

Interviewee: Lesley Priestly (LP)	Interviewers: Pamela Baillie (PB); Susan Howell (SH)
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TITLE	<i>Pamela Baillie and Susan Howell interview Lesley Priestly.</i>
REGION	<i>Dumfries and Galloway</i>
SUBJECTS/KEYWORDS	<i>Kirkcudbright artists' community, Kirkcudbright galleries, local artists, local figures, family history.</i>
COUNTY	<i>Dumfries and Galloway</i>
TOWN	<i>Kirkcudbright</i>
DATE OF INTERVIEW	<i>29/01/18</i>
INTERVIEWER	<i>Pamela Baillie and Susan Howell</i>
YEAR RANGE	<i>2018</i>
SUMMARY	<i>Pamela Baillie interviews Leslie Priestly with Susan Howell. They discuss Leslie's background and her family's move from Glasgow to Kirkcudbright, before going on to discuss the members of Kirkcudbright's artists' community that Leslie knew particularly well. The first of these artists discussed was Lena Alexander, who painted portraits of the children of Kirkcudbright and owned a dress shop called Alexa's which Leslie's aunt and mother eventually came to own. They also discuss John Halliday, who did a portrait of Leslie when he was a young man. Leslie also talks about the Dallases and the Jeffs, and the Kirkcudbright summer school which seemed to take place with Glasgow art students every year. They also discuss the artists Anna Hotchkiss, Vera Alabaster and Phyllis Bone and their work in the community. Finally, there is a discussion about galleries and upcoming developments in the town.</i>

**Leslie Priestly – LP; Pamela Baillie – PB; Susan Howell – SH.**

**Keywords: Background; Lena Alexander; John Halliday; The Dallases and the Jeffs; Kirkcudbright Summer School; Anna Hotchkis, Vera Alabaster and Phyllis Bone; Kirkcudbright Artist' Community; Galleries; Cecile Walton; A New Kirkcudbright Gallery.**

**Background – 0h 00m 00s**

PB: Ok.

SH: We've started.

PB: Ok. So, just to introduce this recording, it's a recording made by Pamela Baillie interviewing Leslie Priestly on the 29<sup>th</sup> of January, 2018 in Kirkcudbright and in the presence of Susan Howell. Um, so, Leslie, maybe you could just give us a little bit of background of yourself, a brief history of, like, when you came to Kirkcudbright... To start with, just to sort of get us into the conversation.

LP: Yes. Well, my parents moved down with us, of course, in 1953 from Glasgow. So, very nice to come down to a rural area... And my father was a teacher at the local school and eventually my mother ran a dress shop in town. And I went to The Johnston School and then I went to the high school, the academy.

PB: Kirkcudbright Academy.

LP: Kirkcudbright Academy, yeah.

PB: Mm.

LP: As regards the artists in the town, one was always aware that there were lots of interesting artistic people around, and it's only in retrospect of course, that you realise how important they were but at the time they were just there: sort of down closes and living in the High Street and-

PB: Yeah.

LP: -Castle Street and so on.

PB: And, um, who were the artists- I mean, were there any that you actually had any close relationship with or communication with?

LP: Well, the, em... The person I remember most was Lena, Lena Alexander, otherwise known as Lena Duncan.

**Lena Alexander – 0h 02m 09s**

PB: Mm.

LP: And yes, I had most to do with her. She started a very nice dress shop in Castle Street called Alexa's, after her own name. But she was an artist and she did wonderful flower portraits and portraits of all the local children.

PB: Mmhm.

LP: Which I- I've got one as well. So, that's- that was most of her work and also, she went to Paris a lot, Lena.

PB: Mm.

LP: And then she started this dress shop, and then I think mebbe she had been doing it for a few years when my aunt was widowed and bought this dress shop from Lena and my mother became involved. So, the pair of them, my mother, Mary Rhodes and her sister Ishbel, ran this classy dress shop called Alexa's. And then, Lena opened a coffee shop in Castle Street, on the other side of the road further down.

PB: Which number was it?

LP: That was number 34.

PB: Quite interesting to know.

LP: Yeah.

PB: And Alexa's, what number was that-? In fact it was number 17.

LP: Alexa's, I couldn't tell you that.

PB: Not sure?

LP: That's now the [?].

PB: That's right, yeah, yeah.

LP: So, she ran this Parisian-style café... Um, little coffee shop but she hadn't a clue how to work the coffee machine [*laughter*]. So, I was a student at that time, so I helped her with the technology-

PB: Sort out things.

LP: -with the coffee machine and, yeah. So, that- she's the main person I have strong memories of just being quite a... Quite a... Fun, smiley, large-ish lady who was good-natured, just not very practical [*laughter*].

**0h 04m 06s**

PB: Uhuh. You mentioned that she'd done a portrait of you, was it a life- was it from life or from a photograph?

LP: It would be from-

PB: I wonder if you had to sit for that?

LP: No, it would be from life.

PB: Yes.

LP: Yes, I had to sit for her.

PB: Uhuh.

LP: In a- I did a lot of dance so I was in a peasant costume-

PB: Yeah.

LP: -which was a character costume for the-

PB: Yeah.

LP: -dance exams at the time. It was next door.

PB: Could we take a photograph of that later, perhaps?

LP: Yes, of course you could. But half of Kirkcudbright's got one.

PB: Yeah.

LP: So, you know.

PB: Yeah.

LP: Yeah. I just remember her being a very pleasant... Slightly, um... What's a word I might use? Slightly, eh...

PB: Eccentric?

LP: Eccentric, that's the word.

PB: Yeah.

LP: Ah, lady.

PB: Mmhm. Quite a colourful character.

LP: Yes.

PB: Mmhm. And were there any other artists that you had connection with?

LP: On a Saturday morning, I used to go to Miles Johnson, Miles Johnson and his wife, Dorothy... Um, lived also on Castle Street.

PB: Mmhm.

LP: And he ran classes, Saturday morning classes for local children to go and do what he did, which was fretwork, cutting...

PB: Yeah.

LP: Cutting out birds and painting and so on. So yes, he was a sweet, kind, smiley man who was lovely. I didn't know his wife so much but I knew Miles Johnson.

PB: Yeah, yeah.

LP: So, you can still find these cut out birds all round Kirkcudbright, I'm sure.

PB: Oh, I know.

LP: Yeah.

PB: And that's when you were at school, yeah?

LP: That's when I was at school, yes.

PB: Yeah, yeah.

LP: I suppose from the age of about ten till fourteen.

#### **John Halliday – 0h 06m 00s**

PB: Yes. And are there- do you have any... Apart from, you know, the Lena Alexander portrait, are there any artifacts you have? I mean, any paintings from the local artists you hold in your house from that period?

LP: From that period?

PB: Yeah.

LP: Well, my mother was quite a collector, so we have inherited a few of her paintings by Taylor.

PB: Mmhm, yeah.

LP: E.A. Taylor and... Um, yes and the other one I have is by John Halliday.

PB: Mmhm.

LP: John Halliday was a student, just a young painter, young artist, and my mother decided he was going to quite possibly be very good and well known. So, she had a painting of me done [*laughter*].

PB: Right.

LP: And again, I'm in my ballet costume which we still have.

PB: Yes.

LP: Um, he's never been along to see it.

PB: Right.

LP: So, I think he just has moved on, you know, from that sort of thing. But he'd be- would've been a very young man, nineteen or twenty.

PB: That'd be quite in- maybe- yes. We'll see about...

LP: Mm.

PB: Cause yes, they would like- they would like sort of photographs of artifacts or- that people would be happy to show because I suppose a lot... Ye know, there's paintings but people don't know about them.

LP: Well, they don't get seen.

PB: Yeah, they don't get seen.

LP: Yes, yes.

PB: Yeah. And, um... As we've talked about Lena Alexander, was she very involved in the town's activities or she was someone that kept to herself?

LP: I couldn't tell you that.

PB: Yeah?

LP: I don't truly remember whether she was or not.

PB: Mmhm.

LP: And then there were the Dallases. Ann and Alistair Dallas-

PB: Right.

LP: -who moved just a few doors along there. She was always cycling past and so happy and friendly.

#### **The Dallases and the Jeffs / Kirkcudbright Summer School – 0h 08m 04s**

PB: Mmhm.

LP: Do you remember her?

PB: I remember- not very clearly, actually.

LP: Yeah.

PB: Yeah.

LP: I mean, since we've lived here she- she was...

SH: What did she do? I don't know...

LP: Watercolours.

SH: Watercolours?

LP: Uhuh, and so did he. He was a bit more forbidding.

SH: Mmhm.

LP: A bit more, ye know, out of reach.

PB: Mmhm.

LP: But she was very, very kind-

PB: Mmhm.

LP: -and interested in everything that was happening.

PB: Mmhm.

LP: And of course, there was a summer school in Kirkcudbright when I was young. You would often see people setting up their easels on the harbour-

PB: Mmhm.

LP: -and just painting the scene in front of them, of the waters either receding or coming in. And apparently, that was- I think they had to do a week- it was... Glasgow School of Art, I think it was compulsory or suggested that they did a week's summer school in Kirkcudbright just because it was such an artistic place and so many...

PB: Mm.

LP: So many artists living there, and the light was apparently very different. So yes, that was quite interesting. I remember that and... Uh. Yeah?

SH: Those students that came to the art school, they just came for the week and stayed here? They would have lodgings...?

LP: That's my understanding.

SH: Yes, yes.

LP: Is they came down and were resident for a week, don't know where they stayed... And yes, it was part of their course to come and stay in Kirkcudbright.

SH: Interesting to know whether they came back and developed into well-known artists or not.

LP: Yes, yes indeed.

PB: Mm.

SH: I don't know.

LP: Yes, uhuh.

SH: I assume they would be taught by the... Someone from the Glasgow School of Art, yes?

LP: Yes, probably but again, I don't know.

SH: Yeah, don't remember.

LP: I was just aware of them being there and it was a sort of annual event. Other artists that were around at the time were Tim Jeffs and his wife. They lived in the High Street... And his, as far as I know, his priority was weaving.

**Anna Hotchkiss, Vera Alabaster and Phyllis Bone – 0h 10m 13s**

PB: Mmhm.

LP: And that's what he was best known for. I don't know what she did, at all. We have one of his rugs-

PB: Yeah.

LP: -inherited from my mother. Em... And then there was Anna Hotchkiss-

PB: Did you know-

LP: - wonderful names.

PB: Did you know her?

LP: I knew what she looked like.

PB: Yeah? Yeah. Cause a lot of these people, I didn't know them. I don't know if she was around when I grew up, it was a bit later.

LP: Probably.

PB: Yeah.

LP: Yeah.

PB: Yeah.

LP: She lived down Greengate's Close and I...

PB: Mmhm.

LP: And I think she was a friend of my mother's, so-

PB: Yeah.

LP: -we'd see her sometimes.

PB: Yes, yes.

LP: It was just the wonderful names: Anna Hotchkiss and Vera Alabaster [*laughter*].

PB: That was another?

LP: That was another. Whether they were their proper names...

PB: Uhuh.

LP: Or assumed names, I don't know.

SH: I hope she was a sculptress [*laughter*].

LP: Alabaster? No, she wasn't.

PB: *[laughter]* Yeah.

LP: But there was a sculptress in the town and that was Phyllis Bone.

SH: Mmhm.

PB: Mmhm.

LP: Who lived up near Barrhill Avenue in a little bungalow. She was quite well known for her pieces and her drawings.

PB: Yeah. And Kirkcudbright, ye know, known for its artists, did you feel that... That that influenced you quite a lot? Did you start painting because of that or it developed an interest in art in yourself?

LP: That's all a very good question *[laughter]*.

PB: Yeah.

LP: Certainly when you're surrounded by so much art-

#### Kirkcudbright Artists' Community – 0h 12m 02s

PB: Mmhm.

LP: -and everybody in Kirkcudbright of my vintage, ye know, collected paintings and their parents collected paintings, so they had lots of paintings by these very well-known people on their walls. Yes, when I came to retire from teaching, I took up- I tried painting. I wanted to get out away from lines and right-angles and numbers and just try and just... So, yes.

PB: Mmhm.

LP: I think being in an environment like this probably does encourage one to give it a go.

PB: Mmhm, yeah. Yeah. And um, how would you say that the life then, in Kirkcudbright, compares to the life now? It's still the artist's town but... Have you any- have you thought about- do you think it's improved in some way or can we just say that was then and this is now? How-

LP: I think that was then and this is now-

PB: Mm.

LP: -is probably the best way to look at it. Obviously, when you're nine, ten eleven-

PB: Mm.

LP: -you're not really looking at it on the grand scale. One was just aware of all these interesting, artistic, interconnected people around.

PB: Mm.

LP: Which I think had- it all started with Hornel, as far as I can understand.

PB: Yeah.

LP: And then more people came because of him and so on. Eh, so, yes, it's just different but it's still got a special atmosphere.

PB: Mmhm.



LP: Kirkcudbright still does have its light in the harbour and... Reflections off the mud [*laughter*].

SH: When you were growing up, was there a gallery in Kirkcudbright that you would go and see these paintings? Did the painters have exhibitions?

**Galleries / Cecile Walton – 0h 14m 00s**

LP: No, I don't think there was a gallery.

SH: No?

LP: No. Not that I was aware of at all. I can't think of one at that time. I think people just probably sold or showed their paintings from their own studios...

PB: Mmhm.

LP: Over the years. Miles Johnson had a shop window cause he lived in Castle Street. So, he would have sold some from there. And the Dallases were quite well-known and they would sell from their property near the Tolbooth, I'm sure.

PB: And the Jeffs, cause I remember I used to go down the Close, yeah, mmhm.

LP: Yes, and the Jeffs.

PB: Mmhm.

LP: But a Kirkcudbright gallery, I do not recall.

PB: Mmhm.

LP: Don't think there was one then.

PB: Can't remember then when the harbour portrait gallery actually...

LP: No, you'd need to speak to somebody from...

PB: Yeah.

LP: From there.

PB: From thereabout. And, um, did you know at all Cecile Walton?

LP: Well, I didn't know her.

PB: Mmhm.

LP: But my mother had a friend who was a bit older than her, Jessica.

PB: Right.

LP: Jessica Allan, who lived out at the Tongland Bridge.

PB: Uhuh.

LP: And she had a beautiful old house with everything original. No television...

PB: Mmhm.

LP: No central heating, as far as I know. And the walls were covered with Cecile Walton's pieces and I thought they were magic, ye know, absolutely magic. She was a good friend of Jessica's.

PB: Was it her paintings-?

LP: Oh, it was her paintings.

PB: -or she did a lot of line drawings?

LP: Oh, did she now? It was paintings.

PB: Yeah, mmhm.

LP: Very ethereal, otherworldly sort of paintings.

PB: Mmhm.

LP: And, yes, Cecile Walton. Yes, I'd love to have had one of them.

PB: Yeah.

LP: Yeah.

PB: *[laughter]* Interesting. And, uh... Have you any thoughts on the development of this new Kirkcudbright gallery that's... We're converting the townhall. Have you any opinions on that? Is it a good thing for the town or...?

#### **A New Kirkcudbright Gallery – 0h 16m 20s**

LP: I think it will be a good thing for the town. Not that it is short of visitors, as ye know, normally but I think it probably will be a good thing for the town.

PB: Mmhm.

LP: It's prestigious.

PB: Yes.

LP: And hopefully, there'll be part of it which shows the heritage of Kirkcudbright artists. We've been talking about some of them. So, hopefully they'll have that as well as the changing exhibitions from Glasgow.

PB: Mmhm.

LP: Yes, I think it'll be very good for the town. Yeah. Looking forward to it.

PB: Yes.

LP: Mm.

PB: I- yeah. Is there anything else, Leslie, that you would like to add to this conversation?

?: Should we pause for a moment?

PB: Yeah.

LP?: Yeah.

*[pause in recording]*

PB: Ok, thanks Leslie. The interview ends here.