

Royal Connections: Quilting and the British Monarchy

by Shiela Betterton

Much historical quilt research has centered in recent years on quilts and quilting in their social contexts, particularly in the folk cultures of America and Europe. Much less attention has been given to their roles in the lives of the privileged. Shiela Betterton, who has studied England's quilting traditions intensively, has assembled here a chronological record of quilts and quilting in the lives of British royalty over eight centuries.

—Editors' Note

In many parts of the United Kingdom during the 19th century, owning a patchwork bedcover was considered a sign of poverty. Quilting, however, was different from piecing and has always been considered the finer art. Quilted garments or furnishings have been known for over 600 years in the UK, and quilting has been associated with Royalty, as well as the general populace.

In feudal England the display of heraldic insignia on clothing was a prominent feature during the reign of Edward III (1327-1377). Personal heraldic symbols developed to distinguish friend from foe in battle. Applique patterns were sewn to the surcoat, a garment which after c 1200 was worn over a protective mail shirt. The designs were also applied to horse trappings.

By the end of the 14th century the long surcoat was replaced by a short tight fitting garment called a jupon.1 Probably the oldest quilted garment extant today is the jupon worn by Edward, the Black Prince (1330-1375). The eldest son of King Edward III, he was a soldier renowned throughout Europe. It was King Edward's wish that his jupon be hung over his tomb in Canterbury Cathedral. The original garment is too fragile for public display, but a replica has been made. His jupon is a close-fitting coat of blue and red velvet, quartered—four pieces of fabric, two red and two blue alternately, make the back; the front is similar. The Royal Arms of England were embroidered in gold on linen and applied to the velvet. The whole garment was gamboised, that is, quilted longitudinally.2

King Edward III's third son, John of Gaunt, who died in 1399, was the ancestor of the Dukes of Beaufort. At Badminton, the present Duke of Beaufort's home in Gloucestershire, there is a small piece of quilted fabric, reputedly part of John of Gaunt's doublet. The top is indigo dyed linen, the backing natural linen, and it is tied, not actually quilted, through a thickness of nearly one inch.3

Edward III, in 1763, had issued a proclamation that no one whose income was below 400 marks per annum should wear cloth of gold4 or embroidery.5 However, just over 100 years later, Princess Mary Tudor, daughter of King Henry

VII (1485-1509), married King Louis XII of France. She had footmen dressed in white cloth of gold quilted with scales, the name given in Europe until recently to the pattern now called "clam shells."6

In May, 1540, Katherine Howard, afterwards fifth wife of King Henry VIII, received from the royal wardrobe as a sign of favor twenty-three quilts of quilted "sarcentet."7 Sarcentet is a soft silk material which was first known in England in the 13th century. Records show that it was being made into quilted and embroidered bedcovers as late as the 18th century, and it is still used.

A wardrobe account towards the end of Henry VIII's reign mentions "one pair of linen sleeves, paned with gold over the arm, quilted with black silk and wrought with flowers between the pane and at the hands." Sleeves were richly embroidered during the reigns of Henry VIII and Elizabeth I, and it is probable that the quilting was worked flat with back stitch. During the reign of Queen Elizabeth (1558-1603),8 quilting was often used by royalty and commoner alike in the very splendid, stiff clothing of the period.9 Sir Francis Drake is reputed to have worn quilted clothing very heavily padded.

Many stately homes claim that Queen Elizabeth I visited and slept there; at Berkeley Castle in Gloucester, the oldest inhabited castle in England, there is a silk quilt with cushions to match, said to have been used by the Queen when she visited. The foundation fabric is very fine linen, the embroidery silver thread and multicolored silks. All motifs are floral—roses, carnations, tulips, etc. The quilting is a double trellis worked in back stitch with pale yellow silk. A petal motif is worked within the trellis. There are three borders. Five cushions complete the set.10

Perhaps the best known use of the word "quilt," other than as a term for a bed cover, occurred during the reign of Elizabeth I. In Shakespeare's play *King Henry IV*, part 1, Act IV, scene 2, Henry, Prince of Wales, greets Falstaff, a very fat man, with the words, "How now, blown Jack, How now, quilt." At that time, the word "quilt" was a term jokingly applied to a fat person.

Mary, Queen of Scots, was an extremely talented and experienced needlewoman, producing many items of exquisite workmanship. She learned her needlework skills in France and would probably have learned to quilt there, but she did not make quilts in Scotland. During her imprisonment she was denied embroidery materials, and most of her

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work during this period was small scale, "little flowers on canvas." While imprisoned on the island of Lochleven, she sent for canvases with outlining, which she filled in with colored silks, drawn in black silk cross-stitch. The quilt at Traquair in Peebleshire, once thought to have been made by the Queen and her four Maries, has been dated much later and is not in the style of her other work. However, if Queen Mary did not make quilts, she wore quilted clothing. Inventories reveal that on one occasion her steward was allowed to send her "a bodice₁₁ of crimson satin, a holland cloak, a bodice quilted . . .

Elizabeth I died in 1603 and her heir was James VI of Scotland (1567-1625), son of Mary, Queen of Scots. He became James I of the combined countries of England and Scotland. During the 1570s breeches worn in Scotland were heavily padded and quilted so that the hip and thigh were exaggerated. Some authorities say that this was to prevent injury. About the same time the doublet changed from a garment with applique patterns to a quilted one; it buttoned at the neck. The quilting pattern was of horizontal bands divided by double lines of stitching, each decorated with diagonal slashes running in opposite directions in each adjoining segment. The quilting on the body was vertical, and horizontal on the sleeves. Portraits of the King wearing such a doublet show this quilting quite clearly.¹² James I is supposed to have been so fearful that he would die through treachery he always wore a quilted doublet for protection.¹³

Extremes of fashion prompted James I to forbid servant girls to wear fabrics such as "Tiffany, velvet; lawns of white,"¹⁴ but, once again, royalty and the nobility were able to indulge in sumptuous fabrics. Bed quilts were so common during the sixteenth century that a traveller from Europe, Paul Hertzner, in his "Travels in England, 1598" mentions that state beds were eleven feet square and covered in quilts shining in gold and silver. At Hampton Court Palace he says, "At no great distance from the Queen's Room we were shown a bed, the tester of which was worked by Anne Boleyn and presented to her husband Henry VIII. In the hall there were numbers of cushions ornamented with gold and silver, many counterpanes and coverlids."

During the early 17th century, fabric already quilted in yellow silk was imported from the east ready for embroidery. Once again, the sovereign, Charles I, interested himself in the English textile trade and issued a proclamation (1631) enumerating those goods which might be imported from the east. Among the permitted imports were "rich carpets of Persia and Cambaya, quilts of satin, taffaty, painted calicoes, benjamin, damasks, satins and taffaties of China, quilts of China embroidered with gold, quilts of Pitani embroidered with silk."¹⁵

Garments said to have been worn by Charles I are in

many stately homes and museums. The cap of white satin quilted in a running pattern, said to have been the skull cap worn by the king at his execution, is now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.¹⁶

Towards the end of the 17th century, Celia Fiennes, who travelled the length and breadth of the country riding side-saddle on a donkey, commented in her diaries on all she saw. She wrote that "in Windsor Castle there was fine Indian quilting and embroidery of silk."

During the 18th and early 19th centuries, all four King George's concerned themselves with the English textile trade. In 1720, King George I passed an Act prohibiting the use of all decorated cottons. It was an Act to "preserve and encourage the woollen and silk manufacturers of this Kingdom and for the more effective employment of the poor by prohibiting the use and wear of all printed, painted, stained or dyed calicoes in apparel, household stuff, furniture or otherwise after the twenty-fifth day of December, 1722."¹⁷ Fashionable ladies, of course, found ways around this edict, as can be seen in surviving garments and bed quilts made of Indian calicoes and palampores during the 18th century.

As well as using quilting for clothes and bed furnishings, some royal ladies made bed quilts, usually helped by their ladies in waiting. In 1742, helped by her ladies, Queen Caroline, wife of King George II, worked a rich white satin quilt.¹⁸ Almost thirty years later, in 1770, Queen Charlotte, wife of George III, was said to have owned a quilt of cream satin embroidered with garlands of flowers. It was on her gilt bed, made in the Adam style in her quarters at Hampton Court Palace.¹⁹

In the early years of the 19th century, textile manufacturers produced decorative panels which could be used as quilt centers. One was printed for the golden jubilee of King George III in 1812 and had the motif G 50 R (for George Rex, 50 years) printed on it. One of the colors was a bright canary yellow, a new and very fashionable shade.²⁰

In 1816 Princess Charlotte married, and the commemorative panel suitable for a screen or a chair was inscribed around the border "Princess Charlotte of Wales, married to Leopold of Saxe Coburg, May 2, 1816." The panel is an elongated octagon with the Prince of Wales Feathers in a cartouche at the top, the Royal Arms at the bottom and a crown at each side. A wide floral border surrounds the

One of the commemorative panels survives on a very large quilted bedcover showing a portrait of Queen Caroline, wife of King George IV. The Queen gained much popular support during her fight against the King's attempts to divorce her. The quilting pattern bears no relationship to the patchwork, which consists of triangular patches arranged in a fairly haphazard way. The quilt was made at Brecon in Wales about 1820 and is now in the collection of the

Welsh National Folk Museum."

On 17th February 1830 the Brig "Liberia" docked in Monrovia, West Africa,²³ having brought from Tennessee, the Rev. George Erskine, a black minister of the Baptist Church, and his family, all of whom had been slaves. Three years earlier, with help from friends, they had obtained their freedom. One of the daughters was Martha," then aged 13, listed as being able to read. She married in Liberia but, in 1850, after the death of her husband returned to the USA. She then married Moses Rix or Ricks and they returned to Monrovia in January, 1853. "Aunt Martha," as she was known, was famous for her patchwork quilts, and determined to make one for Queen Victoria, whom she called, on behalf of all slaves, "Our Mother."

Eventually in 1892, at the age of 75, Martha Ann Ricks was taken to London by Mrs. Jane Roberts, wife of a former President of Liberia. The "African Times" of 1st August 1892 reported that the meeting between the two women took place on Saturday, 16th July 1892, and that Mrs. Ricks took tea with the Queen.

There seems to be some doubt about the pattern of the quilt but it is more than likely that it showed a coffee tree. Moses Ricks was a coffee planter²⁵ and is still well remembered in Liberia as he gave some 50 acres of land for a Baptist school, the Ricks Institute, which continues to this day.²⁶

Portraits of Queen Victoria figure in a number of quilts. One, at the Bowes Museum in County Durham, unquilted, incorporates two pieces of fabric which show the young Queen.²⁷ Another made later in the century commemorates the Queen's jubilee of 1887. The centre panel is of the British Lion surrounded by emblems of the British Empire. The main field is composed of Log Cabin blocks. Inserted into the corners of two of the borders are portraits of the Queen, two as a young woman and two 50 years later.²⁸

A silk quilt made in Australia in 1887 for Queen Victoria's jubilee is composed of a variation on what is now known as the "Log Cabin" pattern. At the center is a panel showing portraits of the Queen, the Royal Coat of Arms and the date 1887. Four blocks of black velvet, one at each corner of the center block, are embroidered with the rose, thistle, leek and shamrock for the four countries of the British Isles.²⁹

With the advent of the railways it became customary, when the sovereign traveled in Great Britain, that he or she used the Royal Train. The first Royal Train was used by Queen Adelaide, wife of King William IV. After the Coronation of King George VI and Queen Elizabeth in 1936, a new Royal Train was commissioned and a talented American interior designer, Marian Dorn (wife of E. McKnight Kauffer) was entrusted with the work of furnishing the Queen's salon. The curtains and carpet she designed herself but she turned to traditional north country quilting for

the bedcover. When Queen Elizabeth II came to the throne she kept the saloon exactly as it was, with its 1930s decor, until new rolling stock was put into service in 1977. The saloon can be seen at the National Railway Museum in York, complete with quilt on the bed. Unfortunately, nothing is known about the quiltmaker.³⁰

In 1967 the Duke of Kent (Queen Elizabeth's cousin), and his wife, who were on a State Visit to the South Pacific, were presented with a tifaifai in the Cook Islands (Rarotonga). It was piece work with a crown (corona) motif. The Cook Islanders have a custom of ceremoniously displaying the tifaifai as they carry it towards the person being honored. A photograph shows that in this instance the women presenting the tifaifai are holding it completely unfolded as they advance towards the royal couple. The donors may place the tifaifai at the feet of the recipient or partially drape it over the person as he or she sits. The old photograph shows tifaifai hanging behind the royal couple and tifaifai draped over their chairs.³¹

To commemorate the coronation of Queen Elizabeth II, Miss Averill Colby, the well-known quilter and author, designed a cope³² which was sewn by the parishioners of Burford in Oxfordshire, and presented to their church, to be



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worn by the parish priest. The body of the cope is of church window hexagons of black, red, green and white satin, brocades and velvet; the orphrey³³ is of crimson velvet with gold octagons and squares; the hood in a pattern of crimson velvet and green and white satin incorporating a cross; the morse³⁴ is diamond check of red velvet and white brocade squares.³⁵

On a visit to Berea, Kentucky, in 1974 I met a number of ladies living in Levi County who made quilts which they sold through the Save the Children Federation. I was shown a "Cherry" pattern quilt and was told that a quilt had been made to this pattern, taken to Washington, DC, by two of the quilters and presented to Mrs. Nixon. I was assured that it had been placed on the bed in which the Queen of England slept when she visited Washington,³⁶ a reassuring token of the friendship between our two countries.

Shiela Betterton, a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, has been associated for 30 years with the American Museum in Britain, the last 19 as its Textile and Needlework Specialist, with a particular interest in quilts. She was born in Northumberland, England, and, she notes, "always slept under quilts." She was intrigued, on a trip to America in 1963, to discover its quilting tradition. She began patchwork and quilting research then, and has continued it around the world ever since. Ms. Betterton lectures in England and abroad on the subject, and has written six books on textiles in the Museum's collection. She has also collaborated on many other publications in the field.

Endnotes

¹Margaret Jourdain, *English Secular Embroidery*, 1910.

²Ibid.

³Personal visit with the Duchess of Beaufort.

⁴Cloth of gold. Rich textile with warp of gold threads and weft of colored silk. The battle between Henry VIII of England and Francis I of France in 1520 was called "Field of Cloth of gold" because of the sumptuous textiles used for clothing, furnishings and horse trappings.

⁵Margaret Jourdain.

⁶Therle Hughes, *English Domestic Needlework*, 1961.

⁷Margaret Jourdain.

⁸Ibid.

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Personal visit to Berkeley Castle.

¹¹Margaret Swain, *The Needlework of Mary, Queen of Scots*.

¹²S. Maxwell and R. Hutchinson, *Scottish Costume 1550-1850*.

¹³The Cecils by Lord David Cecil, 1973.

¹⁴Therle Hughes.

¹⁵Therle Hughes.

¹⁶Margaret Jourdain.

¹⁷Maciver Percival, *The Chintz Book*.

¹⁸Therle Hughes.

¹⁹Ibid.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Ibid. Colour illustration in - Maciver Percival, *The Chintz Book*.

²²Personal visit to Welsh National Folk Museum, St. Fagan's Castle, Cardiff.

²³Professor Svend E. Holsoe, University of Delaware, Correspondence with.

²⁴Cuesta Benberry first alerted me to the story of Martha Ann Ricks, which she is currently researching.

²⁵Professor Svend E. Holsoe.

²⁶Dr. Jane Martin. U.S. Education and Cultural Foundation in Liberia. Correspondence with.

²⁷Personal visit to Bowes Museum, County Durham.

²⁸Personal contact.

²⁹Annette Gero, Australia.

³⁰Personal visit to National Railway Museum, York.

³¹Joyce D. Hammond, *Tifai'ai and Quilts of Polynesia*. University of Hawaii Press, 1986.

³²Cope - Ecclesiastical. Long cloak, richly decorated, worn by a priest, usually a Bishop on ceremonial occasions.

³³Accouterments worn with cope.

³⁴Accouterments worn with cope.

³⁵Averil Colby. Patchwork.

³⁶Personal visit to Appalachian Fireside Crafts, Levi County, Kentucky.

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