

Howard's way

Elizabeth Jane Howard's Bungay home is her refuge, she tells Piers Ford

FOR A MOMENT, it seems that my attempts to meet the writer Elizabeth Jane Howard at her Bungay home are doomed. I've appeared in her doorway just as she has given up on me and sat down at her desk to work. A wave of exasperation, quite understandably, flashes across her face.

Driving the length of the county to see this much admired author – a woman described in a recent interview as 'queenly' – I'm suddenly alarmed that a communication hitch will see me dismissed and back on the road without further ceremony.

But Elizabeth Jane Howard turns out to be equanimity personified. At 82, being interrupted by a late-running journalist, even when she is trying to get back into the rhythm of writing after a period of poor health (arthritis is a constant companion and she has just recovered from a serious back injury), is just a minor irritation that soon evaporates in conversation.

Her novels – including the *Cazalet Chronicle* (four volumes), *The Beautiful Visit*, *After Julius*, *Something in Disguise* and the deeply unsettling *Falling*, recently dramatised for television – have long established her as an observatory writer with few equals on the complexities and foibles of human relationships.

Her 2002 autobiography *Slipstream* recounts friendships in and around the most fascinating literary and intellectual circles of the 20th century as well as her three, challenging, marriages (her first husband was the naturalist Peter Scott, her last the novelist Kingsley Amis). It is remarkable for the dispassionate view she takes of herself at its centre, never looking to the luxury of hindsight for a little kindness, and for the determined even-handedness with which she treats the sometimes jaw-dropping cruelty of others: a mother-in-law here, a lover there, and very often a husband.

"I've had a long time to grow up," she says. "I think it's useful if you can see yourself clearly. Everything has to start from there. That notion got disguised and offset by the faintly sentimental idea that it was self-indulgence to think about yourself. I used to think about other people all the time, but it isn't much good doing that unless you're in order yourself; you can't do anything for the people you're thinking about. That's why I did 30 years of therapy and I learned a very great deal. I'm still learning from it."

She is pleased not to be considered judgmental: "I very much think one shouldn't be. I feel very strongly about that. People who do things



Contemplative Jane, as she is usually known, says she is still learning about life

that aren't right always pay for it themselves, not in time and not in kind, but in some way or other. I know that, because I paid. So there's no point in anyone else telling them they're awful."

Jane – the name by which she is always known to her friends and neighbours – came to live in Bungay in 1990, her heart captured in an instant by Bridge House, predominantly Georgian but with a labyrinthine quality that hints at earlier origins. After selling her London home, the search for a suitable house or flat with a decent garden proved fruitless. Her great friend, the painter Sargy Mann, rang up one day and told her that the property next door was about to go on the market. Why didn't she come and look at it? Her daughter Nicola then viewed the house and told her she really ought to see it.

"So I came up and bought it in ten minutes, that August, and moved in during December," she recalls. "I'd often looked at it and thought it was beautiful. And when I walked into this room (her study) I sort of wanted to live here. Of course one had awful cold feet after making the decision but I've not regretted it at all. I had to have builders in for a long time; it was perfectly structurally sound but not good in other ways, needing more bathrooms and a decent staircase; not only could you not get any furniture upstairs but it would be awful for anyone with bad hips. And I've got an island on the river in the

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garden, which has always been fascinating to me. I can't garden any more, which is maddening, but I've got people who can."

Her time at the house has coincided with that gratifying stage in any writer's life when financial reward finally brings some freedom from the grind of earning a living. It's a surprise to hear that this has come relatively late for an author of Elizabeth Jane Howard's stature. But her first books were written in a more eccentric age when publishers were creatively supportive but paid authors only minute advances and her private life – particularly during her marriage to Kingsley Amis – was not always conducive to the discipline of writing. Now, she is pleased to be in charge of her domain and what happens there.

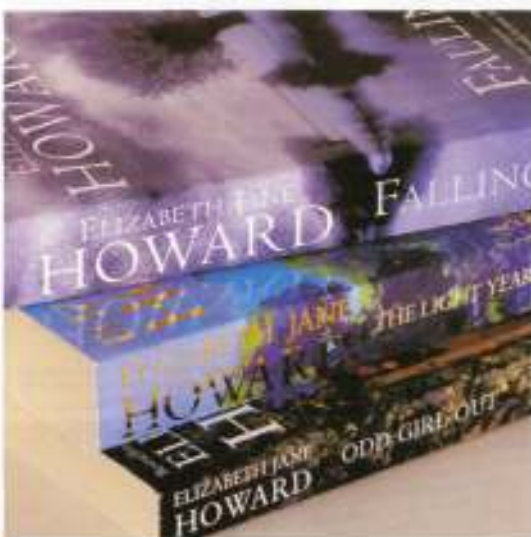
"I suppose it's a refuge," she agrees. "Lots of people come here, which I like. My idea of contentment is to live in a largish house with a lot of people doing their own thing in it. It's a centre for me. I like writing in one place. I don't travel well on that basis. I'm also very interested in my surroundings, my environment. And if you really are interested in that, you need to be there all the time."

She hardly knew Suffolk before relocating but has come to love its beauty and its people. "They're very nice round here, I really like them," she says. "Although one is a 'foreigner' and always will be. They're very courteous. Bungay has a lot of indigenous Bungayites. That's very cheering, they don't want to live anywhere else. But it's true of Suffolk, too. East Anglians are very self-reliant and interesting. They want things to be all right for people. They don't have this sort of London attitude which is all lethargy and indifference, an almost spiteful attitude that if things turn out badly for you, it's too bad. When I was ill, people here were very kind."

The dramatisation of *Falling* – a sinister novel based on her own experience of an affair with someone eventually exposed just in time as a consummate con artist – captured the imagination of a highly satisfying seven million television viewers, a ratings success for a one-off drama. Jane says she had an "enormous" number of letters afterwards from people relating similar personal stories.

Outside, we walk the several hundred yards down from the formal area of the garden through a meadow to the river and across to the island. It's an effortful but vital twice-daily ritual for her.

"It's unfortunate that the climate in this country is good for gardening and bad for arthritis; rather hard luck," she says. "It would be wonderful if they could find some way of circumnavigating that universal complaint." The wish is heartfelt but without an ounce of self-pity. □



Where in Suffolk?

How well do you know your county?
Robert Leader tests your local knowledge

IN MEDIEVAL TIMES the Moot Hall was an Anglo-Saxon meeting hall or assembly room. In some places they were an alternative to guildhalls, and it is a name still given in some towns in England to the local town hall or council building. However, most of them, where they remain, are now converted into homes or other uses. They are usually lovely old Tudor buildings, all grey or black timbers, white plastered or red herringbone brickwork, with overhanging top storeys.

This particular survivor is black and cream, with high red brick chimneys and stands proudly in one of our ancient market towns. However, it is probably unnoticed by most of the passing motorists because it is on a narrow through-road with fairly heavy traffic.

There was another timber-framed Moot Hall on the market hill, which was replaced by the present town hall in the mid-19th century, so clearly there was more than one meeting hall here in the Middle Ages. The town of course is better known for other things, the river, the flanking water meadows, and a famous painter son.

So where in Suffolk is it?

Answer: Sudbury Moot Hall