

## The Workers Story – Interviewee Form

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**Name:** Dorothy Knee

**Number:** WS30

**DOB:** 22.05.23

**Age at interview:** 84

**Dates at Royal Worcester:** 1937-1938, 1944-1948, 1950 to 1982

**Key areas:** Lithographing, printing

**Date of interview:** 17.09.07

**Any other documents:** Three albums of photos, with some lovely ones of Lithograph Department Christmas parties and pantos.

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### **Interview Summary:**

Dorothy began work in the litho room at 14, in 1937. She left to go to Williamson's Tin Factory, but returned in 1944. The department had fallen into chaos after the war, due to staff upheavals, and Dorothy was given the task of sorting it out. She was closely involved in organizing the Christmas 'events' for which the litho is famed, and recalls also a trip to present a dessert service to the Queen in 1977. She retired in 1983.

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### **Interview Synopsis (per 5 minute track)**

#### **CD1 Tracks 1 to 17**

1. (0.00) Interview date and ident.
2. (0.10) Dorothy was born in 1923 in Mill Street, just up the road from the Porcelain Works. She attended St Peter's School, which included girls from two nearby homes, St Alban's and St Lawrence Homes, and recalls her terrifying swimming lessons in the river Severn (teacher Miss Lockin). She never paid much attention to the factory, but nevertheless began work there in 1937, straight from school, aged 14. She followed her friend Betty Shepherd there, who worked in the print room at the litho. Mr Swift was Decorating Manager and Mrs Rouse in charge of the litho. Dorothy began in 'scraping off'.
3. (5.13) It involved scraping off a pattern called L'Aperitif(?), for a hotel in London, with turps. The first weeks were difficult, smelly and uncomfortable. The money was also poor, 7/6 a week, moving on to piece work, so when she was offered 27 shillings in another factory in late 1938, she snapped it up. There were lots of women from the Potteries, who had moved down for work: Mrs Grocott (with whom she got into trouble), Mrs Sharrat, Mrs Moseley (her husband George was good painter). There were only about 6 Worcester women working there. Winn Pearce, a gilder.
4. (10.09) Dorothy was general dogsbody and run about. She describes the process of 'size-down printing', rubbing the prints into a tacky varnish and cleaning it off with turpentine. It was hard work, often leaving blisters on the hands. Dorothy married in 1942, while she was at Williamson's Tin Factory

due to War, then went back to the Porcelain. Print-work could be done fast if you were skilled: Mrs Grocott sized about 50 at once. When Dorothy returned, they were using ammonia tanks to remove the size before gilding.

5. (15.09) Here, Dorothy corrects herself: the ammonia tanks came later. When she first went back (Jan 1944), Mrs Rouse was still there, then she left to have a baby, to be replaced by Miss Rea, who also managed the figurine painters. Then Mr Jimson brought Mrs Kelsall down from the Potteries; she was a tyrant, even terrified the men, and turned everything on its head. Dorothy left in 1948 to have a baby. She describes how different items were priced at piece rate (eg 24 tea cups earned the same as 30 coffee cups), and how Mrs Rouse had begun to choose her favourite girls for the supposedly easier items.
6. (20.08) By Christmas 1948, several of the disgruntled girls, Dorothy's sister Betty among them, had left, to be replaced by Polish girls from the camp at Pinvin. They simply couldn't cope, and probably around early 1951, Mr Crook asked Dorothy, Betty, Irene Gardner and some others to come back. Dorothy returned on a part-time basis, and found a mess of failed ware. She remembers some of the Polish workers' names: Ivor (gilder) worked with Andrew McCosky, and he had a sister in litho; there was Marie Kwalicez(?), whose father had fought in the Polish army and could not return ...
7. (25.10) because he was not a Communist. Another one called Zula (Ivor's sister?), who was rather bossy. Dorothy felt sorry for the factory, because they were 'getting no packing' (ie orders were not being filled). This is when the ammonia tank was introduced, and you had to be careful, because if you left the ware in too long, the pattern came off along with the size. Wrongly applied patterns had to be washed off, which took Dorothy weeks. Mrs Kelsall was sacked on the Friday when she went back, leaving Dorothy in charge (which rather put Kath Harper's nose out of joint). Gradually Dorothy sorted things out, some of the Polish girls left, the older women returned: Margaret Bennett (nee Cox), Betty. Mr Simmons, in charge of Design, was rolling out a new litho system, called Covercoat, a much cleaner process.
8. (30.11) Dorothy had a new team from Malvern, aged 16, straight from school – Rosemary Churchill, Della Peters, Gillian Smith, Mary Burston, Gwen Purcell, Ann Barnes, Janet Grosvenor, who still mainly worked on size-down. The Print Transfers came down on large sheets from Potteries, and lots was wasted when doing smaller ware, so we changed the way that was done. The early patterns, all coloured, were Duchess, Countess, Marquess, which had raised enamel dots on. The clients were hotels, like the Mount Royal in Canada (tea services with a narrow blue border), or big companies like the Canadian Pacific Railway.
9. (35.11) After the war it was London hotels, like Mayfair, L'aperitif. The harder patterns were done by the older journeywomen, and the younger girls got the more poorly-paid ones. During the war, everything went for export, to America (eg Lavinia pattern). Dorothy later moved to Gilding (with Eileen Sinner and Marie Wainwright, later Stravinsky). The factory work brought

some health problems: Eileen had arthritis, Dorothy suffered from turps rash, Rosemary Churchill had a lump caused by holding up the heavy plates for rubbing-on. So Covercoat was a better process, with no rubbing or size, no ammonia (which would not get past health-and-safety today).

10. (40.10) The benches would be scrubbed down on a Friday (in the days before Formica). Dorothy describes the layout of the factory, and the various rooms in which she worked. The factory moved fully over to the Covercoat process in around 1956/57. By this time, Dorothy was in charge, over 40 girls – lithographers, inspectors (lookers-over) and cleaners. The commonest errors on Covercoat were bubbles or badly-joined patterns, or occasionally if the pieces were ‘bunged-up’ too soon on the cork stands, the pattern could be damaged.
11. (45.09) The gilders used to sketch the position of the pattern in charcoal. The women who cleaned the plates up for gilding tended to be older women (Joan Parker). It was a close-knit team, but ‘you always get one that upsets the apple cart.’ Her sister Betty went to take charge of the lithographers in the Porcelain Works (Albion Mill, later Portland); before that Dorothy would have to do both china and porcelain. As they got busier, they employed out-workers (Rosemary, Della, Janet Grosvenor, the Malvern girls); they would do the RA ashtrays at home, which Mr Mann the storekeeper would deliver in his car. Graham Henton was surprised they came in boxes of 100, but such was demand that all the girls would do 100 each, every morning, and all the out-workers would have 10 boxes at a time. No technical equipment was needed, only squeegees, dusters, fairy liquid. Geraldine Smith used to do outwork when she had young children. There was huge demand for ornamentals and china, all needed ‘yesterday’.
12. (50.10) At first Betty didn’t want to take the job, but she was pleased she had. The Albion Mill move, in the early 1960s, was huge. It was mainly new girls; any that went over wanted to return because the new work was heavier. Dorothy had to go backwards and forwards, before Betty stepped in. Evesham was the big porcelain design, but before that there was Fiesta (Kathleen Hill), that the girls called ‘rock and roll’ (trumpets and French horns), then Strawberry, Wild Harvest. The Evesham prints came from Liepold in Germany, in batches of 2000 sheets, and each ‘advance’ was carefully colour-matched against the old batch. This checking-process has not been done for years, and as a result the later Evesham is much more disappointing: ‘fairground colours’. The girls didn’t understand the Evesham name when it first appeared, since peaches are not grown there.
13. (55.09) Designers would consult on new designs, by giving black-and-white ‘fittings’ which Dorothy would test with Mr Burgess. She was on the girls’ side; the designs had to work quickly, with no problems, or it wasn’t fair when they worked piece-rate. Mr Simmons would draw the alterations on the plate. She never saw Professor Baker draw anything on a plate, which was rather odd. The Christmas party became something of an institution: in the first year, there were 50 people, then it grew to over 100. The litho girls used to invite all the directors – Mr Jimson, Mr Mackerackny(?), Mr Milne. They would go

to the Deansway Restaurant then back to canteen. There were different events each year, dressing up, a pantomime; the men were curious to discover what the latest invention was, when the invitations were due out.

14. (1.00.07) Every guest had a present; there were games (with china for prizes), like the string game, where a spoon tied to a length of string would be weaved in and out of guests' clothing; someone would come in and MC for them. For the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the party, there was a cake. Later, the younger girls were less willing to contribute (one shilling a week), so it stopped. There were also a couple of sports' days at the recreation ground (photo). She remembers once entering a three-legged race with Bill Price, who managed the kilns, and falling over.
15. (1.03.46) Dorothy talks through some of the photographs that she has of these events. One pantomime photo shows herself and Betty as the Ugly Sisters, and Rosemary, aged just 16, playing Cinderella. Another shows the men performing 'Saturday Night at the Canteen' (not quite the London Palladium), as the Kay sisters, or the chorus girls: Alf Shepherd (wages offices), Ivor Ashman (Alf's uncle), Brian Holland (a traveller). The girls used to make the dresses, at work, and Mr Lance would turn a blind eye, as long as the work got done. A photograph of the String game shows Betty, a prim-and-proper spinster, with the spoon caught in her skirt. A conflict between Mr Lance of ornamentals and Bill Price the Decorating manager was immortalized in song by Dorothy, to the tune of Ovaltinies: 'We are the litho lovelies, Johnny's little girls, we're up each morning, oh we're yawning, long before the day is dawning; he comes, he goes, his pokes his nose to see if we're alright'. The photo shows them performing it, all got up as school girls.
16. (1.08.44) Another verse has the litho lovelies down as 'Billy's Enemies', but the lyrics of that have been forgotten. The men were either the women's partners, or factory men (Gordon Peplow). Only one man ever got drunk, despite the free drink, but he was never invited again. Barbara Hughes now holds many of the photographs. There's Mrs Bragg, recently widowed, who worked in the ammonia tank, and had a daughter who was a figurine paintress under Miss Rea. Everyone called her 'gran'; they dressed her up as a fairy (all 15 stone of her), and as Pinky and Perky, with Alf Shepherd. The dressing-up began when Dorothy surprised her team (Mrs Bragg in the tank, Rosemary, Della, Mary Burston, Jill Smith) dancing to the can-can on the radio. She secretly sent away to London for real can-can costumes, and produced them on the night of the party for her girls. The Bicentenary dinner took place at the Guildhall.
17. (1.13.44) Only long-service workers could go. They were bussed back afterwards, for dancing to Teddy's Band and refreshments (for those not at the dinner). The dinners were moved to the Grandstand, because the Guildhall floor could no longer support the sheer numbers of long-service people. There was some resentment because directors were invited who had not been at the factory very long. VIPs who visited the department: Tony Armstrong-Jones, Lady Macmillan, Lord Snowdon. A team went up to Buckingham Palace to present a dessert set in 1977: Graham Lewis (maker), Jack Parkinson (kiln

man), Bill Corfield (pattern room), Ivor (gilding), a woman who did the burnishing, and Dorothy ...

### **CD2 Tracks 18 to 20**

- 18.** (1.18.48) ... Pat Rigby (secretary to Peter Ewence), Peter Ewence, Mr Wakeman. They were summoned to the Ball Room for 6pm, wearing short dresses, no hats or gloves. It was such an extraordinary feeling to be standing there in front of all those windows and doors, and so many clocks! Dorothy remembers the beautiful trailing fuschias in the jardinières at the foot of the stairs, beside which stood kilted servants. No-one could resist the temptation to visit the toilets – real old-fashioned thick oak affairs, and a wonderful mirror mounted on elephant tusks. They were told that all the gifts received are used, in rotation.
- 19.** (1.23.50) The Royal Worcester set was on display. Black-, red- and green-coated waiters served drinks; no photographs were permitted. It was Derby Day. A bell rang and the Queen and Prince Philip appeared from a set of glass doors; you could see her gloves weren't brand new, and Philip's topper from the races had left a mark – Dorothy was impressed by the ordinariness of these details. The Queen delivered a lovely personal speech from the podium. All the team were presented individually to the Queen, and Philip spoke to Dorothy about the blue band. She felt it was such an honour. Dorothy left the factory in 1983, when she was 60.
- 20.** (1.28.47) She had been offered part-time, but preferred to make a clean break. She had no regrets, and never went back to factory until one of the other girls retired. However, she did miss the girls, especially the younger ones, who had kept her young and in touch with popular culture. Dorothy has been retired for 24 years.