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An Extraordinary Wiltshire Woman: Mary Petre Bruce

Synopsis of Paper delivered at the West of England and South Wales Women's History Network Spring Study Day Study Day 21 March 2015: WOMEN IN WILTSHIRE HISTORY: Sources at the Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre,

This talk discussed Mary's life and how the archives held at WSHC can be used to research her. In particular I sought to contrast the biographical study of Mary Bruce written by Nancy Wilson in 2012 with Mary's autobiography of 1977, which offers a more elliptical and selective picture of this fascinating individual.

Born in Chelmsford, Essex, in 1895, daughter of an upper class Englishman and an American burlesque performer, Mary Petre was a headstrong young woman who loved speed, beginning her road racing career at age 15 on her brother's motorcycle. She became an unmarried mother in 1920 as a result of an affair with a married man, Stephen Easter. Their child, Tony, benefited from good financial support from his father throughout his childhood. Motherhood did not deter Mary from her love of speed! She soon graduated to cars and married a professional driver, the Hon Victor Austin Bruce, in 1926. Together they found fame, and some fortune, from writing articles and commercial sponsorship associated with taking part in the annual Monte Carlo motor rallies and exploits such as their 1927 6,000 mile motor car journey to the Arctic Circle. Mary also set several solo world records, including driving for 24 hours at Montlhery in 1929. In the 1920s Mary also owned a speed boat company in Sussex, and broke records on sea as well as land.

Seeing the financial rewards enjoyed by female aviation pioneers such as Amy Johnson, Mary took up flying in 1930, and became the first woman to fly solo round the world (19,000 miles) [NB her plane was too small to cross the Pacific or Atlantic, so she flew across the continental landmasses, and travelled First Class by ocean liner the remainder of the journey.] Her flight set several records, including the first flight from England to Japan, and she capitalised on her fame with a national lecture tour and more newspaper and magazine articles, but she did not receive huge financial rewards.

From 1934-1948 Mary acted as co-director of several commercial aviation companies, and during the war years moved into farming in Gloucestershire. She and Victor divorced in 1941, but in the same year her partner, Eric Noddings, an RAF pilot, was killed in an air accident. In 1950 she moved to Priory Steps in Bradford on Avon and took up a new career as managing director of Holman Byfield & Co Ltd, a glove manufacturing company based in Warminster. She also made shrewd property investments in London. It is believed she was a millionaire by the time she died in 1990; her death at 94 made news around the world. The extensive archives of Mrs Bruce held at Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre in collection 1700 have a fascinating history of their own. They were found by chance in 1980 in the derelict former glove factory of Holman Byfield & Co. Ltd. in the Regency Arcade, Warminster, and really only survived due to her accountant requiring them for tax purposes. They include bills, legal papers, minutes, letters, and photographs, and give a fragmentary but fascinating picture of a remarkable, determined woman who was a pioneer in the traditionally male-dominated fields of motoring and aviation.