

The art of narrative embroidery

The Scottish Diaspora Tapestry tells the story of Scots making their way in the world throughout history – and its creation united the endeavours of stitchers across 31 nations

In recent years the small town of Prestonpans, which lies on the Firth of Forth to the east of Edinburgh, has become synonymous with the creation of epic embroideries. The first major embroidery, the *Prestonpans Tapestry*, emulated the *Bayeux Tapestry* and was worked in a restricted range of stitches and limited colour palette. Worked by around 200 stitchers from the communities that Bonnie Prince Charlie's army passed through, the resulting 104 panels, each one metre wide and almost half a metre deep, trace the steps of the Prince from exile in France, culminating in the Battle of Prestonpans, a resounding Jacobite victory.

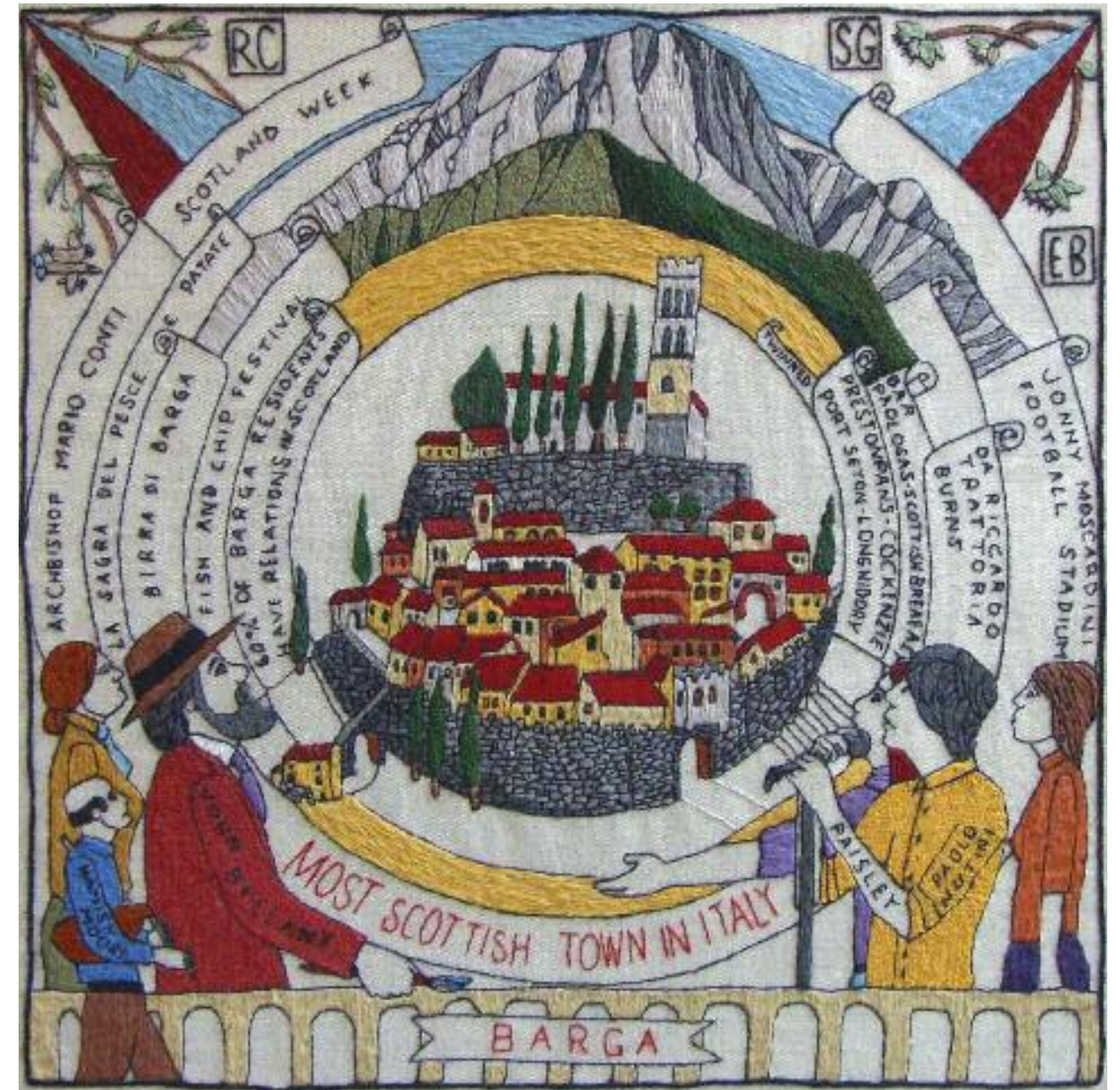
Another even bigger project, *The Tapestry of Scotland*, also emanated from Prestonpans, with more than 1,000 volunteer stitchers from all over Scotland completing some 160 panels, each one metre square. For this project, a wide range of colours and stitches were used.

But the most ambitious embroidery of them all has to be the *Scottish Diaspora Tapestry*. An 'international

community project' the *Diaspora* tells the tales of the Scots who dispersed around the globe, building new lives, often thousands of miles away from their homes. Wherever in the world they live, the Scots and their descendants today retain a sense of pride and connection to their Scottish heritage, and their skills have often had a profound impact on the areas where they settled.

Celebrating those accomplishments and influences, the embroidered panels of the *Diaspora Tapestry* were stitched in countries from Russia to Brazil and from Ethiopia to Antarctica, making them as widely travelled as the people whose stories they document.

Everyone involved with the creation of the epic artworks is aware that they are in fact embroideries, but they reference the world's most famous embroidery, the *Bayeux Tapestry*. Initially, the plans for the *Diaspora* aimed to include 150 panels from 25 countries. By 2012 the countries were identified and Gillian Hart and Yvonne Murphy, the project coordinators were tasked with finding the stories. The Prestonpans area already had historic links



PHOTOGRAPHY: GILLIAN HART



Above: Known as the most Scottish town in Italy, 60 per cent of Barga's residents have family in Scotland and there is an annual fish and chip festival and a Scotland Week there. Famous Scots-Italians are the singer Paolo Nutini and the football player Johnny Moscardini. IT05

From L-R: Dr Elsie Inglis (1864-1917) was a pioneer of women's medicine. With the outbreak of the First World War she was a founder of the Scottish Women's Hospitals for Foreign Service, which opened medical units across the front. The first to open was a 200-bed auxiliary hospital in the medieval Royaumont Abbey, north of Paris, under the auspices of the French Red Cross. FR09

One of the Global Panels, *Auld Lang Syne*. GE02

During the Second World War, Isabella from East Lothian fell in love with Helmut Joswig, a German prisoner of war and, after his discharge in 1948, they determined to build a life together regardless of prejudice. They married in Edinburgh but in 1953 moved to Germany. There they met more opposition: no one would rent a home to a former enemy but through much toil, they built their own home, where Isabella still lives today. They had five children, seven grandchildren, and six great-grandchildren. DE04



to Gothenburg in Sweden and Barga, known as 'the most Scottish town in Italy', so while Gillian and Yvonne went to Barga to unearth stories, Andrew Crummy, the artist responsible for the design work on all three tapestries, headed to Sweden. From those small beginnings, contact was made with Scottish associations, Burns' clubs and blogs all over the world and the stories began to flood in.

For Andrew Crummy, the task was different to his work on the previous tapestries as there was no key historian involved and the narrative originated with the stitchers themselves.

Once the stories were received, sources and facts had to be checked and verified for historical accuracy. To maintain the personal aspect, where possible a piece would be stitched by someone who was a family member, family friend or from the local community of the person or place that was the subject of the panel.

Stitcher Rosemary Farmer, was born in New Zealand, lives in Sydney, Australia and her daughter lives in Musselburgh, a few miles from Prestonpans, so she has both local and wider world connections.

'While I was in Scotland visiting my daughter, I went to a meeting about the *Prestonpans Tapestry* and volunteered to stitch a panel. 'The

large size of the Prestonpans panels meant that they had to be mounted on stretchers; in comparison, I found that the 50cm square size of the *Diaspora* panels was perfect to work on. It didn't need to be put on stretcher bars and I just used an embroidery hoop, moving it around to whichever area I was working on.'

But before anyone could begin stitching, each design had to be meticulously planned. Andrew Crummy worked on a grid system that allowed information to be dropped in.

'The initial design for each panel was hand drawn in black and white and sometimes redrawn several times before the final line drawing was coloured in by hand. I used certain colours to convey certain themes as I felt that this would make it easier for the stitcher.'

Once the design was finalised, the linen/cotton mix fabric, yarns and a copy of the original drawing for the panel, were packaged up and sent to the volunteer stitchers. The accompanying guidelines were very brief (outlines were to be worked in charcoal grey and there should be no three-dimensional stitching) as the stitchers were encouraged to be creative with their choice of stitches.

Having worked on the *Prestonpans Tapestry*, Rosemary was delighted that

From L-R: During the Second World War Loch Ewe in Wester Ross provided sheltered anchorage for Arctic convoys to assemble before sailing to Russia. The men of the convoys were awarded the Ushakov medal by the Russians but only received recognition from the British government in 2013 with the issue of the Arctic Star medal. RU04

The plentiful supply of clean water from Loch Lomond flowing into the River Leven industrialised the Vale of Leven, and it was at Croftengea works in 1827 that the first commercially successful Turkey red dye was made and used. IN13

the outlines were to be stitched in charcoal grey: 'Black outlines were used on the *Prestonpans Tapestry* and it was a nightmare as the black yarn tended to fluff and become very thin. I found that if I ran it over a lead pencil, it kept it from fluffing.'

Once the 'kits' were sent out, it was a waiting game until the panels began to arrive back in Scotland ready to be stretched and backed – and maybe have any little problems sorted out.

When she attended the launch event for the *Diaspora*, Rosemary found that people were very interested in which stitches had been used, so she emailed Dr Gordon Prestoungrange, Baron of

From L-R: David Sime Cargill was born near Montrose in 1826. By 1874 he had founded a successful business in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), but upon visiting Burma, he purchased the Rangoon Oil Refinery, a small oil prospecting business. In 1886 this was renamed the Burmah Oil Company. LK01

Christina Macleod Martin from Coille Ghillidh, believed to be the last Applecross crofter to produce wool for sale, had a spinning wheel, which travelled with her great granddaughter to Piha, New Zealand in the 1850s. In 2010, this spinning-wheel returned to the Applecross Heritage Centre. NZ05b

Prestoungrange, who had the original idea and was the driving force behind the *Prestonpans* and *Diaspora Tapestries* and suggested that a book about the stitching could be a good fund raiser.

'Although the stitchers had been given carte blanche, when I looked closely at the panels it soon became apparent that, by and large, the range of stitches used was quite small. But they had been used in very different ways,' Rosemary recalled.

The book was to be more than just a simple dictionary of stitches and *The Art of Narrative Embroidery*, which she wrote and worked on with Maggie Ferguson, features carefully chosen details that illustrate the ways in

which the stitches were used to such great effect.

'To give the broadest selection, the book includes details from both the *Prestonpans* and *Diaspora Tapestries*. We decided to group the images according to the subject matter. 'Landscape' includes mountains, trees, plants, sea, clouds and sky; 'Heads' includes faces, hair, beards, eyes, wigs and skin tones; 'Buildings' includes castles, churches, houses, bridges, roof-tiles, walls and much more.'

With a final count of over 300 panels from all over the world, some of the volunteer stitchers on the *Diaspora Tapestry* had no previous experience of embroidery, while others were very accomplished needleworkers.

'Even the most inexperienced stitchers had achieved amazing results, but the ones who stitched their panels after the book was published told me that they found it an invaluable resource.'

Rosemary herself stitched three and a half panels, including *Bendigo Gold Rush* and *Gabriel's Gully*, which she completed on her own. In the book, one detail from her *Bendigo Gold Rush* panel demonstrates the use of stem stitch for the bucket and windlass with bullion stitch for the rope and another shows the gold nuggets

worked in loose French knots.

'It was very difficult to narrow down the choice of details shown and areas from some panels, such as the beautifully stitched *Baron Singh* were shown in several chapters while the *Scottish Country Dance* panel was shown in its entirety.'

For the volunteers, the actual stitching was no doubt a huge achievement, but one stitcher also voiced her 'deep sense of pride to be taking part in such a project'.

That sense of pride and connection obviously resonates with many communities around the world as, after a global tour finishing up in Ottawa, visitor numbers to the 30 *Diaspora Tapestry* exhibitions have exceeded 120,000. In 2017, it will be exhibited at Westminster Halls, London (20 March-29 April) before it returns home to Scotland. ●

KATHY TROUP

Details of all of the panels are online at www.scottishdiasporatapestry.org and the books, *Scottish Diaspora Tapestry* and *The Art of Narrative Embroidery* can both be ordered through the website