



Society of Antiquaries
of Scotland

‘Remember Now Thy Creator’

Scottish Girls’ Samplers, 1700–1872

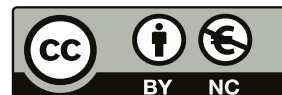
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1.1 and 1.2 Front and back of Lady Ann Duff's sampler bag that held her executry papers, possibly early seventeenth century, linen worked in silk. It shows various small motifs including a deer, pelican in her piety and a rose that may be the model for a later square-headed flower found on some samplers. NRS GD248/27/1, reproduced by permission of The Earl of Seafield.

CHAPTER 1

Scottish samplers

EARLY EVIDENCE FOR SCOTTISH SAMPLERS

As in the rest of Britain, references in written sources mentioning samplers appear in Scotland before there are any surviving pieces. One of the earliest so far found is in the Lord High Treasurer's accounts for 1540:³⁶

Item, send to Lady Jean vij hank of sindry howis of Paris silk, weyand twa unces half unce, price of unce vj s, Summa xv s

(Item, sent to Lady Jean 7 hanks of sundry colours of Paris silk, weighing two and half ounces, price per ounce 6 shillings
Total 15 shillings [Scots])

Item, gevin for ane elne fine bontclaytht to be hir samplaris, price thairof ij s

(Item, given for an ell fine bontcloth [boutcloth] to be her samplers, price thereof 2 shillings [Scots])

Lady Jean was Jean Stewart, one of James V's illegitimate children, born about 1533, so she was seven years old at the time she received the linen and silks for her samplers.³⁷ The king took responsibility for all his children born out of wedlock, so their names occur at various times in the Lord High Treasurer's accounts.

An entry in an inventory of 1561 suggests fabric that has had the design drawn onto it:³⁸

'Twa samplar peces of cammes pennit to be sewit.' 'Pennit' literally means having quills, but as quills were what was used for writing with at this period the context suggests the canvas had been prepared with a design ready to be worked.

Another early record is from the Glasgow burgh records dated 15 March 1577:³⁹

This quilk daye Jonet Finny, sewister, is decernit and ordanit be probaoum of famous vitnes, to delyuer to Jonet Maxuell, dochtir to George Maxuell, four sampillaris within xv dayis nixt.

(This day Jonet Finny, sewer, is judged by evidence of a reputable person to the court and ordered to hand over to Jonet Maxuell, daughter of George Maxuell, four samplers within fifteen days.)

It is not clear from this why Jonet Finny had the samplers or what kind they were. Was Jonet Maxuell another sewer, or a teacher, or were they some she had inherited and did Jonet Finny steal them or borrow them or pretend they belonged to her?

A recent discovery of a spot motif sampler in the National Records of Scotland (formerly the National Archives of Scotland) suggests that Scottish girls also made this type. This particular sampler has been made into a bag and survived because it contained the Executry papers of Lady

Ann Duff (illus 1.1 and illus 1.2).⁴⁰ A label attached to it reads: ‘this Bag contains Papers relative to Lady Ann Duff to be given to Sir James Grant of Grant in the event of her death & before her interment’. It was hoped that Lady Ann had made the sampler as a girl, but it is almost certainly a good deal older.⁴¹ It is of linen, much worn and rather sparsely worked in coloured silks with motifs, some not finished, but a search of published samplers for comparison does not lead to any conclusion about its date or indeed its place of origin. The most likely explanation is that the sampler was found in either her marital or girlhood home and, being practical, she used it as a receptacle for her papers.⁴²

The only reference to an existing seventeenth-century Scottish sampler is found in the catalogue of the Scottish Exhibition of National History, Art and Industry held in Glasgow in 1911. It was worked by Helen Boggie and dated 1689. There was no description included in the catalogue and its present whereabouts are unknown, so the development of specific Scottish traits in samplers before the early eighteenth century is unclear.⁴³ None of the names on surviving seventeenth-century samplers are particularly Scottish, and in fact it is difficult to place where the majority of girls who made them lived within the British Isles. Only the recording of their teacher’s name or initials as well as their own allowed the identification of a school run by Judah Hayle in Ipswich in the 1690s.⁴⁴

Perhaps the way samplers were collected in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries has meant the loss of any firmly dated Scottish samplers before about 1714. The delightful band samplers of the seventeenth century appear to have appealed particularly to collectors, and dealers obviously combed the countryside for them. Collectors such as Sir William Burrell were not interested in provenance when attached to samplers, or indeed to any other decorative domestic items, unless they had a connection to a royal or notable person. This meant that they were sold without their personal history. Moreover, owners often wished to remain anonymous or did not in fact know the identity of the person

named on the sampler or how they might relate to their family. Family history research was not well developed and the means of tracing families in detail was a truly difficult task without the benefits of modern computer programs and the industry of volunteers who have transcribed and published all types of archive material.

A further difficulty is the way items were inherited in the past. Small items could also be given to friends or family members. This is probably how the Kerr samplers arrived at Fingask Castle, Perthshire.⁴⁵ They probably came to the castle through the marriage in 1792 of Janet Murray Scott-Kerr, daughter of William Kerr of Chatto and Sunlaws and Elizabeth Graeme, with her cousin Patrick Threipland of Fingask. The names on the samplers are Stewart [sic] and Nancy (illus 1.3). These were Janet’s brother Stewart, born in 1774, who died in 1797, and her youngest sister, Rebecca Agnes, known as Nancy, born 1777 and died in 1796, and the samplers probably found their way to Fingask when the family home was broken up. This is one of the few instances where it is certain that a boy made a sampler.⁴⁶

Surname changes could occur where an inheritance required it and this can lead to further confusion. Textiles were expensive and clothes were often left to named individuals in wills. Even if the garments did not fit they could have been altered or sold, but household textiles would not have required any alteration. James Beattie, the poet and Professor of Moral Philosophy at Aberdeen University, bought a large quantity of household textiles at a roup, including sheets and tablecloths, on 27 November 1775 from William Urquhart of Meldrum’s effects, which were sold after his death.⁴⁷ If these had been marked with Urquhart’s initials, Beattie would have had them unpicked and re-marked with his own. This was a trick also used by thieves to disguise theft. All these factors have a bearing on the true provenance of samplers, and it is not always easy to determine how a piece was acquired or how it relates to the present owner.

Samplers are not usually mentioned in inventories but a rare occurrence is to be found in the

very detailed inventory of the House of Burray, Orkney, drawn up in 1710. After going through the various rooms of the house listing all the items in them, there is given a list of a miscellaneous collection of things ‘found in the Studdie’. Together with Sir Archibald Stewart’s silver-handled sword, a pair of Hudson’s Bay beaver gloves and footsocks, baby clothes, twenty pieces of wallpaper and a good deal of cloth, is:⁴⁸

It. two samplers for Children.

This early reference to samplers that actually existed proves that Scottish girls were using them even if the reference implies that the samplers were for children’s use and not necessarily by them. But the question then arises as to how they were to be used: as a set of motifs to be copied, or perhaps as a pattern for copy when making their own samplers?

SURVIVING SAMPLERS

Apart from the sampler by Helen Boggie and Lady Ann Duff’s bag which can be deemed to be seventeenth-century, there are very few samplers dating before 1740. The sampler by HB in the National Museums Scotland collection is, sadly, too late to be considered Helen Boggie’s. Based on the dress of the little girl, it is more likely to date from about 1710–20 (illus 1.4). The earliest known dated piece is an alphabet sampler of 1713, now in a poor condition, but it has alphabets worked in red and green, a feature that two samplers dated to 1729 share: Isobel Lumisden’s and one by an unknown girl (illus 1.8).⁴⁹ Other samplers date to the first four decades of the eighteenth century, including an all-letter one by Dorothy Greame [sic], 1734, with the Lord’s

1.3 St[e]wart Kerr of Chatto and Sunlaws’ sampler, made of fabric similar to sackcloth and worked in wool, c. 1780. WK stands for William Kerr Scott-Kerr, Stewart’s father who died in 1782. EG is his mother Elizabeth Graeme, then the initials of his siblings, Alexander, Robert, Elizabeth, Barbara and Janet who married Patrick Threipland 21st in (54.9 cm) x 10¹/₄ (26 cm). NMS A.1993.55.





LEFT. 1.4 HB's sampler of c. 1710–20, showing the sampler maker in her striped dress and embroidered apron. This piece shows all the elements of an early Scottish sampler with red and green letters, more than one alphabet and crowned family initials, worked in silk on linen. 16½ in (41.9 cm) x 7½ in (19.4cm). NMS A.1994.1328.

OPPOSITE. 1.5 Dorothy Greame's sampler dated 1734 has the Lord's Prayer and the Ten Commandments, worked in silk on linen. 12 in (30.5 cm) x 8½ in (20.6 cm). NMS A.1962. 1056, formerly in the collection of the Needlework Development Scheme.

A B C D E F G H I K L M N O P Q R S T V W X Y Z

THE LORDS PRAY
OUR FATHER WHICH

IS IN HEAVEN
THY WILL BE

THY NAME THY KING

DOM COME TO US
WILL BE DONE IN

HEAVEN AS IT IS
SAME IN HEAVEN IS

GIVE US O LORD
OUR DAILY BREAD

FORGIVE OUR DEBTS
AS WE FORGIVE

OUR DEBTORS
LEAD US NOT INTO

TEMPTATION
EVIL KEEP US FREE

FROM ALL UNCLE
SAMPLET 1734

FROM ALL UNCLE
SAMPLET 1734

FROM ALL UNCLE
SAMPLET 1734

ES THINE TO EXECUTE
THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

THOU SHALT HAVE NO OTHER
GODS BEFORE ME NOR

NO IMAGE BEFORE
THEE TAKE NOT THE

NAME OF GOD IN VAIN
THOU SHALT NOT

PROFANE THY SABBATH
DAY HONOUR THY FATHER

AND MOTHER
THOU SHALT NOT KILL

THOU SHALT NOT COMMIT
ADULTERY THOU SHALT

NOT STEAL THOU SHALT
NOT BEAR FALSE WITNESS

THOU SHALT NOT
Covet thy neighbours

WIFE HIS HOUSE HIS
LAND HIS SERVANTS HIS

OX HIS ASS HIS
MULE HIS DONKEY HIS

WIFE HIS HOUSE HIS
LAND HIS SERVANTS HIS

OX HIS ASS HIS
MULE HIS DONKEY HIS

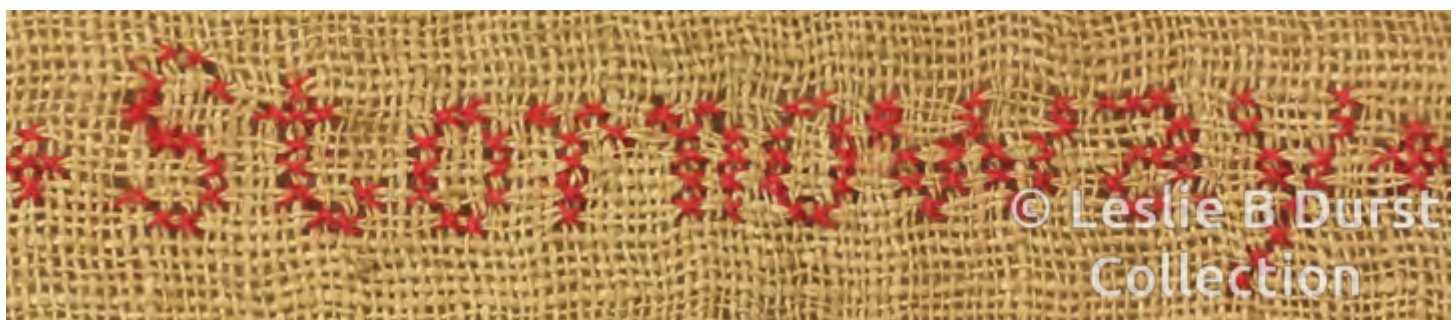


Prayer and the Ten Commandments (illus 1.5).⁵⁰ In the tradition of seventeenth-century band samplers is Jean Morison's of 1728, with band patterns and small motifs as well as several alphabets (illus 1.6).⁵¹ Baby Hunter's sampler of 1737 is a typical long sampler with bands, alphabets and family initials. Although it was given to the National Museums Scotland by a descendant, nothing was known about the maker and his strange name, or indeed if it was worked by a boy, as the donor believed.⁵² By the 1730s the square design was being made, for example by Agnes Morrow in 1736 and Bethia Campbell in 1737.⁵³ But the samplers still had band patterns, alphabets and small motifs (see illus 7.6). Pictorial samplers appear to become popular in about 1740 when Jean Murray worked hers with a house as well as bands and mottoes (illus 6.2).⁵⁴ She also included the Ten Commandments and her parents' initials. This appears to be the date when the characteristics of samplers made in Scotland become more obvious.

Most of the early samplers where the girl has been identified were by the daughters of lawyers, merchants or burgesses in the larger and wealthier trade incorporations, and most lived in the larger towns or cities such as Edinburgh, Glasgow, Perth and Aberdeen. But there are too few samplers surviving from the period before 1740 to say these were the only girls making samplers. By the second half of the eighteenth century girls from a wider background are recorded, girls such as Isabel Ramage, 1770, whose father was a porter; but what did such a description mean at the period? There is no definition in the *Scottish National Dictionary* that fits an occupational description, so presumably the term is English.⁵⁵ Men could change their occupations several

times, as noted in parish records and the later census, so what a man did at the time of a child's baptism may well have changed when she came to make a sampler. Later in the eighteenth century, probably because the provision of education for girls was increasing, samplers are found worked by girls from more rural areas and from less wealthy backgrounds. But it was the provision of schools to the wider community that saw the spread of sampler making to all levels of society and throughout the whole country. In some areas, such as the Hebrides, the Northern Isles and the Highlands, the surviving samplers are mainly quite late in date (illus 1.9). One early example is the sampler made in 1818 by Ann MacColl, the minister's daughter in Tiree, a small island in the Hebrides off the west coast of Scotland, which illustrates the problems girls in such a remote community faced (illus 1.10). Tiree had a relatively large population at the time and in the 1790s *Statistical Account*, written by Ann's father, the Reverend MacColl, there was felt to be a need for more schools and especially one for girls. It is possible that Ann's sampler was worked in a school that was set up in the early years of the nineteenth century as a result. Samplers are recorded by the daughters of weavers, tailors, vintners, farmers, fleshers, servants, bakers, joiners, sailors, innkeepers, maltmen, gentlemen, soldiers, labourers, shipmasters, shoemakers – in fact virtually all possible occupations. What is surprising is that samplers by the daughters of the nobility are rare for any period, as these are the children who would have been expected to have a good education for their time and their parents had the money to acquire it. This is also the case in the rest of the British Isles.

OPPOSITE. 1.6 Jean Morison's sampler of 1728 is narrow with alphabets, band patterns, boxers, small motifs and initials worked in silk on linen. 18 in (45.7 cm) x 8% in (21.9 cm). NMS A.1927.775.





OPPOSITE. 1.7 Mary Macrae's sampler of 1859 includes a script-style alphabet as well as older style ones. Lewis is a Gaelic-speaking area but Mary's sampler is in English, the language that the government required everyone to learn. Gaelic was probably her first language which she would speak at home. She was the daughter of Angus Macrae and Ann Murray, born April 1843 and baptised 2 January 1844 in Stornoway, Isle of Lewis, in the Outer Hebrides. She married Donald Smith of Uvia Mhor, Lewis and they emigrated to Marston Township, Compton County, Quebec, Canada, where they had seven children. Mary died in 1917. 16¼ in (41.3 cm) x 16¼ in (41.3 cm). Leslie B Durst Collection.

LEFT. 1.8 Another early sampler dated 1729 by an unknown girl, worked in silk on linen. This is similar to others that can be dated to the 1720s and early 1730s such as that by Isobel Lumisden (see illus 7.1) with several alphabets in red and green, and crowns. Although there is a date and initials, the maker has not included her name. 16½ in (42.2 cm) x 8⅞ in (20.6 cm). Leslie B Durst Collection.

© Leslie B Durst Collection

A B C D E F G H I K L M N O P Q R S T T Y W X Y Z & 30 31

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12



© Leslie B Durst Collection

OPPOSITE. I.9 Isobel Douglas, dated 26 September 1729. A squarish sampler worked in bands and including three alphabets, although none are in red and green, and family initials. In the lower half are the three most common reversed-flower bands, one with lover's knot, one with six-petal flower and twisted stem, and one with a beaded stem. At the bottom is another leftover seventeenth-century device of small animals including a moth and caterpillar. It is worked on very fine linen in silks. Isobel was the daughter of John Douglas and Janet Muir and was baptised in Edinburgh on 1 March 1717, so was twelve when she worked her sampler. Her father was an armourer and deacon of the Hammermen, a major incorporation as guilds were known, which covered any trade that meant working with a hammer on metal. The Hammermen had been entrusted with the Blue Blanket, presented by King James III to the craftsmen of Edinburgh for their help freeing him in 1482. Isobel therefore belonged to a family of some importance in the city.²¹ (53.3 cm) x 17½ in (44.5 cm). Leslie B Durst Collection.

RIGHT. I.10 Ann McColl's sampler dated 1818 was worked on the island of Tiree. 15¾ in (40 cm) x 7½ in (19 cm). © CSGCIC Glasgow Museums Collection E.1953.92, reproduced by permission.



