



'Talking Quilts Commemorative Quilt', Linda Seward

# Talking Quilts - an Update

by Helen Kent

You may remember the feature in the February 2015 issue by Vicky Martin where she described her role as the Talking Quilts Project Manager which she had started in April 2014. The project has been going from strength to strength since then and the Talking Quilts Committee invited me to attend a reception to celebrate the success of Talking Quilts: Saving Quilter's Stories and the project's exhibition, 'Talking Quilts: Family Connections' which was on display at the Festival of Quilts, Birmingham in August.

The Quilters' Guild developed the idea from the Quilters' Save Our Stories, a similar project organised by Quilt Alliance in America. The Guild decided that quilters in the UK should also record their quilting oral history. I love the way Vicky described how modern oral historians record these stories; 'preserving not only the actual events but also how they capture the accent, local words and phrases, the emotions, joy, the excitement and the sadness'.

The project is due to run three years until March 2017, being funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund and overseen by a Project Committee. It is volunteer led with a team of over 40 quilters from the various regions being trained to conduct the interviews and transcribe them.

Not only have they recorded the stories but have also gone digital, which has enabled a national collection of quilters' stories, including sound and video recordings, photographs and transcripts to be made available to historians, researchers or nosey quilters! You can search through the records, listen to extracts from some of the interviews or view images of the quilts and quilters who made them. The interviewers initially focus on a particular quilt or quilted object – a touchstone object – which holds meaning for the interviewee. They explore the story behind it and then broaden out the interview to discuss the techniques used and the role that quilt making plays in their lives.

The reception was on the opening evening of the Festival of Quilts, an inspiring and colourful event in its own right. Whilst there I bumped into two lovely ladies who were participants in the Talking Quilts project. They had both provided a quilt for inclusion in the project. Margaret Boe from Edinburgh, region 16 of the Guild, used her first sampler quilt. She told me it had started as a cushion but had then developed into a full quilt. She found the experience of taking part interesting and enjoyable.

Bonnie McKerracher from Twechar, again region 16, had chosen a more personal quilt to talk about. She had created a triptyc quilt, three panels linked by their content. Her daughter delivered a baby at 30 weeks. Bonnie had a beautiful grandson called Sam. Unfortunately Sam didn't survive beyond six weeks but Bonnie decided to celebrate his short time with a quilt, 'Celebrating Sam'. In the quilts she depicted his arrival, his first trip to the beach and his leaving them. She told me a lovely quote from a nurse in the hospital who said that 'Sam had been playing with the

Angels but they hadn't caught him yet!', so she used Angels in the design. This is a beautiful bittersweet story which is a wonderful legacy for a very special little boy that brought so much joy for such a brief time but, because of the craft of quilting, will be remembered in the future.



**Talking Quilts Reception**

When asked by volunteer Barbara Janssen which quilt was her 'touchstone' quilt, Ellen Seward chose her '9/11' quilt. She had created this in response to the awful events of the Twin Towers attack. On 11 September she and her eldest daughter had gone to collect her youngest daughter, Rachael, from the airport after she had spent her gap year summer working in New York. They arrived home in time to see the second plane go into the towers. It transpired that Rachael had been on the last plane out of New York.

As they watched the coverage one of the reporters was speaking to a gentleman named Howard Lutnick, the chief executive of a firm called Cantor Fitzgerald. This gentleman had not gone to work that day because he had taken his son to school for the first time. The rest of his firm, about seven hundred employees on the



**Bonnie McKerracher and Margaret Boe**



**Ellen Seward with her '9/11' Quilt**



**Detail of the heart, '9/11' Quilt**

top two floors of the one of towers, along with his brother and sister, were killed. The reporter asked this man repeatedly 'how does it feel?'. Ellen couldn't believe the stupidity of the question and felt that this man just needed someone to hold and hug him but nobody did. That was her turning point; she was stood in a kitchen in England and there was nothing she could do. But she could make a quilt.



*Detail of the souls rising up, '9/11' Quilt*



*Barbara Janssen with 'Nurturing'*



*'Nurturing'*



*Picture on quilt reverse of Barbara and her daughter*

Her main inspiration was of those people going off to work in the morning, standing around the water cooler or coffee machine when wallop. She felt that they had been rocketed into their afterlife, the souls rising up and heading off to heaven. The great billowing dust clouds against the vivid blue sky sparkling with the glass of the thousands of windows that had been shattered. 'If it hadn't been such a grotesque and horrible event, it was beautiful' and she knew she had to capture that on the quilt. Because New York is known as the Big Apple she put a big red heart in the midst of the flames and quilted an apple in the centre. At the bottom she used water as lots of water had been drawn from the bay to extinguish the flames. It also signified that the UK is closely associated with the US as the Atlantic laps both shores. She used various fabrics, some donated by her quilt group, in pale greys, blues and white. The whites and golds, which she dulled, were used to symbolise the souls of the people rising up.



**LEFT: 'Heirloom Quilt', Sabi Westoby**

Barbara Janssen was interviewed by Vicky Martin about her quilt 'Nurturing'. It has another moving story about family. Barbara belongs to South West Quilters who hold an annual quilt challenge where all entries go into the Spring Quilt Show in Exeter. This particular year the challenge was 'Back to my Roots.' She was particularly inspired by this theme as some years before Barbara had been doing some research on her family name, an unusual Irish spelling. With her daughter they were able to visit the area from which the family originated. It was an area of Ireland called Killglass Community in Roscommon. A community which would have been thriving in the early 1800s spread around a lake. They set out to find any

examples of their name in the local churchyards but were unable to and decided to walk around a lake where they got talking to a local. They discovered that hundreds of people in the area were given their marching orders by the English landowners and travelled on the coffin ships to America. Many lost their lives, although Barbara's family had moved to Britain to set up a market garden, it left her with a mixed set of emotions. A combination of sad stories mixed with the beautiful day and place. As they continued around the lake they came across a sculpture depicting a mother bird looking at a baby bird which was dedicated to all those that had lived in that place and died. Standing there with her daughter she found it particularly moving and she decided that one day she would make a quilt. The challenge, 'Back to my Roots' gave her the perfect reason to start.

The first time I heard or read these quilts histories; I had tears in my eyes. They are such powerful, uplifting but sorrowful stories and I was really moved. Most of us remember where we were on the occasion of 9/11. The fact that Ellen felt the way to deal with her feelings of helplessness was to quilt, demonstrates that the simple act of artistic creation allows us to externalise our feelings. Barbara's family story, of the movement of her Irish ancestors at another time of great loss and tragedy for a Nation evokes similar feelings. The recording of these stories by the Talking Quilts project is a fantastic record of a generation of quilters and their quilting tales.



**'Memory Quilt', Pindy Pardesi**

