

Stitching the Story: the Airton Tapestry

Panel 1: What is tapestry?

The word 'tapestry' has two meanings:

- a fabric in which coloured threads are woven or embroidered into pictures or designs; in true tapestry the design is reproduced by weaving weft threads under and over successive warps to make a cloth
- events which inter-relate to tell a story, giving rise to everyday phrases such as 'life's rich tapestry' and 'embroidering the tale'; it is this second meaning we use throughout the present exhibition

There is a long tradition of recording historical events and stories on woven or embroidered wall hangings. One of the most famous examples is the 11th century Bayeux Tapestry which tells the story, on a strip of linen seventy metres in length, of William the Conqueror's defeat of the English in 1066

The Quaker Tapestry, begun in 1981 and now on permanent display in the Friends Meeting House in Kendal, celebrates three hundred and fifty years of Quaker experience and insights in a series of seventy-seven separate embroidered panels

The Airton Tapestry, completed in 2004, and directly inspired by the Quaker Tapestry, depicts events in Airton's Quaker history, so continuing and reinforcing the long tradition of the creative expression of ideas through stitches

Images

- Bayeux tapestry
- Quaker tapestry
- Airton tapestry

Panel 2 & 3: What does the Airton tapestry depict?

It portrays people and events in Airton associated with Quakerism, together with characteristic scenes in and around the village. See if you can find them on the tapestry itself

- The Meeting House: This is shown twice. Outside, a stone over the door bears the date 1700 and the initials of William and Alice Ellis. Blue spikes of Monkshood flower in the garden, as they still do today and Friends are seen arriving to attend Meeting. Inside, the room is divided by a wooden screen, enabling the women, warmed by the fire, to discuss the pastoral needs of members while the men dealt with other church affairs. All met together for regular worship and folk of all periods are shown, some in old-style Quaker dress and others in modern clothing

- William and Alice Ellis' house: This stands across the road from the Meeting House. Alice kept open house for travelling Friends and made six men's coats and women's hoods for lending to those who came unprepared for bad weather. She is seen here welcoming a visitor, with the coats and hoods hanging in the hall behind her
- Adult School: Such schools, frequently established by Friends throughout the country in the 19th and early 20th centuries, did great work in educating young people and adults and a school was set up in Airton in 1905. From 1912 until the 1920s, summer gatherings for Adult School members from all over the north took place in Airton, where students enjoyed a wide range of activities and companionship.
- The Hostel: The building, across the burial ground, began as stabling for Friends coming to Meeting on horseback. Now, offering a dozen beds, it is popular among a variety of youth groups
- Evacuees: Families arrived in 1939 to escape the risks of bombing in Liverpool and stayed for most of the war, cared for by Friends in the Meeting House and hostel
- Birds and flowers: The standing lapwing and the flying curlew are among the best-loved of local birds. The blue flax flowers recall William and Alice Ellis' occupation as linen weavers
- Words of William Ellis: The Quaker message came to Malhamdale in the 1660s and it was William Ellis who wrote, 'I am in great hopes a great part of our valley will be convinced'
- The lower border: This includes pictures drawn by children of Kirkby Malham school and shows the River Aire, Airton bridge with the Pennine Way beside it, the medieval plough-terraces on the hill behind, a tractor taking bales of hay to sheep and cows, a farmer with his dog and part of Airton village

Images

- Images from the Tapestry

Panel 4: Why an Airton tapestry?

The tercentenary of the Airton Friends Meeting House, built by William and Alice Ellis in 1700, was the inspiration for the tapestry exhibited here

The Airton Tapestry follows a tradition that goes back many centuries, of telling a story in embroidery; the Bayeux Tapestry is one of the best known illustrations of this and the Quaker Tapestry is a modern example

The Quaker Tapestry, which can be seen in the Friends Meeting House in Kendal, can best be described as narrative crewel work. It tells the Quaker story in seventy-seven embroidered panels. Similar panels have been worked by Friends in other parts of the country and around the world and the practice of 'weaving a story' in stitches has become a tradition within the Quaker movement itself

Work on the Airton Tapestry has brought together a group of people, Quaker and non-Quaker, with many different skills. The project has taken four years to complete and, in the

process, has emphasised the Quaker philosophy of the sharing of ideas and experience, the work itself illustrating their concern for the fabric of society and the natural world

Images

- Quaker Tapestry panel
- Airton village map showing the location of the Friends' meeting house
- Groups working on the tapestry

Panel 5: Who are the Quakers?

Quakers, or members of the Society of Friends, do not define their faith, which they see as springing from an inner light through the loving outreach of God

Friends meet in silent worship, without priests, rituals or set creeds. They hold strong principles of social justice and service, affirming the equality of all people before God

A Leicestershire shoemaker, George Fox, came to faith through the influence of many religious thinkers and preached throughout the country, rejecting church-going and proclaiming 'the people as the church of God'. In 1652 he travelled on foot through West Yorkshire and by the early 1660s groups of Friends were known to be meeting together in Malhamdale

Images

- George Fox (1624-1691)
- 19th century engraving of Airton Meeting House
- Map of Malhamdale

Panel 6: First steps

The impetus for creating the Airton tapestry came from an article by Alison Burnley, published in *The Friend* in January 2000, which encouraged local groups who had not been involved in the original Quaker Tapestry to portray events in the life of their own Meeting

This idea was enthusiastically received by a number of Friends in Settle Monthly Meeting and the Airton Tapestry Group was formed to produce an embroidered panel to commemorate the tercentenary of Airton Meeting House in Malhamdale. Every member contributed a particular skill other than embroidery, such as drawing, lettering, historical research, fundraising or handyman work

Regular meetings were held and the content of the panel agreed. The well-known Malhamdale artist, Katharine Holmes, made the original drawings and painting from which a final design was produced by Richard Shewell. Members of the Group attended embroidery workshops organised by the Quaker Tapestry in Kendal and practised the stitches in samplers

Children from Kirkby Malham Primary School were involved at an early stage and contributed drawings of their impressions of Airton and its surroundings. Several of these were used in the lower border of the tapestry

Images

- The group at work: stitching the samplers
- The original drawing by Katharine Holmes
- Quaker tapestry workshop
- Original drawing by one of the children

Panel 7: Design to fabric

Close attention was paid to the scale of the design, the main images being placed diagonally to achieve balance and create a pleasing effect

Appleton's crewel wool was used for the work and although the modern dyes are all synthetic, Katharine Holmes, the artist, chose colours which echoed the softer plant dyes for the older figures, reserving the brighter ones for the modern figures and the children's border

The drawing was traced on to greaseproof paper with a special wax pencil and then ironed on to calico, which was then carefully tacked to the woollen fabric. The joined fabrics were then stretched on a frame

Images

- The working drawing
- Group choosing colours with Katharine
- Ironing on the design
- Stretching

Panel 8: Working the design

There were three layers of embroidery. First of all, the outline of the design was stitched from the back. Great care was needed to thrust the needle at right angles through the fabric. The second layer was then worked from the front, infilling the shapes within the outlines. The third layer added the creative, descriptive embroidery, giving the finished work a three-dimensional effect

The panel was passed round the group and each member worked a particular image

Six stitches were used to work the design: stem stitch, split stitch, Peking knot, Bayeux point, chain stitch and Quaker stitch for the lettering

Upper-case lettering was transposed on to the wool fabric through the calico backing. Lower-case letters were worked directly on to the front

Images

- Group working together stitching
- The stitches used to work the design

Panel 9: Completion and celebration

After four years of work, the Airton Tapestry panel was completed and mounted in a handsome, purpose-designed oak frame suitable for hanging

Members of the Airton Tapestry Group met in February 2004 to celebrate and discuss ideas for the future display of the panel in a number of public places where both Friends and members of the local community might enjoy it

The Group felt that the shared activity of producing the tapestry had been truly a means of outreach, not only for the Society of Friends but also for the tiny, historically-significant Meeting House in Airton, now only used for occasional worship

Images Check these!

- Craven Herald picture: Members of the Airton Tapestry Group with the finished panel
- Photograph of the Airton Meeting House as it is today
- Members working together

Panel 10: Who were William and Alice Ellis?

William Ellis (1658-1709) was born in Calton across the river from Airton. When he was sixteen he was apprenticed to John Stott, a linen-weaver in Bradley, near Skipton. The Stott family were Quakers and William himself became a Quaker, attending Friends' meetings and 'becoming convinced in the faith'

When he was twenty-one he moved to Airton, which remained his home for the rest of his life. He gradually established his ministry in the valley, subsequently travelling throughout Britain and also in America to preach the message of Quakerism.

In 1688 William married Alice Davie who shared his beliefs and worked with him to spread the faith. In 1697 they acquired the land on which to build a Meeting House, which was completed in 1700. Nearby, they built a home for themselves and a linen-weaving workshop

Through hard work and good management William established a successful business. He is remembered as a caring man, good to his employees, living truly in the faith - the father of the Quaker movement in Malhamdale.

Images

- William and Alice Ellis' house
- Plan of the parcels of land acquired for the Meeting House
- Airton Meeting House datestone (with initials of William and Alice Ellis)