

ELLEN'S LIFELONG LOVE OF ART

Club member Ellen Goldman gave a talk about the hobbies which have enriched not only her life, but the lives of others too. MOIRA HOLDEN reports.

Ellen's enthusiasm for handicrafts was fuelled as a little girl when she witnessed historical artefacts seeing the light of day for the first time in centuries. She and her sister, Betty, lived in the Hague with her British father and Dutch mother, but were sent to stay with an aunt in England during the school holidays. Her aunt lived near Woodbridge, Suffolk, and was the neighbour of Edith Pretty, a landowner who was intrigued by burial mounds on her land and asked an archaeologist to excavate. These burial mounds turned out to house the majestic treasure of Sutton Hoo. The excavation discovered a 27-metre Anglo-Saxon longship, thought to come from the sixth or seventh century, which is the burial site probably of King Raedwald of the East Angles. 'We saw so many treasures taken out of the ground,' remembers Ellen, now 86. 'We were there when the grave was opened and saw these beautiful things coming out. They showed us a soup tureen they had found – it was beautiful with holes in its sides and in the middle there was a bronze pole. On top of that was a big fish. It was made of all kinds of glass. I didn't understand it at the time, but this is what we call enamel.'

This discovery entranced Ellen and sparked her interest in the art of enamelling. It had such an impact that her mother remembers when Ellen took a dead fish from the pond in the garden and placed it in an upturned bucket before placing it in a hole. She visited Beehive and bought a set of enamelling materials containing copper, pieces of glass and small kiln which could heat up to temperatures of 800 degrees. Ellen's interest in the art of enamelling carried on into her married life. When she and husband, John, married they had little money, so Ellen used her enamelling set to make some blue and white buttons for their daughter's coat. She still has those cherished buttons.

During her childhood, Ellen was enthusiastic about other handicrafts. She became famous in her neighbourhood for her fine collection of teddy bears. During the war, she was often asked by parents to give them a teddy bear so they could give a gift to their children on their birthdays. She got down to the last teddy, which was confiscated by her school teacher and then given to a little Jewish boy in the class at the end of term. 'Two years ago, he made contact with me and we became friends again,' said Ellen. The boy had survived the concentration camps.

Ellen's childhood was heavily influenced by art. Her father was a friend of the now-distinguished painter, Willy Fleur, then an unknown artist struggling to make a living. She bought a painting from him and paid by instalments. Later, she went on to have lessons with him. She was told not to visit his house at mealtimes. But one day, she did. She found out the reason why. The family was so poor it could only afford to have one small potato each and lettuce for their meals. She still has the painting by Willy – it is one of her most prized possessions. Willy was born in 1888 and died in 1967 'The lessons always started with a walk in the woods,' says Ellen. 'He really taught us how to look.'

Ellen worked as a teacher at a school for children with special needs, often teaching art alongside other subjects because no funds were available for an art teacher. She told her pupils about Sutton Hoo and they too became interested in enamelling. A visit by Ellen to an international enamel festival led to a conversation with someone there about her school. Later, a huge parcel arrived. It was an enamelling set and was accompanied by a simple message 'For your school'.

Ellen's lifelong interest in creative arts has also seen her embrace other hobbies including batik and Delft porcelain painting. But how does she view her handicraft pastimes? 'Is it art or is it craft?' she asks. Her reply: 'If you make it with pleasure, then it is art.'