

Mabel Lucie Attwell – the full story

This celebrated female illustrator and designer had built her life and career around the humorous antics of children and brought out the toddler in everyone. Still to this day products are licensed under her name and are just as sought after as the original pieces from the earlier part of the 20th Century, ensuring that her legacy lives on through the eyes of adults who are secretly still children inside.

Noted as a London Socialite and fiercely independent.

Links to Eastbourne

Mabel Attwell briefly lived at Ocklynge Manor, 11 Mill Road, Eastbourne between 1935 and 1936. Her time in Eastbourne is commemorated by a Blue Plaque located at Ocklynge Manor.

Mabel Attwell lived in Eastbourne under her married name of Mabel Earnshaw. She arrived in Eastbourne with her husband Harold in early 1935.

Early Life

Mable was born to Father Augustus Attwell (a butcher) and mother Emily Ann

Born 9 of 10 her three eldest siblings had died before her birth. Various written information says that Mable was not 'the favourite child' and it was this that led her to make up stories that she also illustrated. It's written that her childhood lacked warmth and that her earlier drawings reflected this.

She was privately schooled at Coopers Company School

She had art classes at Regent Street and Heatherleys Art Schools

Personal History

Mabel Lucie Attwell was born in London (Mile End), on 4th of June 1879

study at the Regent School of Art and Heatherley's before leaving of her own accord as she did not have a liking for formal training and wanted to illustrate her own creations rather than copy existing illustrators works.

On you-tube there is a piece of film of Mable and her children.

“Miss Mabel Lucie Attwell works on a drawing whilst three children stand around her and watch. She is in her garden. Miss Attwell (in private life Mrs Earnshaw) uses her own children and friends as models. The artist stands at her easel as the children pose. C/U of three children - one holds a doll, the other a monkey toy”

[Celebrities At Home - Miss Mabel Lucie Attwell \(1921\) - YouTube](#)

Between 1905 and 1913, Mabel had illustrated ten books in total with 4 to 5 colour plates in each for publisher W & R Chambers.

A limited timeline...

1908 (aged 29) Married painter and illustrator Harold Cecil Earnshaw (Known as 'Pat')

1909 (aged 30) gave birth to daughter, Marjorie-Joan, also known as Peggy. She adored her children and her only daughter, Peggy, who was also a talented artist in her own right, began helping her in the 1950s with postcard designs. Peggy's grandson Webster Wickham is now the licensing agent for Mabel Lucie Attwell's work.

1911 Mabel started to design postcards and greeting cards for a company called Valentine & Sons who were based in Dundee

1914 First World War

1917 Battle of the Somme – Husband Harold lost his right arm in a shell explosion. He was right handed and as an artistic person himself relearnt to draw with his left hand. After this Mabel became the breadwinner of the household.

1918 J.M. Barrie requested that Mabel illustrate his new book “Peter Pan”

1922 Developed a close relationship with the Queen of Romania and was invited to stay in Bucharest with the Queen. This was her first trip abroad and with royalty. They had an affinity of each other and their children. Homesick for her family she returned home early to be with her family

1934 Youngest son Brian died of pneumonia aged 20 and is buried All Saints Parish, West Dean in the Cuckmere Valley,

1937 Husband Harold died. Mabel and family had inscribed on his gravestone the words 'In memory of Harold Cecil Earnshaw who died from war wounds on March 17th 1937 aged 51 years'. He is buried in All Saints Parish Church, alongside their youngest son Brian.

During the 1940s and early 50s Mabel carried on designing dolls and the manufacturer "Roddy" issued a range made of composition dolls which were sold in boxes decorated with Mabel's cheeky children.

1939 – 1945 During the Blitz her two London homes were damaged. She moved to Wiltshire

1945 Mabel decided to move to Cornwall to live with her son Peter, where she stayed until her death on 5th November 1964

She died at home in Fowey, Cornwall on 5 November 1964 aged 85

1996 A dedicated museum in tribute of Mable and Harold was opened in Ramsey in Cambridgeshire (previously known as County of Huntingdonshire).

Summary of Work

During her working life, Mabel never seemed to be out of work, with her work being seen on a range of products including books, postcards, china and a range of dolls. Her work is still both enjoyed and collected today

British illustrator and designer. She was known for her cute, nostalgic drawings of children

Not always well received by her peers Mable never gave up on her unique way of drawing that was well received by the public. She would misspell the titles of her work adding to the nativity.

Of all the wares Mabel designed for Shelley over the years it was the figurines which were the best examples of her work. Using the characters from her famed illustrations these chubby children figurines included "The Toddler" and "The Golfer Boy."

bel designed for Shelly over a number of years, producing many designs one of my own personal favourites being the stunning Boo Boo "Sleepy Head" nightlight. Aside from commercial products and pottery Mabel also designed for doll companies. One of her most well-known characters was a chubby toddler named "Diddums" which was created as a celluloid doll by manufacturers Cascelloid/Palitoy. Such was the success of her "Diddums" doll that they were then made from rubber as were many more of her Throughout her long and successful career Mabel Lucie Attwell had been commissioned for hundreds of products and projects. Her work could be found on advertisements, postcards, posters, ceramics, dolls and even wall plaques. She also wrote for many annuals and periodicals and started up her own comic strip in the "London Opinion" titled "Wot a Life."

The most famous freelance artist who worked for the Shelley factory after the war was Mabel Lucie Attwell, although most of her designs were produced pre-war. It is known that after the war "The Mushroom Village" and "The Little Mermaid" were produced, but examples of these pieces are rare.

The more well-known pieces are the little elves and the statuettes with 'elephantine' legs. A range of nursery china was also produced, consisting of teacups, saucers, tea plates, fruit and oatmeal bowls, egg cups, mugs, handled beakers and baby plates.

In 1949, during a Royal visit to Stoke on Trent, Princess Elizabeth was presented with a set of Mable Lucie Attwell nursery china for Prince Charles.

The quantity of ware produced is unknown, but towards the mid-fifties Mabel Lucie Attwell designs were losing their appeal and only small numbers of china and statuettes were being produced. The only statuettes definitely produced were "The Golfer", "The Gardener's Boy", "Our Pets" and "I's Shy".

The costs of producing the lithos were increasing and in 1956 Shelleys contacted Mrs Earnshaw's agents (this was Mabel Lucie Attwell's married name) to ask if another company could be approached to share the costs of litho production. Simpsons of Cobridge were the company who agreed to this proposal. The agreement reached was that Shelleys would continue to produce the litho on china and simpsons would produce it on earthenware. This seemed to satisfy both companies and Shelleys did not experience any decrease in sales, as Simpsons produced a cheaper product using the same lithos.

Characters such as "Snookums" and "Little Happy." Another toy manufacturer "Chad Valley" issued velveteen dolls made by Mabel. These were very popular during the Her nursery ware sets were used by thousands of children including the Royal Princesses Elizabeth and Margaret and even later on Prince Charles is said to have used the same set

Mabel Lucie Attwell was one of Britain's best-loved artists with her work touching generations, from those who grew up with her classic characters, Bunty and the Boo-Boos, to those who have read Charles Kingsley's *The Water Babies*, which she famously illustrated. Her art has found its way into homes across the world through figurines, bathroom plaques and gift cards featuring her charming designs.

Yet, many of her most poignant and humorous illustrations were created to cheer a world at war. She painted prolifically throughout the First and Second World Wars, with postcards featuring her child-like characters and tongue-in-cheek captions that were typical of her saucy sense of humour.

Despite suffering loss and hardship, herself during the wars she continued to encourage people to 'smile through the tears'. This book which brings a collection of her wartime postcards together exclusively for the first time, pays tribute to the indomitable spirit of this incredible woman and to her art that cannot fail to raise a smile today for young and old alike.

Achievements

A packed portfolio by age 16 Mabel drawings of fairies and children were a sell-out via a leading London artist agency (who at first were very dismissive, and not at all enthusiastic about her distinctive style)

Established and prolific designer and illustrator of the 20th Century

1906 – 1917 designed for the London Underground

1921 Illustrator of Peter Pan

1926 Had first design registered by Shelly featured children and the elf like character from her “Boo Boo” illustrations. In the same year she designed tea-sets for Shelley which comprised of the, sought after, mushroom house as a teapot, a sugar bowl again like a mushroom and Boo Boo the Elf as the milk jug.

1930's Mabel designed the “Animal Series” which again included a teapot, sugar bowl and milk jug. Illustrated Water babies

Illustrated Alice In Wonderland

Researchers Views

I thought I did not know Mable Attwell at the point of taking on this research. As I began I hunted for something that she had illustrated and found the book *'Lucie Attwell's Gold Star Book of Rhymes'* which is on display here. As I opened the pages I felt the tug of memory. These illustrations were familiar to me and the realisation that I had indeed grown up, turning the pages of this very book. Very fascinating as early trauma had parted me from many childhood memories.

However, for why she is the only female in Eastbourne to have a 'Blue Plaque' bestowed on her is somewhat of a mystery and I personally feel a little cheated. It is true that she was recorded as living in Eastbourne Ocklynge Grange for a period of time in the 1930s (but exact dates I have not been able to find to date). She was born in London, where she worked and lived most of her life until her two London properties were damaged and she died in the West Country. What was her contribution to Eastbourne, what was her link? It feels like achievement has once again been attributed to wealth and fame, a bit like pinning your bets on somebody after you know they are a winner. I admire Mable Lucie Attwell for her unmistakable talent, longevity, tenacity and a woman of independent means who forged a life as a mother and wife and career in a time when women simply were not encouraged to do so. Is she deserving of a Blue Plaque – yes, definitely but is Eastbourne worthy of her and her plaque, I think there lay a very tenuous link indeed.

