ira et malevolentia*', which concealed a fundamentally good heart.

This fierce protectiveness manifested itself when the constabulary arrived to arrest one tenant after some undergraduate excess: 'You leave him alone, he's not a burglar. He's not a murderer. He's one of my nice young men.'

On another occasion, when some anti-field sports campaigners, enraged by the sight of a brace of pheasants hung out of her window by one of her lodgers, sought to gain entry to the house, she gave them short shrift. 'He can kill what he likes,' she told them. 'He's a sportsman, you know.'

Attired in a quilted dressing-gown, Mrs Barnett would sit in her room for much of the day watching the trade test transmission card on BBC. 'I am waiting for the Royals to come on . . . I know they will be on soon - Ascot and all that,' she would say, whatever the season.

When some undergraduates tried to disseminate the 'free Mandela' message to her lodgers, she showed them the door with the parting shot: 'Who is this Nelson Piquet anyway?' Mrs Barnett could always detect the tread of women's feet on the stairs and would display remarkable swiftness in bounding after them in order, prematurely, to enforce the official curfew.

She was intolerant of the ways of the Modern Girl and when introduced to two of the species at a tea party declared: 'Pickle' and 'Pooh'? What sort of names are those? Get out of here, you brazen hussies. You're here for one thing - and for one thing only.'

On one occasion she was found on her hands and knees outside the door, eavesdropping. Within, a lodger had a 'punk' girlfriend with dyed green hair, whom he hid under a blanket when Mrs Barnett suddenly demanded entry.

Mrs Barnett poked the bedding with a broom handle, thereby revealing the naked punk. She threw out the tenant, observing: 'I wouldn't have minded if it was only the hair on her head that was green.'

Sadie Barnett was an efficient landlady who was capable of great kindnesses to those in need - particularly foreign students, who for years afterwards would write her grateful letters.

But not for nothing did the university newspaper describe her as 'King's Parade's Boadicean landlady'.