

A Stitch In Time



Degree students at work at the RSN's current premises at Hampton Court Palace.

The Royal School of Needlework has an illustrious history spanning 150 years. Holly Crawford looks at a few key moments on the way to this milestone.

TODAY, the home of the Royal School of Needlework (RSN) is the sumptuous surroundings of Hampton Court Palace in the London borough of Richmond upon Thames

— but it can be traced back to more humble origins. The School of Art Needlework, as it was originally known, was founded in 1872 by Lady Victoria Welby and Princess Christian of Schleswig-

Holstein, Queen Victoria's third daughter (also known as Princess Helena), who became the school's first president.

Lady Victoria Welby was an English noblewoman and self-taught musician, artist and philosopher who longed to revive the beautiful artform of needlework.

She also wanted to provide educated women who had no other way of supporting themselves with a means to earn money.

Many were widows or unmarried ladies whose fathers had passed away, leaving them without income.

Had they not been employed by the school, many would have found themselves destitute.

Premises were acquired in a small room above a

bonnet shop in Sloane Street, London, initially employing 20 ladies.

The school did sterling work and received its royal status in 1875 when Queen Victoria became patron.

It also acquired a new name: the Royal School of Needlework.

The RSN "Handbook Of Embroidery", first published in 1880, is still in

circulation and the same traditional techniques are taught at the school.

Thanks to fund-raising efforts by Princess Helena and the school's supporters, a new, purpose-built centre was secured on Exhibition Road, close to the Victoria & Albert Museum.

It was opened in 1903 by George, Prince of Wales (later King George V) and, at its peak, the school employed around

150 workers.

Over the years the RSN has entertained royal visitors and some of them have come on informal visits, such as the visit of the Duchess of Cambridge in 2012, but this is not a new phenomenon.

In 1880, Queen Victoria paid an informal — and by all accounts, surprise — visit to the school.

The story goes that when the Queen arrived, the workers hurriedly shoved

all detritus into work baskets and cupboards so as to appear clean and tidy.

They must have been surprised, then, when Her Majesty asked to look inside said baskets and cupboards. Her reaction was sadly not recorded!

Due to their close royal connections, students of the school made Queen Victoria's funeral pall, which Princess Helena described as "a labour of love".

In due course, the school was also given the honour of embroidering the Coronation Robes of Edward VII and Queen Alexandra.

Fast-forward to the end of World War I and the school was still relevant and, indeed, vital, with RSN staff and students teaching returning soldiers how to sew as a means of therapy.

When Princess Elizabeth was crowned Queen in 1953, she wore a resplendent Robe of State which incorporated a "Wheat and Olive" design

created by the school.

The RSN embroidered the Coronation Goldwork technique, for which it received a Coronation Medal.

This design also features on bottles of the Queen's sparkling wine which has been created to celebrate her Platinum Jubilee.

The RSN team also made the balcony hanging at Buckingham Palace for Her Majesty The Queen's Golden Jubilee.

The royal thread of the school's story continued in 2011, when the RSN worked for Sarah Burton of Alexander McQueen to

create the bespoke lace on the wedding dress, veil and shoes of Kate Middleton, the Duchess of Cambridge.

The Duchess of Gloucester has been its president for a number of years.

The Duchess of Cornwall is the current patron, following in the footsteps of the Queen Mother and Her Majesty The Queen. ■

Stitch Bank

A landmark project is the development of the RSN Stitch Bank, which aims to conserve and preserve every stitch in the world digitally, via photographs, videos and illustrations.

Sadly, many stitches have been forgotten and subsequently lost down the centuries because they fell out of use and were not recorded.

This means that when an older embroidered piece is discovered, even experts cannot recognise certain stitches.

RSN Stitch Bank aims to ensure no further stitches are lost by naming and classifying each one, and it aims to be the biggest repository of stitches in the world. The RSN Stitch Bank can be accessed online at www.rsnstitchbank.org.



The Duchess of Cornwall is the charity's current patron.



An embroidered box project by a graduate of the school.

Anniversary Exhibition

The RSN's rich history is celebrated at the Fashion and Textile Museum in London via an exhibition entitled "150 Years of the Royal School of Needlework: Crown to Catwalk".

Visitors will see commissions produced for the Royal Family, contemporary works created for international designers and pieces by its students, as well as incredible pieces from their archives.

With so many milestones already under their belt and lots of ground-breaking projects under way, one can't help but think that the founders of the RSN would be proud of everything their initiative has, and continues, to achieve.

It not only changed the lives of their contemporaries, but those of future generations.

"150 Years of the Royal School of Needlework: Crown to Catwalk" runs until September 4 at the Fashion and Textile Museum in London. Tickets should be pre-booked on the Fashion and Textile website, www.fashiontextilemuseum.org. For more information, call 020 7407 8664.



The old RSN workroom at Exhibition Road.