

Holt WI

Holt ladies were joined this month by about 25 guests who came to our Open Meeting to enjoy the “Pearl Lady” aka Frances Benton. We were treated to the history, the geography, the science, the biology and, most importantly, the magic of pearls. Frances, who made WI history in causing people to turn down their hearing aids, captivated her audience for two hours with her knowledge, her energy, her enthusiasm, her wit and her warmth. This complete “tour de force” was topped off with wine, a raffle and the opportunity to buy pearl products in aid of charity. Later this month, we convene for a coffee morning at a member’s house in Droitwich and, in July, are looking forward to a trip to Bonterre farm to make flower arrangements as well as David Barrie on steam trains and tea! As ever, new members are always welcome. We meet on the first Thursday of the month at Holt Village Hall, 7 pm.

So now, back to the Open Meeting.

The talk commenced with the charming story of how Frances’ grandmother had enchanted her small granddaughter with her pearls, which she called “moons from fairyland” and the life-long love affair with pearls was born. After university, as a back-packing youngster in the Far East, Frances learned a good deal more about her passion, including how to string pearls on silk, which launched her hobby. The story of an old lady in the Chinese market, who related the tale of the love-sick dragon whose tears formed pearls in his footprints because he could not approach his love without incinerating her, was performed with élan! Despite a demanding day job as a musician, Frances developed her passion, and greeting semi-retirement with excitement over the amount of time she would have for her pearl projects, she described the “tsunami” of interest that had occurred once she discovered the WI circuit and started giving talks. An aim of 20 talks a year became 130 talks in three months, plus teaching at Denman College, plus driving 1000 miles a week! All this is done in aid of her chosen charities.



Here a brief digression about those charities seems to be in order; the energy Frances displayed is obviously a family characteristic, as her charities revealed. Her youngest adopted Zulu son is a lawyer, now training to be a judge in South Africa, completing his transformation from street child in Durban, and determined to help others along the same path, with whatever funds he can raise. Her daughter is Headteacher in a school in Scotland that specialises in those profoundly disabled by autism, seeking to raise enough money to put on a domestic science unit to teach life skills. And alongside all this, Frances and her husband, who live in the heart of France, are renovating an ancient farmhouse from where they will launch holidays labelled “Pearls before Wine”. Apparently, one WI from Oxfordshire has already booked for their AGM next year. Brilliant.

Anyway, back to the pearls. The twenty foot display of strings, necklaces, bracelets, ear-rings and brooches shone gently with the lustre of many colours and gave the contradiction to the idea that pearls are all small, white and round. Apparently, pearls are never entirely the same; “like snowflakes”, colour and shape vary from “starburst” pink with gold through all colours to black, even peacock blue and green. Their history stretches back at least five thousand years. Frances laid out for us the three different types of pearls: “faux”, natural and “cultured”. The third category is the most common now as the understanding and science of producing pearls has been better understood in the last 100 years. But before that “natural” pearls were the preserve of moguls, monarchs, sovereigns, sultans, Tsars and the über-wealthy. Interestingly, historically pearls were worn exclusively by men, and, in Rome, only the patricians were allowed by law to wear them. But there are some powerful exceptions. Cleopatra seduced Mark Antony with a pearl. Our Queen has pearls in her crowns. Recently, a one inch perfect teardrop ivory white pearl sold at auction for £600K. And this is hardly surprising given that the chance of finding any natural pearl is one in two million shells. There are ten thousand oysters to every natural pearl. So for centuries, pearls have been mimicked from glass or other stone, given lustre with varnish. Frances warned us not to be sniffy about such jewellery, often inherited from grandparents, which as she said, can be very beautiful, but will not last like the real thing. Mind you, being careful with the real thing is essential, as pearls dissolve if exposed to the acidic chemicals in perfume or hair spray.



So how are pearls formed and how can you farm or “culture” them? Frances cheerfully exploded the myth that all pearls are produced by oysters chafed by a grain of sand. Natural pearls are produced by several bi-valves including mussels and, of course, oysters. The myth of the grain of

sand came from Japan and one of the first commercial producers of cultured pearls. Mr Minimoto, in 1895, cut open a pearl and found a tiny black nucleus under the layers of nacre (mother-of-pearl). Not blessed with modern highly sophisticated microscopes, he assumed it was a grain of sand. And indeed, went on to farm pearls successfully by irritating oysters with sand. However, about 100 years later, the dot was discovered to be the fossilised remains of a parasitic maggot; the oyster, in self-defence, encloses said maggot with nacre (a mix of calcium carbonate filtered from water and “oyster juice”) which hardens and prevents the bi-valve from being eaten from the inside out. Once the bead becomes uncomfortable, the bi-valve ejects it.

Bi-valves are fantastic water filters, of up to eight gallons of water a day, who collect food and the dissolved mineral salt of calcium carbonate in tiny particles ten times smaller than a grain of dust. They can be persuaded to produce the most mesmerising jewels; farmers use tiny beads to start the process: a round bead for a round pearl, a coin-shaped bead for a coin-shaped pearl, slivers of bamboo for bamboo shaped pearls etc. The colours come from the variety of salts that the bi-valve filters and can be varied artificially, but not with acidic dyes, which would dissolve the calcium carbonate. Pearl farmers value their stock, so the pearl is gently tweezered out when the shell is open. The process is slow. Mussels in the River Tay produce freshwater pearls in about eighteen months, but in the salt water of Okaya, Japan, seawater oysters take about five years. Projects such as a conservation venture on the shores of Lake Windermere, to purify its water, augment the four rivers in Scotland and three in Wales that are producers. Sadly, production may be threatened by pollution in waters and rising sea-levels; warmer waters make for weaker shells; plastic pollution may compromise the quality of the nacre and its lustre.

This fantastic evening was topped off with a large amount being raised for the charities and we were left with some wonderful stories about these “tears of Aphrodite” or “dewdrops filled with moonlight by angels” or the “tears of the dragon”.