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Clare Perkins has helped create dresses for the Queen and she is now on a mission to make every bride feel like a princess. *Carolyn Henderson* meets the Suffolk designer who turns dreams into reality



Every bride dreams of being able to wear a dress fit for a princess. Those who look to the skills of designer and couture dressmaker Clare Perkins can literally see their dreams come true, because after being invited to join the legendary couturier Norman Hartnell, she worked on dresses for the Queen, the Queen Mother and Princess Margaret.

Clare now runs her own business, Silk Rose, from her home near Lavenham, and has wonderful memories of the days when royal hemming was more than just a special technique for use on delicate fabric. But in true fairytale fashion, her most vivid memory is of the day she pricked her finger with a sewing needle and watched in horror as her blood marked the richly-embellished dress.

"It was for the State Opening of Parliament in 1975 and as always, the Queen would wear a white dress with gold embellishments," recalled Clare.

"I was sewing the hem and pricked my finger; blood went on to the fabric and I literally froze in panic.

"I worked there with a lovely lady called Grace. She told me not to worry, because it happened to all the best dressmakers and that they all left their mark.

"Grace told me to chew some white cotton and rub it over the mark. I always say that the Queen had my blood, taken away by my spit!"

Clare was born to be a dressmaker.

"I was one of those little girls who was always making dresses for their dolls from rose petals," she recalled. "I don't know where it came from. My mother, Angela, who writes under the name of Clough, is a historian and genealogist and my father, Richard, was an architect and a war hero. He flew Mitchells and was awarded the DSO."

Clare was educated at a private girls' school and says she was not academic. "The headmistress used to write to my parents and say 'Clare could do better if only she would stop drawing, sewing and playing music,'" she smiled.

Prophetically, her father told the headmistress that one day she would regret saying that because Clare would be making clothes for the Queen.

Clare left school at 16 and, after a brief flirtation with the idea of becoming an occupational therapist, took the advice of her school careers advisor and applied to the London School of Fashion and Technology.

The tutors were so impressed with her portfolio that she was accepted even before her exam results were known and from 1969–1972, Clare revelled in London and the fashion scene. She knew that she wanted to study couture and at the end of her course was asked to join Sir Norman Hartnell.

"You didn't apply, you had to be asked, so it was a real



honour," she said. "But I had to forget everything I'd learned already and start at the bottom by picking up pins from the floor."

It was during Clare's time with Hartnell, recalled as a distant figure of who she was totally in awe, that she learned the painstaking handsewing techniques of couture. Only seams could be joined by treadle machine; everything else was done by hand and it was here that she gained a passion for working with silk and chiffon.

"I loved royal hemming, where you roll fine chiffon," she said. "The Queen Mother loved chiffon and so did Barbara Cartland. Everything Barbara had was cerise pink and everything the Queen Mother wore, she had to replicate."

After two years with Hartnell, Clare got married, wearing – of course – a dress she designed and made herself. Two months after the wedding, she and her husband emigrated to Canada where she concentrated on freelance designing.

As was accepted at the time, her career took a back step while she brought up her sons, Richard, Charlie and Christopher.

However, she has fond memories of shutting

herself in the playpen to sew – to keep pins and needles away from tiny hands – while watching her children play on the safe side of the barrier.

After returning from Canada in the 1980s to live in Suffolk, Clare began creating couture dresses.

"Making a wedding dress is a huge responsibility, but a happy one," she said.

"I don't go round all the shops seeing what other people do, I'm there for someone to create their own dream."

A true romantic, Clare insists that every bride deserves the dress of her dreams. However, practicality dictates that while some are able to pay couture prices, others can't afford them – and with a wave of her magic wand, she has the answer to the problem.

"A lot of people want an original dress, but at a cheaper price," she said. "So I've launched what I call my demi-couture range – dresses made up to my designs, to which I add the individual touches and embellishments, and which cost about a third of the price."

She doesn't stop at wedding dresses. "If you can wear it, I can make it," she said cheerfully, flicking

through her impressive portfolio.

With designs ranging from clothes worn by British equestrian stars at the Atlanta Olympics – created on a freelance basis for the iconic Suffolk clothing company Puffa – to waistcoats for football fans incorporating their club's strip, Clare is as imaginative as she is a perfectionist.

She also wants to pass on her knowledge and skills and to encourage others to enjoy sewing.

Projects include evening classes at Suffolk New College, Ipswich.

"Anyone can sew," she said firmly. "Even my sons grew up knowing how to sew on a button."

But while looking forward to new challenges, Clare holds fast to one tradition.

"When I was with Norman Hartnell, the very last thing that happened with every garment was that his label was sewn in," she said.

"I do the same as him. When I sew in my label, it means the dress is finished and is as perfect as I can make it."

■ For more information telephone Clare on 07526 598363 or visit www.silkrose.co.uk