



It's good to talk

by Vicky Martin

Vicky Martin started working for The Quilters' Guild as the Talking Quilts Project Manager in April 2014. Talking Quilts is an oral history project to capture, preserve and share the stories of UK quilters. The project is supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund and overseen by a Project Committee. The project is volunteer-led, as quilters are trained to conduct the interviews, use the audio recording equipment and transcribe interviews.

Vicky tells us about her introduction to the world of quilting.

Early on I was asked, 'Do you quilt?' 'Erm... no' was my answer. If someone had dropped a pin, you'd have heard it. However, I'm starting to know quite a bit about quilting and region by region the Talking Quilts volunteers are gradually talking me into having a go.

I've spent 15 years either conducting oral history interviews myself, or supporting others to develop and deliver oral history projects. It's something I feel passionately about. Oral history is the oldest method of historical inquiry, our ancestors passed on traditions, skills and knowledge verbally from one generation to the next. Modern oral historians record these stories to help preserve them and enable them to share the stories with the wider world. What makes oral history so special is that the story is told in the teller's own words, so you hear their accent, local words and phrases. But you also hear their emotions, the joy, the excitement and the sadness, that's what makes it so powerful. The stories of everyday people are so interesting and give you a real insight into what's actually going on.

It's the same with Talking Quilts. The interviewees are everyday quilters who start by talking about one quilt or quilted object that they have made, going on to discuss what role quilting plays in their life. The project is using The Quilters' Guild regional structure to rollout the project. So far, over 50



Talking about quilts



Talking Quilts volunteers Nicky and Glenda practice using the audio recording equipment at the Region 14 training day



Talking Quilts volunteer Dorothy Baird talks to members of the public at Ryedale Folk Museum about the project



Talking Quilts Project Manager, Vicky Martin (far right), has a tea break with volunteers Dorothy (far left) and Janet (centre) at Ryedale Folk Museum, before they share some of the recorded quilt stories with the public

interviews have been conducted in three regions; Region 14 (Yorkshire, Cleveland and Teesside), Region 12 (South and Mid Wales) and Region 1 (London and Middlesex). The emerging stories vary in many ways; they include first quilts, celebration quilts, art quilts, memory quilts and quilts made for a purpose. Yet even when people choose a quilt on a similar theme, for example the story of one person's 'first quilt', it is completely different to another's.

By March 2017 the project will have visited eight regions and collected over 80 interviews which will be safely stored at The Quilters' Guild. Sharing these stories with both the quilting and non-quilting community is also a key aspect of the project, so there will be a website and a series of events in the participating regions.

My role is to coordinate the project nationally. In each region I recruit, train and support quilters who volunteer to be interviewers or transcribers for the project. The project stays in a region for about three months, starting with a training day.



Region 12 volunteers get together to talk about their experiences as oral history interviewers and transcribers



Kate Smith with her quilt 'Bletchley Park', made to honour her mother's role in the WRNS during the Second World War



Mandy Craven made her 'Button Town' quilt from a pattern she bought in Salem, Massachusetts

It's always exciting to meet the new volunteers and find out why they have offered their time to support for the project. Sometimes they have skills from their professional lives that they feel might be useful to the role, sometimes they feel strongly about preserving quilting heritage and sometimes they are just intrigued by what stories their fellow quilters might share. It's an intensive day, as we are striving to ensure the project adheres to current guidance for oral history practice, so both the volunteers and I leave exhausted. But at the end you can tell that they are all fired up and keen to get interviewing.

Geography can sometimes be a challenge. Luckily I don't mind long train journeys and it gives me time to do a bit of Redwork embroidery that one of our Region 14 volunteers introduced me to. But thanks to technology, I still feel very connected with how the volunteers are getting on. They keep me updated and I can offer advice and support when they need it. Of course when I start the rollout in Scotland it'll really test my endurance for trains!



Talking Quilts interviewee, Linda Hencher, talked about how she uses her quilts as a prop during her storytelling sessions



Janet Crossley with the quilt she made in memory of her daughter, Rebecca.



Label on Jennifer Nathan's quilt

Kate Smith and her quilt

In July, Talking Quilts volunteer Glenda Smith interviewed Kate Smith about her quilt, 'Bletchley Black and White'. The interview was transcribed by volunteer, Margaret Ferguson. Here is a short extract from the interview.

Kate Smith: 'The quilt when you look at it is mainly black and white and it has a log cabin construction pattern. In the cornerstones of the log cabin is lime green forming a cross across it, and the cross centres on a photograph, a reproduction of a photograph printed onto fabric. And this is a photograph of my mother, whose name was Catherine Mary Moore, and it's a photograph of her in WRNS uniform when she was stationed at Bletchley Park, the code-breaking centre, during the Second World War.'

The quilt was made for an exhibition which the Quilters Guild Region 7 were putting on at Bletchley Park and they were calling for entries on a theme of 'code' or 'code breaking'. And I wanted to make this quilt as a tribute to my mother because she worked there throughout most of the Second World War. She died before the secrets of what the people at Bletchley were doing came into the open. She and I were great friends, she taught me sewing. She died about thirty years ago, before I actually knew what she had done there and so I just wanted to make a piece of work that would go in that exhibition.'



Close up detail of Kate Smith's 'Bletchley Park' quilt, showing her mother's photograph

At the end of the three month rollout I meet up with the volunteers again. It's great to hear how they've got on as they reflect on their experiences as an interviewer. I also feel it's important to find out if I can improve the training or support I give them, to make the journey smoother for future regions. Then we'll talk about how we are going to share the stories

they have captured with non-quilters in their region. In Region 14 they were keen to showcase some of the interviews and some quilts at Ryedale Folk Museum's Craft Weekend. It was a glorious sunny weekend in July and we spoke to so many people who were fascinated by the stories and wanted to share quilting memories of their own or find out more about quilting.



Jennifer Nathan talked about the quilt she made to help support her disabled son Jonathan's transition from residential school into an adult placement

When I was offered the job as Talking Quilts Project Manager, I took it because I wanted to share my love of oral history with more people and I thought that the idea of exploring the stories behind the quilts was perfect for an oral history project. But it's certainly been a two way exchange. Through listening to those stories, seeing the quilts and spending time talking to quilters I've started to have a real appreciation for quilting. And you never know by 2017 they might even have inspired me to make a quilt...

To find out more about Talking Quilts visit www.quiltersguild.org.uk/learn/talking-quilts-oral-history-project, or email Vicky at info@talkingquilts.org.uk

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