

## First adventures in wallpapering and a near divorce

I was in the middle of my “A” levels, and was about to be forced to repeat a year. This happened for two reasons. The first was that the local education authority had, in their infinite wisdom, and possibly to save money, decided to force the “A” stream in our local grammar school to pass through the “O” level meat grinder in their fourth year rather than the conventional five. Suffice it to say that at that time I was one of the weaker brethren in maths – or perhaps the laziest – or possibly just poorly motivated.

The second reason was that my father had passed away whilst I was in the upper sixth year (for the first time around), and to put it bluntly I went off the rails a bit. However serendipity took over and at school I met up with someone who became a bosom friend and whose father was a painter and decorator by trade.

We were both paid the princely sum of £5 a term as physics lab stewards and the friend immediately helped me to undertake my very first decorating project. Mum grudgingly forked out enough money for me to buy the very cheapest wallpaper and ceiling lining paper to decorate my own bedroom, presumably on the grounds that even if I made a pig’s breakfast of the job a) it could be redone professionally, and b) I would be the only person who would have to suffer it anyway. The result was a resounding success, so I was soon allowed to do other jobs around the house in lieu of the normal professionals. The friend and I spent a lot of time together for a couple of years, holidaying together and even playing Canasta on Sundays. However I lost touch with my friend when he went to Chelsea School of Pharmacy, but met up with him some twenty years later, by which time he was MD of Reckitt and Coleman and I was MD of a tiny lamp making company in Hull. What about the decorating job? Well it was actually a great success and spurred me to greater DIY efforts in later years. However the use of a real paraffin burning blowlamp to remove old paint is not to be encouraged for the uninitiated. (Talk to the people who almost destroyed the Cutty Sark).

I met my future (and current) wife whilst at university. We married a year after graduating, with no assets to our names other than a lovingly chosen double bed, a second hand armchair; two painted bentwood chairs and an old kitchen table. Never mind the Monty Python two handfuls of cold gravel – we had it tough. If it hadn’t been for generous wedding present gifts and the use of a friend’s furnished flat it would have been a very bleak year ahead. But providence shone on us and within that year Judith was teaching and I was a research engineer working for the Philips group. Through a certain amount of luck and a loan

for the deposit from Mum we managed to get a mortgage on a three bed semi in Horsham. Great! A home of our own.

So – it needed decorating of course. There was a lounge diner with a sort of three quarter dividing wall between the two sections. The wall had a fireplace and hearth on the living room side. Now at that time, Vymura vinyl wall-covering was much in vogue, and we really fancied a very sixties pattern – a dark brown background with a broad black grid and with various large coloured spots filling the holes in the grid. Very sixties! But expensive, and we could only afford one roll. “No problem!” I declared. I should add that my wife had had no previous experience either of DIY or of my competence. “We’ll hang the one roll on the fireplace wall – it will just fit with a bit of judicious cut and paste” (literally!).

We (or rather my wife) had won a quality carpet as runner up in Good Housekeeping’s Blue Ribbon Bride competition and it had recently been fitted. In the hearth was a beautiful crystal vase with tastefully arranged flowers – perhaps it was an anniversary – and yet so close to divorce... I had mixed up the paste with gay abandon – in a bucket in the hearth. Note the careful preparations dear reader! One of the bentwood chairs stood on the new carpet serving as a pair of steps and the wallpaper was pasted somehow according to directions. We were ready to go and I was full of confidence. Standing on the chair I had to lean forward somewhat to reach the wall. I asked my wife to pass me the carefully folded paper and stretched up to align the top with the ceiling. Not being quite tall enough and not being quite straight enough either, I stood on tiptoe, at which point several things happened sequentially, inevitably in seeming slow motion, and are forever etched in my memory. I lost my balance,. The wallpaper fell jam side down on the carpet and tore in two; I fell sideways, knocking the bucket of paste to spill its contents over the new carpet; I then fell heavily on the crystal vase, smashing it and crushing the flowers beyond redemption. Fortunately I was quite unhurt, which is more than I can say for my poor partner. In my efforts to stabilise myself I had inadvertently punched her squarely on the nose, giving her two black eyes. Unsurprisingly she burst into tears. Surprisingly she still loves me and the divorce never happened.

There are several lessons to be learned from this little anecdote:

- ❖ Prepare for the job before you start
- ❖ Make sure that you have removed ANYTHING precious or valuable
- ❖ Use the right tools for the job
- ❖ Don’t be too overconfident – know your own capabilities.

**John Wells**