

Notes from Local Interest Group 26th January 2023

Present: Maureen Lloyd (ML), John Price, Wendy Ozols, Iris Lloyd, Malc Gonnella, Sue Lawler, Celia Jones, Joan Hughes, Alison Duncan, Roy & Avryl Lloyd, Gina Goodge, Dawn Richards, Bronwen Jenkins, Elsa Harflett, Helen Barnett, Mollie Moore, Tim Francis, James & Jenny Martin, Chris Killey, Jonathan Knowles, Yiolanda Christou, Tom Nicholls, Margaret Herdman, Grace Davies, Richard Thomas

On Zoom: Dainis Ozols, Cherry & Victor Williams, Margaret Price, Jenny Francis, Eva Morgan, Sylvia Illingsworth, Penny Williams

Apologies: Joan Lloyd

ML welcomed everyone and explained that this would be another evening where local people would give us a resumé of their lives and what had brought them to Painscastle. She introduced Malc Gonnella, Sue Lawler, Yiolanda Christou and Jonathan Knowles, our speakers for the evening.

Malc Gonnella

Malc was born in the 1950s, in Chesterfield in Derbyshire. Chesterfield is famous for the crooked spire on its parish church. The crooked spire is evident in just about everything in the town, from shops and cafés, through to the football team (Chesterfield FC, nickname The Spireites) which Malc has supported all his life.

His father was Scottish and his mother was from Chesterfield. However, on his father's side, the family come from a small town called Barga in Tuscany and so Malc is of Italian heritage (although he cannot speak the language!). He and members of his family, with help from an Italian great uncle who was still living in Barga (but who has since died), have researched their Italian background and have constructed a family tree which goes back to the 18th century. Barga is a walled town, about the same size as Hay; however, a newer town has been added outside the old town walls and this has doubled the size of the place. It is perched on a hill top and is surrounded by the Tuscan hills and mountains. The family home is now owned by a Scottish couple who run it as a B&B; this is where his grandfather was brought up. On the wall of the building is a plaque commemorating the fact that Garibaldi met Antonio Mordini in the house in 1862. Mordini was an Italian patriot and, from 1861, a member of the Parliament of the Kingdom of Italy. (Prior to 1861, Italy had comprised a number of different states; unification of these states into a kingdom took place in 1861.)

Malc then told us about one of his relatives, Letizia, who had gone to the USA in 1912, where she had met and married Angelo Martorana, who was from Sicily. Letizia was Malc's great grandfather's sister. They had one son, Giacomo, also known as Jacky, who was born in 1913 (he died in the D Day landings in June 1944). Soon after this Letizia died. In the meantime, Malc's great grandmother, Marianna, left her husband in Italy in 1914 and moved to Glasgow with her son, Guido (Malc's grandfather). She set up one of the first Italian cafés in the city. Soon after she moved, she was joined in Glasgow by Angelo Martorana. Marianna and Angelo eventually got married (in 1922) and they had a son, Sergio, who was born in 1923.

Malc's grandfather, Guido, met his grandmother, Catherine, in Glasgow in 1925 and they married and had five children, Malc's father being the eldest. In the late 1930s, the family moved to London. (In 1938, Malc's great grandfather died and his property in Italy passed to his great aunt.)

When WW2 broke out in 1939, Malc's grandfather was interned on the Isle of Man as an Italian national, despite his having a British passport. In 1940, he was put on a ship to Canada, but a few

days later the ship was torpedoed by a German U boat and it sank, with 805 deaths recorded. Malc's grandfather survived and he was sent back to Scotland. Just eight days later, he was put on another ship, this time bound from Liverpool to Australia. Here he was held in a PoW camp until 1942 when he was released; prisoners were given the option of staying in Australia or returning to the UK. Guido chose to return and he boarded a ship heading for Cape Town and from there he took another ship bound for Liverpool. This ship had no escort and was hit by a torpedo mid-Atlantic. Sadly, Guido was one of the dead, but his wife and family were not told what had happened until a few years later when he was listed as "lost at sea, presumed dead".

In 1949, Angelo died and Malc's great grandmother, Marianna, returned to Italy; she died soon after. His father, John, went into the building construction business and by the 1950s had settled in Chesterfield, where he worked for Sheepbridge Engineering for many years. Here, he met and married Malc's mother, Dorothy; they had six children, quite a squeeze in a small house!

He says that he had a typical 1960s childhood. At school, he passed 10 O levels but underachieved after that, regrettably choosing to concentrate on extra-curricular activities too much! The two A levels that he passed were not enough to get him onto the astronomy degree that he had wanted to undertake, and he ended up on a computer science course at Leicester Poly instead. However, he gave up on this degree after one term.

By 1973 he had got married, had a child and had moved into computer programming, working for Midland Bank. During this time, he completed two OU degrees in Maths and Sciences. He remarried in the 1980s and had two more children. He worked with what was now HSBC until taking early retirement in 2004. He soon took another job with Hewlett Packard in IT project management, eventually retiring again in 2015.

He and Sue married in 2017 and he moved to Cwmbran and then Abergavenny, where Sue was working. In preparation for Sue's retirement, they bought the house in Painscastle in the summer of 2021 and came to live here permanently in the summer of 2022. They have done a great deal of work on the house and are now keen to research the history of Y Dyffryn – and would welcome any information/photos anyone might have, as they are hoping to put together a talk for the Local Interest Group about the property. They have got involved with many local activities and Malc has recently taken over the running of the Painscastle-Rhosgoch website; if anyone would like to assist him with this, please let him know.

Sue Lawler

Sue called her talk, "The Journey So Far". To begin, she told us a lovely story about her name and the trouble it had caused her, as official documents did not seem to have it registered exactly the same way. Her father had added a name to those her parents had already chosen when he went to register her and rather than putting his choice at the end as requested by her mother, he had put it down as her first name!! Some time later, she changed her name by re-ordering the ones she had been given in order to avoid confusion.

She was born in Fleet in Hampshire and she loved the house the family lived in, an attractive Victorian, detached property with a large garden. She was sad to see, some years later, that part of the garden had been sold for another house to be built and that lots of changes had been made inside. On her Mother's side, she has traced her family back to the 18th century and Saffron Walden in Essex. Her maternal grandparents lived in Devon and she has fond memories of childhood holidays spent with them. Her father's family are from Wales and again she has traced her family tree back to the 18th century. Her parents were married in 1945, having met when they both

worked for the MoD, and they had three children, Sue being the youngest. Both her father and mother played bowls and, in fact, her mother played for England in internationals and, in 1983, was selected for a trial for the World Championships in Australia, although she did not actually go to the event, for family reasons.

Her parents loved the outdoors and her childhood was often spent in wild areas, like South Wales. Sue's father was an engineer, but he also loved woodwork and made lots of things for the house. He had a job with the National Gas Turbine Establishment, where he worked on Concorde engines, amongst other projects. Sadly he died in 1984.

Sue told us a little bit about her paternal grandfather, who worked in the Sharlston Colliery, Yorkshire, where he was the colliery deputy. She told us about how they would have to test for dangerous gases in the mine in order to make the working environment as safe as possible for the miners. Being a true Welshman, her grandfather had helped to set up the Sharlston Male Voice Choir, which is still in existence today. The choir once supported Paul Robeson in a concert in Sheffield.

As a child, Sue attended infant and junior school in Fleet and then, on passing her 11+, she moved on to the County Girls' School in Aldershot. She did not enjoy being there and moved to Basingstoke Tech to do her A levels, after which she did a degree in Occupational Psychology at UWIST, followed by a PGCE in Primary Education. She later passed both GCSE and A Level in Welsh and completed a Diploma in Theology at Bangor.

In 1981, Sue got married and she and her husband had two daughters. Her employment record has been very varied, and she has worked at MacMillan Publishers, Whitchurch Psychiatric Hospital, BT as a computer programmer senior systems analyst, the Alberta Alcohol and Drug Abuse Commission, the University of Wales Press, Guilsfield Primary School and as an adults' Welsh Tutor, amongst other jobs. At one time she ran a small company called Boo Childrenswear which produced colourful children's wear, and she showed us a picture of her daughters dressed in one of the more popular outfits. Her last employment was as a Methodist minister and she still works on interview panels for the church.

Sue has also lived in many places and she told us about living in Edmonton, Alberta with her former husband. There, temperatures of -25C were considered "mild" in winter! They had the Rockies on one side of the city and the vast prairies on the other. At that time, Alberta was known for two main activities – oil wells and wheat farming. There is evidence of both of these still dotted around the state, with abandoned "nodding donkey" pumps in the countryside and grain silos along the main rail lines. She also spent a very happy time living on a smallholding in Montgomeryshire, Cwm Nant y Meichiad. She and her former husband bought this as a small farm and sold most of the land to the neighbouring farmers, keeping 50 acres, which they farmed under a conservation scheme. Sue described this place as "my Eden".

Sue said that her interests are many and varied. She loves the countryside and nature and is a member of many environmental organisations. She has been interested in photography since she was a child and is now a member of Hay Camera Club. Crafts, especially knitting, sewing and upholstery, are great passions as well and she also enjoys cooking. Since moving to Painscastle permanently she has joined many of the local groups and has led services in the Adullam Chapel on a number of occasions. She and Malc are keen to take an active role in the community and are very pleased that they moved to such a friendly and welcoming place.

Yiolanda Christou and Jonathan Knowles

Yiolanda and Jonathan live at Top of Lane, on the north side of the Roundabout on the Begwns. They moved here from London some years ago, wanting to escape the city and mobile phones! Yiolanda had wanted to move to Wales as she has a Welsh “Grandmother”. (This lady was not really her Grandmother; she had taken in Yiolanda’s father when he moved to the UK from Cyprus in 1956 and she and all of her relatives became an adopted family for Yiolanda.) Yiolanda had a friend in Glasbury and so was familiar with the area and really wanted to live here. After writing to a number of estate agents in the hope of finding a property for sale, one of them got in touch to tell them about Top of Lane and so they came to view it. The property was a “tiny cottage” in a wonderful location and with the benefit of having some “outbuildings”. The property also came with land, which is now farmed by the Nicholls family.

Initially, after buying the property, Jonathan and Yiolanda would drive down from London on a Friday, often arriving late at night to a very cold house. After seven years of this commuting, they decided to move down here permanently as they wanted the peace and quiet in which to create their designs. They have now built a new house on the site which is larger than the original cottage. Access to the property is not brilliant and they are often snowed in, but they love living here.

Yiolanda and Jonathan are printers of high quality wallpapers and fabrics, using silk screens, and they also produce furniture. Their company (founded in 1992) is called Knowles and Christou <https://www.knowles-christou.com/> . Although they have a showroom in Chelsea, all of their creative work now takes place here in Wales. They have bought a workshop in Talgarth and it is there that they do their printing. They have two 20m tables on which to do the work, all of which is done by hand; it is a complicated and time-consuming process. Each colour in the design has to be applied using its own silk screen, so the more colours there are the longer and more complicated the process is. In order to speed up the drying of the ink before the next section is added to the fabric or paper, they use hairdryers. Yiolanda gave us a demonstration of how the printing work is done using a screen that they had brought with them.

All of the very original designs are created by Jonathan and he also makes the screens. They did have a problem with others trying to copy their work but they have now made the designs so complicated to reproduce that it is no longer viable for people to do this. Yiolanda showed us some samples of wallpaper and fabric, all with wonderful designs. The fabrics they print on are good quality heavy silk and Irish linen, which is of exceptional quality; these produce the best results.

Although Yiolanda had talked to us mostly about their fabric and wallpapers, most of their sales are of furniture – cabinets, chests, dressers, mirrors, tables and chairs. All of this is hand made by Jonathan, to order, and can be decorated with some of his print designs. (Examples of the furniture can be seen on their website.)

Yiolanda explained that they used to work with design students at some of the Art Schools when they were in London, but that they have not had much luck in setting up such educational schemes in the local area.

It was absolutely fascinating to learn about Jonathan and Yiolanda’s work and to discover that these beautiful designs are imagined and made in our local area. Who would have known it?!

ML thanked each of our participants for their most interesting talks. She said how amazing it is that people in the area have such wide-ranging backgrounds and interests and that it is fascinating to discover how they came to be here. It is so kind of them to take the time to prepare such detailed, well-illustrated and informative talks for us. We had all thoroughly enjoyed the evening.

Many thanks to Avryl Lloyd for providing the refreshments, and to Iris Lloyd and Margaret Herdman for helping to serve them. There is always a good deal of chat and catching up done over these at the end of each meeting. Thanks as always go to John Price for his technical wizardry. Our hybrid meetings would not happen without him and we are most grateful for his continual support in this respect.