



Peaks in the Skyline

A Community Art Project for the
Mercat Centre, Milton, Ross-shire
February 2012



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The aim of this project was to involve the local community in creating a wallhanging depicting the landmarks of the village and surrounding area. The chosen medium was handmade felt as it allowed people of different abilities to successfully participate and the finished piece is robust and durable. It also serves to absorb some of the echoing sounds that cause problems in the hall.

Funding for the project was provided by Highland Council's Adult Learning Fund.

The project was led by textile artist Ruth Black and involved people ranging from 8 to 90. Some only joined in for one or two short sessions, others were there every day for the six days that we worked on the felt.



Main Participants

Amanda Widdows
Karen Widdows
Isma Munro
Ruth Rowe
Diana Purvis
Peter Marshall
Brenda Collins
Hazel Bailey
Debbie Anderson
Dorothy Dewitt
Cathy Maclennan
Shannon Fry
Tabitha Beavitt
Mairi Crow

The following people assisted on an ad-hoc basis:

Henry Fossbrooke
Freda Bremna
Linda MacFadyen
Sheila Watters
Wendy Sutherland
Ian Wallace

Stepping Stones Trainees (Milton Woodlands)

Daryl Oliver
Kyle Tulloch
Robbie Henley

Youth Clubs

Callum Collins
Kiera Anderson
Owen Rose
Jarred Forsyth
Kieran Brown
Rhys Feacham
Kelly Kerr

James MacDonald
Damien Buchwald
Leon Collins
Emma Mowatt
Connor Scobbie
Stacy Halliday
Alexander Fraser

Lucas Halliday
Kelly Ross
Chloe Davidson
Courtney Cassidy
Robbie Macleod
Paul Davidson
Nicole Scobbie

Ruth Black is a textile artist working from a studio near Inverness. She specialises in embroidery and feltmaking and has a particular interest in Celtic and Pictish design.

Ruth runs a successful fashion accessories business - Anna Macneil - originally started by her mother, and in which she is now assisted by her daughter Mary. Together, they make things such as hats, scarves, bags, cushions and wallhangings. Ruth also undertakes ecclesiastical embroidery.

Felting classes are offered by Ruth at her studio and she also comes out to tutor groups in the community. Ruth has been making felt for over twenty years and her work has sold to people from across the globe.

Previous community art pieces which Ruth has created include "Soft Rock" (on display in the Mercat Centre, Milton) and "The Black Bridge" (Merkinch, Inverness).

www.ruth-black.co.uk





Some of the distinctive landmarks of Milton and the surrounding area.





During a walk around the village and driving a little further afield I identified a number of buildings and landmarks that seemed to be particularly significant, either because of their functional or historic importance to the village, or distinctive features. I photographed as many as I could from several different angles and then chose this selection from which to build the design.



Day 1

Making basic pre-felt sections of the design.

This day was spent making pieces of pre-felt or half-felt in some of the colours that would be used in the design - mostly greens for trees and bushes and beiges, greys and whites for the buildings.

The first step was to cut out paper templates for each of the buildings and sections of trees. A full scale outline plan had been printed out on a large format printer - two copies so that we had one to follow as a plan and the other to cut up for templates.



Above - Ruth is working on a piece for the Church and Isma is planning for the Mercat Cross.

Left - Amanda is cutting out the paper templates

Below - Tabitha chooses sandstone coloured fleeces to make the ruined Tarbat House



Above - Shannon, Tabitha and Amanda are each blending different shades of green fleeces that will be used to create areas of trees and bushes.

Below - Isma, Cathy, Peter and Ruth are also working on different shades of green - the dark shades that Ruth is using will make the high evergreen archway to the Milton Inn.



We spent the morning with green fleeces and each person laid out the wool fibres in two criss-crossing layers. These were then wet down with hot soapy water, covered in bubble-wrap and gently rubbed to lightly felt the fibres together, just enough to allow the pieces to be squeezed out, and then cut to shape.

In the afternoon we repeated the process, but this time making pre-felts with fibres the colours of the buildings. At this stage there was little attempt to add any details - just the broad colour scheme.

As each piece was cut it was laid out flat on a sheet of polythene along with its paper pattern. By the end of the day we had a large stack of pieces that needed two people to lift it away into the store.



Above - A piece of green pre-felt is cut to the required shape using a paper template.



Above - Isma and Ruth are both working the wet, soapy fleece layers through bubblewrap to help fuse the fibres together to get a piece of pre-felt that can be handled and cut. Peter is studying the paper pieces to see how they will best fit.



Above - Isma has just squeezed out the soapy water from her piece of pre-felt to that it is ready for cutting to shape.



Above - Hazel is manipulating her piece of black and grey pre-felt to get the best fit for the oilrig. Amanda is laying out fleece to make the section that will be used for the woodland log cabin and in the foreground, Peter is laying down the brown fleece that will be used to make the stripey fence that features in many areas around the village.

Below - Cathy is sorting out more green fleece and Ruth is just adding a few more fibres to her's before she starts felting.



Above - Brenda and her son, Callum are happily rubbing the soapy water around through the bubblewrap to make pieces of pre-felt that will be used for houses in the finished design.



Left - Tabitha is smoothing out a piece of green pre-felt, and Amanda and Shannon are both still busy massaging through the bubblewrap.

Right - Cathy is preparing a mix of greys and black that will be used to make the windows in all the buildings.

Below - the coloured stripes get added onto the fence section.



Left - A lot of the soapy water ended up on the floor. Fortunately, Callum likes to do the mopping up!

Below - When we were almost finished for the day, Mairi took a break from the paperwork and came to see what we were up to - she helped Hazel for all of 5 seconds!



Most of the design detail would be added in at a later stage, but some strong colour features were incorporated at this stage, such as the stripes on the fence, slate grey roofs and the blue-ish bands around the top of the school and community centre.

By the end of the first day we had pieces of pre-felt ready for all the buildings that were to feature in the design along with lots of green pieces for all the trees, grass and shrubs that would be used to join up the different features of the design.

We spent 6 hours getting to this stage, but were on target by the end of the day.

Day 2

Making the main piece of felt

The morning of this second day was spent making the basic structure. This involved laying down some icewool fabric to the size it needed to be and the covering this with a layer of fleeces.

Felt shrinks as it is made, usually by about a third in each direction, which means that one has to start off much bigger than one needs. In this case we had calculated that the felt should start off at 9.5m long and 1.1m deep.

For the top half of the felt we used a selection of light blues, pale greys and white to create a background that would be a cloudy sky.

For the lower half, as it would all be covered with pieces of the half-felt that had been made in the previous session, we just used white fleece.

To ensure an even spread and a consistent thickness of fibre layer, we all moved around the table so that everyone worked over the whole area until all the icewool was covered.

The next stage was to pour hot soapy water all over the fleeces, cover with a layer bubblewrap and then start gently rubbing until all the fleece was wet through and flattened. We got to this stage by lunchtime, which meant that we were half a day ahead of schedule.



left - Kiera, Isma and Hazel start at the bottom covering up the black icewool with white fleece. Ruth makes a start with patches of blue sky



Right - Peter adds patches of grey sky, Shannon, Kiera and Tabitha stick with blue sky and Ruth is deciding what colour to use next.

Left - The icewool is laid out ready for everyone to make a start.



Left - Peter is choosing more colours, everyone else is going around the table filling in the gaps to ensure that the whole area is covered in fleece.



Above - Isma takes a well earned rest



Above - approximately 2 gallons of warm soapy water gets poured over the fleece. The trick was to get the water evenly spread in such a way that it stayed on the table rather than pouring onto the floor.



Left - the wet fleece is covered with bubblewrap and then everyone started rubbing to ensure that all the fleece was wet and flattened down. We had to do this rubbing for about an hour, which took us up to lunchtime.



Above - After lunch we started laying out all our cut-out pre-felt pieces on top of the paper plan so that we were sure we had all the pieces that were needed.

Top Middle - Amanda and Isma try to decide what goes where.

Top Right - Ruth and Amanda do a bit more "put and take"

Below - The broad picture begins to take shape.

Bottom Middle - Amanda, Tabitha and Kiera add some trees around the buildings

Bottom Right - everything is finally laid out ready for the next stage.





Left - Everyone joins in to pour more soapy water onto the felt.

Right - The whole piece is covered again with bubblewrap and the rubbing now gets faster and stronger.



Below - the soap is getting to Amanda's hands, so she uses rubber gloves.



Left - Mairi gets a few moments off from the paperwork to join in with the rubbing.

Right - at the end of day 2 we have our design ready for the next stage - passers by drop in to see what we are up to and are impressed enough to take photographs.



Day 3

More wet felting and then adding the detail

The first task was to turn the felt over so that we could do more rubbing on the back of the felt. We kept the felt between its two layers of bubblewrap so that we didn't have to worry about the possibility of it tearing at this stage, while it was still quite fragile. We walked one end to the other end of the table so that it was doubled over, and then we had a series of manouvres to manipulate the felt in place. By this stage some 10 gallons or so of soapy water had been poured onto the felt and it was very heavy.

Turning achieved, we set to with more rubbing - at first with the bubblewrap in place and later directly onto the back of the felt.

With no picture to look at, this stage just felt like hard slog, and it needed some faith that it would all turn out OK. By mid-day we were all done and the next task was to squeeze as much water as we could out of the felt.

We started rolling from one end until we got to the middle, by which stage it was too heavy to move. Then we rolled again from the other end. Tables were strategically moved away as we worked and bubblewrap manipulated as much as possible to funnel the soapy water into buckets. Inevitably, a lot of water ended on the floor! Shannon had brought in an old baby bath which we used as a liner for a wheelbarrow. This allowed us to transport the felt to the shower and tip it out onto the floor. Hazel trod up and down on the felt to squeeze out as much water as she could - using a mop to direct the water down the drain rather than letting it soak back into the felt. At this stage we left it draining and took a well-earned lunch break.

After lunch we lifted it back into the barrow and back to the hall.

This time we spread it out face up on top of sheets of expanded polystyrene so that we could start adding the detail with needle felting.

Felting needles are about 10cm long and at the sharp end have lots of tiny barbs. These barbs catch the wool fibres and allow them to be pushed down through the felt and trapped in place. The technique allows for the addition of very fine detail and can also be used to repair bits of wet-felting that were not 100% successful.

Each person chose an area to work on and gradually the detail started to emerge. It was decided that everyone should get a chance to "sign" the felt by adding in their initials on any part where they did a significant amount of work - but in a subtle way - you will have to look for these tiny details.



Above Left - Ruth, Hazel and Peter are rubbing on the back through the bubblewrap.

Above Right - Peter does some gentle massage style rubbing once the bubblewrap is removed.

Below Far Left - Hazel jumps up and down on the felt while wielding her mop.

Below middle - Peter wheels the felt back to the hall.

Below Right - Peter helps me unfold the felt while Tabitha stops the sheets of polystyrene from getting knocked out of position.





The detail gets added - with photographs of the features to hand for reference.

The sharp lines are created by needle felting on some wool yarns.

By the end of the afternoon, strong sunlight coming low through the windows is making it difficult to see what we are doing.





Above Left - Isma adds detail to the Mercat Cross. Above Right - Hazel works on the detail of her "castle in the air"

Below - Amanda is desperate to finish her work on the castle gates before she heads off to start her new job.



Day 4

More detail is added.

We spent the whole day adding in more details using needle felting. Some of this work was in the form of "repairs", for example, straightening bits that had got misplaced during the wet felting stage. The rest involved adding in details that were too intricate to do as wet felting - such as window frames, television ariels, chimney pots, etc.

The main team spent all day doing this, and we decided to leave the felt spread out on the tables to let the junior youth club have a go. The next day we rolled it out again in the evening to let the senior youth club get involved.



Above - the felt is laid out on top of sheets of expanded polystyrene ready for the team to start needle felting



Far Left Top - Karen adds detail to the windows.

Middle Top - detail has been added to the olirig

Right Top - Isma adds in tree trunks and braches to the woodland surrounding the log cabin.



Far Left Middle - Cathy creates the gardens around Milton Inn



Right Middle - Ruth improves the roof line of the local church.

Far Left Bottom - Debbie works on the basketball court and Shannon adds detail to the school and community centre



Middle Bottom - Tabitha is pleased with her treatment of the local shop.

Right Bottom - Diana straighthens up the stripes on the fence.

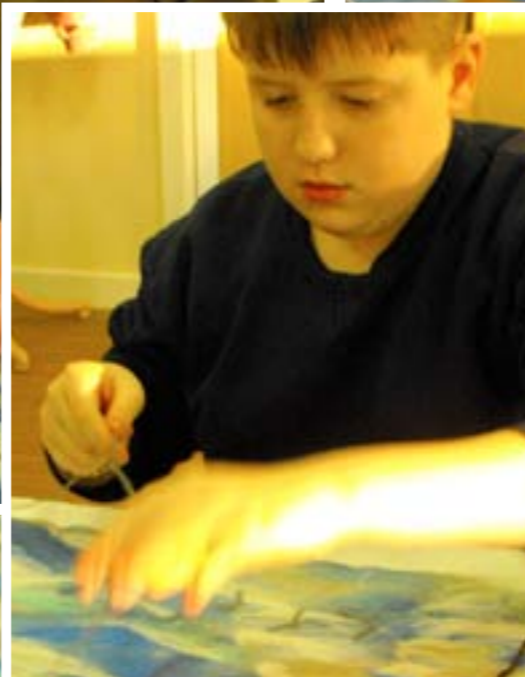




A selection of photographs of the Junior Youth Club adding further detail to the wallhanging. During this time, trees took shape, flocks of gulls and rooks appeared and the mill wheel got its blades.



When refreshments were ready the work suddenly stopped!



The Senior Youth Club members spent some time dipping in and out of the needle felting

Top Right - Emma and Kelly improve the stripes on the fence.

Below Left - Robbie adds branches onto the bushes.

Below Centre - Henry takes a particular interest in the log cabin.

Below Right - Stacey takes over on the fence stripes.



Below - balls of yarn - photographs - and a box for all the broken felting needles!



Day 5

Yet more detail is added.

It was originally intended that this would be the last day but everyone had got so enthusiastic about all the details that could be added using needle felting that we decided to have an extra day.

So..... yet more needle felting.





Clockwise from Top Left - Shannon finishes off the fence, Debbie tidies the grass, Ruth tidies up the Church, Isma makes some daffodils bloom, Leon makes a pigeon fly through Tarbat House, Sheila??? puts more flowers in the Inn's garden, Cathy adds in some flowering baskets, Dorothy adds some texture to the trees.





*Far Left Top - Hazel works on the fence.
Middle Top - Peter works on the fence.
Right Top - abandoned for the lunch break.
Below - back to work for the final push.*



Day 6

The final day involved more wet felting followed by milling.

The work for this day started with more wet felting to fully felt in all the needle felted detail. Using warm water and bars of soap we gently massaged over the entire surface for about an hour. Then we turned the felt over and did the same treatment on the back.

By lunchtime we were ready for the final stage of milling. This involved hard work rolling the felt in bamboo blinds. We were very grateful to Henry for bringing the Milton Woodlands Stepping Stones Trainees to give us some very welcome muscle power.

This stage involved real teamwork mainly because of the size of the felt. The milling squeezes out much of the soapy water and tightens up all the wool fibres, locking them in place.

By the end of the day we had managed to shrink the felt down from 9.5 metres long to just under 8 metres.



Above - the team massage soapy water into the felt to secure the needle felted detail



Above - Shannon works on the back of the felt



Above - the Stepping Stones team assist Ruth and Peter with more soapy water

Right - more soapy water is massaged onto the reverse side of the felt.

Below - Ruth gives a final rub.





Everyone takes a turn with the hard work of milling the felt in the bamboo mats, turning it over and then milling again. When it came to rollong along the length, we used several mats laid together and teamwork was essential.





The final task was to stretch parts of the felt to smooth out wrinkles and improve the shape before the whole thing was covered with organza ready to be taken to the laundry to have all the soap washed out and get the final shrinking.



Finishing

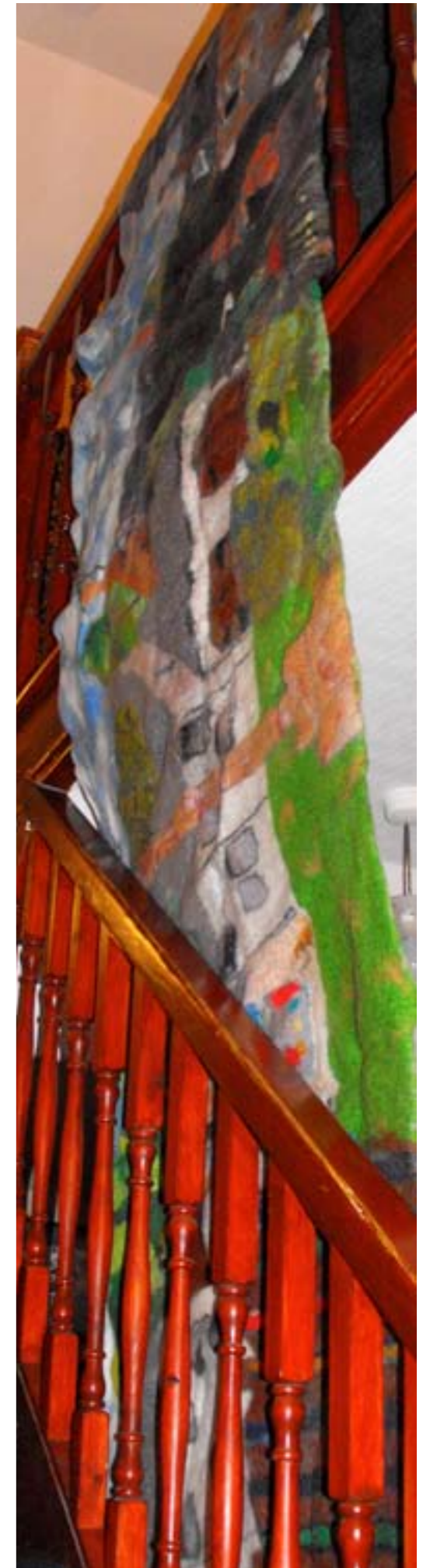
The final stage

After six action-packed days of creative teamwork, the last part involved taking the felt to the laundry to get all the soap washed out of it and to finish the shrinking.

The whole piece was covered with organza, pinned all over with safety pins to keep it in place. This ensured there would be no danger of the felt folding in the washing machine and felting onto itself.

Once washed and dry it had shrunk down to the required 6 metres, but it was still long enough that hanging it up to dry was tricky! The pressing involved several hours work with a hot steam iron during the hottest March day on record!

The last task was to stitch a strip of wide velcro all along the top edge so that it could be hung on the wall.





Front Top Left, clockwise - pressing the felt, laid out outside my studio, the wall where the felt will be hung, stitching the velcro on the back, the finished piece ready for hanging, detail of the velcro being stitched in place.



The finished work - in place

It was just a question of fixing a wooden baton in place, stapling on the prickly side of the velcro and then stretching the felt across the wall. Below you see the KALE chairperson, Ruth pointing it out to anyone who might not have noticed its presence.



