

**AN OBJECT OF INTEREST FROM HUNSTANTON  
HERITAGE CENTRE  
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**HUNSTANTON &  
DISTRICT  
CIVIC SOCIETY**

**PETER LEWIS CROWN – the story of a successful fashion designer.**



Peter in his lovely home in November 2021  
at the time of this interview.

Interviewed by Sheila and Stephen Kent 22 November 2021

Write up by Margi Blunden February 2022

**FROM ELEGANT SEASIDE RESORT TO TOP LONDON  
FASHION HOUSE**

If you had walked along the Hunstanton prom on a Sunday in 1930 you would have witnessed something like a fashion parade in one of the most elegant seaside resorts in the country. All the people strolling along were wearing their finest clothes. In fact as well as the well-dressed people of Hunstanton you might have glimpsed members of the Royal Family.

Into this milieu was born Peter Lewis Crown.

He lived with his family in a 'lovely house' at the bottom of Park Road, Hunstanton when that area of town was rural. His grandfather had a dairy in Westgate and owned the fields where the council estate was later built.

As a boy Peter watched the cows meandering down past the house. He and his sister had a carefree childhood playing on the beach, jumping on the rocks with their poles in front of the cliffs, running free on the dairy farm and taking part in community events such as the annual fancy dress parade. For this his mother who 'had a wonderful imagination' designed their outfits to represent current events and popular advertisements.

She encouraged dressing up as a game for Peter and his friends :

*I loved costumes and clothes and was always pretending to be different characters.*

The bustling little town of Hunstanton did not only provide the ideal setting for children growing up but it provided shops of all kinds. Peter's mother worked for Jones, a dress shop which was near the station. She then worked as a buyer for Buntings Department Store on the High Street. Peter quickly became aware of her love of good quality clothes and fashion and wrote in his book 'House of Lachasse':

*My taste and awareness of colour and style was awakened in my childhood.*

His grandmother set the tone for Peter's later fashion standards. She was always elegantly dressed – *long frocks, high frilled collars and her hair pulled high on her head* – and elegance became the hallmark for Peter's fashion world.

If Hunstanton set the standard for good dressing it also set a standard in hotels.

Peter remembers the Sandringham Hotel near the station as 'magnificent'.

He recalled:

*On Boxing Day the Hunt used to gather there for a drink before heading off over the Ringstead Downs.*

Imagine the hunters in their hunting clothes and boots, the energy, colour and noise of the gathering as they stood at the bar of the hotel before galloping away over the Le Strange Estate!

However, the war changed everything. Troops soon outnumbered the local people. The beach was out of bounds with mines and barbed wire everywhere. As a coastal town movement in and out of the Hunstanton area was restricted. Peter's father had to close his barber's business and join the Army. Life at home was reduced to Peter, his sister and mother.

But this situation gave Peter opportunities to develop his talents. By now he was at King Edward VII school in King's Lynn and excelling at art. He entered every art competition he could find and often won them.

During the holidays he became a part time assistant in the local swimming pool which was opposite the Kit Kat dance hall. The American troops would come over from Snettisham to have a swim and then a dance. They took a shine to Peter when he offered to look after their possessions whilst they were in the water. The rewards were sweets and silk stockings.

Never short on initiative Peter and his sister wanted to help the war effort and raise money. They put on a show in his aunt's large garage. A local fireman built the stage for them. Peter made the costumes, borrowed a piano from the church nearby, made the scenery and posters and persuaded the Hunstanton shopkeepers to display them.

He filled the garage with family and locals for the performance.

An enterprising boy as a young teenager he was soon 'working' for Marshalls a glassware store on the High Street (where the Queen Mother liked to pop in).

His artistic talents were known in the town and at Marshall's request he set up a studio at the top of the house where he fulfilled orders for fancy gifts – painted cork table mats, knitted toys, gloves and scarves, wax jewellery, decorated glassware. His business acumen developed and by the end of the war when he was 15 he had decided he wanted to be a dress designer.

The picture given of our town is of course from a different age but it was hugely influential in directing Peter's career path. London was the place which called and due to his huge determination he got a place at the Chelsea School of Commercial Art funded by the Norfolk Education Committee – all of which he organised himself at seventeen years old.

In January 1948 he moved to London. Before many months he had become Head Student with responsibilities. The Chelsea school was about artistic appreciation, very different from today's art schools where self expression is more important.

The students all dressed quite formally and Peter wore a well-cut dark suit just as he had in Hunstanton. In spite of the formal appearances people adopted, Peter was having the time of his life. Art school was fun!

Always true to his feelings he began to realise that he wanted to move towards the fashion world rather than stay at art school. Through one of his tutors he was offered the chance of an interview at **Lachasse** fashion house. This was a prestigious British couture firm.



One of the longest surviving fashion houses it operated from 1928 – 2006. Many famous British couturiers were trained here.

Peter was offered a position at a time when fine tailoring for women was a hallmark of fashion. If you go to the V&A you can see a red suit tailored at this time in its archive collection.

It was an international business and gave its employees the chance to work in different locations and meet the rich and fashionable people of the day.

In January 1949 he began work there in the workroom where he was taught the correct way to make a garment from first fitting to final pressing and lining.

He also managed to find time to help backstage at the Saville Theatre in Shaftesbury Avenue. This experience was like being part of a theatrical club and it gave him inspiration for his work as he was surrounded by colourful costumes and a vibrant atmosphere. And he started to meet famous performers.

London was a place of opportunity for Peter. He was now invited to join St Martin's School of Art as a part-time lecturer. So after a day at Lachasse he switched into teacher mode and went off to the Art School. His lecturing extended beyond London but eventually he relinquished this role and later joined the Colour Council. This professional organisation offered a collective voice on the influence of colour in design. He found himself working alongside Princess Margaret whose skills with colour were apparently very good.

Now Peter started to build his own client list and he also travelled all over the country to help present fashion shows. This meant going to big country houses and meeting people like Lord and Lady Astor who owned Cliveden - this had been a fashionable place for politicians to stay; indeed it was the setting for the meeting of Christine Keeler and John Profumo whose relationship led to the collapse of the then Tory Government.

But for Peter it was a wonderful place to work and he and his co-workers received much kindness from Lady Astor.

In *House of Lachasse*, he describes one such fashion show in Norfolk at Blickling Hall. This show was in aid of the British Red Cross and it was opened by Viscountess Lewisham, later Countess Spencer and stepmother of Diana Princess of Wales.

*The 1627 Jacobean ceiling inspired Mr Owen, the designer at Lachasse, to create a pale green silk ball gown embroidered in topaz stones, which followed the ceiling's design. A supper party was held after the evening show in a marquee in the grounds and we were*

*surrounded by peacocks strutting and fanning their tails. It was a glamorous end to all our hard work.*

This hard work was often to raise money for charity and this meant travelling all over Britain. A first for the Houses of Parliament occurred when Peter organised a charity event in the Speakers House in aid of the Marie Curie Fund. Through this work to benefit others, Peter met and made friends with many influential people and he received many honours and awards.

He says in his book:

*I treasure all these awards and honours and am proud that I was able to build so successfully on the charity work that I started during my boyhood in Hunstanton.*

Peter's career success led him to becoming director of Lachasse in 1965. He said:

*I was lucky to be given the chance and have the talent to do it.*

Speaking of his talents he said during the interview:

*Colour you are born with. I had an eye for colour and for good materials. My mother would always feel materials for quality.*

*I think cleanness of line makes for good design and this alongside good fabric gave Lachasse a hallmark for quality.*

We asked him what colours and materials he favours.

*Blue – all different blues. And my favourite fabrics are pure wool and pure silk.*

He is a man who has made connections and friends throughout his life and he feels very appreciative of all the wonderful friendships which have come his way.

In today's world of fashion where experiments and extremes seem to hold sway, the world of Lachasse and couture seem almost a museum piece.

However it would be unwise to brush aside the place of elegance, the subtle use of colour, the use of quality fabric and the high standards of workmanship achieved in couture. The wheel of fortune always turns.

Peter's artistic temperament combined with his business acumen took him into the heart of this world where talent, knowledge, flair and creativity flourished to the highest degree. He found his way into its centre from our small town here on the Norfolk coast. Recently he has most kindly donated a signed copy of his book to the Heritage Centre. If you come to visit us please do ask to see it. You will be delighted to find the life story of a generous man who has given much to our country and has never forgotten his origins in Hunstanton and what it gave to him.



On the left - O.B.E. awarded to Peter Lewis-Crown on 15<sup>th</sup> June 1998 for Services to the Fashion Industry and for Charitable Services

On the right – Membership of the U S National Institute of Social Sciences awarded to Peter in respect of his charitable services in the USA.



#### **ADDENDUM**

Peter read through this article and seemed very happy with what had been written. He did say that in recording some of the facts surrounding his life, he wanted it to be known that, if nothing else, he wished to encourage young people to go out into this world and make every effort to achieve something in their life. During the course of his life which started out in Hunstanton, he succeeded in reaching pretty much the very top of the profession that he chose and he likes to think that, if it is possible for him, then it is possible for anyone

#### ***AIM FOR THE TOP – YOU MAY MAKE IT!***

He also said that even though confined to his lovely home in London, he still supports a number of charities and is pleased to help wherever he can. He is also happy to talk on the phone to anyone wanting to contact him – Contact Secretary, Sheila Kent if you wished to be put into contact with Peter.

*Interviewed in his London home by Sheila and Stephen Kent in November 2021*

*Article compiled by Margi Blunden – March 2022*