

Register

Barbara Hall

Africa's first agony aunt who was the fiendish primary compiler of The Sunday Times cryptic crossword for nearly 40 years

Barbara Hall was an essential component of relaxing Sunday afternoons. For many, the post-prandial ritual of choice was to settle down with family and friends and tackle *The Sunday Times* cryptic crossword she compiled.

The Sunday Times had introduced crosswords in 1925 and *The Times* in 1930; from 1972 until 2010 Hall rigorously upheld standards, priding herself on never repeating a clue in the course of some 15,000 crosswords set during her career. And though a relatively mild-mannered woman, Hall reserved "hard words" for any crossword compiler she noticed plagiarising from other puzzles.

Unlike younger compilers, she eschewed computer aids and relied on her phenomenal memory and meticulous archive of clues. Though her cryptic ones could be fiendish, her style was charmingly idiosyncratic; personal favourites tended to be of the punning variety: "dogs do it around trees" (bark), or "the whizzer of Oz" (boomerang). Hall had set her first puzzle for the *Daily Mail* aged 15 and was still devising them into her nineties, by which point she was thought to be the world's longest-serving crossword compiler.

Barbara Hall was born in Derby in 1923 and grew up in the village of Aston-on-Trent. Her father, Lawrence Taylor, was an accountant on the railways. Her mother Olive, née Bradbury, was a Braille teacher.

An only child, she learnt to read when she was three. Pushed hard by her mother, Barbara gained a scholarship to Parkfield Cedars grammar school in Derby. It was here that she found her vocation after winning the *Daily Mail's* crossword compiling competition. The prize was two guineas and publication. She never told them her age.

On leaving school she decided to train as a speech therapist, but in 1941 enrolled in the Women's Royal Naval Service as a coder preparing orders for ships of the North Sea Coastal Command. During these years Hall was affianced to a captain in the Royal Dutch Navy. After he was killed in action she met Richard Seymour Hall, a journalist by trade and a fellow coder in the Royal Navy who served in destroyers in the Mediterranean.

The couple married in 1946 and moved to Oxford, where Richard took

up a place at Keble College to study English and wrote for *Isis*. Barbara, who also had a place at Oxford but could not take it up because she was pregnant, compiled crosswords for *Isis*.

Thereafter, Richard wrote for *The Daily Mail*. The couple had four children in quick succession. In 1955 the family moved to Northern Rhodesia (present-day Zambia) to work as journalists for the Northern Rhodesia Government Information Office. In the late 1950s Richard co-founded *The Central African Mail*, one of the continent's first anti-colonial newspapers aimed at the indigenous population.

He appointed his wife as the paper's agony aunt, "Josephine". Barbara had never been one, but then again Northern Rhodesians had never had one. Letters arrived by the sackload. The majority from men, ranging from requests for tips on their sexual technique, moral scruples about polygamous relationships to a sincere young man who was habitually getting drunk in beer sheds

The Prince of Wales told her the cryptic crossword had always defeated him

and cycling into a ditch on his ride home. That one at least was easy to answer.

"One man wrote to me saying, 'I have married again but unfortunately I have married my mother-in-law.' It sounds incredible but men would roam around the country taking two or three wives and if he'd met the first wife in the town and her family were in the country mistakes could happen. I said to him, 'You must buy your father-in-law many presents and move away.'"

Tell Me Josephine, an anthology of her columns, was published in 1964. It was translated into 19 languages and became a bestseller in Sweden. With little other source material available then, the book was often cited in academic papers about African social attitudes.

The newspaper was particularly valued by Kenneth Kaunda (obituary, June 17, 2021), the leader of Zambia's independence movement. After he became the country's first president following independence in 1964, he remained a close friend of the Halls and was godfather to their fifth son.



Hall compiled crosswords into her nineties; above with her husband Richard

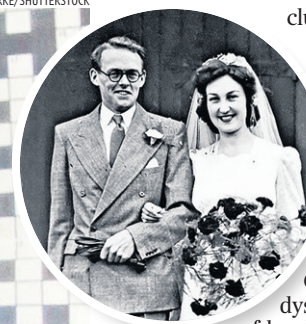
The Hall's house in Lusaka was a vibrant hub for anti-colonial campaigners and also a sanctuary for political escapers from apartheid South Africa. Living next door to the chief of special branch required extra vigilance.

The Central African Mail was taken over by Kaunda's new government and by 1965 Richard was editor of *The Times of Zambia*, owned by Tiny Rowland. The couple were proud to have played their part in winning independence for Zambia but that did not stop Richard from holding Kaunda's government to account. In 1967 a petty quarrel between an Italian butcher in Lusaka and the wife of a government minister escalated and the tradesman was prosecuted. Richard Hall wrote criticising the politician for an abuse of power. The article led to demonstrations outside the Halls' house with banners labelling them as "neo-colonialists". Fearing for their safety, they returned to Britain.

Back in the UK Barbara composed crosswords for *The Daily Mail*, *The Times* and *The Observer*. In 1969 the *Daily Mail* commissioned what was then the world's biggest cryptic crossword, on a Christmas theme. She was increasingly reliant on her compiling wits after her husband left her for another woman. They divorced in 1973.

Heeding the sort of advice she used to dish out as Josephine, Hall picked herself up and got on with her life. The year before she had started working for *The Sunday Times* as principal compiler of the paper's cryptic crossword. She would be appointed the paper's crossword editor in 1977.

Themed crosswords became her speciality and she produced them for magazines on railways, yachting, wine, food and gardening. She even produced a regular crossword for a soft-core pornographic publication called *Forum*, for which she would devise



clues such as: "Voluptuous girl: reason enough for the crime?" Answer: "bigamy [big-Amy]".

In 1984 *The Times* commissioned her to compile a crossword based on George Orwell's dystopian novel. One of her later enterprises for the *Sunday Times* was her popular literary quiz *Bookwise*.

She settled in an elegant but slightly ramshackle house in Camberwell, south London, replete with exotic souvenirs from her travels. In the evenings, she would sit in an armchair thinking up clues, a glass of red wine at her side.

When Hall retired from the *Sunday Times* in 2010, aged 87, discontent rippled to wherever her crosswords had been syndicated. Complaints from readers of *The Australian* were so vociferous that she continued to compile crosswords for it into her nineties.

Hall is survived by her sons: Robin, an IT director; Nick, who is in development and disaster relief; Simon, a journalist and author; Crispin, a project manager in building refurbishment and Jeremy, a social entrepreneur.

She remained a woman of the left and an avowed atheist, wont to give out copies of Bertrand Russell's tract, *Why I'm Not A Christian*. She was also an active member of the Zambia Society, which she had co-founded. Hall would always defend Kaunda and Julius Nyerere, president of Tanzania (another favourite), over their increasingly dictatorial governments, arguing that they were honourable men navigating the huge challenges of African politics while being undermined by agitation from outside forces.

Despite being a republican, Hall was enormously proud of being appointed MBE in 2007. She did, however, afford herself a private smile of satisfaction at her investiture when the Prince of Wales admitted that *The Sunday Times* cryptic crossword always defeated him.

Barbara Hall, MBE, crossword compiler and agony aunt, was born on February 3, 1923. She died on April 18, 2022, aged 99

Robin Parkinson

Comedy actor best known for playing Monsieur Ernest Leclerc in 'Allo 'Allo! and for narrating the children's series Button Moon

If Robin Parkinson had been superstitious, he might never have taken the role for which he was best known in the BBC sitcom *'Allo 'Allo!*

When Haig was offered the part of Monsieur Ernest Leclerc in 1991, two actors had recently died in the role. In the early series of the show Jack Haig had played Monsieur Roger Leclerc, an elderly Resistance forger and habitué of the café run by Gordon Kaye's René Artois, serving a clientele of German officers in occupied France while also running a safe-house for shot-down British airmen.

When Haig died in 1989, aged 76, the scriptwriters circumvented the inconvenience with a plot that involved Roger visiting his twin brother Ernest in prison and swapping places with him.

Derek Royle, a veteran of Brian Rix's Whitehall farces, was brought in to play Monsieur Ernest and the two fictitious brothers became more or less indistinguishable. When Royle died six months after Haig, the producers asked Parkinson to assume the role. He accepted, though further misgivings that the show

was cursed might have been harboured when he was told that shooting of his first series was delayed because two days after Royle had died, Kaye had suffered head injuries in a car crash that resulted in the partial loss of his memory.

Fortunately, he was a pragmatic actor and once Kaye had recovered, he made his debut a year later, playing Leclerc without further mishap until the show ended. He later reprised the role in the West End stage version of *'Allo 'Allo!* and played Leclerc in 2007 in the one-off special *The Return Of 'Allo 'Allo!*

By the time he was cast as Monsieur Leclerc he was in his sixties and had been a fixture in some of Britain's best-loved sitcoms for more than 20 years. His credits included *Dad's Army*, *Terry and June*, *The Young Ones* and *The Liver Birds*; although they were mostly small parts, his face became familiar, even if viewers were unsure of his name. If sit-

Parkinson as Leclerc



com became his forte, he was equally at home in straight roles in *Crossroads*, *Softly, Softly* and *Z Cars*. His first film role came in 1963, in *Billy Liar*, starring Tom Courtenay and Julie Christie, and was followed by *The Family Way* (1966), alongside John and Hayley Mills.

Children knew him by his voice as the narrator of the ITV puppets series *Button Moon*, in which all the characters were based on kitchen utensils. The show ran for more than 90 episodes between 1980 and 1988 as Parkinson recounted the adventures of Mr Spoon who, in each episode, travelled to Button Moon in his homemade rocket ship.

Christopher Robin Parkinson was born in Coventry, Warwickshire, in 1929, the son of Victoria and William Parkinson, an artist, whose talent his son inherited. He was educated at the King Hen-

ry VIII School, Coventry, where the punishment book records that he received six strokes of the cane for flicking ink at a master. He spent some of the war boarding in Somerset but watched the horrific bombing of Coventry when he was back in the countryside on the outskirts of the city. His National Service was spent with The Queen's Royal Lancers in Egypt, where he played the cornet in the army band and was much affected by being called upon to play *The Last Post* for fallen comrades.

On his return to Coventry he worked in his father's art studio and assisted him in window dressing department stores. His first passion was the theatre and he was an active member in two amateur dramatic troupes before he enrolled at the Birmingham School of Speech Training and Dramatic Art. His professional career began at the relatively late age of 28 when he landed a small part at Birmingham Rep in *The Imperial Nightingale*. When one of the leads was taken ill he stepped in for the rest of the run alongside Albert Finney.

After two years at the Belgrade

Theatre in Coventry, he moved to London in 1961 where he worked at the Arts Theatre and settled in Teddington, Middlesex. He eventually clocked up more than 140 appearances on the small screen although the stage remained his first love.

Parkinson is survived by his wife Patricia (née Rogers), whom he married in 1956, and by their daughters Rebecca, a TV producer, and Charlotte, a child protection worker. A third daughter, Sarah, was married to the comedian Paul Merton until her death of cancer in 2003.

He was a lifelong supporter of Coventry City football club and Warwickshire county cricket club, as well as a more than decent golfer, who served as captain and president of the Stage Golfing Society and was always a convivial presence at the 19th hole.

Robin Parkinson, actor, was born on October 25, 1929. He died after a short illness on May 7, 2022, aged 92

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