

JEAN ROOK

THE FIRST LADY OF FLEET STREET

Jean Rook was born on Friday 13th November 1931, the only child of Horace Rook, a consultant engineer, and his wife. The family lived in Hull until 1940, when they moved from the dangers of the city to North Yorkshire. Jean attended Whitby County School. They moved back to Hull after the war, and she became a pupil at Malet Lambert Grammar School. She later wrote that she “never got less than 92% in English”, but was poor at maths. She failed interviews for Oxford and Cambridge, and went to Bedford College, London, where she was awarded a 2:1 in English and then an M.A.

Rather than pursue a teaching career she decided to go into journalism. She applied for a job on the Hull Daily Mail but was told she was too old at 25 and that she hadn't “a cat in hell's chance of getting to Fleet Street”. However, she got a place on the Sheffield Telegraph's graduate trainee scheme, and her distinctive style of writing won her the job of columnist.

She moved to the Yorkshire Post as its Women's Editor, then on to the fashion magazine, “Flair”. In 1961 she returned to Malet Lambert school to present the prizes at the Junior Speech Day, and was a hit with the pupils. From “Flair” she was recruited to be fashion editor of the new Sun newspaper (not Rupert Murdoch's later publication) in September 1964. In 1965 she married fellow journalist Geoff Nash. They had one child, a son, Gresby.

Jean's next move was to the Daily Sketch, which soon merged with the Daily Mail. She was much in demand by this time, and joined the Daily Express. It was there that she was dubbed “The First Lady of Fleet Street”, writing a regular column of interviews and opinion. She said of her own work, “My readers look for the worst in me. They love me to sink my teeth and typewriter keys into some public figure they're dying to have a go at themselves, more especially if it's some sacred cow - or bull - who's never criticised by journalists who won't kick a man when he's up.” Among her targets were the Royal family and top celebrities.

In 1988 she was found to have breast cancer. She was soon back at work after treatment, but 7 months later her husband died of a brain tumour.

The cancer returned, and Jean Rook died in September 1991.

Sources:

“Rook's Eye View” by Jean Rook, Express Newspapers, 1979

“The Cowardly Lioness”, Jean Rook, Sidgwick & Jackson, 1989