

# Derby to Donegal – by design

– colour and fashion in my life –

*Joy Elliott*



*Choosing the best!*

*“I have held many things in my hands and I have lost them all, but whatever I have placed in God’s hands; that I still possess.”*

*Martin Luther 1483 – 1546*

**‘Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for .....’** Heb. 11.1

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## – colour and fashion in my life –

In the beginning there was colour and shape and fabric. I remember most of the dresses my mother made for me; the colours, the fabrics and the shapes. She had no sewing machine and all the seams were stitched by hand, as well as the hems and button holes. I recently discovered that a great-great-grandfather, Job Carter (Mum's great grandfather) was a tailor. My propensity for designing clothes, perhaps also altering them, comes from him. I always seem to be stitching, unpicking, perfecting, changing, cutting, adapting.



*March 1933 - 22 months old*

My earliest memory is of a house just off Normanton, Derby, where there were flowers, lots of different colours, shapes. The next memory is not a good one. It seems my mother was concerned that I was quite timid, having consulted the doctor. We had just moved to a new home. He suggested toughening me up, I suppose I was 3 or 4 at the time; so she put me outside in the street with my doll's pram and locked me out. I stood there crying for what seemed like hours. A lady walking by, paused,

and as it was starting to drizzle with rain, spoke to my mum. (I suppose she either went down the “entry” or knocked loudly on the door – I had tried that without any success – I was let in after the lady’s intervention.)

At about the same age I went to sleep one night. I awoke and called out. No answer. So downstairs I went, no one there! I sat on the arm of the bed-chair crying my eyes out. Why was I sitting on the arm? It still puzzles me. I remember seeing the head of Miss Scarborough, who lived a few doors down, peering over the fence. I must have been crying very loudly or even hysterically. It turned out that both my parents had gone “round the corner” to deliver a wedding present. Incidents, like shutting me out into the street with my doll’s pram and the one just mentioned, did me no good if no direct harm. These instances just served to underline my timidity.

The next memory is a school one; my first day. My mother had made a dress for me from her wedding dress; possibly to encourage me. She embroidered flowers on the bodice. The girl sitting next to me spat on it. I wonder where she is now? Does she remember the bullying she did, constantly, every day from then on?



*With Mum – 1934*



*With Dad – 1935*

On my way home, when I was about 7, there was a girl in another street, who slapped me around every day, coming home from school – so I used to go the long way home, through several different streets, which necessitated hurrying. When I got home, at lunch time, I was not able to eat – but was made to do so. I ran all the way back to school (no bully-girl this time) for afternoon lessons. In the mornings, I was so nervous going to school, I could eat only half a slice of bread. I see looking back how being tense, nervous or scared has affected my digestion and appetite. Let's get on to some happy memories!

Every Saturday, and maybe Sunday afternoon, in the summer, we went “to the country” on the blue bus to Mickleover, with a picnic. Getting off the bus Dad would buy both of us an ice cream cone. Wonderful ice cream, it tasted like custard. Through the church gate, across fields to the railway line. I remember the smell of creosote from the wooden gate. I also remember one of the fields on the way being full of stubble. One time Dad cut me some straws from the corn. Other times it was hay making time; I remember the wonderful smell of dried grass and flowers.

Dad worked for Derbyshire County Council as a sign-writer and painting lines for traffic on the roads. He was very familiar with all the people in the cottages around about. He knew all the villages and boundaries, as well as the roads, fields and lanes. He knew and loved the seasons of the year and what flowers were in season. He would bring home honey and newly laid pullet eggs. He knew the best places to take us to the country; Kings Mills, Darley Dale and Dovedale where the “mayblobs” (marshmarigolds) grew. He knew where to gather watercress from the stream in Findern, where sweet violets could be found, as well as primroses, wild roses in the hedgerows, bluebell woods and cowslip fields at Swarkestone.

Our weekly picnics in the summer were the high spots of our lives, especially when I was not in school (with its attendant



*Millers Dale with  
Dad, – age 6*



*Kings Mills*



*Darley Park – age 5*

tensions). Often I would be sent round the corner to the “Co-Op” for bread and other provisions for the planned picnic. My canvas sandals had been whitened with Blanco earlier that day and put out in the sun to dry. I can remember the warm crispness of them as I put them on over my socks. One of the times returning from the “Co-Op” I was bitten by a dog; perhaps I’d tried to pet him. This memory seems to be attached to a dress I wore that day, orange crêpe/burnt orange with a kind of satin on the back of the fabric.

We never had carpets – only lino and the hand pegged rugs, which were shaken weekly out through the back bedroom window, so we didn’t need a Hoover! In this house, 62 Empress Road, there was no bathroom. Bathing was done in front of the living room fire. It was quite cosy, in a zinc bath. It was hung on a nail, next to the mangle outside. The lavatory was outside also and had a wooden seat, which had to be regularly scrubbed. It had a pull chain. In the winter Dad lit a lantern, in the outside loo, to keep us and the pipes warm. Winters then were colder and summers hotter than now. We also had a chamber pot under our bed; called a Jerry.

In the scullery was the copper pan, which was set into the corner. This deep copper, for boiling laundry, was set in bricks. There was a space underneath, like a tiny oven for lighting the

fire that heated the water. We did not have hot running water in this house. It took ages to fill the copper and ages to empty it. The stone sink was low and oblong. There was a hand-pump for water, which was later replaced with a tap. The sheets were boiled in soapy water and hauled out with a stick, then rinsed in the stone sink and taken outside to the huge mangle. What a lot of labour! The mangle was turned by a huge wheel at the side, which had 2 big rollers. Water was squeezed out of it and collected in a small bath, or container, underneath.

The clothes were then put into a basket and were taken through the gate of the small yard to the washing line. This was on one side of the garden area; the other side was for the next door neighbour, Mrs. Grewcock. This same “copper” was also filled with water for bath-time. It was topped up with water from the narrow boiler, next to the fire in the living room – a kind of side boiler with a fire in the grate and an oven at the other side.

In this oven Mum made Yorkshire puddings, making use of its great heat. Inside were cast iron shelves that could be taken out and re-positioned. In the winter if one of us was in bed ill, in addition to the stone jars used to heat the bed, the shelves of this oven were taken out and wrapped in brown paper and put in the bed to warm it up.

I got many of the childhood infections and diseases – measles, chicken pox, whooping cough, mumps and many episodes of tonsillitis. My memory is of being in the double bed in my parents’ bedroom. I was moved there during the day and back to my own room later.

The way up to the bedrooms was by a dark stairway. A long passage divided the master bedroom and



*School photo – aged 6*

mine. There was a tiny 'boxroom' that I later made my own after my brothers were born. I never liked this passage way – there was an uncomfortable feel to it. I would rush along that passage, if I was sent upstairs to fetch something. Was this just my fancy? Nervousness? I had a night light in my bedroom for several years. I remember lying in my cot by my parents' bed when I was about 3 and being very scared of something on top of a table across the room. Of course, I yelled in fear.

I've always been a very vivid dreamer and some of those dreams I had when I was small were so vivid I can remember parts of them now. They usually involved being chased or threatened in some way. I woke and tried to scream... must have made some sound as my Dad came into the bedroom to reassure me. Other dreams involved jumping up to something high in an effort to escape. Those dreams were probably all to do with the difficulty in school with the school bully and/or the girl who lay in wait on my way home at lunchtime.

I also remember seeing a photograph of a lady with dark hair. The photo was oval and set in a pink alabaster frame. One day Dad came home and broke the photograph and dumped it in the dustbin in a rare display of temper. That photograph was of my grandmother, Selena, who had come to see me, her first grandchild. I saw her only once and always wanted to know more about her. Dad was angry because he was only 14 when he found out the circumstances leading to his birth (rape). Selena, his mother, wanted him with her, but was taking working wages from him. Maybe he also felt displaced as there were half-brothers and half-sisters. It was never talked about until he was in his 70s. He told me then that he had forgiven his mother. If only it had been discussed before then, it would have been so much better for him and for us to understand. I am left with a 'jig-saw' with most of the pieces missing. His half-brothers and half-sisters would have long died by now.



I didn't know Dad's mother was called Selena until I was over 50 and had a significant, brief conversation with him, when I asked what her name was. I could have asked him for more details about his early life – why didn't I? Delicacy? Or was his manner such that I felt I couldn't probe deeper?

Mum was one of eleven children, somewhere in the middle. I recall 9 of the names, the 2 others are missing. They died early, as did Wilfie, the child before next. I think she was number 6. Wilfie had Bright's disease and died at 14. I guess mum was then about 12. She was bullied by her older sisters, though Auntie Flo would have been kinder, I think. As a child, my mum had really green eyes, and her hair was "the colour of a new penny" and needed to be wrung out, in the gutter, due to perspiration, on hot summer days. She once told me that in school, when she was talking to another girl during a lesson, the teacher said "Evelyn Carter, you are the height (spoken by Mum to me, copying the 'height') of rudeness." I have no photographs of her as a child but she wrote down a lot of memories. I imagine her as a child in a pinafore over her dress, and wearing black stockings and boots.

My school had green walls inside with a fire to heat the classroom in winter. There were toilets in the yard. The schoolyard at the front was big. I always hung around the edges of the playground, rarely getting involved in the thick of things. Miss Rastall was my teacher. She once stood me on a chair, slapped the back of my legs with a ruler, and said "now will you remember?" What I was supposed to remember was my arithmetic. My mind just went blank and I didn't remember! This did not help me later – maths, geometry, algebra, logarithms and percentages. The grounding I should have got would have helped me later.

The local church was St. Chad's, which my family attended sporadically. Once there was a party at Christmas. I wore some silver sparkly plimsolls, with an elastic strap to keep them on.

There were also parties in the summer. like the Sunday school outing. There was a dray; I suppose it was pulled by a horse or donkey. In July 1936 we had a carnival in the town; I remember streamers. Friarsgate had double kerbs and I sat on the kerb as the floats went by.

We didn't have many people visiting our house. My mother didn't "keep open house", as it is said here in Ireland. Now and again, Uncle Ron and Auntie Emily came to tea. Bread and butter was served (I doubt if there were any delicacies like ham or cheese), followed by tinned peaches and carnation milk, which I daresay was a substitute for cream. On these visits the best china came out. I remember the designs on the china set featured bunches of cherries.

Christmas was when we went to "the front room". This was the room nearest the road, not the living room where we ate. In here was the settee and 2 armchairs covered in brown rexine. Christmas evening was spent cracking open nuts, hazelnuts, almonds, Brazil nuts, walnuts; and eating oranges. What did we do? As the wireless was in the living room we must have played some game or other, or read books. The fire was lit and it was very cosy. We also played cards; Rummy or Snap, maybe a pencil and paper game, such as how many other words we could get out of one long one. When Dad joined the army we used to play this game by post in our letters. That was a year or two later, when I was ten. The Christmas tree usually was on the sideboard in the living room. It was about 3 feet tall. We had real twist-shaped candles that had to be watched carefully. They were clipped on to the tree with a fish tail shaped candle holder.

Some of the books I read, I remember; Greek mythology tales, children's annuals and Enid Blyton. I was not allowed Pooh Bear! No Beatrix Potter either! The year before Dad joined the army, he and I got up quite early every morning. I lay down, on the home-made rag rug, writing in an exercise book a story about

a girl who hated history. Dad would leave for work at 7 a.m. Maybe I wrote after he left. My memory is of the two us together and of me writing.

Dad joined the Royal Artillery as a despatch rider in early 1941. When he came out of the army and returned to his old job he was given a council van to use. I was 16 and we were then living in Friary Avenue. Previously he usually cycled to the depot at Spondon.

Before he joined up he would come home about 5pm. He shared some of his dinner with me sitting on his knee. I remember his navy work overalls and a kind of oily, painty smell. When he went away to join the Royal Artillery he gave me a button from the overalls which said "Hold Fast" on it. I really missed my Dad – looking back now. I think he was a kind of buffer between me and Mum. Maybe the shock of him going, and the anxiety that he would not return from the war, precipitated the bout of rheumatic fever. I had to stay in bed for 3 months. That was a depressing time. It was the beginning of spring.

I had to sit for a scholarship examination. I found out that the bully, who had spat on my dress, was going to the same school, Parkfield Cedars. I was extremely upset and cried bitterly. She had bullied me through-out Primary school, since I was 5 years old. Mum went down to the "Educational Company" with the letter of my scholarship and got me changed to Homelands School instead. Bliss and relief! With Dad being away, money was



*Dad – aged 35*

very tight, so I had a second-hand school bag. My gymslip I owned already, but all my other uniform had to be bought new.

Homelands was a new and modern school. It had only been built about 5 years when I went there in 1941. Bright classroom windows – all along one wall and very nice wooden desks with inkwells! The first year, I had to write on special cards every Friday afternoon because my writing wasn't satisfactory. I had only been printing in my last school, no joined up writing there.

The grounds of the school were wonderful – big grassy areas, a netball area and a hockey pitch. There was also a big playing field for sports, such as rounders. We had chestnut and lime trees in the school grounds near the classrooms. In autumn I went early to school by bike and collected conkers, a happy memory for me. One day in summer I remember studying for an exam, while lying on my tummy on the grass under the lime trees, with the sun beaming down. Why do some memories stay and others don't? Maybe I felt supreme ease, joy and happiness in that moment.

The first few years at Homeland's School were not easy. I had seen that girls seemed to get stuck in the C forms, so when, much later, I was relegated again to a C class, I decided this was not for me. I worked really hard to get out of this situation.

The following year saw me in 4B; I would have been 13 then. Our Geography and Scripture teacher, Miss Newman, was very encouraging. I remember her with gratitude, as well as the Art teacher who was also very encouraging. Miss Adnams told me that my paintings were "bursting with life".

On the minus side, the P.E. teacher, was a real pig with her cross-expression, dark and stocky. She had it in for me; I suppose because she had no patience with my timidity. I was scared stiff of her and dreaded our gym classes. Country dancing in the gym was enjoyable, vaulting the "horse" was not; I just couldn't do it.

Maybe I was too small to jump and straddle it. We had wall-bars, and ropes and other bars like fences to jump over, some mats (though when I fell from a rope there no mat in place).

When I was 14½ I arrived at my long desired goal – an A-stream class! For the school certificate I was not allowed to study Maths, as I was so hopeless. I took Domestic Science instead.

School and homework then became quite onerous. We had to fill in a Homework Record Book. At the end of each week I had to state how many hours of English, French, Geography, History, Science, Maths, Scripture, I had done. Homework took about 2-3 hours a night. Life at home wasn't easy as I did homework at the kitchen table. There were my brothers needing help and the radio on.

I knew some girls could stay at school after 4pm and have tea and sandwiches and do their prep. I managed to negotiate this for myself. Bliss! When I got home my brothers were in bed and my homework was finished. I can still remember the feeling of freedom. How I managed to get this concession is a mystery. My mum would have preferred me to come home after 4pm. My mother did things to me that her mother had done to her, especially insisting I mind the younger children and help with the housework.

Mum was a controlling, and at times, hysterical woman. It became a responsibility to keep her "sweet". During the war Dad was absent and Mum was very present and with the new school it was all heavy going. I've never found it easy to be light hearted about what happened to me. Life in my parents' house was always serious; not religiously serious.

I was in the Brownies, but being small I was made to be a mascot and wore a special yellow tie. I don't think I enjoyed it really. As in the playground at primary school, I was not good at holding my own and was not a natural mixer. As I grew older I became better at this, but I don't find it comes with ease; in

other words, I manage. I think that is my motto or cipher or motif in life. "I can manage" and I do quite often. This has disadvantages obviously.

In the summer time I woke with a feeling of anticipation and relief. The sun seemed to be always shining. Even the sky looked promising; a feeling of something out there, something nice and happy. School holidays began at the end of June and continued until September; 2 months. What did I do during the day in summer? I made tents in the backyard using chairs, clothes horses, brooms and blankets. I'd have my dinner outside on a stool. The summer was for dresses too – which Mum made from old clothes, given to her by the lady next door. The fabric colours were peach, panne velvet, green with white daises, burnt orange, yellow, brown and green check – I suppose Mum bought the fabric for these. Pale yellow with flowers and blue with flowers; I'm wearing one of those in my earliest school photo.

Grandad worked for the Gas Company. He was not very tall, had a moustache and seemed to me quite grumpy, so was Grandma, who wore long, dangling earrings – definitely not the cuddly type! They sat either side of the fire – I don't think they changed places ever. He grew potatoes in the front garden. I remember button headed red and white daises in his back garden and "London Pride" flowers. The house stank permanently of hops, as Grandad brewed his own beer. The minute you walked in the back door, the smell hit you. I stayed with Grandad and Grandma when Mum went into hospital to have the baby. Because of high blood pressure, she had to go a few weeks before the baby was due.



To her delight it was a boy, to be named David, born October 5th 1942.

*Me – aged 12 with David aged 9 months.*

To prepare for their home-coming, my Aunt Emily came. She built up the fire and left a large, heavy cast iron kettle boiling on the drop down bar of the fire. David was lying wrapped in his shawl on the bed-chair by the fire. I was instructed to lift the kettle, but because of having weak wrists, I dropped the kettle full of boiling water. It missed the baby, thankfully, but unfortunately scalded me badly on my legs. This was the second major time my wrists had let me down.

On this occasion the neighbour, Miss Scarborough, came to help. The doctor came to my house and put a salve on my legs. I had very, very painful scalds. In bed that night, I dreamt I had huge blisters, like jam jars on my legs. Next morning I found I'd wet the bed; shock I suppose, but I did have those huge blisters I'd dreamt of. I was then taken to the local hospital, where the moustached Nurse Thomas would dress the scalds daily. She would tell me to hold on to the bars at the head of the bed while she ripped off the previous day's dressing. This was replaced by a warm layer of Vaseline. This went on for 3 weeks; Vaseline on, Vaseline off... Mum couldn't come very often because of the new baby.

When I got home I then had a series of whitlows, which were very painful. I had boils and then yellow jaundice. I had to have bread without butter or margarine and no eggs. Breakfast was dry toast with jam. This went on until Christmas, so altogether 3 months special diet. Christmas wasn't very different; no cake or pudding either. I went back to school in January. It was very difficult getting into the swing of it again and Pamela Newton had taken my shoe bag and my reserved place in the cloakroom.

We visited "West Bank", where Mum's sister, Dav, worked as a house-keeper. It had a huge garden with rose beds, a big lawn, rockeries, a kitchen garden with vegetables and much fruit. We went several times for tea. This house belonged to Mr. and Mrs. Wood and was enormous compared to our own home.

Just before Julian was born, I went to stay with my Aunt Dolly (Dorothy) in the big house where she was house-keeper. It was spring time, I can remember waking up in the bed, sunshine outside, the sound of the blackbirds singing. The anticipation of the day ahead (I wish I had that kind of anticipation these days, instead of the leaden heaviness when I wake up). I don't know who looked after David at this time. Perhaps Dad was given compassionate leave to come home. I must have been with Aunt Dolly for about a fortnight. But what about school? How did I get there?



*Summer, Auntie Dolly's place  
after rheumatic fever*

Memories of “Westbank”: rain beating on the windows of the library: oak panelling, oak floors, the fire in the library grate, looking through the rain washed windows to the rose garden and reading National Geographic magazines. Mrs. Wood liked to play the grand piano as an accompaniment to my singing songs for her: “Red sails in the sunset”, “My bonny lies over the Ocean”, “Clementine”, Brahms’ lullaby “Slumber Softly”. It was, in retrospect, a very 1930s house; so big, so much wood everywhere and so solid.

The house had central heating of some kind so it was a warm and comfortable house. Auntie’s kitchen was compact and up to date; there was a fridge, which of course we didn’t have. The lawn at this house was huge and there were tennis nets that were brought out and put up – it was that large! At the edge of it was a hedge that screened the kitchen garden. Mr. and Mrs. Wood had a gardener. Mr. Wood was a director of Leys Malleable Castings. I don’t think there were any grown up children but they seemed to be used to children.



During wartime we had our air-raid shelter in the coal cellar, which was quite damp and grew white mould in large rings on the wall. There was a bed by the wall for Mum and me. It was a gloomy place to be in. A curtain was hung to keep the draft out. The door opened to the cellar where there were 2 shelves for cold foods. You had to reach far forward to take anything from the shelves and not lose your balance. If I hear the sound of an air-raid siren on a TV programme, even now, it holds unpleasant associations and gives me an odd feeling. My primary school was bombed during the early part of the war and we had our lessons in different pupils' houses. Air-raids happened because the Rolls Royce factory in Derby was making airplane parts.

We had blackout curtains, drawn across the windows at night, to shut out the light. There was brown tape glued across the window. This sticky tape was beige brown and went in the form of a cross and diagonals rather like the Union Jack design. As soon as the siren sounded then mum and I had to go down to the cellar. As well as darkening the town of Derby, with no lights showing anywhere, we had "smoke screens" – a tall, metal contraption with a lid, burning paraffin fuel.

The brown curtains previously mentioned featured also in other memories, particularly thunderstorms. My mother was a nervous woman and easily became quite hysterical. This memory belongs to a time when Dad was away. When the thunder and lightning began, Mum would take me with her behind the curtain, where the cellar door area was and there we would stay till it all stopped. I don't think that I was as scared as she was. Years later I worked on not being afraid of lightning. (I also taught myself not to be afraid of dogs when I passed them in the street. There were two incidents of bites. I was over 30 years old before I was able to overcome my fear of dogs.)

I had befriended a couple I'd met over the neighbouring garden wall. That lady had an apple tree that I used to stand under on my birthday each year, so as to have the apple blossom

petals fall on me. I pretended I was getting married – heavens above! They were very kind and invited me to visit. Here I learned to play “Rummy”. Mum was annoyed that I went off and left her to be with them, but it wasn’t every night. She was jealous, I think, and thought I should stay home with her. All my childhood she was quite controlling and wanted to be the centre of attention. This kind couple gave me a book to paint in. Later I went alone to the ballet, to see Swan Lake (Robert Helpman and Margot Fonteyn). When I came home I began to paint some of the dance routines in the book. I can still remember the glossy paper and the smell of the Indian ink I used.

Mick Goodwin, my boyfriend, and I went out together for almost a year when we were both working towards our school certificate. We went to the cinema now and again. He came to my house and we kissed in the cellar. I found him very attractive. After Julian was born my mother had the inspired idea of a chaperone. Whenever Mick and I went for a walk, on Burton Road, we had to take David and Julian with us. It must have looked strange to see.

His mother told him to get on with study and stop seeing me. I wonder now how true it was? I cried and cried in my bedroom until I was physically sick. It really upset me for a while, however, I picked myself up. The next year I began to see another boy, John Palmer. I later enjoyed ditching Mick when he wanted to go out again! John Palmer was somewhat immature and did a good deal of train spotting. We were both 15. He played boogie-woogie on his mother’s piano. She liked me and when we broke up a year later she was disappointed.

Around this time I was in two school plays; one on the strength of manufacturing a sneeze. It was called “Le Prince Qui Ne Pouvait Pas Eternuer”, (The Prince who was not able to sneeze). The other I had to play the piano and Stella Southam, a friend, showed me how to play this short piece; just a few bars.

We had no electric iron in those days, so all ironing was done with a cast iron, that had to be put into the fire to heat up. We had to feel for the right heat and test what happened if it was too hot. Gradually one learnt which heat was ok for what we were ironing. We had no ironing board at home either. Ironing was done on a thick layer of old blankets on the table.

I remember a circular skirt, sent from a person in America, for relatives of those in the armed forces. It was lavender with white spots and was very difficult to iron. The dress had to be dampened as it was an early type of synthetic. Some of the clothes sent were unsuitable or out of date. I remember a blue patterned shantung silk dress with puff sleeves – quite babyish. At the age of 15 I no longer wanted puff sleeves like my mother made for me. I wanted more suitable designs. Mum said, if I wanted something more complicated than what she could produce, I had to make it myself, and so I did. Then Auntie Emily lent us her sewing machine. We no longer had to hand-sew seams but we did continue to hem by hand.

I was 16 at the time and had just sat for the final school certificate. I did well in Art; gaining a distinction. I remember the design I did – greys, rust, purple – in the Art Nouveau style. We had to copy a flower. Mine was wilegia pink trumpets. (I also got a distinction in History.) I had an interview in Leicester College of Art, with the idea of taking a course in Fashion design. Mum was against it, giving the reason of the train journey (15 minutes) and being alone on the train. It was obvious to me that the real reason was money, or more likely, control. I went up to my room and cried hard into my pillow. It wasn't possible to persuade my parents. Every week when Mum got Dad's pay packet she would make little piles of money: "that's the rent", "that's insurance", "that's food", "that's the electricity bill" etc. And she'd put her hands on her head and moan "how shall we manage?"

I told my Art teacher, Miss Adnams, who had been so supportive. She put on her thinking cap and got me an interview

with Derby Museum and Art Gallery, with a view to employment. I put together a portfolio of my work and turned up for an interview. I then got the job as Curator's Assistant! It was a post I held for 2 years.

When I first went to work at the museum and art gallery, I had to wear my school navy reefer coat. We had clothes rationing even up to 1950. I still wore my school jumper. The following year I embroidered it and altered the sleeves, etc. I was continuing to make and design my own clothes.

The work was varied and interesting. Each week I had to look after the "flower table"; specimens of wild flowers in jam jars slotted into the table. There were hand-written cards to be done for this in calligraphy. I was sent for a class of manuscript writing to Derby School of Art, about 10 minutes walk from the museum. I painted backgrounds for the bird display (stuffed birds etc.). We had a display of 18th century clothes, so I did a background of a Georgian crescent and made figures from cardboard and paper sculpture. There were winter concerts held in the Art Gallery so I had the job of printing the programmes on the Adana printing press.

I was paid by the month; £5. All but £1 went to my Mum for "board and lodging". I had to work Saturday mornings. Across the road, the view from my window was of the café where my previous school friends gathered. They hadn't a care in the world. When I got home I then had to clean the bedrooms and shake out the heavy hand pegged rugs; then dust, change sheets and other general help.

I used to walk to the Museum each day when the weather was fine, down Burton Road, to the top of Babington Lane and across the Wardwick, about 25 minutes. I think it would have been about a mile. There were other routes, they all took the same time.

Near the Museum and Art Gallery, going towards the Cathedral one lunchtime, I passed a jewellers. My eyes lit on an

amber necklace. I enquired the price and ended up paying it off, week-by-week. The following months I saw a brown stone sparkling necklace (called sun stones) that would match my eyes. The same system followed. I still have those two necklaces (changed around a bit by me in later years) so they are 60 years old now.

During this time I was continuing to help out with my brothers; I was getting fed up. My mother didn't cope well with rebellion. Her answer to my complaints was to lay a carving knife across my neck and say "If you don't do it (whatever it was), I'll murder you." I guess she was just passing on how she'd been raised herself. At the time it was very heavy going. That summer I was 17.

I came under the spell of Christian Science for a while. Then later, a crush I had on Muriel Lowe, lead me to taking an interest in Seventh Day Adventism. Finally I ended up trying the Quakers. Looking back at those times it occurs to me that they were all alternatives to the occasional Church of England attendance. David and Julian were christened, as I was.

In 1948 we all went to Cleethorpes. Julian was 3, David was 5½ and I was 17. I wore the sandals I made from rope (soles) and webbing. I had seen sandals in a shoe shop on my way to work, but couldn't afford them – so I set to and designed and made my own.



*My home-made sandals*

The following summer I went to watch a cricket match with John (the train-spotter) while wearing my shorts. We were at the match almost the whole day and I got very sunburnt and red, especially on my legs. John said I looked like "the wreck of the Hesperus". I got mad and hit him on the head with an empty glass bottle. That seemed to me to be a good ending. I was getting cheesed off with trains anyway.

Robert Gregson then entered my life; dark, small and with thick glasses. He had the use of his parents' car. He was OK, the car didn't lead to any shenanigans. Then there was Harry O'Malley; a good bit older. We had tea in his room, but I didn't like being stroked by him. Mick came along again, so I strung the 3 of them along with relish for a short while. I was quite particular about being caressed. Kissing was OK, but if things got further on that was a definite no-no. Robert said I was the best kisser he knew!

The summer I was 17 my family moved to Allenton. Now we had a bathroom. We no longer had the galvanised bath by the fire on Sunday or Saturday nights. In this new home there were no cellars but a coal house and an outside lavatory, as well as one upstairs in the bathroom. We had a pantry in the kitchen with lots of shelves and a garage – no shared garden or pokey backyard. The day after the move, Mum sent me to get an extra bucket; I was to wash the windows. I mis-appropriated part of the change. I bought lipstick because I was mad at her.

Autumn saw me going out with Alan Hemmings; I was 17 years old at the time. When Alan, my husband-to-be, first came to the Gallery office I took an instant dislike to him. He was enquiring about concerts. We went to concerts in the gallery, and also to amateur dramatics. I was a maid in a play, and got a good mention! I also had to sing in this play "Au Pres De Ma Blonde, il fait, bon, fait bon, fait bon" ... (by the side of my blonde it is good, it is good).

My parents were very much against my going out with Alan Hemmings. At the time I didn't get the reason and significance of their antipathy. Alan's father had killed his brother, Ronald (who had Bright's Disease), aged 8, and then committed suicide. Alan's mother was very much in favour of me as a girl-friend for him. She implied that it would steady him and be the best for him.

Because of my parents' opposition, I tried to break it off with Alan. He cried and said I was all he'd got. In later years this theme of coercion occurred time and time again. Just before I was 18, Easter 1949, Alan got us engaged. I say it like this because I was never asked did I want to marry him. It was just assumed. My parents were so upset about his forced proposal, and also because Alan and I were to go to London for a weekend. He had an appointment with a view to working in London for Henry Guest, a silk merchant in Regent Street. I wore a suit made from strawberry coloured tweed for our weekend away. (This later became a little coat for my son, Guy, in 1958, made by myself.) Alan had given up his job at British Celanese. He was doing freelance work on designing fashion labels, but a proper job was needed for the future. In the summer of that year, 1949, I took on a paper round to make extra money. This daily paper round was done before I went to work, so I ended up very tired at the end of the day.

Alan wanted a summer holiday – but I wanted to buy saucepans for setting up house! We had arguments about me wanting to save versus him wanting to spend .... Our holiday was a hitch-hiking one. We went to the south of England, to Dorset, Portland Bill, Chesil Bank, Maiden Newton. I remember we stayed in a B&B as man and wife, but not in actuality. The owner was very snooty about us not being married and they were unpleasant. When I look back on my first married life it seems to have been a series of situations in which I had to conform to Alan – with no negotiation allowed. (Why did I put up with it for 20 years .....?)

September 1949. My mother continued to make me miserable. She was bad-tempered and menopausal. One Saturday, that September, I came home at tea-time, having gone to get my haircut, after doing the usual bedroom cleaning. She started nagging at me, mostly about Alan. I remember vividly staring at the sugar bowl on the table, with pent-up anger and

frustration. I couldn't speak. I just got up from the table, went upstairs and packed a few things. I left, very quietly, by the front-door, which was hardly ever used. I had no money, and intended to contact Alan's mother. I stopped two people on the street and asked them to buy a stamp I had. By now it was getting dark. I met up with Alan's mother at some club or pub. I must have rung her using the stamp money. I ended up in Alan's friend's house. I was put to bed for a few hours. Alan was phoned in London, to tell him to meet the 'milk train at Paddington Station'. I was walked to the station. The train was due to leave at 1 a.m. from Derby. I sat down, the seat was backwards facing. There was a choice here; I could go forward, or back. A moment I shall always remember. I went forward; the train arrived in London at 4 a.m. If I had gone home again how would my life been?

Alan was lodging in Ruislip, Middlesex. I don't know if anyone let my mother know where I was, or if I wrote to my parents. We did not have a telephone. At Christmas I went home and sang her favourite Christmas carol outside the back door. As I write this I am struck by the fact that I chose this way to let her know I was home (temporarily).

I had obtained a job in Eastcote in the local drapery shop as a window dresser. I hated this, feeling quite inadequate, but I managed. I remember wearing the school jumper I had embroidered with a feather motif and other vivid coloured designs, to cheer it up. Wednesday afternoon was my half-day and I went to visit Alan and take back laundry, to wash in January, February. Alan once wanted me to stay the night. I refused and he looked crestfallen. I got to the station intending to leave for Eastcote, relented and went back. (Why did he not accompany me to the station? Perhaps he was sulking.)

1950: The wedding was scheduled for March 20th – first day of Spring. We had only had four days' honeymoon in March, so planned to have a holiday in the summer. While visiting the library and browsing the book-shelves for inspiration or



destinations, I found a book on Ireland. The page fell open at an illustration of Tran-na-Rossan Strand. I said to Alan 'Look, isn't this where our friends, Di and Mary Morris, went?' So we planned a hitch-hiking holiday to Ireland. Later we discovered that Di and Mary never came to Ireland. Because of that picture I and the family ended up living here .....

Food rationing was still happening in 1950, so I went 'vegetarian', for a while, to get extra cheese for Alan's sandwiches. I also walked all the way to Oxford Circus, from the flat, to save money. Our flat was one-room, with a shared kitchen upstairs. Early on, I began to improvise and use my ingenuity (as I had making my sandals). I obtained a board – part of a packing case from Alan's work-place. I wedged this between the gas cooker and my dressing table. I could prepare meals and wash up the dishes on it. I only had to go upstairs to do the clothes washing. I also rigged up a temporary small line by fixing a little line on the window frame. I hung the washing outside the window, using a cardboard inner reel from the textile fabric. Later on we got a pulley system from the window to the far wall, so my washing hung out over the garden below. My memories of that garden include hearing someone continually practising the piano.

We had a spinet (an early piano), inscribed 'to his Majesty and the princesses'. It was made in the Georgian era. It was a beautiful object, about 5 feet long, approx. 2 feet wide, made with wonderful in-laid wood. The action of a spinet is a little different from the modern piano; sounding like a harpsichord and piano. Shella Southam used to come for tea, from her music studies at the Royal Academy. We gathered around the spinet as she played madrigals. That spinet had to be left behind when we moved to Donegal, as we could not afford to take it. The Polish lady who owned the apartments got to keep it.

We began to organise our Irish hitch-hiking trip. We made our way diagonally across from south-east to north-west, arriving on a Sunday in Northern Ireland. This was memorable chiefly for

not being able to buy any food, everywhere was closed. Augher and Clogher stick in my mind for this. We aimed for Donegal town, going up the west coast. At the town of Maas, we got a lift in a fish lorry with two fellows. They were strongly in favour of our calling on a famous fiddler, Neily Faddy Neil.



*Neily Faddy Neil, Annie  
& children*

This was a very special experience. Neily was a very proud man, and quite temperamental. He was fetched by his eldest daughter to see visitors from England, and was persuaded to play for us. Neily gave his all to his playing; one of the tunes was 'Brian Boru's march'. This family were to become our friends. We were heading for Tran-na-Rossan Bay; I guess the fish lorry men were heading for Dungloe, (having come from Killybegs), to sell their fish.

We skirted the base of Mount Errigal, having come through Gweedore. As we travelled we stopped at a cottage to ask for breakfast, but were refused. Hitch-hikers would have been very unfamiliar to the local people. We probably looked like hippies. Add to that an English accent and no wonder we were looked at askance. We proceeded on the road, passing through Poison Glen and Derryveagh Mountains (beautiful and broody, my favourite mountains in Donegal) and as we went along, Alan asked me if I would consider living in Ireland. I took a look at the complete remoteness of where we were and said "NO!"

We first met Dr. Molloy in Dungloe, when we were walking up the main street. I was wearing an orange-coloured skirt, made from parachute silk-fabric, so flimsy it blew up round my legs in the wind. Dr. Molloy's housekeeper, Anna, gave us the most delicious lamb chops I have ever tasted, so sweet and tender they

were. We stayed overnight at his invitation. During our time with him there had been a discussion of sorts about local industry and emigration. Although Alan was working for Henry Guest in Regent Street, it was obvious to me that he was hankering to work for himself.

The next day we walked to Creeslough, getting nearer and nearer to Tran-na-Rossan Bay on the Rosguill Peninsula. We asked for a bed for the night at McBride's. They were the first people to accept our request for lodging. We were given breakfast in the morning: rashers, eggs and sodabread. We went down to the the strand after breakfast. I have no recollection of what we did after this. I guess this location was the apogée of the trip. Did we come back a different way? Did we re-visit Dr. Molloy? Was it then that the idea of our transplantation began?

Back in London, one day that autumn, a letter arrived from Dr. Molloy. He seemed interested in Alan's ideas of starting up a hand-weaving business (with me of course). He told us of a cottage available to rent. Dr. Molloy ended his letter: 'Did we want to come and try our luck with the weaving project?' I wrote and asked him if the people round about were anti-British. Although he assured us this was not so, later this appeared erroneous; there was definitely some anti-British feeling.

One day, on the London Underground, we saw someone sitting opposite us wearing a mohair scarf. 'That's it' he proclaimed. 'We'll weave mohair scarves, doing our own dyeing'. So we set about contacting different firms. Kensington Weavers for a loom, and Mays for mohair hanks. Relatives were talked into putting up money for our venture. Looking back on all this I think they were quite brave to do so. How naïve we sounded, and also intrepid!

When it all began to gather momentum, I became nervous. I didn't want to pull up roots and travel to another country, to live in a bleak, primitive landscape. I had only just got married in

March, nine months earlier. Adjusting to marriage in a one-room flat in London was enough to begin with. Alan was egotistic. I rebelled against his dictate, but he never yielded. He was really quite selfish in his attitude towards me. I once walked out in desperation, along the Edgware Road. I reluctantly returned to him. I just adapted and put up with things. Really, I think I had great courage, considering what was in store for the future!

We continued to move ahead with plans to re-locate to Donegal. We had little to take with us. All I had were saucepans. Our landlady provided sheets and also gave me an old blanket which I used to back a patchwork quilt that I made. I remember doing the patchwork quilt listening to the plays in the afternoon on BBC radio.

It took months to get ready to leave. During that time we went to see the film 'Gone to Earth', starring Jennifer Jones. The setting was the countryside, and watching it made me long to escape from London and get to the Irish cottage in Donegal, even though I'd never seen it. I had romantic visions of a turf-burning range and bright curtained windows. The reality was to prove very different.

In June 1951 we sailed by mail boat to Dublin from Liverpool, then we travelled by steam train from Dublin to Strabane and on to Lifford. We arrived very weary and a little apprehensive. We boarded the narrow gauge train to Letterkenny. From there we took the Lough Swilly Railway bus. We travelled round the north coast of Donegal by way of Falcarragh, Gweedore and finally to Dungloe. We must have stayed the night in the local hotel. The following day Dr. Molloy and Patsy Sweeney, the Dungloe solicitor, drove us to our cottage in Lettercaugh. It was a town-land, just above Lough Anure, at the foot of a small mountain. I was in for a shock – on the doorstep was a human turd! I wiped my tears and improvised a brush from some branches. This is a moment always remembered because of my instant reaction – 'find a way round it'.

We had no kettle with us, no cups and saucers, and were at a loss how next to proceed. Dr. Molloy or Patsy Sweeney must have suggested we contact the nearest neighbour, Fred Gallagher and his widowed mother, who kindly lent us a kettle, cups, saucers, and plates. (Had we brought food supplies with us?) I remember the dismay of being confronted with a dismal kitchen-living room, with no means of heating the kettle to make the tea. The only method of heating water was to be the fire. There was no electricity; electrification came to Donegal after we left in 1955.

The cottage was single-storey and built on a slope. The back of the cottage had the best windows, with a sycamore tree just outside. There was a cow-byre below the cottage at the rear, on the slope – which was to prove extremely useful. We later used it to facilitate the water drained from the dye house above. Also, I hung my sheets there after washing. My other washing line was suspended from the sycamore tree to the wall of the cottage.

There was a defunct dance-hall, a gap of couple of feet away. In the first few weeks we began to renovate the dance-hall's wooden floor and galvanised tin roof. We were learning to live with no electricity, no running water inside the cottage and no proper sanitation. We had a chemical lavatory in the shed, curtained for privacy. The cottage and dance hall were at a T-junction. Across from us was a road going up to Aglies, which was up the lower slope of Croveigh. The cottage was just below the level of the road, and at the top of a very steep brae, so it was a natural stopping place in a way. It was known locally as 'Paddy Dunkeys' (Paddy Duncan I suppose).

Keith, Alan's friend, a dyer, also arrived to help us. Keith was of very large proportions and with an appetite to match. I found it difficult to keep up with that appetite with my primitive cooking methods. Alan and Keith worked on mending the corrugated dance-hall, which was to house the loom (this would arrive much later). They also painted the outside and made general repairs to it. I was in the cottage struggling with cooking

on the open fire. I washed the clothes and rinsed them in the stream across the road, where there was an open well. When the cows came by I had to chase them away. Buckets were dipped into the well and carried back across the road to the cottage.

My first efforts at cooking on the open fire whilst we had the poor turf sods was not the best. I cooked in the hot ashes; there was an ash pit under the grate, where I kept things warm. Turf ash is so light that the slightest breath of air puffs it everywhere. The ash has to be cleared away regularly. I had a relatively deep ash-pit under the fire, but the ashes had to be lifted-out with a metal dust-pan, shaped like a shovel, then transported outside in a bucket covered with anything to hand. If the day was anyway windy one got covered in ash. The ash was all tipped into the midden (which was a deep pit, about 10 feet long, and about 3 feet deep). If it was a windy day when the ash from the fire was thrown in, it puthered up in a cloud. Everything that couldn't go on the open fire went into the midden, behind the house, including the contents of the chemical lavatory.

Turf ash has a kind of sour smell, when it gets wet, but turf smoke, blue as it rises from the chimney outside, has a lovely sweet smell. Any turf soot getting into food being cooked without a lid, turned it brown, giving it a horrible and bitter taste. It could ruin whatever had been prepared. The fire was put to bed each night. The "embers" of the heart of the fire were covered, smothered, in the ash, to exclude air. Next morning there was the start of the day's fire to be built upon.

I made my first suet pudding by boiling it in the kettle. Next I boiled potatoes in the kettle. We had mashed potato with processed cheese; it was called "thump". Then the kettle was rinsed out so we could have tea. We later bought both a bread oven (bastable) and a crock, which was a three-legged cast iron pot with lid and handle. This was hung from a hook on a chain, suspended from inside the chimney. The frosted turf that we



*Cottage & Weaving Shed*

were first sold would not make red-hot embers. The heat under this bread oven, or bread pan, was not at all sufficient. The embers, which should be red-hot and glowing, could not provide the top or 'browning' heat. By degrees I learned to cook, by trial and error, especially when we got a cartload of decent turf sods.

I cooked many things, such as pancakes, bread, scones and at Christmas, a Christmas cake, Christmas pudding, even mince pies. In the back of my old cookery book are my own adapted

recipes that I had invented. This cook-book is now sixty years old as I write. The three-legged pot in other households was used for boiling large amounts of potatoes (tatties). I used it to heat water for washing, for boiling sheets – and much later, terrycloth nappies. These cast-iron pots were very heavy indeed. They used a great deal of water for washing. The water could spill over and douse the fire if I wasn't watching out for it. Sometimes I had to hold the baby in one arm and swing the pot with the other – no mean feat!

In September the loom arrived – having been sent first to Kerry in error. My sheets and saucepans arrived also. Now I improvised a further cooking arrangement. I used blocks either side of the fire grate, and placed a metal doorscraper across these giving me a base for the saucepans. They soon became very black. This bread oven was 12 inches in diameter, so there was plenty of space for pancakes, rissoles and cakes. I did not like soda bread, and didn't make it successfully anyway, so I made yeast bread instead.

When we first moved to the cottage there was a small amount of furniture: a table, some chairs and a bed (all of which a month later were repossessed to pay a family debt due from previous tenants). Alan made a table from planks and angle joints (used for shelving). He also made chairs, using young birch branches. These wobbled even more than the table! We also now had no bed, so we improvised using the wooden loom packing case to sleep on. We could not afford a mattress so we padded the bed with clothes. There were supporting ridges on the packing case. This was extremely uncomfortable to sleep on. Keith slept on the floor in the next room.

I'm amazed, looking-back in time, how I adapted to such primitive living conditions compared to what I had been used to in London. Granted, when I was first married, I lived in one





*Cooking over the open fire.*

room using the shared upstairs kitchen to do the clothes washing by hand (no machine). I have admiration for my younger self and how I coped.

We had no transport. Dungloe was over four miles away. Most groceries were bought from the vans. You heard the sound of them coming up the hill and went out to them. I was very shy and inexperienced in the beginning. The van that brought meat was driven by a man called “Minch” Brennan – yes, he sold minced beef and he also wore a hairnet!

As Keith and Alan worked on the outside, locals passing by would call out “When are you going to start then?” and variations on that theme. It got quite annoying. Keith left to go home at Christmas. The meagre food, the hard work, especially with the primitive dyeing equipment, and the sleeping arrangements, accounted for his not returning.

This meant that Alan had to learn to dye. I had already been colour matching. If a colour has a certain hue, I would say that it needed more red or yellow, more depth, and so on. I invented



*Alan Hemmings – dyeing*

several basic shades of my own, with names, a shade card, and numbers for them. There was sundust (pale yellow with a slightly red cast); summer blue, inca red – there was a green – I think I called it Patrick green. The first shade card had just six colours. The dye house was one room off the kitchen. We had two zinc dye baths, and heated them with primus stoves. How were they emptied – baled out by bucket? Perhaps there was a stopper in each one. In any event, the residue of dye and the rinsing water of the yarn were hose-piped under the floor boards to the cattle byre beneath. There was a distinct division of labour between us. I can't recall the dyeing process very well, apart from the matching process I was involved in. The dyed hanks of mohair yarn were fixed on a small line strung across the porch, and both doors were left open for the wind to blow and swing the hanks back and forth to dry. My memory is of yellow hanks, for some reason. I don't know that we used this system indefinitely.

The gardaí from Dungloe once came out to visit us, because of the zinc vats we used for dyeing and the fact that I used yeast. They thought we were making poteen. Some local person must have seen our dye house and told of it. The gardai went away satisfied after seeing my bread and the bread oven.

Roger was born in 1953, and as we had no pram we pulled his cot out to the porch, so he could get some fresh air. There was competition for hanging space when I needed to dry sheets and pillow cases.

This picture was taken after the birth of Roger as I look somewhat plump. I'm wringing out a sheet. As I study this photograph I wonder at my 22 year-old self. Did I ever get overwhelmed or despondent



*1953 – doing laundry  
at the well*

with my life? It was difficult and busy coping with primitive living and working conditions, a first baby and being married to Alan. He was a very authoritative and controlling person. Did I ever want to leave? Strange as it seems – no!

*I did not want to write about Donegal, each time my youngest son, Louis, suggested it. It has been a labourious task. I'm a reluctant chronicler of those times.*

*As I write, today's weather is sunny and hot. In Donegal the weather could turn wet and windy, even in summer, because we were near the mountains. I hear on the radio that Derrybeg and Bunbeg had what was obviously a localised cloudburst for three hours, resulting in some parts being under six foot of water and bridges being swept away and roads being sunken.*

The first two years in Donegal were spent in establishing routines, settling in, finding out, experimenting and experiencing hardships and triumphs. Spring of 1952 saw us harvesting – turning and footing turf – on our part of a rented bog. This was traditionally dug in March/April around the same time as the planting of seed potatoes. We didn't dig out the sods ourselves: we paid someone to do this, using the traditional slane, a spade-like tool. We did the turning of the very soggy, wet sods. This was back-breaking work. The sods were left lying on the ground and then, when the top was dry, they were turned over for the underside to dry. Since Donegal is usually rainy this part of the process takes time. The half dry sods are stacked into small heaps in the shape of a traditional tent. This was called



*Alan Hemmings – with creel of dried turf sods – 1952*

“footing”, so that the air can circulate all through, which had to be done on a good windy and sunny day. The opportunity was grabbed, because there could be many wet days in between. We had to avail of any good weather – so weaving and dying had to stop. This work continued through the summer months.

I even celebrated my 21st Birthday, May 2nd, 1952, with a miniature bottle of Irish whiskey while working on the bog. I was bitten ferociously by midges. The turf eventually dried and was harvested. After it was transported off the bog, by someone’s donkey and cart, we stacked it outside the cottage.

During that summer the provider of our milk declined to supply us any longer (we owed money, and possibly there was some discriminatory reason). We had to find another willing supplier ready to give extra milk and that depended on calving.

We now had to go further to collect our milk in the evening, after the day’s work. This milk was got from the McCalls. As I write, I am walking along the road in memory, and up the hill, round the bend and even further, for about a mile. I remember going in the dark sometimes. On the way back, I was uneasy at the passing shapes of rocks. My walking boots sounded solitarily on the road. Collecting the milk from Bidy McCall meant sitting and chatting for some time to be friendly; you couldn’t just get the milk and go! Sometimes it wasn’t ready. Bad weather came into the equation too.



*21st Birthday – going home from the bog*

*To-day, as I write, I did a small amount of hand-washing of t-shirts and trousers. As Lettercaugh is very much on my mind, I wonder at how I got along doing this, especially when I had baby clothes and nappies to wash (no Pampers in those*

*days!). To-day I wear rubber gloves (none available in those days) and spin my clothes after wringing them a little. It feels like I am living on two levels as I write in my book. There have been too many starts to the story of Donegal, and reading through them is both confusing and saddening. I have to make a proper completion this time. Then I can get back to painting and designing a system for privacy, concerning the windows at the front of my current house. How did I cope in the cottage? There was no privacy as you get in a town, city or suburb? People didn't knock on doors, they lifted the latch of my door and would call out 'God save all here' and expect a 'pandy' of tea. It took me a while to figure out that they also needed 'a piece' to go with the tea, we didn't rise to biscuits with our budget. Then would come comments such as 'How much did this or that cost?' I really hated the intrusive remarks, and got into the way of volunteering the cost (which I suppose could have been construed as boastfulness!).*

The combination of early marriage and starting up a venture in such a wild and somewhat primitive location, made life tough. It brought out the pioneering spirit in me however, and inventiveness to overcome difficulties. This spirit in me has remained. Design ability grew also. I continued, when I had the time to sketch and paint, though there was little time left over to do this.

Alan and Keith had arranged a tin funnel (large) to take the dish-water. This went down to the byre beneath, however it was quicker at times, to throw the water out by going outside and flinging it away 'on the street', (a local expression in that neighbourhood). We used the enamel wash basin to wash ourselves (no bath). Water had to be fetched from the open well across the road. Drinking water was got from Alice Gillespies' well, (reached with difficulty down the hill), I became an expert at saving water and using the same water over again.

To get to Alice's house I had to go down the hill beneath our cottage and knock on her door, not exactly permission as such, but one of politeness and consideration. Inside I was invited to a 'pandy' of tea. A pandy was a tin mug, usually blackened from being nudged into the fire, so tea ended up being stewed this way. The people around us for about one eighth mile radius were Gillespie or Gallagher, all related to each other. Further on in Crolly were the O'Donnells.



*"D'Ony the post", 1952 – delivering yarn.*

Our postman rode a bike to deliver post – which included our mohair yarn. This would have made his front carrier quite heavy. He came most weeks. I imagine some yarn surely came another way. Our production wasn't huge.

Life was very busy. Household chores took up a lot of time. I was up early. The locals said mine was the first wisp of smoke rising from the chimney. I washed the concrete floor after breakfast; the floor dried quickly near the fire. Preparation for

meals, washing, then into the weaving shed. I went either to weave or fringe scarves and stoles. I created systems for knotting ends. To fluff-up the woven mohair fabric, I invented a way of securing two dried teasles on a corked knitting needle, to prevent them slipping off. Brushing the loop, or slub, mohair was very labourious and tiring on arms and wrists.

That summer, 1952, I spent working and being pregnant, with morning sickness. During that summer Alan set off cycling to Falcarragh to sell some of what we made. That was quite a feat in every way. Charlie Green took six scarves for his shop, probably 'sale or return'. This was in June. At this time we were very low in finance, for milk and turf especially. I remember having hardly any fuel, mostly turf bits rather than sizable sods. We toasted bread and used beef dripping on it, instead of butter. Then the miracle of our first cheque! Some fresh produce was given to us by the Loch Anure school principle, as I was pregnant. The relief was great – I remember saying grace before we ate. I had never done this before in my life. I had no precedent or pattern for it.



*Setting out on a sales trip.*

On a brief trip to England, September 1952, we brought back a radio (battery powered), and the innards of a wind-up gramophone, housed in a wooden sausage box. Jazz '78s blared out in our cottage that autumn. Books were lent by Dr. Molloy. As the nights drew in we had to light the Tilley lamp earlier and earlier. A second Tilley lamp was needed for weaving at night. The weaving shed was heated by a round bellied stove, sitting on



a plate of iron on the wooden floor. It threw out fierce heat, but the heat didn't reach the far corners of the shed.

I once or twice cycled to Dungloe, borrowing Rosie Gallagher's bike. There were some big boulders in the road on the way; one had to dismount or be knocked off if one attempted to negotiate them. In Dungloe there was only one shop selling cheese from Donegal town. I got the impression I was the only one wanting cheese in the locality. So if we got to Donegal town (by taxi) cheese was first on the list!

### **The babies arrivals ....**

I had decided to follow Dr. Grantly Dick Read's book on Natural Childbirth. I wanted to have the baby at home but the doctor in Dungloe was dead set against this. There had been two breech home-births in recent winters. Snow and ice prevented him from reaching the mothers in time. I had to give birth in Donegal Hospital.

Donegal Hospital was 50 miles away, and I went twice by hired car. Each time I was car-sick and usually had to stop. The journey was long and it was a winter birth, so it was decided that I stay in the National Hotel in Donegal, to await the birth, on my own. I hated this. I was shy and afraid, and wondered about waking up Mrs. Hughes in the night.

Alan had to visit Dublin a fortnight before Roger was due. Being a first birth it went on for a hell of a long time. In reality it was about a day and a half – thirty-six hours. Roger was born on February 27th, 1953, under a general anaesthetic and by forceps delivery. He was a very big baby. As the scales in the hospital were broken they estimated he was about 9lbs.

Looking back at that period of my life – how ever did I manage when I brought Roger home? Childhood is a huge change (and challenge) in a mother's life anyway. No running

water, no electricity, no phone for emergencies, and just the turf for cooking and heating water. I continued to work at the fringeing, finishing, brushing, designing. I didn't have enough breast milk so had to supplement each feed. This meant every feed time was almost two hours long.

Most nights Roger was awake and screaming with colic, and I was at my wit's end to deal with it. This was most likely the three month colic, but it went on a long time. I lay him across my knees on his tummy and rubbed his back to no avail. I remember the wind was howling in the chimney and the rain beating down. It was depressing.

When he was about four months old, it was time to introduce some solid food into his diet. I had to purée the food using a hand-sieve. It was labourious. His cot was in the room off the dye-house and was the only room with a large window, overlooking the sycamore tree.

### **My calendar notes May 29, 1953.**

*'Again we are down in finance – turf nearly gone; that which had been built up against the wall outside nearly gone leaving a row along the top, about a dozen pieces and I hardly dare to go out to fetch one of them now and then. In fact I put it off as long as possible, for they are at the road side, our house being below the road, and anyone can watch the turf getting lower. We dig amongst the stack for buried pieces and today I went to all the little gardens and took off the little lumps of turf that the rain had washed to the surface from the turf mole or mould which is the composition obtained from broken-down turf. But at least we have flour and bread.*

*Last June we lived on dripping and toast – having no potatoes (1952) and we burned pieces of wood, having no turf. That was the lowest; we were waiting for a cheque for our first order. That was when Roger was conceived, last May. This time the difficulty is getting napkins to boil, as I can't use the big crock, not able to get a good*

*enough fire to heat all that cast iron – so I use grandma’s stew saucepan, one of my wedding set, the handle long since gone - since Alan used it for dyeing. I was given a present theoretically last night, Alan said I could have my saucepans to myself. For the last year I have used them (three) once a week and managed with one saucepan and a pandy, or borrowed (fancy a housewife borrowing her own saucepans!) from the dyehouse. And so we go on, battling on for our own posterity and future.*

*‘I was thinking as I watched Alan weave, that here in the weaving shed was sunk our ‘fortune’, that this was the central point of our present life – the loom and company (Donegal Design). He shoots the shuttle across the nylon / angora / botany wool, a new and very original scarf texture. This is our second year; we talk of making a carriage for Roger. Sometimes I resent Donegal Design from the bottom of my heart. It seems to become a thing to separate us from all the little comforts, like a new vest for Alan, a rattle and a pram for Roger, and good food to make my breast milk. Roger has to have a bottle of Cow and Gate per day – today we ate little, but I made doughnuts from left-over pancake batter.*

*Out here in the hills we have lived a life without a radio, but we have heard more of our records. For two years we have been home once. It is here though that with these experiences that I have begun to grow up a little; to train myself to be calm when excitedly expecting things to happen: not to look out for a letter when the postman comes to the shed door. I cut down impossibly on grocers lists, and grated washing soap for soap powder. Although one half of me longs for an elastic belt, or a rattle for Roger (that’s all I ask, never mind the pram) the other half of me knows that this is really living. If only we can keep serene and try to have humour. As I write, I was to have pinched some time from my chores. (Alan cannot work just when he feels like it.) It is getting dusk, so I will go to see his new samples.’*

In this same old calendar, which was out-of-date, written on the backs of the months, is a list of chores for the week. Amongst the ‘wash sheets, windows, kitchen floor’ is a recurring note

'pudding'. I seem to have provided a pudding every single day and 'half hour before two o'clock feed, mix pastry scones and flour for bread'. I got up 6 a.m. every day to make bread.

I kept notes about seeds for the 'garden' (which was just a little strip a few feet wide and long). Notes on colour schemes. A note about a rug. Crochet or raffia, or rush matting? Organise a washing line. I think this other part of the calendar was written long after arriving. It sounds so ambitious!

Then we get 'Fill the crock every day at dusk or when not in use. Put on the fire first thing after breakfast'. (As the crock was deep, it took forever to get hot water for washing clothes.) 'Make big quantities of pastry dough. Bake big quantities of scones.' 'One night for mending, one night for ironing, one for sewing, one for self.' There are notes on names for the colours that I painted up for the dyeing. I think that I had to be quite disciplined to work in the weaving shed, design, care for Roger, bake, clean and carry out these chores with no mod cons .... I am amazed at how I coped.

Roger was three months old when I wrote these notes on the calendar in May. When he was six months old we at last had a pram! Roger no longer had to have his cot moved.

I don't know when or what were the circumstances of us acquiring the Hattersley loom. It is powered by foot pedals, as the shuttle shoots across mechanically, instead of being thrown by hand. This meant an increase in production: Dennis, a local boy, worked on the Kensington loom. Because of being more tied with



*Alan at the Hattersley Loom*

having Roger, I didn't often weave. My work was doing the finishing. This entailed mending the joins in the weft in all the scarves and rugs (throws) where the pirn in the shuttle runs out and the next pirn is put in, leaving a crisscross of thread. We employed a local girl who I had to train. The combination of my inexperience of employing someone and her teenage temperament wasn't easy! She also learned to make short warps on the small wall board. Packy Doran, another local, later came to weave with us when we had our third loom. He came to Dublin with us, when we moved there in 1956.

I was continuing to design colours for the rugs, scarves and stoles. The warps and wefts needed to be thought about; the better the colour of the warp, the more wefts could be thrown across, which was more economical. Around this time Mr. Meikle came into the picture. He had an old Belfast linen warping mill to spare, which he gave to us. This new warping equipment meant that much longer warps could be made, more wefts (colour ways) could be utilised. This resulted in quicker and easier production, more economic and profitable. Alan invented



*Alan teaching Dennis on the Kensington Loom.*

an old bicycle wheel system to turn the 'swifts'. The hanks of dyed yarn were placed on the swifts, and the yarn reeled off on the pirn winder.

Later a wide loom, from Ardara, was used for rugs; the Hattersley for botany scarves; the Kensington (the first and original one) also for scarves and stoles.

### 1953-54

Life continued – baby, house, design work. Roger grew and began to crawl. His digestion was a bit wonky. As he crawled around on the concrete floor he brought up little spits of undigested milk, so I followed round with a floorcloth.

I relied on Dr. Spock's *Manual on Childcare*, in the absence of mother or friend. Later on, Roger, as a young toddler, had a



*Alan's invention.*

good deal of diarrhoea, and I worked out a system of potatoes, bananas and toast, to try to counteract this. He was not a happy and contented baby at times, even though he appears so in photographs. He grizzled a good deal and couldn't seem to amuse himself. Talking was very slow to come, and when I returned from having Guy he gave up altogether. Potty training was impossible, due to the diarrhoea, and he only became trained out of nappies when he was three years old. When Guy was born, I had two children in nappies, in primitive

conditions in Donegal. Another task I took on was to knit. I knitted all Roger's jumpers, jackets and most of my own jumpers using either mohair or botany wool.

My ex-husband, Alan, has also written an account of our time in Donegal. His account is more empirical, mine is of the necessities, down to earth things like the fire, getting water and other domestic necessities .....

My little bit of 'garden' had hollyhocks. Looking at photographs I see there is mostly concrete yard, so we must have had to pick axe a bit of ground and put in some peatmoss. Now and then, in the beginning, returning youngsters from the Saturday night dance congregated outside the weaving shed; a respite from cycling from Dungloe and walking up the very steep hill. They would uproot my flowers and pull down my washing line – no wonder I hung most of my washing later in the byre under the dyehouse. As the cottage was built on 'common' land that gave the problem of our tenure (washing line, e.g.). One learned to live with the bad weather in Donegal. The sky, the wind, the rain are paramount in the countryside.

***I'm finding writing about the past difficult. I've been having weird dreams. Seeing old photographs of Roger as a baby and toddler is disturbing, in the light of the sad events in his life. When we are young we are heedless of the future, of growing old. There has been so much material in all my stops and starts.***

I used to go outside the cottage, for a breather, and look across the neighbouring hills and fields, towards Slieve Snacht, and Thor in the distance. Beautiful. I missed this rural scenery when we had to leave. I miss those mountains. I cannot now get to them as I used to, when I drove my car up to Donegal. I miss those open spaces and the open sky. I am not a truly urban or suburban person. My great-grandparents and those who came before, were not either.

For Guy's birth (1955) I stayed with Annie and Neily Faddy Neil (Alan was away again!) and I slept in her wall bed, in the kitchen by the fire. My mother-in-law came to look after Roger. I went straight to the hospital from Annie's home. Guy was born at 4am – he shot out!!! When I came home from hospital, Alan's mother went home, so again I had no help! Roger appeared not to know me, and stopped talking the few words he did have at that time.

Now I had two babies, two lots of nappies, Roger with his digestive problems and a new baby with colic. Roger was very jealous of the new baby. I had to put Guy in another room and prop up his bottle for him to feed. Roger was angry at my attention to Guy, and was aggressive too. He wasn't a happy child, and didn't seem able to amuse himself. Was he frustrated at not being able to talk?

Plans were being made to move to Dublin. I wasn't consulted. New shareholders, the McDevitts and Alex Nesbit, who held the majority of the shares, were now involved. Their decision to move was paramount. Alex found a premises for us to rent in Dublin. I was not keen to move, having put down roots, though tentative. So much of me was in the cottage, the mountain views, the simplicity of living in the country.

This is the point at which I have never got past in my accounting of our Donegal Design beginnings, and I am sad writing of our departure. I never wanted to leave, but we had to leave to prosper.

*.... It is several weeks since I last wrote, and in the meantime the difficulty of writing on the lines has increased on account of a cataract. I can hardly see the lines and have to bend the page up to discern the line on which to write, but I am not defeated.*



## **The move to Dublin.**

The factory that had been found was in Verschoyle Place, off Mount Street. I don't have as clear a memory of that place as I do of Lettercaugh and later, Clonskeagh. It was dark and cramped, Dickensian in fact. How long were we in that location? It must have been two years as we were still using it when Louis was born in 1957. The home accommodation was in a top floor flat in Raglan Road. Awkward using a pram – did I leave it in the hall entrance?

Now I had running water from a tap and also a bath! There was an electric cooker, a real bedroom and a proper sink to wash the clothes in. A washing machine was unheard of, that came later. I had nearby shops to go to in Ballsbridge. Also I was able to take Roger and Guy to nearby Herbert Park, to play.

Now for some of my domestic inventions. When it was too wet to go to the park I devised ways to occupy Roger. As we now had a new table, the old one Alan made from planks was dismantled. I lugged it on the top flight of stairs, to use for a slide. I put hooks into the doorway to hang a swing, using a cushion for a seat.

Roger always woke at 4 a.m. He was never an easy baby; – now as toddler, almost three, he was somewhat of a handful. He was still untrained, in nappies and still not talking. There was no gate in the front garden. I had to keep a close eye on him, if I ever left him in the front garden. One time I realised he was missing and had to go looking for him. I found myself outside across the road from him. I spotted him riding his tricycle, on the road in front of the cars. Another time I was out looking for him, I'd left Guy asleep in the flat, only to realise the door slammed shut. I had no keys with me and there were nappies boiling on the stove. I ran frantically to Weirs in Baggot Street, a 20 minute return journey, to get a locksmith.

I didn't have much time for designing new colours and fabrics at this stage and don't have any significant recollection; though I must have done some work because we couldn't have kept going on the same ideas without fresh input. I got to know another woman with a child the same age as Roger and she looked after him, as well as her own child and one other a few hours each week. This gave us all some variety. I became pregnant again in August 1956, when Guy was 15 months old. That summer we moved to a rented bungalow on the Harbour Road, in Skerries, north County Dublin. Yet another move! Alan went by train each day to the Mount Street factory.

I had to get used to a new home and new shops. The house on Harbour Road was quite bleak in aspect; the back garden was literally just sand; no flowers, no soil. The back gate opened out onto the beach. All I remember is rain, wind, and the sea coming in and going out. The front windows looked out on the sea, the harbour and fishing boats. I must have done some design work between housework, cooking, children and pregnancy. I was on my own when I went into labour. I had to go to the house next door to phone for a taxi, to go to Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital in Drogheda (approx. 25 miles). Alan was at the RDS Spring Show in Dublin, so I went alone again to the hospital (for the third and last time). While waiting for the taxi I cleared the front "garden" of papers and rubbish. Who looked after the two boys in my absence? Perhaps the neighbours or some other acquaintances took them. I was so pleased that this baby was neither pulled nor pushed out, but came naturally. I stunned the staff at the hospital by asking for an orange to eat and a glass of milk; an unheard of combination.

My mother came over for a week but couldn't stand Alan and left. Yet again no help for me to get on my feet again – just like it had been after Guy's birth. Now there were three children, life became even busier. One thing I now had that I didn't have before was an old-fashioned washing machine. This was 1957.

I remember saying to myself “two children have been sacrificed to the business, but this one won’t be!” Louis got more of me than the first two did. When he was three months old Alan’s mother committed suicide. She had attempted this before, during her second marriage.

The house had 3 bedrooms and during the summer of 1958, when Louis was one year old, I let part of the house out, while we also lived in it. I think this was Alan’s idea. A family came down from Keady (Armagh) with six children. They had the front sitting room and two bedrooms. We crammed into the remaining rooms. This was a furnished house, usually let for the summer holidays, so there would have been plenty of beds. We had to share the kitchen. Fortunately it was a short let, possibly a week or 10 days. The money from that financed our first electric record player.

I spent some time at designing and painting up new colours to be dyed. How did I fit this in? From my standpoint of 52 years ago it’s a ‘lot’ of years to remember. There had to be new designs and colours. We no longer had Donegal Design to ourselves, other people now had a majority interest in it. The intervening three years – 1955-1958 – are hazy. We had a limited rental on the Harbour Road house. We moved to our first real home in 1959, when Louis was 2½ years old. We took out a mortgage. The house cost £2,000. This was a new house, in a new housing development, in Blackrock. There was a garage for a car. Moving from furnished accommodation to a three bed roomed house must have been expensive for us at that time. Having a house of our own – the very first time since 1950 when we married, was a milestone in our life, after flats and rented houses. There was a garden for the boys to play in and for me to tend.

When Guy was four years old he went to All Saints’ National School, Carysfort Avenue, Blackrock, joining Roger, now six years old. This was September 1959. These were the years I was freer to

design and to invent colours and separates. As time went on there was more friction in our marriage. In the work place I shared a room with Alan, working on designs, overseeing pattern cutting and sewing. Design collections were twice yearly. Although we worked in the same space he never introduced me to people visiting on business. Working together needed a great deal of tolerance.

My input into Donegal Design increased when the factory moved to Clonskeagh. What had begun with inventing shades of colour and finishes, now encompassed collections twice yearly, with new colours each time. This meant that sample blankets had to be worked out on paper, then woven. The sample blanket for colour ways was woven to my specification, from which I then cut sections, finally choosing the best ideas. Next the design was reworked on paper and handed back to the weaver. This was carried out for every product. Each product had its range changed by addition and deletion so every spring and summer was quite intensive. The next stage in the design process was to choose and select the most appropriate colours; for instance, a rug or “throw” collection would have several new patterns included in the range. There were several different ranges of rugs; one was a divan cover with a border, so this had four or five new colour ways added. Stoles and scarves were also to be designed. We next began to include “separates” in our range of products. I now designed and oversaw the production of jackets, ponchos, coats, capes and cape coats. This also meant that linings and dyed buttons came into the process. I worked very closely with the CMT section: cut, make and trim. The sample choices were important for the sale of these items.

This account brings me up to the 1960’s when changes in my marriage occurred, which later ended in divorce in the mid-1970’s. Before all that domestic drama happened, I was pleased to win various Irish and European textile awards, like The Bavarian State Gold medal and The Córás Tráchtála design award.

In the late 1960's I met Gerald Elliott, who was working as director for his family textile business in the Coombe, Elliott Poplin. We began socialising together and eventually married in 1977. This was an unusual marriage in that Gerald was much older than I. Much of my life from this period was a time of blessing but also a time of caring for an aging husband. Gerald gave me a number of 'bolts' of poplin, which I designed & sewed into period-style dresses. These are in the textile collection at the Collins Barracks Museum, Dublin. I also designed my daughter-in-law's full-length, water-marked poplin wedding dress.

In 1977 I became a convinced Christian & started attending a home fellowship. Gerald died after 10 years of marriage. I missed Gerald's support & affirmation. Widowhood was later blessed by the arrival of my two grandchildren. I have been also been deeply saddened over my stillborn grand-daughter, Holly, eighteen years ago.

My son and daughter-in-law eventually bought my home where I had been living for 29 years. I then moved to a smaller house which is close to many amenities. I joined Kill O' The Grange, Church of Ireland parish and am very glad to have done so. One aspect of church life that I really enjoy is singing in the church choir.

I kept painting throughout the years, starting off with painting silk scarves to sell in Brown Thomas. Next I painted a series of portraits of my two grandchildren. Then I went on to paint a series of silk banners for the different church seasons and also an altar frontal. One of the artistic highlights of recent years was to have three public displays of my abstract design paintings. A kind friend organised my first exhibition, in a Francis Street antiques shop, which sold out on the opening night.

As I write this I am now eighty years of age. I have had many unusual experiences and challenges over the decades. I believe

that it was God, not mere chance, that brought me over to Donegal from Derby. He brought me there by His plan & design. Through all my many adventures I have seen God's goodness & mercy.

As the Psalmist states in **Psalm 139: 13-18** – *For thou didst form my inward parts, thou didst knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise thee, for thou art fearful and wonderful. Wonderful are thy works! Thou knowest me right well; my frame was not hidden from thee, when I was being made in secret, intricately wrought in the depths of the earth. Thy eyes beheld my unformed substance; in thy book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them. How precious to me are thy thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them! If I would count them, they are more than the sand. When I awake, I am still with thee.*

Joy Elliott, May 2nd, 2011



*The three musketeers – 1960  
wearing home-made báinín jumpers*



*Louis' & Liz's wedding 1985 – Liz wearing the dress I designed for her.*