



Leaving the Tyne, 1915

In memory of the men of the merchant fleet, and in particular the many immigrants and naturalised citizens who, sometimes in the face of xenophobic hostility, continued to serve their adopted country faithfully and well, and brought up their children to think of it as home.

In especial memory of my great grandfather Henry Frederick Bloom.

Inspiration and Techniques

I'm not usually good at responding to a design brief unless I can warp it, sometimes out of all recognition, into something I want to do, so when I received the information about the Embroiderer's Guild project, my first thought was not to attempt it. Then the shade of my grandmother jogged my elbow and asked me to think again.

Grandmama taught me to embroider, nurtured my enthusiasm, and would probably be both bemused and (I hope!) impressed by what I have done with what I was taught. It bemuses me, sometimes, and I'm the one doing it! She was also half-Swedish, born nine years before the beginning of the First World War, and a year before her father became a naturalised British subject. Great-Grandfather had an adventurous life, running away to sea, working as First Mate on a mission ship in the South Seas and trying sheep-farming in Patagonia, but in the end he married a lass from South Shields and settled down to work in coasting vessels, which at least meant he got to see something of his wife and children.

I seem to remember Grandmama saying that he had a heavy accent to the end of his life, and I can imagine that in the less-travelled times of the early twentieth century, many people would have been unable to distinguish a German accent from a Swedish one, and he might have encountered some suspicion, and even hostility. I'm sure he was not alone.

Once I decided that my embroidery would have some connection with Great-Grandfather, I started searching for signs of him, and found him at last as a crew member on a general cargo vessel called the MV Canto, along with twenty British crewmates, two Danes, a Finn, another Swede, and a Russian. The crew list shows country of birth, but not naturalisation status, so I suspect that some of them may have been naturalised too. I couldn't find any pictures of the MV Canto, so I based my ship on a Tyne-built coasting vessel of about the right vintage, passing the headland topped by Tynemouth Priory, which Great-Grandfather (and indeed, his son-in-law, my Grandfather, and *his* father, both sailors themselves) will have known well, and made reference to his former nationality by setting the headland against a "sunrise" composed of a juxtaposition of the Swedish and British

flags. Then as I composed the design, I had to work out how to set it on the background material and shape provided by the Embroiderer's Guild. I settled on a roundel and was immediately reminded of the badges associated with the ships of the Royal Navy, so decided to frame the roundel in some sort of representation of a rope or a wreath, or a combination of the two.

The Embroiderers Guild provided the base material, a felt in a choice of three colours - red, or two shades of blue. I chose the dark blue, and decided that each element would be stitched separately and applied later, both to reduce the cost of mistakes and the wear and tear on the fabric. This proved a good decision, as I stitched the headland and priory twice, and made a false start on the sea as well!

My threads were a mixture of newly-bought, specifically for the project (Danish flower threads, Swedish linen thread, and a wonderful collection of Australian wool), along with threads from stash, and in particular I found uses for several Stef Francis and Oliver Twists overdyed yarns which I had bought years ago, purely because they looked so appealing.

The "flag sunrise", stitched in close rows of chain stitch on a sturdy piece of calico, used the Danish Flower threads, adjusting the tones to the right heraldic brightness by combining two colours in the needle. This proved particularly useful in harmonising the two very different blues of the flags, which are made by modifying the mid shade with a lighter and brighter one (for the Swedish part of the flag) and a darker one (for the British part of the flag).

The headland itself, and the priory, involved a combination of silk, wool, and cotton. The main section of the priory is worked in needlelace, and I managed to devise a way to ensure that there were gaps for the windows, through which the flag sunrise can be glimpsed. The grass is close rows of satin stitches worked over needles of different thicknesses to provide variation, and the rock face is worked in laid and couched stitch. The sea is composed of row upon row of couched double threads of linen, cotton, and rayon, using darker couching threads in the distance, and lighter threads towards the front.

The vessel combines overdyed rayon, stranded silk, stranded cotton, and "art silk" (viscose). It is heavily padded, and the spars are portrayed using knitting cotton covered with silk ribbon, while a tiny watchkeeper painted and stitched onto buckram provides the one human element in the picture. Final details, like the deck cargo, some freeform crochet foam, and the rails around the bows, help to bring the whole thing into focus.

The rope element of the roundel frame was brought to life using raised stem stitch band in soft embroidery cotton, using different shades to create an impression of dimension, while the wreath element used three shades of looped and knotted silk ribbon, and includes silk French knot berries, white for peace.

Inside the back I have attached a photograph of the embroidery, together with my dedication, printed onto a lightweight cotton. On the outside, as well as the label as specified by the Guild, I have attached a label bearing my initials rendered in Morse Code. As the grand-daughter, great grand-daughter (twice!) and great-niece of Master Mariners, I settled on this as my embroidered signature some years ago, and it seemed particularly appropriate to this piece!

Rachel Wright