

How 'William' by Patty Townsend got to New Zealand

By Jan Brock

My mother's cousin, Rosemary Gell, a great-granddaughter of Thomas Townsend of Attleborough Hall, owned 'William' for many years. She and her only sister, Honor, were both unmarried and had no descendants. Rosemary had inherited the painting of William plus about 8 water colours done by Lilian Russell Bell from her parents.

(Incidentally Lilian Russell Bell - or Lilian Russell as she was before her marriage - is a granddaughter of TT and niece of Patty Townsend. She is one of the 'other artists' - apart from Patty Townsend - who supplied illustrations for "George Eliot, Her Early Home")

When my mother died in 1994 Rosemary wrote a letter of condolence to my sister and I. This started a correspondence between Rosemary and myself. On a trip to the UK from our home in New Zealand in 1998 my husband and I visited Rosemary in a rest home in Budleigh Salterton, Devon, where she lived surrounded by her paintings. She worried about what she was going to do with her precious family paintings as she wanted them to be kept in the family. I was her only family contact on the Townsend/Russell side so she asked me if my sister, Lindy, and I would like to be the recipients.

We visited Rosemary again on our next trip in 2002. By this time she was in Exmouth Hospital recovering from a broken hip. She once again talked about her paintings and was now worried about how she would get them to me. It wasn't long after this that she moved into hospital care permanently. A nephew of hers on the Gell side knew her wishes regarding the paintings and between us we made arrangements for them to be sent to my sister's home in Rhyl, North Wales. Rosemary died in 2003.

As all the paintings from Rosemary were to be divided between us some decisions had to be made, which was something my sister and I needed to do together. So for 5 years the paintings were safely stored in boxes under a bed in Lindy's house.

Now we get to the bit that sounds like something out of 'Coronation Street'!

In 2008 my sister was asked by a friend to look after some other pictures while her house was being renovated. For convenience Lindy put them in the box under the bed with 'William'. When the pictures were collected my sister's partner gave the complete box to the friend. It was some time before Lindy realised that William had mistakenly been given to the friend and in the meantime she and the 'friend' had had a disagreement which escalated into considerable ill-feeling.

Getting William back turned into a nightmare as the 'friend' was most uncooperative. She eventually left a short sharp message to say she'd put the box, with William in it, 'under the bush'. My sister searched her garden to no avail and could get no sense out of the 'friend' who was being deliberately elusive and awkward. A few weeks later my sister arrived home to find a box outside her back door. It contained William and a few dead leaves. She presumes that the 'friend' had spitefully put the box out in her *own* garden. Luckily it must have been in a very dry, sheltered spot as William seemed to have suffered no damage. Thankfully I was blissfully unaware of this saga until after William had been returned to my sister.

In March 2009, when Antiques Roadshow was held at Bodnant Gardens in North Wales, my sister took William and the Lilian Russell Bell paintings along for Rupert Maas to see. He was particularly interested in William and that segment of their conversation was recorded for the TV programme. There had been some conversation before the recording in which, somewhat unguardedly, my sister alluded to William having been in a box under a bush for a while. Obviously Lindy didn't really want to enlarge on this on screen so was a bit embarrassed when Rupert Maas brought it up.

There is often some quirky fact about an item that is chosen to appear on Antiques Roadshow. Possibly the 'bush' story was it. However the story of William keeping his lunch in the red handkerchief under his hat also seemed to appeal to Rupert Maas.

Interestingly, after the airing of the AR episode, the BBC sent on 4 letters they had received from viewers about the painting of William. Two were from distant relatives who recognised the name Patty Townsend and with whom I am now in regular contact. One of these ladies actually owns a watercolour painting of William, also done by Patty Townsend c 1879. A third was from a lady who owned 2 x Patty Townsend paintings which she believed had been

given to her great aunt, Violet Shoosmith, a fellow painter, by Patty Townsend.
The final letter was from someone who wanted to buy 'William'! – NFS!

Finally, in mid 2009, on our most recent UK trip, decisions were made and
'William' plus 4 of the Lilian Russell Bell paintings were shipped to New
Zealand where they all hang safely on walls in our home and can be
appreciated.

Jan Brock

Napier, New Zealand

September 2011