

Preface to The Scottish Diaspora Tapestry

Scotland's diaspora across the globe is especially conspicuous for its cultural inheritance, whether this be enchanting poetry of Burns, the skirl of the bagpipes, the exuberant dancing, the taste of malt whisky, or even just a mention of the haggis. Host communities are quickly captivated and engaged.

Today it is suggested that more than 30 million people [six times the population in Scotland] across the world proudly claim and celebrate their Scottish descent, and each has a tale to tell as to how their families made their journeys to the far corners of the earth and made new lives. The largest concentrations are more recent and to be found in the USA, Canada, Australia and of course in England. But Scots have for seven centuries or more travelled and settled from Sweden to Brazil, from Italy to China.

Two questions immediately arise. Why did Scots so migrate and how were they able to make such a significant contribution in their new homes?

All too frequently migrations are the result of persecution or famine, and although Scots left during the brutal 18th century Clearances that is only a small part of the story of the diaspora. The earliest travelled to Europe as soldiers reaching the highest commands and others were powerful merchants. As the British Empire burgeoned Scots went as scientists, engineers, doctors, missionaries and administrators. They travelled in a spirit of optimism, of self belief and adventure. They were inquisitive, necessarily hardy and brave.

It is impossible to explain their obvious global impact and success without pinpointing two great advantages they enjoyed. Firstly, the teachings and practice of John Knox had insisted during the 16th century Reformation that Ministers in their parishes must establish schools so that each could have their own relationship with the Lord. By the time Scotland gained access to the English colonies after the Act of Union in 1707 it had available legions of educated people who could and did play a vital role. Furthermore that foundation layer of educated people enabled Scotland's universities to achieve pre-eminence in many fields through inspired research and the fashioning of The Enlightenment.

Such is the context for the fascinating individual tales told in the panels of the Diaspora Tapestry. Each tale we include is but a Scottish snapshot told by those 'volunteers' who have first stepped forward. They make no claim to be representative in any deliberate way, but as is abundantly clear they are Scots' descendants with fascinating tales to tell and the unquenched enthusiasm and pride to embroider them onto linen. They have also provided their own language translations where that is needed. They have donated thousands of hours to their artworks and gladly gifted them to Scotland care of us in Prestonpans. It is quite impossible to express the depth of our gratitude to them all. Their willing participation means so very much to us as we continue to espouse heritage arts as our own fundamental strategy to nurture our *own* community's post industrial future.

But we do of course realise the great responsibility we have assumed by presuming to ask Scotland's diaspora to tell the nation their tales through us as stewards and custodians. We vow that well into the future, way beyond the first benchmark for Homecoming 2014, we will be welcoming more and more 'volunteer' communities from across the globe who wish to add their tales in an ever growing artwork.

We are frequently asked how has it come about that Prestonpans should have embarked on such a seemingly ambitious project – asking the nation's diaspora to share their tales with us here, just a small town 10 miles east of Edinburgh on the East Lothian coastline. Here's the answer!

Prestonpans has been a small community on the southern shore of the Firth of Forth since a Scandinavia leader Aldhammer settled here. Following the Norman Conquest the monks of Newbattle Abbey were granted coal mining rights in 1189 and began using the coal to make salt – an industrial activity that continued until the 1960s. The accessibility of coal attracted a succession of industries such as glassmaking, pottery, chemicals, soap, brewing, brick making. A convenient local harbour, eventually known as Morrisons Haven, developed to facilitate trade. The Forth itself was also extensively farmed for Pandores oysters shipped south to England.

By the 1960s however the coal mining activity was no longer internationally competitive and the pits closed. And like dominoes the industries which had worked with them closed in turn. By the end of the 1960s no industrial activity remained, the community was stranded like so many others have been over the centuries. Much was done to help of course but our community was in danger of losing its self esteem. Against this backdrop in 1997 a determined campaign was launched to re-kindle our self-esteem using the arts to tell the town's 1000 year history. It began with the painting of largescale outdoor public murals and today there are more than 60. But it quickly extended to other branches of the arts – theatre, poetry, literature, song, music, storytelling. And in 2008 we considered embroidery.

Embroidery was a surprise, triggered by the wish to tell the story of Bonnie Prince Charlie's famous victory close by our town in 1745. His story, his campaign to regain the throne of his grandfather, was directly comparable with William the Conqueror in 1066 – which has been told in the Bayeux Tapestry. Accordingly the goal was set to do the same.

Although the Prince's stunning victory was in Prestonpans, he had landed eight weeks previously at Eriskay in the Outer Hebrides and made his way across the Highlands raising his army and capturing Edinburgh. The tapestry we proposed would tell all of that story and under the principles of community art would desirably involve embroiderers along the route he took. As soon as we invited the affected communities we were overwhelmed with proud-to-help volunteers. Not only did they want to join the project but they wanted to be sure we got the tale right so far as they were concerned. Thus it was that our original 79 panels became 104, each a metre wide, and all were ready for public display in July 2010. Since then our Prestonpans Tapestry has been seen by over a quarter of a million visitors – not least in exhibitions along the Prince's route, but also in France at Pornichet/ St Nazaire from whence he embarked for Scotland in 1745 and in 2013 we exhibited in Bayeux itself, alongside the very artwork which was our inspiration.

The ambition and audacity of what we attempted and achieved in Prestonpans has already contradicted any notion that embroidery is a dying art. We have been asked for guidance by an ever growing number of communities from Ireland, New Zealand, the Netherlands and indeed Edinburgh itself! By 2013 over 1000 stitchers inspired by Alexander MacCall-Smith have created *The Great History of Scotland* tapestry, over 150 metres long, which attracted over 30,000 visitors to its first showing in the Scottish Parliament. But our own arts community was itself restless. Could there be, should there be, a second grand tapestry project created here in Prestonpans? And if so, what might its focus be? How could it follow or match the celebrity success of the first?

What we knew we wanted was to capture once again the widest possible volunteering of embroiderers and their communities. We wanted any second great embroidered community artwork to enable Scottish tales to be told by those who are proud to be their custodians. We also knew it must be wildly almost impossibly ambitious to captivate everyone's imagination just as Bonnie Prince Charlie had in 1745 and again in 2010. Moreover we knew that being ambitious is hugely motivational for the stitchers. They could readily see how they were about to be part of something that would have an enduring life of its own and take their tales to interested audiences they could never normally expect to meet or reach.

Finally, we wanted to create an artwork that would add grandly to our growing collection of outstanding heritage community art in Prestonpans. We have always had ambition to become a significant destination for visitors, as part of our economic renaissance. Our murals, our arts festivals, our re-enactments, our award winning arts hub at The Prestoungrange Gothenburg – they already attract 25,000 and more visitors each year. But with permanent displays for not one but two outstanding tapestries those numbers can realistically reach beyond 100,000.

Whilst all this contemplation was going along, the Scottish Government announced it planned to make 2014 a Year of Homecoming. A first Homecoming had been presented with great success in 2009 and we had made our own modest contribution in Prestonpans. But for 2014 it seemed we could think ambitiously. It came to us in a flash. We would ask Scotland's Diaspora to embroider and tell us their tales when they came home in 2014. It was a different idea, not Scotland telling the diaspora but listening to what the diaspora had to tell us.

Without the internet accessibility we have today it would have been truly daunting, but with such resources initial contacts could be made at little cost. As soon as we started we could feel that overwhelming enthusiasm once again. The diaspora we contacted loved the notion of telling its tales back to Scotland particularly in such a permanent and proud way. They were ready to embroider. To test ourselves, to be sure we could really do it, we prototyped in Sweden and in Italy where we already had the closest ties. They came up trumps.

Emboldened, we invited the Scottish Government, Creative Scotland, Bord na Gaidhlig and Visit Scotland/ Homecoming 2014 to lend their support. They immediately understood its potential, not just as a 2014 project but as a lasting testimony to the diaspora's achievements to be celebrated across Scotland. Most recently we have been joined on the project with doctoral and faculty research at the University of West of Scotland. This additional support meant we could develop an exceptional multilanguage website/ social media interactions and make face to face field visits to

many of the key diaspora communities in Italy, Sweden, the Netherlands, France, Lithuania, China, the USA, Canada and Australia, supplementing our internet researches and augmenting publicity and PR for the Homecoming in 2014. We also met with and learnt from the many 'reverse' diaspora communities living in Scotland today whether as short-term businessmen/ students or as permanent residents.

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It has been suggested that the Scottish Diaspora Tapestry should be concluded with the artworks received in time for launch at the 2014 Homecoming. The premiere opens in Prestonpans on May 31st 2014 and runs throughout our annual 3 Harbours Festival. But how could we? Certainly we do not wish to do that nor seemingly does the diaspora as more and more communities volunteer to tell their tales, are indeed determined to tell them and want to join the tapestry we have in hand. So 2014's exhibitions will be a benchmark, Bench Mark One. More will follow. So if reading here your community wishes to speak up and stitch up, simply get in touch and the wheels will be in motion for you to join

Secondly, as we have learnt and are still learning from the first great Prestonpans Tapestry, the real challenge lies ahead over the next decade or two and more. How can we present the artwork, help its many visitors learn more of the nation's diaspora and marvel at the handiwork of the embroiderers? How can we maintain and conserve it for generations to come? How can we find it a permanent home here in Prestonpans?

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These comments began with the observation of how conspicuous Scotland's cultural inheritance always is around the globe. Let us close on that same note by asking this question: what nation has provided the world with such an anthem as Auld Lang Syne that captures so beautifully the essence of its diaspora?