

A Stitched Conversation.....



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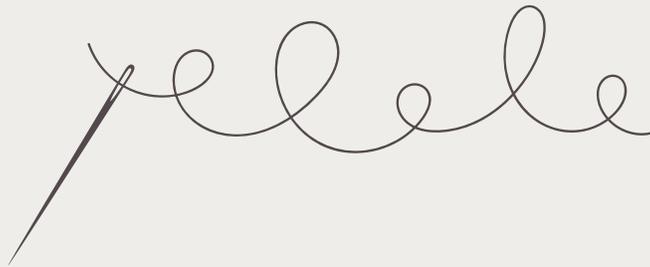
The Stitched Conversation

Postscript



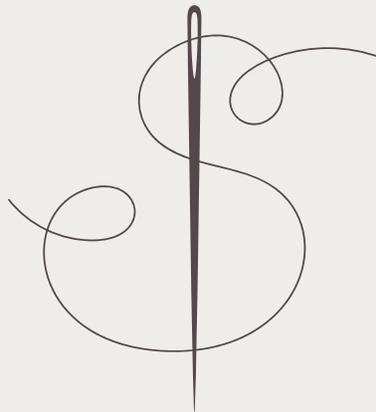
Introduction

We had a small idea. We wanted to test whether stitch was a 'language' capable of being read and understood. We hatched a plan. We would begin a 'stitched conversation' in Cornwall on the southern most tip of the UK and send it on its travels right up to the northern tip of the UK, before sending it to the home of Stitched Stories - the Isle of Arran. As the world spun in the chaos that was the global pandemic we wondered if this experiment would help us individually and collectively. We hoped it would provide a useful distraction at a time when we were all facing such challenges. So we began to assemble the group. 44 people joined the conversation which took almost a year to complete.



How did it work?

We decided on a stitched postcard as the keeper of our language. Each person would stitch a postcard in response to the one stitched by the person before them in the journey north. Each person was sent three photos. The first being the supplies used by the person before them. This gave us all a sense of starting points. The second photo was of the postcard as work-in-progress and this gave us all a sense of the creative process. The third photo was of the finished postcard. We asked each stitcher to leave their final thread hanging - this is where the next stitcher began their part of the conversation. It was a simple idea complimented by a simple plan. But would it work?



We asked members what motivated them to take part in this project. Kerrie reminds us all about the importance of finding something she 'wanted to share in'. The challenges of this time seemed to make finding new ways to connect even more important. Rachel made an excellent point. She felt the 'structure of having a specific week' to complete her piece 'kept her on track.' During the pandemic 'time' has taken on a different role in our lives.

Some of us have found we have had periods when we have had more free time than ever before. That takes some adjusting to and we hoped this project would give members something positive to focus on. Lots of members were 'intrigued' (as Linda puts it) and interested to see how it might work. Julia reminds us that it would be lovely to meet up when the conversation is over and we shall certainly arrange that. Stitched Stories has a very popular [zoom programme](#) so we will add that meet up to the list. Helen was keen to support Stitched Stories in our many creative projects.



Members are the life-blood of the project and it is important to always remember that. Although we have members all over the world this particular project was limited to the UK as there was a chance of a gallery exhibition. International post has been hit hard by the pandemic and we didn't want beautiful postcards getting lost. For some members their local fellow stitchers are the people that inspire them and there are lots of groups like that in the UK. Janette has certainly found her local community, West Kilbride, has other stitchers that inspire and encourage her. In these strange times online groups became the new local. Several members, like Janet, had moved just before or during the first lockdown in the UK. That must have been a challenging experience so we are pleased that Janet and others joined us.



The conversation might have 'travelled' virtually but the map below illustrates where members live.



Let the conversation begin

Our stitched conversation began on the 4th October 2020 when Judy from Cornwall gathered her supplies in anticipation of her stitched conversation starter.



What must it have been like to go first and begin the conversation knowing how far it might travel? Judy tells us -

'It was an honour to go first and felt quite special, but also a bit scary as I had nothing to respond to so just had to take the fabrics I had chosen and begin. The stitching led the way.'

If we are truly honest Judy's final wee sentence is so important. For this to work the stitching had to lead the way. True to her word, Judy got underway and created a beautiful postcard to begin our conversation.



From that point on very few actual words were exchanged. Judy ran this project on behalf of Stitched Stories and we are all so grateful for her calmness and sensitivity as she gently steered us through using emails to communicate to pass on images to the next person in the conversation.



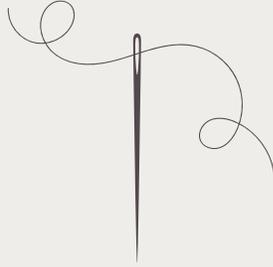
Every Sunday an image of a stitched postcard dropped into a member's inbox and the conversation would continue. The members never met, never talked, just stitched.

Nothing was shared on social media. It quickly began to feel like a secret project. For the experiment to work we had to keep it secret but that brought a quietness and gentleness to the experience that served as an antidote to a busy, noisy world.

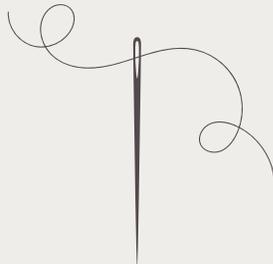
Instructions were brief but we did ask members to think about the cloth they used and to re-use, where possible. Stitched Stories is acutely aware of the harm the textile industry has done to our planet. We wanted to encourage members to re-use and re-purpose where possible. Beyond that, we wanted them to select their cloth with care, mindful that all cloth tells its own story.....

Cloth Stories

In this experiment cloth was the carrier of our conversation, We asked members to complete a short questionnaire after they had finished their stitched postcard. This was a way of understanding the process better. We are recording just some of the answers in this book by way of illustrating some key findings.

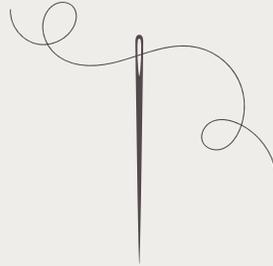


Members did think about their cloth. Judy began our conversation with an old handkerchief given to her by her Gran. Judy believes in 'the importance of preserving things from the past.' Judy had a sense of freedom in the choice of cloth she made. The rest of the members would need to study the cloth that came before their part of the conversation. They did just that. Di from Barton tells us that she chose 'accent colours of autumn which spoke to me from the previous piece.' Di also refers to the history of her cloths she used representing a sense of 'security' for her. And so, early in the conversation, our relationship with cloth has bubbled to the surface.



Cas reminds us of the importance of 'found materials and papers.' Her week fell in Remembrance Week and Cas wanted to choose cloth that marked that occasion, particularly in a time when people couldn't attend services.

Many members used cloth as a way of remembering and holding onto special memories. Arguably, our stitched conversation began before a single stitch was made. Cloth has meanings that are capable of evoking powerful memories. Bettina says 'My mum was an extremely talented and inspiring craftswoman who would have loved, and thoroughly approved of, this project. By choosing cloth that once belonged to her mum - it became 'a way of connecting both her physical and creative legacies.' That connection between cloth and people was an early finding in this project. Many members found the same experience when selecting their cloth. Further to that many of the people remembered were mothers, grandmothers or similar powerful role models in our lives. The members of this stitched conversation are all female. The strength of women begins to flow through every stitch. Nina reminds us of the importance of giving 'fabrics a second life.' There was much repurposing in this project and members should be very proud of their commitment to not buying new cloth when we are surrounded by so much of it in our everyday life.



Tina told us 'I enjoy making beauty out of discards.' That is something we see a lot within the Stitched Stories community.



Some of Lesley's cloth had travelled from India with her. Members extended the significance of their supplies into other areas such as lace and thread. Some of Lesley's threads come from a flea market in Italy where the seller gave her the entire box of 124 skeins that belonged to her late mother.



New fabric from old threads

Everything in Catriona's supplies was re-used, re-purposed or given to her. The embroidery threads were given to her by a friend who was giving up embroidery.



Being part of this stitched conversation meant that members needed to make a 'response.' The first way they did that was through the supplies they gathered. In gathering supplies members were already 'reading' the postcard before theirs. They were then seeking out supplies that could begin to form a response. In our conversation no words were used. These were exchanged from the very beginning with cloth, thread, lace, yarn, beads, buttons etc. Perhaps we can think of our gathered supplies as our letters and the words emerge as we begin to stitch?



Reading Stitched Postcards

When the photos arrived in members' inboxes it was time for them to 'read' the postcard. This is where the experiment jumped into life. Each member had just a week to stitch a response with their own postcard. More than one member talks about having ideas and then that all changing when the previous postcard dropped into their inbox. The danger is that de-rails people and challenges their creative thinking. What is really interesting in the questionnaire responses is that previous postcards resonated with so many members. Far from derailing, members embraced the conversation and their place in it. Carol tells us that the 'use of colour' and 'theme of nature' in the postcard before her inspired her with her creative offering. If you look through the postcard conversation you will see that nature is the dominant theme. That might always have been the case but in a time when people have connected with nature on a deeper level (due to the pandemic) this connection may well have been predicted. We had asked all members to include a section of seed stitching. We felt that this would offer a cohesive element to the whole conversation and we also felt that seed stitch is particularly meditative and, thus, useful at this time.



Use of seed stitch by Charlotte



Use of seed stitch by Beth

There is a fine balance evident in this experiment. Members tended to find that the previous postcard influenced them through a specific viewfinder. This is well explained by Cas who tells us that the 'previous postcard, in its gestural direction of landscape, informed rather than dictated my choice.' Reflecting on this, others have experienced a similar response. Sheena gives us great insight into her creative process by informing us that she believed her stitched response was similar to a spoken conversation when we are reminded of something else while 'in conversation.' That speaks to the potential intricacies of both a spoken and stitched conversation. Looking through the stitched postcards see if you can spot things that remind you of something? What would your response be?

Sue talks of wanting to get 'the feel' of the previous postcard by trying to establish the meaning behind it. Extracts from Sheena and Sue's postcards are below. Both these members were stitching in November. Sheena captures autumn so well and Sue's begins to nod towards winter. I wonder how much the changing seasons influence spoken conversations?



Autumn captured by Sheena



A little nod to winter from Sue

Some members talk of it being 'easier to read' than they anticipated it would be. Alison tells us that 'as soon as I read the postcard prior to mine I knew exactly what I was going to do.' Alison also talks of trying to analyse the 'mood' of the postcard and eloquently informs us that she felt she had 'taken the conversation to a similar place but at a different time.'

There are most certainly times when we try to 'shift' a spoken conversation or 'move it on' so it is fascinating to see that being considered in a stitched conversation.

It is also fair to say that some members did not find 'reading' the postcard easy at first. Helen talks of 'the style and colours' being 'unlike anything I would have done myself'. In response Helen focused on elements and shapes rather than colours. That is a form of extraction which is also used in spoken conversation. Sometimes in responding to someone else's contribution we will extract what makes sense to us. In our stitched experiment you can see that happening throughout the entire conversation as elements are extracted and inserted into a stitched response. Helen picked up the shape of a leaf from the previous postcard and 'found a similar shape' in her fabric. Here we might be mindful of conversations where we are keen to show some understanding and even empathy with the person we are conversing with. It is a subtle but beautiful part of any conversation including our stitched one.



Christine also eludes to some problems in her questionnaire responses. She talks of 'getting bogged down trying to achieve the effect' she was after. Christine also talks about starting to 'doubt' what she was doing. Eventually she understood the need to 'trust' her own 'feelings' and accepted that her piece was moving the conversation on. Comparing our creative work to other people's work is, arguably, never been more problematic since the invention of social media. How many of us compare our work to others as a first response? Christine has taught us the need to embrace our own creative journey. We can, of course, admire other people's work but our creative journey is unique to us and, as such, should be celebrated. A small extract from Christine's postcard is below. Doesn't it immediately make you want to learn the significance of the stamp and piece of paper? That is the joyful thing about a good conversation. It raises as many questions as it does answers and leaves us feeling inspired.



Tina teaches us about the joy of interpretation. Her postcard became an ongoing internal dialogue with herself where she constantly revisited the image of the previous postcard. Her response in the question about how she found the experience reads like a story and is wonderfully uplifting. She speaks of treasure chests and sand and sea and takes us on a little written journey. This is where the stitched conversation shines very brightly. Each postcard is its own story, connected and disconnected in equal measure. Interpretation is a deeply personal process and no two people will draw the same conclusion. But, we shouldn't expect them to. Our stitched postcards are small pieces of art that are, by definition, open to interpretation. Whether it is Tina's treasure chest or Lesley's heart in flight it is all truly mesmerising.



Tina's treasure chest



Lesley's heart in flight

Charlotte talks about giving the next person in the stitched conversation a 'link' or a 'prompt' and that defines much of what we see in this experiment. Members were mindful of the postcard that came before but also mindful of what might follow. That is a wonderful thing to see as it speaks of a sense of community. Stitched Stories has thousands of members and lots of projects. But each project has the capacity to form a smaller, more intimate community and that has never been more important in most of our life times. The digital travelling of the postcard echoes the time the experiment finds itself in. Disconnection is a feature of daily life but it is still challenging to get used to. Charlotte also talks of the stitches in the previous postcard and her own being a 'common language.' Sometimes we have conversations just to find out how much we have in common with other people. In that context this stitched conversation was no different. All members were looking for things they had in common.

Rosamunde speaks of something very special. In the previous postcard she read the silence and stillness in it and found herself honouring that. Rosamunde talks of creating her postcard as a 'journey' and wanting to 'gently move' the conversation along. The two extracts below illustrate what she means I think.



Catriona's gentle piece beautifully moved along by Rosamunde



Gaelle reminds us all about the importance of being part of something bigger than we are. She enjoyed the 'slow process of the whole project' as well. There was no rushing this conversation - it would take as long as it needed to. We aimed to finish it within the year and we did. From deepest Cornwall to northern Scotland members all played their part one stitch at a time. Lorraine lives in Wick and was one of the last members to stitch. She talks about how much she enjoyed the project and stitching her wee postcard. Like some other members, it was the first stitching she had done in a while and proved an excellent way to pick up this type of creative work again. We know from the 52 postcard challenge how much people love creating a small and manageable piece of work. In seeing Lorriane's postcard it reminds us about the importance of place. She has captured the beautiful landscape that is so dominant in her part of the world. I wonder if we can see other familiar landscapes as our eyes travel through the stitched conversation?



The Stitched Conversation



Judy Payne, Penryn



Jasmine Payne, Penryn



Ailsa Poll, Falmouth



Beth Owen, Truro



Di Harris, Barton



Cas Holmes, Maidstone



Kerry Keeble, Minster on Sea



Sheena Booth, Southend



Sue Arran, London



Bettina Langlois, Bristol



Alison Wyatt, Bridgend, Wales



Kerrie Barker, Neath



Helen Pighills, Oxford



Christine Alexander, Colchester



Mandy Lockey, Hitchin



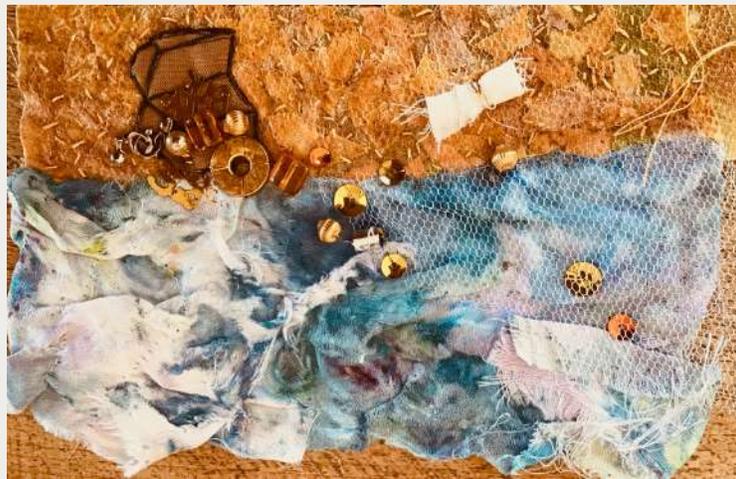
Rachel Willis, Biggleswade



Linda James, Thetford



Nina Smith, Wroxham



Tina Potter, Norwich



Monica Schichtel, Lakenheath



Jane Pullan, Bourne



Lesley Brankin, Malvern



Alison Mesley, Malvern



Julia Rollit, Droitwich



Helen Wratten, Kidderminster



Carol Young, Hull



Charlotte Treglown, Settle



Lynn Huggins-Cooper, Newcastle



Kate Stuart, Newcastle



Carole Gascoigne, Selkirk, Scotland



Catriona Mason, Hamilton



Rosamunde Parsons, Irvine



Janette Dow, West Kilbride



Karen Teal, West Kilbride



Claire Phillips, Largs



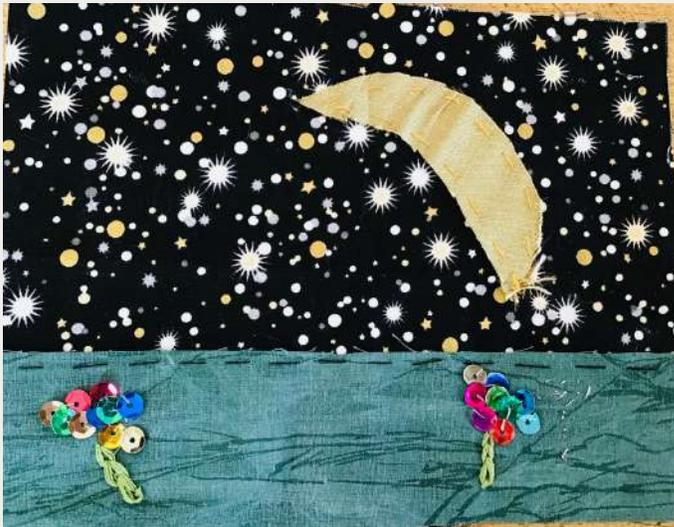
Janet Ferguson, Dalkeith



E Coral Smith, Isle of Arran



Gaelle Chassery, Kilmartin



Anne Kent, Perth



Karen Clements, Stonehaven



Penny Stevenson, Inverness



Lorraine Tait, Wick



Vicky Thompson, Dundee



Fiona Doubleday, Isle of Arran

The conversation closes

Postscript

Our final question in our questionnaire asked members if they could write one sentence about their relationship with stitching. We thought we would share just a few of them -

'Sixty-seven years ago, when I was four years old, my Gran (who was a tailor) gave me the lifelong gift of stitching which has been my constant friend through my life's ups and downs.

Catriona Mason

To me stitching is calming and gives a sense of accomplishment.

Rosamunde Parsons

Stitch is the one physical thing that, in the way it connects one cloth to another, it equally connects us all to each other, a history and a purpose.

Cas Holmes

The needle is my pencil and my thread my colour and it is a way of expressing my creativity in a different art form.

Karen Teal

Stitching is letting the thread tell the story.

Gaelle Chassery

I have stitched and created for as long as I can remember, it's my way of relaxing, staying rooted/grounded and also challenging myself. Through sharing these skills it's also my link to those in my past, present and my future.

Karen Clements

Stitching, as a creative medium, means so much to me. It comes from my heritage and is embedded in my life in a way I find difficult to describe, as it is a source of joy, comfort and remembering.

Sue Arran

Stitching to me has been my saviour, through a life changing cancer diagnosis in September 2019 with mastectomy in November 2019. It really did help me focus on the 'here and now' right through to the strange times of 2020. The power of stitch is incredible.

Alison Wyatt

Stitching is fabric art, no boundaries, just creations.

Kerrie Barker

I guess it has always been a big part of my life as I have always done creative projects with my mum and she has taught me a lot about stitching. So it is something that means a lot to me as it's something we can do together.

Jasmine Payne

And so our conversation comes to an end. The journey has been remarkable and the experiment well tested. We have all 'read' the conversation and so will decide, individually, whether stitch is a language capable of being read and understood. At Stitched Stories HQ we believe our stitched conversation can, indeed, be read and understood but that interpretation is something for the individual. We hope that you have enjoyed our conversation and that you might drop by Stitched Stories again some time to see what we have got up to next? We would like to take this opportunity to thank each and every member of our stitched conversation for taking part and producing a truly beautiful 'conversation.'

We will leave you with two photos. One is of Judy with her postcard at Land's End and the other is of Lorraine and her postcard at John o' Groats. What a fabulous way to sign off....

Fiona Doubleday & Judy Payne
Stitched Stories & Wellbeing

