

## **HOW A LEICESTERSHIRE GIRL CAME TO FARNHAM in 1965 and what she found.**

After studying dressmaking and embroidery at Loughborough College of Art and having been prevented from pursuing a career in theatre, I worked for 7 years as a toy designer for Palitoy (in Leicester and Coalville) – makers of “Tressy with the Hair that Grows,” “Tiny Tears” and “Action Man”. In the beginning, I was paid £8 per week but advanced to what was recognised as ‘a good man’s salary’ (!) of £1000 a year, by the time I left. To some extent, I was tricked into accepting this job, having been told that I would be participating in research to be carried out at the University of Leicester into what toys children liked and wanted and what was educationally beneficial – but, this research was never actually carried out and the designs were dictated by the needs of the market, and the Sales Director in particular! He would burst into the design office, saying “I had a wonderful idea last night....” and we would all inwardly groan!

Popular toy designs were bought in from America, but needed to be ‘anglicised’ for the UK market – and that, along with our own designs created specifically for chain store lines like Marks and Spencers and Littlewoods, was the work that occupied me in the design office; getting designs in front of buyers and into production. Plastic dolls were produced at the main Leicester factory, but were adorned with hair, clothes, shoes and boxes in the small factory at Coalville, which in the early days was run much like a large family, run by two kindly old gentlemen, both called ‘Granddaddy’ by the factory girls. They sang happily along to popular songs at their machines all day and the atmosphere was joyful and productive. We were a successful business. Later, when we were taken over by a large corporation in the 1960s, ‘time and motion’ men were sent in and the whole process became saturated with regulations and form-filling and it was intolerable – and by 1965, I was glad to leave.

‘While living in Leicester, I met my future husband, David, who was a part-time fine art lecturer at Leicester College of Art. His contract came to an end and he was looking for work. We married and then moved to Farnham so that he could take up a position in the Foundation Department in West Street, in what was then called Farnham School of Art. James Hockey was still the Principal and the Foundation Department was run by John Morris, who later succeeded James Hockey as Principal, both exceptional and inspirational men. In fact, many of the artists and sculptors who taught there at the time were well-known nationally, and some internationally. It was a stimulating environment for me, after the urban and industrialised years from which I had escaped.

We lived for two years in a rented gardener’s cottage attached to the large and attractive “Thatched House” in Moor Park. We had started out from Leicester with a van filled with our possessions and later acquired a motor bike and sidecar. I found it difficult to find suitable work and eventually settled for being a part-time shop assistant, selling books in W.H. Smith’s in the Borough. David became a full-time lecturer and our finances improved sufficiently for us then to consider buying our own house. Later on, after we had bought our property in Upper Hale, I worked as a dresser and wardrobe assistant at the Yvonne Arnaud Theatre, whilst studying for a diploma in Speech and Drama.

Just for the record, we were very lucky to have one of the very last Council 90% mortgages offered for properties in need of renovation. Our cottage did not have hot water or a bathroom and the toilet led directly off the tiny lean-to kitchen and so, with grants we

transformed the place. Luckily we lived in an area surrounded by artisans and craftsmen – plumbers, brickies, chippies and electricians and bit by bit the property was restored, extended and improved. Anything bought new by hire-purchase was subject to the most rigorous examination of one's abilities to repay and we furnished the cottage mostly with restored furniture from auctions or second-hand shops. We had no need to buy a car until 1975, as buses ran reliably every twenty minutes to and from Farnham station from 6.0 am until midnight 6 days a week!

Moving to Farnham from Leicester was, to me quite a culture shock. In the midlands I was used to being greeted in a friendly fashion by shop keepers and assistants or even workmen. One was treated as an equal, whoever one might be, whether lord or labourer, or anything in between. Pleasantries were exchanged and then business conducted. Here in Farnham the difference was noticeable. Shop assistants were reluctant to look you in the eye and dispatched business transactions without acknowledgement. This became even more obvious to me when I became a shop assistant myself and found that any attempt on my part to engage in any friendly opening remarks were often dismissed rather abruptly.

A new friend also tipped me off discreetly by explaining that I would need to make phone appointments before visiting anybody. 'Dropping in' was not acceptable. Where I had come from, 'dropping in' on friends was quite the thing – it was acknowledged that 'you take us as you find us' was a sign of friendship and no one was thought the worse of, if found in a mess or a pickle. In Surrey things were very different. Also, there seemed to be a firm rule here that any help, gift or hospitality must be reciprocated at once. Where I came from, goodwill was freely given, without strings – otherwise, the value of the gift to the receiver was felt to be lost.

Having thought about all this, I came to realise that in the south the old class barriers were still firmly in place in the 1960s. The servant class (shop assistants and workmen) simply did not expect to be treated as equals by their 'betters'. The upper and middle classes still held to the social mores of the Edwardians and Victorians. A town like Farnham had grown and been largely settled by the professional classes, while the artisans were mostly corralled into the poorer areas like the old Hale Ward, close to Aldershot. In the midlands (and the north) the working classes vastly outnumbered 'the toffs' who ran the factories and businesses which employed them. This must have led to the bosses discovering that a certain amount of 'being on a level' with their workforce produced better results and was much safer – hence the easier relationship between them when meeting face to face in public places. Anyone acting in a haughty or disdainful manner would be given very short shrift by the working population.