

Commemorating Mary Quant in Chelsea

With a major retrospective dedicated to the designer's work at the V&A, Sarah Farrugia and Keith Howard describe how they set about commemorating Mary Quant with a plaque on the former site of her shop in the King's Road.

KEITH: Imagine yourself on the King's Road outside Joe & the Juice. Official address: 138a. But the calendar proclaims it is November 1955. A party is underway to celebrate the opening of a shop; a shop where no shop had existed



*Mary Quant's shop Bazaar photographed by John Bignell in 1959
(Copyright: Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea Libraries)*

COMMEMORATING MARY QUANT IN CHELSEA

before. A garish striped marquee in the forecourt is quite outrageous for decorous 1950s Chelsea. A trestle table inside the tent is crammed with food and drink. A burning brazier in a corner provides a congenial, affable atmosphere. You are an onlooker to the opening of Mary Quant's first boutique, *Bazaar*. The hubbub of that irreverent party has long since faded, but the banquet marks the beginning of a revolution. Yes, really. A fashion revolution. A youth revolution.

SARAH: Mary Quant's *Bazaar* was one of the first of many boutiques in the King's Road. It drew admiring crowds from the very moment she set up shop, but also created uproar. Among the critics was the Chelsea Society, which according to Mary's memoirs, apparently posted very rude notices through her door! The previous year, it had objected to proposals to turn the building into a coffee bar. To make things worse, at the time, the uncle of Alexander Plunkett-Greene, Mary's husband, was one of the Society's leading figures and lived around the corner from *Bazaar* in Markham Square. By the early 1960s, the look she helped to create and popularise – mini skirt, tights and hair in Vidal Sassoon's five-point bob – revolutionised women's appearance. *Bazaar* and Mary made Chelsea the height of fashion and quite the place to see and be seen. As some members of the Chelsea Society may remember, the Sixties was a tumultuous time in SW3.

MARKHAM HOUSE

During the summer the Society received many complaints about the alterations which were being made to Markham House on the corner of King's Road and Markham Square, and the use to which it was proposed to put those premises.

removed and the forecourt thrown into the footway. Many regrets were expressed at the destruction of yet another landmark of old Chelsea, the elegance and suitability of which gave pleasure to so many Chelsea people.

Assuming Markham House is no longer suitable as a residence, since it faces directly on to the King's Road, an admirable purpose would be that for which it had been used in recent years; namely, a solicitor's office. It is not suitable for a coffee bar, although a town planning application to use the

Extracts from the Chelsea Society Annual Report 1955 about Markham House, the site of the future Bazaar

COMMEMORATING MARY QUANT IN CHELSEA

KEITH: Mary Quant's seminal fashion designs were an instant hit with young women. *Bazaar* was a runaway success and Mary changed the face and global influence of British fashion irrevocably.

Today we can see the after-effects of the creative ingenuity of Dame Mary Quant OBE. She unleashed the energy of countless young designers and encouraged us all to express our individuality through our fashion choices.

SARAH: In December 2017, as part of the King's Road Christmas celebrations, a stall was set up in Dovehouse Green: 'Bar Humbug'. The atmosphere was convivial and we served warm spiced apple juice. Two people just started chatting; two strangers living in the same neighbourhood. Keith Howard and I were discussing nothing in particular when he mentioned that a plaque should be installed to honour Mary Quant at the location of *Bazaar* – what a good idea.

KEITH: Events and places far less historically significant are routinely commemorated with a sign or a plaque. So why aren't Mary Quant and the site of *Bazaar*? I had often wondered. Well, that was about to change ... Sarah thought the plaque was a great idea and suggested I present it at the next meeting of the King's Road Breakfast Club – an informal gathering of people interested in new ideas and making things happen. So began a collaboration between Sarah and myself to correct the scandalous oversight.

SARAH: We worked together to get the various permissions (the building's owners, RBKC, Mary Quant's family), find a plaque production team and funding. Fortunately, with its typical generosity, the Cadogan Estate stepped forward.

KEITH: I drew up a design for the plaque and outlined an unveiling event. In the New Year of 2018, I met with Sarah again to share my ideas, this time in warmth of the coffee shop atop Peter Jones in Sloane Square.

I began researching and contacting people who were connected with Mary Quant's boutique in the 1960's and received enthusiastic support from all.

Then in June 2018, the plaque project received an injection of rocket fuel. The Victoria and Albert Museum announced a blockbuster retrospective showcasing the fashions of Mary Quant. I ramped up my outreach program to garner support while Sarah blazed through the critical checklist items such as permissions,

COMMEMORATING MARY QUANT IN CHELSEA

including the use of Mary Quant's iconic daisy logo in the plaque design, and the all-important funding.

Manufacture of the plaque was undertaken by the Frank and Susan Ashworth foundry in rural Cornwall. It also makes all those sky blue English Heritage plaques that can be seen across London.

SARAH: We are about to install a plaque on the building to remind everyone of the cultural earthquake that she started on our very doorstep.

But the story behind the plaque is important in the context of civic engagement. Is Chelsea a village? Many who have lived here for generations claim it is. But in today's hectic world, neighbourliness can appear to be a quaint, anachronistic concept. Very little of any substance can happen unless people can find time to meet and chat with each other. A nod of the head and passing the time of day on the way to the bus stop is all very well and feels good in the moment, but can it result in a meaningful exchange? Against the backdrop of anonymity that is typical in every city, the Mary Quant commemoration is an example of a small gathering leading to a wonderful outcome.

What I've learned from the project is that many of us have great ideas, but we don't know to realise them. A village is a place where people can connect with each other in so many different ways. It's not just about working together to stop the negative, but to enable the positive: a plaque on a building; a secret cinema on Cremorne Gardens; the creation of a people's Christmas choir, singing on a green; and so many more things that are imagined, then set aside and never brought to reality.

Working with Keith to make the Mary Quant plaque a reality shows that village life or neighbourliness can still exist in Chelsea if we all make a time and a place for it.

KEITH: An unveiling and dedication event is scheduled for the Summer. The plaque finally recognizes one of the King's Road's - and Britain's - most famous cultural heritage sites.



The Plaque due to be unveiled on the former site of Bazaar