

# The Quaker Tapestry

by Bridget Guest



Anne Wynn-Wilson, founder of the Quaker Tapestry, in 1982



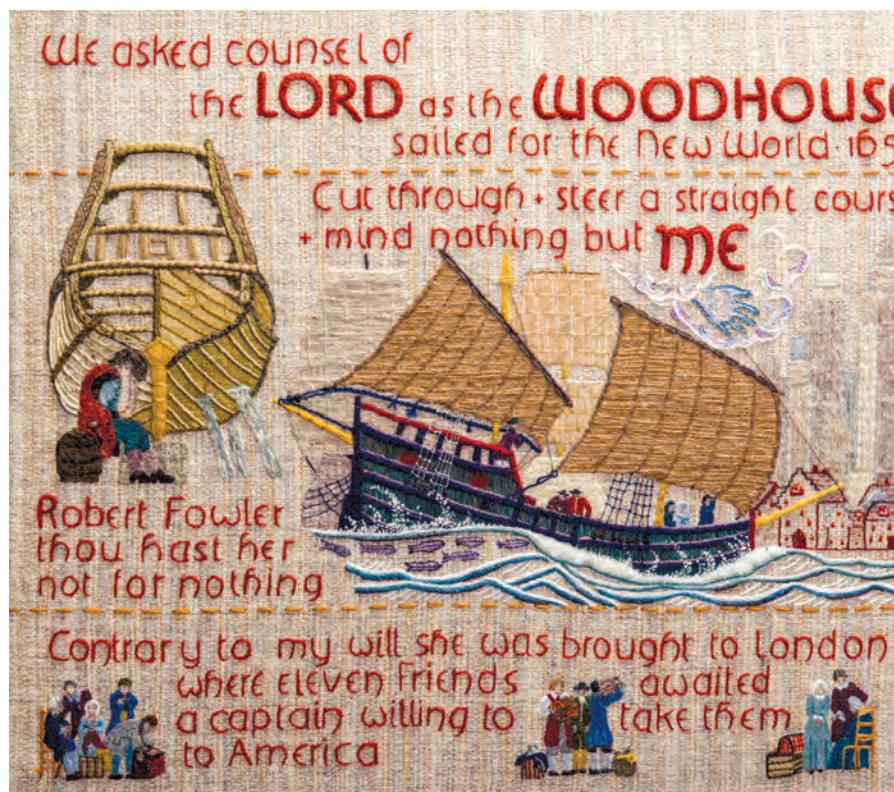
Letter R worked in Quaker Stitch

A long time ago, against all odds, a tiny ship and its eleven passengers arrived safely on what is now Long Island, New York. The 360th anniversary of the arrival of this ship, the *Woodhouse*, with the first Quakers to the United States, is just one of hundreds of stories from around the world skillfully captured in seventy-seven colorful embroidery panels known as the Quaker Tapestry.

Often compared to the Bayeux Tapestry in its technique, the Quaker Tapestry, housed in Kendal, England, is a celebration of 370 years of Quakerism around the globe, reflecting a faith built on peace, honesty, integrity, and equality. The tapestry inspires all who see it, moving some to tears, and it has encouraged the creation of other community tapestries, such as the North American Quaker Tapestry.

Begun in 1981 and completed in 1996, it is the work of four thousand men, women, and children from around the world. Few embroideries have been created at such distances and travelled as far to be united as a single work. One panel has quite a track record in and of itself: embroidered by children in the United States, it includes drawings by their peers in Brazil, Canada, Chile, Europe, and Japan.

The project started in southwest England when a twelve-year-old boy wondered if there was a way to brighten up his classroom in a small Quaker



The Voyage of the Woodhouse



meeting house. Jonathan Stocks' question sparked an idea in the mind of his teacher, Anne Wynn-Wilson, an accomplished embroiderer, to create a number of tapestry panels telling the Quaker story.

In 1982, Wynn-Wilson mounted an exhibition of works-in-progress, which brought an enthusiastic response from many Quakers. Designers came forward, embroidery groups were formed, and training workshops were arranged.

The project spread to fifteen countries, making it possibly the community textile project with the largest number of participants ever undertaken. Sections were completed in Australia, the United States, the West Indies, Europe, and the United Kingdom by many different groups. In some cases, the panels made perilous journeys. One of the four teachers, Ann Castle, took a panel to workshops across Australia, once instructing under a gum tree in 104° Fahrenheit. She returned to England, leaving the panel behind to travel on between groups until it was finished and returned to the United Kingdom.

For many, working on the panel had deep meaning. A retired engineer who spent a week embroidering a Nantucket whaling ship wrote that the panel would last longer than any factory he had ever built. An injured dancer, confined to a wheelchair, said that creating the flowing waves and exploding sea-spray around a ship made her feel like she was dancing again. One man was certain that his wife, who had a terminal illness, stayed alive to finish her section.

The design was heavily influenced by the Bayeux Tapestry. Like that epic needlework, each panel has an embroidered band at the top and bottom. The panels are worked in crewel embroidery with wool yarn. Faces, hands, and buildings are outlined on handwoven wool ground cloth. The Quaker tapestry uses stitches similar to those used on the Bayeux Tapestry. Five historic and well-known stitches—split, stem, chain, Bayeux Point, and Peking knot—are used for the solid infilling of subject matter, such as clothing, roofs, flowers, and coaches, and for additional detailing. Wynn-Wilson invented a new stitch, known as Quaker stitch, to create the distinctive cord or rope-like curved lettering.

Creative excellence can be seen in depictions of glass windows, New York skyscrapers, reflections in puddles, dramatic scenes, and convincing ship's rigging, chains, and ropes. The skeletal outline of a weeping tree in winter, with its solid trunk, allows the architectural details of the building behind to show through. In another panel, leaves are formed by Peking knots worked in different tensions to create texture. The appearance of glass is achieved by using a smooth wool split stitch, and clothing is fashioned with Bayeux Point.

Topics covered in the colourful and vibrant panels, each measuring 21" x 25", are incredibly diverse. A number tell of the influential role of Quakers in the social history of the United States, especially on the East Coast. Quakers were the only ones to keep the peace treaties they made with the indigenous people. Another panel focuses on Quaker involvement in the abolition of the slave trade in the United Kingdom and the United States, where many Quakers



*Detail of Nantucket whaling ship stitched by a retired engineer*



*Women in Australia working on a panel in 1984*



*Detail of tree in winter in front of Woodbrooke, the first of a federation of Selly Oak Colleges*





*The Georgian Quaker Meeting House in Kendal, England, home of the Quaker Tapestry*

A number of the panels relate to Quaker values of healing, compassion, and reform.



*Detail of angry mob attacking spiritual leader George Fox for his speaking out on lecture day*

helped escapees along the Underground Railroad. The contribution of the first American-born Quaker botanist, John Bartram (1699-1777), is recognized in the panel *Quaker Botanists* (see back cover). *Live Adventurously* tells the story of the descendants of twenty families who migrated from the North American mainland to Nantucket Island in the mid-seventeenth century and their sacrifice for their beliefs.

A number of the panels relate to Quaker values of healing, compassion, and reform. One depicts Elizabeth Fry's work with female prisoners at the end of the eighteenth and the turn of the nineteenth century. Also covered is the work of Quaker doctors who pioneered new ways of healing and of scientists, astronomers, and botanists who expanded our understanding of the world around us. There are stories of Quaker industrialists and engineers as well as the first bankers.

While the tapestry commemorates the contributions that Quakers, non-conformists, have made to the modern world, it attests to and celebrates the imagination and craftsmanship of the global community who made it. The tapestry speaks to people who love embroidery and social history.

The tapestry panels have travelled to more than 160 venues in the United Kingdom, Europe, and North America since 1988, allowing visitors to view up close the intricate stitching. In 1993 and 1994, a selection went to Philadelphia,



*Detail of the bottom band of the final panel, The World Family of Friends*

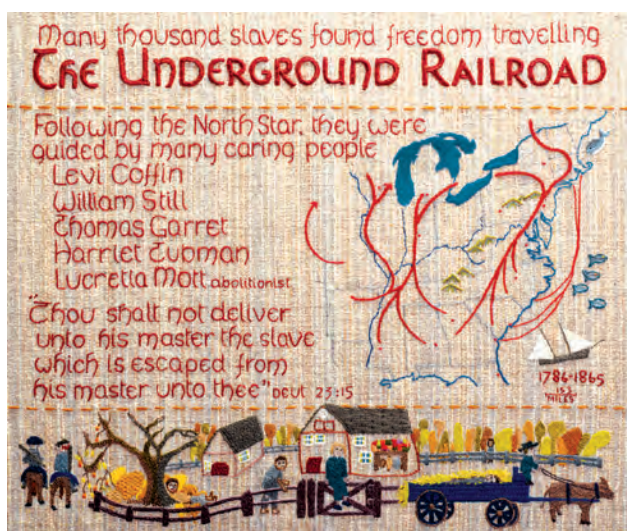




Detail of Live Adventurously, depicting the move to Millard Haven



Detail of panel depicting George Fox's vision of a great people



Panel commemorating the Underground Railroad



Quakers work to promote peace.



Jonathan Stocks stitching in 1982



Detail of stitching of the galleon the Woodhouse





General Manager of the Quaker Tapestry Museum  
Bridget Guest



Kit offered by the Quaker Tapestry Museum



Visitors to the museum view the panel on Mary Fisher, an early convert to Quakerism who eventually emigrated to Charleston, South Carolina.

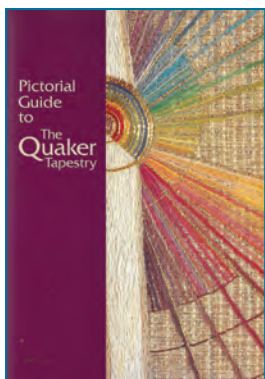
Oregon, New York, North Carolina, and Indiana. The tapestry will visit London August 7–18, 2017.

The Quaker Tapestry has a permanent home in Kendal, the gateway to the English Lake District National Park, in northwest England. Forty-four panels, along with other exhibits, are on permanent display in the historic 200-year-old Friends Meeting House, a fine Georgian building.

The Quaker Tapestry is an accredited Arts Council museum, a Visit England Hidden Gem, and a charity. Interactive displays, films, audio guides, and children's activities offer something for visitors of all ages. Funds are also raised through embroidery workshops and the sale of kits I have designed.

Anyone interested in hosting a roadshow is invited to contact me at [Bridget@quaker-tapestry.co.uk](mailto:Bridget@quaker-tapestry.co.uk). ■

**Bridget Guest** is an expert embroiderer and the general manager of the Quaker Tapestry Museum in England. Guest earned a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Art & Design and a Post Graduate Certificate in Education in Art/Design & Textiles. For the past twenty-three years, she has promoted Quaker Tapestry embroidery techniques through workshops, demonstrations, and the production of kits. She also organises annual roadshows, allowing more people to view the tapestry.



Visit [www.quaker-tapestry.co.uk](http://www.quaker-tapestry.co.uk) for more information and to browse the online shop for kits, cards, gifts, the *Pictorial Guide to the Quaker Tapestry*, and other books and items.