

“Working together has its own creative magic – and it’s fun!”

by Gordon Prestoungrange

There are already at least three story lines in circulation about The Prestonpans Tapestry. The first is that it tells of the young Prince’s determination to regain his father’s kingdom, which of course it does. Less obviously, it evidences the determination of the post-industrial community in Prestonpans since 1997 to recover its sense of place *through the arts* after the collapse of its socioeconomic fabric in the 1960s and the Battle in September 1745 is a significant element of that sense of place. The third story line tells of the Herculean volunteer ‘stitchers’ who created a tapestry’s 104 one metre panels, the longest in the world, in the space of nine months – that third story is now beginning to emerge – and here’s a first summary.

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Best estimates, since not even our self-confessed ‘diarist’ stitcher in Eskbank was actually counting, suggest more than 10 million stitches were made over 25,000 hours. There was no apparent organisation structure for what has been accomplished, just an invitation to volunteer, a drop-in-centre, a website and a midway share-and-compare workshop. Certainly the 1745 cartoon of Cope confirming his own defeat at Prestonpans to Lord Ker in Berwick had been taken as the ‘design’ concept

by artist Andrew Crummy, the initial 79 panels had been identified from the many written accounts of the Prince’s campaign, and suitable wools and linen had been found. But virtually everything else has been heuristic. It just simply emerged as volunteers arrived, offering ideas and skill and time and support and encouragement. The leadership that arose was situational. There were no elections to roles as they became necessary, they were just assumed and welcomed whether that role was doing further research on the content of panels or the architecture of the mid 18th century, in helping finish panels where an original volunteer was unable, in blocking, photographing and stitching the panels together as fives. The project’s excitement and dynamic simply created volunteers, all sorts and conditions of people literally across the world wanted to be part of it. To be of it and in it became and remained an exhilarating experience – despite some natural angst and the looming deadlines.

“... skills learned from grandmother and mother ...”

The majority of the talented embroiderers who stitched The Prestonpans Tapestry gained their interest and their skills in sewing from grandmother



or mother, although in two moving instances the skill was acquired whilst convalescing from TB as a child, one taught by nuns. For a minority there was almost a complete lack of experience at sewing much more than buttons on school uniforms but there was amongst them all a cadre with a very great deal of experience, often with hard won City & Guilds or Art College qualifications in embroidery and textile design, several of whom were teachers in these fields. Many too were members of arts and crafts groups such as the Halflinbarns Schoolhouse Weavers, the Embroiders Guild, the Scottish Costume Society, the Craft Clinic in Fisherrow, the Inveresk Sewers, the Culrose Needwork Group and the Stathendrick Stitchers. Other groups were non-specific but resolved to tackle panels such as Ageing Well Edinburgh and the Scottish Rurals WI.

One of the most fascinating aspects of those who volunteered however was not the variety of their competence or skills but their declared motivations for wanting to take part. High amongst them was a love of Scotland, 'doing something for Scotland' one declared. Equally there were deep Jacobite emotions usually with strong ancestral connections. The Prince had lodged in 1745 in more than one of the stitchers' ancestral family homes such as Gray's Mill and Sunlaws close by Kelso. And where there might be no direct link there were myriad instances of nostalgic or highly localised associations. Dunblane's stitchers took the greatest interest in Balhaldie House and those on Eriskay and living in and close by Kinlochmoidart House were determined to sew 'their' panels. The parents of the stitcher of the Salutation Inn in Perth had met, held their wedding reception and ruby wedding celebrations in that very hotel. Another's ancestors had tended the Light at Ardnamurchan not long after the Prince

had sailed in its surrounding waters. Robertsons were determined to stitch the panel for Blair Castle and the capture of Cope's coach at Cockenzie. Eponymous Andersons wished to stitch the Riggonhead Defile and those whose homes today are depicted in the Inveresk panel wished to stitch them. The Craft Clinic at Fisherrow, having resolved to tackle the two Musselburgh panels including Pinkie House, found their neighbour at the Craft Clinic actually stayed in Pinkie House today and recruited her to stitch her own bedroom window.

Yet how did all these stitchers hear about, learn about the tapestry project in the first place? The first occasion the Trust 'asked' for volunteers was on the rear cover of the 2009 3Harbours Festival programme – in May/ June. That proved decisive, not only bringing forward the first dozen or more volunteers but those early volunteers were very frequently members of the arts and crafts groups already mentioned. There was immediate clamour for the panels to stitch which couldn't be met that swiftly, but workshops were held at the Prestoungrange Gothenburg for the ever increasing number of volunteers to share Andrew Crummy's earliest drawings and to ask for their critique. Many stitchers began to reserve particular panels for the manner of reasons already described. But the Trustees definitely wanted to encourage stitchers right across the Highlands not just close by in the Lowlands. A grand expedition was planned to Eriskay plus a week's residence at Borrodale. The Trust's BattleBus took to the road and with the help of press coverage in *Am Paipear* and *Westword* stitchers were found at presentations in Eriskay & Astley Halls, by door stepping at Kinlochmoidart and in car park chatter at Glenfinnan. Local Highland weekly newspapers also carried the call for



volunteers as did *The Scotsman*, the *East Lothian Courier*, *Life* and *News*. And of course there were exceptional word-of-mouth recruits. A volunteer from the USA was a longstanding family friend of a Port Seton stitcher who'd gone to Florida as a Rotary Ambassador, from Australia a migrant mother was alerted by her Musselburgh daughter, in Dublin the artist's father-in-law and at Feuilleade in France this book's graphic designer's family and expat circle signed on. To our absolute delight by Christmas 2009 we knew we had more than enough stitchers to accomplish the challenge – indeed there were reserves to spare.

“Panel Beaters, stitch addicts watched over by husbands and cats ...”

Several were alpha women, but they did not dominate and with only the rarest exception did they remonstrate. Their contributions were deployed quietly and effectively co-ordinating dispersed sub-sets of stitchers and helping show 'how' at the drop-in sessions. They were indispensable. But so were the contributions of the angels who were always there quietly helping and when needed stepping up to the breach or stitching the way out of a tight corner. More than one volunteer had to admit they could not finish on time or as well as they felt they should, and the quiet ones quietly did what was needed.

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As the project progressed nick names emerged and were adopted. The core team proclaimed they were 'panel beaters' whilst individual stitchers admitted to becoming stitch addicts or junkies with earnest discussion of detox routines. 'Some weeks I couldn't put it down, other weeks I couldn't pick it up'. 'Lemsip Linda' had to start her tapestry panel all over when she spilt the medicine on her linen! Others more prosaically talked of 'stitching during the long winter months' - and it was a tough winter, whilst a poet amongst them mused: 'stitching frees yet challenges the mind'. Habitual behaviours developed – one group that could have imbibed whisky galore opted to take Earl Grey tea; another ate McGhee's cakes when they met every Tuesday. Others reported just how far their panels had travelled, not only on holidays to France or Norfolk but to Glen Nevis and Portsoy – the latter when a coterie of Port Seton & Cockenzie stitchers became obsessed with rowing their *Boatie Blest*, their crews becoming 2010 World Champions in their class!

Husbands [all but one stitcher were female] came in for many a compliment, and sympathy, as did the occasional cat and dog. All watched

patiently and husbands attended to domestic duties many stitchers would normally have done. Fellow embroiderers were greatly valued for their mutual contributions, suggesting stitching ideas, showing what they'd achieved as exemplars at the Thursday drop-in and Midway workshops. The website also played a significant role here even though only two thirds of stitchers were au fait with the technology.

“But where were the moon and the stars?”

All stitchers were determined to get 'their panel' as right as may be and from the outset were very much encouraged to do so.. Andrew Crummy and his history counsellors had done their best but? Perhaps the most spectacular instance of correctly second guessing was at Blair Castle where the Roberstons had the panel in hand. The Prince stayed several days watching bowls and evidently eating his first pineapple. There are several stories of his sojourn but few gave proper precedence to the exiled Jacobite William, Duke of Atholl and his cousin Lady Lude - who organised a Ball. Another stitcher was greatly taxed as to the position in the sky of the moon and the stars on September 20th/ 21st. No less an authority than the French Astronomical Society was successfully consulted. At Glenfinnan debate raged, and remains unresolved, as to where precisely the Prince's Standard was raised. The present Cameron of Lochiel [a Founding Patron of the Battle Trust] was consulted and added a stitch or two to the panel himself. At Dunbar the stitcher's husband was despatched to the harbour to locate 'Cope's Steps' which he successfully did; at Fassfern the bedroom where the Prince slept was explored to see just how easily he could have plucked the iconic white rose outside the window. Others, as on Eriskay,



questioned and corrected the disposition of the islands offshore, and yet more adjusted the architecture of the buildings.

Alas it's finished!

This community 'arts' project, creating the world's longest tapestry, occasioned virtually all the benefits one could have anticipated. For some it provided an absorbing opportunity to sideline just a little a current sadness or to distract a tad from a debilitating illness. Its momentum and the sheer beauty of what was emerging raised the spirits and the souls of all concerned. Elderly mothers and daughters worked together on panels, in one case mother was losing her sight but she certainly made her contribution. Grandchildren watched, often puzzled but receiving unthought of lessons in Scottish history, and many added a stitch or two. Everyone said they couldn't wait to see it finished and that they desperately wanted to see the entire tapestry once it was stitched together. They'd fly in from America, or Australia, Ireland or France, or descend from the Highlands to the Lowlands, for that sight. A 'private viewing' all together, for everyone who stitched, was a must. So was this book of the Tapestry as a keepsake and souvenir – not incidentally that the photographic images on these pages so carefully prepared by Gillian Hart can ever match the depth and texture of the embroidered linen. Embroidery is a unique medium, but this book tries to offer what the panels alone cannot, the rounded story.

Because we all recognise the uniqueness of embroidery as a medium the Trust further resolved that the real McCoy must be toured, paraded across



the nation and in due course the Diaspora. It was resolved to carry it across the Highlands in triumph to the very places the Prince visited in 1745 on the very dates he was there. It had to travel to Eriskay and Arisaig and Glenfinnan and Fort William [true the Prince never took that Fort!], to Blair Castle, Perth, Dunblane and Sterling. And in each of these locations the stitchers' friends and family and their local communities will be able to see what together 'they' have accomplished, and perhaps learn a little more of their history. And the simple message is that so very much can be achieved by 'voluntarism'. What we behold is quite simply astonishing, amazing, incredible.

Legacies from the Legacy

At the Battle Trust we anticipate six major outcomes, legacies of our legacy from the Prince. First and foremost we expect to heighten national awareness of, and thereby advance, our campaign to create a vibrant Living History Centre in Prestonpans with the Tapestry as a prime exhibit. Secondly, we expect to see a surge of interest in and involvement with sewing/ stitching/ embroidery. Seeing what has been achieved will certainly trigger ideas and aspirations amongst others to create a similarly beautiful artwork. Thirdly we expect to see the Tapestry visited by a host of young students as they study the Scottish History curriculum with it becoming a powerful new medium that supplements the Trust's existing programme of re-enactments and BattleGaming. Fourthly, we expect debate and disagreement and learning all around from the details we have placed in the Tapestry's panels and our history notes – the story of the '45 is so replete with romanticised myth that we have no illusions we have it all right – only Allah is Perfect! Fifthly, we shall trumpet the triumph of 'voluntarism'. It can move mountains – of linen and wool – and it can move hearts and minds. And sixthly, we expect to see a greater surge in the continuing re-assertion of our community self-esteem in Prestonpans and our neighbours in Port Seton and Cockenzie, through the arts, as we all make our way in the 21st century. There is every right to be immensely proud of the sense of place our heritage has afforded our community - not only arising from this iconic battle in 1745 but from The Pans' industrial contribution to the Scottish nation across a thousand years.

10 million thanks to everyone who stitched a stitch and to everyone who made their stitching possible.