

The Workers Story – Interviewee Form

Name: Henry and Barbara Sandon (both Henry and Barbara have passed away since this interview was recorded, Henry in 2023 and Barbara in 2013)

Number: WS18

Dates at Royal Worcester: Started in 1966.

Key areas: All

Date of interview: 15.05.07

NB. In this interview the Sandons talk over each other quite a lot

Interview Summary:

Barbara grew up in Friar Street and went to St Peter's School (now the Museum) from the age of 5 to 13. She remembers playing netball in the playground, now within the factory site. Barbara worked as Henry's secretary in the 1970s and organised tours round the factory. She played an important role at the Porcelain Museum.

Henry came to Worcester in 1953 and took over as curator of the museum from Cyril Shingler in 1966. His first tasks were to get to know the factory and its craftsmen, and to move the museum from its old building to the current site (ground floor of today's museum). As well as researching, purchasing and displaying porcelain, Henry organised tours, briefed tour guides and took round VIPs himself. He also did a series of archaeological digs on the old factory site at Warmstry House in the early 60s and exhibited the findings. Henry finished as curator in 1983 but continued to be its greatest supporter and the world's greatest expert on Royal Worcester porcelain until his death in 2023.

Interview Synopsis (per 5 minute track)

CD 1 Tracks 1 to 17

1. (0.00) Ident.
2. (0.17) Starts with Barbara, who was at school in what is now the Reject Shop when she was 5. Then they moved to the Museum building, boys below, girls upstairs. It was called St Peter's school. She left at 13 and went to Commercial School. Many children from her school went on to work at RW. She watched all the workers walking in, and leaving at lunchtime. Reckons there were about 180 girls, and the same in the boys school. They used to play netball in the playground – (yard just outside Museum front entrance).
3. (5.16) There was always an aniseed smell. Didn't notice the noise. The canal side was open to the factory. After Commercial School, Barbara went to work at Metal Box. She lived in Friar Street, next door to the painter Albert Shuck.
4. (7.10) Henry came to Worcester in 1953, to teach at the Grammar School and sing and conduct in the cathedral choir. He became Curator of the Museum in 1966. Before that he came to the Museum to play whist in the Worcester

canteen – the prizes were pieces of porcelain! First impressions – buzzing, booming, ‘it was a terribly exciting place’. Jumped at the chance of the Museum job. First main task was to get acclimatized with the factory so he could organise factory tours. He went to every department and investigated all the secrets of the factory. Also he was involved in moving the museum over from the old building (now café) to the lower half of the school. Cyril Shingler (old curator) stayed on for 6 months to help the move. Says he was made welcome in the factory and the workers were open with him, and happy to tell him what they did... which was a change from the secrecy of the past. He even had a go at some of the processes.

5. (12.11) Says he was amazed by how old many of them were. Says all the departments were large eg. 40 or 50 flower makers. The foreman would take him round. ‘In a short space of time I’d imbibed all these skills in the mind’. Then able to take VIPs around. Henry organised the tours with another lady; these were booming, there were about 10 guides and hundreds of visitors a week. Went from raw materials, to making, to glazing, to kilns, to decorating and flower making, to the junior painters. Took an hour. Henry knew some of the original Terrible Seven, eg Ted Townsend. They terrorised the factory when they were young.
6. (17.10) eg playing cricket down the department, the wicket was a Stinton vase! Says gilders and painters never got on. Gilders would cover their signatures with a lump of gold. Painters were high and mighty, dressed well etc. Mentions the elderly gilder who could swing on a beam. Gilding took much longer than painting, and the gilders’ concentration was enormous. Talks about Percy Lewis ‘a devil of a fellow – a very fine gilder’. Also Ivor Williams ‘the greatest gilder of the 20th century’. Could draw a complete circle in gold by hand.
7. (22.12) He did it while Henry watched... says it’s the greatest skill a gilder can have. Talks about some of his greatest pieces eg the Churchill urn in the museum, and a piece Ivor did for his and Barbara’s wedding. Says that some of the craftsmen could take you back in two steps to the 18th century. Harry Davis was very shy, and a real gentleman. Barbara says he was always immaculate. He could paint anything – his early subjects were Highland sheep. You only painted your subject. If no orders came in for that subject, you sat and twiddled your thumbs. Often work was scarce and the job was perilous. Harry’s master Edward Salter committed suicide under the pressures of shortage of work.
8. (27.10) Ted Townsend took over Highland cattle and sheep. There were a dozen fruit painters. It was still a closed shop up to the 70s and 80s. In the thirties, Dyson Perrins paid the workers out of his own pocket when there was no work. Some of the gilders took tours around, and would cover the sign saying no gratuities. When there was no work, they’d read the paper... or one would read to the others to fill up the day. Sometimes the gilders were allotted a number of pieces, they would then draw lots to see who would do them. Some of the senior painters let the juniors watch them, but they wouldn’t teach them. Henry’s son John was allowed to watch. Harry would often do 10 or 12

firings to get the depth of colour. If he wasn't happy by the 5th or 6th firing, he'd have them fired at a very high temperature to burn the other layers away.

9. (32.16) Who were the best fruit painters? The greatest was Richard Sebright, he died in 1952, so Harry didn't meet him. He was a slow painter and as a result, earned almost nothing. 'A difficult tragic man' who became mentally ill. He lived with 2 older ladies, who then turned their attentions on Henry. Sebright burnt all his water colours before he was taken to an asylum. The women, he says, were mainly decorators and enamellers, but some had special subjects. Daisy Rea did flowers, Kitty Blake did blackberries. Daisy had tea every afternoon with Harry Davis. Henry says he was scared of Daisy. The girls called her 'scissors' because she was long, thin and wiry.
10. (37.12) Describes where all the painters worked. Senior men at the top, junior boys next, then senior women, then junior girls and the kilns at the bottom. Talks about Arthur Haynes, a ware carrier. He was about 4 ft something. The tourists loved him and Henry played crib with him in the canteen at lunchtime. Moves on to the modellers... some were from the factory (Gertner, French and Peter Ewence) but most were done by freelancers. Henry describes them as 'a breath of high class air' coming into the factory. Birds were done by Dorothy, but Dorris liked doing birds, but wasn't allowed, so she did birds for Crown Staffs.
11. (42.16) Dorothy worked quite closely with the flower-makers. She didn't mind each flower or leaf being different as this reflected nature. She awarded them points for good work, and then rewarded them with gifts and sweets. She was very proud of the flower-makers. Dorothy would work with Gertner, who cut the models up into pieces. Then the modeller (DD or DL) would sit by and work with the mould maker. Dorris Lindner was quite scary. She was masculine, and could 'swear like a trooper'. The directors were 'scared stiff of her'. Everyone avoided her in the mornings, then the directors would give her a bottle of gin at lunchtime, and the afternoons were great and she'd drive back to the Cotswolds 'drunk as a skunk'. Henry's son David Sandon has a recording made with Dorris. Henry's favourite DL model is the arab stallion.
12. (47.12) Also loves Arkle. She preferred the jump horses to the flat horses. Henry and Barbara watched her modelling Arkle in her 80s. He describes her studio in the Cotswolds as 'cluttered', with a garden filled with Henry Moore type sculptures. Talks about going to tea there. DL's dog would jump on the table and eat the cake. Remembers a party in London for her 80th birthday – various VIP guests. She was presented with a punch bowl gilded by Ivor Williams with the names of all her work. H and B went over next week and found her using it to plant bulbs. She said she would have preferred a case of gin! Was there any rivalry between DL and DD? Not really, though DL wanted to do birds. Freda Doughty was a totally different character from her sister. Describes them as 'Laurel and Hardy'.
13. (52.08) Freda specialised in figures (Days of the week, and Months of the year). Other freelance modellers' work wasn't so popular, eg. Indian Braves, Art Deco designs etc. These are now very rare – there may only be one or two

in existence. Says that people would occasionally turn up at the museum saying they'd been the model for a particular FD 'child'. Talks about Joe Gimson, who was a Mason. Remembers Bob Bradley showing JG a model of a bull ready for its owners. JG screeched at him that the bull's 'private parts' were on back to front!

14. (57.10) (Short Track) Henry tried to get the bull for the museum, but JG had had it smashed up in the 'quarry'.
15. (58.00) Back to the Museum. The old museum was much too small and terribly cluttered. The Trustees got the lease on St Peter's school, the ground floor was for the museum, and the upper floor for an enormous computer. Some Plymouth shop-fitters used the old museum cases and constructed new ones. Cyril Shingle and Henry brought over the pots in ware baskets. Henry had two rooms – the left one had Victorian pieces to Doughty birds (the climax of the tour), and the right one had the 18th century things. Within 6 months it was opened by the Lord Lieutenant of Worcestershire. The Chicago took 6 men to carry it over. Mr Binns (MD and art director) had intended the Museum to be a source of inspiration to the workers. At that time it contained foreign porcelain too.
16. (1.03.00) This was all sold when he died, to raise money to refurbish the museum. Story about Mr Binns being fooled by a fake 'Bronze age' cup and saucer found on the Malverns. When he'd retired, he'd still come back everyday and see everyone. Talks further about Binns (stories handed down by Harry Davis and others). Gilders, painters and design department (Peter Ewence, Neal French etc) would come over to museum to sketch and copy items.
17. (1.08.02) eg. Neal and Peter did a new version of 'Royal Garden'. Museum was also visited by visitors going round the factory. Barbara organised the tours (1970s), the guides and the shop. 'It was swarming with people'. Also introduced a 'Connoisseurs Tour'. In winter the local schools could come for free (a source of new apprentices). The tour was 1.5 hours. They had about a dozen guides. They would learn from other guides, then Henry would 'test' them. Some were former workers.

CD 2 Tracks 18 to 22

18. (1.12.59) Mentions some of the guides including June Taylor, a motherly lady. Groups were about 10-12. Also Dick Barton, who organised the tours for years. Henry also did exhibitions and archaeology. This was on the Warmstry House site – he did a series of digs over some years, looking at the 'wasters' – what was thrown away on the original factory site. The digs made them change their views on what was and wasn't made by Worcester. Describes some of the most important finds. Henry exhibited what he found, attracting very knowledgeable people from all over the world.
19. (1.18.03) The 'finds' were often washed in the Sandon's kitchen sink. It led to Henry being called whenever pottery finds were made in Worcester. Talks

about his other roles in the City (eg cathedral). Mentions Dr Malcolm Nixon who did a lot of archaeological work on the kiln sites and church. Henry also did work on the 'Grainger' sites (early porcelain sites) – all ran in conjunction with what he was doing in the Museum.

20. (1.23.03) (Barbara talking in background) Taking VIPs/ sports teams around. They would sign their names, which Ivor Williams would gild on plates. Each member of the team would get one, and some were sold off. Good publicity. Tells story of taking a leading jump jockey, Stan Mellor, around, who gave the workers a tip that romped home at 14/1. Also mentions singers, actors, politicians and President Reagan's son. (Barbara had to look after *his* son who behaved badly). Talks about the Queen's visit to the Commandery, where they had a display of WP models etc.
21. (1.28.01)(Barbara talking in background) At the 250th anniversary, the three curators (Cyril Shingler, Henry and Harry Frost) were presented to the Queen. Mentions Maggie Thatcher, Edward Heath (who was interested in porcelain) and Peter Walker. Heath invited Henry up to Downing Street to look at some c.1810 china he'd just bought. Thoughts on the fact that the porcelain unites people from all backgrounds. (Barbara and Henry talking over each other about a group from Wedgwood). Another of Henry's roles was increasing the collection.
22. (1.33.02) Talks about purchasing the Wigornia Cream Boat in 1973. He went to Sotheby's to bid up to £12,000 for it, but was out bid by an American Businessman who bought it for £20,000. However he said he'd sell it back to them, if they could raise the cash (which they did). Story of an Oxfordshire farmer who was asking about the 'Royal Lily' pattern (one missing from the Royal Collection) and said he had a large amount of it. Henry thought he was a nutter, but went to view the pieces and found them to be entirely genuine – more than 1000 pieces. (NB this interview finishes quite abruptly on this story).