

## ASHLEY, LAURA (née Mountney; 1925 - 1985), designer and businesswoman

**Name:** Laura Ashley  
**Date of birth:** 1925  
**Date of death:** 1985  
**Spouse:** Bernard Albert Ashley  
**Child:** Laura Jane Ashley  
**Child:** David Ashley  
**Child:** Nick Ashley  
**Child:** Emma Mary Shuckburgh (née Ashley)  
**Parent:** Margaret Mountney (née Davies)  
**Parent:** Lewis Stanley Mountney  
**Gender:** Female  
**Occupation:** designer and businesswoman  
**Area of activity:** Business and Industry  
**Author:** Ffion Mair Jones

Laura Ashley was born on 7 September 1925 at 31 Station Terrace, Dowlais (the home of her grandmother, Margaret Davies), the daughter of Lewis Stanley Mountney and his wife Margaret (née Davies), who were first cousins. It was Margaret Mountney's decision that the birth should take place in Dowlais rather than at Camden Road, London, where she had settled after her marriage, and although she and her baby subsequently returned to the capital, where Laura later became a pupil at Elmwood School, Croydon, the home of 'Grandma Wales' in Dowlais Top left a deep impression on the young girl. It was here that she spent holidays during her childhood, taking note of the womenfolk's diligence in fashioning patchwork creations and rag mats, preparing unparalleled home-cooked food, and attending chapel - where the fact that the services were conducted in Welsh in no way diluted the impression they made, leaving memories which grounded Laura's faith as a Christian.

After Britain declared war on Germany in early September 1939, the retreat to south Wales became more permanent, as Margaret Mountney and her children (Laura, the eldest, together with two brothers and one sister) moved to Station Terrace for refuge from the bombs in London. After a period at Aberdare Secretarial College, Laura returned to the capital to keep house for her father (a veteran of the trenches of the Great War), who was suffering from the effects of shell-shock and struggling to cope on his own. She also joined the war effort, becoming a member of the Girls' Training Corps in 1941 and the Women's Royal Naval Service in 1943, and following the D-Day landings on the beaches of Normandy - now a qualified Wren - she worked in northern France, including the capital, Paris, and in Brussels. She was demobilized in August 1946, and returned to work in the City.

During the early years of the war, Laura had become friendly with a man a year her junior, Bernard Albert Ashley (1926-2009). The son of a grocer, Bernard cherished ambitious dreams for the future, and a period in the Far East fighting alongside the Gurkhas had sharpened his sense of purpose. In February 1949, the two were married. Although Laura continued to work - now at the headquarters of the Federation of Women's Institutes in Eccleston Street, Victoria - she also strove to ensure her husband's wellbeing and the comfort of their home, however modest (it was a basic three-room flat up a flight of 99 steps from street level). These impulses signaled the importance of stability and maintaining tradition in Laura's approach to life. During March 1952, she was involved in organizing an exhibition of traditional handicrafts, items that called to mind her childhood memories of the diligence of Grandma Wales and the family in Dowlais. This experience led to an effort to find small prints that could be used to create patchwork and, with the help of Bernard Ashley, to create a silk screen for printing such material on textiles. The screen was placed on the kitchen table in the small apartment, and the printing of table mats and headscarves for women on silk and cotton, the natural materials that were to become such an important part of Laura Ashley's vision as a designer, began. The product was initially distributed locally but, within a few months, demand had increased to such an extent that the business needed a larger base. The removal of the screen and other equipment from the small flat would, undoubtedly, have been very acceptable to Laura following the birth of her first child, Laura Jane, on 1 October 1953. A basement in Cambridge Street was accordingly secured early in 1954 and on 19 March, the Ashley Mountney Company was officially founded.

At the heart of the business partnership that was now developing between Laura and her husband were Bernard Ashley's engineering skills, alongside his unwavering determination to succeed. He put his mind to work to produce a large machine that could print material continuously, a development which led to significant growth in the weekly output of the nascent enterprise. Meanwhile, Laura was prompted to seek inspiration ever more widely for attractive patterns. A Victorian element became core to the company's product after the huge success of tea towels produced on a theme from this period. Furthermore, after the birth of a second child, David, on 1 November 1954, when the family moved to a cottage in the countryside near Limpsfield on the Kent-Surrey border, the natural world - wild flowers, woodlands, small, tidy fields, and the pleasure of homegrown produce - contributed to the evolution of Laura's sense of the company's artistic development.

The Limpsfield period was one of growth for the Ashley Mountney Company, with sales rising from £2000 to £8000 per annum between 1955 and 1960. However, due to growing tensions between Laura and her husband - his frequent absences, the family's material poverty, and the pressure of caring for three small children, following the birth of Nick on 15 January 1956 - not to mention significant damage to the business equipment after floods on the nearby river Darent in September 1958, Laura took the unprecedented step of leaving the matrimonial home. With children in tow, she drove off in her rickety Morris Minor, first to Eastbourne, East Sussex, and then to Wales, where she camped on the banks of the river Mawddach, near Dolgellau in Merioneth, during the summer of 1961. Neither the marriage nor the business partnership was over, however. She was soon followed by Bernard, and the family resettled in Gwalia House, Machynlleth, where the business started the next chapter in its history. With Laura running a shop from home in Machynlleth - a space that became a community hub, thanks to her quiet, unflappable personality and her ability to foster a homely and attractive ambience - Bernard managed to relocate the business with all its machinery on the site of the old Tybrith social club, near Carno, initially, before later securing more substantial premises at the old Victorian Carno station.

Central to these developments was the growth of the company's workforce. In a rural area suffering constant depopulation due to a lack of job opportunities, the Ashley Mountney Company offered the local community hope for regeneration. Drawing on their own experiences of flexible working, as a mother particularly in the case of Laura (Emma Mary, the last of her four children, was born in April 1965), Bernard and Laura's care for their workforce was exemplary and showed progressive characteristics that made working life possible in rural mid-Wales communities, for men and women alike. Bernard made natural and effortless connections with local men on social visits to the pub, and saw potential for the Ashley Mountney Company in the likes of local sheep shearing champion Meirion Rowlands (d. 2008), who was about to leave the area due to lack of work opportunities. Foremost in Laura's mind was extending the flexibility of working from home to young mothers, whilst both firmly believed in the importance of good pay, and did not seek formal training in potential employees - as if finding that a clean slate had more to offer.

The company was renamed 'Laura Ashley' in 1961, and by the mid-1960s its products were selling well in kitchen and craft shops in Britain and in major stores around the world. In 1967, the first of a series of stores was opened in London, at 23 Pelham Street. Here, Laura Ashley clothes were given widespread exposure in the capital itself, coverage which led to success because, rather than in spite of, their lack of modernity. Laura Ashley did not seek the hedonism of the Swinging Sixties; indeed, as she said in an interview later, 'I am very Welsh, and... looking at all this from the quiet mountains'. Items such as the long Victorian nightdress and the simple day dress based on the same pattern, with their nostalgic, feminine appeal, attracted the London crowds even in the heyday of the mini skirt. As the business in the capital grew, Gwalia House in Machynlleth was closed, but further stores opened in Shrewsbury and Bath, along with the company's first European store, in Geneva.

The home factories in Carno and mid Wales were also further developed and, in response to the company's steady growth, elements of the business were formalized. A financial manager, John James, was appointed in August 1974, partly to address problems arising from over-trading and from an expansion so rapid that there was never enough money in hand. Official board meetings also became a feature of the company's management for the first time. Although Laura was present as Deputy to Chairman Bernard, it was the image of the company that interested her rather than its financial health. According to interior designer Carolyn Warrender, 'In fact, she really wasn't a businesswoman; marketing was such a nasty word to her'. To reflect her lack of commitment to the management of the board, Laura's role as Deputy on the Laura Ashley Group was exchanged in 1980 for the position of Design Director, a role that put her in charge of the artistic philosophy of the business. As the company turned increasingly towards interior design, the responsibility for clothes was devolved to another member of staff, leaving Laura free to develop materials and accessories for home decoration. By now, she and her husband had left Rhyddoldog, the mansion near Rhayader in Mid Wales which they bought in 1973 (although it remained in their possession), and were spending their time on the Continent, to a large extent to avoid tax liabilities. In 1978, they became the owners of Remainsil château in Picardy, an eighteenth-century building that provided ample scope for decorating grand rooms in a historical style, work that was of great interest to Laura at this time. She was given

further opportunities to work on interior decoration with the purchase in 1982 and 1983 of the stone farmhouse of Le Preverger near St Tropez on the Côte d'Azur (previously owned by the actress Jeanne Moreau (1928-2017)), and of 43 Rue Ducale, Brussels, reputed home of the French Embassy during the Napoleonic period.

As Laura approached her sixtieth birthday in August and September 1985, interior design continued to be prevalent in her thoughts. She had had to stay away from Britain for extended periods in order to satisfy tax requirements and had as a result missed significant occasions such as receiving an Honorary Degree of Doctor of Literature from the University of London and attending the wedding of her youngest son, Nick, in 1984. Now, however, a felicitous opportunity arose to return to help her eldest daughter, Jane, who was expecting her first baby, to refurbish a cottage in the Cotswolds. Giving in to her motherly instincts as well as indulging herself by working to ensure the comfort of the new home, Laura made a significant decision for one of her other children too, writing to Nick on 24 August 1985 to inform him of her decision to resign as Design Director of the Laura Ashley Group (which was about to be floated on the stock market) and to transfer the role to him.

In accordance with her wishes, Laura's birthday was a private celebration, spent in the company of her daughter and new grandson, her mother, her sister, Mary Coates, and Bernard. That night, she got up from her bedroom at her daughter's cottage without turning on the lights. A fall down the stairs resulted in serious head injuries. Although she was flown to Walsgrave hospital, Coventry, and survived for ten days on life support, she never regained consciousness and died on 17 September 1985. A funeral service was held at Carno parish church, with the Dowlais Male Choir (of which she had been Vice President) present to sing a hymn, before laying her to rest in the cemetery.

Within two months of her death, the company was floated, valued at nearly £270 million, with shares totaling £1.25 million allocated at no cost to the staff - a final indication of Laura's care for this extended 'family'. Despite the exceptional initial interest, the company was dogged by troubles in the following years and by 2001 the family's links with the business had ended. Involvement with the Ashley Family Foundation, a registered charity originally established in 1986 as The Laura Ashley Foundation, continued, however. Jane, Laura's eldest daughter, served as Director until 2020, and her sister Emma Shuckburgh as Director for Wales from 1999.

Author

Ffion Mair Jones

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