Panel 45 THE BORDER REIVERS AND KINMONT WILLIE 1593

16th June 2012 was a very, very wet day. Roads were like rivers, sometimes with the contents of the river bed flowing down them too. Driving precariously home from the Borders Book Festival with our precious panel in the back of the car, Veronica and Margaret Shaw, a farmer’s wife, hoped that calling in the help of a tractor wouldn’t be necessary. Surviving these trials, we now had a variation on the problem which rulers of Scotland and England had wrestled with for hundreds of years – what were we going to do about the Border Reivers?

When the tapestry was first suggested, Sally and Veronica thought the village should apply for a panel. Likely volunteers were recruited and over time Smailholm Stitchers (11 women and one man) was formed. Most people knew most people in the group. Two live in Kelso, one in Gordon, six within 100 yard radius of village centre, two about half a mile away at the west end, one a couple of miles away. While everyone had experience in various forms of sewing (six had made their own wedding dresses) only two were highly skilled in embroidery . Fortunately for those of us for whom split stitch was an alien concept, they generously shared their time, skills and advice on use of stitches, though when they weren’t handy, YouTube was also useful.

Roles evolved - Fiona and Margaret Shaw were clearly our lead stitchers, Robyn our artistic adviser and Veronica was project manager. Ad hoc mini-meetings were frequent, but as a group we met monthly at 8pm on a Monday, hence the time on our clock tag, and the initials of our twelve participants round the clock face, a contrast to our less subtle tag, the iconic Smailholm Tower. We used a large free standing frame, each stitching in our own homes, so meetings were a delight as the updated panel was unveiled. We ate a lot of cake.

Margaret Shaw stitched first, and by our second meeting on 11th July we had beautiful Border fields. By 1st August we had Fiona’s amazing livestock. This was such a great boost, most of us felt very inadequate embroiderers but we were beginning to see our place in creating something beautiful . Catherine and Veronica moved on with the gauntlets, Avril did the reivers’ jacks, Sally and Fiona did their helmets, Fiona and Margaret Shaw did the beards, Derrick did Kinmont Willie’s jack and Robyn his face, hair and the first chunk of horses’ manes, Susan did Hermitage Castle, Denise (herself an Armstrong, from a Hawick family) did Carlisle Castle, Margaret Skea did Gilnockie Tower, and Isabel did the words and borders. We all did extra bits as the panel moved around and the opportunity arose.

We knew little about the Border Reivers, but research was easy and fascinating. Alistair Moffat has very helpfully written a fantastic book about them. Unlike some panels, this one came without many blank spaces to fill, so our job was to develop what was there.

We avoided symmetry. Reivers didn’t have uniforms, so didn’t need to be the same. The tower on the right, a stylised Hermitage Castle, described by Eric Robson as “Sod off, in stone”, had to be its authentic, intimidating dark grey. For the other tower, Gilnockie, home of the Armstrongs near Langholm, we used artistic licence with the colour for contrast.

The Reivers’ horses on Andrew’s drawing had no manes so Robyn, the horsewoman and artist in our group, came up with a beautiful design of windswept, raindrop scattered manes, to reflect these tough little ponies’ journeys across the Borders in inhospitable winter weather. Andrew approved, and in his studio allowed Robyn to add her design straight to the linen.

Willie Armstrong’s hair and beard reflect his age – mid-50s was elderly for a Reiver (legend has it that he died in his bed, around the age of 70). That he is “wearing a Pringle sweater”, as Dorie Wilkie observed, was not by design but it seemed very appropriate and the first of many coincidences. Sally is the daughter of a former Managing Director of Pringle; the Pringles were the reivers who lived in Smailholm Tower; and Derrick, who stitched the jack, spent a lifetime working in knitting yarn production in Yorkshire.

In August 2012 Neil Armstrong, the first man on the moon, died, surely the most memorable descendant of the Armstrongs of Gilnockie. He had visited the tower and received the freedom of the Langholm. So Fiona stitched a stormy winter’s night moon, such as the Reivers might have seen on their raids.

Archbishop Gavin Dunbar of Glasgow’s 1525 “The Great Monition of Cursing Against the Border Reivers”, in wonderful 16th century Scots’ , was read from every pulpit in the land. It was far too good to ignore. ***“I CURSE thair heid and all the haris of their heid”*** he said, and much, much more. Do read the whole damning text, readily available on the internet.And we had to include the Reiver words now common in our language – bereaved and blackmail. We loved Andrew’s suggestion that we weave them into the landscape, as the Reivers wove these nefarious activities into their journeys across the marches.

A quote from “The Ballad of Kinmont Willie” was also Andrew’s suggestion. From this romanticised version of events by Walter Scott we chose “My hands are tied but my tongue is free, and who will dare this deed avow?”. Scott spent much of his childhood at Sandyknowe Farm, by Smailholm Tower, and some of his inspiration is known to stem from those days.

The Debatable Land, The Scots Dyke, and Berwick-upon-Tweed came on the linen and we continued the west to east theme as we filled the blanks. Liddesdale and Teviotdale were lawless Reiver territory, the Cheviots added hills to the dales. Andrew supported our very partisan suggestion that we put “Smailholm” in the middle – we have the best preserved Reiver tower, Historic Scotland should be proud of us!

We loved our panel, so appropriate for us. We learned a lot, about far more than stitching. Some of us volunteered to trace panels at the Hub, where we spent many happy days, made new, very talented friends, and raided the wool boxes! We went on a trip to the Prestonpans Tapestry, and had fun with our panel and a horse at Smailholm Tower for a photoshoot with Jackie Kemp and a photographer from The Herald. We enjoyed a day at “The Blether”. But best of all, we got on well, relationships were formed or renewed, old hobbies were revived, the spirit of co-operation and sharing was always to the fore . Although we are no longer a group in practical terms, there is no escape, we are bound together forever in the legacy of The Great Tapestry of Scotland.

We also stitched the Invention of the Modern Kilt (Panel 59), and you can find more information about our group in that section.