

Holt WI

Spring has been accompanied by a burst of activity in Holt WI. As well as the usual lunch club, we have already competed in the Worcestershire Federation quiz and attended the annual Campaign and Resolutions day in preparation for this summer's AGM. More about the resolutions next month, but for the time being, this is what we have been doing. Holt's team did not win the quiz, but nor did we disgrace ourselves. Coming only 3 points behind the winners, and averaging over 80% on all rounds (including sport) we felt satisfied with the evening's effort.

Then to the monthly meeting. What a treat! Our speaker was Karen van Hoff and her talk was entitled "A Fashion Designer's Journey". Well, for some of our members, who are more at home in fleeces and wellingtons, this was not necessarily an area of much interest, but oh my goodness, where we in for a treat. With ultimately self-deprecating humour and a store of comical anecdotes, Karen had us all laughing and listening hard to see what was coming next. Essentially self-taught, Karen entered and won a WI competition by mistake, making some fashion accessories for her mother-in-law, whilst marooned in a small Dorset Cottage, her husband working away, heavily pregnant and without a job. She quite wanted to go to the WI meetings herself, but her habit of making her own eccentric clothing had led to her mother-in-law begging her not to.

Karen told us about her extraordinary journey to realise her creative ambitions, which had commenced, aged three, with her tendency to paint a pet dog with coloured cornflour. Various side-issues intervened such as taking sciences in school rather than the arts, such as jobs that included technical support in encephalographs in a neurology department, such as a brief spell as a barrister's clerk and another running a small holding in Shropshire, even the "distractions" of three daughters. But the journey continued through qualifications obtained at night-school, but mainly self-teaching. One particularly amusing incident concerned Karen's second wedding where she managed to be dressed as Titania, Queen of the Fairies, on a budget of £12.50. It is amazing what can be done wire and old cans, not to mention fabric acquired from a range of places. Indeed, Karen's first hat was started with a Kellogg's cornflake packet! Apparently, you can make a dress-makers dummy from two pillows some sellotape and a bra filled with socks. Who'd have known?



Eventually, working from Ludlow, Karen create stunning millinery as Hardy Hall hats, before her next venture, Van Hoff Designs, saw her producing exquisite wedding accessories for some of the top bridal designers, including at Liberty's in London. Today she knits and embroiders with fine wire, gems and pearls to create unique fibre art and couture jewellery.

Her work sells in shops and galleries, literally all over the world and we were privileged to see some samples in the selection she brought with her.



The bravura display was arresting and unique, but I think what most members will take away from this wonderful evening was the warmth and humour with which Karen has lived her life, supporting herself and her daughters by sometimes several jobs at once, without losing the passion to produce beautiful artefacts. She told us that her latest venture as an inspirational speaker is going quite well for someone who just “talks about herself and eats a lot of cake”!

Preparations are now underway at Holt for a coffee morning and fund-raiser in May, an outing to Attingham Park at Atcham in June plus the annual Shrawley cup competition and a theatre trip in July. By the end of the summer we hope to have a permanent archive set up at the Hive, which will include records and scrapbooks going back decades. Looking forward, we are always happy to welcome new members. We meet every month at Holt Village Hall, usually the first Thursday of the month at 7.45, although next month is May 11th to avoid the local elections.