

Mapping Museums project interview transcript

Name: Brenda Wilson

Role: Owner (and director of Shirley Leaf and Petal Co.)

Museum: Flower Maker's Museum

Location: Back room/workshop of the museum, which is housed in an old chemist shop, 58A High Street, Hastings TN34 3EN

Date: 23/10/18

Interviewer: Toby Butler

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The project is based at Birkbeck, University of London. The interview recordings and associated materials are archived at the Bishopsgate Library, London.

For readability the transcript has been made using 'intelligent' transcription (removing ums, ers etc).

[00:00:01]

BW: I didn't change it at all. People love the atmosphere. Absolutely love it. Yes. I have a visitor's book because visitors, with countries that remind me of who'd been in. It's on the counter. Can you see it? That's it, because we cater for all ages you see, we've got a whole list downstairs of each country. The people come from, they will, Netherlands. Where's that one? That's got quite a few on one page, which is good, we don't have to keep looking for it then.

TB: So you're saying that on Tripadvisor you have a lot of great comments?

[00:01:17]

Very good because we don't have a website as such because we manufacturers so other people do it for us. Thrilled with us, you know, and the day they sort of communicate with each other is to come here and have you told by um, recommendation and the only advertising we do is with the council leaflets or brochures for the town, for the old town. And I do that to support the council, you know, for their funds. But some, because much as we love the public and we do, we do a lot with the children as well. We have bags of off cuts and things where they can spend their 50 pences, so there's a tremendous amount here for them as well as their parents. And also you find the men will stand outside the door because we look at that with flower arrangement and they'll say, no, no, I won't come in.

And I say it's not flower arrangements if you want to go downstairs, have a look. I said, you haven't got to pay, you know, your pound towards that charity. They go down and we can't get them away. They will spend hours down there because they're fascinated with the tools and the quality of the tools which were all hand fashioned, you know, a hundred years, 150 years ago. And we still use the same tools today, but nobody can service them. There isn't anybody with the knowledge of the combination of the metals, if you like, in them, to be able to repair them.

[00:03:00]

TB: Well, yes. I see, what would be great, you did give me a little outline when I first came in, but it would be good to have it on the recording. Can we start with a couple basic facts about the business and then just tell me about how it all started. So first of all, when did the museum open to the public? Was it 1981?

BW: No, it's just purely a manufacturing business up until I opened this in 91.

TB: 91 right. Okay. That's what it was opened to the public as a museum.

BW: Well, I started it then, putting it together, because I thought people should appreciate, and school children, how hard people worked as home workers. And they did. They used to work by candlelight, all kinds of things, they used to strain their eyes. But they used to produce masses and masses. It was all in grosses then, 144 against the normal hundreds. But um, and they used to pass them up and the staff used to say (that were there when I took it over) they used to have queues because, it was a church so you had the double doors, the one end, double doors the other side of the frontage. They used to queue up at 7 in the morning with all their trays that they used to bring

back the work they'd done the night before, go in the one side that would have them recorded in their workbooks, and they would work out the other door and pick up another tray as they went to do that evening.

[00:04:40]

TB: and you say that there were over 100 homeworkers.

BW: There was over a hundred home workers, families, if you like. Now you multiply that by er, there were big families then as well. And all the children used to help. But a century ago or even longer than that the boys used to thread pearls and all kinds of things and the children, their hair used to turn green with the lead that was in the products and they used to lose their hair at the front.

TB: And what period are we talking about for the home working?

BW: They've always had homeworkers going back centuries. But this company originated from Bow in London where all the milliners and flower makers were, in Luton as well. They've always had home workers because you'd have people working in your factories if you like, but you'd also have home workers because of the volume which used to go through.

[00:05:49]

TB: I see, yes, You first encountered the company when?

BW: I bought the company in 81.

TB: Okay. So at that point were they using home workers when you first witnessed it?

BW: Yes; we still have homeworkers today. We don't have many because obviously they're mostly elderly people, but they love earning a little bit of money because it's something for them to do, to keep the hands supple. And as one gentleman said to me, you said, I love doing it, said because I can buy my wife a present every so often - they love it because it makes them feel useful and important. And I think no matter how old you will, you can always be doing something to make yourself feel valuable.

[00:06:40]

TB: Yes, so that was pretty interesting. So you're not just employing them for the work as it were, you also feel there's a social benefit.

BW: It is a social benefit. I also, because I have Saturday people, I take a great deal of interest in them because some of them, there'd been encouraged to get a job by their parents. They're not always keen, you know, to do it, but they do blend in their learning. The person I have got now wouldn't use the phone to talk, 'uh, I won't use the phone. She does now! She's improving. And so a lot of the people, shall we say, they, they blend into the business and they blossom. It's hard work with one or two. But we get there in the end. And then of course, I always encourage anybody with families, we have bags of off cuts and things that the children can use. And I'll always have special prizes for children, so their parents bring them in to spend their pocket money. I think it is important

we encourage the young people and even teenagers and what have you, because it is important today.

[00:07:59]

TB: So what is it that with the families and the young people, what is it about this whole thing which you think it can teach them? You mentioned the homeworking working already and how hard it was, but, but are there other things that you think are important?

BW: What do you mean by the actual, well there is nothing like it in Europe, like this, I can assure you is that. I think they've always said, it's because of the reception they give here. How we are cheerful with them. And we say, I always say to them, if you rummage long enough. You'll find what you want.

[Phone rings - BW takes the call for an order]

[00:09:12]

TB: What I'd like to do is take you all the way back to before you even encountered this place and, and, and what were you doing and what was your work?

BW: I was one of the first youth workers in Birmingham city to be employed before I was 21 and they didn't do that as a rule. So I used to run youth clubs with other people professionally, and then I've always been interested in the handicrafts, anything like that. Design-wise, there was the colour. And I believe that if you look about you, wherever you, are, something magical is all around you. The skies, the trees, the people, and if you're a people watcher as we call them, life is very interesting. You can always learn from other people, anything that's happening around you and all this, you convey into what you're doing. Colour, shapes, anything like that which stimulates you and keeps you going. I'm 82 now.

TB: That's amazing, gosh, you don't look it.

BW: I inherited a very, very good genes from our parents.

TB: You wouldn't mind telling me your date of birth would you?

BW: XX-XXX 1936.

TB: Okay. Right. So you, you lived through the Second World War.

BW: Oh yes I was evacuated to Wales you see. I had the Magical Childhood in Wales, in the mountains.

TB: Whereabouts were you in Wales?

BW: South Wales, in Ystradgynlais. And then we always used to go to Swansea even during the war years, you used to go to Swansea on the train down there, and you always had, shall we say, always had an ice cream from one of those carts that went along the road and something I'll always remember. It was a great big barrage balloon tethered across the road. It was huge. And to me it was magical, absolutely magical. This great big silver barrage balloon tethered to the ground. And we

used to sit in the old fashioned Woolworths, do you remember, when Woolworths was really grand, like going to Harrods, And then we always used to go up there upstairs and you could go up there, have a meal there, I hope this is not trivial, you could have a meal there where you had huge plate of fish and chips, bread and butter, cup of tea, all for two and six. That's twelve and a half pence, isn't it today, yes. Yeah.

[00:12:18]

TB: So from Birmingham, Wales, you came down, what brought you down here.

BW: That's interesting because I believe in fate. Whatever you do in life, whether it's good, whether it's bad, it's what you do with it. Because we've had lots of say illnesses in the family, all kinds of things. And we learn to cope with it as we go along. Life isn't easy, but, you can be, shall we say, you can try to be optimistic, not everybody can. So I got a job to do with Rackham's in Birmingham to, to do with one of their big celebrations of their age. And it was in the eighties, just before the eighties. And I had, they said, well, we want these huge laurel, laurel garlands in gold leaves and green leaves to swag all over the ceiling. It was a huge place, I don't know whether you know Rackham's at all?

TB: No, was it a store?

[00:13:36]

BW: Oh yes, a big store yes. Very important, it was the big one in Birmingham. And I was in the exhibition industry in the NEC. I was one of the founder people at the NEC actually, I was the first person ever, I was freelance to have a full security pass. Normally you could only have one if you belong to a company. And I was there for seven or eight years, well a London company had asked me if I would represent them as well in my spare time. Then I had this call from the Rackham's and I went in to see them. They told me about these garlands they wanted. So I said, well, yes, this London company knows where, you know, if they tell me where it is. So they sent me two or three samples. Nothing was what we wanted, I thought it could be improved so much more. So I said to the company, take me where this factory is and I can show them exactly what the order is for, how they want it to look. So I came down here and that's where, it was an elderly couple and the business was really, really on its last legs then because of all the imports which had ruined their trade and um, so I told them exactly how I thought it should look. They made it up, I took it back to Rackhams; they were delighted. And that order, if you work it out, what you mean today in the late seventies, early eighties, it was a £12,000 order. You multiply that by what it would be today, which was a very good one. Now I had all the commission on that and everything else they would be like because, from that, the company used to specialize in creating a Christmas grottoes. So I used to make giant flowers, six foot flowers and underground animated animals and all sorts. So from that we used to do Selfridges. We've done Harrods before now, lots of the London stores, so it sort of developed into that from this flower company as it was, and a couple of really wish to retire and jokingly they said, do you want to buy a business? We want to retire. And that's sowed the seeds you see, I'd never been to Hastings. I had travelled a lot around the country but I had never actually stayed at Hastings.

[00:16:13]

TB: When you walked into, presumably went into some sort of sales office when you went to speak to the client, to the manufacturer, but where was it and what was it like, because it wasn't actually in this building?

BW: No, it was in the church hall, mission hall in Duke Road. They'd had others before, smaller halls and they graduated to that one there. And to me the atmosphere was lovely because being a big church you had to a cutting room, a dye room, the drawing room where the staff used to sit in the middle and you had offices. And to me this was fascinating and I thought aw there is potential here, loads of potential. And again, thinking of it in the long term, because I'd worked so hard at the NEC, I'd been overdoing, you know, I employed girls and all sorts of things there. A did really well. I was there for seven years, eight years and my doctor said, look, you got to slow down, you ought to take partners, or you, you know, have something else. So I thought, well I could commute between here and Worcestershire. And so that's how I started. And from doing shop decor and things like that's gradually become, shall we say we do films, television and because of the, the way we talk to people on the phone, when they ring up, they love it. You will have one of the big people say in the national theatre or whatever. And they say, oh, Brenda, remember we did those for so and so? I said, yes. Okay. He said, just repeat that for us. When they have their productions. He will say, that's what we love about you, Brenda. We can ring you up. You don't say to me, send me an email. And it's attitude you see, over the phone.

[00:18:32]

BW: What you do, chop it up and everything? I repeat a bit too much. We have television companies here with usually a half an hour or an hour or whatever. They came on the um, what you call the people who go on the road in their vintage cars down here. So they rang me up and asked if they could interview a little piece for that. We found you and thought you were unusual. They were here four hours with the stars of the show and I thought they were never going to go. And I said I am sorry, for rabbiting on. But they said we love it simply because when we do this sort of thing with people in shops we can't get them to talk. So I said, well, I'm very sorry (laughs) But I give talks as well on the business, and I make it, I'll take people through what's the company's been doing recently; we have recently been doing the musical version of Frozen, all kinds of things and people love it and then I'll get invited back again so we can update on what they've been doing. I have groups here, if it's an international group and we have coped with them, uh, we divide them up. Say you've got to coach load of people, divide them up into three sections or four, the others road to have a coffee. One section comes in and we do this and they love it and they go away with a goody bag and you know, they've seen something which they are absolutely amazed. And they love the, shall we say, the, the feel of yesterday because you go downstairs and you have seen things there that we put there. And the fact that we still use those machines today, the machines they used a hundred years ago.

[00:20:45]

TB: Yes, so this is very much a working museum.

BW: Oh very much. We're working every everyday we'd open everyday working the museum is open if people want to go down between 10 and 4pm something like that. Oh No, they come and they see us working. I'll take people in now who wants to come and spend a day with me working, bringing

their fabrics and then we allocate that time to them and these are a lot of the fashion designers in London at the colleges and things like that. Fashion schools and they come down and spend the day with us, there could be usually two of them, while the one is doing the tools with the other and then I am around and Paul is on the cutting machine.

TB: Do you have any, do you keep records of your visitor numbers? It might be quite hard to unravel the casual visitor coming to the museum and others who might be coming in to buy things. But do you have any sense of how many people you've had a week or year or anything like that?

BW: We don't really keep numbers but we are busy every day. We're busy because we are working every day, anybody passing by will pop in or whatever, and they come a number of times. We've got people who keep coming back because they will say, oh my goodness. So I'll say, well bring you sandwiches next time and you can spend your time downstairs. It's that friendly atmosphere. And we welcome everybody.

[00:22:18]

TB: Let's just go back, so you decided to take on this amazing business which feeds into what you were doing, I presume exhibition design and things at the NEC, so you knew that you had the clients and that owning that business kind of feeds through to that. But that was in a large church like building, wasn't it? And then at some point you must've decided firstly to move it. And secondly, to end up as a museum. So just, just take me through those two decisions.

BW: I didn't realise; well they knew, but they've been with it for years, the owners, when I settled into it, I was purely looking at it from the manufacturing point of view, but when I was in there I thought this really is unique. It has to be because it is history and I'm very interested in imparting to people in youngsters and everybody, the importance of history. And I taught this really should, you know, should be preserved. So at the back of my mind I always, and I have struggled over the years. I've spent all my money and keeping it going because we have no private assistance at all. I've just spent £24,000 on the roof here because I own building. So to me it was very, very important.

[00:23:52]

I used to stay at the factory after the staff had gone. I used to stay for a couple of hours in the evening and I used to just go around looking at the tools. But I can work backwards. Just the Chinese write backwards. I can look at something and I know what it's going to produce. So you might look at some and all that. And you wouldn't know what it makes up, but I can look at that and I know exactly what it's going to be when it's finished and this is a gift. And it is one that I am very grateful for. The Lord, but because he's given me this gift of being able to read, I can't read backwards, but I can read my tools because people say, how do you know what everything is? But a lot of them are catalogued. When I came down here, we had to because it was vast, and used to have ladders to get up to the top to the tools; but here we've had to condense it. And did you see the cabinet downstairs with the hand tools that they used to use over the fires? Those. I found those in a tin trunk in the basement because it's been times where they had a pump there, a water pump down in the basement. I had to stay overnight a couple of nights because I'd keep the water from flooding in, but that trunk was down there all the time I was there. It was there for about 10 years or more, but you know, when there's a tin trunk you don't want to have any because you don't know what's in it.

So eventually when it was moving we opened it and we found all these hand tools. That's it. You wouldn't get anywhere else. You won't see the amount that we've got, because every homemaker would have replicas of the tools she was using, because as people who've been in, the elderly people, they say 'I used to help my grandmother. I used to use those you'd have two on the open fire or the gas hob, while the one was being used. And then usually the younger ones of the family used to carry them to the grandmother for her to use while the other one was taken back to heat up. So in the home you had an automated system and there's a lot of people who tell me they used to do that or they used to thread the pearls or they... It is surprising because so many people are employed in this area.

[00:26:26]

TB: So for you it was a fascination with the tools themselves, and the history that they had, but also it's not just, as I'm looking around now, you've also kept all of the things like the public health and safety notices, the correspondence,

BW: Everything, I saved everything.

TB: the little signs, the clocking in...

BW: because it is all history. It's all part of what you've got here. That's why I don't modernize it, I've modernized enough for us to use because we've only got one machine downstairs and it says we had to knock the wall out to the back to get that fit. The crane came over and we and sort of rebuilt it in there. I've got one in store which I would love a home for it. It's in Burgundy coloured enamel and it originally it was steam driven. It should be in a museum somewhere. It should be saved. It cost me a fortune keeping it in the garage all these years.

[00:27:21]

TB: So you in fact you couldn't fit it all into this building, but you've done obviously as much as you can.

BW: It's virtually all here, but it's all cramped up in the rooms upstairs. We've got, shall we say, as much as we can down stairs without spoiling it, and then people can have a go, not on the electric machines, but on the machines, they can have a go. It's purely atmosphere. I had an elderly gentleman; he was a rep and he said, 'I've got to bring my father in law here'. So he brought him. And evidently he was a businessman, been on many, many boards in the states and he was very dapper, must have been late eighties, beautifully dressed. So his son in law, brought him down and he couldn't believe it. And he said to me, my dear, don't change it. You leave this exactly as it is. He said, I've worked all over the world. I've seen most places. He said, I've never seen anything like this. I've had so many lovely comments of people and they will say they love to come here, you know, and what have you. And I had somebody who came, who had, you know, obviously we get a lot of people from abroad and when he finished he came up and he said, this is for you, he said this is fantastic. And he gave me a five pound note for the charities whereas normally it's a pound. He said it is worth far more, you must have this. And then he gave me five pounds to spend on any child who came in and hadn't got, because if they haven't got enough to buy anything I'll let them have it. He said you put that towards any child who needs a little bit extra money.

[00:29:17]

TB: Well that's lovely. So your motivation, at the beginning was to show share some of this obviously with the public

BW: And to earn a living.

TB: Well that's the other thing. So I mean, did you also think, well it will bring people in and it'll help with the business as well. Was there also a commercial element?

BW: Well don't forget it was closed doors to begin with where we were. You got in at 8 clock, you worked until four or five. The staff weren't like that all the time but they were used to it. And then you had everything in its place, your wire, benches and they used to have these veiners all the way up the aisle of the church where they would be working and they said that the, the elderly ladies used to work on those at 7 in the morning til five in the evening. Really hard work and this is hard work doing these with some of them. So it was to earn a living and my imagination was really going over time then because I'd always had, I went to commercial college whereas I should have gone to design, you know, fashion. But it always comes out in you. It will come out in you. Even if you know, you're a frustrated designer it does still come out in you. So now I do a lot of design work. I work with people. I suggest things to them and people go to the states and all over the place. We just had the lady in who lives in this country and in LA and she's taken a whole lot back with her because she loves what we do here. She loves the velvet, she loves me to make up things for her; you're part of people's lives.

[00:31:17]

TB: So first of all it was closed, but there was a moment where you thought I'm going to open the door. Was that where the chapel was or was it only here when you did that?

BW: It was when, it was because I lived in the Old Town you see, so I had this vision of the company being slightly smaller, but with an open door for the public and it's worked. Okay we are not know frantically busy with the public all the time, but they're allowed to come in and see us working when, when we, you working with our orders and we do unusual things. We, people who make films, see it's all the national theatres we supply. We supply poppies. This company originally, many, many years ago used to make the red poppies when you had this very beautiful reds, satin ones, fluffy ones on your lapel and people used to wear them and you had the lovely green leaf on it. And in fact, a few years ago, the poppy factory itself that is for disabled people now asked to us to go round to advise them on their flame proofing process. So we went and spent a lovely day down there and they'd got samples of what this factory used to make many, many years ago before the disabled factory was built. And it was lovely to see these people who could operate the machine even if it was only one finger or their foot or they can make boxes, you know, simply by moving about above their heads. It was lovely to see it. And so I went up there and advised them. I think it was at Richmond. I'm trying to think now. I think it was Richmond there, yes. And so we had, you know, we saw then, what we used to do, many decades ago. But we do other poppies; quite controversial, but we do them; not for our benefit. Well only on the manufacturing side, but we were the ones who designed originally the peace poppy.

TB: For the Peace Pledge Union?

BW: Yes. And for many, many years, I can't think how many years now, we used to make those, and then they decided, it was about two years ago, but I had a very good relationship with them. Yes. And also the Animal Aid. Have you seen the Animal Aid purple poppies. And also we now produce black poppies for black people who died during the war. Canada is very interested, the States are interested. We don't sell them, but we supply the person who does. So we do all sorts of things.

TB: Well that is fascinating, that there is a kind of radical element to it, that is really quite surprising. I don't know why.

[00:34:23]

BW: I have made giant flowers, did you see the letter from the queen? I was very proud of that.

TB: Oh yes. Lovely. Was that something you decided to do spontaneously or...

BW: Yes the staff thought I was mad. They said, we can't do that. I said I will, I'm sure the queen will like it. So I sent it and as you saw, I had that reply. We sent it on the Friday overnight. It's got to her on Saturday morning. Then as it said in the letter, it was, her secretary. It was sent to Windsor to be there for the weekend in her private apartments. I had that letter back thanking me on the Monday morning. I thought that was brilliant. Brilliant.

[00:35:16]

TB: Okay, so, so I think we've kind of covered why you wanted to open it up. Look, just to recap. So it was really a decision about downsizing to move into a smaller space.

BW: Here, yes, because I had the idea in the back of my head to open to the public but where we were in the factory, You couldn't have the public up there, it just wasn't, you know, it wasn't the sort of place for that.

TB: Okay. So obviously being in the old town is great for that.

BW: Yes and I love the old town you see, I've lived here for over 30 years. I love the people. I love the old town.

[00:35:54]

TB: You were saying that one of the big things was, you couldn't open it, partly because it's a working environment. You've got lots of presses out and it's dangerous or that kind of thing. So you've kind of quite cleverly managed to, to, to, well the big machine is behind glass, so people can't get to that, but still is there an issue with the public wondering about when you're actually working?

BW: We don't encourage them in here. They can have good look out there. And then as I've said to you, I say if you rummage around long enough, you'll find what you want and they love it because you don't get these old fashioned kind of shops anymore. Then they will go downstairs. They pay you a pound, that's all we charge them. And they go downstairs and then they can spend as long as they like, as long as they like there. And in fact you can tell how trusting we are, we've only just had that camera fixed at the top there in the last three months.

TB: Right. This is CCTV.

BW: We never had one before. Never had one.

TB: Why did you have that put in?

BW: Well, we'd had a couple of people who tampered with the stuff downstairs and I thought well perhaps it's time to have some pictures now. I forget to look at it. The staff, look at it, I forget. Normally the staff are very, very good, and the visitors.

TB: Do you think this place has an impact on the local area and in an email?

[00:37:25]

BW: Yes. People love it here. The Bob did the fixtures and fittings here and that. I mean, you can't walk down the road with that. You have to say hello to so many people call it wave to so many people, etc. It's real village life if you blended with it.

TB: Yes. So do you think this has helped you kind of become a part of the community?

BW: I was brought up in this sort of community in Wales. You see, in the mountains. A tight village community where you had the male voice choir as you know, and the church I was brought up very conscious of the church, etc. Which shapes your life for the rest of your life. I mean, when I came back, when I was 10, I was there for seven years, I could hardly speak English, so I've got that love of Wales and anybody who comes in, they recognize some Welsh in me and then people, some people recognize some Worcestershire in me and it ends up with people thinking I come from South Africa, but we always, we've always got time to talk to people and I often say to the stuff, I really got to stop this. I'm talking too much out there, but you know, it's good and now I'm sort of part of the traders and what goes on here. I will always help, you know, even if I, I'm a, I haven't got time. Sometimes I will always help in some way because I think you have to, if you want to be part of the community, like the old town is, and the church and the, you know, the day centres and people, you join in the festivals. We have an awful lot. Do you come down to some of the festivals?

TB: Yes I do

BW: It's way of living. Much as I love Worcestershire, much as I love Wales and I would have retired there. I'm happy here. Happy.

[00:39:29]

TB: And what about other museums? Do you have any much dealings with them or is there a network here?

BW: There was one further up, there was one in St Leonards, but also I find much as I'd like to take part in some of the national museum organisations and they get the literature and so on. They're so expensive just to go and listen to something. I mean they are talking about 100, 200 pounds a day, which is ridiculous. And when you inquire of any of that insurance, anything like that? Oh, it's way up there.

TB: I see. Yes. So you think

BW: it's not for the small museum person

TB: Right, it is designed for a salaried employee with expenses and so on. In terms of the Hastings kind of thing, do you have any contact with say I don't know, the shipwreck museum or the other tourist attractions?

[00:40:28]

BW: I see them in various functions, Yes. Because I'm on the tourist board here with the businesses we meet once a month or two months and I'm always interested in that. I always take part when I can.

TB: Alright. So that's all organised by the council and it is to do with tourism?

BW: Kevin's still in charge of it. Oh yes, they do the, I think they do their best here to create; and they listened, they listen to our advice so you know, all in turn we relate how we've done the last two or three months or whatever. How have we done over Christmas or Easter, and they listen. They do listen.

TB: Yes. And is the idea to do joined up marketing and events?

BW: , that's it. It is all to do with their marketing. Mind you they advertise, they shall we say, they exhibit abroad and mostly down south or so far up. And I keep on saying you should advertise in Scotland because there are people up there who will come down here. So that's my bee in my bonnet you see. It's surprising the people who discover us and they say, oh, I have never been here before, we're coming again. They bring the children. I know parking is a problem, but if you can get over that or come on the train or whatever.

TB: That's funny. I did a job interview in Scotland once and we were chatting and they said, oh, you come from Kent! And for them it's like the costa del sol, that's where the sun shines they said.

BW: Do you know I have been waiting for torrential rain about three months now because my roof has been done, but there's a small leak and you know, with these old places. This is dates back to the 14th century this does. The foundations. We are on the sea wall, it is actually built on the sea wall part of it. There's huge sea wall out there look right. And I've been waiting for torrential rain so we can have the water to come in then we'll know whether it's travelling, it finds its own level.

[00:42:55]

TB: Did you get any help at all when the museum first started from anybody in terms of outside funding or advice or was it just you?

BW: No, nothing. And as much I would like to leave this to the nation, the council, they've got no money now, and they're very proud of this, they send the journalists from all over the world here.

TB: Did you model it, it is laid out in a certain way, did you model it on anything that you've seen before?

BW: I used the building as a picture and then I'm very good if you're packing a car or packing anything or goods or anything. I know exactly how to do it and I did the same with the building. So

now there probably isn't a square inch here, but people love it, that I don't use. I would have loved a bigger place, but it's not available here. If somebody had said to me, I'm a millionaire, I'll buy next door for you and you can expand, I'd love it, and I'd start all over again.

TB: So it wasn't like you came in and thought I've seen something like this, or I have a display philosophy, it was practically getting things into the space, but in such a way that people could see it.

BW: Like a jigsaw. And then as we go along, as you'll see, I write notes and things and you know, and it all pinned up. Sometimes it's not printed or whatever, but it's in my handwriting. The people love reading all the notes on things. I mean the fact that I have the picture hanging up there on Mama Mia, we've been doing Mamma Mia for years, all the decoration and the denim out there, they rang and they said Brenda can you find us something that looks fern -like, that we can stitch on to jeans etc, then I put things together for them and suggest. And so people love reading about Mama Mia, and love never dies. We've done all sorts of things. Mary Poppins.

[00:45:05]

TB: Oh, I see. so when have you got a new job and your some point you think, well, I'll make a little label up. On the wall. That'll open up that little area.

BW: That's it. and they say, it takes so long to comprehend it, oh it is so lovely.

TB: Yes. that has happened over years and years. You just added more and more labels.

BW: Yes, I did added one yesterday because I knew you were coming of the nationals, the maypole garlands. Each one was nine meters long and you can imagine that on stage with the cast, and I thought I must label that up now. But you see I don't set out to do anything. It's when I've got time and I think like I did with you, I must put a label on there. There is nothing formal. It's letting see people, the jobs we've done, the tools we use. Did you see the sets of machines? Eight of them all together. There's one on the top of the stairs with the handle on it like that. They used to have, they used to have a whole rows of those along the factory because they make dalias and things like that, and they all graduated sizes to create the petals. And there is a whole set of those eight I've got, I've saved everything, I shouldn't really should I (laughs).

[00:46:41]

TB: You told me that clearly you've loved the, I'm thinking about the personal connection you have with all of this and you've mentioned the creativity. You mentioned the tools and you mentioned the craft aspect to it, all of which obviously really echoed in you, I suppose. Is there anything else about the subject matter that sings in your heart as it were when you're doing this?

BW: It's the fact that our door is never closed. People can walk in whenever they want to, if they want to chat, we'll listen. And this is important for people who need that little bit of help. Sometimes you say, oh they have gone on and on, but we never ever reject anybody.

TB: So people will pop in just for a chat.

BW: Yes, if I'm not well they will, and people who haven't seen me for the couple of years because they've got homes abroad, so they take out stuff with them abroad because they don't have to

water them, you know, and then when they come back they always pop in to see me, from all over the place. And the staff are good as well. They're very good with the customers because that is important. Not just the person who owns it, but the people who answer the phone or the people. And you've always got to have a smile on your face. I always say smile. And you're halfway there.

[00:48:10]

TB: Yes, so you try to pass on your philosophy to staff

BW: Very much so with the staff. Yes. I will always work with staff if somebody is a little bit shy and won't talk and everything; Liz is marvellous with the customers, just leave her to it, and she also makes poppies very well. She's a poppy maker. Erin now is very good with the hand cutter and the veining. You've seen this yes, because they have to learn with this, with different fabrics. Your velvets, your cotton, your satin or felt they all have different pressures. It's not just a case of turning the wheel. You learn how to treat every type of fabric. Again, diversifying. We've encouraged people to bring their own fabrics if they want to. They love it. The fashion people or leather. We don't stock leather, but they can bring their leather and we will, they can choose the tools. They pay a fee for coming here and doing that and they can have their leather cut out. Apart from the lady who sent me some leather, which was really for a horse and it was so thick we just couldn't get through it like a saddle!

TB: Okay, lovely.

[00:49:42]

BW: I think all my experiences through life have added to this. Totally. I started up a secondary school magazine. I Was in the exhibition industry. It all adds to your knowledge, and your experience.

TB: Yes. Well, how about this place as an expression of you, I was just thinking the display downstairs where you've got a really interesting corner. When you say, this of course is quite personal to me, and this is a picture of my mother; just tell me about that, I'm really interested that you have that corner.

BW: Right, now that corner is people who have donated to me; one is a lady, she's passed away now and she was a fashion designer in London and she used to do tailoring in a very, very expensive French way and she loved it downstairs and she said, and she wanted me to have this suit on the wall, so I'd put that in and that's how it started. And then there was one or two other items and then there was one or two things in cases and then the spats, and then the hats I found in a charity shop, did you see that, all that you see, all personal things and odd things that I have come across. Oh I've got some tools out there that somebody donated to me because he'd seen what I have got there. I'll show it to you in a minute. It's a gauge. And he, he'd seen one hanging there and I said, oh yes, I'd saw that in Bath in a boot fair and I said it looked interesting and I didn't know whether it was a tool to do with flower making. He said, I've got another one. He says, I'll bring it into you and this is what they do you see, now I've got some that are hanging up there. I ask people, if they can guess what it is, and they love that, that the fact that you know they have to guess and they never guess what it is. I'll show you one here that we, Paul will show to people if he is on the machine or if I have them in and I'm giving a talk. Now can you guess what that is, what that cuts?

[00:52:10]

TB: This is like a cookie cutter. It looks like a ghost or some sort.

BW: We love the comments and one person has ever been correct and she was a student, about 18.

TB: I've got no idea.

BW: That's how you to read the tools. So you look at that now I can show you. Can you see a picture there? Can you guess now what it is? It is a stork. With the baby. And that's what we do. And I take it with me on talks. And people are always fascinated. Now look at the workmanship. When you think the industry was vast. And the people, we've got French names on, some of them we've got English names and it's fascinating to read the stamps on them. I've still got the brochures that you use to buy from them.

[00:53:28]

TB: I noticed downstairs there was a letter from a German manufacturer. It's a little window into history

BW: You won't see that virtually anywhere else.

TB:, it's lovely how you mixed that in with things.

00:53:43

BW: Yes, as I say, it's history and I'm a hoarder. I've always said this, if you didn't have hoarders you wouldn't have museums today, you might have modern museums, but you wouldn't have a really old, authentic one like this where you've got all the original samples, did you see on the stairs, the plaster of Paris moulds; and then there were all sorts of things that you paint on to, to reduce the colour of a pansy in between; now the girls on the benches when these flowers were made originally, the velvet ones. They all used to work with their camel hair brushes and they would tint the leaves with colour, and the way you can tell who has knitted something. I'm not a knitter, but I believe that, you know, you can tell, you could with the girls who had done the samples. Because they used to sell to all the big stores in London. They had reps going out from here all over, to Ireland. A lady came in, she said, said, we used to have a big case, she said, and I used to travel to Ireland to sell their goods.

[00:55:10]

TB: Interesting. Has the museum changed in any way since you first set it up here?

BW: Not really! Because we haven't got room to change things. But I do add interesting things in the box, where did you see the, the Millennium Dome remember that, did you see that? We created 21 trees to go in the, they had computers at the bottom, trees coming out, two huge trees because we specialize in leaves and petals. That's, that's our main thing. And it just, I don't know whether it was sponsored by, I think he may have been sponsored by one of the stores, Tesco or something like that. But it was magnificent. I went up to the dome to see it, it was wonderful. But I made sure then as each tree was made, it was a lot of money. I invoiced them for each tree, as a safeguard. They

were quite happy then I think they had about 21 and trees and then when that was taken down some years later, they bought them at Paddock Wood, and they the hop farm itself, all of it which they had in there for years. So, you know, our stuff does the rounds because it is flame proofed, it has to be flameproofed and we are the flameproof specialists.

[00:56:39]

TB: Yes I was fascinated by the hops

BW: Did you see the box downstairs with all of them in?

TB: yes, for their display, sadly the display has gone at the hop farm, I'm hoping they will bring it back again in some way.

Has the visitor profile changed over the years?

[00:57:10]

BW: Well we get them right across the board. You see lots of tourists because they've heard of us. One lady came from Australia on a world tour. She's up in London especially to get my autograph because of the television programs. Travel programs include us quite a lot. So somebody will come and say, oh we know about you.

TB: you also mentioned trip advisor; so these are kind of international spaces, which I guess are important to you.

BW: Yes they are, because people now from London, they come on their world tours and they are nearly always recommended to come down to Hastings. Hastings is on the map. Yes, very much so.

TB: Why is that do you think?

BW: Well, purely because they've upped their image here. We've got so much to offer which people don't really know about because of the, I gather that it wasn't such salubrious place as it used to be. And of course now here in the old town, you've got so many old traditional businesses, which I mean, people will come in and say this, I've never seen one like this. And I say, well, you won't because we are unique. And it's homely, it's not in your face, you know, with all square cabinets, with things set out. It's the homeliness I think, of the business.

[00:58:51]

TB: Was that also going back to the fact you got a portrait of your mother on the wall?

BW: Yes, I've got that in my possession, and I thought I'll put that in there because it looked nice, my mother is in there. Did you see the one with the clock, where the person was presenting it to an elderly lady?

TB: Yes the oldest person in the parish?

BW: Now we've got the clock, that was from Wales and that was from a bishop or whatever he was. He was presenting it to a distant relative of the people I was with for her service or something to the... So it's all history. My history.

TB: So you've kind of deliberately entwined some of your own personal history with the business.

BW: Yes. Just for that corner as a matter of interest, most of it comes from what was used, what produced, the factory produced or people who bought the stuff from the factory. Because that hat you see, the history of that is that it had a hand bag to match, the customer worked at the factory and she'd go to a very posh wedding to go to. So she was allowed to make that handbag and the hat. When I saw it in the charity shop because it had got a note on the back, what it was, and when I got there the handbag had been sold, but the, but the hat was there and I was so thrilled because I recognise the work at the factory.

[01:00:33]

TB: Yes, that's amazing. You separated it off to indicate that it isn't part of the business collection as it were?

BW: Well, yes, a very small part, but most of it is from the factory, but it's just my mother's photograph and obviously the model to hold the stuff but the samples in there are virtually the factory's. Because we have got a container out there with some kind of drug in it. Daren't open it, because they used to use chemicals and drugs you see it for the formation and the setting of the colours. For what they were producing.

TB: Well, yes. There's that thing about mad hatters, I don't know if that is right, the lead in the hats used to drive people crazy?

BW: Yes. The children's hair used to turn green. And they used to work by candlelight, which used to ruin their eyes.

TB: So you had to be a bit careful with some of that stuff.

[01:01:23]

BW: Well, yes. Don't put it in the newspapers or somebody might take it! Now you see those scent bottles, where would you find those today? I've never been uncorked them, I've left them exactly as they are when they came from the factory all those years ago. And they are part of what is there. I'll tell you what is good today is, you know, there's marzipan, because they were, they were great suppliers of confectioners. They used to got all over the country with the confectionary item. Marzipan, you know, the things you get at Christmas. And you have a stork in the top. It wouldn't be allowed today because I found all this wicker work stuff everywhere and the thin cane, the homeworkers used to have to chop that up, add a leaf to it and stick it in the top of the marzipan. Now today that would be banned because of choking. And the wax, you see the original grapes to use make it all wax, balls of wax. Flammable. Did you see the wax pots downstairs under the fireplace that they used to dip the stiffeners(?) in? People had copper pots home, one with wax in it, and you had different colours, wax, whether it was a silvery white or pure white or whatever, and you had to get it to a certain temperature, and then they had a bucket of water at the side and I

often say to people, now, do you know why they had the bucket of water? They used to have flowers on a stem to hold it, dip it in, and they used to do thousands of these each day. Dip it in then straight into the bucket, so you didn't get to drip on the wax. Otherwise, if you held it up and so did this, it would form a drip onto the flower so you didn't get a drip on the flower. So what you do, you put it straight into cold water.

01:03:36

TB: Where did you get all the knowledge of all of this from, I mean clearly you had a whole set of employees when you first got the business, was it through them that you found out all about this?

BW: No, I learned the hard way. Because you had people on the benches who had learned their trade as it were. Their knowledge; they wouldn't divulge it. Oh no. Oh yes. There was one lady there. She's been there 30, 40 years. She would not teach a teenager at all. And when, I gather when they first started at the factory, that's the way the girls had to do it, they had to watch somebody else and then try and do it. Oh no, they didn't have time to teach people. So I've learned mine through reading about it, absorbing it in my head, seeing what I can do with this, various cutters and the fabrics; I love fabrics anyway, love fabrics. So that's how I've learned. And purely by spending hours delving into. I mean I've got a cabinet full at home with history, and some of the invoices are beautiful, you know, when they were hand drawn and produced. I've got some beautiful invoices. I haven't got room here and I haven't got time to go through. I've said to my family, don't just burn that. Don't just burn those boxes because when you've got time, go through them. Like I did in Wales, I inherited from Wales, they hadn't got any children. And I found some invoices there for a lean-to being built to create a kitchen and everything else, and it came to 12 pounds something. And it is all listed, the nails that were used everything. And to me, when you read that, you're reading history.

[01:05:36]

TB: So through all these things and these papers you have built up this amazing encyclopaedic knowledge.

BW: I have built up the knowledge. And I will always talk to people who are elderly and been connected because you get your knowledge from them as well.

[01:05:56]

TB: Financially does it... you are not charging a load of money for people to come and see this or anything. So is that an issue for you personally, in terms of the museum part of it, Is it more that you've got the business and the museum is something which is an added bonus or, or financially, in fact, is the museum quite important to the business?

BW: The museum is, because it is integral with the whole thing. And we get the manufacturing side when suddenly somebody wants a whole forest built. Or now the president, Danny this morning, they are doing, what are they doing? Oh, they're doing a version of Cats. So the film company wanted masses and masses of leaves autumnal leaves, all on the ground, etc. so they ring me up and we've done a number of jobs for them. He describes it to me, what they want. We've got the cutters, we send samples and then go on from there. But with this one, he'll have the parchment. We used

to have vegetable parchment. You can't get that anymore because all the parchment today is siliconed, which prevents you from colouring it, or fire proofing it. And you can't get the wires so much now. A lot of the things you just cannot get any more because it's obsolete you see, with all the modern Chinese production, but with Danny, he said you have the parchment? We have got stacks of it downstairs so Paul was sending him a the samples of the big leaves today and then what he's going to do with it, because they are a company contractors. He said I'm going to scrunch it up and paint it, and that's how they produce all the leaves. For filming and all sorts of things. We've done a lot of film work.

[01:07:53]

TB: I see. So like financially, those sorts of jobs...

BW: they work together. Obviously the manufacturing produces more than the museum, but we couldn't do what we do without the museum.

TB: Oh really? okay.

BW: Well we couldn't because of all the tools, the museum is all the tools and the machines. This all part of the museum. This has got 1915 on it look. And this big family, they were quite famous in their day for producing tools. And I would say that 90 percent of the tools here have got a Bick [the manufacturer] And you've got the grandfather, the father and the son sometimes on the initials. They will London people. I gather they were London people.

[01:08:41]

TB: You have converted them, these old steam... [takes photo of a press that has had an electric heater installed]. You have modernised... is there a firm that will do that?

BW: No, we've got somebody who's a university graduate, Gary, he as got quite a high profile job, but he is very laid back and he loves doing something like this. So he comes in every so often and when he sees the parts, he collects the parts in a box, so we've got some parts here that we can use. When the safety people came first of all, i I thought aw, you know, will they pass everything for us? But they did because it was, its type of building and because it was historical. So we were allowed to, and they approved of it. We made sure of course, I had that screen built so nobody could sort of, you know, hands or anything else and we make sure that they can't fall over anything and all kinds of things; and we help elderly people down the stairs.

[01:10:05]

TB: That's great. Thank you. I think that's covered everything. I mean that there's just one last little thing which was about how the museum is organized and how decisions are made and so on. But in terms of governance, I am thinking you haven't got trustees have you, you're the boss. It's your thing?

BW: That's it. And with the staff I do believe, I always say you are only as good as your staff. No matter what you produce in design if they also are not interested in what they're doing, where is your business then? And you have to say you know, treats customers with a smile and I think your staff are very important today. Very important. None of these sort of rigidity, like you used to

have, you know, at one time you could only have a cup of coffee at a certain time and that, but if they are working hard and they need an extra cuppa, they can do it.

[01:10:59]

TB: Yes. That's been quite a revolution, hasn't it, the way that has changed. That's brilliant. Thank you so much.

[ENDS]