

# A Stitcher's View of the Bayeux Tapestry

by Dolores Andrew



*Duke William of Normandy in battle*

It is an  
impressive  
sight . . .

In 2014, I had the marvelous opportunity to achieve a major item on my bucket list: viewing the Bayeux Tapestry. While we were traveling in France, my husband and I spent two days in the town of Bayeux and at the museum. After reading about the embroidery and studying the images in books for many years, to actually see this impressive work was unforgettable.

We arrived in Bayeux on a cool, drizzly, spring day. We had no trouble finding the embroidery since all signs in town seemed to point toward it. The tapestry is housed in a former seventeenth-century seminary, now named the Centre Guillaume le Conquérant, not far from the center of town. It is very well presented and protected.

The 230-foot-long piece of history is displayed behind glass with a waist-high railing in front, under limited, controlled lighting. When we first entered, we saw a fourteen- to fifteen-foot portion, which gradually curved into the gallery space. Upon following the curve we could then see the bulk of the tremendous expanse of embroidery, almost disappearing into the distance. It is an impressive sight, especially knowing that a group of people had stitched all of it!

My first impression was surprise at the condition of the fabric. It is patched, mended, and frayed a lot on the left edge where the design begins. After all, the tapestry is more than 940 years old, so patching and mending would be expected, but none of that wear and repair ever shows in photos in books or magazines.



*The Bayeux Tapestry, 230-feet long, stretches along the walls inside the Centre Guillaume le Conquérant.*

©Ville de Bayeux

The embroidery is about twenty inches high, a size which would have been comfortable to stitch. Visible holes along the top and bottom edges of the fabric show where the linen had been fastened to a frame. The linen would have been mounted on very long frames indeed!

Many studies have found that the embroidery was worked on at least nine lengths of linen, with eight of them extant. However, except for the join of the first two lengths, I could not find seam lines, in spite of my careful study.

The events are illustrated in fifty-nine scenes, or vignettes. The history depicted in the embroidery begins in 1065, with the end of the reign of Edward the Confessor, the King of England. He produced no heirs. According to the legend, he promised his throne to a number of people, including two cousins: the brother of his wife, Harold, who lived in England, and William, who lived in Normandy.

The tapestry begins with Edward sitting on the English throne, talking with Harold. Edward is in poor health and looks frail. The embroidery continues with Harold's trip to Normandy, and the relationship between Harold and William. Harold swears loyalty to William, most likely under duress, and then returns to England. The day after Edward died in early 1066, Harold was crowned king, to William's great displeasure.

The remainder of the embroidery is dedicated to William learning of Harold's rise to the throne, the construction of the Norman ships, sailing to England in late September 1066, and the battle near Hastings that October. Harold's death in the battle is also recorded in the tapestry.

The end of the final existing panel is frayed and patched like the one at the beginning, and it concludes with the battle's end. Some scholars surmise that the story would end as it began, this time showing William as king on the throne. We were told that some pieces might have been cut off for souvenirs or even stolen, perhaps explaining the missing ninth length. Indeed, between 1816 and 1818, Charles Stothard produced a series of drawings of the embroidery and evidently cut himself a piece to keep. I cannot imagine anyone cutting it. It is fortunate that it is now better protected.



*King Edward, on the throne, speaks with Harold.*



*Harold rides, with falcon in hand.*



*Harold is crowned King of England after King Edward dies.*





*Fanciful representation of the stronghold of Count Conon at Dol, where William suppresses the count who opposes him on the matter of invading England.*



*Mont Saint Michel*



*Harold, in chain mail, takes an arrow in the eye.*

While we were in Bayeux, we learned of the various places the embroidery had been moved over the centuries. How lucky we are that it survived at all.

Examining the work as a stitcher, I was first drawn to the center sections where the story unfolds, and not to the narrow border designs that run along the top and bottom of the linen. It was easy to see that the whole composition was designed by one person but a lot of people did the actual stitching over an unknown period of time, which could have been several months, as some sources claim, or several years, which seems more likely.

Just think about assembling that quantity of materials: creating a quantity and quality of linen, spinning the wool, and dyeing the yarns; choosing the stitches and where to use them; finding the stitchers to stitch; and locating places to house the stitching. This doesn't even take into consideration the design discussions and choosing the scenes. All of these decisions could have taken over a year just by themselves with the complications of travel at that time. Certainly there were no handy needlework stores to rush out to in those days!

The scenes were stitched in a variety of common stitches, mostly outline and laid work. Stem stitches were used on figures, trees, and water. Outline stitches were used for the Latin text which identified people, places, and actions. At times, outline stitches were also used on the figures' garments. Chain and blanket are used in many shapes: sails, boats, armor, and some buildings. Additional buildings were done in a combination of stitches to make more decorative designs.

What has been named the Bayeux stitch, a solid laid work with multiple layers, depicts the many figures and horses. The bottom layer resembles satin stitch, but instead of bringing the needle back and inserting it right next to the top of the first stitch, the embroiderer brings out the needle right next to the end of the first stitch to begin forming the next stitch. This motion conserves the thread. A second row of laid stitches is worked perpendicular to the first set

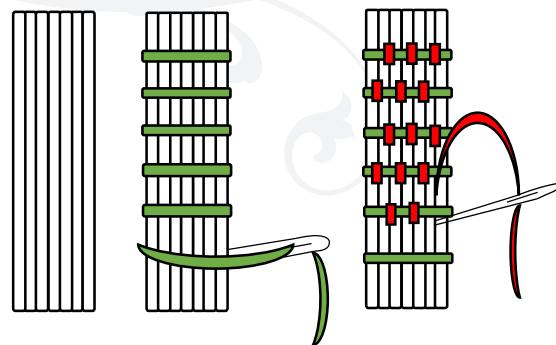


*Ship that accompanies Harold on his voyage to Normandy.*





*From left, a messenger brings news of Harold's coronation to Duke William of Normandy. William speaks with Bishop Odo about building a fleet, while a ship's carpenter readies for action.*



*Bayeux stitch*

of laid stitches. Finally, the laid work is anchored with tacking stitches, not unlike couching. This stitch is used for clothing, making it look very solid indeed. With three passes, it had to have been a time-consuming stitch to do. They all look so perfect and right, but I couldn't help wondering how often a stitcher had to undo the stitches because of a goof or because the designer had decided that that stitch, or color or shape, wasn't *quite right* in that area.

The thread colors are mostly muted browns, rust, blue-greens, and black, but in the last half, some brighter colors appear, along with a few reds. Could this difference be due to the lack of care shown it over the centuries, when it was rolled up casually, and some colors were protected, while others were exposed and allowed to fade? Or is it a result of the variables, like water, temperature, soil, and timing in the dyeing process?

The figures, mostly male, are handled fairly well, with some attempt at character, such as beards, moustaches, and hair. The English are depicted with moustaches. The Normans have shaved napes and faces. Although they are stylized, there is some animation in how they are drawn. Some of the assistants and helpers are identified in the running text. Bishop Odo, William's half-brother, is shown four times, and many think he had something to do with commissioning the embroidery.

Only three women are depicted in the central portion of the embroidery, and only one of them is named. No mention is made of William's wife, Queen Mathilde. In years past, she was thought to be a possible source or inspiration for the embroidery, but she is neither mentioned nor depicted in it.



*Harold, swearing an oath. Note the mustache and longer hair, indicative of the English.*



*Normans, with shaved nape and short hair, digging ditches that will surround a stockade*

*Horse**Imaginative tree**Horses falling in battle*

Horses are marvelously drawn with great detail, good animation, and some personality. The designer knew horses. I especially enjoyed seeing a laughing horse peering out of one ship! The ships and sails are also well designed, again with some character and detail. The designer obviously knew and liked boats.

Buildings must have been a problem for the designer. First, there were the limitations of the space on the linen. How can you depict Westminster Abbey in fifteen or sixteen inches? Simplify and stylize it. Another problem was the lack of handling perspective and complicated architecture. It was solved by depicting some objects close by as large, and those far away or less important as small. Sometimes, a color change alone helped to establish a more distant shape or figure.

I was especially drawn to the fanciful tree shapes. They were frequently used as scene dividers, but also were shown in other ways, such being cut down or being used to make ships and wagons. The trees curved, with intertwined colors and shapes; unlike known plants, these are imaginative and delightful to examine. The branches weave in and out like a lattice-topped pie crust, intricate and complicated. Each tree-shape had to have taken at least a couple of hours to stitch and be correct.

In the battle scenes, the overlapping figures, horses, and armor and the awkward positions of them all effectively express movement, danger, and confusion. The action and drama of the battle was further enhanced by showing bodies, shields, body parts, and the gradual appearance of horses in the lower border, stitched only in black outline stitches. The stark simplicity of the stitches deftly illustrates the violence of the scenes. The one large complicated scene of William and his troops advancing to the battle was especially impressive. The overlapping and animation of the figures and animals conveys the vastness and reality of the scene considering the limited space on the linen.

While walking along the railing and viewing the embroidery, the audio usually directed our attention to the activity in the center panels. However, on my subsequent visits the next day, I had time to study the upper and lower borders. They are little gems themselves. One source reported that an examination of the back of the embroidery (those lucky people!) revealed that the borders were stitched along with the center panels, not separately, as could be assumed because of the borders' content. Sometimes the wool used in the center was carried up or down to continue an element into the border. It certainly saved wool that way and kept the work on both panels and borders moving along.

The borders start out showing birds and animals, some real, some mythical, separated occasionally by diagonal bands of stitches. Then there are rural scenes of plowing and hunting worked as miniatures, and some scenes relate the action in a fable. I think that these must have been fun for a stitcher to work on, given the violence of the battle scenes. Occasionally images in the top border are interrupted by Latin explanations, or to accommodate the tall sails of the ships or a large building. The lower borders of the later panels beneath the battle scenes contain the simply rendered bodies of the soldiers.

Many books and magazine articles have been written over the years, speculating on who commissioned the work, when it was done, by whom, and above all, where it was done. Did Odo, Queen Mathilde, or someone else commission the work?



Another question that always comes up is *why* it was done, and in that particular medium. Huge events and battles have often had something created to celebrate them—a statue, a monument, a mural, even a gigantic painting. William had the Battle Abbey built only a year after the battle. We saw the abbey’s remaining shell when we visited the site several years ago. Evidently, the building must not have been enough of a monument.

So, why commemorate these events in an embroidery? Were other art forms considered? This was the age of elaborate hangings and vestments in silk and gold and of illuminated manuscripts. Did surface embroidery at first seem too humble and too unexciting for such a large scale event?

The *Liber Eliensis* records that the widow of Britnoth, Æthelflæd, gave the Ely Abbey, in what is now Cambridgeshire, England, an embroidered hanging of the deeds of her husband shortly after his death in 991. The implication is that it had been stitched before his death and had hung in their home. Could this have been a precedent for the Bayeux Tapestry? Her tapestry no longer exists, so we cannot be sure. Were there others?

While I sat for a while, contemplating the challenge of taking on the task of relating these events to an eleventh-century audience of mostly illiterate masses, I wondered how the designer knew where to begin. Did the designer, clearly a man, sit down with those who would direct the embroiderers and decide with them that the work would be 100 or 200 feet, and it just grew? Did they choose the scenes, lay them out for reference, and somehow the design kept extending? Paper was a precious commodity, vellum was rare, and books for reference were even scarcer. We know some of the sources, but they are only the tip of the iceberg. What sources, such as illuminated manuscripts and Bibles, were used as references for the figures and the horses? Did they trace the details on vellum? Did they use parchment for transfer and prick the design onto the embroidery? How I wish that they had kept notes!

There are so many unanswered questions.

A replica of the tapestry was stitched by the Leek Embroidery in Staffordshire, England, in 1885 and was exhibited in 1886. It is housed in Berkshire, England at the Reading Museum. ■

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*The funeral procession of King Edward*



*A comet, later named Halley's Comet, appears as a bad omen of events to come after Harold's coronation.*

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# Stitching History: The French Shore Embroiderers

by Dr. Candace Cochrane



Photography by Candace Cochrane

*Lucy Byrne and Loretta Symmonds at embroidery frame with Remembering the Treaty of Utrecht panels on the wall.*



*The French Shore Interpretation Centre in Conche, Newfoundland, Canada*

To say that the French Shore embroiderers can be found at the end of a long and winding unpaved road, far from any cities, is an understatement. They live at the northernmost region of the island of Newfoundland, part of Canada's easternmost province of Newfoundland and Labrador, itself a seemingly far off place. The embroiderers reside in several small neighboring fishing villages and work mostly on large embroideries at the French Shore Interpretation Centre (FSIC) in the village of Conche, population 150.

Until fifty years ago, the villages existed in roadless isolation. The long and winding road not only characterizes the embroiderers' geographic location but also their history, now being portrayed in the embroidered murals and pictures created by local embroiderers.

The FSIC, the cultural heritage hub of the area, is in a clapboard building that was once a community health clinic. Its exterior is modest but has award-winning exhibits that include the two large embroidered history murals: The French Shore Tapestry and Remembering the 1713 Treaty of Utrecht—A History of the French in Atlantic Canada.

The permanent settlers of the French Shore who were of English and Irish descent first came to the northern Newfoundland shores more than two hundred years ago when codfishery was an important, international industry. The settlers brought with them craft skills from their homeland. Knowing how to sew was essential as virtually all clothes were homemade. Their embroidery added a bit of color and design to the household linens. The women used basic stitches: French knot, lazy daisy, stem, satin, herringbone and split.



Photography by Candace Cochrane

*The French arrive in Labrador.*



*Linen* was a catchword for all kinds of inexpensive cloth that could be ordered through the mail, or recycled from used flour bags. Beginning in the early twentieth century, the famous Grenfell Medical Mission took embroidery a step further by creating a craft industry in northern Newfoundland and coastal Labrador that employed local women to embroider bags, parkas, and other goods. These decorative items with images of dog teams, northern scenes, and animals were sold to raise funds for medical services in the area and to provide small incomes for the workers.

By the early 1960s, for a variety of reasons, much of the traditional craftwork had begun to die out. Thirty years later, the development of a tourism industry and the accompanying economic diversification has helped to bring homemade goods and craftwork back to life. Serendipitously, a growing worldwide interest in cultural heritage renewed the very old idea of embroidered history murals, now exemplified by such large works as The Great Tapestry of Scotland, the Irish Ros Tapestry, and the South African Keiskamma Tapestry. More recently, this idea also caught fire in rural Newfoundland at the French Shore Interpretation Centre.

Today's French Shore embroiderers honed their stitching skills, not by decorating household linens, but by stitching The French Shore Tapestry, completed in 2009. It is a tour de force history of Newfoundland's historic French Shore, beginning with images of the land before human settlement and quickly moving on to native peoples and the arrival of the Vikings in 1000. The tapestry replicates the dimensions of the eleventh-century Bayeux Tapestry (21 inches in height and 230 feet long), and use of what has come to be called the Bayeux stitch, a laid and couched stitch. The French Shore Tapestry was an effort that took twenty thousand hours over three years to make.

When the team of artists and embroiderers began the French Shore Tapestry, they may not have fully realized the magnitude and complexity of the task, from the sheer size of the tapestry to the long distance between the embroiderers and the image artists,



*Conche, Newfoundland, and the road leading to it.*

Photography by Shawna Foley



*The panels were mounted onto large frames for stitching. This panel depicts the Acadians.*

Photography by Candace Cochrane





*Men at work in and around the fishing room.*



*This 1769 print by Duhamel Du Monceau served as a source for the rendering of the fishing room.*

Photography by Candace Cochrane

Photography by Candace Cochrane

Jean Claude Roy and Christina Roy. The Roys live half the year in France, one thousand miles away from Joan Simmonds, FSIC project manager and one of the thirteen French Shore embroiderers in rural Newfoundland. By the time they all were finished, they had a lot of expertise in the process of creating the images, transferring them to linen; making the inevitable changes in color and design that result from the translation from design on paper to working into cloth, building frames accommodating as many as ten embroiderers at the same time; and coordinating designs, materials and schedules. The list goes on, and the details of it all could fill a dozen magazines!

When the opportunity to create a second mural arose after the marathon of the first project, Simmonds knew the final product would need to be made of smaller sections. Allowing the work to be done in several neighboring communities at the same time made it easier to pack and ship the finished work to a variety of exhibition venues.

For the theme of the second project, it's fair to ask, "Why focus on the 1713 Treaty of Utrecht, which seems a bit of a dry subject?" The Treaty of Utrecht had great significance for the future of Newfoundland and by extension, for the history of North America. In many ways it signaled the eventual dominance of Great Britain in its culture, language, and evolution towards a government by citizens, a defining characteristic of Canada and the United States. Specifically, the treaty brought an end to the



*The illustration guides the stitching. The Siege of Louisbourg in 1758 during the French and Indian War led to the loss of French holdings in Canada.*

Photography by Candace Cochrane



European War of the Spanish Succession, also known in North America as Queen Anne's War, a war between European countries with territorial interests in North America. Its provisions gave Great Britain territorial title to Hudson Bay, Newfoundland, what is now Maine, and Acadia (now parts of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick). In return, France received the exclusive right to continue its lucrative seasonal cod fishing industry in a part of Newfoundland designated as the French Shore. However, the treaty's language was imprecise, precipitating more conflict, including the French and Indian War (1754–1763), which finally ended France's attempts at hegemony of North America.

For the purposes of the FSIC, the treaty provides a unifying hook on which to hang a larger mural subject, the 400-year French presence in North America, during a time when France and England were vying for political and cultural domination of the continent.

On a practical note, the Treaty of Utrecht was three hundred years old in 2014, and historical anniversaries in Canada can sometimes shake loose government funding in the name of rural economic development and celebration of heritage. For this project, funding was provided by two Newfoundland and Labrador provincial departments to create a traveling exhibit of eight separate embroidered panels and text banners that not only told the story of the treaty but important aspects of French cultural heritage in Atlantic Canada. No doubt they appreciated the format of separate panels, making them far more manageable for travel than the heavy and unwieldy French Shore Tapestry, which after one difficult attempt to travel, now permanently resides in Conche.

The French Shore embroiderers, part of a loose pool of fifteen talented women living in or near Conche, rotated in and out of stitching tasks depending on their steadier work as store clerks, fish plant workers, teachers, and housewives. Not all knew how to embroider before embarking on their work for the murals. The stem stitch was familiar but not the Bayeux Stitch, which Joan Simmonds learned at a workshop in France and subsequently taught the other embroiderers how to work with perfection on the front and back.



*Joan Simmonds, at right, goes over a design transfer with embroiderers.*

Photography by Candace Cochrane



*Pierre Le Moyne D'Iberville leads his detachment on a nine-day March across the Avalon Peninsula to attack British settlements during King Williams War in 1696.*

Photography by Candace Cochrane





Photography by Candace Cochrane

*Ruby Brenton works the first layer of Bayeux stitch after the stem stitch has been worked*

To stitch the treaty mural, the embroiderers used Appleton two-ply crewel wool and Jacobean linen, and once again exclusively the Bayeux and stem stitches they had used for the French Shore Tapestry. Cindy Colosimo Robbins, the artist who created the designs for the panels, is a well-published illustrator, designer, and painter who lives in southern Labrador, an hour's ferry ride north across the Straits of Belle Isle from Conche.

Separate panels were less complicated to design because there was no requirement to have one scene move smoothly to the next. In the treaty project, each panel scene is self-contained. Although the panels have designated dimensions (32" x 40"), the embroiderers were less constrained when translating

the drawings to linen than they were with the dimensions used for the French Shore Tapestry. As the last treaty panels were being stitched and hung side-by-side, we could easily see the eight panels as one unfolding story.

When asked how they can maintain their enthusiasm for the work when they put in eight-hour workdays, day after day, the embroiderers had no trouble with their answers. As Lucy Byrne bent over the frame holding the unfinished scene of the Siege of Louisbourg in 1758, she remarked, "When I am stitching the scene, the figures come alive in my mind—the horses and the soldiers. I feel like I am IN the scene. The real world around me drops away. I might look up at the clock and find that several hours have gone by and I never realized it."

Sitting across from her, stitching another scene, Loretta Symmonds also loses track of time, but doesn't mind. She added, "Once I start something, like the boat in this scene, I feel compelled to finish it no matter how long it takes, to see how it will look complete."



Photography by Candace Cochrane

*The British force the removal of 11,500 Acadians from their homes to the American colonies, Great Britain, and France during the Great Deportation (1755–1764) as a strategy to defeat France in the French and Indian War. The Acadians had refused to sign an oath of allegiance to Great Britain and had assisted France in military operations against the British.*

There was a general consensus among the embroiderers about what it felt like to stitch these scenes from history. Simmonds, who is also the manager of the treaty project, looked around the workroom of finished and unfinished panels, and said, “When I take the needle in my hand, I lose myself in the threads. Embroidering makes me feel light; everything else drifts away. If I had the time, I think I could go on for twenty-four hours.”

After Remembering the 1713 Treaty of Utrecht was completed, it took its first trip to be exhibited at the Provincial Craft Council’s Devon House Gallery in St. John’s, Newfoundland. The FSIC hopes that the tapestry’s journey will continue so it can teach people about the vibrant and sometimes tragic story of the French who came to North America in search of profit and a new home. It reminds viewers of the contribution the French have made to the culture of both Canada and the United States. And it also tells a second story about a group of women living in far off Newfoundland and Labrador who tell their history in cloth and thread.

Since word has spread about the amazing history murals, the number of visitors to the FSIC is increasing despite—or perhaps because of—its exotic location. On any given day in season, a group may appear from Brittany and other parts of Europe, the United States, and western Canada. Travel groups, government officials, tourists, embroiderers, and historians are anxious to see what all the buzz is about. Simmonds and her assistants, or one of the embroiderers, are on hand to talk about the history and embroidery process, or even let visitors take a stitch in on-going projects.

The FSIC has also filled commissions for other heritage centers and private collectors, excerpting scenes from the murals or creating new designs depicting traditional fishing scenes, historic events, family homes, and portraits. The work has provided much needed income to the center and the embroiderers, who need little impetus to sit at their frames and lose themselves stitching history. ■

**Dr. Candace Cochrane** has done extensive research on the use of visual images to teach and learn history. She is a writer and photographer whose book *Outport: The Soul of Newfoundland*, is a portrait of a fishing village in transition. She has made her home in Massachusetts and Newfoundland for many years.



*Dorothy Loughery takes a brief moment to look up before going back to stitching.*



*In the foreground, an Acadian trades with for furs with peoples of the First Nations. Noteworthy to the European settlement of North America was the close bond the early French settlers made with the First Nations already occupying the land. The Acadians, depicted in the background, developed innovative farming techniques to turn marshland into rich soil for farming.*



For information on attractions, communities, and hours of operation, visit [frenchshore.com](http://frenchshore.com). Click on Conche for more about the French Shore Interpretation Centre.



# The Great Tapestry of Scotland

by Kristian Kerr



Viewers take in the Great Tapestry of Scotland.



Stitchers' signature from panel 20, which represents the reign of King Macbeth in the eleventh century

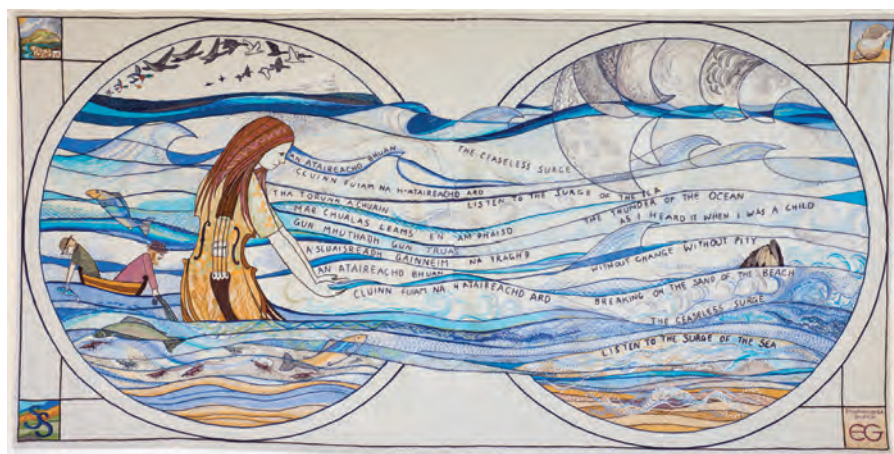


Detail from panel 87. The coat of arms of the City of Glasgow, commemorating the city's growth in the 1820s

The Great Tapestry of Scotland is a 468-foot crewel embroidery depicting the entire history of Scotland in 160 panels stitched by more than a thousand volunteer stitchers. A community-arts project taking place on a national scale, it was made between 2010 and 2013 and has received over 300,000 visitors in exhibitions around Scotland. This is the story of the creation of a beloved national artwork.

The idea for The Great Tapestry of Scotland was born in November 2010, when internationally best-selling author Alexander McCall Smith viewed the Prestonpans Tapestry, which tells the story of a single battle in the 1745 Jacobite Rising, at an exhibition in Edinburgh. Struck by embroidery's potential as a medium for large-scale storytelling, he envisioned the entire history of Scotland stitched by its people and so commissioned Andrew Crummy, the Prestonpans artist, that same day. The next day, historian Alistair Moffat was commissioned to devise the new tapestry's historical sequence. From a lightning flash of inspiration, the creation of The Great Tapestry of Scotland became a massive three-year labor of research, imagination, drawing, stitching, logistical organization, and, above all, love.

Beginning in 2011, Crummy and Moffat worked together to construct the tapestry's narrative. Moffat created a sequence that covered 420 million years of Scottish history, from the geological formation of the landscape up to the 2000s. He was determined that the tapestry would be a history representing not only conventional historical events and individuals (Bannockburn, Mary Queen of Scots, and all that) but also the story of common life: how people lived, worked, and expressed themselves. As a result, the tapestry includes elements as diverse as the first house at Barn's Ness, the Border Reivers, the scientific and industrial developments of the eighteenth century, the poetry of Robert Burns, and Scotland's obsession with football.



The panel, "The Ceaseless Sea." The words read, "Listen to the surge of the sea/The thunder of the ocean/as I heard it when I was a child/without change without pity/breaking on the sand of the beach."

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Alex Hewitt

For all the long hours and the wealth of individual talent they poured into the project, both Moffat and Crummy see the tapestry as a reflection of the Scottish people. It is an artwork made by Scots that captures rather than dictates their sense of nation and history. Moffat calls it “a tapestry that distills Scotland’s unique sense of herself.” Crummy echoed the sentiment. “It’s not my view of Scotland’s history. It’s about creating something where lots of people can say this is what they think is important.”

The tapestry is in many ways a self-portrait: Its final panels consist of the “Parliament of Ancestors,” a convocation of Scots past and present, showing how the reconvening of the Scottish Parliament, the tapestry’s end point, is an opportunity to simultaneously memorialize and look to the future. The panels show political leaders and famous Scots (Andy Murray’s 2013 Wimbledon trophy was added just as stitching completed) but these luminaries are surrounded by stitchers and folk.

For Crummy, the work of designing the panels occupied the whole of 2011 and 2012. He began with a series of storyboards, then enlarged the drawings gradually up to full-size sheets of one meter square, the designs evolving each time. To give the tapestry visual unity over such diverse content and to allow for areas of individual expression, he incorporated a simple grid pattern into each panel. In a manner reminiscent of Pictish carvings, illuminated manuscripts, or the designs of Charles Rennie Mackintosh, the empty squares would allow the stitchers to incorporate their own signatures or talismans into each panel.

With the historical research and design work well underway, the Herculean task of stitching the enormous tapestry began. Stitch Coordinator Dorie Wilkie masterfully interpreted Crummy’s designs for stitch. She began by considering which stitches should be used on each panel and prepared guidelines for the as-yet-unknown stitchers. With the design process still underway, the first call for stitchers went out at the Borders Book Festival in June 2011. Initial worries that few would answer were immediately laid to rest when, after a fortnight, Wilkie and Gillian Hart had recruited



*Alexander McCall Smith*



*Andrew Crummy at the boards*



*Detail from panel 48, "The Dawn of the Ulster-Scots," showing the migration and settlement of Scots in Northern Ireland in the early seventeenth century*





*Stitch Coordinator Dorie Wilkie holds pillow that reads, "A team effort is a lot of people doing as I say."*



*Detail from the panel 14, featuring Ruthwell Cross, an Anglo-Saxon monument dating from the eighth century when part of southern Scotland was in the Kingdom of Northumbria*



*Detail from panel 20, which represents the reign of King Macbeth in the 11th century*



*Panel 60: Charles Edward Stuart, Bonnie Prince Charlie, who contended for the throne of England, Scotland, and Ireland, inspired the Jacobite uprising of 1745, an unsuccessful venture against overwhelming odds, but a great source of Scottish pride. Susan Mansfield and Alistair Moffat note his charisma and observe that "the surprise is not that he failed, but that he very nearly succeeded."*

more than two hundred people and had begun to form them into groups. Wilkie sourced materials, selecting linen from Peter Greig and Co. in Kirkcaldy, founded in 1825 and now Scotland's only surviving linen mill. As soon as a panel's design was finalized, it was traced onto linen and sent out with selected yarns in a package to its waiting stitchers.

With the stitching operation involving more than one thousand people across Scotland, their work was coordinated by a core team of volunteers. Under Wilkie's leadership, this group traced the panels, prepared the stitching packs, and posted them to points as far afield as the Shetland Islands and Dumfriesshire. Their operations ran from The Hub, just two rooms in an Eskbank industrial estate, but their influence reached all over Scotland. During the months of stitching, Crummy, Wilkie, and Hart travelled to visit stitching groups. The core group advised and reassured their stitchers, uncovering and nurturing what they describe as the "amazing skill hidden away in Scottish living rooms."

Wilkie describes the project as taking stitching into new realms, and she was determined to achieve a high standard of artistry while depicting non-traditional subjects. Some of the tapestry's content challenged stitchers' ingenuity, such as steel helmets or a rugby ball. On the other hand, panels depicting either textile arts or large items of clothing (such as Bonnie Prince Charlie's jacket) offered a canvas for more traditional designs. The Fair Isle panel, though, necessitated a kind of media crossover, replicating in crewelwork designs that had been created on knitting needles. Yvonne Beale from the Orkney Islands, who stitched the panel about the cloning of Dolly the Sheep, described opening her package: "The first thing that struck me when I opened the package was the smell of the wool. It was funny to think that I was going to be turning wool back into a sheep!"

Wilkie served as an advisor on how to fill large, solid areas in Crummy's designs. Lyn Dunachie, working on the double panel "The Ceaseless Sea" in Glasgow, consulted Wilkie about the figure's dress. Wilkie suggested that she



cover the figure, shaded a solid yellow in the design, in wild flowers. On the finished panel, the figure is covered with a pattern of the flowers used to produce yellow dye. These details, the collaborations between the stitchers, embellish the design and deepen a panel's meaning, as well as give the tapestry its unique texture and intricacy of detail.

The stitching groups were of different sizes, some self-formed and others assigned by central command. A small minority worked alone, but at least three worked in family units, and the majority in local groups of friends, or a rowing club, or a community choir. As far as possible, groups were assigned panels representing local history. Jim Mulrine, one of seventeen men that stitched the tapestry, worked on the Scottish Trades Union Congress (STUC) panel. He had signed up for the tapestry hoping to pursue an interest in the thirteenth-century scholar Duns Scotus, but found himself assigned to the STUC with four local women. Retired from a career as an upholsterer in the Clydeside shipyards, he decided that the subject matter had resonance for him and set about collaborating with his new colleagues.

To get closer to their subject matter and gather inspiration for filling the vacant borders on their panel, many stitching groups organized field trips to sites related to their panel. Some groups saw each other daily, others hardly at all: two stitchers in Caithness posted the panel between each other because the distance was too great; Gillian Scott-Forrest and Tracey MacLeod sent their panel, unattended and not without some trepidation, to Moira Macpherson on the island of South Uist via the Caledonian MacBrayne ferry. During 2012 and the first half of 2013, these groups put in an average of four hundred hours to stitch each panel. Kate Edmunds reported that she spent thirty-seven hours on two square inches of James Hutton's rocks and another stitcher has been heard to remark he'd spent seven hours "doing Sean Connery's hair."

All panels had been sent to stitchers by Christmas 2012 and, in spring 2013, the first completed panel, the Encampment at Cramond, was returned to The Hub. Every panel has a story of the stitching experience behind it. For many, the magnitude and resonance of the endeavour had been daunting at the beginning. Mary Richardson, an experienced stitcher, confessed, "I was shaking as I made the first stitch." At the other end of the process there was attachment and familiarity. Muriel Clelland said, "When we got the panel empty, it seemed



*Panel 15: The Picts defeat the Angles at Dunnichen in 685 and put an end to the Angles' plan to extend their holdings to the north.*



*Panel 45: The Border Reivers (meaning raiders and plunderers, an accepted way of life at the time) rescue Kinmont Willie Armstrong from Carlisle Castle in 1596. He had been illegally imprisoned by English authorities on a truce day when opponents could meet together to make deals and negotiate treaties.*





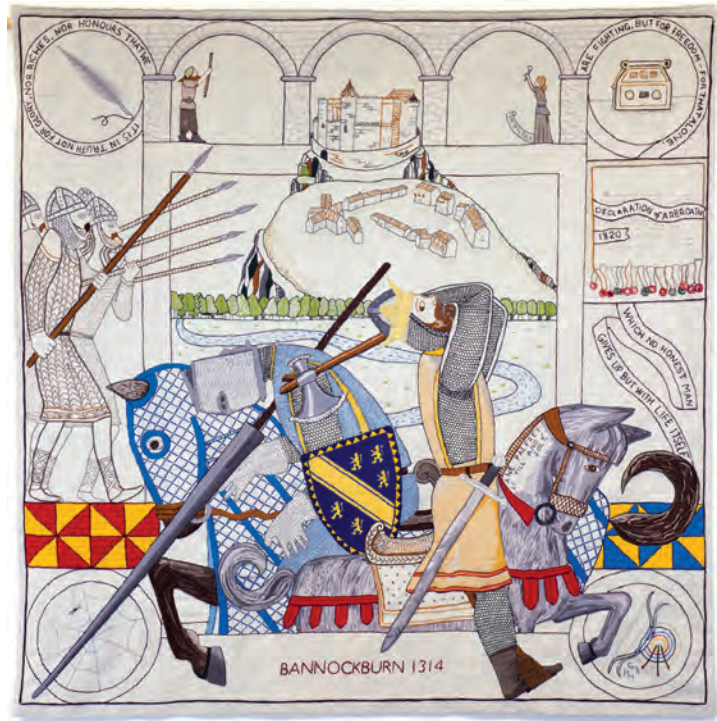
*Tracing patterns at The Hub*



*Stitchers at work*



*Detail from panel 29*



*Panel 30: Robert the Bruce, King of the Scots, defeats the huge force of Edward II of England in the 1314 Battle of Bannockburn.*

not so interesting, but soon we got caught up in it. It tells an important story and we've really grown to love it."

With a completion deadline set, The Hub embarked on the final stage of the project, namely the work of collating the panels and unifying the work of more than one thousand hands into a single artwork. This process involved stretching and blocking to even out the different tensions at which different hands had stitched. Panels were sprayed with water then stretched on frames, and the tracing of the designs removed. The panels were backed, hemmed, and fitted with Velcro strips to allow for easy hanging.

Throughout this process, The Great Tapestry of Scotland brought people together; it has reclaimed forgotten parts of Scotland's history and memorialized its stitchers' stories alongside better-known tales. Project Coordinator Jan Rutherford said, "Wherever you take a panel, people are really surprised at the quality of the stitching and the level of effort people have put in. There is excitement. There is delight."

Stitcher Veronica Ross said, "We are creating something that we hope has a long-term future. We'd like to think it will be around for a thousand years (like the Bayeux tapestry). We are thinking: This is part of the nation's history. Aren't we lucky to be part of it?"

The tapestry's first exhibition over three weeks at the Scottish Parliament in September 2013 was a resounding success. For many of the eight hundred stitchers who attended a special preview, this was the first time that they were able to fully comprehend the scale of the project in which they had been participating from their living rooms. The Caithness Textile Arts Stitching Group said of the experience, "It was not until we saw our panel in its place amongst the rest that we fully realized what a truly magnificent project we've

been part of. We are grateful for the opportunity you gave us to represent a part of Scotland's story and to have our own little place in Scotland's history."

The exhibition allowed fifty thousand visitors to get close to the panels to appreciate their craft. Many people were unexpectedly moved by the stitching and others commented on the striking modernity of the tapestry's design and its execution. Visitors found that it jogged memories of history learned many years before, or alternately connected their own lives to the events depicted.

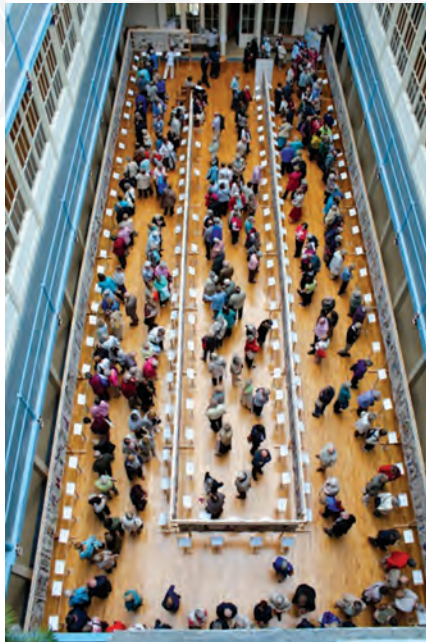
The responses of visitors and critics alike confirmed the fulfilment of the vision that the tapestry would represent and belong to the Scottish people. Capturing the project's grandeur with characteristically Scottish self-deprecating humour, Ben Macintyre wrote in *The Times*, "The idea is simple yet grand, an artwork about a people, made by a people, both democratic and epic. It captures what Scotland means to itself more aptly than any number of songs, speeches, or high artworks could: Scotland the brave, but also the inventive, Scotland the ironic, and Scotland the occasionally rubbish." Somewhat more poignantly, an anonymous visitor wrote, "As a Scot living overseas, this brought tears to my eyes. The history and the sense of nationhood shine through in the completion of this task. Thank you."

Since 2013 The Great Tapestry of Scotland has been touring Scottish communities and greeted with record crowds. It will move into a permanent home in the Scottish Borders in 2017. The project has been financially supported by Creative Scotland and the generosity of private donors and Charitable Trusts. ■

**Kristian Kerr** is a freelance writer, editor, and PhD student based in Edinburgh. Since 2013, she has been a project assistant for *The Great Tapestry of Scotland*, coordinating its exhibition tour and educational outreach program. A lover of Scottish history and literature since childhood, her favorite panel depicts Robert Louis Stevenson's life and work.



News, exhibition information, sample stitches, and an online shop selling books, a calendar, mugs, postcards, a CD, and tea towels can be found at [www.scotlandstapestry.com](http://www.scotlandstapestry.com).



*The Great Tapestry of Scotland on exhibition at the Anchor Mill in Paisley, Scotland, in 2013*

### THE GREAT TAPESTRY OF SCOTLAND FACTS AND FIGURES

- 468 feet long, 39 inches high
- 160 panels
- More than 1,000 stitchers aged between four and 94
- 65,000 sewing hours
- 300 miles of yarn (the length of Scotland and beyond)
- 420 million years of history from the land's geological formation to the reconvening of the Scottish Parliament in 1999
- One fabulous work of art!

### READ MORE ABOUT THE GREAT TAPESTRY OF SCOTLAND

*The Great Tapestry of Scotland*, by Alistair Moffat, presents full-color plates of each panel accompanied by historical text.

*The Great Tapestry of Scotland: The Making of a Masterpiece*, by Susan Mansfield and Alistair Moffat, tells the story of the tapestry's creation in detail.

*The Story of Scotland, Inspired by the Great Tapestry of Scotland*, by Allan Burnett, is an illustrated history for 8–12 year-olds.



# The Keiskamma Tapestry

by Dr. Carol Hofmeyr



*Two women at work on the tapestry*



*San man*

The Keiskamma Tapestry has had a positive effect on the residents of Hamburg, South Africa, the rural village I moved to in 2000. The village has seen many wars and a lot of conflict and sadness, as illustrated in the tapestry. Hamburg was and still is a frontier village, and the villagers continue to face difficulties. Although the historic reasons for specific conflicts are no longer remembered and apartheid has been terminated legally, attitudes and prejudice between different races and cultures continue. This strife exists in stark contrast to the spectacular beauty of the natural environment.

In 1857, the British founded Hamburg to protect British farmers living on the frontier with the Xhosa. They settled German ex-mercenaries here; hence the German name.

The ancestors of Xhosa experienced frontier wars, now called the wars of dispossession. Today's Xhosa have been subjected to the white domination of apartheid and experience the frustrations and poverty that comes with living in isolated rural areas of South Africa. Many have been cut off from their roots and have forgotten how and why they belonged to certain families, clans, and tribes.

The Keiskamma Art Project was founded in 2001 to help alleviate the poverty and depression evident in the rural village of Hamburg. By 2003, more than one hundred women had learned to embroider, thanks to the teaching of dedicated volunteers from the United Kingdom.



*The Xhosa living peacefully, raising cattle, prior to the arrival of the British and Dutch*



We were intrigued by the Bayeux Tapestry, which tells the story of another conquest, that of Saxon England by the Normans. It served as an inspiration to tell our own story of the conquest of the Xhosa by the Dutch and British, but also the final vindication of the Xhosa. We hoped to give back to the designers and embroiderers their own story, raise self-esteem, engender a sense of identity and belonging, and illustrate that isolated Hamburg has experienced universal difficulties that human beings have suffered and survived through the ages. We retained the use of the word *tapestry* as used in *Bayeux Tapestry* although both works are actually embroideries.

Our two embroidery teachers learned the Bayeux stitch, and taught it to the women of Hamburg. Meanwhile, we held workshops during which we told stories, read history, and invited historians to talk to us. Then the women drew the stories they had told or heard.

We tried to keep the same dimensions as in the Bayeux Tapestry. We worked on hessian with pure wool spun and dyed locally by another nearby project.

The story begins with South Africa's first peoples, the Khoi and the San. They were migratory hunter-gatherers and had no sense of land ownership, in contrast to the Europeans who began arriving in the seventeenth century. The Khoi and San cultures and lineage were almost totally destroyed by conflict and dispossession.

The next sections of the tapestry show the almost constant state of war that existed between the Xhosa and the Dutch and British during the 100 Years War, which lasted from 1779 to 1879.

The saddest event of the war years is the slaughter of cattle and resulting suicide of the Xhosa people. In 1856 and 1857, Nongqawuse, a young Xhosa girl, prophesied that if the Xhosa killed their cattle and destroyed their crops, the British settlers would be driven into the sea and new herds of cattle would arise and the crops be replenished. Demoralized and feeling their situation hopeless after many years of wars and the increasing amounts of land taken from them by settlers, many Xhosa believed her prophesy and acted on it once it was sanctioned by the paramount chief. By 1857, 300,000 to 400,000 head of cattle had been killed, more than 78,000



*Khoi lady*



*Peaceful village in Hamburg*



*The Xhosa, a peaceful and hospitable people prior to the wars of dispossession, rescue Europeans from a shipwreck.*





*In the wars of dispossession, the British burned Xhosa villages when the Xhosa retaliated against them for having raided and stolen Xhosa cattle.*



*The slaughter of cattle leads to the starvation of the people. Above are the words: The cattle are the race. They being dead the race dies.*



*Native animals*

people had died, and entire communities were starving. The Xhosa begged for work in the white settlements, and the colony and its hegemonic practices expanded even further.

The embroiderers in Hamburg worked much faster than we imagined. By the time we counted the several huge rolls of embroidered work, we already had one hundred meters and had not yet documented the first democratic elections in South Africa, held in 1994. Consequently, we skipped some history to show the brutality of apartheid and then in the last section, to stitch people queuing at the ballot boxes to conclude the history with reconciliation.



*Three women embellishing the tapestry*



As we had very little funding, we asked individuals to sponsor half-meter sections of the story. We embroidered their names on the margin, together with the names of all those who had worked on the project. These included more than one hundred women and a few men from the villages of Hamburg, Ntlini, and Bodiam, as well as other volunteers, far too many to name individually here.

Once these huge pieces were completed, we needed to find a way to join them in the correct sequence. This task was more difficult than we had expected. Eventually, we found a solution: We photographed all the work, printed the images small enough to pin on a board, arranged and labeled them in sequence, and then numbered the rolls.

We spent a week sewing the work together. Finally, we formed a human chain to hold the full length of the tapestry, standing along a gravel road in Hamburg. We paced it out, and at 120 meters (394 feet), it is currently one of the longest embroideries in the world.

The work was exhibited at the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown in 2004. It won a national art award. The tapestry was bought by the Standard Bank in South Africa, given to Parliament, and now hangs, encircling the legislature, in a new section of the Parliament buildings in Cape Town.

The Keiskamma Art Project has expanded from being simply an income-generating art project. The project now includes a health program to fight HIV and AIDS and provides education and music programs to give the next generation tools to help fight poverty and marginalization. The organization can be reached at [enquiries@keiskamma.org](mailto:enquiries@keiskamma.org). ■

**Dr. Carol Hofmeyr**, a doctor and artist residing in Hamburg, South Africa, set up the Keiskamma Trust in 2001 to foster hope and offer support for the most vulnerable. She is also interested in the natural environment and the education of young artists.



*After the Xhosa extermination of their cattle, the British gained Xhosa lands in exchange for food and work for the starving Xhosa. The family depicted at the left is one of the many suffering removal, a practice that continued until the end of apartheid.*

Beautifully embroidered cushions, stuffed animals, and wall art, as well as prints, upholstery, and sculpture can be purchased online from the Keiskamma Art Project. Visit the Shop page on the Keiskamma website at [www.keiskamma.com](http://www.keiskamma.com).



For more information on the Keiskamma Art Project, a link to view all of the panels, and to contribute to the project, visit [www.keiskamma.org](http://www.keiskamma.org).

Photography in this article by Robert Hofmeyr and Tanya Jordaan



*Villagers have won the vote. Stitched above are the words: Your Voice Is Your Vote.*