



A STITCH in time

The Royal School of Needlework is turning 150. But the Hampton Court based institution is certainly not stuck in the past. Jane McGowan picks up the threads with Chief Executive Susan Kay-Williams



Behind the walls of Hampton Court Palace, in one of the magnificent apartments designed by Sir Christopher Wren, some of Britain's most highly skilled embroiderers are quietly stitching away. It is 35 years now since the Royal School of Needlework moved in, and this year, with a wonderfully creative flourish, it celebrates its 150th anniversary.

Founded partly to provide employment for impecunious ladies, the RSN has worked on everything from coronation robes and the wedding dress for HRH the Duchess of Cambridge to logos for the 2002 World Cup. Through world wars, pandemics and bewildering



RSN Chief Executive Susan Kay-Williams

social change, the school has continued to thrive, its dedication to the art of embroidery undimmed.

To mark the anniversary, a major exhibition, '150 Years of the Royal School of Needlework: Crown to Catwalk', will run throughout the spring and summer at the Fashion and Textile Museum in London, showcasing glories from the RSN's illustrious past, as well as works by its current crop of students.

"We want to reflect on the past 150 years, but it's not that we have reached this milestone and now we stop," says Chief Executive, Dr Susan Kay-Williams. "The exhibition is a springboard for the future too. We want it to highlight the whole period of the RSN, surprising people with things they may not have known we worked on."

Founded in 1872 by Lady Victoria Welby, the School of Art Needlework – as it was originally called – began life above a shop in London's Sloane Street, with 20 women in its employ. The royal connections arose swiftly. Queen Victoria's third daughter, Princess Helena – officially Princess Christian of Schleswig-Holstein – was appointed the school's first president, and in 1875 Queen Victoria herself became patron.

According to its founding declaration, the new institution had twin aims: "To revive a beautiful art which had fallen into disuse and, through its revival, to provide employment for educated women who, without a suitable livelihood, would otherwise find themselves compelled to live in poverty."

On both counts it made rapid strides, and by 1903 it was ready to move into new, purpose-built premises in Exhibition Road in Kensington, near the Victoria and Albert Museum, where it could cater for up to 150 embroiderers.

"Our turnover of workers was quite something, as we were seen as providing a suitable employment for 'distressed gentlewomen'. As soon as they got married, or found someone else to look after them, they would be gone," explains Dr Kay-Williams.

"Our first students were mainly younger women who had lost a father, which was why they needed to earn money. These were ladies entering the workplace for the first time and there were guidelines to explain the working week, when they would be required to attend and so on. That professionalised them for the world of work. The core teaching hours were 10am until 4pm, and they still are today."

The embroiderers were employed as 'piece workers', paid only for what they completed. For the quick and proficient, wages were higher, but even then many of the ladies remained in reduced circumstances. In any case, earnings came nowhere near those of a man.

"It wouldn't have been enough to put something aside for a rainy day. By the time we reach the early 20th century, the records show some people working into their 70s, or even 80s. There was no pension, so they had to keep going."

NEEDLE NUGGETS

- The work on Queen Victoria's funeral pall was completed in 48 hours by 45 women, all stitching continuously for 21 hours at a stretch
- For a time, from 1916, the school had a lingerie department making trousseaux for members of the aristocracy
- In 2002 the RSN embroidered the official logo for the FIFA World Cup in Japan and South Korea
- In 2016 the school created an epic 6m x 4m embroidery for one of the world's biggest TV shows, Game of Thrones





Still, the consummate skill of these workers, combined with the tireless efforts of Princess Helena, ensured that the school won a series of notable commissions, including large-scale embroideries for such celebrated artists as Edward Burne-Jones, Walter Crane and the grand master of the Arts and Crafts movement, William Morris. Poignantly, in 1901, it was also asked to make the funeral pall for its royal patron – “a labour of love”, as Princess Helena described it.

Between commissions the ladies would make smaller items for the school's celebrated sales, which quickly became an established part of the traditional London ‘season’. Anyone who was anyone would attend these events, to make purchases and to be waited on by Princess Helena herself, who acted as the sales assistant.

“The sale started when she arrived, so it could be anything from noon to 2pm. At 7pm it would end, but the whole thing could last for two or three days and the Princess would be there all the time.”

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She was also very keen to make items affordable, emphasising that one didn't have to be a ‘lady’ to buy something from the Royal School of Art Needlework, as it was called until 1922.

“You would be served by the Princess whether you wanted a blotter cover or a five-panel screen,” says Dr Kay-Williams. “She believed there should be something for everyone.”

Following her death in 1923, the title of president passed to the Duchess of York, better remembered today as Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth The Queen Mother.

And while WWII put an end to the sales, the aftermath of its cataclysmic predecessor had already seen the school adopt an intriguing new role. In the face of trauma, it transpires, the craft of embroidery can be a stimulant for mental wellbeing.

“We taught soldiers returning from the First World War to stitch as part of active therapy, and we've been using stitch as an aid to mental health ever since,” says Dr Kay-Williams. “During World War Two, we actually sent out a press release saying ‘Don't knit, stitch’. The point is that, if you're really competent, you can do other things while you knit, but for stitching you have to be more focused, more still. That leads to healing.”

And so, alongside all the items commissioned by leading designers, the Church and the royals – including garments from every British coronation of the 20th century – the upcoming London exhibition will recreate a scene of two men in military dress stitching.

“It links in so well with the world of today,” reflects Dr Kay-Williams.

IN THE BANK

The RSN is aiming to create a ‘bank’ to help identify and preserve stitches for future generations. As techniques and materials change, stitches may be lost. But the online portal – including online tutorials, illustrations and histories – will be available for students, creators and curators to access a wealth of stitches dating back centuries.

■ Visit: royal-needlework.org.uk



STITCH WALL



Commissions still provide the RSN with much of its income. But the school has also expanded its teaching, creating future professionals and helping those who wish to enhance their personal skills. As part of the anniversary celebrations it is offering a range of special classes – both in person and online – inspired by the past 150 years.

“We breed people who are fiercely loyal. Once taught by the RSN, you are held by an invisible thread which, every so often, will become elastic and bring you back to us. I absolutely believe that we will continue, and that we will grow and flex as required.”

■ For exhibition dates and details: royal-needlework.org.uk