



## **St Finnbarr's Altar Cloth, and the making thereof.**

Last October Marian Swanson sidled up to me and asked if I would make a new altar cloth, to celebrate the centenary of St Finnbarr's Church. I say "sidled" because I managed to wriggle out of making a wall hanging that Marian asked me to make a couple of years ago. I admitted to a certain amount of guilt and perhaps she thought I would give her the same reaction. However this project seemed a huge challenge, also a lovely idea. So yes, Marian, thank you for setting me off on a great journey.

After many sleepless three am. episodes thinking what to do, could I weave something? Could I embroider something? Three months later a flash of inspiration, paint on silk. With the help of Sally

Wild and Annie Millard we searched through fabric catalogues for the main cloth, we came up with a cream tweed called Monk's Wool, a happy choice for a church. We also needed a good quality silk for a base for the decoration which we were to paint on and then to fix onto the bottom of the tweed. We planned to cover the silk band with birds, flowers and animals found in Sutherland.

So this was the start. Monica's agreement was sought, and the order for the fabrics was placed.

Out came all the flower and bird books we could find and work began. We drew dozens of ideas and on a six foot by seven inches of lining paper which was fixed on to a frame, we arranged the flowers, birds and animals and drew in heavy inks so that we could trace them onto the silk, using a fade-able pen. Next the silk had to be pinned to the frame and using a waterproof stuff called Gutter, (which prevents the dyes from leaking outside the lines), we traced the decoration onto the silk. Sounds complicated?

Now for the Cross. Monica went on line and found a stone Celtic Cross from Nova Scotia. The Highland Settlers monument in Winnipeg,



Manitoba, honours the Scots, many from the Strath of Kildonan, in Sutherland, who arrived by the Red River in 1812. Others from Sutherland put down roots in Nova Scotia. This Cross seemed ideal. So with a compass, ruler and some hesitation, I got it down on paper, then onto the silk.

Now for the painting or dyeing, the colours we chose with Monica and off we went.

We used the Struie room in the Social Club for space, my shed is great but it has limits. This part took two days and we were very pleased to see that, with the three of us working on different parts of the silk, it matched well because we were using the same colour palate.

Next for the tricky part, the dyes had to be fixed. The dyes I have are French DuPont dyes which leave the silk softer than some other dyes and to make them permanent they have to be steamed. I use a pressure cooker, (not used for food!), the silk has to be wrapped in tissue paper then rolled into a tube to fit the pot, which is lined with about six layers of newspaper, the silk roll is then next covered with another six layers of newspaper, that is then covered with strong foil wrapping all tied round the pot to make sure the silk stays dry,

if it gets wet the colours would run. The steaming takes three quarters of an hour. Then the exciting bit, let off the steam, take out the parcel and see what we have. Success it looked good!

A wash in gentle soap to take out any excess dye, rinse and iron while still damp, there were a few small creases, I haven't done such long piece of silk before, but a light spray of starch sorted them out.

Next, the silk was backed with the sort of stuff quilters use and we stitched around the flowers and birds etc.

When I painted the 'gold' dye I sprinkled it with salt to give the mottled effect. The Cross covers the join up the centre of the tweed cloth.

We invited any parishioners who would like and were able, to join in the sewing and Monica, Gill and Marian came and put in a few hours work which was fun.

On April 14th I took the work to church for everyone to have a look at what we had done so far and it seemed to pass muster.

Annie, Sally and I had a day at the Social Club with sewing machines joining the tweed, we had



decided that as the cross was to be in the centre not much of the join would show except for a couple of inches at the bottom. I unpicked the weave and re-wove it to hide the join.

Now to sew the whole thing together. We have an altar six foot by three. Back to the Struie Room for space to sew the tweed and the linen lining together, (the linen was a gift, all nine metres, thank you donor). Gosh this is quite a story!

Now we had to sew the silk to the tweed, that went smoothly, then to add the cord around the edge. If ever you have tried this you will know what I mean when I when I say "fiddly"

Monica came up again and we chose the edging for the cross which we decided was going to be the gold rather than the cream, which edges the panel at the base. All done by mid May.

Now for the first fitting and to find a way to secure the piece to the altar. Monica came to the church to show us behind the scenes, as it were, and we decided that a row of D rings sewn on the cloth would fix on to hooks to be fitted, hidden under the back of the altar by Ernie. Back to the

Struie room and the final machining done, just a little bit of hand finishing off to do.

It is all coming together now and one final fitting. On the 15th July we did it, sewed the D rings in place, a few big poppers on hospital corners to secure the sides at the top and now you know all the secrets of our centenary Altar Cloth.

We started work in March and finished on July 15th not every day but it took about 130 hours with a few hairy moments. It has been a delight to be involved with everyone who helped including art work from me, Sally, Annie and Sandee Mackintosh, and sewing from Monica Dargie, Jill Evans and Marian Swanson and a rear view of Ernie Millard under the altar and my John has a photographic record.

I could not have done this alone, so a thousand thanks to Annie Millard and Sally Wild, and guess what, we think we may have spotted another project!