Society of Antiquaries of Scotland

‘Remember Now Thy Creator’

Scottish Girls’ Samplers, 1700–1872

Naomi E A Tarrant

ISBN: 978-1-908332-07-3 (hardback) • 978-1-908332-27-1 (PDF)

Tarrant, N E A 2014 *‘Remember Now Thy Creator’: Scottish Girls’ Samplers, 1700–1872*. Edinburgh: Society of Antiquaries of Scotland. https://doi.org/10.9750/9781908332271

Society of Antiquaries of Scotland is a registered Scottish charity number SC 010440. Visit our website at www.socantscot.org or find us on Twitter @socantscot.

INTRODUCTION

What is a sampler?

Samplers worked by young girls in the past have long been a subject for books, which often give patterns of old pieces and suggestions for new ones. On the whole, samplers have been viewed solely from the embroiderer's perspective because they have both fascinated and intrigued. However, there is more to these works and recent research has begun to explore other aspects of samplers. This book considers samplers made in Scotland within the context of girls' lives. It is illustrated by a wide selection of pieces from public and private collections and shows the variety that was made by young girls as they learned needle skills.

Today we assume that samplers are embroidered and that those who make them are embroiderers. Embroidery is the decorating of cloth with stitching and is seen as an extra embellishment, not necessary to the function of a garment or piece. But other words that might be used include 'sewing' and 'needlework'. Sewing usually refers to the making of garments, the most important needlework activity, requiring learning how to join two pieces of cloth to make a secure seam. Fabric was expensive in terms of labour and materials in the days when every part of its production was done by hand. Embroidery is an old skill known at least from the Bronze Age, but was not the only way clothes or furnishings could be embellished.

Embroidery has not always been a craft associated with women, and even today in some parts of the world professional embroiderers are men, for example in India. In order to train in the craft skills needed for working embroidery, small practice pieces must have been used, especially when expensive silk or metal threads were involved, and these are the origin of what would become known as samplers. Samplers exist from many European countries dating from the sixteenth century onwards, although little research has been done on some areas. The making of samplers was also transported to the new colonies in America by the mid-seventeenth century,[1] and by the nineteenth century samplers are found from most European countries and from those areas of the world where European influence or colonies existed.[2] Earlier embroidery traditions from the Nazca and Paracas cultures of South America, for example, also created samplers, although they are not well known.[3] The Paracan examples are dated between 800 BC and AD 100, but none appears to have been published. Samplers were also found on archaeological sites in Egypt dating from the twelfth to the sixteenth century AD.[4] Contrary to popular belief, the mainly geometric patterns on these pieces were not copied wholesale by European embroiderers. Geometric designs are well suited both to weaving designs, where threads intersect at right angles, and to embroidery, and there is a very long tradition of these patterns from most civilisations. Both the Egyptian and Paracan examples are true samplers, and as each had a rich embroidery tradition the

workers were presumably trying out stitches and patterns.

DEFINITIONS

The word 'sampler' derives from the Old French word *essemplaire*, meaning an example, which in turn comes from the Latin *exemplum*. In English the word has traditionally been regarded as meaning an exercise in embroidery worked by a young girl as part of her schooling, which is the subject of this book. But there are other meanings for the word, and today if the word 'sampler' is entered into a search engine on the Internet there will be hits for other definitions.

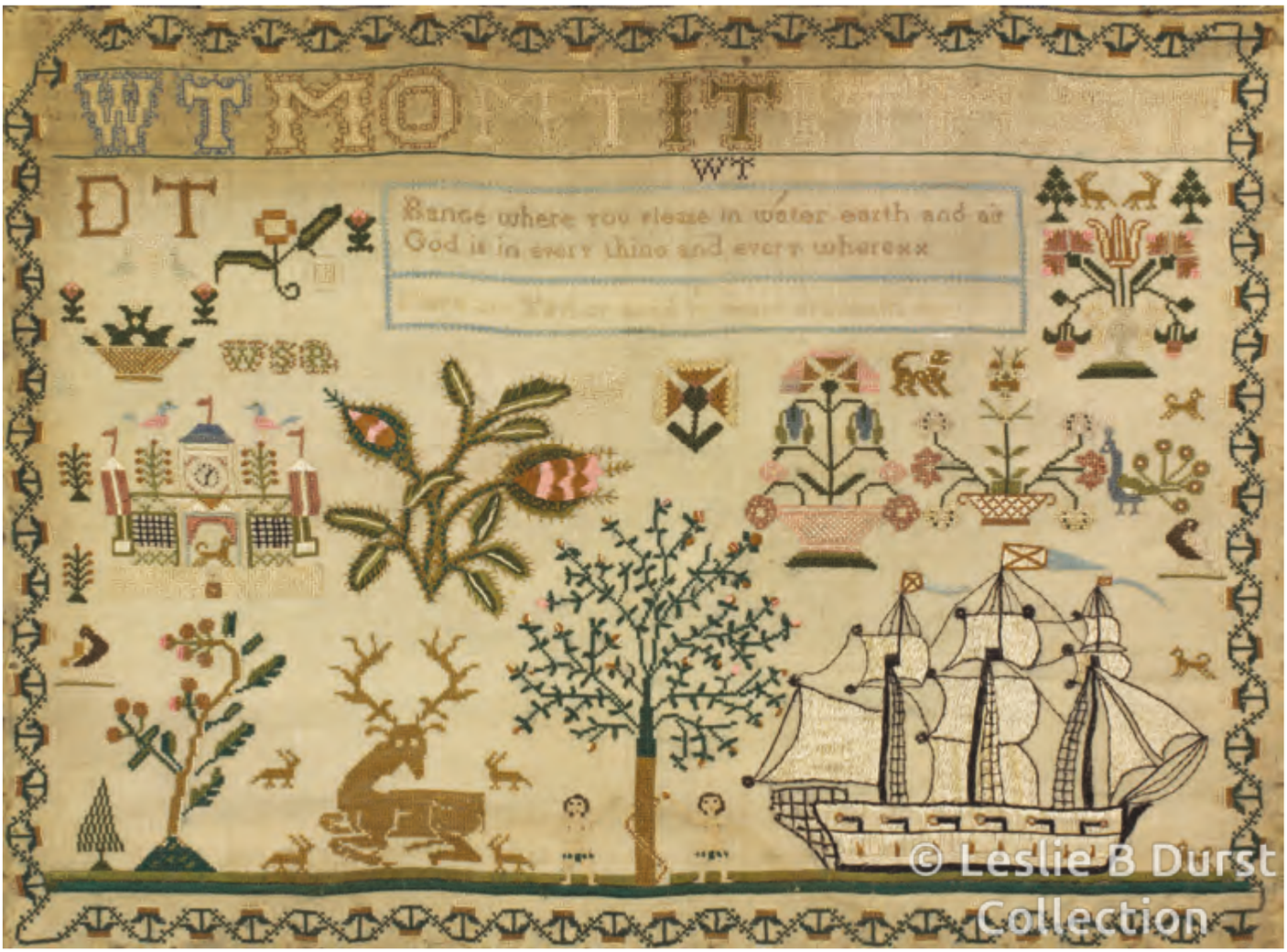
The word 'sampler', or variations of it, was used in both English and Scots from the medieval period onwards and had a common source. Etymological dictionaries help to pinpoint when the object might have been in common use and also at what date it is first noted in both written and printed sources. A search of older dictionaries reveals the meaning of the word 'sampler' when the objects were actually being made. For Scotland, the various languages that were spoken there, Scots and Gaelic as well as English, need to be explored. In Middle English, *saumpleweth* is a sampler of cloth used to match a colour, while a *saumpler* could be a copy of a book from which other copies were to be made, a model, a replica and a surgical instrument, as well as a surname: Stephanus le Sampler is recorded in 1250 but it is not clear to what his surname related.[5] No mention is made of the word, though, in relation to embroidery. There are few dialect words in English for a sampler. *Sampleter* was used in Warwickshire, while *sampleth* was found in Durham, Cumberland, Lancashire and Yorkshire, and *sampluth* too in Yorkshire.[6] Like English, the Older Scots tongue, as the Scots language up to 1700 is known, used the word in the first instance to mean an example to be imitated, a model, for all kinds of things, with its use in embroidery as a secondary definition. It had religious connotations too, as Christ was to be seen as a 'sampler', a model for people to follow. However, in the *Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue* there are references to the use of the word from at least 1540 in the Lord High Treasurer's accounts as well as in letters and inventories in the later sixteenth century.[7] This is well before we have any surviving pieces, exactly as in England and Wales.[8]

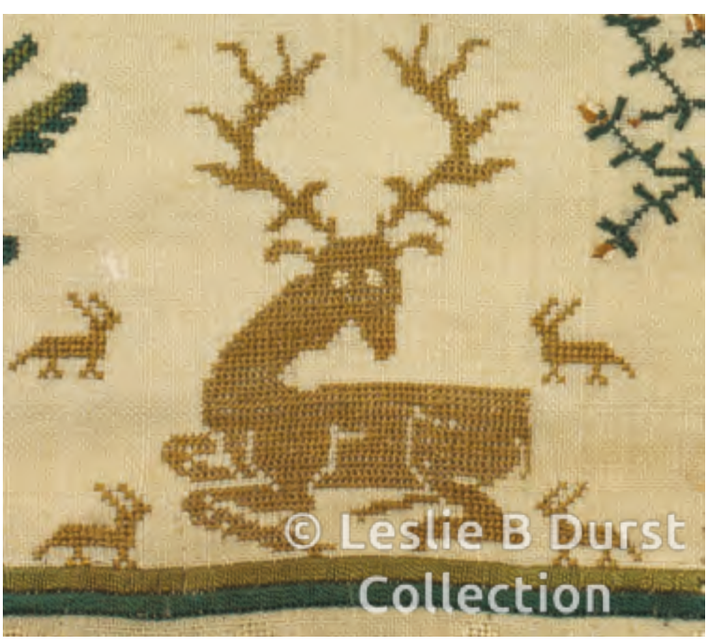
In the earliest printed dictionary of Scottish Gaelic, Robert Armstrong's *Gaelic Dictionary in Two Parts* of 1825, *samplair* is given in Gaelic for 'sample', 'example', and in the English–Gaelic section the word 'sampler' appears with *samplair* as its translation. In the Highland Society of Scotland's *Dictionary of the Gaelic Language* published in Edinburgh in 1828, *samplair* is included and translated as 'a copy', 'pattern', 'exemplar'. The word 'sampler' does not appear in Alexander MacDonald's *Gaelic and English Vocabulary* of 1741. Later dictionaries, including Edward Dwelly's *Faclair Gàidhlig* (1901–11) seem to follow with *samplair*, although the word has dropped out of today's dictionaries of Scottish Gaelic. Armstrong's dictionary of 1825 with its Perthshire bias might well catch the most reliable version of 'sampler' in Scottish Gaelic, implying also that this was the area where the working of samplers might well have infiltrated the Gàidhealtachd.[9]

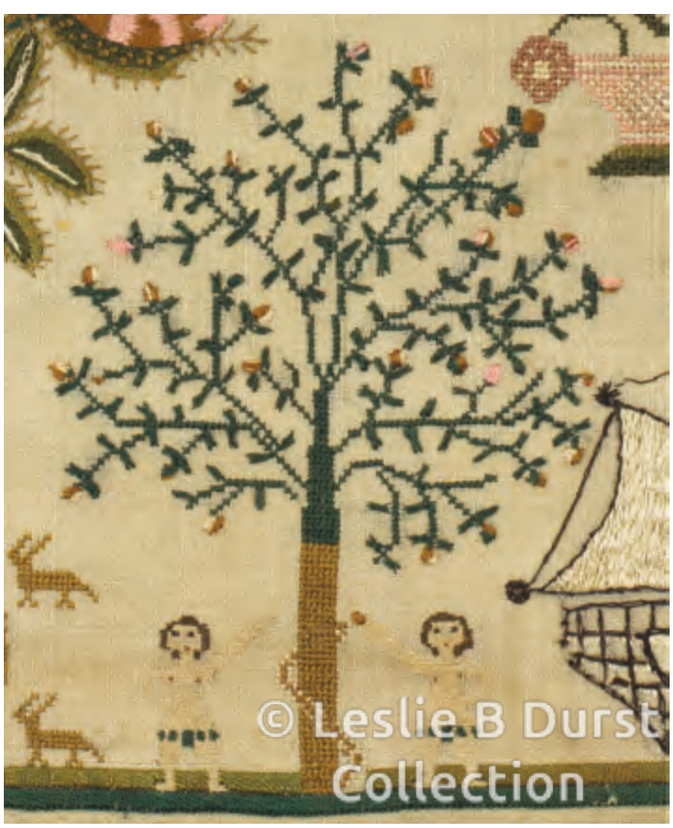
EARLY HISTORY

In medieval Europe there were embroidery workshops staffed by professional embroiderers making both church vestments and pieces for secular clients. The so-called Bayeux Tapestry is actually an embroidery that would have been made in a professional workshop, and it demonstrates that such establishments were well known

OPPOSITE. I.1. Maryann Taylor was born in 1796 in Arbroath, the daughter of William Taylor and Margaret Gold. In 1806 she worked her sampler, which shows some similarities with those worked by Mrs Sturrock's pupils in that town, particularly Jesie Balfour's. However, there is no 'school' pattern for any of the girls' samplers, except that they all appear to choose fairly obscure verses. Maryann includes a stag lying down, a very old motif found on seventeenth-century samplers. 20 in (50.8 cm) x 16 in (40.6 cm). Leslie B Durst Collection.


WTMOMIT
WT
DT
Range where you rlease in water earth and air
God is in every thing and every wherexx
WSB
© Leslie B Durst Collection


© Leslie B Durst Collection


© Leslie B Durst Collection

by the late eleventh century. The apprentices at these embroidery workshops probably learned by doing small examples, and other embroiderers must have tried out new stitches, patterns, effects or colours before they were used on expensive new garments and hangings. So samplers would have existed, they just do not survive from that era, and so far no written evidence of them has been found.[10] Presumably, like many crafts, the skills of the embroiderer were taught by example and working, and not by a written text, and the only printed books that dealt with any aspect of the craft were those with patterns for use in making lace and embroidery that start to appear from the 1520s, published in Germany, Italy and France, although not until the 1590s in Britain. Most of these books copied patterns from each other, so that over about a hundred years there was little difference in the designs produced.[11] It is not clear how widespread domestic embroidery was before the latter part of the sixteenth century, but there is ample evidence for women in their own homes making a wide variety of household and personal items trimmed with embroidery and lace from the mid-century onwards. This suggests that domestic embroidery was increasing.

The professional embroiderers who had staffed the medieval workshops must have found life more difficult after the Reformation in the mid-sixteenth century abolished vestments for churchmen, as these would have been a major part of their work. The royal courts in England and Scotland both used professional embroiderers to make the official pieces, such as coats of arms for thrones or suits of clothing for members of the royal family, and this work continued.[12] Records of the Broderers' Company of London were lost in the Great Fire of 1666 but various articles survive that show that work for professional embroiderers was still important in the seventeenth century and that the traditions of the workshops of the medieval period lived on. In Scotland there is the Hay Banner, possibly worked for the visit of James VI and I to Edinburgh in 1617, a coat of arms and a trumpet banner of Charles II, and a herald's tabard with Queen Anne's Arms dating to 1702–7, all in National Museums Scotland (NMS).[13] As well as these official embroideries there are the two sets of wall hangings known as the Lochleven and Linlithgow hangings and wrongly described as the handiwork of Mary, Queen of Scots, which are also the work of a professional embroidery workshop.[14]

The lack of surviving garments and furnishings before the mid-sixteenth century makes it difficult to assess the importance of domestic work, that is, embroidery done by women in their homes for their own use and not to sell. It is not clear how much making of garments went on at home in this period and how much might have been done by women who made their living from this work. Plain sewing, that is, the making of under- and over-garments and household textiles such as sheets, is a hidden aspect for most periods, while embroidery was to be seen in furnishings and clothing. From the sixteenth century, embroidery on garments becomes more obvious, as the portraits of the period make clear. Surviving inventories also suggest that the increase in wealth led to more textiles being used in homes and many of these were decorated with embroidery. Other crafts that came to be associated with women's skills also became popular at this time, such as lace making and knitting, and both of these were practised by professionals. These too added to the comfort of clothing, the better fit of knitted stockings, for example, or to their decoration, particularly lace, which together with embroidery could add considerably to the cost and elegance of a person's dress. What made all the products of these crafts desirable were the skills that someone who had been well taught and who worked at them all the time brought to them, and that required a professional. Women who were busy running a household, looking after a family or working to earn money for a living did not have time for decorative work. It required time and a father or husband with money to allow a wife or daughter leisure to embroider.

The earliest dated sampler so far found in Britain is that worked by Jane Bostocke for her cousin Alice Lee and dated 1598, although there are earlier dated ones from Germany and the

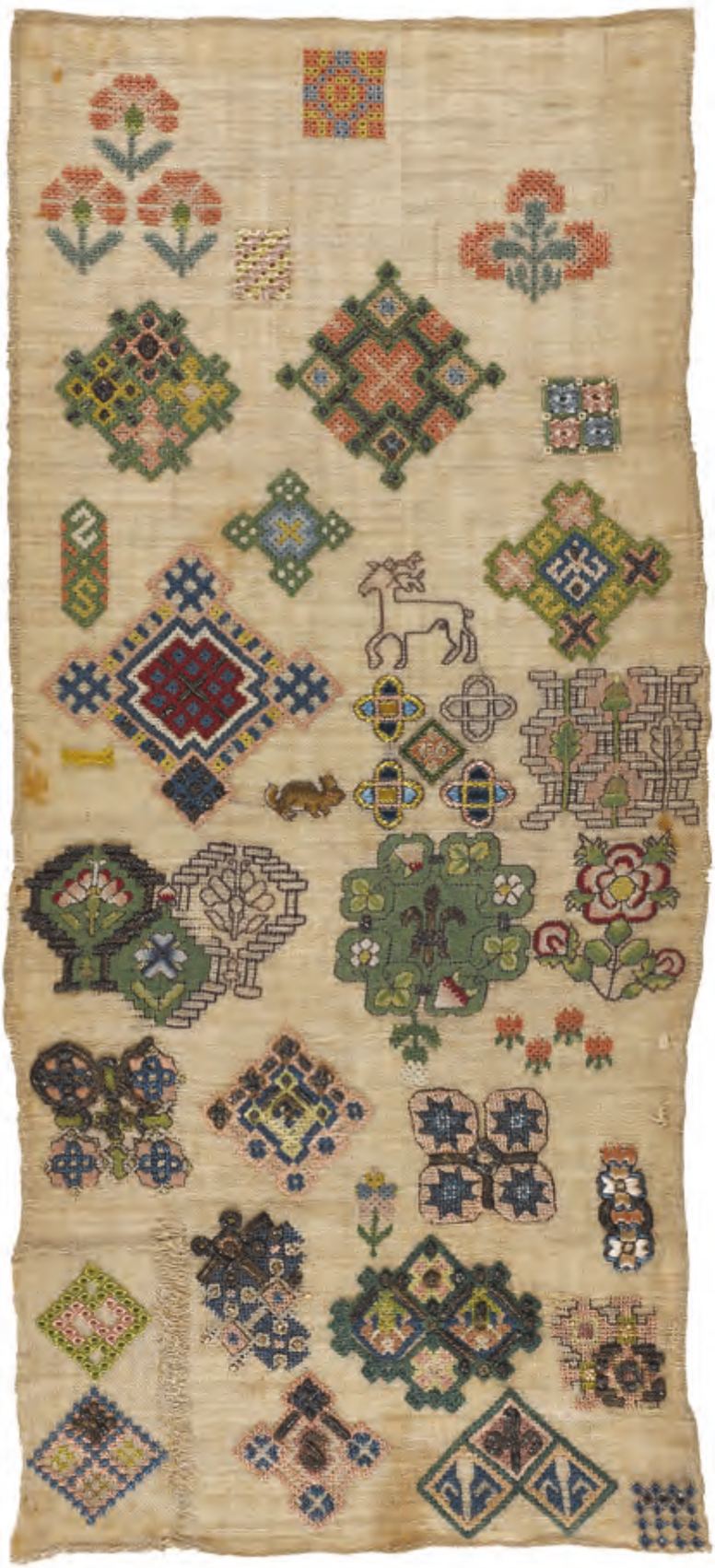
Netherlands.[15] There are, however, several of the so-called 'spot motif' samplers that might be earlier in date, named from their patterns or small designs, such as an animal, scattered at random over the linen.[16] A recent discovery of a sampler, possibly by Mary Fitzalan, who died aged sixteen in 1557, shows popular blackwork designs, such as those used on shirts and chemises of the period, as well as a Garter motif, relevant as her husband, the Duke of Norfolk, was a Knight of the Garter.[17] Names or initials and dates begin to appear on samplers in the early seventeenth century but do not occur with any frequency until after 1660. So far none of these surviving seventeenth-century samplers with names can be ascribed to Scottish girls.

It could be argued that the word 'sampler' does not fairly describe the embroideries that girls made after the early years of the seventeenth century. Surviving samplers that can be dated before the early 1600s suggest that the samplers were in fact examples of current embroidery patterns and techniques that a woman might want to preserve as a record for future use. It is not clear that they were worked by girls and they could just as easily have been the work of women, who, because the printed pattern books were expensive, chose a sampler as a cheaper way of recording their interests. For example, the Countess of Atholl wrote to her sister Lady Levinstoun in 1560 requesting the return of her sampler, as she had 'many warks [works] begun bydand [remaining] on it'.[18] An embroiderer, having worked the stitches onto cloth, would then have known how to work them again. The Jane Bostocke sampler is a case in point.[19] She was nearly forty when she made the piece for her cousin, who was two years old.[20] It is unfinished, which may mean that Jane died before she could complete it. What survives suggests she is making a pattern book for the little girl with a number of popular designs that could be used for both clothes and furnishings. Wealth increased in the sixteenth century through more trade and new routes, and helps to account for the greater number of household textiles towards the end of the sixteenth century. This trend is very marked in all European countries and perhaps explains why samplers appear in increasing numbers as more and more girls and women were embroidering items.

Spot motif samplers are considered to be the earliest and truest samplers because they show examples of motifs, patterns, stitches and colours (illus I.2). On these pieces the various motifs are worked in a haphazard fashion wherever there is a space and sometimes patches are found in them.[21] Others are more ordered, such as Jane Bostocke's. The designs and patterns could all have been used on contemporary embroidery, as surviving pieces and portraits show. By the mid-seventeenth century the more popular long samplers start to be very ordered, with bands going across the width, and the occasional alphabet, dates and initials are found.[22] Also to be found are white-work samplers that include needle lace patterns and there are some pieces that are half white work and half coloured embroidery.[23] By the eighteenth century the sampler tends to be square in shape and develops into a more structured piece with border, alphabet, name and date, and sometimes with a verse.[24]

COLLECTING AND RESEARCHING SAMPLERS

Interest in samplers started in the late nineteenth century, just as they were beginning to stop being made as a routine part of a girl's education. There are several mentions in the periodical *Notes and Queries* from the 1870s, mainly in connection with the verses on samplers, but it is surprising to find that some of the early writers, such as Mrs Head, do not appear to understand why samplers were made, nor do they record anything about the makers. It is as if these women who wrote about samplers had not made any themselves and therefore did not understand their significance. This is reinforced by the sometimes sneering references to samplers in the press of the late nineteenth century, for example in the *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser* for 27 November 1886, in a review on the improvement in contemporary embroidery. In the 1890s there had been two articles on samplers published



in art journals of the day, but the first attempt to study the history of samplers was by Marcus Huish in 1900. He worked on an exhibition of samplers in London for the Fine Art Society that was enlarged to include 'Pictures in imitation of Tapestry' and miscellaneous embroidered items such as clothing. The book associated with the exhibition, though, dealt only with samplers and pictures, not clothing. A second edition was published in 1913 and until recently was still in print. This book was illustrated with several black and white photographs and a few in colour and attempted to set out a framework for dating samplers. Huish looked for but did not find any regional differences. The book and exhibition led to several other articles being written in various journals, but only one, by Florence Lewer in *The Essex Review* (1908), attempted to look for samplers specific to a particular area. In Scotland, G A Fothergill wrote an article in the journal of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland on Scottish samplers, but he did not find any of the traits that today can be associated with samplers made there.[25] Subsequently samplers formed part of the Scottish Exhibition of National History, Art and Industry held in Glasgow in 1911. However, the catalogue was not illustrated with any pieces, and although several samplers have since been identified as being in the exhibition the whereabouts of the majority are now unknown.[26] One aspect of this interest in samplers was that they had a better press in the twentieth century, and they were always good for small filler pieces in the provincial newspapers, such as that in the *Dundee Courier*, 24 October 1929, on 'Why the Sampler has come back into fashion'.[27]

The exhibition in London also appears to have sparked off a collecting mania for samplers among people who already collected embroidery, such as Sir William Burrell. Some of these collections, for example those of Mrs Longman and Dr Glaisher, found their way into major museums, and the Victoria and Albert Museum and the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge both hold large collections of samplers from all parts of the world, while Sir William's collection is to be found in Glasgow in the Burrell Collection.[28] Fothergill also mentions a large collection of samplers in the possession of Mr and Mrs C Rees Price in Glasgow, numbering about ninety, although only ten were Scottish. Most of the latter appear to have been lent to the 1911 exhibition. A collection made by Dr Douglas Goodhart in the mid to late twentieth century is now owned by the National Trust and is at Montacute House, Somerset.[29] Sampler collecting fell out of popularity by the mid-twentieth century but the increase in all types of textile sales from the late 1960s onwards led to renewed interest in them and several books were published. One of the earliest and still one of the best is Averil Colby's, published in 1964, in which she attempted to define elements of samplers. Museums also published illustrated catalogues of their sampler collections but today these are published online.[30] Samplers lend themselves to being photographed digitally and as they are flat do not need the kind of mounting or support that clothing requires to show its structure.

Several authors have attempted to use samplers and the embroideries that are closely related to them to study aspects of women's lives. In America samplers have long been regarded as 'folk art', which they are not. Folk art can be defined as the work of artists who follow current trends but have not had the training, so that their work has a naïve quality to it. In America, for example, this includes many portrait painters. It can also include objects that are not part of contemporary culture but which have a specific relevance and use to 'folk', the people, usually in rural areas, who make and use objects for their everyday work, for example bird decoys. Samplers do not fit into either of these categories and should be seen as part of mainstream culture

OPPOSITE. I.2. Spot motif sampler, early seventeenth century, showing various motifs and patterns suitable for cushions and covers, with a small patch in the bottom left corner. This sampler could have been worked by an adult rather then a child and shows a wide variety of stitches. Linen worked in silks and metal threads in braid, Ceylon, buttonhole, double running, eyelet, long-armed cross, rococo, satin, tent and pulled stitches. 18¾ in (47.6 cm) x 8¼ in (21 cm). NMS A.1962. 1058, formerly in the collection of the Needlework Development Scheme.

worked by young girls. Seeing samplers as part of a folk art tradition has led some writers to view them as naïve, but all children produce such work before they have learnt the requisite skills. Other writers with a feminist perspective have used samplers and embroideries to look at the way women were regarded in the past, and how they themselves saw their position, with reference to the subject matter of their work.[31] Examples include the seventeenth-century embroidered pictures with their emphasis on depicting some of the female heroines of the biblical stories, such as Esther, Judith and Susannah. The verses on samplers have also attracted attention in studies about the religious attitudes of the period, particularly, through the morbid quality of some works used, the attitude to death.[32] Recently, more research has been directed to studying any regional differences, as well as identifying schools or teachers by the style of work produced by their pupils.[33] Following on from the work of Betty Ring, several major regional surveys in America have recently been published. But there is still much that can be learned about girls' lives by studying their most famous surviving work, their samplers.

Collecting may be the most obvious afterlife for samplers, but an intriguing and unexpected use can be found in the pages of *Hansard*, the official report of the proceedings in the Houses of Parliament. In 1908 the United Kingdom government introduced the Act that is regarded as one of the foundations of the modern welfare state, the Old-Age Pension Act. This gave pensions to people aged seventy and over from January 1909. Because the government had estimated the number of likely seventy-year-olds from the 1901 census returns, they were alarmed by the greater numbers who actually came forward to claim pensions. This meant an increase in the money needed to cover the extra number of pensions and required asking Parliament to vote for additional funds. On 1 March 1909 there was a debate in the House of Commons on the Supplementary Estimates for 1908–9 regarding the extra funding required for Old-Age Pensions. The debate was long and detailed with instances of some Members of Parliament bemoaning the fact that some people were cheating and others saying that proving entitlement to a pension was proving difficult for some people and that the appeals procedure against refusal was flawed. In the middle of the debate Mr Burns, the President of the Local Government Board, which was responsible for the administration of the Act, spoke of the difficulty the administrators found themselves in because of the absence of baptismal certificates and other documentary evidence. He then went on:

> It has been sometimes interesting, at times pathetic, at times humorous, when one saw the way in which some of the applicants brought auxiliary evidence of their ages. One of the most interesting cases which I had submitted to me was that of a lady of Irish nationality whose only evidence that she was seventy-two was a sampler which she had made when she was a girl of ten or twelve years of age. In the corner of the sampler was worked a record of her birthday in 1836. That was the only evidence she had and the Pension Officer went into her case, and I personally concerned myself in it. It shows how much harm may be done if great trouble is not taken in a case like that. The lady admitted that she had begun crocheting in the date in the right-hand corner, but her mother represented to her that the two corners were not exactly the same. The applicant remembered that she had picked half the '1836' out of the sampler, and then put it on one side, and had left it for forty years. The old lady was asked whether the half of the 36 left in the corner of the sampler was not her real age.
>
> That was a case in which the President of the Local Government Board had personally to intervene, and I can say that nothing gave me greater pleasure than on Sunday night last to walk across Clapham Common, with two inches of snow on the ground, to visit the old lady, who was in her bed, and to inform her

> that in my judgment it had been satisfactorily determined she was more than entitled to the benefit of the doubt.

Proving their age was considered to be relatively easy in England and Wales, which had had registration of births, marriages and deaths since 1837, but much more difficult in Ireland, where such registration was only introduced in 1864. The 1841 and 1851 censuses were also permitted but the irregularities of these and inconsistencies between the two made it difficult to rely on them. During a debate in the House of Commons in May 1909 on the large number of people in Ireland disallowed pensions because they did not have any documentary proof of their age, the following contributions by members are of interest:

> Mr T M Kettle: I remember one afternoon, on which the President of the Local Government Board of England came down and told us a very pathetic story, which was received with the enthusiastic approval of the House, of how he had tramped over the snow, down somewhere near Clapham Common, to visit an old lady, and how he had directed that she should be paid an old age pension, although the chief evidence, and the only evidence, on her behalf, was a year which was worked on a sampler. I am not sure that I know what a sampler is, but my hon. Friend near me tells me it is something which was worked in wool. At any rate in this case the date was worked upon it, which the President of the Local Government Board thought was sufficient evidence on which to grant a pension at Clapham. I suppose it was, but I do not think it would be held sufficient evidence by the Local Government Board in Ireland; so far as I know there is no human being of the type of the President of the Local Government Board connected with that office who would tramp two miles across the snow to award a pension to anybody, except perhaps himself.

Another Irish member, T P O'Connor, later in the debate remarked, 'I notice that my young Friend with all his erudition did not know what a sampler was, but a sampler to me is like some dim familiar affectionate echo from that past which, in my case, spreads over a much longer period of life than that of my young Friend. A sampler was a familiar article of furniture, if I may so describe it, in every household in Ireland when I was a boy, the same age as my hon. and learned Friend.'[34] How many people were able to claim their pension by this means is not known, or if a sampler ever proved a person's age for any other reason.[35] Indeed, it is a good thing that the elderly lady mentioned did not unpick her age or date from the sampler, as some girls are thought to have done.