

A tribute to Alfreda MARY Challis.

THE MARY CHALLIS STORY (1925-2008)



In our shared family's lineage, Mary was the last in a direct line from Thomas (1754-1816), Jonathon (1796-?), Arthur James (1832-1903) and Alfred (1875-1944), Mary's father. From Jonathon onwards the family all occupied the same site in High street, Sawston, and the present house and adjoining shop was built by grandfather Arthur.



[\(Click to see larger image.\)](#)

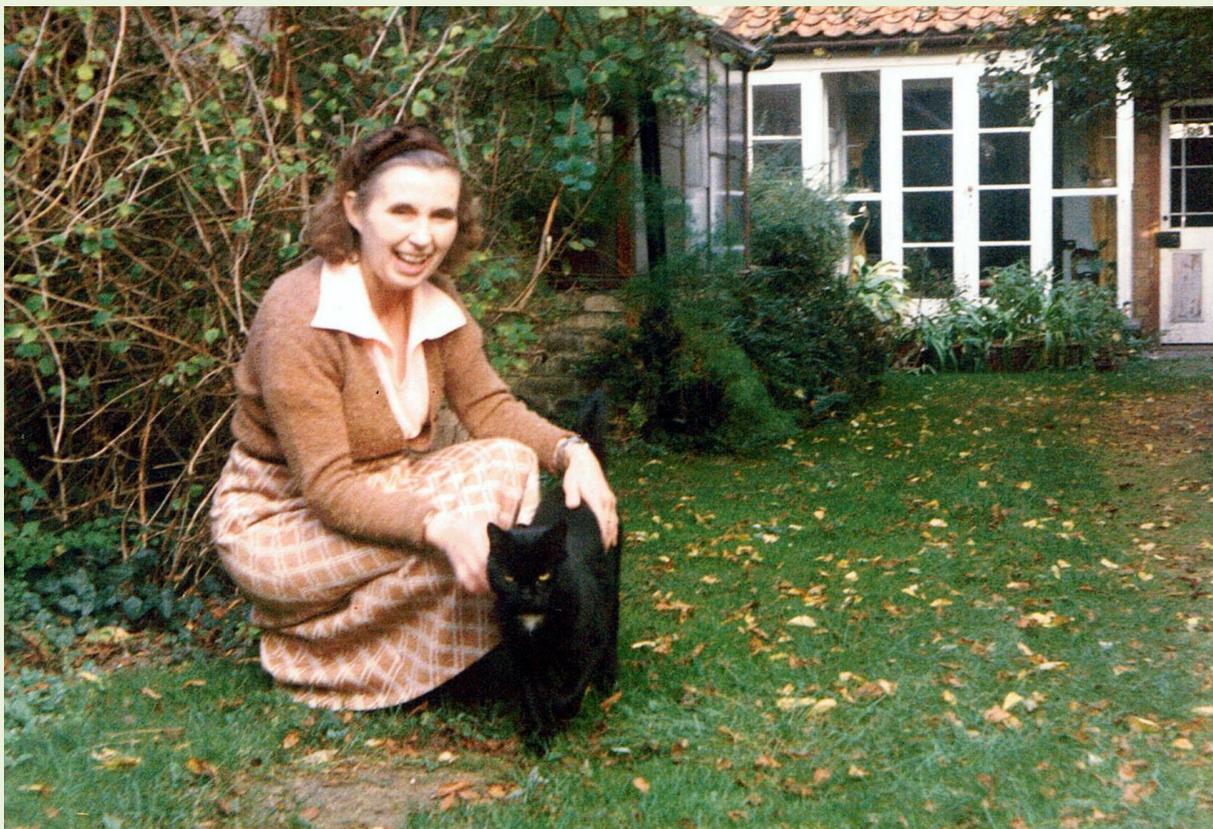
Mary was educated at the [Perse School](#), Cambridge, and then at [Studley Horticultural College](#), Warwickshire. She left with an honours degree in botanical science (she never mentioned that – I learnt it from someone else). She could have had a brilliant career in the academic world but that wasn't for her.

She was content to be a companion to her mother (she was only 19 when her father died) and to create a self-sufficient world in her large secluded garden and she toiled from dawn to dusk, tending it and caring for her birds, bees, cats and other animals. It was her own garden of Eden, better than the biblical one – I never saw any serpents there. She kept daily records of max/min temperatures, weather etc., where she planted and when she harvested.



It was typical of her methodical approach to every aspect of her life and she still found time for her favourite hobby, photography. She did her own processing, enlarging and I was allowed to keep all her albums and records.

Mary's only acknowledgement to the latter half of the 20th century was to acquire a Volvo motor car, which she drove up to 2003, before rolling it into a ditch. She was unhurt but I never dared ask how she'd managed to do it.



After an absence of 40 years I returned to live in Sawston and one day I gave Mary a call, got an immediate welcome and it was as though I'd never been away. She welcomed my regular visits as her other friends passed away one by one, and when failing health caused her to slow down I was glad that I could help in some small way. Her body might have weakened but her mind remained sharp. I eventually plucked up courage to tell of my early love for her, and was rewarded with a smile. Although she hated being dependent on anybody, I think it was a benign fate that

I was able to be on hand when needed. After a mild stroke and enforced hospital care, Mary struggled on for two more years before giving up, but she had already made plans for her property to be left in trust for the residents of Sawston; the large garden and orchard as a wildlife park and the house to become a museum of local history.



Most of her capital assets were left to her favourite charities but rental income from other properties totalling £42000 per annum was enough to fund this wonderful bequest, and the response from visitors and an enthusiastic team of volunteers toiling in the grounds is enough to ensure that the Challis name will endure in Sawston for many years to come.

[Challis Trust.](#)

Bryan Howe, April 2016.