

# The Brereton bed hangings

Carolyn Ferguson reviews some significant pieces on display in 'Frayed'

*'Frayed: Textiles on the Edge' is an important exhibition, showcasing a number of interesting textiles by those seeking solace in stitch. As quilters we know that sewing is good occupational therapy and that when the hands are busy the mind is often stilled. We are also aware that stitch is beneficial for those who are confined or who perhaps have mental health issues.*

## Designer and maker

A maker who was brought to the edge by family circumstances was Anna Margareta Brereton (née Lloyd) (1756–1819) of Brinton Hall, near Melton Constable, Norfolk. Family history says that Anna Margareta sewed the set of linen and cotton patchwork hangings known as the Brereton bed hangings to regain her sanity following the death of her son John at the age of 14 in 1800. In the period 1781–96, Anna Margareta and her husband John had ten children, four of whom died in infancy.<sup>1</sup> John was her fifth child to die, an event that was said to change her life. A tribute published by William Upjohn after her death in 1819 revealed that during the depression following John's death she retreated from public life and turned to the church for solace. This act of designing and making patchwork between 1801 and 1805 must have been therapeutic, for by 1813 Anna Margareta was well enough to go to London and have her silhouette made.

These hangings are without doubt the most valued set of items in the Norfolk Museums Costume and Textile Collection. Their display in 'Frayed' reinforces the poignant history of a Norfolk family and gives the public a further opportunity to see a superb set of early patchworks.

## The bed hangings

No one has counted the numbers of different fabrics and individual patchwork pieces, but we do know that the bed set has nineteen separate pieces that come together to furnish a four-poster bed. There are bed curtains, top and bottom and inner and outer valances, swags and tails, a head cloth and a magnificent coverlet, all made out of cottons and linens of the period. Anna Margareta used a variety of geometric shapes including hexagons and long hexagons (sometimes called 'coffin' hexagons), pieced blocks and appliqué in her design. Perhaps most remarkable are the broderie perse baskets of flowers that are enclosed within frames of hexagons. The technique was much used by ladies of the late 18th century to create patchwork tree-of-life designs in imitation of the popular Indian palampores of the 1600s. Had Anna seen such items? Maybe her inspirations were provided by floral designs on quilted petticoats – or had she admired Indian embroideries of the 18th century?<sup>2</sup> How too did she collect such a large assortment of different flowered fabrics and different qualities and weights? Family history suggests that visiting friends and family provided fabrics for her to work with. However, considering the vast number of



Top:  
Brereton bed hangings

Above:  
Brereton bed hangings:  
coverlet, detail

Below:  
Picture of Anna Margareta  
by an unknown artist



different fabrics of both furnishing and dress weights, this seems unlikely unless such people were part of the textile trade. It's more probable that her husband John used his contacts within the textile trade to access offcuts and samples and even books of samples, for in 1792 he is variously described as trader, draper, grocer, tallow chandler, soap boiler and feed factor. Quilt historian Bridget Long suggests that the numbers on some fabrics refer to print work samples and that marks on certain patches indicate the use of fents or ends of rolls of material.<sup>3</sup> Such fabrics were often supplied by travelling packmen and would be a further source of fabrics for patchwork.

The coverlet has a frame layout with a centre of hexagon rosettes framing the broderie perse flower baskets (or urns). The flowers are

BRERETON BED HANGINGS AND LORINA BUIJWER IMAGES © NORFOLK MUSEUMS AND ARCHAEOLOGY SERVICE

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which represent a full compendium of early 19th-century chintz fabrics.

### Some other pieces

As well as these important bed hangings, 'Frayed' also shows other significant historical and contemporary works. The stitched texts of two women, Elizabeth Parker and Lorina Bulwer, give a moving portrait of their lives. 'As I cannot write I put this down simply and freely as I might speak to a person to whose intimacy and tenderness I can fully intrust myself.' So begins Elizabeth Parker's sampler, which was embroidered at some time after 1830. The red cross-stitched words give a heartfelt rendering of her early life which are truly moving. Happily, historians believe that Elizabeth's later years were less troubled.

The 2002 auction catalogue described a Lorina Bulwer work, now in the collection of Norfolk Museums, as 'an extraordinary long band sampler, c.15' x 1', chaotically worked in coloured wools on bands of pink, red, brown and blue cotton'. The sampler is addressed as a letter to the Maharajah of Kelvedon and other notable figures; its embroidered words, sewn through many layers of cloth, show her to be delusional, and provide an incoherent diatribe against her family, her life and her loss of liberty. Lorina was born in 1838 and helped her mother run a Yarmouth boarding house. After her mother's death in 1893 she found herself disinherited and was committed to the lunatic ward of the Great Yarmouth workhouse

asylum by her brother, a woollen draper. Ruth Battersby-Tooke, the exhibition's curator, states that 'the path of Lorina's reality is on a parallel track to our own, the two will never intersect' and certainly this is true. Through this piece, and a further 12 foot long sampler that now belongs to the Thackray Medical Museum in Leeds but which is being shown alongside the Norfolk piece for the first time in this exhibition, we see the extent of her illness. There are also pieces in the exhibition by artists such as Tracy Emin and Sara Impey.

I wish the museum success, and hope that the exhibition will give a true appreciation of the therapeutic uses of stitch both now and in the past.

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easily recognisable as sunflowers, daffodils, peonies, morning glory and chrysanthus, to list but a few. There are four borders or frames of varying composition. The broad edging differs, though, from all the other pieces. Here we find one example of a printed panel which seems to have been stitched on later. We do know that the coverlet was cut in half vertically and rejoined and reworked in the 1930s. Family history states that Anna Margareta's only daughter Mary helped her mother, but as she married and moved away in 1801 this may be family myth rather than fact. The diagonal inset strips through the borders include a later fabric from the late 1820s to 1830s, which suggests that this was a remodelling after Anna Margareta's death, possibly by her daughter or perhaps her daughter-in-law Elizabeth who, with her husband William, revamped Brinton Hall in the 1820s. We know also that Anna Margareta's sister Elizabeth married her husband's twin, Abel Brereton, and that they lived nearby. So the two Elizabeths may have been involved. Whoever subsequent needlewomen were, they reinforce the lasting vision of Anna Margareta Brereton in providing a harmonious and unique set of early bed hangings

Above:  
Embroidered letter by  
Lorina Bulwer, c.1901

*I am grateful to Norfolk Museums and Archaeology Service and Bridget Long for providing access to the documentation of the hangings carried out in October 2004.*

*Information on the Brereton Hangings was first published in 2013 in Miscellany, the journal of the Costume and Textile Association.*

### References

- <sup>1</sup> I am grateful to M. Sandford for this part of the Brereton family tree.
- <sup>2</sup> See bedspread of linen and cotton twill, embroidered in India for the European market c.1700, V&A collection Accession Number LM.13-1930.
- <sup>3</sup> Bridget Long, 'The Blossoming of Patchwork: A Study of Cotton and Linen Patchwork at the End of the Eighteenth and Beginning of the Nineteenth Centuries', *Quilt Studies* 7 (2006), 32–33.

### 'Frayed: Textiles on the Edge'

Until 2 March 2014

Time and Tide, Museum of Great Yarmouth Life, Blackfriars Road, Great Yarmouth NR30 3BX

Open Mon to Fri 10–4, Sat and Sun 12 noon–4

Admission to the exhibition is free with general museum admission.

Courses, drop-in events and workshops are being run in conjunction with the exhibition. For more information, visit [www.museums.norfolk.gov.uk](http://www.museums.norfolk.gov.uk) or call 01493 743930.

You can find out more about the project on the 'Frayed' blog: [frayedtextilesoneedge.wordpress.com](http://frayedtextilesoneedge.wordpress.com)