



Soft Rock 5

*Five Felt Wall Hangings
made by
community groups on
the Black Isle*



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 inspired by the work of George Bain and the imagery found on local Pictish Stones. 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.

The project was made possible by funding from Heritage Lottery, Museums Galleries Scotland and the Highland Council



**LOTTERY FUNDED
MAOINICHTE LEIS
A' CHRANNCHUR**



Wendy Sanders

Groam House Museum
Project Co-ordinator

Five felt wall hangings

I was delighted to be invited to lead groups of volunteers in this project to create felt panels inspired by the Pictish stones of the area and the work of George Bain - combining my favourite community art medium with my specialist design field.

Feltmaking is ideal for bringing together people with different levels of ability so they can all fully participate in creative activity. For these panels we combined several different feltmaking techniques to achieve the finished pieces.

Each panel employed the same sequence of processes and followed a similar layout, but each group gave their own input to the design resulting in five panels which work well together but are all highly individual and reflect the places where each one was made and the interests of those who made them.

Our volunteers were mostly older adults but on several occasions we were joined by younger members of the community. Everyone participated not just in the practical work but also in the design process, the refreshments and the conversation - a good time was had by all.

In addition to the help of each group of volunteers, I was assisted throughout each project by Wendy Sanders, the project co-ordinator and by my friend and fellow feltmaker Eileen Smillie. I am grateful to both for their effort, energy and enthusiasm.

Ruth Black

www.ruth-black.co.uk

Each group worked on their panel for 5 days over a two to four week period. This book shows the processes we used in sequence.

Each felt was made on a height-adjustable table measuring 120 x 240cm. Felt shrinks as an essential part of the felting process so the finished pieces each measure approximately 100 x 200cm.

People dropped in and out for each project, some attending every session, others only able to help for a short time. People gave of their precious time and came out in all weathers to assist. Some were able to help with more than one project.

These are lists of the participants for each group with the group photos taken at the end of each project. Not everyone was able to be present for these final photographs.

Groam House Museum Volunteers Group

January 2015

Seaforth Lodge, Fortrose

Susan Bound, Liz Broxton, Hannah Cameron, Rita Fabling, Jean Hogben, Pat Kemsley, Maureen Kitchingham, Carola Martin-Smith, Donald Matheson, Val Southern, Megan Stubbs, Kimberley Taylor, Tricia Tickner, Evelyn Topp, Su Wompra



Resolis Friendship Group

February 2015

Resolis Memorial Village Hall

Joy Barker, Alec Beaton, Christine Campbell, David Dawes, Lynne Dawes, Margaret Faulkner, Ann George, Clive Howard, Rachel Wood



Culbokie Friendship Group

April 2015

Culbokie Church Centre

Janet Bird, Alli Bisset, Barbara Crocker, Mike Crocker, Ann George, Sheila H Graham, Norma Grant, Jean Hackett, Rosalind MacNaughton, Margaret Magson, Miriam Moore, Carolyn Morrison, Andrea Rodway, Maureen Rose, Alastair Rose, Judith Rose, Joshua Rose, Elaine Slinn, Claire Stringer, Clare Tickner, Jacqueline Torode



Avoch Friendship Club

May 2015

Parish Church Hall, Avoch

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



Muir of Ord Art Group

June 2015

Muir of Ord

Hannah Anderson, Erica Atkinson, Victor Atkinson, Gordon Davis, Ian Dempster, Kathryn Nuttal Halliwell, Eleanor Innes, Alex Johannesen, Helen Leslie, Neil McKay, Annie MacLean, Tracy Shaw, Natalie Shearer, Morven Skinner, Moira Torrie, Stewart Torrie, Tracy Underwood, Marion Wharram



Day 1 - Design and Preparation

The first day for each group started with looking at the general design for the wall hangings and working out what would go into the central section.

With ideas buzzing about the designs, everyone then chose some colours of Merino wool fibres. These would be used to make pieces of coloured half-felt from which the Celtic knotwork designs would be cut.

Each person had to choose two colours, one dark shade and the other brighter or lighter. Some opted for toning shades, others for complementary colours.

With colours selected each person covered a sheet of bubblewrap with a layer of the darker colour of fibres.



Groam House Volunteers



*Resolis
Friendship
Group*



The first group - volunteers from Groam House Museum - had the most difficult task as they had only the paper plan to work from. All subsequent groups could see what the previous group had done.





***Culbokie
Friendship Group***



Avoch Friendship Club



Muir of Ord Art Group



People continued to lay down their fibres until they had good, even coverage and then they started with their second colour, this time adding the fibres so they laid at right angles to those of the first layer.

When they had completed two layers they tested for evenness with their fingertips - eyes closed as it is much easier to get a true indication of thickness using just feel.

Then it was time to add some decorative fibres. The choice was metallics, silks, synthetics, other textured wools and mohair. As most of these fibres will not felt in their own right, they had to be covered with a very fine layer of merino wool so they would be trapped in place.

The museum volunteers were the first group to work on this project. Although I had prepared some drawings of Celtic knotwork panels, we needed more so one person volunteered to work from George Bain's book to create some more designs.





With all the fibres in place, the next step was to pour on warm soapy water then cover with bubblewrap. The soap used was bubblebath - smells nice and is easily dissolved in the warm water. A little more water was splashed on top of the bubblewrap making it easier to slide our hands over the plastic.

Water was spread through the fibres by pressing on the bubblewrap and then there was several minutes of rubbing before turning over the bubblewrap & felt sandwiches and repeating the rubbing on the back.

At this stage we were not really felting the fibres, just rubbing them enough to let them hold together so we could cut out our knotwork shapes. This is known as half-felt or pre-felt.

As people were working at different rates, we had to be careful with the water, not letting it run into others' dry fibres. There was a tendency either to over-wet the fibres so a lot of the water landed on the floor (I always take a large bagful of towels!) or not to pour on enough so extra had to be added.

After several minutes of rubbing the bubblewraps were removed, the half-felts folded up and squeezed out. For each group, the first person to reach this stage was apprehensive about the wringing but pleasantly surprised to find that it all held together and they had a piece of fabric.





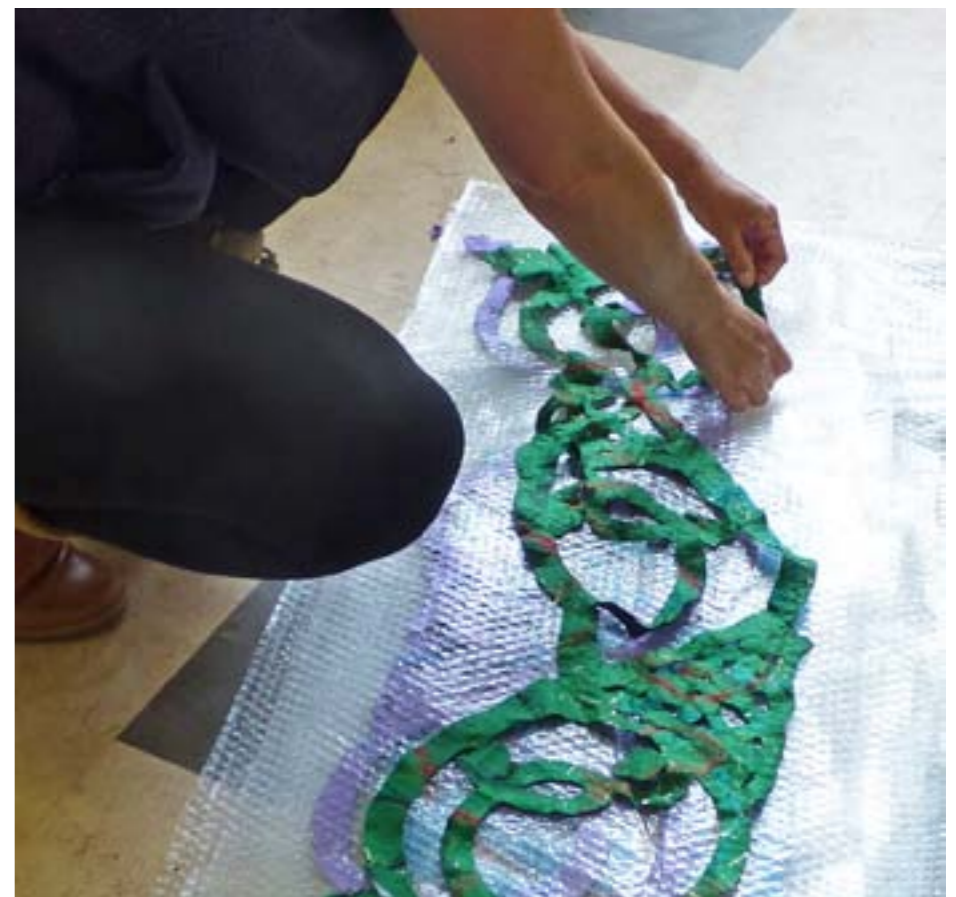
Drawings of knotwork panels were traced onto a special translucent, non-woven fabric that could be used as cutting patterns on the wet half-felt. Spirit based marker pens were used so the ink wouldn't run when it got wet. In addition to the knotwork panels there were some other details for the designs specific to each place.

These tracings were then pressed onto the damp felts - they stayed in place because they were wet, but some people found that it was better to have the added benefit of pins.

Then started the cutting out. It was easy enough to cut around the outside, but getting at some small pieces that needed to be cut from the centre proved rather trickier. We found that it helped to avoid confusion if small marks were made in each section that had to be cut away.

This was quite time consuming but each group had a pile of cut-outs by the end of the day, all ready for the next stage. As these pieces were quite fragile, they were all laid on sheets of bubblewrap to provide a bit of stability. Some people were concerned that their cutting was rather untidy but I reassured them that it would all turn out okay as the project progressed. For those groups who got the cutting done quickly enough we were able to lay out the cut-outs on the paper plan and shuffle them around to get the best layout so that we were ready for the next day.





Day 2 - Making the background

This day was all about making the main piece of felt and adding the knotwork cut-outs and other design features.

The process for making the background felt was much the same as for the cut-outs - two layers of white merino wool fibres at right angles to each other with some additional decorative fibres on top. We worked on a table measuring 120 x 240 cm. A sheet of bubblewrap was laid out and covered with a sheet of ice wool which is an open mesh knitted fabric with lots of fluffy wool fibres. This provides an extra layer and support for the felt and ensured there would be no thin patches that might compromise the integrity of felt.

As we laid out the fibres we all moved around the table which ensured a more even spread of the fibres. Once the two layers of white fibres were in place we added some subtle, decorative fibres such as tussah silk, bamboo, metallics, mohair yarns and coarser wools. Fine webs of merino wool were used to trap these decorative fibres in place. The idea was to create a background that was reminiscent of the Celtic manuscripts that inspired George Bain.

When everything was in place we added about 10 litres of warm soapy water, covered with bubblewrap and pressed and rubbed until the fibres were fully wetted and flattened.





Making the background felts took all morning for each group. In the afternoon we started building up the designs. We used a technique known as inlay felting laying down our cut-outs of half-felt onto our background half-felt and merging the two together.

To ensure that everything fitted, we started at one end and added the pieces in order. Sometimes we had to do a little bit of jiggling to make it all fit but the calculations had been carefully worked out and it was just a question of careful positioning.

When the knotwork cut-outs were in place we used sharp scissors to snip through the top colour of each cut-out at the intersections. This was to create the “over & under” effect that is typical of Celtic knotwork.

After the snipping we added a bit more soapy water and covered the felt with bubblewrap, then rubbed..... and rubbed..... and rubbed some more.

Unlike our earlier efforts, this time we were taking the felting the full way so a lot of rubbing was needed. After about 30 minutes of rubbing we turned the felt over - a team effort was needed as the wet felt was very heavy.

The rubbing was then repeated on the back and after a while we could see the knotwork designs showing on the back, a sure sign that the felting process had worked.

All that remained was to squeeze out as much of the water as we could by rolling up the felt and wringing it out. The bag of towels I had brought were needed for this as more water seemed to land on the floor than in the bowls and buckets.





Day 3 - Adding text and details

The centre part of each panel was to contain some text with each group choosing their own words. The museum volunteers group elected to use one of the traditional Celtic blessings that George Bain used in his book. Two groups made up rhymes relevant to their location, one group chose to use some biblical text and another chose part of a poem that was relevant to their village's heritage.

The method we used to add the text was needle felting, a dry felting process which uses sharp barbed needles to tangle the fibres. Expanded polystyrene sheets were laid on the table under the felt to act as a support for the needle felting. I had prepared translucent vinyl stencils for the words and these were laid out on our felt with ribbons pinned as base guidelines for the text. Fibres were then pushed through to build up each letter.

Groam House Volunteers and Resolis Friendship Group did their felts in the depths of winter and as a consequence, they were doing this on damp felt as it had not been possible to dry it out between sessions. This made the process a bit more difficult and unpleasant but they coped well and achieved just as good results as the other groups.

The needles break easily. In some of the photographs you will see a bowl or saucer with the pile of broken needles building up. These sessions were particularly sociable, helped along with teabreaks and the odd visitor or two (or sometimes the whole club had its regular meeting) coming in to see the work progressing.

With the text complete, work started on emphasising the detail of the knotwork panels and any other parts of the design where additional detail was needed. For this we used some of the left-over scraps of half-felt that would otherwise have gone to waste.





Day 4 - More Needlefelting

Part of the aim of this project was to give people a better understanding of Celtic knotwork. George Bain spent many years studying Pictish stones, Celtic manuscripts and metalwork of the period before publishing his book. He advocated that people should, in the first instance, copy these ancient designs before attempting to create their own as he felt this helped to achieve a good understanding of the art form.

Most of this fourth day was spent working on the panels of knotwork around the sides of our felts. Each wide line of the knot had to be edged with more of the darker colour that was showing from underneath. What required a bit more attention was adding in these border lines at each intersection to create the impression of one part of the line going over or under another part.

People had different strategies for getting this right - some laid bits of fluff in place, others pinned bits of ribbon as markers, some just kept asking me where to go next and others decided that the odd "deliberate" mistake wouldn't matter! I think it is fair to say that everyone finished with a bit more understanding of the designs than when they started.

There were also other aspects of each design that needed attention. Some were Pictish symbols or Celtic Zoomorphics. Others were of a more modern era - shoals of fish and a fishing boat for the Avoch panel, traditional "black cattle" and whisky stills at Muir of Ord.

From time to time we would peel the felt back from the polystyrene to check that the penetration of the fibres was sufficient.





Day 5 - The Final Push

The morning of the last day was spent finishing off all the needlefelting, checking the knotwork lines, making sure all the lettering was even and secure and adding any finishing touches that were needed.

This was one of those tasks that could have gone on forever - we kept seeing more bits that could be tidied or improved, a little bit more fibre here and there, tidying a line, touching up a claw, putting a little swirl of yarn to fill in a blank space..... I had to call a halt.

With all the detail complete, the felt was turned over and we spent about 30 minutes needling from the back. This helped to secure all the needlefelted fibres.

Then it was time to stand back and admire our handiwork for a few minutes before taking a lunchbreak and preparing for the afternoon's hard work.





All the needlefelted additions needed to be further secured by giving a final wet felt. This was necessary to ensure that nothing would come loose with the inevitable handling that may happen when the wallhangings are on public display.

The felt was spread on top of a sheet of bubblewrap, several litres of warm soapy water was poured on, then covered with another sheet of bubblewrap. This was followed by some 20 minutes of rubbing before the bubblewrap was removed and then we did a few more minutes of rubbing directly onto the felt. This allowed us to feel if there were any parts not fully secured. We turned the felt over and repeated the process.

Then the really hard work began! Milling is a process that involves rolling the felt in large bamboo mats. It squeezes out much of the water and tightens the fibres against each other both shrinking and strengthening the felt. This rolling required teamwork because of the size of the felt. We had to roll the felt back and forth to a count of 100 - and this had to be done four times, first from one end, then the other, followed by side to side. Sometimes the roll came unravelled and the counting had to stop while the felt was re-rolled.





Each group pinned a strip of fabric across the top of the back so we could display the felt on a clothes rail I had taken along for the purpose.

Everyone was delighted with the results and many people brought out their cameras, smart phones and tablets before we posed for the group photos.

At this stage the felts were still damp and a lot of soap was trapped amongst the fibres. All this soap had to be rinsed out but because of the size, I had to take them home and rinse in the bath. It took four bathfuls of hot water before the water was running clear. Each time I trampled up and down on the felt with bare feet to help with the rinsing and the wringing. Satisfied there was no more soap, I squeezed out as much water as I could and left them hanging over a clothes horse in the bath to drip dry.

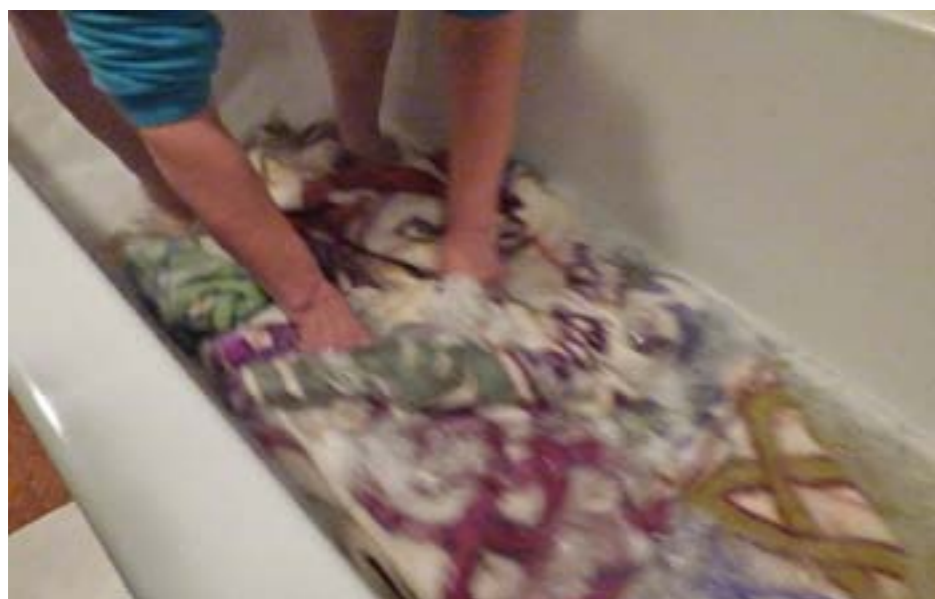
A few little details were added to some of the wallhangings - the odd bead and sequin to add a little bit of interest, but you have to look hard to see them.

When fully dry I pressed them with a hot steam iron and then hand-sewed a fabric strip along the back of both top and bottom edges. The bottom strip was to hold a heavy steel bar to weight the wallhanging. The top strip was for the bar to allow the panel to be hung.

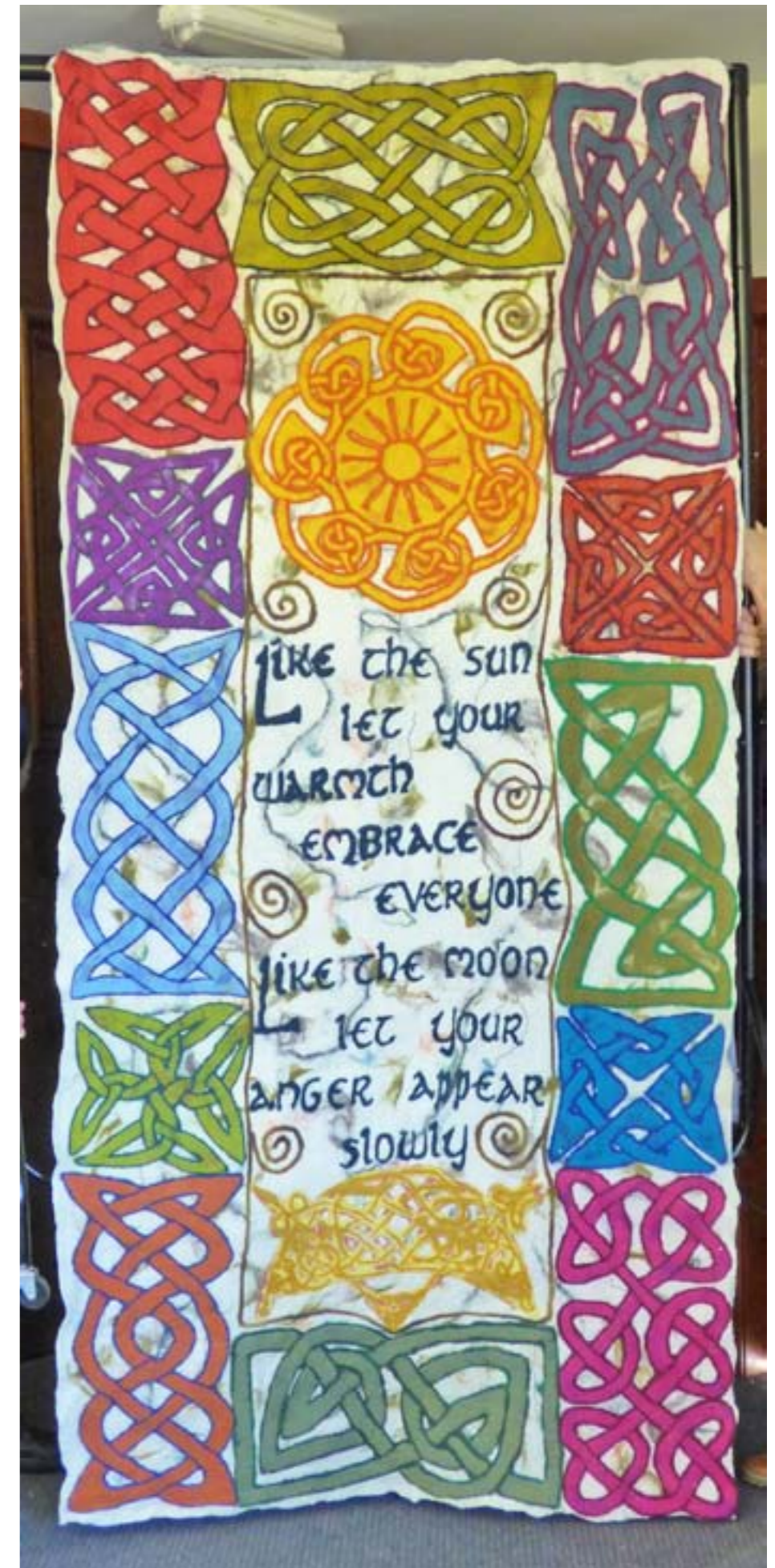
All finished, and on display! We hope you enjoy looking at them as much as we have enjoyed creating them.

The full stories of how each felt wallhanging was made can be read on my blog.

<http://embroiderybyruth.blogspot.co.uk/2015/01/feltmaking-inspired-by-work-of-george.html>



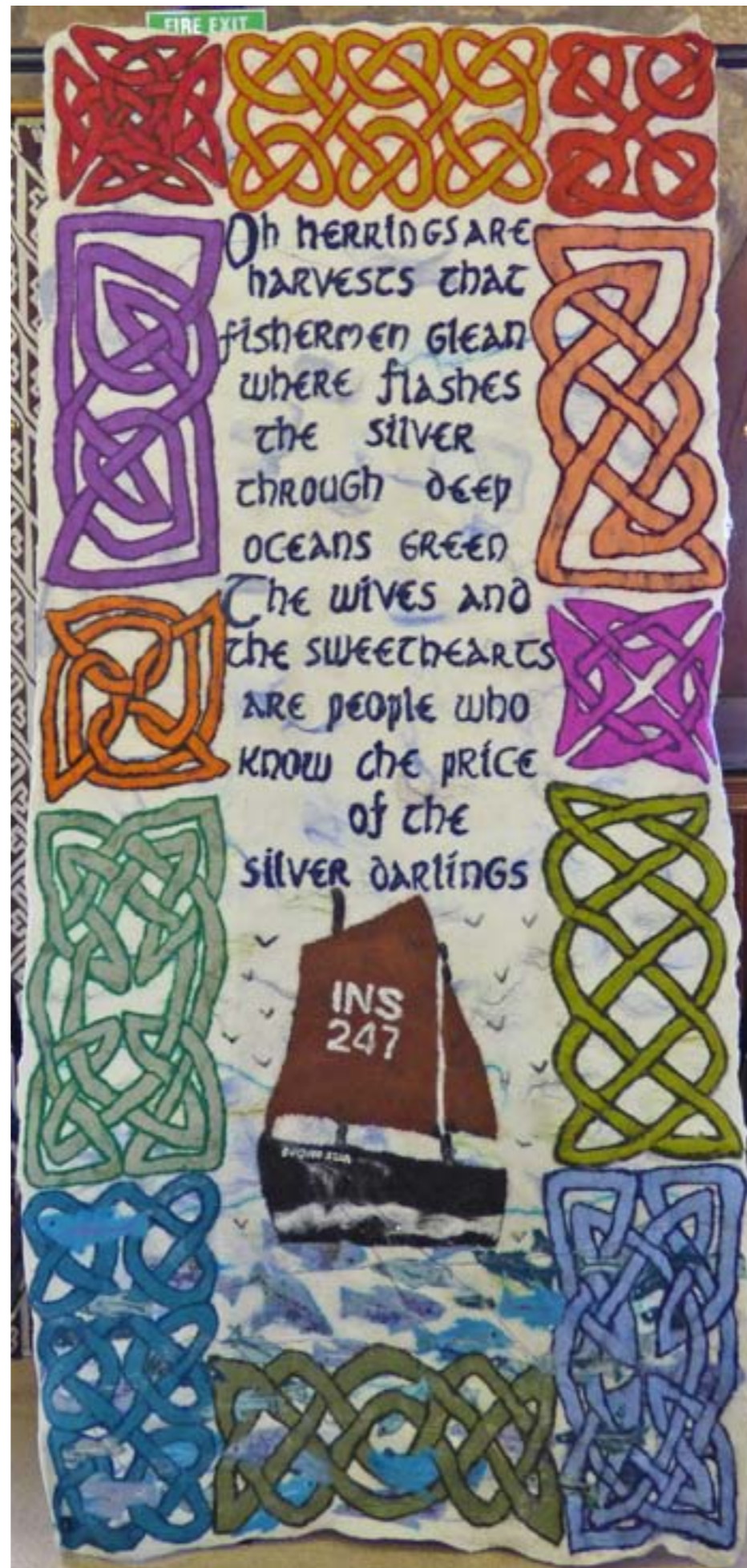
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Groam House Museum - www.groamhouse.org.uk