



LYNDA'S WAY

Sandra Smith talks to *Howards' Way* set designer and talented watercolour artist Lynda Kettle

It was characterised by power dressing and sculptured hairstyles against an achingly beautiful south coast backdrop. If you were asked to name one of the most successful and glamorous British television drama series of the 1980s, you would probably include *Howards' Way*. We eagerly anticipated those Sunday evenings. When would Jan Howard succumb to medallioned Ken Masters' advances? Would Tom fulfil his dream by rescuing the Mermaid Boatyard? Just how grumpy could Jack Rolfe be? Reflecting the real life era of aspiration

and enterprise, the *Howards'* family dynamics amid the yachting fraternity gripped the nation. Of course, television dramas aren't just about quality actors. Important as individual performances are, authentic props and settings are equally vital in ensuring viewers are immersed in a captivating plot line. One of the backroom creatives who worked on this iconic series is retired set designer Lynda Kettle. "*Howards' Way* was a brilliant production with lovely people in it," she fondly recalls from her Devon home.



"Outside filming (each episode took a few weeks) continued throughout the year around Hampshire's Lymington and Hamble, then back at Pebble Mill we built studio sets. I've worked on plenty of productions where I was standing outside in the freezing cold."

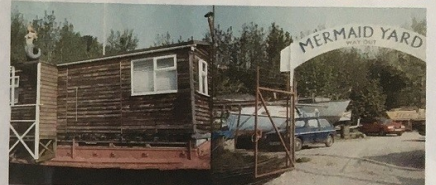
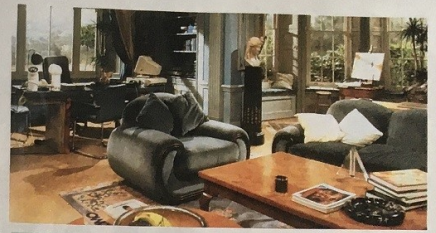
Encouraged at school by a teacher who also worked as a theatre designer in her spare time, Lynda, one of whose skills is technical drawing, studied Craft Theatre Design at O-level. She went to Birmingham School of Theatre Design before, at the age of 20, joining one of the BBC's premier studios.

"During my training, all theatre work was done at a centre opposite Lee Longlands in Broad Street with tutors from the Birmingham Rep. Then a temporary vacancy came up as an art director at Pebble Mill. Initially I joined for three months but this extended to 30 years."

Pebble Mill Studios, opened by Princess Anne in June 1971, soon became a centre of excellence. The nine-acre site, situated in the affluent suburb of Edgbaston, housed 27 designers. From there, much of the planning for *Howards' Way* took place as Lynda explains.

"Directors, cameramen and designers would go and take a look at locations in order to choose where to film. Outside filming included the point at which actors opened doors to a building then we'd cut to the studio. In editing, both outdoor and set shots were combined." Sets were initially designed in model

Photographs: (The Howards) Albany



Main picture: Tracey Childs, Maurice Colbourne, Edward Highmore and Jan Harvey as the Howards of *Howards' Way* in 1986. Left: Lynda painting at home. Top right: Lynda designed the Frees' glamorous lounge. The Mermaid boatyard where much of the action took place.

form, a quarter of an inch to a foot or, post metric, 1 in 50. Lynda's drawings, along with handwritten notes which helped guide lighting engineers, included doors, windows, moulding, wallpaper and even dado rails. The heights were specified before she supervised the construction of the actual sets.

Knowledge of the script also enabled her to determine whether close up or long distance camera shots would be used. Floors were painted to reflect the required location while props such as door handles, tea sets etc were loaned from prop hire companies and kept in vast storerooms at Pebble Mill. In charge of the overall look of a scene, Lynda was conscious of continuity since errors are quickly picked up by viewers.

Although *Howards' Way* was based in England, and filming around the Solent was often followed by cast and crew having dinner together while staying in Southampton, overseas locations were also used.

"We did a lot of filming in Malta," says Lynda, "for instance when Jan Howard, played by Jan Harvey, launched her perfume. We filmed in Guernsey, too. In one episode Leo Howard (Edward Highmore) falls overboard. When I first read the script, I thought: 'How will we do that?' We decided on a Mediterranean film studio which had a 4ft deep tank,

like a swimming pool. We built a boat, put it on rockers on barrels in the water and used rain machines."

With many scenes taking place indoors, reflecting the time of day and weather conditions was crucial. So greenery, for instance, might be painted onto large cloths, wind machine activated or, for night time shots, black cloths hung against windows.

As well as *Howards' Way*, Lynda's portfolio includes *Good Morning With Anne and Nick*, *Angels*, working with Kate O'Mara in *The Brothers* and designing for *2point4 Children*. Her career in the industry is remarkable not only for her success but that this was done in an era when set design was a male-dominated profession. So navigating through the dynamics of traditional male and female roles took another, more people-related, skill.

"When I had my daughter, my female boss said it would be advisable not to talk about my child in the office as women having children, as well as a full-time profession, was frowned on. In those days there were few women designers. Some men who were below me thought they wanted to have my job but I'd go to experienced carpenters and ask their advice rather than saying I wanted things done my way. In the end the men became my friends."

On the other hand, the help of female colleagues was something she valued as much as the support from her husband who picked up the children from school and cooked when Lynda put in long hours at work.

Creativity has manifested itself in other ways during her life. She has also painted for as long as she can remember. Her gentle landscapes showcase an affinity for colour while she is also Chair of Sidmouth Society of Artists. A member of the Royal Birmingham Society of Artists, her paintings of the University of Birmingham buildings reveal that technical drawing ability which she demonstrated decades earlier.

Similarly, those people skills which she employed so positively at Pebble Mill Studios (demolished in September 2005) now inform her role as an engaging speaker and art demonstrator. Perhaps her personable nature is why she got on so well with the cast and crew of *Howards' Way*.

The characters certainly resonated with the public. During a five-year period, 78 episodes were filmed and, despite 30 years passing since the series ended, high fashion, yachting and *The Jolly Sailor* remain embedded in the nation's memory.

www.lynda-kettle.com