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Jean Barr, aka Jean Stuart, in the Middleton Hall supported apartment she moved to in 2020. Picture: STUART BOULTON

## The double life of an agony aunt

**Counsellor, magistrate, wife and mother: Jean has had many roles, but she used a pseudonym to dispense advice**

FOR many of her 89 years, Jean Barr has been living a double life. For 61 years, she was the Jean Barr who was married to Norman, the engineer who was in charge of the electrification of the East Coast Main Line from the Scottish border to York.

This Jean Barr is a mother, grandmother and now a great-grandmother.

For 35 years, Jean Barr was a magistrate, hearing cases in Middlesbrough, and for all her working life, she has been Jean Barr the counsellor who pioneered listening therapy in Darlington and County Durham then introduced it to the rest of the country.

Being that Jean Barr led to her becoming Jean Stuart the agony aunt and writer, appearing for 17 years in the pages of the Middlesbrough Evening Gazette solving the problems of Teesside.

"From being a child during the war," says Jean, "I was always drawn to people who were unhappy, to listen to them and to try to find out if they could get comfort from anywhere. As I grew older that grew more important."

She was trained as a counsellor in London and sent to Middlesbrough to work in marriage guidance. A local GP called her in to help bereaved patients who were beyond



medicine; Darlington council asked her to train its social workers.

"It's all about listening," she says. "It is helping people listen to themselves, to recognise where their unhappiness is coming from, and helping them to have another look at the way in which they operate."

"It really is teaching oneself with someone giving you a bit of a push. It grew like topsy."

Her methods came to the attention of the editor of the Gazette, who, in 1970, asked her to become the paper's agony aunt.

"He was insistent, whereas I just worried nobody would write," says Jean – that's Jean Stuart, as she took the name of her youngest son for her by-line that was plastered across the top of the page.

"In truth, it was a doddle. In next to no time I was getting 300 letters a week."

"I'm pleased to say I replied to every single letter, and the editor allowed me a secretary who came to my house at least once a week. "There were all kinds of problems. What amazed me



Jean stepping out with Norman, her husband of 61 years, who she met on her first day at school and married 20 years later

most were the young men, aged 16 to 30, who wrote because they felt inadequate or lonely because they had a fear of being rejected."

Jean Stuart's success led to her writing books and becoming something of a celebrity. In 1983, she organised the first North East Ladies Day luncheon at the Dolphin Centre in Darlington, a friendship event raising money for local charities.

More than 100 women attended, and now, 42 years later, 450 women attend the lunch each year at Hardwick Hall at Sedgfield – 2025's is on September 24 – and they've raised nearly £400,000.

Jean Stuart is still the president and is kept in touch with developments by the committee.

But really, at heart, she is Jean Barr.

"On my third birthday I went to school for the first time and at playtime that first morning, a seven-year-old boy came into the classroom and got hold of

my hand and said: 'I'm going to give you a ride'," she says, as if it were yesterday.

"He took me to a low windowsill, sat me on it and told me to put my arms around his neck. He ran around all playtime and again in the afternoon."

"The next day he was there, so 20 years later we got married. We were really good friends. We were so important to each other, and it just had to be."

In 2007, she and Norman decided to move into Middleton Hall.

"We had a largeish house that needed cleaning and a big garden that needed weeding, and after we had seen the apartments here, we began to think how much easier life would be," she says.

They had more than ten happy years together in the hall before Norman died five years ago.

"We'd been married 61 years," she says. "It is a fairy story. It really is."

Every agony aunt loves a happy ending.



The other Jean Barr, or Jean Stuart as she was known when she worked as an agony aunt and wrote books using her son's name as a pseudonym

## The baby rescued from the rubble of the Blitz

**Sonia is eternally grateful to the couple who chose her when her family was lost to the horrors of wartime London**

SONIA Wade feels she's got lucky in the lottery of life, even though as a tiny baby she lost her parents in the Blitz in London.

She was found amid the rubble and smoke of bombardment, and was taken to a Salvation Army hall near St Paul's Cathedral.

The cathedral is the only clue to her previous life: she presumes her family had lived in the streets around it in London which were the targets of the Luftwaffe's Blitz from its first day, 'Black Saturday', September 7, 1940.

It was the first of 57 consecutive nights of bombardment during which 11,000 homes in London were destroyed and 30,000 Londoners lost their lives.

St Paul's was an obvious target but, miraculously, it survived and became a symbol of Britain's unbreakable spirit. On September 12, a one ton bomb fell near it – the largest ever to be dropped on London – which probably would have destroyed it had it gone off but, mercifully, it failed.

Sadly, Sonia's family must have been caught in one of those early raids because she celebrates her birthday on September 21, the day on which she was adopted from the Sally Army hall and her new life began.

"I was about six weeks old, but I don't know," she says. "It doesn't matter, a few days either way."

She was adopted by Clara and Jimmy Dunn who, up in Stockton, had heard a wireless broadcast about how there were babies found in the wreckage who needed adopting.

As they had been unable to have a family of their own, they took the train to London and reported to the hall in the shadow of the cathedral's famous dome.

"The girls were one side, the boys the other," says Sonia.

"My mother said to my father: 'You go down the girls' side',

and she went down the boys' side.

"They both came back with a baby, but my mother gave in and they kept the baby my dad had chosen – so I was chosen, which I think is a lovely word."

"They were given a bottle of milk, a nappy, a blanket and a baby and off you go, back on the train to Stockton."

"On the train, a lady asked my mother: 'How old's your baby?'. 'I don't know,' she said. The lady said: 'What do you mean, you don't know?'. My mother said: 'We've just picked her up from London', and the lady said: 'So near yet so far'."

The stranger's enigmatic phrase must have been an expression of

amazement at how close the baby in

the blanket had come to losing her life, and it provided Clara with inspiration for a name: "so near" became Sonia.

As the Luftwaffe threatened to wreak similar damage on Teesside to that which they had inflicted on London, Sonia and her

parents were evacuated to Windermere for her early months, but soon returned to Grosvenor Road.

Jimmy was an ICI engineering draughtsman at Wilton Castle, and Clara was a home economics teacher at Richard Hine school in Stockton. Soon they had a daughter, Bridget, to complete their family. "She got the brains and I got the common sense," says Sonia.

The sisters were sent to board at the Friends School at Great Ayton, where Sonia came to the attention of John Wade, from a large family of south Durham farmers.

"He used to come and pick up his brothers. I was there waiting in the playground for my parents to pick me up and he said he spotted me," says Sonia.

They married in 1962, had three children, and while John worked their farms around Long Newton, Sonia was a practice



Sonia in the Middleton Hall apartment she's called home for 13 years. Left is Sonia, aged about 11 weeks old, with her mother Clara

nurse in Stockton.

"When I was four, I got whooping cough and I used to ride round Fairfield on my three wheeler bike with a bowl taped onto the handlebars," she explains. "Every time I coughed, I was sick into the bowl. I covered it over, cycled back home, rinsed it out, washed it with Dettol, put it back on the bike and went off. My mother said then: 'You're going to be a nurse'."

Sonia lost her John to pancreatic cancer in 2002 and moved into Middleton Hall in 2012.

"It was a very difficult decision, but my family shouted: 'Do it, do it'," she says.

Now her life is full of knitting and nattering, singing for the soul and exercise classes, and she is very thankful for the way it has all turned out.

She remembers how, on the eve of her going to boarding school, her mother broke the news of her beginnings.

"We were in a double bed in the front room – we lived in Yarm Road, Eaglescliffe, opposite the golf course – and she said: 'Don't be sad, you're adopted' then she told me the story," says Sonia.

"They were just such lovely people. Every day I thank God for them. They gave me my grounding, who I am now. I don't dwell on anything else because I was so happy with them."

"It could all have been so different."



Sonia's adoptive parents, Jimmy and Clara Dunn, to whom she is so grateful