

Portmeirion's Story

'I've always wanted to have a pottery. My husband was slightly horrified at the idea at first. But we believe gaiety, brightness and good design are good business as well as good things in themselves.'
– Susan Williams-Ellis (1918 – 2007)

Portmeirion was founded in 1960 by the legendary pottery designer Susan Williams-Ellis and her husband Euan Cooper-Willis. Susan sadly passed away in November 2007 but her philosophy of creating collections that are not only beautiful but also functional and affordable lives on at Portmeirion.

Susan was born on the 6th June 1918 to the architect Sir Clough Williams-Ellis, the architect and creator of Portmeirion Village in North Wales, and his wife Anabel. Susan's life was spent socialising with and being taught by creative talents such as Bernard and David Leach, Henry Moore and Graham Sutherland and, keeping such interesting company, her innate feeling for shape, form and pattern flourished. The opportunity to use those skills came along when her father, Clough, asked her to create some ceramic gifts for the shop at Portmeirion Village.

Following the success and increasing demand for this pottery, in 1960 Susan and Euan purchased A. E. Gray Ltd., a small pottery decorating company based in Stoke-on-Trent. This was followed by the purchase of a second pottery company, Kirkhams Ltd., that had the capacity to not only decorate the pottery but also make it. This allowed Susan to design both shape and surface pattern which, in the 1960s, was considered quite unique. These two businesses were combined and Portmeirion Potteries was born. In fact, Portmeirion Potteries continues to manufacture Susan's designs as well as others in the same factory in Stoke-on-Trent to this very day.

Susan's early Portmeirion designs include Malachite (1960) and Moss Agate (1961). Neither was produced in large quantities but both received high critical acclaim. Her next designs featured unusually bright, floral images (Portmeirion Rose and Tiger Lily), and then followed the iconic Totem design in 1963. With layered glazes of various hues, Totem brought Portmeirion well and truly to the forefront of fashionable design in this memorable era of evolving and revolutionary British design style.

With an ever-evolving reputation for striking design, Susan later created Magic City(1966) and Magic Garden(1970) which both featured strong and bold surface patterns. Susan's original prototype for Magic Garden was found in the cellar of Bank House (Susan and Euan's home that was attached to the factory). The design had been directly pencilled onto a cylindrical coffee pot and was simply stunning – so much so it inspired Portmeirion to create the Magic Garden Graphite collection in celebration of its 50th anniversary in 2010. This can now be seen at the Victoria and Albert museum in London.

The 1970's saw the birth of what is considered by many to be Portmeirion's most recognised design, Botanic Garden. Launched in 1972, Botanic Garden was uniquely different - inspired by a serendipitous find of antique botanical books, and with a variety of individual floral decorations, it encapsulated the new mood for casual dining. It became an instant success and has become a classic of British design and hailed as the world's most popular casual tableware design.

Susan always expected her pottery designs to fit comfortably with everyday life – today a requirement of every contemporary consumer – and, in her quest for success, she was heavily involved in the manufacture of all her designs. Such involvement and devotion to the quality of the design and production of the product was rare, and when combined with Susan's individual style and creativity, became unique.

In 2005 Susan received an honorary fellowship from University of Arts, London. At the time Susan said, "I decided to pursue pottery, rather than painting, mainly because I wanted to create affordable and beautiful things. Being in Stoke has been a wonderful part of my life. The people of Stoke are really the nicest people one could ever meet, and their hard work has established Portmeirion and enabled us to sell our pots around the world. I have been very fortunate."

Keele University also awarded her an Honorary Degree of Master of the University for an Outstanding Contribution to the Ceramics Industry Internationally.

With nearly fifty years of creativity, Susan Williams Ellis's contribution to British design style, Portmeirion Potteries and the British ceramics industry has been immeasurable and places her firmly in the company of a small group of great and celebrated 20th Century ceramic designers. Her philosophy that tableware should be both beautiful and practical will continue to permeate Portmeirion's design values and to determine the success of the company that she created in the challenges of the 21st century.