

1st April "Rags To Riches" A humorous talk by Jean Henshaw.

Jean began her talk with some background information about her family. Her father was born in 1902. They were a poor family of mother father and 9 children. The father died young and in those days there were no pensions or handouts so they all had to work hard to make ends meet. Jean's father became a coal merchant. It was hard work and she remembers in the terrible winter of 1947 that he would take 2 sledges out on the coal lorry so that he could deliver coal to inaccessible places to ensure that everyone had a fire. Because he was poor he could not afford to get married straight away and so he was engaged for 9 years. He eventually married and had 4 children - Jean, twin girls and one son. In those days mums did not go out to work, they were always there when you came home from school. As Jean's father had had a hard life he was determined to give his own children every chance with theirs. When Jean was young there was no television or "game boys" to entertain them in the evenings so they used to pass the time making peg rugs. Her mother was able to knit, embroider and crochet and she taught her 3 daughters these skills. Although her brother was 3 years younger than Jean he was determined that everything his sister could do he could do better. He not only learned to knit but also mastered the complex patterns of Fair-Isle knitting. He became so good at it that he made up his own patterns. However, Jean's brother was not bright at school. He had a speech impediment and pronounced his "J's" as "H's". This was a problem as his 3 sisters were Jean, Joyce and Janet! Jean's mother blamed her for his backwardness as she said she spoke for him and didn't give him the chance to speak for himself. In the 1950's a new curate was appointed to the parish church in Matlock. He was Paul Miller. He had been a prisoner of war in Japan. Before the war he had been an artist but due to his experiences in the war he turned to religion and became a priest. It was Paul who saw the artistic potential in her brother. When her brother became 14 and eligible to leave school the headmaster said to her father "I'm sorry Mr. Allen but your son is backward", this condition would probably be described today as having "learning difficulties". Jean's father suggested that he could be a plumber but he turned this down and said he would get himself a job. He did indeed find a job as an apprentice dental technician (making false teeth). Paul Miller suggested that he join Chesterfield Art school at Hasland. So he went to night school where he studied sculpture, painting and design and he excelled at all. His lecturer recognised that he was gifted and suggested that he studied full-time. There were no grants at this time and his lecturer helped him in a two year crash course. He passed this with flying colours. As he had come this far he decided to apply to a good art college. He was accepted at Camberwell Art College and did exceptionally well. He sat the scholarship and was one of only 5 in England to pass. He then spent a year at the Royal College of Art and won a scholarship there. His mother and father went to London to see him receive his diploma in his cap and gown. However, his parents did not rate London and remarked, "you can keep it!" Her brother was now out on his own. His first job was with Sandersons who were famous for producing co-ordinated wallpaper, paint and curtain fabrics. He went on to work as a designer at Courtaulds but he still loved Fair-Isle. Eventually he became head of Design at the Royal College of Art in the department of Design and Knitwear. Here he worked with various famous students including Princess Margaret's daughter, the Duchess of Kent's daughter and the Emmanuels who designed the Princess of Wales' wedding dress. He still had speech difficulties

and was unable to pronounce some words (he was probably dyslexic). His students were aware of this and said the unpronounceable words for him. Despite his difficulties with words he decided in 1985, with the help of his students, to write a book entitled "The Machine Knitters Book" by John Allen. His name was actually John Donald Allen but he was known as Don at home and John professionally. There was a book launch and signing at Harrods which was covered by Thames TV. Jean and her sister travelled to London by the early train (known as the milk train) to be at the launch of the book. Jean is the proud owner of a copy of the book which her brother duly signed.. John always remembered his days as a hard up student. His father had been good to him and during the holidays he used to work to get money to help with his fees. He had one job at the local colour works in Matlock and would come home on different occasions with his beard dyed red, blue and green. The chemicals made him ill so the next year he went to work in the local sewerage works which horrified his mother. He retained his interest in Fair-Isle knitting and became Chairman of the Fair-Isle Industry. He went island hopping in the islands and visited the ladies who were doing the hand knitting. John never married but he would have made a wonderful father. He is always treating the grandchildren and great grandchildren of his sisters who now number 15. Sadly none of them are as artistic or gifted as he is.

He bought his first house with his mother in mind. She was a great admirer of Winston Churchill whose constituency was in Woodford and this is where his house is situated. It is a Victorian house and it is filled with antiques and clutter. In 1987 the magazine "Homes and Gardens" featured his house. The pictures show pieces of furniture he bought in Sheffield. One particular item is an ornate Japanese cabinet. He loves china and has a collection of some unusual Clarice Cliff pieces. He also collects clocks and has as many as 7 in one room all set to different times! John has been to Nepal and Katmandu in the course of his work. He was so struck by the poverty of the children there that he and a friend sponsor the local school. John takes designs made in England to Nepal where they do wonderful textile work. They work outside on grass to produce collages and floor coverings. The Nepalese are happy people who work like mad to make money but stop when they think they have enough. John contacted Jean because he wanted to arrange an exhibition of his carpets and collages in Derbyshire. The problem was finding a room big enough. Mansfield Museum was chosen and the exhibition "Dream-time Revisited" featured carpets, wall hangings and collages. He sold everything. John is particularly interested in Aboriginal art and has lectured on the subject around the world. He held an exhibition of Aboriginal art and found a buyer for a rug priced at £1500, plus orders for 3 others. Even when he became 70 two years ago he was still working, holding exhibitions at Thoresby and the NEC at Birmingham. He asked Jean if she would help him find a lady in Derbyshire who was a lecturer on textiles at Sheffield University. The lady's name was Sarah Burgess who turned out to be Jean's next door neighbour! John is on the panel for the Duke of Edinburgh awards and when the panel meets he has lunch with the Duke on the Thames. He describes the Duke as having a good sense of humour but with a large vocabulary of swear words! When John was 70 he held a party at Thoresby. Here Jean was introduced to a lady that she had met at a house party in London 20 years ago. She remembered that the house had its own swimming pool and obviously belonged to wealthy people. The lady said that her brother was disappointed not to have met her. Who was the brother? Non other than Richard Todd the film star!

During a recent visit to Nepal John was taken ill. He had drunk some yak milk that was not sterilised. He came home at Christmas but was losing weight and going downhill. In January he collapsed and was found to have cancer of the stomach as well as the infection from the yak milk. He was admitted to the Royal Marsden hospital and it was thought that he only had a few days to live. However, 3 days later he rang Jean to say he “felt champion”, his Christian faith had saved him. He is now back to normal planning to go to Nepal again and hold another exhibition at Thoresby. So he has gone from rags to riches and achieved everything despite his headmaster labelling him “backward!”
Roy Pidcock gave the vote of thanks.