



Interviewee: Elsi Duncan
UoS Dates: 1969-1973
Role(s): Student



Interview summary:

Summary of content; with time (min:secs)

Start 00.08 Elsi came as a student in 1969. She studied at Hamilton Academy and wanted to be an artist, having won the art medal at school. Advised by her Scottish parents against art as a career, she decided to study biology which she also enjoyed, but unsure of where to study. However, ED also taught kayaking for Lanarkshire Council at their outdoor centres and a fellow instructor told her about the new university in Stirling. ED visited in Spring and the view from Pathfoot out over the Carse of Stirling to the Gargunnoch Hills confirmed Stirling as where she wanted to be.

ED also studied Chemistry at Stirling, having always been interested in how things work and her science training taught her the value of testing, useful in her business career. For example, in the business she has run for 34 years D Signs Limited, a sign making company, she tests the new materials which become available to check their long term performance under different conditions. She also took Psychology as a subject throughout her degree, which is Biology with Psychology. Very much an artist, she returned to art after science and has made a living out of it.

ED's first semester accommodation was a very cold caravan in the Cornton. Walked to the university along Causewayhead Rd. ED did try crossing Graham's Dairy land, fields as a shortcut between the caravan site and the university, since, having a country background, she thought it would be OK, but Graham's made it clear not acceptable to them.

06.50 For the second semester, ED shared a flat in the lower part of a house in Abercromby Drive in Bridge of Allan with 4 other students. Those were innocent days, and the flat was set up with double beds. ED recalls how the elderly landlords were sometimes a bit put out by student behaviour. The flat had a large laundry room outside. For the first charity parade they put together a Biology Society green dragon, based on an Austin A40 belonging to Ian Simpson, which was covered in rhododendrons collected behind Bridge of Allan. 'Birnam Wood comes to Dunsinane' was the title with ED dressed as a witch. They had acquired a bale of jute sacking and used the big sinks with a mangle in the laundry room to die the sacking green. However, charity events seemed to fall out of favour in later years.

13.35 ED became involved in the Student Council because she loved being at the centre of things. When she stood for election, she drew a caricature of herself for the poster campaign, little realising that caricatures

would be part of her future career. She was one of only 3 women elected out of around 20 members. ED also served on many other committees, such as the Biology Society, the Alangrange committee, the Canoeing Club. ED remembers the Rannoch Centre, a shooting lodge, which the university owned at that time. It was also used for Biology field trips and was a great facility. ED recalls a wonderful Easter canoeing trip over Rannoch Moor and several lochs, in the snow. A fellow student on the trip was Doug Allan, who since has made a great career out of photography, especially underwater and in icy landscapes, with polar bears. ED held the office of Entertainments Convener, and organised concerts, including signing the contract for Pink Floyd and Elton John. Elton John became famous between signing the contract and the date when he could do the concert. He honoured his obligation which was a coup. There were people in the university – like Paul Martin and Bob Hall - who came from the London area and had contacts with bands.

20.10 ED did not do her full term in office as her many activities meant she struggled with her academic work and took a semester out, returning to repeat the third semester. She took a general degree rather than Honours as she really wanted to make a life with art. ED recalls an amusing incident where her lecturer John Stewart reprimanded her for copying her dissection drawings from the text book – in fact, these had been drawn freehand! During her time out ED worked in Glasgow and helped out with the Simon Community soup kitchen in George Square. She had lived at home in Glasgow during her time out and had to be persuaded by her parents to carry on with her studies, get her degree and then go off travelling. Now very glad she did so. However, she wasn't very happy during this period as it was not what she wanted to do.

22.25 Later ED was able to live in The Tin House, so called because it was a corrugated hut in an orchard on Glen Rd, Bridge of Allan. The house had been derelict and belonged to Mr. Scott of Scott's Jams of Carluke whose orchards produced plums and apples for the jams. Mr. Scott was very elderly and lived in a farmhouse on the other side of the hill in a little glen. ED got hold of a piece of tin panel from an old cooking stove and painted the name of The Tin House with a little drawing as a sign, which is interesting as signs are the commercial side of art and she was to go on to have a business making signs.

24.30 ED remembers enjoying all the classes and labs very much, especially loved the light and brightness of the classrooms. The labs were very intense, with dissection, for example. She recalls Neville Dix's fungi labs, Stan Mathew's plant biology classes, where the chemistry she was studying also was useful. ED's Advisor of Studies was Pete Bannister, who later went to Australia.

Ed recalls the influence of Neville Dix, Stan Mathews and Dr. McEwan from Psychology. She also took the Education course, but didn't do the extra 6 months to qualify as a teacher. She thoroughly enjoyed the sessions where local pupils came into labs for lessons with the trainee teachers, because these were filmed and reviewed on television screens.

31.10 Having studied science subjects, when she clearly still loved art, ED didn't have any idea about what she wanted to do when she finished her degree. She had heard of the 'Milk Round' but didn't participate in it at all. She had no idea of pursuing a career and wanted to travel. She enjoyed the academic subjects, finding out how things worked, but the academic side was a stage she had to get through. She enjoyed the graduation event, her parents were very proud and she was the first in her family to get a degree. The aim of the Robbin's Report in establishing the new universities in the 60s had been to make a university education accessible to a larger number of people and to people who traditionally would not have studied and she was one of that group. For ED the degree did not mean a lot personally at the time but she has appreciated being able to use the qualifications in her business, as it gives some status. Being a woman in business was hard, especially since sign-writing was 'a man's job'. Having the BA and subsequently a DIA with Marketing which she studied at Galashiels with a view to translating the art skills to an income, has been very useful. In fact, marketing her skills is very important for herself and for the people she employs, and looking back, her extra-curricular activities serving on all the committees was a form of marketing of herself. ED also feels the analysis, research, composition of essays involved in obtaining a degree have all been useful training for her business life.

35.30 On graduation ED was still unsure of what to do. She had spent time in North America on a BUNAC programme after her second year, teaching canoeing and she wanted to spend more time in America. She went to stay in Maine, New England with someone she had met through university and when her visa ran out she moved on to Canada, where she stayed on illegally for 2 years, in Montreal for a year, then Vancouver.

She learned things from these experiences which all contributed to being able to establish and run a business, which is a very lonely occupation, especially in a man's world.

36.40 On returning from America, ED knew she wanted to make her living from art work and did a Diploma in Industrial Administration at Galashiels College. She wanted to learn about marketing. In one of her jobs in Canada she had worked on a ship on the Fraser River which was being renovated and turned into a supply ship. ED had to paint the name The Cotton Princess on the side of the ship with a stencil – using a gantry. That is how the sign-writing idea began and ED wanted to know how to do it properly. In 1977 she took a course at Falkirk Tech which still offered sign-writing classes and, although computers were on the horizon, sign-writing was still offered as part of the painting trade. ED worked during the day in Easterhouse in Glasgow on a sculpture project and attended sign-writing evening classes at Falkirk. ED was made redundant from the Easterhouse project when it finished. She was unemployed for a year and had to sign on for benefits.

42.30 ED then took the course in Galashiels college to learn about the commercial side of art, especially marketing and how to make a living from art. By this time, things were changing and many big industries were disappearing. To encourage self-employment the government devised the Enterprise Allowance to encourage people to set up businesses and become self-employed. ED received the very first Enterprise Allowance, awarded on 14 August 1983 and the sum was £40 a week. To be accepted, she had to prove she had raised £1000 to start up a business – a difficult sum for ED at the time, but she worked out a way with her mother. ED cashed in her superannuation from the Easterhouse sculpture project to buy enamels and brushes to start the sign-writing business from a company called Wrights of Lymm in Cheshire. The company is still in business today.

45.10 ED lived for many years in the Stirling area and had noticed, around 1980, that the original timber sign for the University of Stirling at the entrance to the campus was in a bad state. She decided to make a new sign and gift to thank the university, using the crest in university colours of silver grey on a green background. ED believes the university paid her to paint a second sign for the other side of the entrance. The current stainless steel sign is newer and is not her work. ED's sign-writing business D Signs Ltd has been a success. The company survived the recession when others went under. ED has provided Scottish jobs, trained many people and contributed via VAT to society. She is now wondering about retirement. She hopes the company and brand will continue, possibly as a cooperative. For now, ED still enjoys what she does and is still working. She keeps fit, and still climbs scaffolding to do work such as adding prize-winners names to the board at Dollar Academy, for example. Nowadays, much design work is done on computers, by her staff.

49.30 ED lives in Glasgow now. She took up outdoor swimming after having both hips replaced, and swims in the Loch Lomond annual event. ED is asked if the outdoor swimming could have had a forerunner in the incident, fondly recalled, when some students, including ED, went skinny-dipping in Airthrey Loch one night on their way back from Alangrange! ED was photographed then and the photos later appeared in brochures sent out to prospective students by the Students' Association.

51.45 ED recalls other memories, such as running discos in Alangrange, lovely walks on campus and in Hermitage Wood. ED also recalls cycling to the Sheriffmuir Inn which was a very basic inn then. There was also a charity walk up to Dumyat organized by Neil Walden. She also recalls the Queen's Visit when students protested about the money being spent on the visit. There was also the occupation of the University Court. ED participated in the occupation, but was not on campus for the Queen's Visit.

Ends

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