

Documenting Britain's Quilts: A Look at the Findings

by Janet Rae

*The Quilters' Guild, a British educational charity, completed in 1993 a three-year quilt documentation programme, the British Quilt Heritage Project, conducted in England, Scotland and Wales. A total of 4,183 items were recorded at 30 different venues. The book of the Project, **Quilt Treasures: The Quilters' Guild Heritage Search**, was published by Deirdre McDonald Books in London in June. It will be published in the United States by Rutledge Hill Press in the spring of 1996. Here Janet Rae, the Guild's Heritage Officer at the time of the Project, and general editor of the book, reports on the survey's findings.*

Documenting quilts is not, as we are all aware, an exact science. While technical features, construction, materials and layout can be objectively noted, corroborative written proof is needed to support the histories we record and interpret. Nevertheless, examination of quilts in numbers can discover trends and dispel previously-held beliefs. It can also turn up fascinating oddities. This was the case with the British Quilt Heritage Project.

Perhaps the first myth to be dispelled was the belief that traditional British patchwork was normally done in

of working in blocks. Not so. The Project turned up many examples of block patchwork, particularly in Wales and Scotland. Most were simple in form, an eight-pointed star, windmill or nine-patch. Others used simple squares for dramatic effect, particularly some of the Welsh woolen quilts which, made in two or three colors only, were reminiscent of the American Lancaster County, Pennsylvania Amish style.

There were examples of baskets worked in blocks, made in Turkey red and white, and numerous Log Cabin quilts. The latter were particularly prevalent in Scotland, the Isle of Man and the North of England. Strips in the blocks for the most simple of these, from the Isle of Man, were said to have been based on the measurements of the maker's hand. All were made from coarsely woven woolen fabrics or cotton shirtings. Many of the Scottish quilts dated from the Victorian era, when velvets, silks, satins and ribbons were used instead of cotton or wool.

Curiously, British quiltmakers did not attach labels or names to specific patterns, or if they did, none of these names have survived in the oral tradition. A basket was a basket and a star a star, and the designs were never specifically titled as in the American tradition ("Ohio Star" or "Grape Basket"). And, although the team working on the Project designated Log Cabin blocks as such when they appeared, this was the American usage. Indeed, as I dis-

cussed during earlier research in Britain, this particular block was called a number of different names in needlework books, including 'Egyptian' or 'Mummy' pattern (based on the linen wrappings on mummies) 'Canadian Logwood,' 'Loghouse Quilting,' 'Straight Patchwork,' 'Roof Pattern,' etc.

The Project did, however, record the popularity of different geometric shapes, particularly those used in mosaic patchwork quilts. As anticipated, the most popular pattern was the hexagon, sewn over paper templates. There were 365 quilts with hexagons as the all-over pattern, and a further 222 which had the single or double rosette hexagon pattern. The next most popular shape was the square, and there were 439 quilts where it predominated as an overall pattern.

Noting a Characteristic Layout

In terms of patchwork design trends, perhaps the Project's most interesting find was not an individual pattern, but a quilt layout. Ten years ago, while researching *Quilts of the British Isles*, I saw several quilts in the collection of the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum in Northern Ireland which were laid out with borders surrounding a central square. I had really not seen many other examples of this layout until they started appearing from private cupboards and blanket chests in the course of the documentation programme.

Classification of these quilts caused quite a debate among the documentation team, especially when it was recognized they did not fit the characteristics of 'medallion quilts.' Generally speaking, they did not have a turned square centre, but one that was sited straight on. Each border was then worked as a specific unit around the centre. Sometimes these borders were simple and nothing more than strips of fabric with patched corners (triangles or squares). Other times the borders were pieced squares on point, triangles, rectangles, stars, diamonds. Applique was occasionally seen in the centre square or in a border or corner square. The most elaborate example of this genre contained 19 frames. Four of the frame quilts presented for recording were in pristine condition, never having been washed. Two had printed centre panels (made in 1805 and 1810), and all were the work of four sisters, whose lives spanned a period from 1798 to 1875.

About 15 per cent of the pieced quilts presented for documentation fell into this 'frame' category. The earliest one bearing a date was simple and crudely pieced; it had the name "Anna Cartwrite" and the year 1796. The major-

ity of frame quilts recorded were made in the last half of the 19th century, and there were several examples of this frame layout on both sides of double-sided patchwork quilts.

There were many curiosities among the pieced quilts, including a very intricate, unfinished 18th century quilt top with a central basket of sunflowers and very complex patterns of trailing flower vines, hearts turned into flower patterns, clamshells, tulips, etc. Most of the patterns used were those one would expect to see as appliqué. In this pieced top, the maker first drew the entire design full size on paper, then cut each piece to use as a template. All of the papers, including the numbered flower petals, were intact.

There were two quilts made of pink corset material (one from fabric samples from the Spirella corset factory in Wrexham and dating from the 1930s) and many interesting examples of war time quilting, including the Red Cross quilts which flowed into Britain during the Second World War. Fifty-four quilts were recorded with labels of the Canadian Red Cross Society; all were easily recognizable because of their fabrics (occasionally they used V-for-Victory prints) and their utilitarian quilting.

Traditional Wholecloth Quilts

Wholecloth quilts are a very traditional and fundamental part of British quilting, particularly in Wales and the North of England. It was therefore no surprise that about one-third of all quilts recorded fell into this category. One of the oldest, dated 1695, had a chain-stitch embroidered flower motif on a diamond-grid background executed in backstitch. An even earlier quilt in silk, found in Cornwall, had Indo-Portuguese quilted designs which had been stuffed. The oldest item of quilted clothing brought to one of our documentation days was a green silk 'undress' made about 1720. It was used for informal wear, much as one would wear a modern housecoat. The body of the garment was quilted in an all-over diamond pattern with a border containing a vine of flowers and leaves.

Wholecloth quilts, as one of our team pointed out, were hardly ever dated, and one of the quilting 'finds' of the Project was a group of quilts signed and dated by Alice Orange and made between 1851 and 1856. Sewn for the rector of the parish of Dinnington in Northumberland, these quilts contained a number of motifs which included fans, stars, chains, hearts and tulips. One distinctive motif in an 1852 quilt was a gryphon, part of the rector's family crest. Little was discovered about Alice Orange other than she was the rector's housekeeper, aged 38 at the time of the 1851 census.

From the outset, the British Quilt Heritage Project made a special effort to record interesting fabric used in quilts, and was fortunate in having two printed textile specialists attached to the team. 'Reading a Quilt' by looking at, among other things, the fabrics used became an important aspect of the Project and many close-up photographs were taken to record over 200 years of textile printing in Britain. The result, as produced in the book of the Project, gives guidance to quilt dating and testimony about the wealth of

cotton patterns that rolled from British mills, especially in the 19th century. Another major decision taken at the outset was the employment of a specialist textile photographer to attend each documentation venue and to photograph as many quilts as possible. Although lighting conditions and lack of time precluded the photography of many wholecloth quilts (many patterns were recorded only by hand), the Guild nevertheless has been left with a first class slide archive to match the project's databank.

One disappointment of the Project was the lack of adequate social history accompanying most of the quilts brought to us for recording. Although much was discovered through patient examination of patchwork, quilting patterns and fabric, it was usually difficult to obtain details of the maker. What did emerge through quilts with a known provenance, and through other means, were some interesting episodes of quilts crossing the Atlantic. On the very first day of documentation in Chester, two women turned up within an hour of each other bearing American kit quilts from the 1930s which used a dogwood appliqué pattern. One woman at least had been sent the kit to make up. The Project recorded 126 quilts from the United States (many of these dating from the 1930s) and 89 from Canada. A very few had interesting stories attached, including a Rose of Sharon quilt made by Sarah Ann Sobey who emigrated to Memphis, Tennessee, about 1850. She subsequently became caught up in the American Civil War and lost everything except the quilt, which she carried with her when she returned to Liverpool, where she married a farmer. She lived the rest of her life in Lancashire.

As with all research projects, there is still much to learn and investigate about quilt making in Britain. The 'traveling' of certain patterns over the ocean and between continents is a fascinating subject in itself. Nurse Jean McGregor Young of Lanarkshire, who worked in a Chinese mission hospital in the 1920s, and by 1941 was matron of a Red Cross convalescent home in England, probably made her Dresden plate quilt after seeing the Canadian Red Cross quilts. But what connections are there between the simple geometric style common to both the Welsh and the Amish? As with most research, The Project was more a starting point than a conclusion.

*Janet Rae, an American living in Scotland, graduated with a degree in English from the University of Michigan and has worked most of her professional life as a journalist. Her **Quilts of the British Isles** was published in 1987, and in 1988, **Traditional Crafts of Scotland**, which she co-authored. She was Heritage Officer of the British Quilters' Guild for five years, with general responsibility for the Guilds Documentation programme. She lectures on quilting and has helped organize several quilt exhibitions in the UK. For the last ten years she has been a partner in an Edinburgh-based consultancy specializing in corporate publishing, and she also runs a small arts and crafts gallery in the Scottish Borders.*