

Soft Rock 5

Project 4

Avoch Friendship Club





Groam House Museum - Rosemarkie



Detailed drawing of the Nigg Stone by George Bain

Introduction

Over several months during 2015 five groups of older adults based on the Black Isle took part in Soft Rock 5, the latest in a series of outreach projects organised by Groam House Museum, Rosemarkie. Working with Inverness-based textile artist Ruth Black, each group learnt the art of felting, and using various techniques completed their own unique wall hanging using the work of George Bain and the imagery found on local Pictish Stones as inspiration. Over the later part of 2015 the five banners were exhibited in various locations locally, finishing their journey on display at Celtic Connections Festival 2016 in Glasgow.

Thanks must go to the group leaders, volunteers and participants whose enthusiasm and commitment made the project such a success, and without whom these beautiful pieces would not exist.

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**LOTTERY FUNDED
MAOINICHTE LEIS
A' CHRANNCHUR**



Wendy Sanders

Groam House Museum
Project Co-ordinator

The fourth wall hanging

This felt panel was made by a team of volunteers from Avoch Friendship Club under the guidance of textile artist Ruth Black. This album shows the various stages that we went through in creating the wall hanging over five action-packed days working in the Parish Church Hall.

The wall hanging design was inspired by the work of George Bain, who in turn was inspired by the complex Pictish and Celtic designs of the early Christian and pre-Christian sculptured stone monuments that abound in the north and east of Scotland. Bain studied the stones and Celtic manuscripts of the same period and worked out methods for constructing Celtic designs in the same style. These methods are explained in his book "Celtic Art - The Methods of Construction".

The following people contributed to the making of this panel:

- Moira Anderson
- Jennifer Barclay
- Ruth Black
- Ishbel Kelly
- Janice Macleman
- Sheena Macleman
- Jacqueline Patience
- Audrey Malpas
- Heather Moore
- Lewie Patience
- Margaret Anne Patience
- Annette B Patience
- Catherine Patience
- Isobel Ross
- Eileen Smillie
- Jennifer Staunton
- Megan Stubbs

Session 1, 11th May 2015

The day began with looking at the felt made by another group so that everyone had an idea of what we were aiming at. The format was to be similar to the previous panels with knotwork around the edges and the group choosing some text and images for the central part. This group decided they wanted to reflect the fishing heritage of the village of Avoch.

Then we had the task of choosing our colours.



Each person had to choose two colours of Merino wool fibres, a dark one and a brighter one that would look good with it.



We started by laying down the darker wool fibres onto a sheet of bubblewrap (bubbles side up).



We made sure that with all the fibres were running in the same direction.



The brighter colours were then laid on top but this time with the fibres all running at right angles to those of the first layer.



We continued until the first layer was completely covered by the second layer.





With two layers of wool fibres in place we could start adding some bling - in the form of glittery Angelina or smooth silk fibres. These fibres were added sparingly and the trapped in place with a very fine web of merino wool fibres.



Next we poured on warm soapy water, being careful to get the edges wet, but keep the floor dry.



With the fibres wet, we laid another sheet of bubblewrap on top and spread the water through the fibres. Then we started rubbing and massaging our felt, working up a lather as our hands worked.



For this stage we only wanted to partially felt the fibres so the rubbing only continued for a few minutes and then the felt / bubblewrap sandwiches were flipped over and the rubbing continued on the back.



After a few more minutes of rubbing the bubblewrap was peeled off and the felt bundled up to squeeze out the water.



With all the pieces of coloured half-felt made we could start the next stage - tracing the designs that would be used for making panels of knotwork.

For this we used spirit marker pens tracing onto a non-woven thin white fabric that is normally used as a stabilizer backing for machine embroidery.



In addition to our knotwork panels, we wanted fish shapes as it had been decided earlier that we wanted to pick up on the fishing heritage of the village.



As the tracings were completed they were laid on top of the smoothed out pieces of damp half-felt. The tracings held in place on the felt because of the moisture, but some people wanted to use pins to keep the patterns in place for cutting.



Some people preferred to stand while they were cutting. Others found they could concentrate better if they were sitting down.



We needed a total of 12 panels - 4 of them were squares, the other 8 were rectangles that were the equivalent of two squares.



It is several decades since commercial fishing boats unloaded their catches in Avoch harbour, but there are still many fishing families living in the village. However, we looked to the earlier times for our imagery and traced out a picture of a Zulu boat. This was then cut out from another piece of half-felt we had made earlier.



We also had a large shoal of fish by the end of the afternoon.



All that remained for the day was to pack everything up, laying our cut-outs carefully in a large box to keep them safe for the next session.



The table was covered first by a sheet of bubblewrap on which we spread out a layer of icewool fabric before starting to lay down tufts of white merino wool.



With the first layer complete we started a second layer with the fibres at right angles to those below.



Jackie took time out to thread sequins onto some fine merino yarn - these would be needed later. The rest of the team continued to lay down the white wool fibres.

Session 2, 13th May 2015

While waiting for everyone to arrive I laid the paper plan on the floor and put the cut-outs from the previous day around the edges. This would not be the final design - just a suggestion to get people thinking as we worked.





With two layers of white wool in place it was time to add some fancy bits - mohair yarns, glitzy fibres, silk and some curly wools would give interesting texture.



We had several strands of yarn threaded with sequins, but these would be added later.

The table was covered with a sheet of organza so the decorative parts would not move about as we poured on soapy water.



Several litres of warm soapy water were poured over the fibres.



Another sheet of bubblewrap was laid on top and we spent a few minutes spreading the water through the fibres until everything was wet.



Once it was all wet we carefully tucked under the fluffy edges so nothing was hanging off the edges of the table.



Then we had to rub all over, some using our hands, others using massage rollers. At this stage we only had to partially felt as we still had to add on our cut-out designs from the previous session.



It was now time to build our design. The first step was to position some of our fish. We wanted them to appear to be swimming through the knotwork making it look like a fishing net.

We went back to the paper plan and discussed the arrangement of the knotwork panels, sliding them about on the plan until we were happy with the layout.



Once the positions were agreed we started transferring them to the felt panel.



We started at the bottom and worked towards the top to ensure that everything fitted in. A little bit of juggling was needed to get a good balance.



When the knotwork was all in place we added the remaining fish, the boat and some of our strands of sequins.



When all the cut-outs were in place we started cutting through the top layer of colour at each intersection to mimic the "over & under" effect of Celtic knotwork.

Happy with our design, we added a little more warm soapy water onto the dry parts, covered the whole with bubblewrap and started rubbing.



And rubbing.....



And more rubbing.....



After about half an hour of rubbing we turned the felt over.



And then we had to give the back of the felt the same treatment. Unlike earlier, this time we wanted the felting process to go all the way making the cut-outs felt onto the background to be one strong piece of fabric.



All that rubbing took its toll - a teabreak was needed!



When we were happy that the piece was fully felted we rolled it up squeezing out the soapy water as we went.



We had added a couple of gallons of water to the felt and this all had to come out. We had bowls to catch the suds but a lot still landed on the floor. However we had towels and mops!

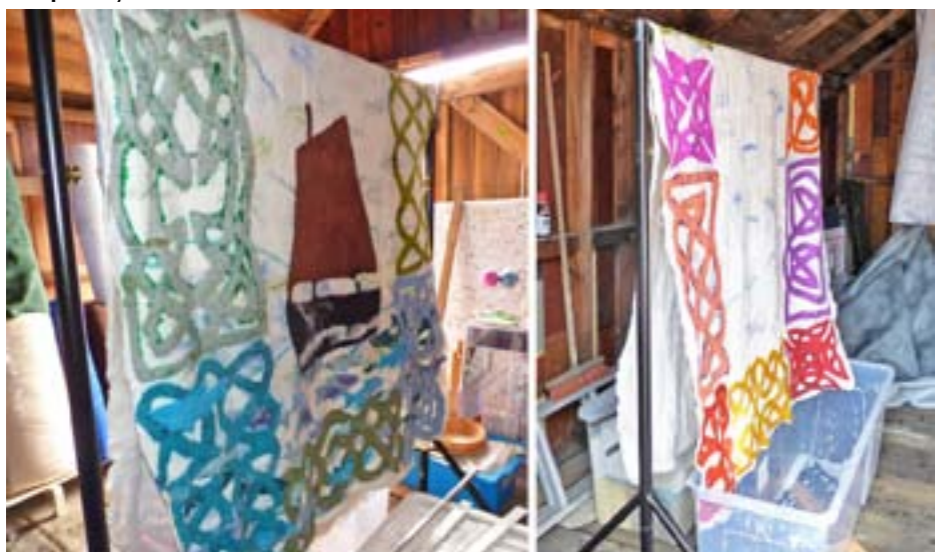




Once squeezed, we had to roll it out and admire our handiwork.



I took the felt away and left it hanging in the garage to drip dry over the weekend.



Session 3, 18th May 2015

The felt had dried out nicely over the weekend with just a little bit of dampness in the corners. In the afternoon it was to be the regular meeting of the Club, and it was agreed that we would carry on working through the meeting inviting any other members to come and participate. We set the table up in the corner of the hall at sitting height, covered it with slabs of expanded polystyrene and spread the felt out on top.



We pinned lengths of ribbon to use as baselines for positioning the text templates. Felting needles were used to push wool fibres through the stencils into the felt below.



There was delight when the first word was completed - not the first of our text, but the word we worked on first. The text chosen for our panel was taken from the poem "Silver Darlings" by Bob Halfin and Hulskramer written in 1970. The poem is about the herring fishing industry of the 19th and early 20th centuries - an industry on which the village of Avoch was founded.



There was limited space so we opted to use the first two and last two lines.

Oh herrings are harvests that fishermen glean,
Where flashes the silver through deep oceans green,....
The wives and the sweethearts are people who know
The price of the silver darlings.

While those at the top end of the table worked on the lettering, those at the bottom started work on adding detail to the knotwork and the fish.



The text continued to grow and there was increased enthusiasm each time we were able to remove a stencil.



In the afternoon other Club members started to arrive and they were keen to see what we were working on. Most were content to watch but a few of them were happy to pick up a felting needle and have a go for a few minutes. Our problem was one of space. The wallhanging panel seemed big when there were six people working on it but as more people crowded around the table it appeared to have shrunk! Those who had been present in the morning were happy to share their new-found skill with others. However, we did go through quite a large number of felting needles as we worked. The dish in the middle of the table was to hold the broken needles.



The fish swimming through the knotwork made it quite difficult to figure out where the overs and unders of the interlace were to go.



Session 4, 20th May 2015

We had been able to leave the table set up from the previous session so this morning we were able to start work right away.



There was only a little bit of wording to complete and this was dealt with quickly. This left space for people to start working on adding the knotwork detail.



This was the part where people really got to grips with how Celtic knotwork is constructed. Following the line around the design was easy enough, getting the overs and unders in order seemed to be more problematic.



At the previous session we did a draw to choose the name and number for the fishing boat. As a retired fisherman, Lewie was given the task of putting the registration number on the sail and the name on the hull.



From time to time we peeled the felt back from the polystyrene to have a look at the back so people could see how successful their needlefelting was.



This is the pile of scrap half-felt left over from our cut-outs on the first day whose fibres we were using to add detail to the knotwork panels.



At the end of the day the bulk of the needlefelting was done and we went home satisfied that the end was in sight.



Session 5, 26th May 2015

We had some needlefelting detail to finish so the table was set up again at sitting height. Before people arrived I did some quick needling of the knotwork intersections so that people could see where the overs and unders would go. This meant more time could be spent needlefelting and less time working out.



Some of the letters were thinner than others so some people spent some time evening them up. This involved standing back to look from further away.



Jackie added in a flock of seagulls around the fishing boat.



After a couple of hours we decided we had all the detail in place and were able to stand back and have a good look before turning the felt over to do some needlefelting from the back.



This stage was necessary to lock the needlefelted fibres in place and it took the rest of the morning to complete this task.

Over lunchtime I dismantled the table and set it up again at standing height. A sheet of bubblewrap was spread over the table.



With the felt in place we were ready to pour on several jugfuls of warm soapy water.



Another sheet of bubblewrap was spread over the wet felt.



Then it was back to rubbing and rubbing..... This proved to be something of a spectator sport!



After 20 minutes of rubbing we removed the bubblewrap and worked directly on the felt before turning it over to work on the front.



A quick look before putting the bubblewrap back in place.





Lots more moving around the table as we rubbed and then the bubblewrap was peeled back for a few minutes of hands-on massaging to ensure there were no loose parts.



Finally we had rubbed enough and sat back for a welcome cuppa.



For the next stage we needed to squeeze the soapy water out of the felt. We started by rolling it up tightly.



Then we started to squeeze out the water. A lot of water landed on the floor rather than in the bucket, but we did have lots of towels to mop up the suds.



We laid some more towels on the table and covered these with some bamboo blinds on which we laid out the felt. Then the felt and bamboo were rolled up like a swiss roll.



We needed teamwork for this stage, rolling the bundle back and forth to a count of 100. Team 1.....



We unrolled and rolled up from the other end and repeated the process with team 2.



I don't have any 8 foot wide bamboo mats so we had to work with two layers - one made up of a 6' and a 2', the second layer was the two 4' mats.



This pair were having a good rest before their team had to start work.



Team 3 put in their hundred rolls, followed by team 4.



This rolling process is called milling and it firmed up the felt, shrinking it each time in the direction of rolling.

To allow us to hang the felt up so we could see it the way it would be displayed, we used safety pins to attach a fabric tube across the top at the back of the felt.



Phones, cameras and tablets appeared as people wanted to photograph the felt before posing for the group photo.





Later that evening.....Finishing

All that remained was for me to take the felt home to rinse out the soap and let the felt dry.

Because of its size, the only way to do this was in the bath, trampling it with my feet.



With all the soap gone, all that remained was to hang the felt out to dry. As it held about 10 litres of water, the felt was far too heavy to hang on a washing line but a free-standing towel rail sufficed. After a couple of days the felt was dry, pressed flat and a strip of velcro sewn onto the back to allow it to be hung up for display.



Groam House Museum - www.groamhouse.org.uk