

**Pat Russell**

*Would you mind telling me your full name and the year you were born?*

A: Patricia Mary Russell née Couch, born in Wembley, Middlesex in 1919.

*And where did you grow up?*

A: In Farnborough, Hants

*And which schools did you go to?*

A: I went to Farnborough Hill, the convent college as a daygirl.

*As this interview is on Abingdon, can you tell us when you first came to Abingdon*

A: Yes, we came in 1944, '43 or '44, yes that's right.

*That's a long time ago isn't it?*

A: Yes, it is a long time ago. Well Jenny was born in Abingdon and she's no, no that's wrong '47 because it was Graham that was born in '44, it was '47 we came here, sorry.

*And what brought you here?*

A: My husband was one of the first physicists at Harwell and we moved into the pre-fabs to start with.

*Which were?*

A: At Harwell, at the site, at AERE. the Atomic Energy Research Establishment.

*So, you all squashed into a little prefab did you?*

A: There were only two of us; oh and one child, a toddler; two of us and a toddler, yes. And then I was expecting another baby and of course '47 was that terrible winter and we were almost cut off up there and I had to come down to Abingdon. And the Maternity Hospital was called The Warren, can you believe it, a very appropriate ... and Jenny was born in March '47, I think it was just ... I think I just got down from Harwell when the bad weather stopped but after that we were surrounded by floods. So just as well I got there when I did.

*Well, what was it like living up there?*

A: It was all right. Yes. They were very basic and they could be very cold. And in fact, the condensation on the walls would freeze and I even had ice on the water beside my bed. The drink of water beside my bed would have ice on it. But we had a very efficient little stove and as long as they managed to get the coke up to us from Harwell village we were all right. It was pretty all right.

*How did you manage shopping and that sort of thing?*

A: Well, I think we had a shop on the site, but I could get a bus down into Harwell or you could get a bus to Newbury in those days. I don't remember, I think people must have come out to us. I think people like greengrocers and bread and milk and that sort of thing probably came and delivered.

*It has changed*

A: Yes

*How long were you there before you moved?*

A: Oh, not that long. Eh now I'm getting mixed up. I came to Abingdon in '47 because I must have been at the prefabs for a couple of years before that because Jenny was about eight months when I moved to Fitzharry's estate. Yes, and we were one of the first people to move in onto that estate. I was on the corner opposite Boxhill School and beyond Boxhill School was all fields. It was the edge of the country then.

*And a lot of people from Harwell were there with you, were they?*

A: It was a Harwell estate. And in fact, my husband was on the committee allocating houses and I think they took the number of children, took the number in the family and squared it or doubled it or something. Every house had at least two children if not more. There were about 500 children I think, but it was great fun, actually we were all very happy.

*It sounds great.*

A: That was on the Fitzharry's estate. The old Fitzharry's Manor was there then. It was all boarded up and the children used to play around. And my son who was a very gentle nature really, they always thought there was a ghost there and he told me he said, "I think it's all right because I think it's the Holy Ghost".

*What a story. What was the house like at the point you were there?*

A: The Fitzharry's?

Yes

A: Yes, nice four-bedroom semi-detached houses. They were quite big, yes, and gardens. We had to start the garden from scratch, since it had been a builder's yard it was quite hard work. Some had four bedrooms and some had three but they were all Harwell people..

*So, thinking about your life in Abingdon can you tell me about a particular time you can remember well, perhaps because it is important to you. Some particular significant time in the early days of your time in Abingdon.*

A: Well, I suppose I moved into this house in the centre of the town in '59. Yes, that's right. And I suppose the major event was when the circus came and used the wasteland opposite me to have their centre. And we had elephants come down East Saint Helen Street and I had my pet dog and cat, I expect, got very nervous because they could hear these animal noises from across the road and they got quite anxious about it. That's one of the big events that I remember.

*So where was the bit of spare land?*

A: Across where St. Helen's Court [is] as it's called.

*Oh there.*

A: Yes there, and that was all wasteland. The circus was right at the back and in the front was rough ground and we all kept our cars there.

*Gosh yes, you could have done that.*

A: A little thing I remember about living on Fitzharry's estate was that I used my bicycle a lot to come downtown to shop. And you weren't allowed to rest your bicycles against the shop fronts and the police would tell you off, and you had to put your bicycle against the kerb. There were police around.

*They'd be getting on top of the kerb now, wouldn't they?*

A: Yes absolutely. There weren't any cars to speak of and when I came into East St. Helen's we had parking where you liked down the street. And I think it was two-way too, and in fact, Mrs. Castle and I used to keep our cars just outside the house in the daytime.

*Tell us quickly about the ... you were saying about the elephants. Did they go down to the river?*

A: Yes, I believe they did, yes, they had to go down for watering. And that little alleyway, that little slope down to the river was called the Waterings where the dray horses used to go to drink. I had a help in the house, a real Abingdonian. And I heard these things from her.

*So, what was happening in your life at that time particularly when you came into East St. Helen Street?*

A: Unfortunately, my husband met with an accident while I was at Fitzharry's and Sir John Cockcroft was very kind and said ... that I stayed on and I used to share the house with a couple from .... they had a bedroom and a dining room. And then I started, I went over to the Art School to think about going back to Art School but they offered me a job assisting the Graphic Design teacher at evening school. And the condition was that the young couple, part of their rent was they had to baby-sit when I was out teaching. But then I moved down into this house which has got a big room on the first floor, two rooms knocked into one which made a lovely studio and I was there from '59 and I'm still here.

*So, you had been at Art College before you were married?*

A: Yes, yes before the war.

*Before the war?*

A: Yes, I went to Chelsea School of Art.

*And then it was a question of picking it up afterwards, after your husband died?*

A: That's right, yes.

*Was the accident concerned...*

A: Yes, it was at Harwell. He had some .... there was some very tall sort of three or four storey towers and he had apparatus right up separating light oxygen from heavy oxygen and it was just about to come to fruition. And there was scaffolding all round this apparatus and he was on the top, the top bit of the scaffolding on a stepladder and he leant over to adjust something and the stepladder tipped over and he fractured his skull. He lived for three days in the Radcliffe but that was it.

*A terrible shock. So, you were left with two very young children?*

A: Yes, yes two and four.

*So then really you sort of had to think of a career for yourself?*

A: Yes, well I did go and work at Harwell for a little time. That meant getting two small children onto the works bus at quarter to eight or something in the morning and leaving them at the nursery up there. I did it for a bit but it was terrible, it was too bad. I went down with pneumonia and became rather ill, and so I stopped doing that, and that's when I went over to the Art School. I also went back to London to my old calligraphy teacher a couple of days a week. Can't think what I did with the children anyway, and I worked towards being made a Fellow of the Society of Scribes and Illuminators, which I became in 1956.

*So tell me, when you started you came to live here and you were in this studio here. How did your career sort of take off? Or how did it work out?*

A: Well, I was doing this teaching at the Art School at Oxford. Let me think what happens. I got very interested in the new way of teaching art, which was just being established and I went to some summer schools in Barry and Glamorgan. And there was a teacher of embroidery at the Art School who wanted to put IHS on an altar frontal she was doing, and she asked me to help her design the lettering. And this started a partnership between us, with me producing the designs in lettering and also in heraldry and then Elizabeth was more or less making them. But then we were commissioned by an architect in Oxford who was building a chapel for the deaf in Luton- We were commissioned to make the four altar frontals. And I'd always made my children's clothes, oh by the way, Elizabeth was using a machine, machine embroidery, what's now called collage and so I eventually .... I soon became ... I was doing as much of the sewing and embroidery as she was and between us we made these altar frontals.

I think after that Elizabeth went away. She moved her job and I was left. And the Bear Lane Gallery, which was a very good Fine Art Gallery in Oxford, were putting on an exhibition called Modern Art and the Church. It was just after Coventry had been dedicated and they rang me and said had I got any vestments they could put in this exhibition. And I said, "I'm sorry I haven't". And then I thought, well you'd better make some. So, I rang up and said 'I would have, I would make a cope with lettering all round the orphrey' and that was the start of my church embroidery career; that's how it started, it started totally accidentally.

Eventually I built up, I got quite busy. There's a terrific grapevine goes on and I was soon working. My first old building was Pershore Abbey and that was a big adventure to put modern work into an old building and with Peter Moore's encouragement we did, and found that I could design appropriately. It's modern, it's contemporary, not contemporary with the building but contemporary for me; but I was always careful that it harmonised with the building. So, I got a bit of a name for this and I worked. Then of course Peter Moore went to Ely Cathedral so he asked me to do work for them and I made an altar frontal, a big altar frontal for them. And also I made a set of copes, cut out ready to sew for the ladies to make. Then he went on to St. Albans. But then I started working for other cathedrals, Worcester, Norwich particularly. Norwich I did a lot of work for, and Worcester and Lichfield. A little bit in Exeter. Where else was it, St. Paul's Cathedral in London eventually.

Also, I didn't stop my calligraphy. I still kept up some part-time teaching of calligraphy. And when the Art School moved to Brookes, it was getting much more formalised and I worked then for the Graphic Design Department teaching basic design of letter forms. Which was very exciting for me, I had a lovely time with it. Although I loved the church embroidery and I loved the fabrics, lettering is really what I like doing, what I like best so I worked out a scheme of teaching. Then Batsford asked me to write a book which I wrote 'Lettering for Embroidery' which really combined part of the teaching and then going into fabrics later on. And that of course led to me being able to go to Canada and the States. If you've got a book it goes before you and in the 70s and 80s did a lot of

tours of, it was design from letter forms for artists and craftsmen. Mostly for textile artists, mostly for embroiderers, but not necessarily. And it got me a long way and I had these eight-, ten-week tours so I did a lot of sightseeing on the way and made a lot of friends

*So, Pat tell me: how did you manage if you say that everything was done from the studio upstairs, how did you manage because copes are big things?*

A: Well, we took over most of the house. Yes, they are big and when you are making five you need a lot of space but the room, the little room at the back, was ... I had hooks across the beam in the ceiling and the copes could hang in there. By this time, I had an assistant who came not full time but really when I wanted her and when there was work that she could do. I had several different assistants and we worked very well together.

*You said you had your little template on it, did you?*

A: I had a little satin ribbon, which said 'Pat Russell, Abingdon-on-Thames', and all my work has one of these on the back. You don't sign church embroidery on the front I don't think that would be right - I didn't sign it actually, I had these labels.

*So, if one was fortunate to go to Lichfield and managed to have a look for the copes, that's what we want to look for inside?*

A: That's right. I did a cope for the Dean of Lichfield, which had a tree of life right up the back of it and then lettering flowing down the side. Nice one that was. And another one for the Dean of Worcester for their, I don't remember whether eight hundredth or nine hundredth anniversary and that was a major one with a Greek inscription running round the altar. I did a lot of work for Wells Cathedral for their eight hundredth, I don't know if these are eight hundredth or nine hundredth and I did a set of copes for them and some altar frontals. The copes I echoed the double arch in Wells so that the top, the reverse arch, was almost like the shape of the hood and then the other lines flowing down. Usually, I didn't do sets of all in the same colour but I had colours that related, just slightly shaded that I felt was more interesting when they were processing.

*Did they give you some idea of what exactly they wanted or were you left to your own devices to produce it?*

A: No, well if they just say they want a set of festival copes or green copes or something.

*So, they weren't too particular about what they wanted, or were some more than others?*

A: No, no the thing was I found usually they didn't know what they wanted, but I provided the ideas. Because my ideas came from the setting, the church or cathedral, attending a service, talking to people like the flower arrangers or vergers or anybody and getting the feel of the services and then I could design something that I felt was right for it. And all my designs were made in miniature one-tenth scale, and I've got a whole lot of little copes. But I always design the copes in miniature first and if you took these miniatures into the building and held them up you could soon see which was going to look right in that particular building.

*That's very interesting.*

A: Yes it was, it was fascinating. And I met a lot of very interesting people and it was good, yes. Right, we are just going back to Abingdon.

*So, when you moved from Fitzharry's you came down to East Saint Helen Street. What was it like? I mean what was the town centre like? What was East Saint Helen Street like?*

A: Well, there were a lot of shops. There were at least three greengrocers in the town and a couple of grocers and at least two butchers.