

Mad about MARY

One woman loves nothing more than sharing her passion for fashion with the world

Looking back on her teenage years, 74-year-old Ruth Lowe recalls with great fondness the fabulous nightlife of the Swinging Sixties. Dressed in their latest Mary Quant-inspired homemade outfits, Ruth and her older sister, Lys, now 76, regularly visited the clubs in their home city of Birmingham to watch the latest bands perform.

Those happy times, centred around music and fashion, were to have a lifelong effect on Ruth, and would eventually lead her to a new and rewarding career at the age of 60.

'My sister seemed to know everybody who was anybody so she could get me into the nightclubs from about the age of 14. It was absolutely fabulous!' Ruth recalls.

Like many teenagers of the time, her sister was heavily into fashion, and she helped and encouraged Ruth to make her own outfits. With their heads full of design ideas from fashion magazines and armed with cheap fabric and accessories bought from Birmingham's Rag Market, the sisters would set to work on their latest creations.

'We both worked as paper girls, and we used to read all

the magazines before we delivered them! If there was anything interesting, we'd buy them from the shop and then go home and make them up,' Ruth remembers.

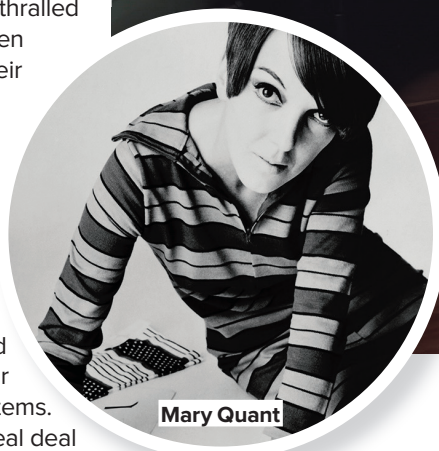
The sisters were so enthralled with Mary Quant they even managed to convince their boyfriends to drive them down to London on the back of their Lambretta scooters to visit the designer's famous boutique, Bazaar, on the King's Road.

It wasn't until 1988, however, that Ruth would become the proud owner of genuine Mary Quant items. 'I started collecting the real deal when I bought a beat-up Mary Quant Designer Mini car, which needed a full restoration. I knew it was going to be a show car and thought it would be a good idea to put Mary Quant items in it,' Ruth says. 'I started with the make-up, thinking I could make myself up in it, until my daughter, Deana, told me that it would be too old to wear!'

A few lipsticks and eyeshadows would go on to become part of a collection of more than 1,500 items by the legendary British designer. Ruth's collection now consists



Ruth has loved Mary Quant since she was just 14



Mary Quant

of tights, umbrellas, boots, shoes, dresses, jackets and more. 'You name it, I've got it in my collection,' she grins proudly. With every new piece that continues to arrive at her door, Ruth is happily taken back to her fun-filled youth.

What started as a collecting hobby purely for Ruth's own enjoyment would become something so much more, thanks to the TV programme *Antiques Roadshow*, in 2009. 'I was watching the show one day and at the end it said to get

in touch if you were a collector, so I did, and they invited me to go along. I took my Mini and three suitcases full of clothes,' Ruth says.

It was on that day that she met Katherine Higgins, the expert on 20th-century collectables. Ruth kept in touch with her, and exhibited some of her collection at a gallery in Woking as part of a pop art exhibition curated by Katherine.

Later, Katherine asked Ruth if she would like to meet Mary Quant. 'I said don't be silly, of course I do!' Ruth laughs. 'So we went to one of her talks and I was introduced as her number

A Mary Quant exhibition at the V&A, 2019-20



Thirty-two of Ruth's items were shown at the V&A

one fan. It was overwhelming, but she was charming and interested in me. I told her the incredible impact she'd had on my life.'

Following this wonderful opportunity to meet her idol, Katherine suggested that Ruth should do talks of her own. 'She was talking to a girl who wouldn't even put her hand up in class at school. I was very shy because I had a lisp and couldn't read out in class,' says Ruth. But her confidence had grown over the years, thanks in

part to those dancing days, and to the many hours spent talking to people about her Mary Quant items at the car shows. With her extensive research and having read the designer's biography more than 10 times, Ruth felt

You've got to have a passion'

ready to take to the stage. In August 1999, still working as a PA, Ruth did her first talk to share her precious collection and to take her audience down memory lane. 'I was very nervous, but my friend reassured me that it was really good,' she says.

Word spread and she was soon doing a couple of talks a month. When Ruth retired aged 66 in 2015, she had extra time to dedicate to her passion and could spend more evenings providing the nostalgic talks.

Today she gives one or two talks a week to captivated audiences of WI groups, the u3a, schools, charities, embroidery guilds, dressmakers and more. 'I'm as daft as a brush and play up a bit now to make people laugh, but I didn't do that at first as I didn't have the confidence,' she explains. 'I talk to anybody who will listen because I'm passionate about it.

You've got to have a passion. It's a very big part of my life.'

That passion led not only to Ruth giving talks but also to loaning 32 items to the Victoria and Albert Museum's Mary Quant exhibition, which ran from April 2019 to February 2020. Her passion for fashion has seen her network expand to include her wide-ranging audiences, museum curators and even former colleagues of Mary Quant.

'It's given me a completely new lease of life,' Ruth says. 'And it has all come from what I remembered about wearing the clothes I did as a teenager.'