

# Designing the Prestonpans Tapestry

by Andrew Crummy

Creating a 104 metre long tapestry has to be a mad thing to do. But such is the challenge that happens at the Prestoungrange Arts Festival. Over the past 8 years as Convenor of The Prestonpans Murals Trail I have become accustomed to Gordon Prestoungrange's positive creative spirit.

I was trained as an illustrator at Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art, Dundee. I went on to do an MA in Design at Glasgow School of Art. After leaving Art School in 1985 I worked as an illustrator in London for magazines such as *The Observer*, *Time Out* and *New Musical Express*. Around that time I began painting murals for Midland Bank and other large organisations across the world. I would frequently work with large groups to create these artworks. The largest of these murals was a quarter mile long.

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I often used history as the basis for my mural designs such as the murals in Middlesborough, Sheffield, around The Scott Monument in Edinburgh and for The National Museums of Scotland. In 2006 I completed a Mural-in-a-Day focussed on the Battle of Prestonpans for the Prestoungrange Arts Festival at the 6th Global Murals Conference which was hosted in the town.

The Prestonpans Tapestry is very much based on the traditions of Community Arts in Scotland with which I have been familiar all my life since my mother was the Organising Secretary of the Craigmillar Festival Society. The aim of any Community Arts project is to produce 'a collective work that will be a catalyst for change'. We all very much hope this fine tapestry will help with the continuing regeneration of Prestonpans and attract many a visitor into the town. When creating an artwork in this particular manner all sorts of possibilities can start to happen. In the following text I aim to show how from a small conversation an artwork can develop and grow.

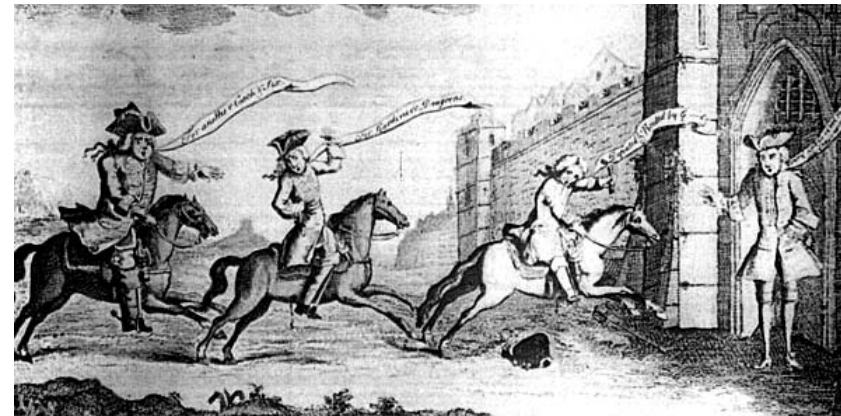
*A contemporary print showing Sir John Cope arriving at Berwick to announce his defeat at Prestonpans, which was the original inspiration for the tapestry.*

## 'I've just been to Bayeux'

One morning in March 2009 Gordon Prestoungrange said to me, at the end of an Arts Festival meeting, in his usual relaxed manner: "I went to see the Bayeux Tapestry last week and I thought we could do that for the Battle of Prestonpans". And after a quick intake of breath added: "but it must be one metre longer, it should be 79 metres overall". At that point I nodded, smiled and agreed with him. From that one brief conversation the journey began.

I headed home and I started telling my wife Carmel Daly about the idea. Well lo and behold Carmel had done a lot of stitching. After 12 years of marriage I discovered a secret my wife had never before disclosed to me!

When visiting the Bayeux Tapestry Gordon had thoughtfully bought a 'kit' which Carmel and I took apart and used to create the first sample of how the Pans Tapestry might look. Almost immediately I took the decision to base the style of the tapestry on the famous cartoon of Johnnie Cope



arriving at Berwick upon Tweed telling of, or rather confirming, his defeat – drawn just after the battle in 1745. I ordered a piece of white linen online and Carmel starting stitching.

I knew next to nothing about stitching. Carmel had been taught embroidery by her father because, when he had TB as a young boy, the nuns in the hospital in Dublin had taught him to stitch. Carmel's father, Michal Dalaigh, I am delighted to tell, has completed one of the panels on the Highland Charge at Prestonpans.

Without Carmel and her knowledge and skill the idea might never have gone anywhere. But on seeing her work we quickly created a series of advertisements and brochures inviting other stitchers to volunteer to help us create the tapestry. The most effective medium was an advertisement on the back of the 3Harbours Arts Festival brochure for June 2009. From that single advertisement our soon to be Lead Stitcher; Dorie Wilkie appeared, and the indefatigable Elma Colvin. I met Elizabeth Jones, another of the indefatigables later that year at the 2009 Battle of Prestonpans Re-enactments in September. I had known Elma for many years because her son Calum had gone to college with me at Dundee.

At this point Gordon began to arrange field visits along the Prince's route initially at his landing point on Eriskay where he recruited several local stitchers. This was followed in August 2009 with a residential week at Borrodale House where the Prince had stayed awaiting the responses of Clan Chiefs 264 years before. We met and recruited many local stitchers as we visited many of the Highland locations associated with the '45. This included volunteers in Arisaig and Kinlochmoidart. It was during this time that we met Sandra Casey in the car park at Glennfinnan, where our resident Bonnie Prince Charlie, Arran Johnson, and his partner Fiona Campbell [dressed as Jenny Cameron] were about to raise the Prince's Standard and rally the Highland Army.

A series of key meetings was also convened amongst all who showed an interest at The Prestoungrange Gothenburg, our arts hub in Prestonpans. To our great surprise, delight and amazement we started getting not just a few but twenty or thirty stitchers coming along. It was at this point in early October 2009 that we began to realise that this mad idea could actually work.



*The first sample completed by Carmel Daly based on the 1745 print.*

## Of Crewel and Wools and Linen

My considerable dilemma, now that we looked likely to have enough volunteers, was I was neither a stitcher nor tapestry expert. I am a trained illustrator/artist/muralist. Which meant I was accustomed to working with a large amount of visual information which has to be drawn or painted. I needed to translate this knowledge into stitch. But what material would I use? Which yarn would I use or was it even yarn? After several visits to New Lanark, where we nearly ended up getting specially made yarn, I knew something was not right. I searched and searched. My problem was I was looking for a design concept to construct the artwork onto.

Then one night I found on the internet an embroidered jacket worn by Bonnie Prince Charlie. It explained it was created in the style of Jacobean Crewel embroidery. A revelation occurred for me, it all fell into place. Then I discovered the Bayeux was done in Crewel work. But where to find crewel yarn? I ordered some online. But the next day my family and I were up town looking at wool shops and a shop assistant asked if we'd been to the Grassmarket Embroidery shop. I entered the shop and there stood a large stand with the beautiful range of Appleton's crewel yarns. Since that moment Sue Black, who owns the shop, has been a very great help throughout the project.

I had found my yarn but what about the linen? I sent away for sample after sample. Eventually I found a Scottish Ecu linen and took it into Sue Black's Embroidery shop where they confirmed it was good – but needed to be heavier. And when Carmel and Dorie both also agreed this was a good way forward we were all set. We had the yarn and the linen. So all we now needed was a finished sample.

### Story telling is not illustration of course

I plunged into a world of research, where I immersed myself in any type of visual storytelling that portrayed a battle. I looked at battle paintings, well known movies such as 'Braveheart' and 'Flags of my Father', graphic novels, anything that might give me a clue.

I was readily aware from the outset that I was not illustrating a text with which I was long familiar, rather I was telling a story in stitch. It is a

'traditional' form of public art not widely used today, indeed I was told by someone that it "had definitely gone out of fashion".

The brief was to visualise 79 'event' panels selected by Gordon and derived from the writings of Martin Margulies in his book *The Battle of Prestonpans* published in 2007. Martin's book became my bible. Eventually I would broaden my research to myriad references far and wide including Christopher Duffy's book *The '45* and Stephen Lord's *Walking with Charlie* [Stephen had earlier voluntarily joined us all at Borrodale]. These books have vital visual references but I needed so much more. To make the tapestry work, every element had to have some reference attached to it. There is very little decoration in it that is not taken from an aspect of the period or the Prince's story. In fact, because we recruited many stitchers across the locations the Prince had visited in 1745, such as Blair Castle and Dunblane, there was local knowledge and myth that enabled them to add their own references.

When I was in the depth of creating the work I would be constantly emailing Martin in the USA and Gordon. Arran Johnston became very important and as I emailed Martin he would talk to Arran. As the tapestry progressed Arran became of ever growing significance as he knew what Bonnie Prince Charlie wore and so much more. [Indeed Arran's own book on the Prince, *Valour Does Not Wait*, appears simultaneously with the completion of the tapestry.]

Everything had to be as accurate as possible, but what became apparent was that for each panel there were often two, three or even four versions of the same event – for example how precisely the Prince's Standard was raised at Glenfinnan, and where. Many experts would have different opinions and eye witnesses of the battle would tell it slightly differently. What became unavoidably clear is that the accepted persona of Bonnie Prince Charlie is a concoction of history, myth, fact and romance.

Many of these historical authors would have had firm opinions about the Jacobite cause. There were those who were against and those who were for him. Yet personally I did not want to take sides but rather to try and just 'tell', or rather stitch, this epic tale. As it turns out the story is so full of intrigue, desertion and double agents that it can never be a simple story to tell. My true task was to create visual clarity; to tell the story as clearly as possible.

It is of course a truly epic tale told against the fantastic backdrop of the Scottish landscape and a period of impending change of Scottish culture. It is a story that has inspired many wonderful songs, paintings, poems, dance and literature. My challenge was to translate this into a monumental piece of crewel work.

### Searching for a Structure

First I had to find a structure, a way to hang the whole story, a visual language that would tell the story but also be stitched by many people scattered far and wide.

I began by sketching what was in my head, then I reduced each panel to a tiny sketch which was really just a series of shapes related to the story. Next I began to add some detail: houses, mountains, Jacobites, text. Slowly I was building up the references. Through this process I began to realise that parts of the written text would not work as a visual panel, I would have to break them down and tease out the story. It was this teasing out that carried the number of panels from 79 to a final 104.

The next stage was to create the series of panels at A4 size, still very rough working sketches but now with more detail. Some were better drawn than others. These were all to be sent to the local stitchers to verify or add information that I could not or did not know.

Then finally I created the full size drawings that the stitchers would get to work from – each 1000mm x 461mm. These were a big jump in both finish and content. I would first draw out the panel in pencil then use a felt tip marker to indicate the line and filled in area. Even searching out the felt tip markers that made the line to match the yarn was important. It could not be too thick or too thin.

So for months I lived in my studio, not seeing my family, through one of the coldest winters in many years. I created 104 metres of drawings standing half a metre tall. Each night as I walked home I told myself how fast I was going, working out how many I had to produce a day. Being positive all the time. When I had a good day I would praise myself for producing two finished drawings, on a bad day I was telling myself how I would finish off the panel tomorrow morning.



*A detail of the sketch for The Canter of Coltbridge panel.*

Always positive, always telling myself I would get there. I worked all the way through the Christmas break, taking only Christmas Day and New Year's Day off completely. It was easy starting off; a great feeling at having done 10 drawings, at 20 or 30 the end seemed a long distance away. When I reached 50 drawings it was just wonderful. At 80 drawings the end seemed so near but somehow miles away. Then one day somehow I was at the end!

### Drawings to Linen by Light Box & Stitching the Panel

As soon as a drawing was done it was transferred onto linen, at first by Elma Colvin. She had been given, on loan from her son Calum, a large Light Box. I will always be grateful to Elma who traced out nearly fifty panels in her home. By Christmas my friend Pat Fox had made two light boxes for me. Elizabeth Jones, and many others, came and traced the rest of the panels onto the linen.

Finally before Gillian Hart despatched the drawings away to the stitchers Elma and Dorie prepared the linen and the wool and the notes to go with them – all in an elegant tube.



*Elizabeth Jones tracing out a panel onto the linen, under blanket on the lightbox.*

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The first panel to get started was based on the cartoon of Johnny Cope arriving at Berwick upon Tweed confirming his own defeat. And this was given to Kate Edmunds, who has been meticulous in her embroidery. Next came Dorie Wilkie's panel showing Edinburgh baking bread for Johnnie Cope's army.

Once the panels and drawings were out with the stitchers my role changed. We initiated Thursday morning drop-in stitching sessions at my studio. And we started field visits and personal telephone and email contact with those stitchers who could not come to our workshops. A further significant element in all this was that Gordon created an excellent website where pictures of the panels were put up as they progressed. An example of how it worked was when Elma Colvin, who was embroidering 'The Seven Men of Moidart' panel, completed a tartan kilt. That kilt was photographed and widely shared. This inspired others to have a go at doing a tartan. Later on Mary Richardson completed several beautiful embroidered tartan kilts for the 'Prince calls a halt to the Battle' and once again this inspired others. Another inspirational picture circulated was

Esther Sharpley's rendering of trees. Maud Crawford's £30,000 Reward panel was another inspiration.

The Thursday morning drop-in workshops were always well attended. They became motivational mornings where the stitchers brought in their successes and their problems. Every time a panel came in a group of stitchers would stand over it, always curious, always focused. Always eager to learn. Some of the stitchers were very experienced indeed but most had little or no experience. All would devour information and skill. The extent of supportive group learning that has gone on has been truly amazing to me. At the special Mid-Way party we convened more than 70 ladies gathered for a day of sharing and stitching and learning – and the Prince (aka Arran Johnston) inspected their progress.

### The 'Second' Story of the Tapestry

I feel very strongly indeed that the 'second' story of our tapestry, one which one imagines the Prince would have greatly enjoyed, is of the army



*Stitchers at the mid-way party*

of volunteer stitchers. Once again the Raising of the Prince's Standard has worked its magic. His army of stitchers has rallied together to transform my drawings into something truly dynamic. And Cameron of Lochiel, on cue, joined them too to add his stitches!

How can a large and disparate group learn so rapidly? Enormous credit goes to the natural leadership skills of Dorie Wilkie which has seen the stitchers working almost as a single unit. As the tapestry has progressed the stitching has become at once more complex and boldly confident.

My aim was never to produce a series of 'finished' panels, but a sketch that would hopefully encourage stitchers to give each panel the stamp or mark of their own individuality. So the final work is multi-layered as together we do indeed tell the Prince's story. It is a single work of art with a dramatic story line, but deeply layered with human interest and individuality.

I am often asked how I feel when I see one of my drawings so beautifully stitched. There is no easy answer to that question. Time and again I am left speechless. Together we have created a dazzling and unique Scottish work of art stretching 104 metres. The detail in the stitches is truly amazing. Every inch of that length has been stitched by human hand. That is new poetry, the poetry of our tapestry. Into those panels perhaps 10 million stitches, 25,000 hours of embroidery by more than 200 women – and two men. For a whole range of reasons each one agreed to complete a panel for the Prince, for Scotland, for a place in our nation's history. But also it has been my greatest pleasure to know that our volunteers have created their panels for reasons of personal caring and community, the very opposite of the bloody scenes depicted in the final stages of our tapestry at the Battle of Prestonpans itself.

It has been a quite extraordinary journey, one that will continue. Who knows where it will end?

*Andrew Crummy drawing out the finished panel "The Prince Offers a Reward of £30,000 for the Elector of Hanover"*

