

One of Hampshire's Best Loved Shops

By Lesley Drew

ANYONE who knows Alresford knows its china shop. The windows are always worth looking at for its displays are a speciality. Then there is the service within. Alresford has the reputation of being a town where old-fashioned courtesy and service abound with its individually unique retailers. Some people remember Stiles China Shop however far away their home may be. The day I dropped in to see Elizabeth Davis, joint owner with husband Christopher, she had just taken an order for a figurine from a lady living in Indonesia. It will be collected personally in the summer.

Such an order or indeed customer could never have been envisaged by James Stiles when in 1953 he moved his young family to the town and opened up his ironmongery business in West Street, Alresford. At the time he and his wife Mary already had a similar thriving business in Bishops Waltham and this shop next to the church passage (now an Opticians) was part of a planned expansion. James had started his first ironmongers immediately after the war, on being demobbed from the RAF. He brought with him one of his staff, John Ball, who had also served in the Air Force.

The Alresford business flourished so quickly that James Stiles soon decided to sell the Bishops Waltham business. He took a second shop across the road in Broad Street and ran both until two adjoining properties, numbers 13 and 15 Broad Street became available and the business went under one very large roof.

Stiles sold all the traditional items from nuts and bolts to garden equipment and household items including basic crockery and chamber pots. James and Mary had two children, a son and daughter and daughter Elizabeth can still recall the customers who came in leaving their horses tied to iron rings outside.



Mr & Mrs James Stiles of Alresford (Photograph: Brian Champion of Alresford)

When premises in the adjoining West Street, which backed on to Stiles, became vacant, Mr and Mrs Stiles bought it simply because it was there! The jungle drums, for which Alresford is famous among residents, started beating out rumours and gossip as to what use the empty premises would be put. A china shop said the gossips. Well, traditionally ironmongers and china have gone together, so the Stiles family thought, why not?

The junior members had now grown up and it was Mary who took charge of the new venture. Daughter Elizabeth, who had just finished college, joined her to assist with administration. So it was, by dint of local rumour that the now famous Stiles China Shop came into being.

From the start the Stiles family acknowledged that Alresford was a town that appreciated quality. They acquired dealerships with Spode, Denby, Royal Doulton, Royal Worcester and Stuart Crystal and shoppers responded with enthusiasm. When number 11 Broad Street became available, the thriving china shop moved in alongside the original business and there it remains today, forty years on and in an age when independent china shops are becoming a thing of the past in the wake of large department stores.

James and Mary Stiles went into semi-retirement thirty years ago, leaving John Ball as Manager of the

Ironmongery and Hardware, with exceptionally long serving staff Alec, Joan and Dorcas. They were a team second to none. The shop had become a meeting place for locals where they could buy their goods, receive advice and enjoy a joke. Anyone feeling low always felt much the better for having called in on Stiles. Elizabeth took over management of the China Shop. Her brother had by now emigrated to Australia. Like the ironmongers, much of the success of the business has been built upon long-serving, caring, friendly and knowledgeable staff. By nature of the merchandise, obviously local custom was not on a week by week basis like the ironmongers, but nevertheless their customers were regular and in addition, Alresford's ever increasing attraction to tourists meant customers were now becoming international. These visitors from abroad loved the "English courtesy and service".

When Mr and Mrs Stiles went into full retirement 18 years ago (James died in 1999) the two businesses finally went separate ways. John Ball also retired and the ironmongers shop was sold as a going concern. The long serving staff was taken on by the new owner who renamed the business Homestyle and one member, Joan is still to be found serving behind the counter.

Elizabeth and her husband Chris Davis took over Stiles China Shop in

partnership. In the forty years she has been in the business, Elizabeth recalls many changes in the town but is delighted to be able to say that many of its retail businesses remain independent, making the town a very special place for shoppers.

The business deals with regular orders from New Zealand, Australia, Canada and the USA as well as many European countries. They have moved with the times and with their own Website, overseas customers are continually increasing. They describe their business as "The shop in the heart of the country that deals world-wide". Foreign customers even on Internet seem to enjoy a more personal service than can be received from the famous London stores. Elizabeth and Chris choose their staff carefully, tending to prefer the mature assistant who demonstrates the ability to be a team player and has a sense of humour. As a result they work together more like friends than colleagues and their employers describe them as "fantastic".

The seriousness of window dressing began in 1953 when Mary Stiles dressed the window especially for the Coronation and won the Chamber of Trade's award. Ever since, Stiles China Shop has endeavoured to have changing and imaginative displays. Sandie Harwin has proved very talented in this field and all the staff enjoy the admiring comments received.



Elizabeth Davis is proud that Stiles China Shop has been a Moorcroft outlet for three years (Photograph: Lesley Drew)

When Royal Worcester China celebrated their 250th Anniversary in 2001 they selected the best of their retailers' worldwide to attend the factory on the day Her Majesty the Queen and Prince Philip visited. Elizabeth and Chris Davis were there from Alresford and were honoured to be presented to their Royal Highnesses.

It is not easy to become an outlet for a company like Moorcroft, so Stiles was delighted to be able to start selling their pottery three years ago. Since then they have become one of Moorcroft's prime accounts, acknowledgement of which is being made this March. Each year Moorcroft host six special one-day events across the United Kingdom. On Saturday 20th March, Stiles of Alresford will be their southern venue. One of their top designers, Emma Bossons, will be on the premises to talk with collectors and customers and Stiles will have many limited edition pieces on show, some of the newest designs being very special prestige pieces.

William Moorcroft designed his first piece of highly distinctive pottery in 1897 since when the company has been acknowledged with endless awards, medals and royal appointments. The firm has supplied Liberty of London for more than a hundred years and early designs can now be found in museums and galleries across the world. Moorcroft China is frequently featured on the televised *Antiques Road Show*. On the death of William Moorcroft in 1945, son Walter carried on and introduced such famous designs as the lily, magnolia and hibiscus. Walter died in 2002 and Emma Bossons has designed an Anemone Tribute in his honour.

The 20th March in Alresford will be a very special day for collectors of Moorcroft.



A new and very special limited edition piece of Moorcroft

STILES

THE CHINA SHOP, ALRESFORD



**MOORCROFT
EVENT DAY
SATURDAY 20TH MARCH**

2004 Limited Edition
'The Caravan' By Rachel Bishop



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