

MARY F. HART 1948-2021 – An Appreciation

Nicholas Hart writes

For a summary of her life and works a visit to Mary's Tribute page on <https://mary-hart-2021.muchloved.com/> is well worth a visit for those who have not yet done so.

The purpose of this Appreciation is to concentrate on Mary's relationship with the Museum, and her contributions to it, both for immediate interest and for Museum record.

Mary was introduced to the Museum in about 1997/8 by our neighbour, Meg Thomas, a long-time member of its management committee. At that time the backbone of the museum consisted of the husband-and-wife team of Peter and Sheila Harris, with Peter, a well known local figure and a respected local scientific artist historian and naturalist, its Chair. Between them they ran and managed everything for us, using the management meetings for consultation and volunteer recruitment.

Peter's unexpected death in early 1999 created a vacuum that needed to be filled quickly.

At a meeting at 100 Cannon Hill Lane in 2000 Andrew Wakefield became our chairman, and Meg Thomas took over curatorial matters. Mary was invited to become membership secretary.

At the same time, because her background in fashion and textile chemistry had become known, she agreed to become the Museum's block printer, and take charge of the school visits.

In both roles she made big strides for the museum over the next 15 years.

As block printer, with the help of Sheila who had assisted Peter previously, she refined the process of the printing workshops, and built up the team who were able to take over seamlessly when she stepped back in 2016.

In the early days, full size heavy printing blocks were being used, with a different one for each of the three colours – red, green and blue – that were available. Originally the children were asked to bring in their own bits of material, but Mary soon changed that and sourced simple polycotton which we were able to pre-prepare in the appropriate sizes.

This was a great success with the children, who then had nice clean prints to frame. She added a simple print stamp to add the Museum's details, and later a simple certificate of achievement for each child.

Originally each child signed their piece of cloth because the prints were wet, so they couldn't take them away with them. Instead, they had to be hung on clothes horses to dry, and carefully packed and delivered to the school several days later for distribution to the children.

On printing outreach days at Merton Abbey Mills, or the Chapter House, managing these became increasingly difficult because of the numbers. There was a famous occasion when Mary and

Alison worked at duplicate stations through a long Kidsfest, bank holiday with over 200 prints being created, and with the two of them being surrounded by the wet prints like a mad laundry.

Mary then rationalised the process.

Firstly, the original blocks were getting tired, and had no particular design which illustrated Merton's involvement in these processes. They were also very big for the children to handle. Mary found that the V&A were producing mini blocks, carved in India, with designs taken from famous William Morris and Arthur Liberty designs. A full set of these was sourced, and readily became great favourites, and remain so today

At the same time, relying on her knowledge of textiles and printing, Mary was able to work out that we could dispense with the drying process for the prints. By placing them between two sheets of kitchen towel, wrapped round with a Museum certificate and held together by an elastic band, the child could take the print immediately, and only had to unroll it once home to let it finish drying there. This is the system that is still used today.

During this time Mary built up her own collection of original printing blocks which she took to outreach events (so the Museum's collection could be kept safe), and these she has donated to the Museum, together with her collections of Liberty printed materials.

Ever creative and wanting to support the Museum and its finances, Mary also produced lavender bags and bookmarks for the museum shop, sourcing the lavender locally (mainly from Mayfield). [The current lavender display in the Museum is substantially her work].

As important as her printing and technical skills, Mary's academic knowledge of the works of William Morris and Arthur Liberty meant the Museum had a ready source of knowledge on which to fall back when questions were asked, and the answers not easily resourced.

Her work as membership secretary was carried out in her own unique way. Not only did she ensure that the Museum members and volunteers were well fed at events at least 4 times a year, she planned the bigger events, like the Summer Opening and the AGM. For the Summer opening, not only did she produce a huge array of food, but also a celebration decorated cake, with a mini cake for the Mayor to take home.

Her contributions to the AGM always included at least one fully decorated Christmas cake for the raffle.

For the Christmas party, not only were there cakes and food, but always gift bags for everyone, which she started planning in January each year.

In between times, her talent was in keeping in touch. She knew everyone, and rang regularly to keep in touch, with both member and volunteers, and also local councillors and others from organisations with common interests. By the time she stood back in 2016 the rather disjointed feel had been replaced by a much tighter bonding amongst all concerned, and she was constantly delighted by how the new Operations Team had built on and improved what she had left them.

These examples give the broader picture of Mary's effect on the Museum. There were the many smaller things, of course, which underlined that effect. It is worth listing some of these here, in no particular order:

- Birthday card and Christmas cards—she collected the birthdays of all members and volunteers, and friends of the Museum whenever she could, and made sure each received a handwritten personalised birthday card and Christmas card each year;
- Importance of the Visitors Book—when present at any Museum events, she made sure this was properly completed by everyone, helping to create a wider list of those interested in our progress both for our own use, and for reporting purposes;
- Museum displays – she was directly responsible for the content of Museum displays of lavender, bread and dyes;
- One of the reasons volunteer lunches were so well attended was that Mary took the trouble to ring round everyone to find out what they wanted to eat, and preparing individual lunch boxes for each;
- The concept of the special cakes—it wasn't just that Mary baked and decorated the cakes, it was her idea to make these relevant to each event and provided the mini me version for the Mayor;
- Talking of cakes, it was the little things she did for people that counted so much. For example, there's Andrew Wakefield's 'I'll eat my hat'. Andrew was bemoaning the fact that he had bet Ken Livingstone he would eat his signature Panama hat if London ever won the right to stage the Olympics, and now had to do so. Mary baked a cakeshaped like that hat, so he could do so and keep his promise;
- Insisting on the close relationship with Merton Abbey Mills, the Priory, Wandle valley Festival, Honeywood etc., rather than the more insular approach that was left over from the days when we were a lone voice in the borough;
- Building the relationships with John Hawksof the Priory Trust and Dave Saxby of the Museum of London whose input has helped the Museum over the years, not least acquiring John as a Trustee and volunteer;
- Generally organising and motivating people to attend events;
- Me and Michael! If not for Mary roping me in to help with the legal work on Ravensbury Mill anything I have contributed over the last 20 odd years would not have happened, and without Michael we would not have secured Wandle.org, or had any sort of online presence until much later;

- Much of the entertainment and catering work was carried out at Mary's own expense, and she did it for love of the Museum. At the management committee's insistence, she reluctantly put in occasional invoices, but it did diminish her pleasure when she did so;
- It is always beneficial for grant aided organisations such as ours to work closely with the Local Authority, and the close relationships which Mary often developed with councillors, the Mayors and the Mayor's office and other officers must always have been beneficial;
- Mary was a regular representative of the Museum at outreach events, such as the annual May Fair, and the Wimbledon Village Fair. She developed the view that we should look professional and organised and should spend the money to do so. It was her pushing that bought us our first proper banner, and the big gazebo that stood up to the storm at the May Fair one year when the local Army Cadet Corps' tents were collapsing all around. Unlike the previous year at the Wimbledon Village Fair where the collapse of one of the normal gazebos under the heavy rain ruined so much, our stock was saved.

It is as much for the little things as anything that Mary will be much missed by many, not just us her family.

Nicholas Hart. July 2021

P.S. (Priory Subscript)

As Nicholas has described, one of Mary's great outreaches for the Museum was the Chapter House of Merton Priory, where on many occasions she brought the everlastingly popular children's block printing, and where her spirit of enthusiasm, bonhomie and fun prevailed over the entire proceedings. Her collection of Liberty print dresses, adorning a group of mannequins affectionately known as "The Ladies", continues to be a focal point and, with her lovely silks and Morris pattern books, a constant reminder of her huge contribution. She was in her element in this unique, decidedly wacky place, and will always be remembered as the Priory's Mother Superior!



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