

Olden life



Who was... Mrs Exeter?

MRS EXETER – a glamorous woman of a certain age – lived on the pages of British *Vogue*, flourishing in the 1950s and early 1960s when it was perfectly acceptable to put ‘Fashion for the Older Woman’ on the cover of that glossiest of magazines.

Invented by *Vogue*, Mrs Exeter’s raison d’être was to discuss the fashion requirements of readers vaguely described as ‘over fifty’, to many of whom she came to seem real. Photographed or drawn by fashion illustrators, Mrs Exeter appeared regularly in the magazine, selecting clothes that, as she put it, ‘lose none of their chic through being kind’, occasionally launching gentle barbs. Deploring a season in which particularly drab and sensible beachwear was offered, she sniffed – ‘We don’t want to dress like Victorian governesses. After all, most of us have some assets.’

A storyline was always woven around Mrs Exeter’s recommendations, sometimes several columns in length, sometimes shorter, reflecting the varying enthusiasm of different *Vogue* copywriters for taking on the role of amanuensis to Mrs Exeter. Over the years, biographical details emerged. Mrs Exeter had gone to a convent school where she wore Panama hats, strap shoes and impertinent little scarves. Widely travelled, she had begun to tour when young women still needed chaperoning, and retained fond memories of Baden-Baden. Mrs Exeter was partial to the occasional cocktail and a cigarette. She especially liked cruising, and once became quite excited about a slimming cruise around the Eastern Mediterranean.

Back in England, Mrs Exeter led a town and country life, having had the good fortune to inherit a cottage. Her house in town boasted parquet floors, and her cottage had a greenhouse in



The glamorous Mrs Exeter cutting a stylish figure in *Vogue Pattern Book* magazine

So completely was Mrs Exeter identified with the lady of a certain age and her requirements that it was sufficient for *Vogue* to note in passing ‘Mrs Exeter would love these’, ‘favoured by Mrs Exeter’, or ‘a girdle for Mrs Exeter’ without needing to be more explicit. Mrs Exeter never entertained the idea of dyeing her hair – ladies didn’t, then – and chose to wear colours like cinnamon, copper, spice and navy that went well with silver locks. She had mastered the art of disguise – ‘One of my weaknesses, which I am regretful of, is my neck. It just isn’t the same neck. The three-strand necklace was simply made for me, and scarves too, that ride high.’ Above all, Mrs Exeter had a sense of humour. Referring to the headline of an accessories feature in *Vogue*, she wrote – ‘I thought at first that “the best-dressed bag” was referring to me, but was delighted to see the splendid handbags on pages 84–87.’

Then, suddenly in the summer of 1964, dear Mrs Exeter disappeared from the magazine, never to be seen or heard of again. To borrow a phrase from her favourite murder mysteries, then at the height of their popularity – who murdered Mrs Exeter? The pages of *Vogue* tell the tale. Youth burst into the magazine, darling girls and impossibly beautiful boys, dancing through the night. ‘Get the look! What you need,’ said *Vogue*, ‘is shiny hair, high cheekbones, and the accessory, a small droopy dog.’ No one wanted to grow old gracefully. No one wanted to grow old, ever. *Vogue* declared ‘The Dog, the Monkey, the Swim, the Pony, the Table Tennis – these are the dances and this is the gear – pop crepe, pop colours, pop shapes.’ Youth murdered Mrs Exeter, without even noticing. *Pop!*

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which she kept a tub of Atrix barrier cream to soothe hands after gardening. She drove herself between the two, rather fast, in a Humber Hawk, having taught her grandson James how to change a tyre in case of need. She had a Siamese cat, and a niece she had shepherded through the Season.

