

3BBR Bilby community Radio Myfanwy Fallenby audio transcript

- Voice of Interviewer
Shelley Varcos: Welcome to *Back to Bilby* – a journey through our history and the people who shaped our town....
Our focus today is on Myfanwy Fallenby, the owner of Material Designs.
Myfanwy, welcome to the show.
- Myfanwy: Thanks Shelley. Nice to catch up with you again. How's the uni course at Bendaby University going?
- Shelley: Fine thanks Myfanwy. I'm doing graphic design, and I certainly got a lot of my motivation from seeing what you did at Material Designs when I worked there.
Perhaps we can start with the business. What exactly does Material Designs do?
- Myfanwy: Well, I started it up when I returned to Bilby about 10 years ago. As you know, I'd been working in Sydney as a set designer, with a film company..
- Shelley: Yes, I'd like to hear a bit more about that later...
- Myfanwy: ...and I just realised that I'd had enough of the big city, lack of community, everyone being bitchy and trying to compete all the time. I just love hand-printed fabrics, that's one of the reasons I was first drawn into set design. I don't know whether you ever saw them, but I did a lot of work with Australian films and TV shows like Seachange...
- Shelley: ..er..no...it doesn't ring any bells...
- Myfanwy: Not surprising, it was quite a long time ago! But when I decided to leave Sydney, and come back here to Bilby I wasn't prepared to just sit around having cups of tea.
Nothing against cups of tea, but I always like to be active, getting involved with people, feeling the adrenalin rush of creating something.
I knew in the country there are lots of women who couldn't get jobs, casual jobs to support their husbands who were on the land, or jobs while their kids were at school. Bilby was a lot different when I first came back – only about 9000 people, lots of farmers in the district, kids going off to the city as fast as they could after they finished school...
- Shelley: Yes, that was what I was going to do, until you started Material Designs...What made you think of that particular sort of business?
- Myfanwy: Well, Material Designs is all about creating lovely designs on high quality fabrics. I just adore colours, as you can see from the sorts of clothes I wear! I've always stood out a bit in Bilby – they still talk about that evening gown I wore to the Shire Council dinner and awards night last year, don't they! That was one of my best designs, a shimmery blue/gold with an overlay of what looked like cascading raindrops – it took me hours to make that!

Shelley: What are your favourite colours? Or designs?

Myfanwy: I think my most popular design was in a whole range of orangy reds, blues and greens, picking up an Australian bush theme – so it had dancing eucalyptus leaf patterns in strong olive green and grey, a sense of this beautiful deep blue life-giving river flowing through, a bush fire in its corners burning up the tree trunks – it was full of life and fire!
I design the patterns, we set up the hand-printing on fabrics I buy from a supplier in Sydney, then sell them as one-off special designs – we've got buyers all over Australia, even some from overseas. Did you know Marieke von Hecht, the famous European dress designer, uses our fabrics and designs? They're mostly dress designers...they really appreciate how different each length of fabric is! Quite a few put in special orders.

Shelley: How many people do you have working for you now?

Myfanwy: I've got 3 designers now, and 7 women who are specialists in the delicate printing process. And of course about 4 or 5 who help with the packing, the administration, all that stuff... I just wanted to get some women involved in crafts, building up some skills that I knew were already there in lots of my friends from when I was growing up, and running a small business that would keep me busy and involved with other people.
It's amazing how quickly it's grown – we have about a \$25 million turnover this year – but of course that's also linked with the growth of Bilby.

Shelley: How do you feel about the way Bilby has grown?

Myfanwy: It's so difficult, isn't it. It's good to see the town really active, lively, and full of visitors. And of course that's part of the reason why Material Designs is such a success – we do lots of door sales on the weekends when the tourists come in droves. And they tell everyone about it, take our contact details – the word-of-mouth reputation of Material Designs is terrific.
But I'm concerned, it's one of the reasons why I've joined the historical society. I don't want to lose the essential quality of Bilby, its long history that's reflected in such sites as the graveyard...

Shelley: You have your own family interest in the records of the graveyard don't you...

Myfanwy: Yes, there's three generations of my family buried there. I guess you know about our family history?

Shelley: No, tell us a bit about it. Your family sounds like it's Welsh, judging by your name!

Myfanwy: Yes, our family is a bit small now, just me and my brother and his family – they live in Bendalong... my great-grandparents came with their three sons and two daughters from a lovely little town called Chirk – it's right on the border with England.

Shelley: Do you speak Welsh yourself?

- Myfanwy: No, I've always wanted to learn ...
That's part of the reason why I'm interested in family – it was such a long journey, so many hopes and dreams, how did that family manage, 5 children under seven years old?...and quite a few Welsh families came to Bilby because of the old tin mine, you know, the site at Mount Owen?
- Shelley: Was that really a tin mine? I just assumed it was only gold...
- Myfanwy: No, they started with gold but it ran out very quickly, it was just some surface gold, only lasted about eighteen months. Of course it started a bit of a rush, and lots of people came to settle in Bilby. Some very enterprising early settlers (they had been miners in Wales) started looking for other minerals, and that's how they discovered and set up the Mount Owen tin mine.
We're doing a special display in the museum on it – it was such a dynamic time for Bilby, lots of families ended up settling here because of the good location – the Valley View river and good farming land. So there was something to sustain them after the tin mine went.
- Shelley: What happened to your family? Were they tin miners?
- Myfanwy: My grandfather was born and brought up here in Bilby. You know McKirdy's place, down near the Bendalong Road? That's where they used to live – it was a farm then! The family moved onto the land – they always said mining was dirty and dangerous. I think most of the townspeople were relieved when the old mine collapsed and no one wanted to try and start it again – too expensive to mine... and there were rumours of ghosts at Mount Owen after the cave-in!
- Shelley: Ghosts? I didn't know Bilby had any ghosts...Who were they? Did anyone see them? How did you find out about them?
- Myfanwy: It was a bit of family folklore – you see, my great-grandfather died in the cave-in, and my great-grandmother (she was called Myfanwy too) was a bit psychic, she could tell the future. So, she told everyone he was going to die that day, tried to get him not to go. He laughed at her, went off up the track singing ... you know... the old mine track we call it now... and turned to wave at her just at that corner where it twists around the Hanging rocks.
- Shelley: Yes, I know the spot. It's always seemed a bit spooky... hey, is that where the ghost is?
- Myfanwy: Any of our family can always hear a lovely Welsh voice singing when we go to the Hanging rocks. It's just a fragment, but it's in Welsh. It was one my grandfather said his father always sang to him when he was a child, scared of the dark...
- Shelley: Can anyone else hear it?
- Myfanwy: We've found out lots of interesting stories about Hanging rocks, since we started doing our display for the museum about Mount Owen – we found out a bit more about Ben Travers, you know, the bushranger who's buried in the graveyard. It seems he used to hide near Hanging rocks, and he talked about hearing this Welsh man

singing – gave him a fright, he thought someone was about to find his hideout - he told his brother, who passed it on through his family. We're doing quite a big feature on Ben Travers – did you know at one stage he was in a fight with Ned Kelly? Beat him and stole his horse!!

Shelley: No I had no idea. We didn't do much on the history of Bilby at primary school...

Myfanwy: That's such a pity. The schools should teach more history, not just the facts, but bringing it to life – there's a great opportunity to do that with Bilby, because we've still got so many of the old buildings, the historical old documents stored by families who've lived here for three generations... there's a growing interest in collecting all the history, putting it into displays so we can appreciate what our ancestors really achieved, how they managed to live in a place which was strange and different, quite threatening really. It's one of the reasons why I think people are interested in those reality TV shows that put people back in time to see the challenges of living in the old ways, not having shops or refrigeration...

Shelley: Speaking of TV shows, how do you feel about the popularity of our own City Stresses Country Pleasures? After all, you were the one who helped get it set up in Bilby, weren't you?

Myfanwy: Yes, I feel quite proud about that. I knew Valerie ... Valerie Geranini the producer of the show... from my Sydney days. We had some great times at after-parties when filming was finished! We always got on so well, even though we were a bit different in age – must have been kindred spirits!
Anyway, I remember one day talking to her on the phone, soon after I came back here ... I guess I was pretty excited about the town, all its beautiful old buildings, the friendly welcome I'd been given when I talked about starting Material designs, all the lovely views over the Valley from the lookout... and suddenly she said, how about we put Bilby in the middle of this TV series I'm producing on the differences between city and country? She'd been looking all over the place for a setting which would look genuinely historical and also a bit old-fashioned – strong sense of a community which was a bit of a sleepy hollow but full of fun and characters.

Shelley: We've certainly got characters here! What did Valerie think of Bilby when she saw it?

Myfanwy: She was delighted, she's very creative, as well as super organised ... immediately saw the possibilities for lots of storylines about the historical backstory, you know the last series when they did the flashback on Ben Travers? Stories that showed where Bilby's characters came from. She's worked in lots of stories on the environment of the graveyard and wetlands, that lovely spot on the river near the waterhole where we all go picnicking, even the Hanging rocks area!...

Shelley: And it's been going for three series now. What do you think about the effect of the show on the town? Do you think it has changed Bilby itself? The people here? After all, we have a lot of tourists here now, as well as this great influx of crews for every series, maybe not so much of a community feel?...

Myfanwy: That's what I meant before – Bilby has sure changed from when I was growing up. Then we knew everyone...yes, I can see you smile, that could be a nuisance – I was a bit of a wild kid, always wanting to go to parties... I was so frustrated, it was hard being creative here then. I started in designing when I was young, designed and made all my own clothes– we had no businesses in Bilby except for the shops, and of course the farms. And they were struggling too – there was nothing to do for young kids.

Shelley: Didn't you go out with Chops Lambert at one stage?

Myfanwy: You have been doing some homework! Yes, (sigh)...I must have been about fifteen! He was in the footy team – a really good looking boy, very popular with the girls...we didn't last long, we were just too different!

Shelley: How do you feel now about being in opposition to Chops?

Myfanwy: Oh, we still get on really well, most of the time – except when we both try to talk at once at public meetings! It's not personal, we're both just trying to do the best for Bilby. You talked about change, it really has been difficult to keep Bilby growing while still maintaining the strengths of this town. It's a community first and foremost, even if it's a nationally famous one now. I don't want to lose that very special quality.

Shelley: What do you think is the future for Bilby? Will it go back to being a bit of a ghost town like it was in the 70s, if the TV show leaves?

Myfanwy: I'm so glad you asked that – it's a vital question. That's what I think we can avoid, this boom and bust mentality. Bilby has some of the most wonderful natural resources, a history which is accurately documented all the way from the gold rush times, some real characters from the past (and the present!) and now an overlay of coffee and craft shops built up by the tourist trade. It seems to me, we've got a real opportunity here – why not expand the tourist opportunity, into something more organised like a trail history walk round the Mount Owen area, as well as through the town? And how about an event which celebrates the unique qualities of Bilby?

Shelley: Isn't there some talk of a festival? Any ideas for a name?

Myfanwy: How about Lights, Camera, Action in Bilby? No, that's just a joke...I think the Shire Council is talking about something like the Bilby Country Pleasures Festival – I think there'll be something on arts and crafts...I'll get involved there... and also I think there's talk of having performances, music, street theatre, maybe a display in the art gallery. We want to show Bilby as being sustainable – no more boom and bust!

Shelley: Well you certainly have contributed to the boom – and thank you so much for talking to us today.

Myfanwy: You're welcome Shelley. And good luck with your studies – let me know if you want any help with your folio.

Shelley: That was Myfanwy Fallenby, with a typical generosity in offering to

help – as she has been doing in Bilby over the last ten years. You can follow up some more of her ideas through the Bilby Historical Society, and also check out the Shire Council website for more details on the proposed festival.

Thanks for listening to *Back to Bilby* – and keep listening next week when we interview Myfanwy's childhood sweetheart, Chops Lambert, our Business Association leader and another third generation Bilby citizen with a few stories to tell!