

EUNICE WILSON (1921-2021)

Eunice was born in 1921, in Bradford. At the age of five, she contracted the polio that would semi-paralyse her for the rest of her life. Her mother Lucy refused to make any concessions to her disability, insisting she could do anything she set her mind to. Her father Joseph, an engineer and aircraft designer, unusually for the time wanted his daughter also to qualify as an engineer. ‘But the trouble was I couldn’t do sums.’

So in the 1960s, after studying at the Birmingham School of Art, Eunice became a consultant for the shoe and leather industries. She tried to persuade such brands as Lotus, Dolcis and Clarks to use beautiful leathers in exciting colours; to her great disappointment they stuck to brown or black. However, the Lancashire Tanning Company, founded by German Jewish refugees and known as Lanctan, welcomed Eunice’s advice on colour forecasts, and dyed leathers to match each season’s fashions. Eunice oversaw the photographs and design of their catalogues, which one year featured “Viva Maria”, with wonderful purple and light green leathers; and “Gladiator” – sandals of metallic-finished leather. She also organised fashion events at Lanctan’s agents, Bevingtons at Neckinger Mills in Bermondsey. In the flats close by lived the latest rock’n’roll sensation, Tommy Steele, and the very young Vivien Clore would station herself at Eunice’s window for hours in the hope of catching a glimpse of her idol.

Eunice visited Milan, Florence, Paris and Dublin. She met eminent designers, including the elderly Salvatore Ferragamo and the young Manolo Blahnik. In every town or city, she searched flea markets for interesting old shoes, eventually donating her collection to the Nottingham Shoe Museum. The Victoria and Albert’s big shoe exhibition *Pleasure and Pain*, a few years ago, included one of Eunice’s finds – an antique pair of decorative wooden platforms to be worn in a hammam – and she was thrilled to see it in the catalogue.

She was the author of *Fashion Bags*, and the seminal *A History of Shoe Fashions*, illustrated with her own elegant designs, which is still sought after by students.

In the late 1960s she learnt to drive, and bought a small blue Daf car, an automatic with the indicator on the steering wheel. She was one of the first to get to grips with computers, and explored the internet enthusiastically. She kept a very old computer which she would hitch to her new laptops in Heath Robinson fashion, never quite grasping that its limited capability had not kept pace with technology. Her friend Frank did his best to keep her connected, but she replaced laptops with alarming regularity – ‘That one’s no good; it doesn’t work!’

Eunice’s parents and sister moved to London, and the family lived for a time in Kensington. After Eunice’s sister married, they moved in the early 70s to Harbord Street, where she became a familiar sight on her increasingly-battered electric buggy, which finally ended its days held together – just – with brown sticky tape.

A neighbour remembers her mobility van with grass growing on the roof, and its electronic doors having to be tied shut with string because they would fly open whenever Concorde roared overhead.

In her 60s, Eunice forged another career as a genealogist for RAF families. This followed her own experience of tracing her family back generations; her mother's maiden name was Thirkill, and she was particularly proud of her Viking descent.

Until relatively recently, Eunice spent every Tuesday researching at the National Archives. Her interest in aviation stemmed from her engagement to a young RAF pilot who sadly lost his life in the last war. She never married, but devoted much of her retirement to raising funds for the RAF, and wrote several books for them – *Dangerous Sky: A Resource Guide to the Battle of Britain*; *The D-Day Quiz Book*, and *The RAF Quiz Book*.

In the evenings, before she drew her curtains, Eunice could be seen from the street, surrounded by books and papers.

She would cross-reference relationships and coincidences in the margins of her own books and loved nothing better than unpicking a conundrum. She read so voraciously that her Lenten self-denial was 'not to order any more books on Amazon!' So she set about working her way through her neighbour Claire Mee's library of biographies and diaries.

Eunice took a liberal and tolerant view of the world – 'I want to believe that we're getting better and better.' Her conversion to Roman Catholicism was carefully considered and important to her, and she received Communion frequently, thanks to a neighbour who brought it from St Thomas's, Rylston Road. Alongside this, her birthday – Bastille Day – meant that 'Rebellion!' had to be celebrated, with neighbours, champagne and smoked salmon sandwiches. One party was particularly lively; she had just had electrically-operated curtains installed and had huge fun proudly swishing them back and forth until the batteries ran out.

Another birthday party was held at teatime in Haynes Café in Fulham Football Club. Far more people turned up than expected, and Eunice rode proudly home with the basket of her buggy overflowing with cards and flowers. The restrictions of Covid meant that her last birthday could only be celebrated by neighbours gathering in the street to sing Happy Birthday.

Despite having to be helped considerably in her last months by neighbours, Eunice was a model of resilience and self-reliance – the cliché 'fiercely independent' falls far short – and no one ever heard a word of self-pity from her. Like Hamlet, she could live bounded in a nutshell and think herself king of infinite space. She died at home almost six months to the day after her 99th birthday, and many will feel they have lost a wise and wonderful friend.

When she was very little, before she got polio, Eunice's mother made her a fancy-dress costume, an impish red devil, 'Because you're *so* naughty!' Eunice loved it so much she wore it whenever she could. Unfortunately, there's no photograph of her in it. Yet we can all imagine the little Eunice of nearly a century ago, running round the house dressed as a little red devil, and giggling.