

Managing Miss Porter's Collection

By Roland Bannister

When Hazel Porter left her family's house to the National Trust in 1997 she also left their furniture, furnishings, clothes, books, accounts and invoices, and their personal correspondence and photographs. There are cupboards full of textiles, a collection of needlework and millinery made by Hazel and her mother Florence and sister Ella, Christmas cards and decorations, school reports, school magazines c1920 and, in the bathroom, combs, soaps, ointments bandages, and - yes - dentures.

Sadly there is little evidence of Herbert, the man of the house, as he died when his children were young. But this adds poignancy to the few items of his that we have. There are some 6000 items in all, and together they tell the Amazing Story of everyday life in this Newcastle family from 1910 to 1997.

This great gift brings with it a three-fold responsibility for the National Trust and the volunteers of Miss Porter's House Management Committee. First, we must protect the collection's vulnerability to an array of pests, fungi, weathers - and humans. Second, we need to accession and catalogue the collection. And third, we need to ensure that the collection is accessible to the public.

Pest and fungi control is the most important and the most formidable of these challenges. Recommended treatments include freezing of fabric and timber - which of course includes the lounge suite, the carpets, the curtains and so on - a daunting and expensive task. Less daunting treatments include fumigation by oxygen deprivation, use of fungicide against mould, treatments for ants and cockroaches, the replacement of cardboard storage boxes with plastic containers, the removal of junk timber from the yard, and the need for regular inspections.

Accessioning and cataloguing is time consuming but our robust Cataloguing & Accessioning sub-committee is taking this work forward. The sub-committee is also computerising the accession records on paper that were done a decade ago. The group will scan the many documents left by the family with our new scanner funded by a Volunteer Initiated Museum grant, to make individual photographs of each item in the collection.

Our House and Collection subcommittee has, in the past year, cleaned and organised each item. Prior to each Open Day or Special Visit this group presents a display from the collection according to a pre-planned theme: one month it



Linen and lace, bearing the initials of Hazel and Ella Porter



Shoes - carefully looked after by the Porters

is China and Glass, and another is Needlework. Last December our theme was Christmas with the Porters and in May it was Mother's Day at Miss Porter's House.

People enjoy seeing household items from days gone by, including recycled or remodelled things such as curtains made into cushions, clothes that have been patched or altered and local McIntyre flour bags. The Porter women were great needleworkers and the garments they made attract much attention. Some of their belongings, especially when viewed singly, seem unimposing, and perhaps some are rather 'kitsch'. But when considered as a whole, the collection is awe-inspiring: objects and artefacts from across most of the 20th century, all owned and used by the one family of four.

Roland Bannister, PhD, is chair of Miss Porter's House Management Committee



The kitchen - much as it was. On the table is one of the recently found colonial leadlight panels