Uncoverings 1998

Volume 19 of
the Research Papers of
the American Quilt Study Group

Edited by Virginia Gunn

The Quilt Designers of North East England

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For a period from the late-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, a quilting trade, apparently unique for its time, flourished in the North East of England. A small group of individuals, most trained by apprenticeship, set up business, drawing designs for quilting onto quilt tops. The quilt tops were either created by the designers, or produced by other quiltmakers of the region and then sent to the designers for quilting designs to be marked out. The majority of the tops were wholecloth ones but the designers also seamed "strippy" (Bars) and pieced tops to which quilting designs were added. They drew the designs by hand using a combination of outline pattern templates and freehand drawing. Customers added batting and backing to the tops, then quilted them. This paper describes how the trade operated, the quilts it produced, and the lifestyle and influence of one of the chief (and now most famous) practitioners, Elizabeth Sanderson.

For a period spanning the late-nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century, a quilting trade, apparently unique for its time, flourished in the valleys of Weardale and Allendale, in the North Pennine Dales of North East England. A small group of individuals established a "cottage industry" working as quilt designers or quilt "stampers" (the colloquial term), marking out designs for quilting onto quilt tops.[1] The quilt tops were either created by the designers, or produced by other quiltmakers of the region, then sent to the designers for marking. The majority of the tops marked with quilting designs were wholecloth ones, but the designers also seamed "strippy" (Bars) and pieced tops to which quilting designs were added. The

designs were drawn by hand with blue-coloured pencil using a combination of outline pattern templates and freehand drawing. The ready marked tops were commissioned or purchased by customers who added batting and backing to complete the quilts (which are referred to throughout this paper as "designed quilts").

The establishment of the quilt design trade has been attributed to a local draper, George Gardiner.[2] His shop in the village of Allenheads is thought to be where the trade began and where he trained apprentices. His known apprentices were all young girls or young women of whom Elizabeth Sanderson became the best-known and longest-established practitioner.

These quilt designers became very skilled and their style of pattern drafting shows a quality developed from training and practice. Their designs are elaborate but conform to identifiable lay-out plans and use a small but characteristic library of template patterns and fillers. Whether drawn on wholecloth, strippy, or pieced tops, the designs are stylistically unique and can therefore be traced and identified on quilts now dispersed around the world. (For a detailed description of this style, see the section on Characteristics below.)

Practitioners of the trade were apparently confined to the two dales of Allendale and Weardale, but customers came from a wider area, though still largely from North East England. Inexpensive and apparently well-known, the service was widely used both by individual quilters and by quilting groups because it provided a ready alternative for anyone unwilling to tackle that accepted difficulty in quiltmaking–marking out a quilting design of clarity and quality. Literally thousands of quilt tops were marked; hundreds still survive.

The quilts produced in this way from this region are rarely signed or dated but their special characteristics make them, for the most part, identifiable. The blue pencil marks are often still visible, the nature of the patterns and their disposition give a stylistically distinctive identification "mark," and the characteristic use of particular fabrics together with cotton batting are all hallmarks of these designed quilts. The purpose of this paper is to describe in detail how this trade operated, the characteristics of the quilts it produced, and the lifestyle and influence of one of the chief (and now most famous) designers, Elizabeth Sanderson.

The Place: Locality, Industry, and the Quiltmaking Tradition

Locality and Industry

Situated at the northerly end of the Pennine Hills in North East England, only a few miles of barren moorland divide Allendale and Weardale–the upper valleys of the Rivers Allen and Wear respectively (see figure 1). Though remote from metropolitan influence, these were not backward areas but had good communications, by road and later rail, with the urban centres of the region, in particular Newcastle upon Tyne.

For several hundred years prior to the twentieth century, the two dales had been economically important for the extraction of minerals, particularly lead. In the first part of the nineteenth century, the well-established lead-mining industry of the dales prospered in the wake of the Industrial Revolution. For much of the nineteenth century, a lively and relatively prosperous community, based on mineral extraction and hill farming, survived in the two dales. As lead mining expanded so too did the population; the 1861 census records 6,400 residents in Allendale, most of them born within the dale. Communities were therefore close–a network of interwoven family relationships (indicated by the commonality of certain surnames, including Sanderson) with shared experience and social activity. The consequent social and cultural practices were long-established and built upon the traditions of the district. Quiltmaking was just one such tradition; music-making was another.[3]

Prosperity did not, however, last. Like other rural areas of Britain, the dales suffered a level of rural depopulation from the mid-nineteenth century onwards as workers were drawn, or pushed, to the rapidly developing industrial areas of North East England, or even further afield. One celebrated incident of industrial strife in Allendale in 1849 led to sixty people emigrating to Galena, Illinois, where their lead-mining skills were presumably in demand.[4]

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, the lead-mining industry was hit by a severe slump because of a drop in the price of lead. It began in 1878 and reached a record low in 1892. The sudden collapse of mining activity led to mass migration from the dales as families left in search of work.

Quiltmaking in the Dales

Quiltmaking was already an established vernacular craft in the dales in the early nineteenth century though surviving quilts from this period are rare.[5] The dales tradition had developed from a wider British tradition of "country" quiltmaking which laid emphasis on the stitchery of quilting. While intricate patchwork and formal broderie perse appliqué became part of a genteel English lady's stitching repertoire, quilting wholecloth, strippy, and simpler patch-

Figure 1. Location of Allendale and Weardale in North East England.

work and appliquéd quilts was common practice in certain rural parts of Britain in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and part of rural folk lore.[6]

Quiltmaking remained a cultural practice throughout much of northern Britain in the nineteenth century, resulting in what are now referred to as "North Country quilts." An especially vibrant culture evolved in the North Pennine Dales. It produced some of the finest of nineteenth-century British quilts. Dales' quilters produced wholecloth and strippy quilts of confidence and quality but they also developed distinctive pieced and appliquéd designs. On these quilts the quilted designs reflect the long-established British pattern library of motifs and filler patterns used on both quilts and quilted clothing, but with added regionally distinctive patterns. For the most part, these regional patterns were stylized forms of leaves, flowers, and ferns but included sinuous chain and feather patterns. Perhaps it is in the nineteenth-century quilts of the dales that we see captured the confidence and creativity of these self-contained communities. Certainly, the range and quality of quilts rivals that from any other part of Britain.

Two aspects of nineteenth-century quiltmaking in the North Pennine Dales highlight the strength of the activity at that time. It is one of the few regions of Britain in which quilting "parties" were recorded where music, song, and dance mixed with quilting.[7] It is also one of the few regions of Britain which records quilts with an inward transatlantic influence; the red, white and green appliqué quilts produced in the second half of the nineteenth century appear to be copies of patterns circulating in America at that time.[8] It is perhaps a reflection of the dales quilters' confidence and ability that they were able to absorb and adapt to new ideas and influences. It was within this framework of an active quiltmaking culture with associated, high-quality, technical skills and design expertise that the quilt design trade developed.

The Quilt Design Trade: Initiation, Operation, and Evolution

Initial Beginning

Two particular questions surround the initiation of the quilt design trade: how, when, and why did it begin; and how did such a unique

style apparently develop so quickly once trade commenced? Local archive and printed sources have proved essentially unrevealing. The designers appear not to have advertised nor kept any formal business accounts and, save for one business card, no personal papers (except paper template patterns) have come to light within the families of the now-deceased designers. It is from oral sources that information has been gathered; but such research has taken place almost entirely in the second half of the twentieth century–a generation too late to capture any *reliable* recollection of the early establishment of the trade and the gentleman who reputedly began it.[9]

The first written account of the quilt design trade was given by the late Mavis FitzRandolph in her classic book *Traditional Quilting*, and most subsequent accounts are based on this source.[10] Travelling the dales in the early 1950s with Florence Fletcher, a local quilter married to a mining engineer, FitzRandolph interviewed quilters, customers, and the surviving quilt designers. Her information came entirely from oral sources. She ascribed the establishment of the trade to a village shopkeeper, George Gardiner (1853–ca.1900):

> During the latter half of the nineteenth century a certain George Gardiner of Allendale, Northumberland, marked patterns on "quilt tops". . . . He kept the Allenheads village shop (and a lovely shop it was, as old people in the village will still tell you) in Mill Cottages, Dirt Pot. . . . He also trimmed hats, and girls would walk up from Allendale Town or over the fells from Wearhead and throughout Northumberland; he taught his wife's two nieces, who were brought up by the Gardiners, to quilt and mark patterns, and one of them is still active, but his most notable pupil was Elizabeth Sanderson, who served her time with him as an apprentice *and became even more famous than he.* [emphasis added][11]

What led a draper in a remote English village to do something only previously done (in a much earlier time period) for more sophisticated metropolitan markets–mark out quilting designs for paying customers?[12] FitzRandolph shed no light though she did comment: "He had many followers though I have been unable to discover whether he had any immediate predecessors to link him with the eighteenth-century markers."[13]

No known relatives of George Gardiner have survived, but cen-

sus records reveal some biographical details.[14] He is first recorded in 1861 at the age of eight, listed as the grandson of Thomas and Elizabeth Sanderson of Cornfield Cottage, Allenheads. In 1871 (aged 18) he is recorded as living with his widowed grandmother (Elizabeth Sanderson, senior) in Allenheads, and described as a draper's shopman.[15] By 1881, George Gardiner was married to Sarah (a local girl, from a village two miles away) and described as a draper. He and his wife lived at Smelt Mill Cottages, Allenheads; they subsequently had no children. In 1891, George and Sarah Gardiner had apparently separated, with Sarah still living at Smelt Mill Cottages and described as a milliner (with the word "dress" added to the record in a clearly separate hand).[16] George is recorded still living in Allenheads as a boarder (lodger) in the home of a 59–year-old widow; he is still described as a draper. George Gardiner is said to have died before 1900 but the parish records contain no mention of his death.

Though the census records confirm he was a draper, no formal documentary evidence exists to confirm that George Gardiner did indeed begin the quilt design trade and no surviving quilts can be ascribed to his hand with certainty; however, there seems no reason to doubt the *main body* of information as recorded by FitzRandolph. The *Historical Directory, 1886* (a trade directory), however, does *not* record George Gardiner amongst the eleven "Grocers and Drapers" listed for Allenheads, though it does record a Mary Stephenson as a dressmaker at Mill Cottages.[17] This could suggest that George Gardiner did not have his own shop but worked for an employer.

As to when the quilt design trade began, FitzRandolph broadly suggested "the latter half of the nineteenth century."[18] It seems probable, though, that the quilt design trade followed on from the Gardiners' millinery trade which presumably developed following George's marriage to Sarah in 1876.[19] The likelihood is that quilt designing was added sometime in the 1880s.

Two factors may have had some influence on the establishment of the trade at that point in time. Firstly, the domestic sewing machine had become fairly commonplace in the previous 1870s decade and, as a draper, George Gardiner could have capitalized on its potential use in the traditional practice of quiltmaking, for which he presumably provided at least some supplies. Secondly, the 1880s

was a period of serious industrial decline in the dales. The dramatic slump in the fortunes of the lead-mining industry in the second half of the nineteenth century, when the price of lead collapsed, and the consequent migration out of the dales badly affected those businesses dependent on the community. This included shopkeepers of whom Gardiner was one.[20] Perhaps his divergence into quilt designing was a response to the economic pressure of trying to sustain a living amongst a declining community. If so, it appears to have been successful.

If he began the quilt design trade, did he also set the style? George Gardiner remains a mysterious figure with a lifestyle (indicated by the census records) which did not accord with the norm for a man of his background. Most men born into dales' families at that time were apprenticed into one or other of the trades associated with the lead-mining industry. Gardiner's grandfather, in whose family he was raised, was an enginewright, as was one of his uncles in the same household. Another uncle was a lead-ore miner. George, however, became a draper's shopman and eventually a draper. Did he follow another line of business because it suited him better, either for reasons of preference or physical capability?

Did he learn the millinery trade from his wife, Sarah, and develop a particular aptitude for it? Did they establish a textile business which combined dressmaking, millinery, and quilt designing with general drapery? Was his new and innovative style of designing so admired that customers were only too eager to purchase one of his designs for a "best" quilt. These questions are, and will remain, conjecture, but the trade, once established, apparently prospered.

How the Trade Operated

The existence of the quilt designers during the period they were active (ca.1880–ca.1960) appears to have been common knowledge amongst women in North East England who either made quilts, for whatever reason, or belonged to sewing groups, usually church or chapel-based. (These sewing groups or clubs were a major social and fund-raising activity in communities throughout North East England in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries.) Never apparently advertised, the trade succeeded by word-of-mouth transmission and recommendation. One designer in Weardale, Olive

Figure 2. Olive Allinson's business card, front and back, with her prices for marking and for ready-marked tops. Weardale Museum.

Allinson, produced a business card, but she seems to have been a rare exception (see figure 2).[21]

Customers could avail themselves of the service in one of three ways: (1) they could order a ready marked quilt top, of specified type and colour, from a designer; (2) they could post a ready prepared (pieced or seamed) quilt top to a designer who would return the marked-out top by post; (3) they could purchase a ready marked quilt top from the stock of a travelling salesman.[22] The cost was low–the price for marking a wholecloth quilt design on customer-supplied fabric was £0.1s.6d (US$0.38) to £0.2s.0d ($0.50) depend-

ing on design.[23] Prices seem not to have varied greatly in the first half of the twentieth century, the period of activity best researched, though they did increase (to £0.5s.0d ($1.25)) in the 1950s. Olive Allinson's card (presumed to date from the 1930s) gives prices for purchasing a ready-marked top: "sateen covers [presumed wholecloth] 7/- [$1.75]; star patched covers ready marked, calico 7/6 [$1.88], sateen 8/6 [$2.15]." She also appears to have had a variable rate for marking out customers' tops "1/6 [$0.38], 1/9 [$0.44] & 2/- [$0.55] each & 1/- [$0.25] for striped covers."[24]

Once the trade was established, there must have been considerable customer demand for George Gardiner to establish the apprenticeship scheme which continued in an unbroken chain for the years of the trade's existence. Again, it was FitzRandolph who first recorded the details. She confirmed that Elizabeth Sanderson was one of Gardiner's apprentices (see above), then continued:

> [Elizabeth Sanderson] taught many girls to quilt and mark patterns [including] Mrs. Coulthard of Weardale [and] Mrs. [Jennie] Peart of Allendale [who] started work at the age of fourteen and served for a year without payment . . . she worked from eight in the morning till seven at night . . . and she served for six years being paid two shillings [$0.50] weekly in the second year and finally four shillings [$1]. In 1952 [Jennie Peart] was charging five shillings [$1.25] for marking out a quilt top . . . and has had one apprentice herself [Mary Fairless], who is still at work.[25]

This information must be regarded as accurate. It seems likely that FitzRandolph interviewed the two former apprentices mentioned, the late Jennie Peart (née Liddell) and Mary Fairless, who were both still living in Allendale in the 1950s. Mary Fairless lives there today (1997).

Customer Case Studies

From interviews conducted, mainly in the late 1970s and 1980s, I have selected the following case studies as representative of the overall research findings and to explain customer rationale in choosing to purchase a designed quilt. The case studies also highlight the type and condition of many of the surviving quilts.

- *Case Record 1.* Three wholecloth quilts were known to have been made by Louise Rutherford in Rothbury, Northumberland.[26] She

married in the early years of the twentieth century but it was eight years before her first child was born. At a time when married women usually did not work unless family circumstances dictated otherwise, Mrs. Rutherford spent much of the early years of her marriage quilting. She sent to "someone in Allendale" (thirty miles away) for the quilt tops, all of which are cream-coloured cotton sateen with the blue pencil marks clearly visible. The quilts are all in near-perfect condition and had never been used or washed. Her daughter could give no technical information about how the quilts had been made.[27]

• *Case Record 2.* Four wholecloth quilts in the possession of a Northumberland lady had all been quilted by her maternal grandmother, a professional quilter. Like many women in North East coal-mining communities who needed additional income, she had established quilt "clubs," making quilts for customers who paid weekly in small instalments.[28] Most of the quilts produced in this way were either wholecloth or strippy quilts and their designs were simply crafted using a small library of North Country patterns.

Three of the quilts are typical of this genre but the fourth was a striking apple-green and cream sateen quilt, little used, and with all the hallmarks of a designed quilt–blue pencil marks, and the characteristic motifs and freehand patterns drawn in typical style. The owner explained that this quilt had been her own mother's wedding quilt and that her grandmother had sent to "someone in Allendale" for the quilt top, then quilted it herself as a wedding gift to her daughter (ca. 1920).[29]

It is significant that a professional quilter, well able to plan quilts herself, nevertheless called upon the services of a quilt designer to mark out a "special" quilt–in this case, her daughter's wedding quilt. It is an indication of the recognition accorded to the quality of the designers' work.

• *Case Record 3.* In 1988 I interviewed Mrs. Lister and Mrs. Ena Richardson, two neighbours in a mining village outside Consett, County Durham. One had four family quilts, the other seven. Amongst both small collections were three quilts which looked like designed quilts. Questioning the owners about their origins confirmed this initial identification. One quilt was a pink/yellow strippy

quilt in cotton sateen, with a running feather pattern quilted down each strip (see figure 3). The owner identified this quilt as one which had been marked by Mrs. Gowland of Weardale, the only certain confirmation from an oral source that the designers marked strippy quilts.

The other two quilts–one a pink and white star quilt and the other a pink wholecloth, both in cotton sateen–were thought to have been produced by the village community quilting group in the 1920s. This group raised funds specifically for a village hall which was eventually opened in 1926. Groups of this kind (usually associated with churches and chapels) often quilted tops ordered from the Allendale/Weardale quilt designers. It was a cheap and simple option to the problem of producing an attractive and acceptable design from amongst a group of quilters of varying abilities whose chief interest was in stitching, not designing.

Characteristics of the North Pennine Dales' Designed Quilts

If the formal historical evidence for the quilt-design trade is sparse, then the many surviving quilts provide tangible evidence of a design style which appears to have been established, right from the time of George Gardiner's assumed introduction. Though it is rare to find designed quilts identical in every detail, close analysis has identified common features which can be used to describe and identify this particular stock of quilts. This section will describe the quilt-top types and the identifying characteristics of fabric type, colour palette, marked design, pattern disposition, and pattern library. Each of these has, in some way, features which are characteristic of these quilts.

Quilt-top Types

If surviving quilts do indeed represent contemporary popular choices, the four types of ready marked quilt tops produced by the designers were, in descending order of popularity:

- *Wholecloth quilts.* These were the main product, with three strips of 30" wide fabric machine-seamed together to produce a double-

Figure 3. Strippy quilt in pink-and-yellow sateen marked with the running feather pattern by Mrs. Gowland of Weardale around 1920. Private collection.

bed-sized quilt top (see figure 4). Marked out in a day or less, these quilts were popular for eventual wedding gifts when completed by the customer.[30] Many survive because they were often "kept for best."

- *Star quilts.* The large, double eight-pointed star with five surrounding frames pieced in two colours was a bold design developed by Elizabeth Sanderson rather than George Gardiner (see figure 5).[31] Twenty-five of these Star quilts were brought to documen-

Figure 4. Wholecloth quilt in cream-coloured cotton sateen, late-nineteenth/early-twentieth century (97" x 108"). Courtesy of BEAMISH: North of England Open Air Museum.

tation days during the British Quilters' Guild three-year documentation programme.[32] Star quilt tops could be purchased or commissioned from the quilt designers or bought from travelling salesmen.[33] Piecing and marking out the designs for these tops was considered to be a job for the more skilled designers, not inexperienced apprentices.[34] This star design, however, was also copied by other quilters in the region.[35]

- *Pieced tops.* Pieced quilts with quilting designs that bear the characteristics of the quilt designers are known in collections. Most have a direct and substantiated connection with Elizabeth Sanderson and include scrap mosaic patchworks, a Basket quilt, a Feathered Star quilt, and a Streak o' Lightning quilt.[36] American design influence in these pieced tops cannot be discounted but the popular North Country pink-and-white palette is also evident. With the exception of the Basket quilt, now in the collection of Beamish Museum, the tops were not pieced by Elizabeth Sanderson; she or one of the designers drew out the quilting patterns either on the pieced tops or on the backing fabric.
- *Strippy tops.* Though strippy quilts were a popular North Country quilt type, only one survives that is known to be the product of a quilt designer–a pink-and-yellow top marked by a Weardale designer (see figure 3).[37] This absence of strippy quilts may reflect the fact that they were regarded as everyday quilts so even "designed" strippies may have seen greater use and discard. Equally, they were an easy type of quilt to piece and plan so quilters may have felt more able to make their own strippy quilts and therefore less need to purchase a top from a designer.

Quilt-top Fabrics

Cotton fabrics were most often used for all quilt types, with cotton sateen for most wholecloth quilts. Cotton sateen was also popular for star quilts, though a flat weave cotton was combined with Turkey red twill, as in the two star quilts still owned by Elizabeth Sanderson's family.[38] Solid colours rather than prints were the norm. Since the quilt designer only supplied the quilt top, the nature of the wadding and backing was up to the customer to choose. In practice, most quilts had a thickish cotton batting and were made to be reversible, with a cotton or cotton sateen wholecloth backing in the same or contrasting colour to the marked-out top.

Figure 5. Star quilt in turquoise-and-cream cotton sateen: ca. 1930 (82.5" x 82.5"). Author's collection.

Colours

A small colour palette dominated, presumably as a result of customer choice and fabric availability. Cream-coloured sateen was the most popular choice, followed by pastel shades of blue and pink. Green and yellow were also popular in their varieties of apple green and old-gold yellow (the darkest of the usual colour choices). For star quilts, a two-colour combination was invariable with a coloured fabric usually combined with white or ivory. So red/white, yellow/white, green/white, pink/white, blue/white are the star quilt colours, in the main, though some handsome exceptions, including an old-gold and brown star quilt, have been recorded.

Marked Designs

The quilt designers used blue pencil to mark out the design for the customer to quilt. The blue pencil lines are clearly visible on designed quilts unless they have been subjected to much use and laundering. A close look at the marked lines, especially on unquilted tops, is very revealing. Very evident is the skillful, confident pattern drafting that only comes from an experienced hand. Frequently, a particular pattern is repeated with slight variations, suggesting the addition of freehand elements to fill in from an outline template; sometimes the complete pattern appears to have been drawn freehand.

Disposition of the Designs

Most wholecloth quilts follow the typical layout of a central design, border, and filling pattern but each of those design fields has certain identifying features in the designed quilts from this region. First, the central design or central motif is large, often reaching out almost to the borders. It contains several motif patterns usually packed closely together and in an eight-fold arrangement (see figure 6). These motifs may be double- or triple-lined for clarity. The very centre of the design is usually a circular pattern. The whole central design flows outwards into the filling pattern, without formal containing lines. Within the design, pattern motifs or small areas between motifs may be filled with scrolls.

Second, border patterns connect at the corners with a motif or motif cluster, rather than turn the corner (see figure 7). Again, the border pattern flows inwards to the filling area, without the formal separating lines which could have been found on earlier quilting designs (see figure 8). Most borders include a degree of freehand pattern drawing as well as template pattern motifs (see illustrations). If a second border is present it is usually narrow, and not sharply separated from the main border.

Finally, the filling pattern itself is invariably square diamonds, usually drawn at no wider than 1" intervals and often closer. As would be expected of professional designers, these lines are accurate and correctly aligned (not always true of all North Country quilts).

Figure 6. Centre detail from off-white coloured wholecloth quilt in cotton sateen, showing one-quarter of the symmetrical centre pattern. Private collection.

Figure 7. Corner detail from an apple-green coloured wholecloth quilt in cotton sateen; corner patterns rarely flowed around corners but were interrupted by individual patterns or pattern groups. Private collection.

The Pattern Library

Two unique patterns which occur within the designed quilts can be regarded as trademarks. The first is the flat-iron, an oval shape in triple-lined form filled with a leaf or rose pattern, with added scrolls. The second trademark pattern, with no known ascribed name, is in the form of an open spiral with added plumed outline. It occurs in corners and centres but rarely in borders. In the absence of any signature, these trademark patterns can be positive identification marks for the designed quilts (see figure 9).

Other individual patterns, popular with the designers but not unique to them, include: the Lover's Knot, Sunflower, Feather Wreath, all circular patterns for the very centre of quilts; feather patterns, especially the large swirling Curved Feather; and large leaf and fern patterns together with variations of the circular rose–Single Rose and Double Rose, though not the Tudor Rose. Popular border patterns include the Swag (or Festoon), the Goosefeather, Fan and Half-bell with scrolls (figure 9). The use of freehand scrolls and scalloped, leafy-type patterns, both probably drawn freehand, to fill spaces between the pattern motifs is one of the most characteristic features of these designed quilts. They can be found in centres, corners and also in the space between the main border and quilt edge (see figures 4, 6, 7, and 8).

A word of caution, however. The above characteristics have to be considered together in order to surely identify a designed quilt. Most other North Country quilts were also made from cotton fabrics with cotton wadding, and the colour palette was similar. In imitation of the quilt designers, some were marked with blue pencil and used some of the characteristic patterns. It is the general combination, disposition and, most of all, the *quality* of the design which sets the designed quilts apart.

Origin and Influence of the Designers' Style

Before the middle of the nineteenth century, the quilt stitchery element on many traditional British quilts (as distinct from coverlets) was very pronounced, with elaborate designs quilted not only on wholecloth quilts but on medallion patchworks as well. These quilts usually had a commonality of quilting design. They used the central motif form set in well-defined borders with geometric divisions (arcs or zig-zag lines). The use of two parallel lines to define these

Figure 8. Classic border detail from a cream-coloured wholecloth quilt in cotton sateen. Private collection.

divisions was a central feature of most of these quilting designs and one retained by Welsh quilters right into the twentieth century. This gave a rigid, sculptured look to the quilts and cut off the borders from the central field of the design (see diagrammatic representation in figure 10).

This feature of defining lines is not present on the designed quilts, so allowing the pattern elements to flow together. Also, the designers used a pattern library with many more curvilinear patterns–rose, leaf, and feather patterns particularly. Together, these produced quilting designs with a fluid look. The size of the centres of the quilting designs also increased dramatically, creating large cen-

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Figure 9. *(Opposite page)* Trademark and characteristic patterns from designed quilts: a. unnamed scroll and scallop pattern; b. triple-lined flat iron with rose, leaf, and scroll infill; c. swag border; d. goose-wing border; e. unnamed border. Patterns (a) and (b) can be considered trademark patterns since they are rarely found on other than designed quilts. Note the curvilinear nature of all the patterns and the combinations of scrolls and scallop outlines which, though similar in form, vary in detail.

tral features to hold the eye. But to the practical quilter, this also cut down the area to be filled with cross-hatching, a tedious and difficult task. Another apparent innovation on the designed quilts was the introduction of scattered, open scrolls and scalloped, leafy-type patterns, both of which were used as fillers in between other pattern motifs. The loose form of these scrolls is quite different from the formal tight spirals of Welsh quilts.

The fact that such marked, identifying features can be seen on the designed quilts would accord with a single, creative hand masterminding this change, as suggested by the oral evidence documented by FitzRandolph. Her evidence points to George Gardiner as the initial agent of change.

Once set, elements of this design style were transferred by other individual quilters in the North of England to their own quilts. Recognizing the qualities and practicalities inherent in the style of the designed quilts, quiltmakers sometimes copied the curvilinear pattern choice and fluid disposition of centres and borders, but they did not always have the same experience and skill. Such derivative quilts, like those produced by local church groups, often show a restricted pattern choice and an openness of design which looks amateurish when set alongside a quality designed quilt.

Elizabeth Sanderson (1861–1933)

The role of Elizabeth Sanderson in developing and extending the quilt design trade is more certain than that of her predecessor and possible mentor, George Gardiner. She is well remembered by surviving relatives, customers' families, dales' residents and, indeed, the families of her apprentices. Oral information has been obtained from all these sources.

Census details confirm that she was born Elizabeth Jane Sanderson in 1861, the eldest daughter of William and Mary Sanderson of Allenheads (at the head of Allendale). They further confirm her residence in Allenheads in 1871 and 1891 (though not in 1881, for whatever reason) and her death in 1933. Interestingly, none of the records available for consultation (i.e. up to 1891) record an *occupation* for her.[39] FitzRandolph confirmed, however, that she was taught the quilt design trade by George Gardiner, though at pre-

Figure 10. Diagrammatic representation of the central motif with borders and corners layout. The basic divisions of the quilt surface are formed by double rows of quilted lines, spaced 3/4"–1" apart, within which the pattern elements are arranged.

cisely what age she was apprenticed is uncertain.[40] Her apprenticeship must have post-dated the likely 1880s establishment of the trade by George Gardiner (see above) but, since it is known she took on her own first apprentice in the last decade of the nineteenth century, then a date around 1890 seems possible.

She spent all or most of her life living in the family home in Allenheads until her death in December 1933 at the age of 72. By that time she lived alone, but for much of her life her family unit had included her sister, her brother, and her own son William, born out of wedlock. Her sister kept house and her brother worked locally, leaving Elizabeth free to supplement the household income by quilt designing. Her output was prodigious; she is said to have marked out quilt tops at the rate of one or two a day.[41] She never appears to have advertised and no papers relating to her business have survived, but the trade was so well known by word-of-mouth that she seems never to have been short of work. Her niece, Bessie Ripley, remembers the pile of cotton sateen waiting to be seamed into quilt tops and the round mahogany table on which the fabric was laid out for the designs to be drawn.[42]

Business was good enough for Elizabeth Sanderson to train her own apprentices, beginning in the 1890s.[43] They began as young girls, usually at fourteen years of age after leaving school, working for a year as live-in apprentices without payment, then receiving a small payment in the second year rising to £0.4s.0d [$1] per week thereafter. Working hours (circa 1910) were from 8 o'clock in the morning to 7 o'clock at night with a break for lunch and tea; Miss Sanderson was reputedly a stern teacher with a "prim and exacting" manner.[44] How many apprentices were trained is not known; only some of those who went on to practice the trade in their own right have been recorded. They include: Mrs. Coulthard of Weardale, her first apprentice in the 1890s; Jennie Peart of Allendale, apprenticed around 1910 and who herself taught Mary Fairless of Allendale; Olive Allinson (it is presumed), the sole designer known to have produced a business card; and Frances Humble of Weardale, known from mention in a letter to Shiela Betterton of the American Museum in Bath (see figure 11). Shiela Betterton spent some time in the North Pennine Dales in the 1970s and purchased a marked star top from an elderly lady, Annie Dalton of Cowshill, Weardale, who she met following a quilt sale.[45] This unquilted green-

Figure 11. Elizabeth Sanderson (far right) photographed around 1910 outside her home in Allenheads. With her are two apprentices; far left is Jennie Liddell, later Mrs. Peart. Courtesy of BEAMISH: North of England Open Air Museum.

and-white quilt top is now in the Heritage Collection of the Quilters Guild of Great Britain.

Although only a handful of surviving quilts can be ascribed to Sanderson's hand with certainty, their quality confirms her reputation as described by FitzRandolph. Many more surviving pieces are of such a quality, drawn with such sureness of hand and known to have been drawn out by "someone in Allendale" that they may well have come from her workroom. The bold, two-colour star design was indeed her invention (see note 31). Her pride in this design may be assumed from the fact that the two quilts left to her family, which she herself designed and quilted, are both star quilts.

Most of the quilts produced from the Allendale and Weardale designers, whilst rarely identical in every detail, do have a pattern set and disposition which marks them out as stock designs. In other words, once a successful product format was arrived at, it was followed with only the patterns varied slightly within the format for

each quilt. The star quilts particularly show a uniformity of design; some of the wholecloth quilts from the 1920s have been documented with identical centre designs.[46] But although formats can be similar, the quality of draughtsmanship can vary. It is tempting to think that those of superior line quality, known to have come from Allendale and dating from the pre-World War II period were from Sanderson's workroom, but the lack of certainty is a frustration needing further research and analysis.

One set of quilts which has come to light in recent years does, however, bear witness to Elizabeth Sanderson's special talent. Three pieced quilts (two block designs and one Streak o' Lightning), known to have been made by village women in Allenheads and quilted communally, had their coarse, cotton backing material marked out for quilting by Sanderson.[47] The designs on these three quilts show an elaboration, experimentation, and quality of line that could only have come from someone with supreme skill and talent, allied to the experience and confidence gained in long practice. They were marked almost at the end of Elizabeth Sanderson's life but are of a style quite different to the designs that were her stock-in-trade. Marked out for neighbours and friends, they suggest a rare opportunity for experimentation.

Discussion

That the quilt design trade existed in Northern England and spanned the approximate period 1880–1960 is without doubt. Oral testimony, the surviving quilts, and the information recorded and published first by Mavis FitzRandolph, then others including Averil Colby and myself, all bear witness to the *fact* of the trade. The real questions are why such a unique operation began and how it came to produce quilts of such a quality and style–a style which seems to introduce new elements (a free-flowing form and "trademark" patterns) which differ from the regional style previously in use. So what were the factors that could have combined to allow this trade to develop in a corner of northern England?

From a cultural perspective, a vital factor was the prior existence of quiltmaking as part of regional culture in the North of England in the first half of the nineteenth century. Skilled quilters

already existed to provide a pool of practitioners who recognized both the superior quality of design on the Allendale/Weardale quilts and the limitations of their own design skills. They were therefore willing, and able, to pay for a service which provided them with a ready marked quilt top to be turned into a handsome quilt. Only their stitching skills were required and then, as now, there was always pleasure in the making.

Because quiltmaking was an active vernacular craft in the region, and because the use of quilts as *top* bedcovers was common practice in most homes in North East England throughout the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, provision of such bedcovers provided a required domestic artifact. It was also a means of expressing a sense of belonging to that particular region of England with its attendant class and cultural overtones. So circumstances combined to provide a *market* for the trade product–a marked quilt top–which fitted with a domestic and cultural need and a widespread leisure and social practice.

From an economic perspective, the 1880s period, during which the trade apparently evolved, coincided with a period of serious industrial decline in the North Pennine Dales. Trade in Allenheads declined dramatically because of de-population so there was pressure on all traders, including Gardiner. Perhaps a need to diversify his trade base, combined, at that point in time, with the opportunity to provide quilt tops at relative speed (by seaming with the machine), "pushed" George Gardiner, an experienced draper with an apparent talent for millinery, into the establishment of the quilt-design trade. The paradox is that a trade and activity which became, quintessentially, a women's business and leisure occupation was begun by a man.

What of the style characteristics of the quilts themselves? The use of cotton sateen, cotton batting, and a largely pastel colour palette represents no more than was common practice in the quilt-making tradition of North East England as a whole over the historical period covered. The pattern disposition, too, with a central design set in a square-diamond field and bordered with one or, occasionally, more borders was the common design format for wholecloth quilts that had been in use in Britain for centuries. But within that format, these designed quilts did develop their own characteristics and unique pattern elements (see figure 9). That unique-

ness seems to have been established at the outset, suggesting the influence of an individual creative hand. Since there seems no reason to dispute that George Gardiner began the quilt design trade, the assumption could be that it was his hand. It is certain, however, that Elizabeth Sanderson had a strong influence on subsequent design and since, where connections can be made, surviving quilts are linked to her rather than Gardiner, there is room for doubt as to which of the two had the greatest influence on the style of the designed quilts.

The research into this quilt design trade has highlighted aspects of English quiltmaking history that are worthy of comment. Despite extensive searches in an attempt to back up the known oral history of the trade, no newspaper articles, advertisements, letters, or documentary material of any kind came to light that gave any hint of the trade, save for the business card of Olive Allinson. Yet the existence of the trade is undeniable; so why should no formal mention be found?

One conclusion is that, save for George Gardiner, the practitioners and customers were women. It seems that the trade was given little formal status, either within the dales' community or within a wider social culture, by the men who usually recorded official documents. There are probably two reasons for this: first, it was an unusual trade, hard to "pigeon-hole" and therefore name; and secondly, it was a home-based textile trade and by the late-nineteenth century these had low status.[48] Even in census records, Elizabeth Sanderson, a woman known to have spent most of her life designing quilts, is given no occupational status.

If the trade was accorded little formal status during its lifetime, the quilts remain as evidence and testimony to a well-established cottage industry, and to a small group of skilled craftspeople whose development in time and place was a response to a unique combination of regional, cultural, economic and personality factors. The style and quality of these quilts will always speak in a way that few documents can for the individual quilt designers whose time, energy, skill and artistry went into their creation.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank the anonymous referees and the editor of *Uncoverings* for their very helpful comments which have greatly enhanced the focus of this paper.

Notes and References

1. This colloquial term may have arisen from the similarity of appearance between the blue pencil lines of the quilt designs to the blue stamped transfer lines of commercially available embroidery patterns. The term "designer" is unlikely to have been used within the communities of the dales or, indeed, throughout the North East region though it is a more appropriate designation for the activity.
2. Mavis FitzRandolph, *Traditional Quilting* (London: Batsford, 1954), 39–40.
3. Dorothy Osler, *Traditional British Quilts* (London: Batsford, 1987), 117.
4. Thomas Hutchinson, *Memories from Sinderhope* (unpublished, Northumberland Record Office, NRO 3469). Hutchinson records that sixty people left Allendale for Illinois on 17 May 1849, after an eighteen-week strike over hours and working conditions.
5. The diary of Thomas Dixon (1832–37), a lead-ore smelter of Dukesfield near Hexham in Northumberland, contains the following entry: "March 12 1832: Setting 'tatoes - very cold day with showers wind E - Jane twilting at our folks." The use of the colloquial term "twilting" for quilting is noteworthy; it was in common use in the region throughout the nineteenth century and later. (Diary information supplied by Dr Stafford Linsley, Department of Continuing Education, University of Newcastle upon Tyne).
6. Osler, 104–06.
7. Averil Colby, *Quilting* (London: Batsford, 1972), 142. Colby cited an entry entitled *Quilting Feast* from *A Glossary of the Dialect of Almondbury and Huddersfield* (Yorkshire) detailing quilting parties and the hospitality provided. More ironically, a footnote to the 1872 edition of Thomas Wilson's poem *The Pitman's Pay* (London: Routledge), originally published in 1843, reads as follows: "It was an awful sight for the male inmates of the house to see the quilting frame erected on the Monday morning, with many of the gossips in the vicinity set down to their highly important labour. The whole attention of the mistress was given to these lady stitchers, nothing else was properly attended to as long as this important labour continued. The best creature comforts were provided for them."
8. Osler, plates 5 and 6. It is likely that this transfer of design ideas was

brought about by returning émigrés, and by correspondence from emigrants who enclosed American newspaper and magazine articles in their letters to relatives in England.

9. Mavis FitzRandolph conducted research, in company with Florence Fletcher (then resident in Weardale) in the early 1950s. Tyne & Wear Museums established an Oral History Scheme in the late 1970s–tapes and transcripts are housed in the Shipley Art Gallery, Gateshead, Tyne & Wear. The Quilters Guild of Great Britain conducted a Tape Archive Programme in the early 1980s and a Quilt Documentation Programme between 1990–1993. I established an individual programme of oral research in the early 1980s before the publication of *Traditional British Quilts.* Insofar as the quilt designers are concerned, my information has come from three main sources: (1) relatives of practitioners i.e. those who worked as quilt designers either in Allendale or Weardale; (2) relatives of customers; or (3) residents or former residents of the two dales who remember the practice in operation but did not necessarily participate either as customers or practitioners.
10. FitzRandolph, 39–43. The information collected and recorded by Mavis FitzRandolph has formed the basis of most subsequent writing on this subject, including that of Averil Colby.
11. FitzRandolph, 39.
12. Ibid., 38–39. FitzRandolph cites the eighteenth-century Sussex schoolmaster, Walter Gale, who supplemented his income by drawing out quilting and embroidery designs.
13. Ibid., 39.
14. Northumberland Record Office, *Census of Population* (1851, 1861, 1871, 1881, 1891) and Registers of Births, Deaths and Marriages in the Parish of Allenheads. Population censuses in the UK are only available for general consultation in Public Record Offices after one hundred years have elapsed, so no census after 1891 could be consulted.
15. Sanderson was one of the common surnames in Allenheads in the nineteenth century. No apparent family connection existed between Elizabeth Sanderson, George Gardiner's grandmother, and Elizabeth Jane Sanderson, the quilt designer.
16. Northumberland Record Office, *Census of Population 1891.*
17. *Historical Directory, 1886,* consulted in Newcastle City Reference Library. Interestingly, the 1881 census record includes Mary Stephenson and her cousin Mary Scott as living with the Gardiners at Smelt Mill Cottage and describes them both as dressmakers. Were these the "wife's cousins" referred to by Mavis FitzRandolph?
18. FitzRandolph, 39.
19. Northumberland Record Office, Marriage Register, Church of St Peter, Allenheads. The register recorded the marriage of George Gardiner, 23, draper to Sarah Stokoe, 23(4), spinster. No occupation was recorded for

Sarah at the time of her marriage but she was described in the 1881 Census as a milliner.

20. H. Dixon, *An Allendale Miscellany* (Newcastle: Frank Graham, 1974), 74. Dixon commented on the late nineteenth-century depopulation in Allendale: "The effects of depopulation were probably felt most acutely by local retailers or shopkeepers. Allenheads had fourteen of them . . . now there are fewer than six in the whole area [Allendale]."
21. Collections of the Weardale Museum, St John's Chapel, County Durham.
22. More than seventy travelling salesmen operated in Northumberland, mostly based in Newcastle upon Tyne, in 1894 (*Kelly's Directory of Northumberland, 1894*). The North East region had a good train network by that time and horse-drawn transport operated regularly between villages, towns, and railway stations.
23. In 1910 the exchange rate was US$4.868/£1; all conversions have been worked on an approximate basis of $5/£1. For a price comparison to these quilt-marking charges, in 1910 the average wage of an agricultural worker was £1.15s.4d ($8.84) per week. In 1911, the average annual miner's wage was £84 ($420) per year. Data on exchange rates and wages are from B. R. Mitchell, *British Historical Statistics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988).
24. Olive Allinson's business card has these hand-written prices on the reverse. The date of the card is unknown.
25. FitzRandolph, 40–43.
26. The quilts were originally owned by the quiltmaker's daughter. Two are now in the author's collection.
27. Mrs. Ramshaw, Louise Rutherford's daughter, Newcastle upon Tyne, interviewed by author, October 1985.
28. Osler, 122–25.
29. Mrs. Scales of Hepscott, Northumberland, interviewed by author, June 1984. Mrs. Scales' grandmother lived in the mining village of Murton, County Durham, in the early 1900s.
30. Mrs. Bessie Ripley, Stanhope, County Durham, Elizabeth Sanderson's niece, interview by author, May 1985.
31. The theory that the star design was developed by Elizabeth Sanderson was confirmed to me in an interview with her granddaughter-in-law, Mrs. Monica Sanderson, Allendale, April 1997.
32. *Quilt Treasures: The Quilters' Guild Heritage Search* (London: Deirdre McDonald, 1995), 108.
33. FitzRandolph, 40.
34. Mrs. Bessie Ripley.
35. One pink-and-white star quilt, of unknown origin, in my collection I believe to be a copy. With a slightly smaller central star and simpler quilt-

ing designs, its quality is not quite to the standard of the "designed" star quilts.

36. Rosemary E. Allan, *North Country Quilts and Coverlets* (Stanley, Co. Durham: Beamish Museum, 1987), 68. Other examples are in private collections.
37. Collection of Mrs. Lister, Castleside, near Consett, County Durham, photographed in 1988.
38. Two surviving grandsons of Elizabeth Sanderson, the sons of her son William, each have a Turkey red-and-white star quilt.
39. Northumberland Record Office, *Census of Population* (1871, 1881, 1891).
40. FitzRandolph, 39.
41. Mrs. Bessie Ripley. See also FitzRandolph, 40.
42. Bessie Ripley gave no clue as to size of the marking table but it was possibly one of the round dining tables on a central pedestal, common at the time and around five feet in diameter. It would probably not have accommodated the full quilt top.
43. FitzRandolph, 40.
44. Mrs. Bessie Ripley. Working from the known facts–i.e. charges for marking, known production rate, apprentices' pay and conditions–it is possible to hypothesize a potential profit margin for Elizabeth Sanderson's workshop around 1910. Assume that she marked out seven tops per week, on average, and that for five of these she supplied the material (9 yards of sateen). Profit for marking would have been £0.1s.6d ($0.38) x 7 = £0.10s.6d ($2.66) per week; if fabric was purchased wholesale with a 100 percent mark-up, then profit could have been approximately £0.10s ($2.50) per week. This assumes a wholesale cost of 3d ($0.06) per yard of sateen. Total profit = approximately £1 ($5), less payment to apprentices (1 @ £0.4s ($1) per week, another working for no payment) and the cost of weekly boarding for apprentices. Working on these loose assumptions, Elizabeth Sanderson could have been earning about half the average man's weekly wage of the period.
45. Correspondence between Shiela Betterton and Annie Dalton in author's collection. The correspondence includes the following extract in a letter, dated "Sept 10th 1971," to Shiela Betterton from Mrs. Dalton: "they were all drawn out by Frances Humble who walked over the fells to be taught by Miss Sanderson Allenheads. I quilted one for a granchild [sic] which had been left all run together [seamed] and traced ready. Now at the sale I bought a top all stitched together in the star pattern like my blue & white & already traced . . . It is in green & white, it is not thick cotton but the colours will be fast colours, as I will never do it now."
46. Two quilts documented during the Quilters' Guild Documentation Pro-

ject at the documentation day at the Bowes Museum, Barnard Castle, County Durham, had identical centre designs.

47. Mrs. Wright, Allenheads, interview by author, September 1995.
48. D. J. Rowe, "Occupations in Northumberland and Co. Durham, 1851–1911," *Northern History* 8 (1973). Rowe does not cite *any* textile occupations; it is presumed they come under his "twenty per cent of occupations not covered by the statistics" (p. 123). He does, however, cite female non-activity rates from 1851 to 1911 for the County of Northumberland, which includes Allendale. These drop only slightly from 80 percent in 1851 to 77.2 percent in 1911 (table, Occupations).