

## ‘A 5,000-hr. labour of love’: The kneelers of St John’s

As many of you will have noticed you can now sit down in a pew with only one kneeler at your feet. Over the years our precious kneelers have piled up around us, most no longer used. In order to make it easier for us to keep the church clean, we have placed the more elaborate kneelers in the nave of the church and put the plainer ones in the side aisles. Many with an affection for a particular kneeler have taken it home, donations having been put towards the spire fund.

Who made these kneelers? Who learnt the art of when to use a ‘Florentine stitch’ or an ‘Hungarian Diamond’? And what inspired the creation of over 300 tapestries, each one unique? Many of these tapestries are initialled, so occasionally we can identify the embroiderers who created them, but all too often they are unclaimed and their makers unidentified.

As the Scissors Paper Stone community project unfolded this year, we realised that not only do the numbered pews we fill connect us with men and women whose rental payments are in our map of 1890, but the kneelers at our feet connect us with the parishioners who made them.

Though kneelers have been made in Britain from the seventeenth century onwards, parish production didn’t get going in earnest till after the Second World War. Visit Wadham College in Oxford to discover the first politically sensitive kneelers, stitched in honour of the Stuart dynasty and commissioned in the early seventeenth century by Stuart sympathiser, Dorothy Wadham. Thanks to the accession of the Hanoverians a hundred years later, the Stuart coat of arms made these kneelers politically suspect. Because they were tucked away in an archive these sumptuous works have survived in almost their original glory.

For the last fifty or so years, our kneelers have been used by thousands and are witness to the craftsmanship rather than the political beliefs of their makers. Though some of them have worn at the seams, most still look crisp and clean, thanks to the efforts of our cleaning teams over the decades. The wealth of imagery is extraordinary. Who made this predatory whale and the balletic Jonah? And this commanding eagle, the symbol of St John the Evangelist? (Perhaps with a worm in its mouth?)



Pauline Heath and Rowan Ireland have photographed a huge number of our kneelers which we will send to the Kneeler Archive, set up because nationally kneelers are going out of use.

Explore: <https://archive.parishkneelers.co.uk/>

The theme of this year's Scissors Paper Stone exhibition is 'Unseen'. Local artists are responding to the lives of the people who maintained the life-styles of St John's pew-renters in the nineteenth century. The parishioners of St John's who created our kneelers are almost as unseen as these nineteenth century domestic workers. Sadly, we have no record of their names and the kneelers they made.

We do know that there were two particularly productive groups of kneeler-makers: one in the 1970s led by Pam Booker and Sadie Lockwood and the other in the early 2000s led by Eileen Stirling.

David Booker has shared with me information and photographs that help us get a sense of the first kneeler project. The report about the project in July 1974's Sheffield Telegraph, was entitled 'A 5,000-hr. Labour of Love'. It opens with the proud declaration that 'Sore knees are a thing of the past at St John's Church, Ranmoor, Sheffield.'

The photograph shows on the left David's mother, Pam, who organised the creation of 100 kneelers and on the right Mrs Sadie Lockwood of Caxton Road Ranmoor 'who designed the motifs'. I have been unable to learn much about Sadie but we have another monument to her craft and design skills in the church. To the right of the vestry door is her magnificent tapestry commemorating the burning of our first church in 1888. She was clearly a highly skilled embroiderer or 'broderer'.



Pam Booker and Sadie Lockwood 1974



Pam Booker in the 1970s

Pam Booker was not only a skilled needle-woman, she also had the great gift of enabling people to work together. She built up a team of people partly because of her own sociability. Pam had, since the death of her husband, brought up her two sons on her own. Her husband had survived four years in a German Prisoner of War Camp during the Second World War but he died of Hodgkins disease in 1955. Supported by her brother and sisters, Pam lived in Fulwood and was a devoted mother of David and Keith. She was a member of St John's, welcoming people into her home for all kinds of social gathering. The making of kneelers brought many women together.

The second wave of kneelers flooded our pews at the beginning of this century, when Alison Wragg, our assistant priest, was given a kneeler kit by her dear friends Doreen and Ted Bales. Alice Underwood was a member of Eileen Stirling's team. Alice remembers,

*I did a scene of a bird on blossom, if I remember right - using a picture in one of my embroidery books (The Country Diary Book of Crafts). I think this was crab apple blossom.*

The images were generated in all sorts of different ways. Some were personal and some from a booklet called Church Hassocks by Designers Forum. 'Broderers' were encouraged to put their initials on the side. Most worked from home rather than in groups.

The famous Winchester Cathedral embroidery project 1931-1938, celebrated in Tracy Chevalier's novel A Single Thread, was apparently a highly organised but social affair. Unsatisfactory work was to be unpicked and colours used were carefully monitored. The inspiration for this project was the gifted Louisa Pesel, from Bradford. She served as the director of the Royal Hellenic School of Needlework and Lace in Athens, Greece, from 1903 to 1907. Her career was brought to a halt by the need to care for her elderly parents in Bradford. When they died she was able to resume her nurture of the nation's embroiderers. Her imagination and

practical skills were an inspiration to all those who worked with her, many of whose lives, like hers, were to a certain extent circumscribed by domestic duties.

Elizabeth Bingham has collected images of kneelers across the country. Her book, *Kneelers: The Unsung Folk art of England and Wales* (2023) will eventually find its way into the St John's Library. It is full of tranquil images of what she calls 'The Pleasures of Peacetime': footballers, fishermen, steam trains and my favourite, a slip road on to the A14 to be found in All Saints Sproughton. Do explore the history of this craft which has been part of the tapestry of our spiritual lives for so long.

*Mary Grover*

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