

Talking Quilts: Saving Quilters' Stories



Project Manager Vicky Martin updates us with the story so far

Talking Quilts is a national oral history project of The Quilters' Guild, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund. It aims to record, preserve and share the UK's rich and diverse quilting heritage through the stories of today's quilters.

The three-year project is being led by volunteers. Quilters are trained to conduct oral history interviews using audio recording equipment, as well as to complete interview transcriptions. The interviews focus on a 'touchstone object' – a quilt or quilted object made by the interviewee – and explore the story

behind it. The interview then broadens out to explore the quilter's relationship with quiltmaking and the role quiltmaking plays in their life.

The resulting digital audio recordings and transcripts of the interviews, along with accompanying photographs, are safely stored at The Quilters' Guild and will ultimately be shared with the public through an accessible online archive. The project will also provide a template that can be easily adopted by other groups and individuals wishing to document quilters' stories in their own communities.

Below:
Talking Quilts volunteer Janet Crossley talks with members of the public at Ryedale Folk Museum, North Yorkshire, about quilts and quilting, as part of Talking Quilts in Region 14

IN APRIL 2014 I started working as the Project Manager for Talking Quilts. Within my first month I had visited the team at The Guild's headquarters in York, attended the Conference & AGM in Portsmouth and delivered our first oral history training session to volunteers in Region 14. I decided after that first training session that it would be good if I could 'stand in our volunteers' shoes' and conduct an interview myself. Finally, in March 2015, almost twelve months into the project, I interviewed Fiona Roberts about a quilt that she was involved in making to celebrate the 175th birthday of the University of Chester. I hope that it will be the first of many interviews I undertake.

It's been an exciting and busy twelve months. Talking Quilts got underway in Region 14 (Yorkshire, Humberside, Teesside and Cleveland) and our brave volunteers were the first to receive training and start interviewing their fellow quilters. Over three months, eight volunteers interviewed nineteen fellow quilters. Nicky Ryden took part in Region 14, commenting: 'It was a really good experience; I

so enjoyed the opportunity to talk about my quilt to someone who was knowledgeable and interested.' We captured stories about a quilt used to support literacy in schools, a quilt marking the code-breaking history of Bletchley Park, and a Jubilee quilt made for a first grandchild.

The project then moved on to Region 12 (South & Mid Wales), starting with a sunny training day in Port Talbot and some equally sunny volunteers. Talking Quilts volunteer Binkie Thomas interviewed a 99-year-old quilter from a quilt group in the South Wales valleys who said she'd 'had a unique experience with the Gilvachgoch Quilters who still do it all on frames; I didn't know they existed! I just feel proud to have been part of this important work.'

In November 2014, Talking Quilts travelled to Region 1 (London and Middlesex) and volunteers from across the Region explored the diversity in the quilting community. Talking Quilts volunteer Alice Sage met a quilter who wanted to tell people about her home country of Iraq, through her quilt *Piece for Peace*, which in particular explores the invasion in



Left:
Talking Quilts volunteers, Dorothy (left) and Janet (middle), and Talking Quilts Project Manager Vicky Martin, have a well-earned tea break after talking with members of the public at Ryedale Folk Museum, North Yorkshire; Region 14



2003. We also captured the story of Jacqueline Illes' well-travelled *My Lucy Boston Quilt*, a traditional quilt made in the UK, India, South America, New Zealand and the USA.

Talking Quilts is now in Region 16 (Scotland), with volunteers taking part in training sessions in Edinburgh and Inverness. We will roll out the project to another two Regions before the end of 2015. We are also working hard to create a dedicated website for Talking Quilts where everyone can enjoy reading and hearing extracts from the stories we've saved. In the meantime, in the panel (right) is a preview of one of the wonderful stories that we are capturing, in the form of an extract from Joy Morgan's interview with Liz Savage from Region 2 about the first quilt she made, called *Quilt for Gwyneth* for her mother.

A worthwhile venture

When I was interviewed for the role of Talking Quilts Project Manager, I was asked, 'Why bother? Why do an oral history project to capture the stories of quilters from across the UK?' The answer is simple. The stories of everyday quilters are priceless pieces of our heritage. But what makes them even more special is that you can hear them in the person's own words, celebrating the local dialects and accents. You can listen to the joy, excitement, thoughtfulness or sadness in their remembrances. It's a privilege to be involved in a project that brings me so close to people's personal histories, and I'm looking forward to discovering many more fascinating stories as the year unfolds.

Vicky Martin



Above:
Quilt for Gwyneth made by Liz Savage for her mother; interviewed in Region 2

Quilt for Gwyneth by Liz Savage, Region 2; interview by Joy Morgan

'This was my first proper quilt ... I started quilting when I retired because it was something I'd always wanted to do. I'd always sewn, mainly clothes for myself and my children when they were small, and never done patchwork and quilting, but always thought it would be a good idea, and then of course when you retire you've got time and you need to do something, and in Neath, where I live, there wasn't a group that I knew so I used to volunteer with the National Trust at Aberdulais Falls, my husband and I, and we went on a visit from the Friends of Aberdulais Falls to the American Museum at Bath where there is a fantastic display of quilts and I was inspired when we were there to join a group, but, as I said, there wasn't one so I started one basically in Aberdulais Falls. And we started off about five or six of us and at the moment we are 30, so we have come on quite a way, and it's called The Wednesday Stitchers and it's been a big part of my life and still remains a big part of my life...'



Top left:
Talking Quilts' first interviewee Nicky Ryden spoke to Julie Hollings about the quilt she made to celebrate her 25th wedding anniversary; interviewed in Region 14

Left:
Piece for Peace, detail, made by Najilaa Khalil; interviewed in Region 1

To find out more about Talking Quilts or to sign up for the Talking Quilts newsletter, contact Vicky Martin, Project Manager, at info@talkingquilts.org.uk. You can also visit us on The Guild's stand at the Festival of Quilts at the NEC, Birmingham 6–9 August.