

3. My Wife's Bust

Beneath Mundy's sweetshop and tobacconists on Leyton High road opposite the town hall at the busy junction with Ruckholt Road (where my Nan once lived at No. 22) was a cellar which extended to the full size of the shop premises run by Uncle Denny Wicks. This cellar was spacious but had barely enough room to stand. It could not be used for shop stock mainly because this might involve the proprietor going missing down the cellar long enough for the local tea leaves to filch stuff from behind the counter. The floor was bare earth and damp was a problem.

Without any external land for a shed on these rented premises the cellar doubled as Denny's man cave from whence he would often emerge coughing like a devilish, underworld apparition with a smoking problem but actually wrapped in a cloud of choking plaster dust out of the cellar stairway and into the shop.

Denny used the cellar to make plaster moulds and plaster casts for his clay sculptures many of which were huge requiring many bags of plaster, a great deal of work, sweat urged on by a liberal abundance of indiscriminate, vigorous cursing.

This is where my next precious object had it's start although I should perhaps say 'her' since I am referring to this bust of my wife made by Dennis Wicks in 1970 when she was 22.



She stands 56 cm tall, is pretty near life size and being made in solid plaster she is extremely heavy. In 1970 we were newly married and had lived in Walthamstow at No. 8 The Drive for about a year. Denny's sweet and tobacconist shop (Mundy's) was a short bus drive away in Leyton High Road where we could be found most Friday evenings or Sunday afternoons enjoying Aunt Rose's roast dinner followed by a game of cribbage or quiet talk of music and art. We both, my wife and I, helped out in the shop on occasion either when the shop was busy or in their absence (at the cash and carry for example). Once we ran the shop for two weeks while Den and Rose had a rare holiday. Today we wonder how they could have trusted us, we were only kids really, newly married, newly in London and at 21 looking after a busy shop with valuable stock for two weeks during which time they did not even telephone to check all was well. They must have been desperate. At other times I would help Denny on one of his projects shop fitting, stock taking, reorganising or casting his clay sculptures.

We were very close. My brother and I had been close with Den and Rose since boyhood but I had also spent the periods in Industry required by my University engineering course at various sites in the Chelmsford area and lived with Den and Rose in Billericay nearby. To me they were

a second set of parents. In particular Denny fostered in me a love of art, music and creativity, the things my own Dad could not. I had the best of both worlds, a rock solid, practical, hard working role model for a father and an art and music loving uncle for a spiritual father. I count myself as having been very fortunate.

Denny attracted young acolytes. His personality was magnetic, inspiring, he drew you in to his personal crazy world and lavished attention with unalloyed kindness and heartfelt interest. One such was a young lady called Diane who, with myself, one warm day in 1970, helped Denny to cast this bust.

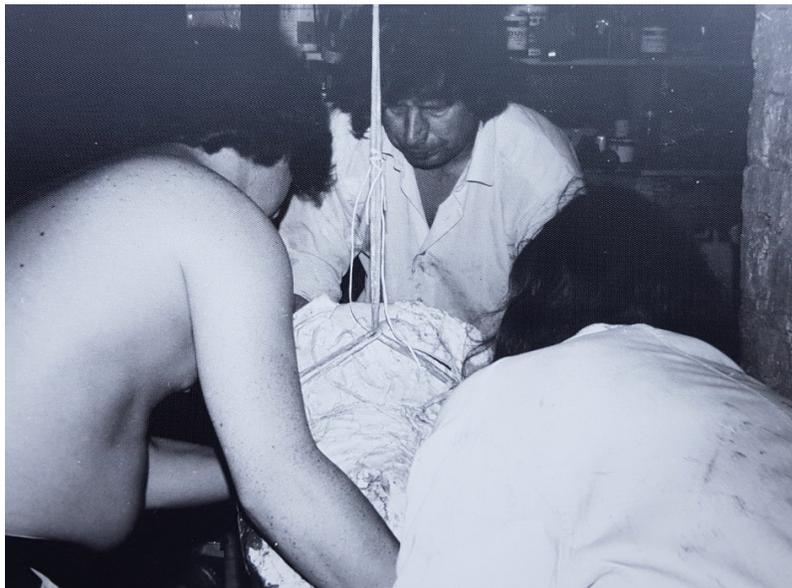
The image below shows where we started. This is the original in clay, built around a wooden armature with a scrunched up chicken-wire frame for support. I remember that Denny constantly maintained and repaired the work to prevent or repair cracks during the week of its sculpting. The sittings took place upstairs in the lounge after the shop was closed, Sharon perched on a high stool, Denny and I chatted while he worked and Rose conjured up beguiling odours for supper in their tiny passage-like kitchen next door.



The next step was to create a mould by cocooning the original in Plaster of Paris. You can see in the next image that in places this was 80mm thick and created in two separable halves. Unfortunately I am unable to remember how the division was achieved or how the problem of undercuts was dealt with (in the folds of the frills for example). Denny was by now well practised at the techniques required but looking at his work today I marvel at how accomplished he was.



The messy job came next. "The pour!". The mould halves were joined by strong twine and the whole lump in one piece was hung from the floor joists above. We had buckets, cans of water and bags of plaster standing by. The mould leaked like a sieve making it necessary to keep up a steady supply of newly mixed plaster which was poured in through the fill holes by Denny whilst Diane and I held the mould steady. Chaotic does not adequately describe the atmosphere down there in that hot cellar. Plaster flying everywhere, sweat dripping, we fell over each other several times and the cursing exceeded every standard of decent behaviour.



The end result was brilliant. Minor repairs to fill joints, inclusions and surface blemishes completed the work apart from it's final finish which was to be a special (for then) bronze

powder rubbed, brushed and burnished onto a dark umber base. Denny and I went to a famous supplier of sculpting materials in Warren Street, in the West End, Alec Tiranti's, to buy this material.

Unfortunately the base broke away from my wife's bust at some time and she spent a good while stored in the loft in blankets. Eventually I repaired the base with reinforcing ironwork, and remoulded a new base. She is now a prominent feature of our living room reminding us of those fun times as impoverished newly weds lucky to have such a loving and stimulating couple near by and connecting us with Leyton, his East London sweet shop, my East London roots, Uncle Denny and Rose Wicks, my Nan's home around the corner opposite St. Lukes church where my Mum and Dad were married. Not forgetting a young woman called Diane who is the starting point for my next connection story.