

Sewing a Fine Yarn

Artist Sue Prince and embroiderer Cathy Reavy have joined forces for an arts project that celebrates one of the oldest native breeds of sheep – the Derbyshire Gritstone

THE beautiful Staffordshire Peak District is home to the equally enchanting villages of Ilam and Alstonefield, where two creative talents have come together to share their inspiration. When self-taught embroiderer, Cathy Reavy, was asked by folk artist, Sue Prince, to produce an embroidery of her painting of a Derbyshire Gritstone Sheep, the task may have seemed a little daunting to some. But some 18 months later, the needlework is finished and Cathy has run her first weekend workshop at Sue's organic farm at Beechenhill, Ilam, near Dovedale.

Sue is a contemporary folk artist telling stories of people and their places; it's like folk music only in paint. She uses traditional, homemade, egg tempera paint, a technique found in Sweden where it had all but died out. Over the last 11 years Sue has been instrumental in the revival of this technique in Sweden. She has been much inspired in her paintings by the Bayeux Tapestry, the most famous surviving piece of narrative medieval embroidery and the first example of Crewelwork, surface embroidery worked with wool on linen. And so it seemed only fitting that in translating Sue's work into stitches, Crewelwork was the type of embroidery Cathy decided to use.

A near-neighbour of Sue's and based in Alstonefield, Cathy runs 'Threads' Needlework & Embroidery Workshops with a programme covering a wide range of techniques in addition



Stitching the sheep at the workshop

to Crewelwork, including Japanese temari balls, drawn thread work, stumpwork and Bayeux stitch. With a background in Human Resources and a love of training, Cathy says: 'I am constantly seeking inspiration for new needlework projects that I can run as workshops and pass on what I have learned to others. With their vibrancy of colour and striking design, Sue's paintings lend themselves brilliantly to embroidery, and in particular to Crewelwork, a special favourite of mine.'

In tackling the Gritstone Sheep project, Cathy explains 'my first task was to decide which embroidery stitches would best match the subject of the painting. According to the Derbyshire Gritstone Sheepbreeders Society, the breed "is a good-looking aristocratic sheep" with "the finest fleece of all the hill breeds". I felt that there was particular scope with the sheep's wool and I am pleased with the results of the various knotted stitches that are raised from the surface and bring the sheep to life.

'The next stage was to choose the wool colours from a very large range of Appleton's two-ply crewel wools. Sue and I sat down in her studio one day comparing wool to actual paint colours to achieve the best possible match. I was then ready to begin stitching, and spent many days in the summer of 2015 working outside in the garden for the best light. The embroidery measures 11" x 8" and so it was quite an undertaking, but thoroughly enjoyable, with some stitches evolving as I went along.'

As 2015 came to a close, and with some trepidation on her part, Cathy revealed the finished embroidery to Sue. Sue says, 'I was absolutely delighted by Cathy's interpretation of my painting! Being so influenced by medieval Crewelwork embroideries, it was like seeing history come to life. I am inspired by telling stories in the way they have always been told, be it stitching or painting, it's a timeless way of recording our world.'

Cathy adds, 'with Sue's seal of approval, I decided to run weekend workshops, teaching others to stitch the sheep as a Crewelwork project. The first one took place last November and it was lovely to be able to benefit from the environment of the Haybarn and Gallery at Beechenhill, where we were surrounded by Sue's artwork. There are quite a lot of different stitches to teach and so it is fairly concentrated, but I had



Cathy Reavy (centre) on Day 1 of the workshop



At the workshop, Jani Barnard and Sue Prince



Crewelwork embroidery of the Derbyshire Gritstone



Sue's original painting



On the workshop – Liz Molloy and Cathy Reavy

aimed for it to be relaxing at the same time. I feel extremely encouraged by the feedback!

Karen Ellis frequently attends Cathy's workshops and remarked, 'it was fantastic to have the opportunity to meet the Gritstone Sheep artist, Sue Prince and her excitement and enthusiasm for our project will inspire me to finish it!'

And another attendee, Sarah Farmer commented, 'the Derbyshire Gritstone Sheep Crewelwork weekend was an excellent event. The venue was perfect with good facilities, excellent food and inspirational views over the Peak District. Cathy is a brilliant teacher managing to help everyone on the course work at their own speed. I learned lots of new stitches and enjoyed the talk on the history of Crewelwork. It was lovely to meet Sue Prince and to see examples of her work. I came away feeling as though I had been on holiday.'

'At Beechenhill Farm, we loved having the Threads Workshop stitching away in the Haybarn, we are an eco-venue so this peaceful and creative course worked here perfectly,' says Sue. 'I chatted to them over a lunch of

our homemade soups, bread and local cheeses and came back for the coffee and cake later!'

Although the next Derbyshire Gritstone Sheep Crewelwork workshop in April is fully booked, a further weekend at Beechenhill is planned for 22nd–24th September, for which bookings are now being taken. Some experience of stitching is best, but if you are a beginner, Cathy's day class programme in Alstonefield includes many suitable projects including a Crewelwork Pomegranate. The complete list of workshops for 2017 can be viewed on her website at www.threadsworkshops.co.uk.

Sue's paintings can be seen at Chatsworth until March as part of the Peak District Artisans exhibition, in a solo exhibition at the Foxlowe Arts Centre, Leek, until 1st April and she will be running a folk art painting course at St John's Street Gallery, Ashbourne on 20th March. ♦ Cathy can be contacted on 01335 310125 or email threadsworkshops@gmail.com. Sue can be contacted on 01335 310467, at sue@beechenhill.co.uk or view www.SuePrinceartist.co.uk.