

# Clever Needlemen

## The Disabled Soldiers' Embroidery Industry and the Embroiderers' Guild

In January 1925 the *Daily News* ran a cheery article under the banner 'Clever Needlemen' that suggested 'While needlework is becoming rarer among women, it has in recent years become commoner among men.' The subject of the article, embroideries made by men badly disabled in the First World War, had been generating much public interest since the war had ended.

Today the contribution of disabled ex-servicemen to this history of embroidery is almost entirely forgotten. Recent examples of needlework by armed forces personnel, the so-called 'sewing soldiers,' from the embroideries by Major Alexis Casdagli, made as a prisoner of war during the Second World War, shown as part of the Victoria and Albert Museum's *Power of Making* exhibition, to Lt-Col Neil Stace, a finalist in the BBC's Great British Sewing Bee, who took his sewing machine with him on tour to Bosnia and Afghanistan, or the late Lt-Col Henry Worsley, special forces veteran and arctic explorer, who took up embroidery to help 'calm his nerves' in war zones, have reignited some interest in what could be interpreted as a tradition of men sewing.

However, little remains known of the disabled soldiers who embroidered during the First World War and throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Articles with titles such as 'Ex-Bricklayer's Clever Embroidery: Disabled Soldier Who Works Through the Night at Design,' or 'Disabled Soldiers as Master Embroiderers,' routinely appeared in the press in the period recounting harrowing tales of suffering and endurance, and redemptive stories of craft as convalescence: 'One or two of the cleverest workers have only one hand; one, who was in the Royal Artillery, has to wear a collar with a support for his chin which prevents his bending his head to do his work, and does it by hanging it on the door and standing looking up at it. All of them suffer much pain, and often have to put the work on one side for long periods.'

Nearly all of the needlework produced by disabled ex-servicemen in the inter-war years was done under the auspices of a single workshop known as the Disabled Soldiers' Embroidery Industry. Although important examples of their work survive in several museums the Embroiderers' Guild collection holds the largest known group of embroideries made by this organisation.

The Disabled Soldiers' Embroidery Industry was founded in 1918 by Annie Collin, under the auspices of the Friends of the Poor, with the help of Princess Marie Louise (a granddaughter of Queen Victoria) and Ernest Thesiger, the actor and artist who was one of the most celebrated male embroiderers of the inter-war years (and later a Vice-Patron of the Embroiderers' Guild), to support severely disabled men who were returning from the war to face the fresh trauma of unemployment. It officially closed in 1955 but some of its men could still be found selling and exhibiting their work as late as 1968.

The unique collection housed by the Embroiderers' Guild gives some insight into the range and development of the workshop throughout the period. They initially produced modest domestic goods such as bags and purses. The two examples in the Guild's collection, one in a simple cotton sateen depicting two birds (EG 1999.31), and one of a more complex diapered pattern (EG T261), show different levels of skill amongst the men. Floral embroidery was a mainstay of the workshop and the two petit point panels in the collection (EG 3541.2 and EG 3541.3), and a floral panel designed as a chair cover, show the influence of earlier Arts and Crafts embroidery. And their interest in historic technique is evident in the small mat with blackwork embroidery (EG 3541.1).

A pincushion depicting the Union Jack (EG 2014.13) underscores the patriotic character with which the production of the workshop was sometimes marketed. And a footstool in the style of an

eighteenth century tapestry is more than likely a design from Weldon's, the sewing-pattern manufacturers, who promoted their workshop in their adverts and publications.

Whilst critics of needlework in the inter-war years dismissed this renewed interest in historical sources and the production of mundane everyday objects, suggesting embroidery 'will survive even the vicissitudes of the late antimacassar and woolwork mat stage,' the Disabled Soldiers' Embroidery Industry also became known for more sophisticated work.

When H.M. Queen Mary, a key figure in the revival of interest in embroidery in the early twentieth century, first encountered their work she 'expressed appreciation of the clever stitching done by the men – equal to that belonging to [the] heyday of embroidery – the eighteenth century.' In 1919, she commissioned an altar frontal for the private chapel at Buckingham Palace, and her daughter Princess Mary commissioned further ecclesiastical embroideries for Goldsborough church in Yorkshire, associated with her husband's family, and where her sons were christened. Queen Mary's other children also became important patrons. The Prince of Wales attended exhibition openings and commissioned 'replicas of old maps made by John Speed during Elizabethan days.' The Duchess of York, and the young princesses, regularly attended openings, and many other members of the extended Royal household provided commissions and support, especially Lady Carisbrooke and the Queen of Spain.

Throughout the inter-war years newspapers regularly ran articles under the heading, 'Clever Needlemen,' one even suggested 'That men often surpass women in needlecraft is [now] an acknowledged fact.' The high-profile commissions, such as the ecclesiastical embroideries the workshop made for St. George's Memorial Church at Ypres and for Cunard's White Star liner, *RMS Queen Mary*, were often cited as evidence.

In 1924 at an embroidery exhibition the press speculated that the work of these 'Good Needle Men' confirmed the fact that 'needlework is not a manly occupation is quite exploded.' In this year the Queen became the Royal Patron of both the Disabled Soldiers' Embroidery Industry and the Embroiderers' Guild, simultaneously. Although, we are close to celebrating its centennial year the Disabled Soldiers' Embroidery Industry is today virtually unknown but the group of their embroideries held in the Embroiderers' Guild collection affords some insight into the history, achievement and significance of this much neglected organisation.

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