

Effort paying off as 'Bayeux Tapestry' comes to life

The project, a true labour of love for a team of Norfolk volunteers, will go on show when Norwich Castle reopens. **Rowan Mantell** reports

The main difference between the embroiderers of the Bayeux Tapestry, almost 1,000 years ago, and its Norfolk sequel today, is that the needlewomen of the Norwich Castle tapestry don't get paid.

Across the county an astonishing piece of needlework is taking shape, telling the story of Norman Norfolk in wool and linen. In homes around the county, 21st century women have spent hundreds of hours each bringing the knights in armour, feasts, battles, war horses, wildlife, peace treaties, savagery and ceremonies of 11th century East Anglia back to life – in the manner of the Bayeux Tapestry.

"The skill, the attention to detail, the creative intuition, they would have all got a job in the 11th century. They would have made it on to the Bayeux Crew," said Norwich Castle museum curator Agata Gomolka.

When it is finished the 18m long tapestry will hang in the king's bedchamber of the restored castle keep.

Norwich artist Fiona Gowen was commissioned to design it in the style and colour palette of the Bayeux Tapestry. She takes up the story of William the Conqueror's 1066 victory over slaughtered arrow-in-the-eye King Harold, as the new king discusses plans for a new castle in Norwich. The story continues with East Anglian hero Hereward the Wake rebelling against the Norman invaders, and ends with the final serious resistance to the Norman conquerors as Emma, Countess of Norfolk and East Anglia, defends Norwich Castle against the besieging king's army. At first glance the cartoon-strip

storytelling – the knights and their horses, the fighting and the feasting, the castles and the boats, all set within a border of farmyard and mythical animals – could be the world-famous Bayeux Tapestry which was created in Kent almost a millennium ago.

But the vibrant figures and colours, embroidered through thousands of hours in homes across Norfolk, have all been stitched in the past couple of years.

Jean Fraser of Bergh Apton spent two-and-a-half years with her section of the tapestry, showing Hereward resisting the Norman conquerors in Ely, and said she particularly enjoyed embroidering the horses. And she let her grandchildren, aged eight, 13 and 15, add some hidden stitches so that they could be part of the historic project.

Nine of the 14 panels are now complete, with one of the remaining sections set aside for members of the public to stitch their own contribution to the remarkable project.

"It's incredible, it's absolutely mind-blowing, the time, the talent, the effort that's gone into it," said

Fiona, on seeing the finished panels laid out alongside each other for the first time.

Just like the original tapestry, this is actually an embroidery, and the volunteers had to learn the 'Bayeux stitch', practising on small pieces of material until they were ready to tackle the actual work. They are also creating wall hangings, banners, cushions and decorations for the restored royal bedroom, and visitors will be able to handle some of the practice pieces to get an idea of how they were created.



Volunteers who are embroidering the Norwich Friends' Tapestry include Vivienne Tuddenham (left) and Pat Swinborne

Although the 21st century tapestry began with regular communal sewing sessions, after the pandemic struck many volunteers sewed their sections in isolation.

Wendy Tholen of Brooke said they had a head start when it came to pandemic hygiene as they were already washing their hands every 10 minutes while sewing, to keep the linen (from Bayeux) clean.

In the first frame is a picture of Norwich Castle – stitched by Fran Sales of Mulbarton who was new to embroidery when she volunteered to help make the new tapestry.

Jacky Pestell, of Hempstead,

spent more than 500 hours, stitching up to five hours a day, on her section of the tapestry which shows William the Conqueror pardoning Hereward and includes a wonderfully colourful and stylised Bayeux-style twisted tree. "I couldn't wait until I got to the tree. It was just the movement in it," she said.

Jenny Furlong, of Holt, worked on a panel showing ginger-bearded Hereward leading his men in rebellion through the Fens, almost every day for many months. She had lived in the Fens and said she was delighted to be given that section. Its borders were embroidered by Judith Rolfe of Shouldham who said: "I loved

doing the birds – but I had to pull out the first bit of chain mail I tried because it looked like a flint footpath!"

Pat Swinborne of Surlingham spent many hundreds of hours embroidering the marriage of Earl Ralph and Emma, including the borders to the scene, and admitted: "I was absolutely ecstatic when I finished. It had been in our sitting room for 18 months."

The new tapestry will be called the Norwich Friends Tapestry in honour of the Friends of Norwich Museums, the oldest such organisation in the country, which celebrates its centenary this year and funded the project. When



Volunteer embroiderers Wendy Tholen and Jean Fraser with their section of the tapestry



Part of the Norwich Friends' Tapestry



Battle rages in the Norwich sequel to the Bayeux Tapestry



Jacky Pestell with her section of the Norwich Friends' Tapestry

Pictures: SONYA DUNCAN

Norwich Castle Keep reopens in 2023, restored to its original glory as a royal palace, the tapestry will hang in the king's bedchamber – telling and becoming part of our history.

The original Bayeux Tapestry is believed to have been made in Canterbury around 1070. It belonged to Bayeux Cathedral, in Normandy, until the French Revolution in 1792 and has been on display in its own museum in Bayeux since 1945. Negotiations are underway to bring it, on loan, to England for the first time since it was created here.

The Bayeux stitch is the 'colouring in' after a shape has been outlined in stem stitch. It

involves a first stage of simple long 'laid' stitches, very close together, with each stitch anchored by tiny 'couch' stitches over the top, and then enhanced with a three-dimensional 'picot' stitch. Both the Bayeux and the Friends' tapestries use just two stitches – stem and Bayeux – which leave hardly any thread on the back of the linen, because hand spun and dyed wool was expensive almost 1,000 years ago.

An astonishing replica of the original Bayeux Tapestry is being created in Wisbech by Mia Hansson.

Norwich Castle Museum remains open while the central keep is restored.