

INTERVIEW WITH MARGARET HART

26TH JANUARY 2016

This is an interview with Mrs Margaret Hart. We are sitting in her sitting room in Prospect Road, Hythe. She is going to tell us about her early memories, and her memories of when she first moved to Hythe.

“Margaret, where were you born?”

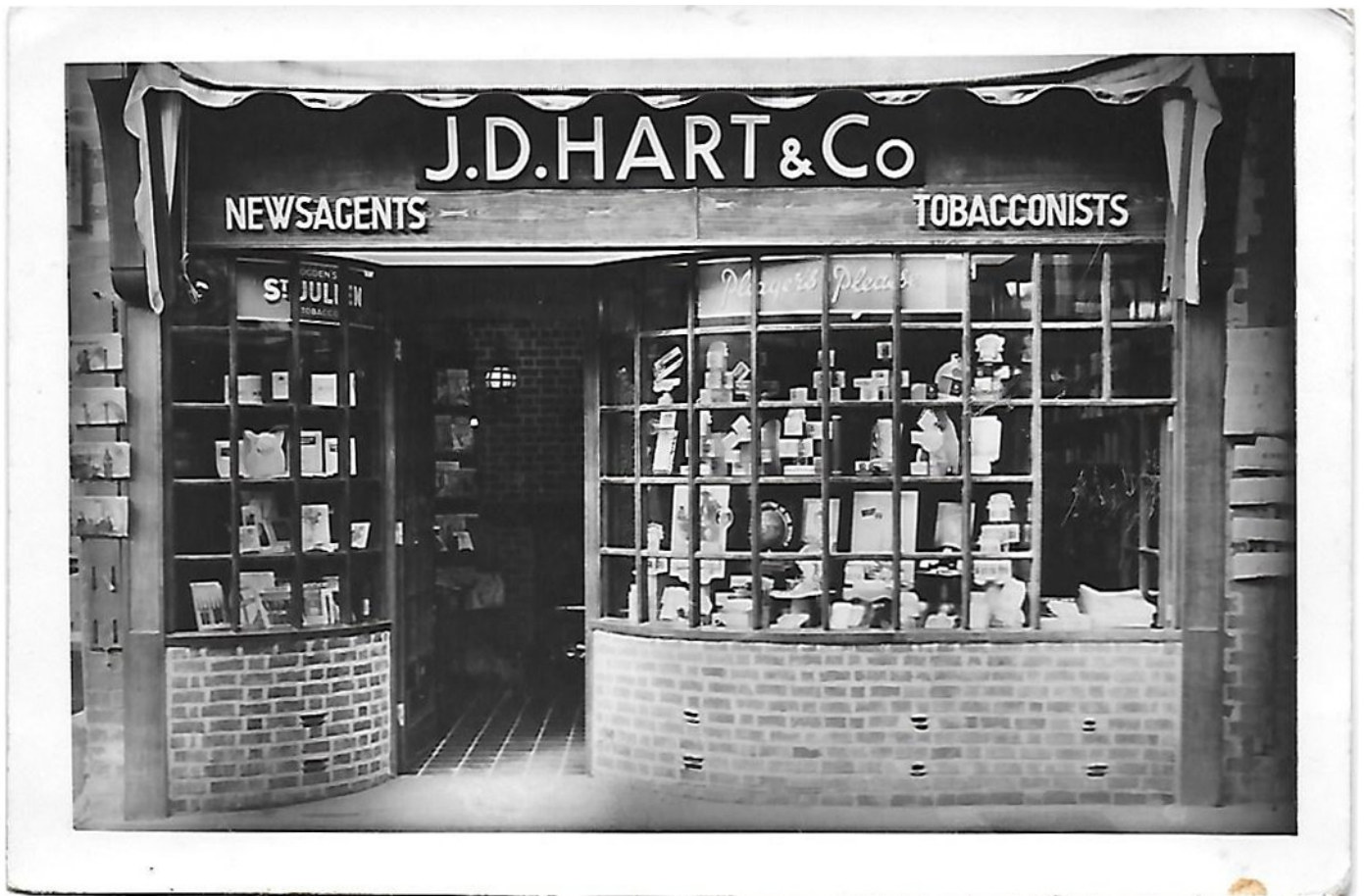
“I was born in Cambridge. My father was good fun, he was a butcher, we had a farm and a butcher’s shop. I wanted to join the Wrens, but couldn’t as I had to help my Father in the shop, in food production, as I was a butcher. So I joined the St. John’s Ambulance Brigade and became a nurse.”

“My friend was a pilot on Stirling bombers on an airfield near Cambridge. He would come to our house and we would play cards. He took no notice of me whatsoever as he thought I was too old, I was two years older than he was, but he kept coming. He would play his records and I would go out with my boyfriend and he would stay in with my Mother (*Loud laughter.*) One day he came to tea and he wouldn’t sit down. I asked him why not and he said, leaning on the mantelpiece, ‘I had a bit of a bust-up last night.’ He had crashed his plane on the railway lines at Waterbeach, with the bombs onboard. That night I went to the First Aid post, and all the searchlights were pointing down onto the ground instead of up in the air, and they were all pointing at his aircraft. He had hurt his finger and hurt his bottom so he couldn’t sit down. I had a photograph of his plane, broken in half on the railway lines.”

“So how did you come to be married to him?”

“I won’t go into that but I married a sailor, a Merchant Navy sailor, very nice man, and then I had my son John. But then I found out that like all sailors he had a woman in every port. He came out of the Merchant Navy and I was married to him for about three years. Meanwhile, Jim, the bomber pilot was posted up to Lossiemouth so I didn’t see him. My husband and I lived with my parents in Cambridge. I opened a toyshop in Cambridge. My Father had a butcher’s shop, which had a big room at the side and he said that I could turn it into a shop. I sold toys, even though I knew nothing about toys, so I went up to London to a Toy Fair in the Haymarket. Going round the Exhibition I was thinking ‘If only I had some of these toys I could really make a thing of this shop,’ as you couldn’t get toys just after the War. An elderly man came up to me and asked if he could help me. I said no thank you, but I told him the supplier I asked could not supply me with toys as they were already supplying another customer in Cambridge. After a discussion he said, ‘I think we can let you have an account.’ It turned out he was the boss of Triang Toys. My husband left the Merchant Navy and said he would help, but decided he would close at twelve and go for a drink instead. No good at all! Anyway, he got a job on the Cam, taking a pleasure boat up and down. Meanwhile, he had a girl at the other end of Cambridge. I found this out and thought, well, don’t think much of that. He was also a con man, he drank, and he conned my Mother out of money.

Meanwhile, up in Scotland, Jim married a vicar's daughter. He used to collect a lot of crystal glass, and she sold all of it, as she thought marrying a pilot he wouldn't last long, so he got a divorce too, and put a notice in the Times to say he would not be responsible for her debts. Then he wrote to my Mother to ask if he could come to see her. Meanwhile, I was getting a divorce.



Anyway, after a little while we got married and we came down to Hythe. Jim's father had left him some money, so in 1952 we bought a paper shop, and we settled in Hythe. A year later I had my second son, Mike. I've moved nine times in Hythe!

I used to be up at six in the morning marking the papers. We had ten newsboys, and one Winter nine of the newsboys went down with the flu', so I was delivering papers up Cliff Road in the thick snow at four o'clock in the afternoon, so I can mark papers with the best of them.

We didn't go to bed particularly early and we lived over the shop, number 99 High Street, which is now "Owletts". At the top of the shop there is a bedroom which has a kingpost going up to the roof right through the middle of the room. We had to saw the bed in half to get it into the room. We couldn't saw the kingpost in half or the shop would have fallen to bits! One Christmas I was cooking the turkey bones in the kitchen at the back, and there was a big glass dome in the kitchen, which exploded, and there were turkey bits all over the kitchen. My younger son, Mike, used to keep hamsters, and he wanted to get some baby hamsters, so he got a male and a female, and said, 'You've got to help me, Mum.' We had a big refectory table and he said, 'I'll hold Tilly at one end, you hold the other one at the other end, and when I say go, let them go. They met in the middle, and fell off! Anyway, the result was a litter, and this was just before the Venetian Fete.

You had to separate the males and females, otherwise you had trouble. We all went to the Fete, and being a newsagents there were a lot of newspapers at the back, all stacked up, and when we came back the wretched hamsters had escaped, and were behind the newspapers, behind the fridge, everywhere.



Anyway, we finally found them all, put them in cages, and Mike said he was going to sell them in the shop. In our day there was a side window, which opened up. He put a lot of straw in there and the baby hamsters, so we sold hamsters as well, ten pence each. Years later I met a man in the High Street who told me he used to be one of my newsboys.

We lived there for a bit and then my Mother in law came and lived with us and we moved out to Dymchurch where we lived on the Beach Estate for a couple of years. Then we bought another house on the estate, it was called 'Windswept' and by golly it was! It was breezy! We had a newsagent's in Dymchurch, but we found out that the manager there was diddling us. He used to buy stock and sell it in the shop. So we got rid of that and moved somewhere else in Dymchurch. Then we moved back to Hythe, and after seventeen years of early mornings, seven days a week we were fed up so he thought he would get a job. The only job he could get was manager of a newsagents in Folkestone!



He was always interested in churches – he had perfect pitch for an organ so he found a job going round old churches doing something or other but that didn't last. Then he saw another job advertised at an Estate Agents in Cheriton. They used to ask him in the morning if he had polished his shoes, and this a man that went to public school. Anyway they turned out to be rogues so he left there.

So, the only thing for it, I would open a shop myself, as I'd always had a shop. There was one in Bank Street for rent, it was a very old-fashioned shop, but I thought if I get in there I could at least learn how to do clothes. (It is a dry cleaners now). I didn't even know my own dress size, so how I was supposed to do dresses I don't know. But anyway, we took it. You went into the shop where there was a big counter facing you and behind it was a bit built out which was a toilet! First thing I sold was a scarf – the customer had a ten-pound note and I had no change. I had some funny customers, I can tell you. I had one lady that came in and bought a skirt. She brought it back the next day because she didn't like it. She told me she hadn't worn it, but she'd cut the lining out and there was food all down it. I sold hats as well, fur hats, real fur hats. One lady bought a fur hat and brought it back telling me it wasn't real fur. I pointed out that you could see the skin on the inside so it was real fur. She still argued and threatened to contact Esther Rantzen, who did a consumer programme on TV at the time. Another woman left a baby in the shop. The couple were in the fitting room where she was trying on various things, she bought some and left. I went into the fitting room later and there was the baby in a carry cot. Another man came in and wanted to buy a

number of dresses at a discount, for his harem. I had a transvestite who wanted to try on a dress, which I refused. A lady suffering from thalidomide handicaps once came in, and I helped her try on various things, helped her a lot. She bought a dress and some jumpers and her son picked her up in a taxi. A few days later the police came and told me that it was a con, the cheque had bounced and she had been doing this all along the South coast. You do get some funny ones!”

“Especially in Hythe!”

“I learned different things and travellers helped me, but I thought, this is no good you’ve got to get in the High Street. I found a shop, number 124 for rent which was an Estate Agents. Philip Chapmans. We took this shop, knocked the front out and put a shop window in. Little did we know that you are supposed to get permission. One day the owner of the premises, a Mr Fuller, who used to own the greengrocers went past and came in and said ‘What have you done to my premises!’ Anyway we put the shop window in and carpeted the place. After a little while we got rid of the Bank Street shop as I couldn’t do two of them. In the meantime there was an old house in North Road that was for sale but it had suffered from a bomb in the War. Its back was broken but it was a lovely old house. We bought that, while still renting the dress shop, knocked it down, built our own house, and built two houses in the grounds, one of which we sold to Charlie Cole. Then after we had been there a couple of years, and I liked living there, the freehold of the shop became vacant so we sold the house to buy the freehold of the shop. We lived in a caravan in the garden for a year because the flat was let. When they left and we moved into the flat we had several holidays in the caravan. We went on holiday once, and on the way back there was a terrific thunderstorm and we couldn’t get out of London with the caravan, so the only thing to do was to go as high as possible, which was Crystal Palace, because all the bridges were flooded and you couldn’t get a caravan through. We were wondering, how can we open up the shop in the morning – we had a wet dog, Mike with asthma in the caravan, pouring with rain and we were stuck there for the night. Whenever we went to London we thought, ‘Don’t go near Crystal Palace!’

Then a flat came up in North Road. As you go into Church Road there is a waterworks place, and a house near there had been converted to flats. We took one of those, very nice, with its own lift. We lived there for two or three years, with me running the dress shop and Jim doing the accounts. While walking round Saltwood he found a house he liked at the corner of Seaton Avenue and Looker’s Lane. This was just before house prices boomed, so we put the flat on the market, which sold within forty-eight hours and we bought the house in Saltwood. My grandson was born about then. We were there for quite a while, even though it was a bit of a so-and-so going up and down to the shop. While we were in North Road, a customer, Mrs Denny, said ‘We are starting an Art group, why don’t you come and join?’ I said no at first but she kept on about it so eventually I joined. We met at the Church Hall - your records of the Art group will tell you when I joined. Two members were the wife and daughter of Mr Sharp, the builder.”

“Tell us about the accidents in 1973 when the car went through the shop Margaret.”



“My husband did voluntary work in the Library at Chartham once a week on a Thursday. I was in the shop on my own. Suddenly there was a crash and there was a car come through the shop. Consequently there was a great big traffic jam all through the High Street and Military Road. Who’s in the jam?

My husband. I phoned the police. The only person hurt was a woman in the car who had hurt her ankle. When my husband came home he said ‘ My God, I didn’t realise it was our shop causing the trouble!’ The shop window was smashed, the glass went all over the clothes – luckily it was insured, but that wasn’t very nice. “

“And then you had another one!”

“About a month went by, after we had the shop all done up nicely again, and another car came in! When I phoned the police and the Fire Brigade they said, ‘You’ve already had one car in!’ and I said ‘I know I’ve got another one in now!’ So the shop window was all boarded up again with the clothes all covered in glass again. Do you remember Frances Griffiths, a singer, used to be in F.H.O.D.S. she was in the shop with me.”

“And when did you retire?”

“When I was 65, I said I’m not working when I’m 65, so we sold the business. In the meantime I had joined the St. Leonards Players, and we did a lot of drama for about twenty years.”

“That was about 1985?”

“Yes, about 1985. I was older than my husband so had to wait two years before I got a pension. We went to America, and we went to Canada where I have second cousins. A friend I had made during the War invited us to Indianapolis and one of Jim’s crew lived in California so we went to him – he kept in touch with all his crew. Then old Jim has to go and die on me, he was 75. Two years younger than me, I was too old for him in the War!