

The Workers Story – Interviewee Form

Name: Stella Chambers

Number: WS21

DOB: 08.12.37

Age at interview: 69

Dates at Royal Worcester: 1952 to 2002 (with an 11 year break in the middle)

Key areas: Burnishing

Date of interview: 29.05.07

Interview Summary:

Stella Chambers started at RW aged 15, directly from school. She initially wanted to be a painter, but was put off by Daisy Rea, and went into the burnishers under Dot Purser. She later moved into ornamental burnishing, to work through a backlog of rich ornamental work piled up at the back of the room. She particularly remembers doing the military and royal models, especially Henry VIII and Elizabeth I. She took 11 years off to bring up her children, then returned to the burnishing department for a further 23 years. She says the biggest change in that time was how the younger girls treated the older women and supervisors – they lacked respect and ‘ruled the room’.

Interview Synopsis (per 5 minute track)

Tracks 1 to 9

1. (0.00) Interview ident.
2. (0.13) Stella started aged 15 straight from school. Her auntie was a caster, she became a burnisher, working 8 to 6. Miss Purser was in charge. She wanted to be a paintress, but Personnel told her that Daisy Rea was strict and she would have to really love painting to pursue it, so she chose burnishing. First job was a box of Warmistry coffee ‘cans’ – took her all day and she was exhausted and bored. Had to go over it in ‘wet’ sand and then dry sand. Describes working with the gold – which started off brown, and became shiny as you burnished, but you could rub too much and rub the gold off. After a while she learned to be an ornamental burnisher (there was a back log of rich ornamental work which John Lance wanted cleared).
3. (5.12) Talks about the difference between bloodstone and agate. Agate was a pencil, ‘used for picking bits of brown out’. The bloodstone or ‘burnisher’ was used to go round the top of a vase to make it really shiny. There were two separate rooms, the younger girls ‘the sanders’ were in one room, and the older ladies were in the other room doing the rich work (eg all-over acid plates). When they got bored, they ‘wandered off’ but were fetched back by their supervisor Dot Purser. She dished out work, and inspected every piece. They all hated doing ‘Regency’ and cream soup cups. She used to take the gold off when she was doing painted fruit, but this could be touched up by the gilders. Remembers and lists the girls she worked with. Moved to ‘ornamental’ under Mrs Harris, with two other girls.

4. (10.13) This was an 'apprenticeship', and the company took off 5 shillings a week. Remembers doing Henry VIII – and picking out the gold ornamentation with the agate stone. Often the gilders would miss a pearl out, and it had to be sent back. Each took 11 hours. Also remembers doing military officers, admirals, Scotch Guard, Sir Walter Raleigh, Edward 1, and Queen Elizabeth 1. She was very tricky as the sceptre was easy to snap off. When finished, Mrs Harris would take it to the ornamental stock room. Talks about how you can tell different burnishers work apart.
5. (14.25) Moved on to doing more rich work, as it was better paid. Did acid plates and complicated tea sets. She enjoyed doing the all-over acid plates – it took an hour to do one. Hard physical work – it's taken its toll on her fingers. Describes her average day, starting at 8, break at 10, at 11 they had music while you work, then lunch break for an hour, and a tea break at 3.30. She would also have an hour at 12 to go through 'the bad ware' or the 'slack table' in the sanders. Another girl did the rich ware. Rarely visited other departments except the printers. They never went to the paintresses because Miss Rea was so strict. Used to get up to mischief in the toilets. Always went out for lunch, unless it was raining, when you could stay inside with the door locked. Used to by tickets for 3 pence for rolls.
6. (19.24) Describes the canteen as well, and the rush to get back in through the gates at five to two. Stella had a break to have children. She was off for 11 years. Hated it when she came back. They'd moved to the old litho room. Mrs Harris, Miss Purser and Miss Mason were still there, but the rest were new and were not at all friendly. She worked 9 till 3.30 to fit in with school hours. Says it was difficult to juggle the school holidays. Says the biggest change was how the girls treated the supervisor – they had no respect. She continued as a burnisher for another 23 years.
7. (24.29) They were less supervised – one example was teapots, where they'd do the bases, but hated doing the covers, so left these. Beth Shepherd would come up and moan, because she couldn't send the teapots through because they had no covers. Stella says she loved her job, but hated the girls. Mentions one new manager who wanted people to work in other departments when their work was slack. They went to Portland and burnished there. 'They didn't like having us down there, as they did it on a machine and we still did it by hand'. For the last 6 months, she had to work a burnishing machine, which she didn't like. Was it quicker? She says she was quicker by hand. She was put on the 'Diplomat' pattern, which scratched very easily and couldn't be done on the machine. Also did the Sultan's pattern – it took 25 mins to do the edge of the plate with its gold crest. A young manager said it was taking too long.
8. (29.26) He got them to do it on the machine, but she says it was no good. 'The last 18 months it was going down hill fast'. Even the all-over acid plates were done on the machine. She explains the differences between hand burnishing and machine burnishing. It was very easy to scratch the painted fruit - it could be sent back but it always looked 'patched up'. The older ladies (Vera Mason, Mrs Leak, Milly Brown) used to do the best work – ie Queen's tea set and the cricketer's plates. Talks about her send off in 2002.

9. (34.27) Talks about one case of bullying in the room. She nearly left when she came back after having children but was determined not to be 'driven out'.