



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

by Gordon Prestoungrange

The Prestonpans Tapestry was completed at the end of July and unveiled at a marquee in Prestonpans at a private viewing for the 200 volunteers who had helped create it.

Reputedly the longest tapestry in the world, this amazing embroidery was commissioned by the Battle of Prestonpans Heritage Trust. It shows the early months of the 1745 Jacobite rising – from the arrival of Bonnie Prince Charlie in Scotland through to his resounding victory in Prestonpans on 21 September.

The whole project has taken nearly two years to come to fruition. The tapestry is still to find a permanent home – although the Trust aims for it will form the centrepiece in a future living history battle centre in Prestonpans. In the meantime, it’s making a whistle-stop tour of East Lothian in September – in the Village Hall in Gullane on 16th and in the Prestonpans Community Centre on the 24th and 25th.

Future exhibition dates will be announced on the website - www.prestonpanstapestry.org

The story of the Prestonpans Tapestry is a truly remarkable one. On one level it simply tells the tale of the young Prince’s journey and determination to regain his father’s kingdom.

On a deeper level it represents the community of Prestonpans and its determination to recover from the economic devastation caused in the 1970s by the decline in all its major industries. The arts and heritage have been key to this process, especially its association with the Battle of Prestonpans.

But the third and perhaps most impressive aspect of the tapestry is the Herculean efforts of the volunteer ‘stitchers’ who created the tapestry’s 104 one-metre panels, in the space of just nine months. That is the story that will be told by this article.

Best estimates 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.

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. Then 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 grown organically. 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.

The majority of the talented embroiderers who stitched The Prestonpans Tapestry gained their interest and their skills in sewing from grandmother or mother. In two moving instances the skill was acquired whilst convalescing from TB as a child, one taught by nuns.

Some were completely inexperienced at sewing much more than buttons on school uniforms, but among them were some with a very great deal of experience, often with hard won City & Guilds or Art College qualifications in embroidery and textile design. Some were



Project leaders [l/r] Andrew Crummy, artist, Dorie Wilkie, stitcher, Gillian Hart, photographer and administrator.

even teachers in these fields.

Many too were members of arts and crafts groups such as the Halflinbarns Schoolhouse Weavers, the Embroiderers Guild, the Scottish Costume Society, the Craft Clinic in Fisherrow, the Inveresk Sewers, the Culrose Needlework Group and the Stathendrick Stitchers. Other groups were non-specific, 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 but their motivation for wanting to take part. High on this list 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.

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 around 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 those 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 current homes 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 actually stayed in Pinkie House and recruited her to stitch her own bedroom window.

How did all these stitchers learn about the tapestry project in the first place? The first time the Trust ‘asked’ for volunteers was on the rear cover of the 3 Harbours Festival programme in May/ June 2009. That proved decisive and attracted the first dozen or so volunteers, some of



The Seven Men of Moidart embroidered by Elma Colvin, who also contributed the quotation as title to this article.

whom were members of the arts and crafts groups already mentioned.

There was immediate clamour for panels to stitch. These couldn’t be supplied straight away but workshops were held at the Prestoungrange Gothenburg for the growing band of volunteers to share Andrew Crummy’s earliest drawings and contribute their critique. Many stitchers began to reserve particular panels for the manner of reasons already described.

But the Trustees wanted to encourage

stitchers right across the Highlands, not just from around the Lothians. A grand expedition was planned to Eriskay, followed by a week’s residence at Borrodale. The Trust’s BattleBus took to the road and, with the help of local press coverage, stitchers were found at presentations in Eriskay & Arisiag, by door stepping at Kinlochmoidart and in car park chatter at Glenfinnan.

Of course there were exceptional words-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 the tapestry’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.

Several were alpha women, but they did not dominate and, with only the rarest exception, did not remonstrate. Their contributions were deployed quietly and effectively, co-ordinating 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 stepping up to the breach when needed, 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.

To be continued...

All photographs by Tony Marsh.