

**Rags, to Glad-Rags, to Riches: A Study Day on Coco Chanel
February 19th, 2020, Hemingford Abbots
Given by U3A lecturer and AS member Carole Pook**



Carole is wearing a Coco Chanel inspired outfit of black dress and pearls and modelling one of Sharon Paul's hats

In the morning....We listened with fascination to the story of Coco Chanel's sad and difficult early life and her emergence as a beautiful and talented young woman. Taught by nuns in her

orphanage how to sew, she was able to make a living as a seamstress. However, ambition drove her to learn skills in tailoring. Subsequent relationships with wealthy men helped to launch her career as a fashion designer in Paris. She was an astute businesswoman, and her brand name was a huge success in her lifetime and has been thereafter.

Carole drew attention to the difficulties of pinning down facts about Coco's life, as she so often altered her "story". There were also uncomfortable truths about her opinions and her role as a collaborator in Nazi-occupied Paris.

Clearly, she was a survivor, using her wits and charm to make her way. One example is her use of cotton jersey for her collections when luxury fabrics were unavailable in The Great War. Another is her perfume Chanel Number 5, given free to customers ensuring the brand name travelled.

Carole's talk was excellently researched and presented with many intriguing anecdotes and photographs of Coco and her circle. It was easy to be seduced by the glamour of the world she inhabited and the fairy-tale story of her transformation from orphanage to global fame.

In the afternoon...We welcomed the originator of Simply Hats from Market Deeping, just outside Peterborough.

There was a nice connection between our morning and afternoon session: both Coco Chanel and Sharon Paul had started by buying simple straw hats and decorating them fabulously, gaining instant recognition for their creative talents. Sharon had a great number of hats to show from her collection, inviting members of the audience to model them. Her people skills were evident, and she clearly derives huge satisfaction from meeting her clients and tailoring her hats to their needs. Part of her service is preparing women for great occasions, and we were shown the correct way to hold a clutch bag (it's more than just clutching!!). Not surprisingly, her website shows a large number of satisfied customers looking relaxed and confident even in the largest of hats.

This was the third Study Day Carole has organised and presented and was greatly enjoyed by all who attended. There was an excellent lunch master-minded by Carole and served by committee members. The light-hearted fashion parade in the afternoon was a very good way to end a day of interest and relaxed fellowship.

Coco Chanel memorably said: "The best things in life are free. The second-best things are very, very expensive." However, we interpret her comments, £17.00 pounds a head for our Study Day was remarkably good value!