



# *Soft Rock 5*

*Project 2*

*Resolis Friendship Group*



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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**Wendy Sanders**

Groam House Museum  
Project Co-ordinator



**LOTTERY FUNDED  
MAOINICHTE LEIS  
A' CHRANNCHUR**



## The second wall hanging

This felt panel was made by a team of volunteers from Resolis Friendship Group 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 Resolis Memorial 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.

- Joy Barker
- Alec Beaton
- Ruth Black
- Christine Campbell
- David Dawes
- Lynne Dawes
- Margaret Faulkner
- Ann George
- Clive Howard
- Wendy Sanders
- Eileen Smillie
- Rachel Wood

## Session 1, 12th February 2015

We started off by looking at the wallhanging that had been made by the first group so that everyone had an idea of what we were aiming at. Then we looked at the mock-up of the proposed design. There was going to be plenty of scope for creating variations within the design, so volunteers were asked to give some thought to this as they were working on the next stage. After this it was down to choosing colours.



Each person was asked to choose a strong dark colour for their first layer of fibres.



There was not quite enough room around the table for everyone, so Wendy was relegated to the kitchen. She had assisted with the first wall hanging so she knew what she was doing.



A second layer of fibres was added on top with the fibres running at right angles to those of the first layer. This time, people chose a light, bright colour that would provide contrast with the base layer.



The layers built up quickly and soon we were ready to pour on the warm soapy water necessary for the felting process.



Each piece was approximately 70 x 40 cm and it took about half a litre of water each to make them wet enough. The soap used was bubblebath - easy to mix into the water and provides a good lather. The soap and water lubricate the wool fibres making it easy for them to slide past each other and tangle up.

Once wet, a sheet of bubblewrap was laid on top of each piece and smoothed out to ensure all the fibres were wet.



A splash of soapy water on top of the bubblewrap made it easier to slide our hands over the plastic.



Then it was a question of rubbing - and rubbing - and more rubbing.... until the fibres were sufficiently felted to allow us to handle them as pieces of fabric.



We needed a further four pieces of felt - this time measuring about 35cm square, so four of our volunteers went through to the kitchen to make these. The process was exactly the same - one layer of dark fibres and one layer of bright fibres at right angles, soapy water and lots of rubbing.



While this was going on, the rest of us dismantled and reassembled the table dropping it down to sitting height, necessary for the next stage.

Sitting was necessary for the next stage - I had drawn all the knotwork designs in pencil, but these needed to be gone over with felt pens and then traced onto a special fabric so that they could be used as patterns.





Once all the designs were drawn out, we laid them roughly in position on the table and put the pieces of felt in the middle so we could decide which colours to cut from each pattern.



The patterns had all been traced onto a fabric that was thin, translucent and would stick to the wet pieces of felt while we cut them out. The big scissors were sharper, but we did not enough to go around, the little scissors were better for getting into the sharp corners.



Some found the task easier than others. Christine cleverly put a felt pen mark in each of the bits that was to be cut away - it made it easy to see where one could put the scissors in. By the end of the afternoon - with some help and sustenance in the form of tea and jam tarts; we had all 12 knotwork panels cut out and ready to go.



Once everything was cut out, we laid them down on the paper plan - and of course, changed our minds about what would go where. This was our final choice.



## Session 2, 17th February 2015

This was the day for making the main piece of felt. The table was set up at standing height and covered with a sheet of bubblewrap followed by a sheet of ice wool that would provide strength and integrity to the felt. Then the work began - laying down the wool fibres.



For the first layer, all the fibres were running across the table. In the second layer the fibres ran the length of the piece. Then we patted all over to test for and rectify any thin spots.





To give the felt some interesting texture and avoid a large expanse of white we chose other fibres and yarns to add onto the surface. These included coarser textured wools, silks, mohair, bamboo fibre and some synthetic and metallic fibres. To give an even coverage, everyone moved around the table adding in their own bits. Finally, to ensure everything would work into the felt, we covered these bits with very fine webs of white merino wool fibres.



We poured warm soapy water all over - about 10 litres - and then covered with a sheet of bubblewrap and started rubbing..... and rubbing.



We laid out the cut-outs from the previous session - and then re-arranged them! Then they were transferred to our large felt sheet.



We spent time snipping through the top layers of the coloured felt cut-outs to create the “overs & unders” typical of Celtic knotwork. People used various strategies to keep themselves right - such as laying small pieces of ribbon at each cross-over point.

Then, with everything in place we added more soapy water.



Bubblewrap was repositioned and then serious rubbing began..... and more rubbing..... and more.



Once we were happy that the knotwork pieces were properly felting into the background, we turned the whole felt and bubblewrap sandwich over and repeated the rubbing process on the back, finishing off by removing the bubblewrap and rubbing directly on the felt. After a while we could see some of the coloured fibres coming through on the back - a sure sign that the felting process was working.



We turned the felt over again and did a final rub with no bubblewrap, then we rolled the felt up tightly to squeeze out as much water as possible.



Once we had squeezed out the water, we laid out the felt again and we could see the overs and unders - all ready for the next stage.



## Session 3, 19th February 2015

The main focus for this day was creating the text for the central section. The name "Resolis" means a sunny slope or incline and the group wanted a phrase that referred to the sun. The chosen text was "Like the sun, let your warmth embrace everyone. Like the moon, let your anger appear slowly." We decided that the space above and below the text would be best filled with two Pictish symbols - one a sun disc (or spoked wheel), the other a crescent & V-rod to represent the moon.



The first step was to make two pieces of felt for these two symbols and then squeeze out the excess soapy water.



The rest of the team settled down to needlefelting, starting with the lettering for the text. This was done through clear plastic stencils with ribbons pinned across to keep the text straight.



As we worked, the collection of broken needles grew steadily! Tea and cake helped to keep us going!



With the lettering complete we turned our attention to the knotwork panels and started needlefelting the darker borders of the lines to emphasise the overs & unders.



This was the day for the group's regular monthly meeting so at lunchtime we had to move everything through to the large hall. The felt had to be rolled up and the large felting table dismantled. Then it was all set up again and the other members of the group were invited to come and see what we were up to. Some were content to watch, others felt inspired to join in until the afternoon speaker arrived. The core team kept on needlefelting through the afternoon.





I had prepared some paper cut-outs for our two Pictish symbols and at the end of the day we cleared the table and put them in position to see how it would look. They needed to be made a bit smaller - an easy task back at the studio where I could simply reduce them in size before cutting out the felt pieces with my laser cutter.



## Session 4, 24th February 2015

To fill our spaces above and below the text, we had chosen two Pictish symbols. To depict the sun, we chose the sun disc or spoked wheel symbol from the Ardjackie stone which now sits outside Tain Museum.



As we were also taking inspiration from George Bain's work, we decided to surround the disc with a knotwork border from his book. Here Bain explains why an odd number of repeats will give a single line for this particular design.



To represent the moon, we chose the Crescent & V-rod symbol from the Rosemarkie Stone in Groam House Museum.



My granddaughter, Rachel, was with us on work experience and her first task was to snip away the bits from the design that had been missed by the laser cutter.



This then had to be needlefelted in place. As the design was rather intricate, we decided to create the detail by adding wool rovings to the centre of the lines rather than the edges.





The lines for the sun disc were a bit broader, so they got the normal treatment of emphasising the edges to create the overs & unders.



The whole day was spent adding in the detail using needlefelting - a time consuming process made more enjoyable by the companionship of working as a group.



Although traces of the darker borders and cross-overs were there from the wet felting process, needlefelting really transformed the appearance and it was well worth all the effort that the team put in.



It required concentration and we went through a lot of felting needles, but by the end of the day we were almost done. From time to time we took a quick peek at the back just to check that the needling was adequate.



We ended the day with only two of the knotwork panels still to finish.





Bright sunshine was shining through the windows, warming the room and creating strong shadows. We were happy with our efforts.



## Session 5, 26th February 2015

The final push!



I had suggested to people that they arrived a little late as there was just the top corner needing the detail added - a one-person job. It was quickly finished and we were ready to do a general all-over stabbing with the felting needles.



A lot of chatting as we worked - for this stage there was no need to concentrate as it was just a question of going over everything to be sure it was fully secured. We were helped on our way with another lovely cake courtesy of Clive.



Every so often we sneaked a peek at the back to check that we were stabbing deep enough.





Then it was time to turn it over and work from the back - again a process that didn't require much concentration.



We stabbed happily for the rest of the morning - and then it was lunchtime. This time we had delicious stilton & broccoli soup provided by Lynne and David. Once this was done we cleared the table, raised the trestles to standing height and got set up for the final stage.



We poured more hot soapy water onto the felt, covered it with bubblewrap and then started rubbing.



Every few minutes we moved round the table to ensure even coverage. We finished with a few minutes rubbing without any bubblewrap.



After about 30 minutes of rubbing, we turned the felt over, adjusted the bubblewrap and rubbed some more.



And some more.....





A final rub without the bubblewrap ensured that everything was fully felted in place.

The next stage was the milling. This involved team work and muscle power.



The felt was rolled up in a large bamboo blind. Lynne and I did the first stint - a hundred rolls back and forth counting out loud as we rolled to keep the rhythm and show others how it should be done.

The towels soak up the water that is coming out during the rolling process.

Then the felt was unrolled and re-rolled ready for the next team. The felt shrinks as the soapy water gets squeezed out, and it always shrinks in the direction of rolling.

Team 2 worked from the other end of the table.



Then team 3.....



..... and team 4.



To ensure the felt would shrink evenly, this process had to be repeated but this time, rolling from side to side. This takes rather more team work.....



The rolling process took about an hour, by which time the felt had shrunk about 12cm across the width and 20cm in length.

We pinned a tube of fabric onto the back as a temporary measure, just so that we could hang the felt up.





Cameras, phones, tablets - everyone wanted a record of their work! The clothes rail is not quite high enough to display it properly, but Wendy and David held it a little higher while each person got a good shot.

Then I put my camera on the tripod and set the self-timer for the group photo. Didn't we do well?!!



## Finishing the felt - later that night!

For Resolis Friendship Group, the work was done, but there was still a lot of soapy water trapped in the felt.

Because of the size, it is impossible to deal with that in an ordinary sink, so this task was something I did at home - in the bath. I used a large plastic box to transport it before transferring to the bath.

It took several rinses - treading the felt with my feet was the easiest way to move it about to assist with removing the soap. There were a few loose fibres coming off in the bath, which I caught with a sieve rather than letting them block up the drain.

By the time I was done, the felt was much firmer and the water tended to bounce off it rather than soak in immediately. The bathroom was quite steamy by this time, and the lens of the camera kept misting over before I could get a satisfactory photograph of the water droplets!

Then, it was just a question of hanging it up to dry - a process which took about three days, partly because of the cold weather.







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