

Talking Quilts: Saving Quilters' Stories



Now it's time to listen to all those quilters' stories ...

Talking Quilts was an oral history project of The Quilters' Guild of the British Isles, funded by the Heritage Lottery Fund. It recorded, preserved and continues to share the stories of today's UK quiltmakers. The project was led by volunteers, both Quilters' Guild members and non-members, who were trained and supported to conduct and transcribe interviews. Over a three-year period, Talking Quilts visited eight Regions, following the regional structure of The Quilters' Guild.

AT THE QUILTERS' Guild AGM in Torquay this spring, Pauline Macaulay, Chair of the Talking Quilts Committee, announced that this three-year project of The Quilters' Guild had been completed on time and within budget. Talking Quilts: Saving Quilters' Stories completed its last day on Friday 31 March 2017. Pauline proudly shared the project's successes, including that over 147 quilters from across the UK had been interviewed, 79 volunteers had been trained in oral history methods, and that volunteers had contributed over 6,000 hours of their own time. Talking Quilts had recorded a fascinating collection of diverse stories that gave a snapshot of today's quilters.

Aims

In April 2014, when Talking Quilts began, it aimed to record, document and share the stories of everyday quilters spoken in their own words, dialects, accents and mother tongues. The project was awarded £89,100 by the Heritage Lottery Fund to complete the following objectives within three years:

- Train volunteers in oral history methods to interview, transcribe and store digital data.
- Interview 80 quilters in eight of the eighteen Guild Regions to preserve their memories and experiences and to share their

involvement in quilting heritage.

- Encourage the general public to have a much greater awareness and appreciation of quilting as a heritage and creative art form.
- Disseminate innovative quilting practices in a variety of new settings.

Getting started

Part-time Project Manager of Talking Quilts, Vicky Martin, travelled to each of the eight selected Guild Regions in England, Scotland and Wales, and trained volunteers to interview, record and transcribe stories, and to photograph the quilters with their chosen quilt. The choice of Regions was based on achieving a geographical spread across the UK. It also depended on the initial enthusiasm shown by quilters in the Regions.

Volunteers began with a training day at a local venue, learning about oral history interview techniques, using recording equipment and taking supporting photographs. Each volunteer committed to interview at least two quilters and travel expenses were met by project funds. Interviews focused around a chosen quilt or quilted item, known as a 'touchstone object', which had been made by the quilter themselves. Each interview lasted about one hour and covered





a variety of topics including first quilts, favoured techniques, stash secrets and the meaning of quilting in their lives.

Volunteers faced challenges and the Project Manager was on hand to support them. Volunteers needed to share recording equipment and sometimes interviewees became unavailable, making interview planning complicated. Most volunteers were also new to oral history interviewing, and had not used recording equipment before, so their enthusiasm was matched with an anxiety about whether they would do a good job.

In progress

The project was well supported throughout by our volunteers and other organisations. Lucy Boyd at LBD Associates chose to support Talking Quilts as her charity project of the year and designed pro bono a logo which colourfully and graphically captured the essence of the Talking Quilts project. It gave us a clear brand which helped us produce professional displays at events and exhibitions.

The Talking Quilts Committee met four times a year to ensure the project was on track (see photo above). Meeting rooms were generously provided by Voluntary Arts Scotland, Hull Jady Accountants in Wigan and the Royal Anthropological Institute in London. Each committee member brought to the project relevant skills and expertise, such as

communications, accountancy and volunteer management. This proved invaluable in overseeing the project's progress. Each member always brought a stitched piece to these meetings to remind us what the project was all about – the joy of stitching.

The Committee held two reviews – one mid-term to be sure the project was on course, to identify any problems and to plan ahead, and one towards the end of the project to evaluate the project for the Heritage Lottery Fund and for the Guild's Trustees.

Achievements

Talking Quilts wishes to celebrate the following achievements:

- 48 volunteers in eight Quilters' Guild Regions were trained in oral history methods.
- 147 interviews with Guild and non-Guild members were recorded, transcribed and saved.
- 16 quilters were filmed in 3-minute videos (see the Talking Quilts website).
- 8 Talking Quilts video interviews and a Talking Quilts project film are available (see YouTube 'Talking Quilts').
- The Talking Quilts website features transcripts, photographs and audio extracts from interviews.
- The Talking Quilts Handbook with oral history guidelines is available free to download from the Talking Quilts website.
- The Talking Quilts Collection is stored at The Quilters' Guild

Above:

The final Talking Quilts Committee meeting. Left to right: Dorothy Baird, Jane Rae, Clare Jady, Pauline Macaulay, Gillian Harrison, Janice Lawson, Vicky Martin and Joan Adams (not present in photo Linda Seward).

Opposite, top:

Region 4 training day on interviewing, November 2015: Amanda Davidge (back to camera) and Barbara Janssen.

Opposite, bottom:

Gopa Raha with her batik quilted wallhanging featuring the Hindu goddess Durga and explaining the story of the Durgapuja festival.

headquarters in York, under the care of The Guild's curator.

- Volunteers contributed over 6,000 hours of their own time.
- Over 400 people visited the Talking Quilts 'Family Connections' gallery at the Festival of Quilts 2016 in the National Exhibition Centre (NEC) in Birmingham.
- Articles about the project have featured in over 20 publications including *The Quilter*, *House Beautiful*, *Oral History* (the journal of the Oral History Society) and *Today's Quilter*.

Taking the stories forward

At the end of March 2017 the Talking Quilts Committee met for the last time to mark the end of their long journey together. There was much laughter, tears, a quiet sigh of relief and an overwhelming feeling of pride at what had been achieved and how we'd helped to save many quilters' stories for present and future generations.

The Talking Quilts Committee is especially grateful to The Quilters' Guild of the British Isles for supporting this project; to all those quilters who agreed to be interviewed; and all the volunteers who organised and recorded the interviews and to all who participated in various ways. We also wish to record our thanks to the Heritage Lottery Fund for their financial support and guidance over the years 2014–2017.

And now it's time to listen to all those quilters' stories and to understand the meaning of quilting in their lives.

Pauline Macaulay, Chair of the Talking Quilts Committee, and Vicky Martin, Talking Quilts Project Manager

Learn more about Talking Quilts

Visit the Talking Quilts website to read interview transcripts, see photographs, hear audio extracts and see 3-minute videos. You can also download, for free, the Talking Quilts Handbook which contains oral history guidelines.

www.talkingquilts.org.uk

More information is also available from The Quilters' Guild curator, Heather Audin: curator@quiltmuseum.org.uk