

## The Story of Naphill's Most Senior Lace-maker



These are the hands of Elsie Hussey happy to still be creating Honiton lace in her 96<sup>th</sup> year ..... Elsie is a remarkable lady who has lived in our community for most of her life. She was born in London but grew up with her brothers and sister in the house her Father built when he brought his family to Marlow Bottom to benefit from living in the countryside.

Elsie attended Marlow's Infant School, she recalls riding to school in a lorry each day having walked about a mile to the point where it picked the children up. The school building still stands on Oxford Road today. Elsie tells of missing the lorry one day and having to walk all the way with an older pupil. She says the Headmistress was so pleased with Elsie because she had walked over 3 miles to get to school that she let Elsie put her hand in the Big Sweetie Jar and take out a sweet as well as giving her a penny .... worth a lot more in the 1920s and a huge reward for a small girl!

The memory of one School Christmas Party comes to mind readily for Elsie; she wasn't well during the day but as there was no way of going home she had to stay until the lorry came at the end of the school day. Elsie remembers there was a Punch and Judy show at the party that year and one of the teachers nursed Elsie on her knee in the front row. As usual, Punch's baby fell out of the booth but landed in Elsie's lap .... it terrified Elsie and she has been scared of 'Punch and Judy' ever since!

Elsie moved on from the Infant school to the School in St Peter's Street. During their last 3 years there the children went all day every Monday and Elsie learnt housewifery including laundering and cookery. She learnt to read and became skilled at Mental Arithmetic, her craft skills were kindled there too in the sewing and knitting classes. Elsie is left handed which caused a problem because the teacher was right handed and in those days left handers just had to conform ... Elsie was given a ball of wool with four knitting needles, and made to sit on the wooden knitting box in the corner so that she could concentrate, the pattern for making

a pair of socks was written on the blackboard. Elsie says it was a struggle but she remembers turning a heel and must have finished the pair because she progressed to the gloves too, and finished those as well. Teachers from other classes used to come in to see how Elsie was progressing, she did well, her last school project was a blue baby matinee coat knitted on 2 needles. Elsie remembers her sister wanting Elsie to take up real knitting when she left school, in fact on her 15<sup>th</sup> birthday she gave Elsie the wool and a complex pattern to make a dusty pink jumper. Elsie completed it with help from her sister and has been a keen knitter ever since.

The first sewing lessons focussed on learning about different seams through making a kimono style jacket for a baby by hand. When the girls progressed to using a sewing machine the Headmistress always manoeuvred the fabric while the girls turned the machine's handle. Along with the others, Elsie progressed on to making a pair of pink, double seated, calico bloomers and the final project, a pretty flowered summer dress.

The skills Elsie learnt at school laid a firm foundation for her lifelong interest in handicrafts, she developed her dressmaking and ventured into tailoring too. Over the years she has made many items of clothing for her family including evening dresses, a suit and a full length coat for herself, lots of everyday dresses for her daughter and herself, a jacket for her eldest son, a hacking jacket for 4 year old David, a sports jacket for her husband and her daughter's wedding dress. She also turned her hand to crochet and spinning.

In 1937, aged 14, Elsie left school and just four days later started work. In her first job she learnt to put dowels in the front, back and side rails of dining room chairs, to insert metal rings in the side rails of armchairs and settees, to cane seats and take bruising out of wood.

When the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War broke out Elsie was just 16 and continued to work at the chair factory for a while but she loved the 9 months that she spent working in Lyons Tea Shop in High Wycombe. From there she moved on to a job with Ernest Turners Electrical Engineers where she was working with copper, brass and aluminium strip and recalls making coil frames to be used in the dials for aeroplanes. Elsie worked there for 12 ½ years.

In 1951 Elsie married John Hussey and they started their married life in a caravan in Naphill. It wasn't long before they found living with a baby in a small caravan is challenging, so they were delighted when they were offered a brand new house in Risborough, and over the moon when they moved to Naphill in 1954, into the house that has been Elsie's home ever since.

Elsie and John had 3 children, 2 boys and a girl. When the youngest, David, was about 3 Elsie did some home-work assembling thermostats for fish tanks and following that she did two home-help jobs.

Aged 49 Elsie took on her first 'office' job just down the road at Trada and, in her own words, 'loved every minute of it'. She worked in the offices there for about 16 years, even after she retired they called on her when they needed extra hands to help collate paperwork.

In her retirement Elsie took up hardhanger and lace-making, crafts that have given her much pleasure and through which she has made many friends; she joined local groups for both and developed a whole new social life too.

But it is making Honiton lace that has given her the most joy. Elsie is a regular and much loved participant in Elizabeth Trebble's Workshops at Missenden Abbey, she no longer attends the Friday evening session of each quarterly workshop but works tirelessly for the rest of the weekend. She is also a member of the Risboro' Lacemakers' group attending their monthly 'Do Days and the weekly-during-term-time Downley Lacemakers' group. This is where I first met Elsie, when I started making lace five years ago, and once I had mastered the basics of lace-making she soon introduced me to the magic of making honiton lace .... I am hooked too!

An inspirational Lady, despite failing eyesight Elsie is still making lace and keeping us entertained with stories recalled from her own rich history.

[Alex Adkins, Walter's Ash]