



SITTING PRETTY: Diana Mackie in Number Ten, the self-contained luxury accommodation which recently received a five-star rating from VisitScotland

Artistic endeavour runs in Diana's family

LYNNE KENNEDY
profile



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Last week LYNNE KENNEDY drove north to Borreraig to meet up with Diana Mackie in her studio there, and discovered why her family background meant Mackie was almost predestined to become an artist.

We are looking for more people to profile. If there is someone in your area you think should be interviewed, please contact Lynne on 01471 820400 or e-mail lynne@whfp.co.uk

BORRERAIG, in the north west of Skye, is a place I had never visited before last week and when I arrive on a blustery morning I can barely see anything in front of artist Diana Mackie's house.

A couple of hours later when I leave the clouds have parted sufficiently for me to see the view across the Minch and towards the Outer Hebrides; it is this vista which inspires Diana on a daily basis.

She has been painting for as long as she can remember, unsurprisingly, as art is in her blood. Her great, great, great grandfather was Samuel de Wilde, an 18th century Royal Academician who had a studio on Drury Lane in London.

He used to portray the actors of the day and Somerset Maugham had the largest collection of his drawings — around 350 — which were left to the National Theatre, and subsequently the Garrick Club in Covent Garden where they are now held. Diana's grandmother was a talented pen-and-ink artist and her mother also painted.

"My upbringing and my parents' expectations of me were all about getting exams, though, not succeeding in art."

Born in 1947, the second of two girls, Diana was schooled in London.

"My father was Glaswegian, but his job took him to London — he was a company director with a wood importer. His father, my grandfather, had a cottage in Benderloch in Argyll so my love of the Highlands started at a young age. It felt very natural to be there, whereas suburban London never made me feel the same."

Aside from her summer holidays, her love of the sea is, like her artistic ability, in her genes. Her great grandfather was a clipper ship captain, crossing the world's oceans on the tea runs to Melbourne and back.

"He is mentioned in the book 'Colonial Clippers' because he took the record off the 'Cutty Sark' on one of his runs. His father was the harbourmaster at Peterhead and, on his mother's side, his grandfather was in the Battle of Trafalgar. I've got two of his logs and every letter he ever wrote to my granny from sea."

School was something Diana found a thoroughly miserable experience.

"I got no qualifications and my teacher's advice was to be a hotel receptionist or a hairdresser so I left school at 15 and did City and Guilds in hairdressing."

Learning such a trade turned out to be fortuitous, as she married at 20 and had a daughter, Amy, so her hairdressing skills gave her the opportunity to work from home.

"My husband was a printer at 'The Times'

and was very left-wing. There were frequent strikes and so money was not coming in regularly."

Although she worked as a hairdresser during the day, Diana was never far from an art class. "I always did evening classes or summer courses. In my mind, absolutely everything was geared towards the day when I would be a full-time artist."

In her late 20s she joined the local art society, ending up as chairman. She was, at the time, a watercolourist and her work began selling locally.

She divorced at 40, remaining in London but dabbling briefly in an altogether different career.

"I had a two-year spell as an estate agent, selling property in Chelsea, Knightsbridge and Belgravia. I took the job as a dare but actually did okay and, although it was drawing to the end of the boom, I managed to sell quite a large number of properties."

WHEN THE recession of the early 90s, hit Diana got out of the property game. However, she also went through a tough time personally.

"I had loaned most of my savings to a friend who needed it for a business deal. Unfortunately, that didn't work out and I had also been in hospital so I was at a pretty low point when Fate stepped in."

"A friend of mine discovered the Three Chimneys when it had just opened. She loved it so much she bought a house nearby. It was in a pretty bad state but she told me to get up to Skye and sort myself out."

"I had my first night at Anne Gracie's then B&B and the next day I moved into the house and stayed there for a couple of years."

She began spending her days driving to Neist Point to study cloud formations, and on the days when it was too wild she stayed indoors immersing herself in studying colour theory. A couple of years later, to give herself something to focus on, she decided to do a degree.

"Having no GCSEs I wasn't sure anyone would take me so I went to the Edinburgh School of Art and begged them. Unfortunately, they had closed and couldn't consider me for another year."

"A friend suggested that I do the Interior Design course at Napier. I was horrified because I couldn't use a computer, was still using imperial measurements and had no concept of technical drawing. There were 40 of us on the course and, apart from one other 28-year-old student, I was the oldest person there."

At the age of 50 she not only graduated but won the course medal. "If my father had still been alive he would have been very

impressed after my dismal performance at school!"

HER FIRST JOB after graduating was to design the interiors of The House Over-By, the new accommodation being built by Eddie and Shirley Spear next to the Three Chimneys.

"Shirley, Eddie and I were joined at the hip for a year on that project. It was my first real-life project and was utterly thrilling."

As well as all the interior work, Diana also did the landscaping and planting outside. "I've had a lifelong love of gardening. The family home was an Elizabethan inn at one time and there was a two-acre garden with a huge herbaceous border that I used to vanish into at the weekends."

Fate had stepped in once again for Diana — this time in terms of her living space. "I found myself in need of a home and a friend gave me the rent of his cottage at 10 Borreraig, with the option to buy when I had the money."

With the Three Chimneys project over, she needed something else to work on and so set about fixing up her new home, adding an extension to house a studio which opened in May 2000. Up until then all Diana's work was in watercolour — she had not yet discovered oils.

"It was quite bizarre — the friend who pushed me to go to Napier also came to visit and brought me a metre-square canvas and some oils. I was so nervous of it but one night there was this horrendous storm and I got up, put on the fire and some very loud opera music and thought 'This is the moment!'"

The resulting work was bought by the MacLeod Estate and, as far as she knows, is still hanging behind the till in the shop at Dunvegan Castle.

"Painting is my priority and, because the nature of oils means that they have to dry at various stages, it takes about three months to do one painting so I'm always working on two or three at a time."

Around six or seven years ago Diana met her partner, Alan Cleobury-Jones.

"Alan came to Scotland about 20 years ago after two decades touring abroad as a rock drummer. He got a job as percussion teacher in St Andrews and also worked with Edinburgh City Council as a teacher, and co-directs the Edinburgh School Jazz Orchestra."

"I had been in Edinburgh with Shirley where she was picking up an award and a mutual friend suggested Alan and I meet up. We got on well so saw each other every now and again for a while and then in the end he moved to Skye."

The two have been collaborating on a film

project for the past couple of years, bringing together Diana's paintings and Alan's compositions.

"It all came about because I had an exhibition at An Tuireann. George Kozikowska had a video camera which he focused on the painting so close that when you watched it you almost felt you were in the painting itself. I loved it because I'd always painted to create the maximum illusion of space and take the viewer right into the piece of art and give them a sense of personal association with the work."

Diana decided to explore this idea further and contacted film companies all over the country.

"They were giving me huge quotes and as I was refused funding from the arts council I just didn't think it would ever come to fruition. Then I found a wonderful company in Inverness who did news TV and corporate videos. They had never done anything like this before but Anna, their technician, got totally caught up in the idea and we've spent nearly two years on the project — making a short pilot first and then the main film, which uses five paintings."

Alan composed a soundtrack for the pilot film, although it will take another six months to complete the full soundtrack.

"We would quite like it to be used educationally, in some way, although my real dream is for Scottish Ballet to do something with it. If you can imagine the stage set with the film taking up the whole of the backdrop and then scaffolding rigs set up, where the dancers would weave in and out, the human body would take on the form of the moving colours and elements of the landscape."

Another project Diana has just finished, is the marketing for Number 10 — the self-contained luxury accommodation she built as an extension to her home.

"I wanted a gallery space, and Alan needed somewhere to do his composing and set up all his instruments. At the same time, my mother was very poorly so as well as the gallery and music studio, we decided to add on a small living space."

Unfortunately, her mother passed away before the work was finished so the space became Number 10.

Diana designed the interior, including the furniture which was made by local company Touchwood, and Number 10 recently received a five-star rating from VisitScotland. She has spent the last six months marketing the place and is now ready to get back to immersing herself in her painting and having a bit of time out, without any major projects on the go.

Something tells me, though, that it won't be long before she gets her teeth into something else.