

## About the exhibition.

**Bucks Open Studios June 12<sup>th</sup> – June 27<sup>th</sup> 2009**

### Exhibition of Miniatures

Dolphin Cottage, 68 Altwood Road, Maidenhead. SL6 4PZ

Open: Saturdays and Sundays 12 – 4pm; Wednesdays 4 - 7pm

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This is an exhibition of miniatures in Maidenhead where you can see beautifully crafted furniture and models made for film sets in the puppet animation series *Willoughby Drive*. Animation films go too fast to appreciate individual bits of furniture or models. This was the incentive to have exhibitions where people can see the detail of the work and the dedication of the craftsmen.

*Willoughby Drive* was a pleasurable labour of love that took fourteen years to complete. It is a series of 13 ten-minute puppet animation films about the adventures of three families who lived next door to each other in Willoughby Drive. Each set is a quarter of life size, so the puppets are 16 to 18 inches (one quarter of a 6 ft/72" man) and each scene has quarter of life-size props, most of which were specially made.

To find craftsmen who would make furniture, as well as doors, windows, and all the other props needed for the film sets, I roamed round craft fairs far and wide. I talked to wood turners, metal workers, toy makers and any other craftsmen who were selling things in miniature. Occasionally there were a few who were selling something in life size, like handmade handbags or lamp shades that I wanted made quarter of life-size. "Ooh, that sounds interesting. We'll have a go." was the reply. (Notice the handbag in the Gumble Bumps' sitting room.) Those who agreed to help came from all over England and worked at home where I visited them

As I was furnishing three houses it was important that the sitting rooms, dining rooms, kitchens etc looked as different from each other as possible. Some of the furniture, like the staircase, did for the three houses with different carpets, or the sink was painted in different colours. Tables and chairs, windows, doors and walls could all be swapped around with different colours. You can see one of the dining rooms with its sideboard, and eighteenth century table and chairs. In the films there were as many outdoor sets as indoor ones. Some of these filled the whole studio and are too big to exhibit. However in the garage you can see the three Willoughby Drive houses and their front gardens. This will include some garden furniture, a mowing machine, the tricycle, milkfloat and bus and other outdoor props.

One of my greatest pleasures was visiting my craftsmen. For most of them the things they make is a hobby. It was unusual for them to be making things for a specific purpose and their enjoyment of this added to my enthusiasm. It was, moreover, a challenge for them since many of the things I needed demanded more than skill but also ingenuity and imagination. Each episode presented new hurdles. For instance in *The Conman* there is an old fashioned chemist based on the one in Ironbridge Shropshire. For this I found a gifted glass blower from Oxford. He produced a huge

amount of glass jars, of different shapes and sizes which afterwards I filled with brightly coloured bath oils and powders to imitate the cures for Victorian sickness. You may smile at the labels of innumerable remedies for such ailments as “*Blushing*” or a “*Torpid liver*” or for “*Faded Faces*”, and other embarrassing disorders.

From the episode *New Neighbours* you can see two of my oddest requests: a smelling machine and a camera that could see through brick walls. These were inventions of the most eccentric of the neighbours.

At this time I had a brilliant model maker. He could make anything: a kitchen sink, a dustbin, hills, roads, cars, a milk float, a furniture van, anything I asked for. He was ingenious at making things made for one purpose do for another, which considerably cut the cost. Thus when different cars such as a van, a police car or a taxi, were needed, he made aluminium covers that fitted over the one basic body. These conversions can be seen in the summer house, on your way to the studio.

For the last two episodes I found Roy Wood from Reading, a prize winning wood turner and another one who welcomed challenges. He also had a lovely sense of humour and sometimes left me little jokes, too small to be seen in the film but perfectly visible at the exhibition. One of these jokes you can see in the doctor’s consulting room, on the blood pressure gauge, made for *The Diet*. On this he wrote for very high blood pressure “Oh dear!” but when it fell dangerously low “RIP”.

Often I got carried away when poking about in bric-a-brac or antique shops and found something the right size. One day, much to my excitement, I found a tiny set of Shakespeare plays, 5 by 3cms, bound in black leather. Imagine my disappointment when I filmed them they could hardly be seen while the little red raisin packets I had covered and titled as pretend books were far more convincing. Notice too the Meissen looking glass, wickedly extravagant but so right for the Gumble Bumps’ ornate sitting room. It appears often in the films but probably is seldom noticed.

The magic carpet was a different story. I had searched in vain for a carpet special enough to use. No luck, until one day I found in the attic, a carefully wrapped packet with a beautiful piece of embroidery inside. It had been made with meticulous care and love by a great-great-great aunt well over a hundred and fifty years ago. It was perfect. Now, its flying days over, it hangs on the wall as part of the exhibition.

In three of the sets you can see the neighbours: Mr and Mrs Barraclough in their dining room; Horace and Amelia Wotherspoon with their little girls Susan and Ella in their kitchen and Mr and Mrs Gumble Bump in their sitting room. Moreover you can see many of the main animal characters: The Visiting Dog, The Talking Horse, The Cow, whose head fell off in the last scene, and the parrot.

A warm welcome for anyone interested.

Tana Fletcher 2010