Snug Harbour House – A Prisoner's Legacy

by Pam North

Lucy Ward, a British miniaturist and dollhouse collector, found a marvelous treasure for herself – one with an interesting history. She shared the story of her acquisition of an unusual and charming dollhouse.

“As a miniaturist I have collected many dollhouses; some are vintage, others modern. One particular house I purchased many years ago intrigued me mostly because of its history. It was built back in the 1960s by an unknown prisoner in the prison workshop, and when finished it was raffled for a children's home, raising £44.00. He spent over 300 leisure hours working on the project, which is constructed from bits of waste material he found in the prison workshops. I purchased the house, called *Snug Harbour,* from the winner of the raffle.”

From 1803 to 1815, Britain was at war with Napoleonic France, and many thousands of prisoners were taken. To help accommodate them, redundant warships were commissioned as floating prisons known as 'the hulks'. Several hulks were at anchor at Plymouth, England, among other places, and conditions were extremely bad with poor sanitary arrangements, little exercise, lack of fresh air, and poor diet. The death rate rose to an unacceptable level, and a prison on land was decided upon as a replacement. Princetown on Dartmoor was considered a suitable location, and there the prison came to be built. The Prince of Wales owned the land and it was he who laid the foundation stone on March 20, 1806. Dartmoor Prison stands in the midst of bleak, misty moorland, with forbidding weather, isolated in one of Devon's most picturesque places to visit, and it has housed some of the country's most notorious killers. The prison has slowly evolved, and now holds low-category prisoners who are encouraged to undertake training programs to help them after their release. Single cell accommodation still applies, and they eat in their cells, but showers and telephone communication with their families are freely available. They are not there to be punished; their sentence is loss of liberty tempered by help towards reform and rehabilitation. Ward has has her own memories of it. “I remember as a child driving past with my parents on holiday back in the 1960s. The prisoners could be seen chopping stone in the quarry, and they would stare as we drove past. Those images have stayed with me.”
*Snug Harbour* is a depiction of an early 18th century cottage with timber framing and a thatched roof, which is typical of the vernacular Tudor architecture of Devon cottages. It stands 2 feet tall x 2 feet deep x 2.6 feet wide, and is fully furnished. The prisoner used model railway material on the exterior, and paint samples for the kitchen floor, thatch on the roof, and stamps for the pictures on the walls. To access the house the thatch roof lifts off to view the top floor which has three bedrooms and a bathroom, with all the furniture fixed in place. This level is then lifted off to view the lower level, which has a lounge, dining room and kitchen, again with all furniture fixed in place. Outside is a garage and outhouse toilet, and a sign stands in the garden which reads: “Snug Harbour - Desirable Freehold Residence To Be Sold By Public Auction By J Watts & Sons Inc, Real Estators -Broad Arrow House - Ball And Chain Drive – Princetown”.
Internally it is more modern than its exterior style. The upper level has a master bedroom with a double bed and a wardrobe, both fixed in place, and typical 1960s wallpaper and bedding. A small bedroom, with similar wallpaper and a single bed, is at the rear. There is a nursery, painted pink with transfers on the walls, which has a cot and a wardrobe. The bathroom comes with bath, vanity unit, and toilet. The lower level has a dining room with a front bay window, wood paneling, and a central dining table. A door leads to the kitchen, which has a sink unit, wall cabinets, and a cooker, all fixed in place, and a door leading onto the garden. The living room is open-plan, with a central fireplace, front bay window, stairs rising to the first floor, a television and a sofa; its windows are made from wood with Perspex panes and a thumb print of paint in the center, and the flooring is imitation wood, with corduroy material as carpet. Double doors at the back open onto a patio and a serving hatch to the kitchen. Outside is a coal bunker, and an outside toilet complete with paper roll. At one side is a garage, and various paths and garden surround the cottage.
Ward further describes the dollhouse: “The cottage would have been constructed with items found in the prison workshop, and it appears the prisoner used model railway findings, old stamps, and paint tile samples. Since it was going to be auctioned, he may have been given a few extra pieces to complete the cottage. I have left it just as it was when it arrived, other than to clean it. It seems to me that he probably imagined it would be given to a child. I often wonder about the man who built this house, and what his crimes were. I also wonder why it was named *Snug Harbour;* was this the name of a pub he frequented, or perhaps a house he once lived in, or even the place of a crime? Did he have children? Did building this house remind him of happier times? I have so many unanswered questions, but one thing I do know is that he was very talented. His finished house must have made him proud, and it must have been sad to let it go. The house stands in my dining room. I place a tiny, lighted, silver tinsel Christmas tree in the bay window, and it looks so inviting. It gives me great pleasure to own such a lovely house, and for it to be part of my collection.”