



**Sue Willoughby**

**1941—2011**

**A Commemoration of a Life in Lace**

**North Cheshire Lacemakers Group**

# Sue Willoughby

1941 - 2011

President

North Cheshire Lacemakers Group



We have been privileged to know Sue as a skilled lacemaker, a gifted and inspiring teacher, and a founder member and President of our Group. We also knew her as a lady devoted to her family: a caring daughter, sister, wife, mother and grandmother. In celebrating her life in lace, we remember too her family and friends, and all that she has brought to so many people in her personal life.

## THANKSGIVING FOR SUE WILLOUGHBY

My lacemaking began in Nottingham in 1992 where I was taught Torchon, Bedfordshire and Bruges. On moving to Peterborough five years later I was able to join a lacemaking group, but rarely had the opportunity to learn from a teacher in a formal way; I enjoyed the lace I was working on with help from others in the group, but could not learn a new lace. I had a dream that one day I would like to learn Bucks Point, but wasn't sure if I had the skill to learn such a fine lace, and certainly was not up to learning from a book! On arrival in the North West in 2002 I joined West Lancs Lacemakers and North Cheshire Lacemakers and of course I met Sue Willoughby.

I quickly saw not only what a skilled lacemaker she was, but also appreciated her sensitivity and sheer brilliance as a teacher! I sometimes felt inadequate as leading such a full life, I could not practice as I should, but Sue encouraged me and accepted me as I was. The day came when I asked if she would teach me Bucks Point – and oh! the joy of being properly taught again and learning this very pretty lace.

Early in 2011 I embarked on a small Bucks Point circular mat and Sue was there to give help and advice as I started it off, teaching me stuff I could never learn from any book! I have just finished that piece – I call it my Marathon lace as I did quite a lot while my 80 year old Dad was running the Marathon in April! But it will also be my piece in loving remembrance of Sue, a beautiful person and a wonderful teacher.

*Jayne Shepherd*

## SUE WILLOUGHBY A LACEMAKER OF EXCELLENCE

Susan Elizabeth Waters, born 1941 in Lyndhurst, qualified at Leicester as a Domestic Science teacher specialising in Needlework, and taught in Hampshire. She married Derek Willoughby in 1964, retaining her very appropriate initials - S.E.W! Helsby became home when Derek joined ICI in 1965; they had three children and three grandchildren.

Sue's father came from near Olney, a bobbin-lacemaking area. His mother died when he was four and his 13-year-old sister Kate Waters brought up her five siblings for two years. When their father remarried, his new wife asked if Kate could learn lacemaking as a reward (not to earn her living). Sue said, *"She stood, watching - not allowed to move because it made dust. The lacemaker was Sarah Whiting, in her sixties in the 1901 Census, occupation 'lacemaker'. Kate's teaching stopped at 18 when they moved, but she continued as a hobby, so I reckon I've got connections right back to the Lace Schools. Sarah Whiting must have learned in a Lace School, and Kate had a pure lace from that time."*



*Sue with a photo  
of Aunt Kate*

When Sue was 12, she stayed with Aunt Kate who taught her lacemaking to keep her out of mischief. Kate made mainly Bedfordshire small edgings and narrow Bucks Point edgings. Sue started with a little Bedfordshire edging, with just whole-stitch and half-stitch. A couple of years later Kate gave her a second pattern, and taught her how to make leaves - the only two patterns Sue knew until she was 35!

In 1977 Sue saw an advert about a new Manchester lacemaking group. She was recovering from her first bout of arthritis so Derek drove her, the bolster and a Bedfordshire pattern. The lady greeting her admired her equipment. Sue recalled, *"I preened and said, 'I'm a lacemaker, have*

*been for years' - **two patterns!** - 'I do Bedfordshire and Bucks Point'; she said, 'No, my dear, you're doing Bedfordshire.' It was Susanne Thompson! I've laughed with Susanne over it many a time."*

Sue took lessons with Jane Rushworth and Susanne, then courses, expanding her repertoire from Bucks and Beds to include other laces, but surprisingly - *"I had great difficulty with Torchon at first, I couldn't suss out the footside!"* She studied with many tutors, broadening her knowledge: *"As a lacemaker you've got to know the correct way, but also the way that suits you. How you handle the bobbins and threads, your type of pillow - all these alter how your lace develops, so you need to get as many little bits as you can."*

Sue was in the first group taking the new City & Guilds Lacemaking qualification. *"Two children were still at school, of an age when they could look after themselves, so I thought, I could do it; it was a challenge I would like to do. We worked mainly on our own, meeting monthly, helping each other. It got a real powerhouse drive, we boosted each other and took C&G. The Saturday group continued; people were working towards Part 2. I couldn't do it at the time - I had another flare-up - but I could take part, the brainstorming, the ideas ... it was very good. Although I'm a traditional lace-maker, I'm not averse to trying modern ideas and achieving something."*



*Bucks Point edging  
made by Sue from a  
historical Olney  
parchment from her  
treasured collection.*

Candidates had to cover various areas, not all to everyone's taste: *"We had to do Needlelace - not a craft I'm happy with, but I found Tambour hardest - you'd realise you hadn't caught it with your hook and out it would come! It took me three days to do a simple leaf."* Some participants pursued forms other than their original interests, while Sue enjoyed the personal challenge but confirmed her love of traditional styles.

She soon had people keen to learn lacemaking. A trained teacher, she began her first class around 1979-80, then another, rising to seven a week, skilfully conducted with understanding and humour. She took time to help students of all abilities: *"I enjoy teaching; I enjoy somebody coming in knowing nothing about lace, and watching them develop."* Sue organised residential weekends, and trips to lace collections and other events, at home and abroad. She and Derek worked tirelessly on planning to bring broader experiences of lace.

Sue had particular interest in teaching lacemaking to youngsters, holding a children's class. For the 1981 Royal Wedding, Sue worked with her Hillside School youngsters to make a Lace Wedding Plaque gift for the Royal Couple. They received a thank-you letter, and the gift featured in the Royal Gifts souvenir brochure!

The Manchester Group held an exhibition in Chester but had no room to accept new members. Sue explained *"I felt we couldn't take our work to Chester and say 'This is what we do but you can't do it', so Liz Fowler, Lesley Groom and I established a steering committee; we had an inaugural meeting in 1983, and our first AGM in '84 when we set up the North Cheshire Lacemakers Group."* In 2004 Sue was offered the Presidency of the Group and reflected with a smile, *"I'm rather chuffed; it's very kind."* She served on The Lace Guild committee and chaired their Young Lacemakers.

Visiting a Northamptonshire museum, handling old parchments and obtaining photocopies, sparked an interest in investigating old patterns without a lace sample, working out how the design was made. Sue's first such work was headpiece (photographed as a Barbara Underwood book's frontispiece). Research enabled Sue to understand pattern markings and learn that the headpiece should have raised tallies.

She was able to take some patterns from the Luton collection, and working historic designs became her passion. She recalled Anne Buck's Thomas Lester book showing raised work, and described her determination to develop a technique for making them: *"I thought, 'There's got to be a way of doing it', and I've played with various ways."*

*I have succeeded - there's two or three ways." She created new designs using the technique: "I've developed the raised petals, I've done it for*



*Wedding cushion with rings; Sue's design using raised petals*

audience to understand how the threads weave, and amused that frequently *men* would say, 'that's logical'! Her lace featured in publications - her exquisite Collar with Ivy Leaf Pattern, from an old parchment, is in Barbara Underwood's "Bedfordshire Lace Collection". On lace identification, she deferred to others' knowledge but agreed she



*The Ivy Leaf collar*

*they didn't go back and undo, they just kept going so you got funny things happening, and it can throw you when you're looking at it. But yes, I am interested in looking and trying to decide."*

*cushions - a wedding cushion and a brooch cushion - and I'm very pleased. With the wedding cushion you can fix the rings inside the raised part. It's basically looking at old patterns and the working out that I've found a great challenge and enjoyed doing; if it doesn't work you think again - keeping going until you achieve what you want."*

Sue gave illustrated talks to WI and other groups, always with practice pillows for hands-on experience, enabling her



*Sue's Bedfordshire piece, now on extended loan to Knuston Hall as part of the Barbara Underwood Collection*

could "very often give a hint"; she brought years of experience but also a practical lacemaker's insight: "*I find it very interesting - but I can easily be fooled! We talk about techniques - but the old lacemakers used whatever was at hand because they were producing it for money,*

Despite her traditional background, Sue had no hesitation in suggesting patterns such as those of Eeva-Liisa Kortelahti to her students although they have unconventional aspects. *“It looks to the students as if they can do it, and you point out that funny things happen; it makes you read the pattern and understand what’s going on, and it helps you to understand other types of lace at the same time.”*

Sue joined the international lacemaking organisation OI DFA in 1993, attending biennial meetings. She and Derek went to Finland, Ghent, Barcelona, Nottingham, Prague and Greece, and she was thrilled to get to Japan in 2010. *“It’s lovely, you meet people with the same interests, you’ve something to talk about, but there are varied backgrounds - it IS a world of lace.”*

Sue was an original member of the Westhope Group of lacemakers, established following City & Guilds. The group is a forum for excellence and development in all lacemaking disciplines; Sue embraced innovative styles as well as developing and perfecting her favoured English laces. The first Group exhibition was around 1994; members took it on tour: *“Some of us went to set it up in Bruges; it was a great success.”* Westhope inspired her to try new things: *“It has stretched me a little bit, and I do like to encourage students who use colour.... I am traditionalist, I do like white lace, but there’s a place for everything.”* One of her Westhope projects was a hat with myriad Milanese braids, inspired by a photograph.

Sue gained a Medal for Excellence in The Lace Guild 2004 "Myth or Mystery" exhibition, for a Bedfordshire headpiece - typically, she studied and made the Northampton collection pattern to discover how it was originally worked. That was her private pleasure in lacemaking, together with her teaching to introduce others to the craft she loved: *“I want to take patterns and find out how they are done. I want to do lace for my pleasure, I want to teach it for other people’s pleasure, and I like to admire what has been achieved.”*

***Extracts from a biography of Sue Willoughby prepared by Joan Wakem for The Lace Guild, 2006, and photographs on other pages, reproduced by kind permission of The Lace Guild. The full Biography may be borrowed from The Lace Guild library.***



## REMEMBERING SUE WILLOUGHBY

More years ago than I care to remember (1983? 1984?), I was at Knuston Hall in Northamptonshire, on a week's residential lacemaking course. In those days there was a "gang" of us, and an occasionally rowdy gang we were, with Margaret "Momma" Reynolds, in her 70s, being the ringleader! We would go every year to Knuston in late July/early August, and we had the most marvellous fun.

Some illustrious names were also at Knuston with us in those days, and our tutors were Vi Bullard and Barbara Underwood. Sue was one of the illustrious, of course, and I particularly remember the year she was a City & Guilds "guinea pig". This was when the C&G course in Lacemaking was being planned and piloted, and a number of lacemaking teachers and other gifted folk spent a year working through the proposed syllabus, to check its feasibility. (Everyone later took two or three years to work it, but not Sue and her colleagues!)

Sue was working the Bedfordshire headpiece that later featured on the front of one of Barbara's books, and on about the Thursday evening of the week, she had approximately two inches of the ends of the headpiece to work. At 11 pm we all went to bed (we were keen in those days – at our pillows at 8 am, work through the day, and go to bed only when we couldn't keep our eyes open!) Sue said she would stay up and finish her lace, partly because she *wanted* to get it finished, and also because of the deadlines she had to meet.

When we came down the following morning, she was still at her pillow, but the lace was finished, and, understandably, we all gasped over it and admired it. As you can imagine, she had used hundreds and hundreds of bobbins, and had cut them off, leaving ends, when she needed to add more pairs. Her lace, though very visible, was also festooned with these hundreds of ends waiting to be sewn in or cut off, and as we complimented her on her work she looked at it and said ruefully, "Yes, well, it will be a lot better when it's had a haircut and a shave!" The truth of her words you can see for yourself, on the front cover of Barbara's book.

*With gentle and awe-inspired memories of a very gifted lady.*

*Sue Taylor*

## **SUE WILLOUGHBY - AN INSPIRING TEACHER**

I first knew Sue during the early years of my joining the world of lacemaking in the early 1980s. I remember the trepidation that Pat, Joyce and myself felt the very first time we spent a week at Knuston Hall. How had we managed to find ourselves in the company of the 'big guns' of lacemaking? They, of course, included Sue Willoughby!!

As the years went by I did get to know her much better and so many recollections come to mind. There were happy rewarding weekends at Bala, all sorts of group outings and trips, a wonderful visit to Bruges in 2003..... these were all high spots in my lacemaking life.

More and more I came to realise and appreciate Sue's wonderful skills as a lacemaker and also her talents as a teacher. The two things don't necessarily go together, but Sue was certainly blessed in this way. She had the patience and calmness of approach, not to mention humour, which always had the effect of overcoming a problem, or extending one's knowledge that bit further.

While we will mourn the loss of Sue for her association with the North Cheshire Group as well as the South Wirral Group on a personal basis, she had far wider connections. As a long-standing member of the Lace Guild, and Westhope Group as well as OIDFA, she was known far and wide for her wonderful lacemaking, her continuous promotion of lacemaking, and her enthusiasm for a craft with which she lived for virtually all her life.

She was fortunate that her family were equally involved, and the wonderful loving support given to her by Derek was invaluable. Indeed we and many more will mourn the loss of Sue, not only for what she has given to lacemaking, but also as herself - a truly unique person.

*Irene Clements*

## **NORTH AND MID-WALES LACEMAKERS EXHIBITION**

The idea for an exhibition, to show what beautiful work was being produced in North Wales, began in 1991, the brainchild of Joyce Dorsett who organised a committee to stage the first exhibition at Penrhyn Castle, near Bangor, in the 'Brushing Room'. This was a small and rather dark gallery, but the quality and quantity of lace sent in was outstanding. Joyce persuaded various businesses to donate prizes, and she invited Sue to come to be the judge.

Sue approached this daunting task with great professionalism, and I think, very great courage. It was not an easy task, but she had spent much time in preparing a marking system and also spent a lot of time in the actual careful judging of each individual piece of lace. There was also a trophy to be awarded to her personal favourite piece, and she chose a delightful picture of a Heron in free lace - with the words that it was not something that she could ever have made herself, therefore it was the piece that she would most like to take home! This was typical of Sue - her own work was precise, technically difficult, often monochrome and beautifully executed, but she could still admire work that did not fall into these categories. She was also a huge encouragement to all those ladies who entered work at that first exhibition, so that each person felt that their lace was really valued.

Over the years she maintained an interest in what was happening with the North Wales Exhibition, and those students of hers whom she taught in her weekend courses at Bala were also encouraged to enter their work in later exhibitions, as she did herself. Derek also came with his beautifully turned bobbins to sell.

After that first exhibition it was decided not to have the lace judged and to award prizes, but to have a few trophies to be awarded according to votes cast by the general public who visited the exhibition.

We in North Wales are very grateful for Sue's careful commitment to that first exhibition, and from those small beginnings it is still going strong - 2012 being the eighth exhibition.

*Mary Vellacott*

## **SUE WILLOUGHBY**

### ***An appreciation from July 1990 Pillow Talk on Sue's retirement from NCLG Chairmanship***

As the longest serving committee member (and one who has increasingly more grey hairs as the years go by as a result!), may I give a vote of thanks to Sue Willoughby for her term of office as Chairman.

Although '*dynamic*' may not be the word which immediately springs to mind to describe Sue, I think it quite appropriate.

In her two years, Sue has been untiring in her efforts on the Group's behalf. She has been particularly strong in forward planning, and I think that when a group meets relatively infrequently, as we do, this has been one of the secrets of our success. Particular highlights have been the trip to Bedford and the recent exhibition, both of which were Sue's inspiration. Under her Chairmanship, the Group has grown and prospered beyond all expectations.

I am sure that the members will join me in thanking Sue for her dedication (and indeed, Derek for his not inconsiderable assistance in the background), and in wishing her enjoyment of more leisurely meetings in the future, and also in wishing Joyce Conroy every success in her new role.

*Ruth Hockney*

## **SUE WILLOUGHBY - WERE TO START**

I started in Sue's Tuesday class in 1994 and had no idea I would still be making lace all these years later. Torchon just clicked with me - although I am sure Sue was pretty fed up with me saying, "Oh yes, that's really logical" whenever something finally made sense to me!

I got to the stage of looking at a new pattern - a circular edging, I think, that would need to be joined back to the starting point - and saying to Sue, "Where do I start?" I have never forgotten her response: "Well, where do you want to finish?" I must have given her a very blank look - but her explanation of thinking ahead in order to hide the finishing knots under some cloth-stitch made a lasting impression on me.

Some years later I started piano lessons and learned the hard way that working out good fingering patterns is essential, so that you don't "run out of fingers". The same principle applies - thinking backwards can be a great help. Many's the time my piano teacher has heard me say on this subject, "My lace teacher Sue says 'where do you want to finish?'"

They were wise words from a wise lady, who has given me so much pleasure through lacemaking.

*Joan Wakem*

## **WADDESDON MANOR AND LUTON MUSEUM SUE WILLOUGHBY'S TRIP 23-24 JUNE**

*Some members went on a trip in June, organised by Sue, first to the National Trust's Waddesdon Manor near Aylesbury. It was the Rothschilds' home and has a huge collection of furniture and other treasures, gardens, and an excellent lace collection. Our hotel stay included an evening talk on Threads by supplier Alan Rout, and a chance to buy from him and Winslow Bobbins on Sunday morning. Then to Luton Museum to see the reserve lace collection and have a quick look at the Lace and other galleries. Liz Proctor writes about this memorable weekend.*

At long last the day came when we got on the Selwyns coach which had some tables at the back, and a bar area too - Sue and Derek provided tea and coffee so we were looked after from the start! We arrived at Waddesdon Manor at 11 am and split into two groups; I was in the first to see the lace guided by a very kind lady who talked with Sue about the cataloguing she had to do. The lace was lovely. Then the groups changed over and I went to the Manor - a beautiful place, too big to see in one day!

At 4.30 we went on to Winslow, to the Bell Hotel - a funny place with old rooms and passages. We were in time to change and look round the town before a lovely dinner and a talk afterwards. Next morning we had a very nice breakfast then two stalls to buy bobbin, threads, books etc. On the coach again at 11.15 and to Luton for lunch, and then the Museum. It was a shame we couldn't stay longer. We got back to Frodsham about 7.30. A GREAT BIG THANK-YOU to Sue and Derek on behalf of us all.

*Liz Proctor*

*First published in Pillow Talk November 2001*

**SUE WILLOUGHBY**  
**NCLG SPEAKER MARCH 2003**

Our very own Sue Willoughby never fails to entertain and inform us, and her talk in March on The Lace Guild was no exception. Formed in 1976, the Guild grew from the resurgence of lace as a craft and its aims included the promotion of knowledge, conservation and cataloguing of lace - the Guild now has full Museum status - as well as the setting of standards through assessments for young and adult lacemakers.

Sue's slides took us through these and other aspects of the Lace Guild's work, such as mounting exhibitions, producing books and other publications and the provision of study bursaries.

Inevitably, Sue brought us to the annual Conventions of the Guild with the AGM, taster workshops, displays and suppliers - a timely coverage with the Llandudno event so close in both time and space!

Sue also covered The Hollies - the Guild's headquarters where admin, the library, collections, planning and so much else are squashed into this unassuming double-fronted house on a main road near the glass industry of Stourbridge. Thank you, Sue, for bringing The Lace Guild to its non-members, and for showing all its facets for its members who may well not have considered how wide-ranging are their organisation's activities.

*First published in Pillow Talk July 2003*

## **A WEEKEND OF LAUGHTER, EATING AND LACE BALA, 8-10 OCTOBER 1999**

Is this your idea of heaven? Lace pillow, Sue on hand to help, breakfast, morning coffee, lunch, afternoon tea, dinner and evening drinks prepared for you, great company and no shopping, no housework, no washing and ironing and no interruptions for a whole weekend. Well, this is exactly what you get on one of Sue's weekends at Frondderw, Bala.

Arriving late Friday afternoon, we were made very welcome from the moment we walked in. Having left our pillows in the comfortable workroom, we unpacked and joined everybody else for sherry before being served the first of a series of excellent meals. (Be prepared to put on several pounds during the weekend.) Then we returned to the workroom for the first session.

After breakfast on Saturday, it was back to the pillows. In the afternoon, it was time for a break and a chance to clear our heads by a walk down to Bala and a wander round the shops, before returning for tea and cakes. (Much needed after the climb back up the hill.) Refreshed, we worked on.

The weekend flew past and by teatime on Sunday, everybody was very pleased with the progress they had made, had had a good laugh, felt relaxed and determined to start a diet on Monday. I had managed two repeats of a Bucks motif, which for a Bucks novice was very good going. I hope that I hadn't stressed Sue too much by my lack of understanding of the angles, I always needed to have the position of my pillow adjusted by Sue!

A weekend at Bala is a great opportunity to learn a new lace, get going on a new project or finish off that piece which has been on the pillow for years in a relaxed and friendly atmosphere with Sue on hand to help. If this has whetted your appetite, the dates of this year's weekends are in the back of Pillow Talk.

*Sara Ruks*

*First published in Pillow Talk March 2000*



## WESTHOPE GROUP MEMORIES

I remember Sue as being a very welcoming member of the group when I joined, always fun to be with. I will miss her being at our annual meetings. I got to know her a little better when I helped her hang the group's exhibition 'Divergence' at Frodsham in 2009. Sue organised this venue for the exhibition and worked hard, along with Derek, to make it a success. Sue made beautiful traditional lace, but she was up for the challenge of working in the more unusual ways of the Westhope group. Her piece for the latest group exhibition, 'Inside Out', was proof of this.

Sue was a lovely lady and will be greatly missed.

*Pamela Layzell - Westhope Goup*



*One of Sue's Westhope projects; Hat with Milanese Braids nicknamed 'Bathcap', inspired by a photo of The Crescent, Bath, with trees and railings in the foreground*



I thought she was meant to be a bit frail, but, last time I stayed with her, she and her husband took me for a little stroll straight up the great rock behind their house, on a hot day, at about five miles an hour. It was, however, well worth it on two counts. The view from the top was splendid, and I found some seeds on the way up of a lovely yellow-flowered creeper which now graces the garden here.

*Anne Dyer - Westhope Group*

*Sue's Bedfordshire Headpiece with Lappets, for which she was awarded a Medal for Excellence in The Lace Guild's 2004 'Myth or Mystery' exhibition. This lace is now on extended loan to the Rachel B Kay-Shuttleworth Collection at Gawthorpe Hall.*

## NEIGHBOURING GROUPS

I will always remember her infectious enthusiasm for lacemaking. It was with the children at Helsby School. It was with the lacemakers in Japan. It was present in her many classes. I caught the bug. Many thanks Sue.

*Judy Gleave  
Cheshire Bobbin Clickers*



*Photo of Sue teaching at  
one of her Shrewsbury  
classes. Descriptive pose,  
the hands say it all!*

*Reproduced with the kind  
permission of the  
Shrewsbury Lacemakers.*

My own recollection of Sue was in relation to starting a tablecloth edging. I was wondering if I really wanted to do such a big project, with corners which would mean that I was locked into making it a set size. Sue's comment to that was 'why do you need corners', so I have embarked on the edging and will make it the size I want it to be, gathering around corners like Sue suggested.

*Mary Steer—Chairman  
Shrewsbury Lacemakers*



*Bedfordshire Headpiece  
made by Sue from a pattern  
from the collection of  
John Sargeant.  
This piece is on extended  
loan to  
The Lace Guild.*



Donations in Sue's memory by family, friends and lacemakers to Hospice of the Good Shepherd, Backford, Chester, have exceeded £3,000