

# 'The Fabric of Diversity' Community Arts Project



Essex Church, 112 Palace Gardens Terrace, London W8 4RT

[www.kensington-unitarians.org.uk](http://www.kensington-unitarians.org.uk)



# **‘The Fabric of Diversity’ Community Arts Project**

‘The Fabric of Diversity’, a community arts project, took place at Essex Church from October 2008 to March 2009. The textile art workshops were advertised locally and online and were open to all. A diverse group of individuals came together over fifteen sessions to develop their creative potential, working together on a large-scale textile artwork, expressing aspects of their own personal life experiences and also exploring the themes of interdependence and connections to others in the local and global community. The finished piece was unveiled on 28<sup>th</sup> June 2009.

Participants received instruction in basic techniques for making felt by hand. They were then invited to create three felt squares for use in a ‘Fabric of Diversity’ community wall-hanging:

1. A square to represent some aspect of themselves
2. A square to represent their connection to the local community
3. A square to represent a connection between themselves and the wider world/the cosmos

Some participants were only able to attend one or two workshops and so contributed a single felt square representing just one of these suggested themes. Others were able to come to all of the workshops and produced lots of felt squares, exploring the theme from many angles, so were able to select more pieces to contribute to the finished wall-hanging. The squares were collected and laid out by myself, Sara Frith, and Caroline Blair, and were stitched together between April-June.

This booklet contains information from all those who took part in the project. Each person has written a little about their experience and the meaning of each of the squares they have created.

This project was supported by a grant from the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea’s Arts Grant Scheme, also by the Essex Church management committee, and by a generous donation made by a supporter within the Unitarian congregation. As the project facilitator, I would like to express my gratitude for this support, and also for the enormous encouragement I have received from members of the congregation and all those artists who took part in the project.

We hope to be able to offer further community arts projects at Essex Church in the future and are currently seeking funding to make this possible. Please contact [arts@kensington-unitarians.org.uk](mailto:arts@kensington-unitarians.org.uk) for more information about our forthcoming activities.

**Jane Blackall**



## Caroline Blair

I left school many years ago convinced that, after an entire year's 'needlework' making a garish, wonky acrylic skirt, I would never touch anything creative again in my life. Producing two daughters changed my mind, and I started running up little romper suits and other garments of uncertain description. Once old enough to talk, they begged me to desist immediately and buy them proper clothes from a shop, and my skills once more fell into disuse. It was not until a few years ago, on joining the church creativity group, that I once again experienced the feeling of actually making something that cannot be bought. I discovered that creating objects (even unskilfully) can be playful, absorbing and oddly rewarding.

When not trying to be creative I work as a chiropodist in North West London and live with my husband, three adult children (one someone else's) and three rats.



This square is 'me' in the sense of 'what I would like to be'. Nuno felting is achieved by allowing wisps of wool to grip each other through some sheer, gauzy fabric. It is not really recommended to try the technique with a stout cushion cover made of densely woven silk. I insisted on trying and spent nearly two hours beating the fabric into submission. At the end I was surprised to find that the results were rather nice, and quite different from any other square I had seen. So the square is an idealized 'me' in the sense of showing a determination to try something frankly ill-advised, then having the sheer persistence to make it work against the odds. Now all I have to do is make my life match the square...

This square is my relationship to those round me. I wanted the sewn on lines to look labyrinthine, but also attractive. The journey towards other people is not always straightforward, but the travelling can be beautiful in itself. The background is alpaca wool, for no better reason than that I love alpacas and only wish I could have a friendly relationship with some. Using some wisps of their wool is probably the closest I will ever get.





This square is showing my place in the universe. I started off with an autumnal background – rust, olive etc – feeling that my own life is beginning to take on an autumn hue: not disagreeable at all (I love autumn colours) but a little thought-provoking. The silver motif was one I had kept for years from a greeting card because I liked the idea of not being alone in the journey through life. The other ‘twin’ stands for everyone – parents, siblings, partners, children, friends and kind strangers – who has ever been my companion in life.

This was an attempt to represent myself. Feet are surely the most undervalued part of ourselves, and while doing chiropody training I was charmed to find that I had perfect feet. Why do we treat feet so cruelly? We don’t force our hands into rigid gloves an inch too small all round and fixed at a painful angle, but feet are as sensitive, as richly supplied with nerves and blood, as our hands. They operate as rigid levers and yielding shock absorbers, they carry sensory information from the Earth to our bodies, they dance, stamp, explore, stretch and curl – we are our feet.



The kokopelli is symbolic of both music and fertility, and I like the idea that it demonstrates my relationships to people I know. Music has always been a huge part of my life, not in any way that gains me brownie points – I play no instruments and don’t appreciate anything ‘difficult’ – but in the hiding-under-the-bedclothes-listening-to-Radio-Luxembourg sense (when young) and the sitting-up-until-4-in-the-morning-finding-music-downloads sense (now). And ‘fertility’ stands for everything – family and friends, gardening, walking, music, art, books, TV programmes, cooking and eating – that makes life the rich business it is.

Butterflies are a perfect representation of the way we find beauty in the universe. No one has ever had a tame butterfly that came when it was called or a butterfly trained to do impressive tricks. Intrinsicly unpredictable, elusive, disappointing and then magically, serendipitously there, they stand for everything we can’t plan, can’t arrange but just have to respond to when it happens.





## Sara Frith

In recent years, creativity has become an increasingly important facet of my life.

Connecting with my emotions, my body, and creativity as well as connecting with my deeper self – and that which is beyond self – all feel interrelated for me.

The opportunity to have had a regular weekly space for experiential, experimental, exploratory creative expression has been enlivening, inspiring and nourishing in a very deep way.



These first two squares are my attempt to represent myself through colour. I have two squares in order to include both the curiosity, aliveness and energy as well as the darkness, self-reflection, and internal depths. I also see myself as both reaching out for connections as well as having a need for solitude.



With this square, I have made an attempt to make tangible and to share my connection with the night sky. When I look up and see that vast horizon-to-horizon stretch of darkness, glittering with all those lights... I feel at once both tiny and, at the same time, part of something vast and mysterious and unknowable.



This square represents my community connection with people. I've used different fibres to make the felt, including merino wool, cotton, silk, ramie and bamboo, as well as silk, embroidery floss, and cotton thread for the embroidery. By using all these varied materials I wanted to acknowledge and honour the healing, nourishing, enriching and inspiring qualities I experience during creativity. And to say a big thank you to the people and groups who are including and mentoring me during this process of both deepening and unfolding – including here in Notting Hill, in Richmond, Great Hucklow, and East London.



The huge abundance and range of colours of wool to choose from was inspiring in itself. I think I counted thirteen shades of green!! Which for me – who finds such inspiration and nourishment in nature – I just had to try to make something with them. Over the weeks, I also did similar experiments with reds, browns, and purples.

I made this originally for the beauty of the shades. On reflection, though, I now see it and think of the colour of our blood as it hits the air. Red – associated with passion and anger as well as birth – an essential component of humanity and human-ness.



As soon as I saw the word “diversity” in the title of the group project, I knew there had to be a rainbow.



This square now brings to mind, for me, cave paintings or sandstone fossils, or the earth itself. And yet the original association was with animal fur.

Purple, lovely sacred purple... (and one of my favourite colours as well).



The mystery can unfold through allowing myself to trust the process of creativity.



## Jane Blackall

I have been a member of Kensington Unitarians for 10 years. I am currently the part-time Outreach Officer at Essex Church working on arts and education projects and also on publicity. I came up with the idea for this community arts project and have been the facilitator of the series of textile workshop sessions.

Though I have been keen on art and craft activities throughout my life, there was a period of about 8 years (while I was studying and pursuing my previous career in medical imaging) when I neglected this side of my interests, and almost entirely gave up on creative pursuits. More recently, I have developed a passion for textiles, first taking a course at the Mary Ward Centre and going on to study for a City and Guilds qualification in feltmaking.



This square represents me and my place in the world. I think of orange as my 'signature colour' somehow, so I am meant to be the orange amoeba-like creature, reaching out into the world. Contained within that orange envelope are areas of both darkness and light. The smaller amoeba-like shape, reaching out towards me, represents all of the world's wonders and possibilities offering themselves forward. The brightly coloured dots within it represent the rich variety of life and the white border is meant to suggest the divine light in all things.

This square represents my own connection to the local community. It features numerous (angel-shaped) figures which stand for all the souls – mostly anonymous and unsung – who have been custodians of this church in the past and have worked to keep a liberal religious presence alive in London over hundreds of years. I am included as the little (and slightly wonky) orange figure, supported by so many others who have gone before me, and also doing my bit to help the church thrive and serve the local community in the years to come.



This square is intended to represent 'Indra's Net'. This is a metaphor from Hindu and Buddhist mythology which illustrates the way in which all things (people, creatures, actions, phenomena) are interconnected.

"Suspended above the palace of Indra, who symbolizes the natural forces that protect and nurture life, is an enormous net. A brilliant jewel is attached to each of the knots of the net. Each jewel contains and reflects the image of all the other jewels in the net, which sparkles in the magnificence of its totality. This parable provides a metaphor for the interdependence and interpenetration of all phenomena."

The following squares were made in memory of my beloved friend, Simon John Barlow.

Simon John died suddenly on 16th October 2008, just after this project started, and the sessions were put on hold for a while in the weeks afterwards due to my bereavement. Simon John was, amongst many other things, a fellow artist and feltmaker, and so I had originally hoped that he would contribute squares of his own to the piece. I therefore felt moved to make a special series of squares in his name.



This first square is a tiny attempt to represent something of the essence of Simon John. The main colours relate to aspects of his life. Pale pink is a colour I associate with healing and the life of the spirit. There are also representations of both deep darkness and bright light. The multicoloured dots at the centre represent an encapsulation of Simon John's rich and varied life experiences.



This represents Simon John's connection to the local community. A few years ago, back in 2004, he came to serve Essex Church as interim minister for six weeks. The community had been going through some turbulent times back then and Simon John lightened our spirits and helped us to make a fresh start. It was an important turning point in the life of the church. The spiral represents the healing that he brought to our community during that time. The various skin-coloured dots around the edge represent the diverse people of the congregation whose lives were touched by Simon John's ministry here.

This represents something of Simon John's ongoing presence in the cosmos in the memories of those who knew and loved him. The picture is based on a real photograph taken of our shadows, standing together on a bridge, cast on to a clear stream on a sunny summer's day.

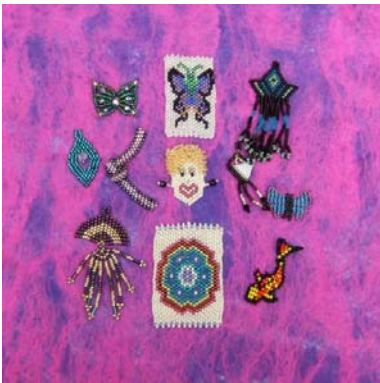




## Patricia Walker-Hesson

My name is Patricia Walker-Hesson. Except for crochet, and a period of silver jewellery making many years ago, I have really only taken up craft activities in a big way since I retired. About 8 years ago, an American friend introduced me to bead-weaving, and I have been making jewellery ever since. Apart from that, my greatest encouragement has been Essex Church where we have a creativity group, and where I have been able to experiment with all types of materials. Sometimes they are things I feel I would like to continue and sometimes they are things that are just not right for me. What is extremely enjoyable about this group is that we have the chance to 'play' in the company of like-minded people.

I have been a member of Essex Church for over 30 years and am a Trustee and member of the Management Committee.



This square with the beadwork represents me. It shows my love of colour and the joy I get from anything that sparkles or glistens. The words that come to mind are 'exuberance' and 'positivity'. I am proud of my beadwork and thrilled that I was fortunate enough to be introduced to something that suits me so well. The pieces of beadwork on the square are just samples of things I was experimenting with.

This square with the 'yin/yang symbol' represents the connection between myself and the local community. It represents balance and the dark and light side of life. It is a reminder to me that a balance in all things is essential. It is also the symbol for Tai Chi which I am learning to practice.



This fish represents the connection between myself and the wider world. It shows my love of water (I sometimes get desperate to see an expanse of water). I and all human beings are made up, to a large extent, of water and this underlines our likeness and our link one to the other. None of us can live without water and I worry that a shortage of water will almost certainly be the cause of wars in the future.

## Jennifer Blair

I am a law student at the moment, having done a classics degree. I am trying to find some human-rights work for next year. I had no felt-making or textiles experience at all before doing this. All my clothes are held together with safety pins because I am so averse to sewing.



The fan. This represents myself. The fan is a symbol of air; learning and studying are traditionally associated with the element air. This is how I have spent most of my life so far. There is a rudimentary dragon on the fan; this represents the search for difficult answers to me, as dragons are both dangerous and difficult to find. I am interested in mythology as a route to wisdom.

The Tree. I like the idea that the people close to me are connected to me through shared roots; they may appear in some ways to reflect me, but are always quite different as well. I put the little fish in the reflection because the thought that sometimes you have to look closely to identify individual differences appealed to me.



The Sun. Last year I visited the Indian state of Sikkim, and visited some of the Buddhist monasteries there. The colours of this square are copied from the blue and gold of the art work I saw there. I found the art mysterious but moving. The monks were both mystical and practical, feeding and educating the poor while spending much time in ritual and meditation. I took the conventional symbol of the Sun (as being at the centre of the cosmos) but depicted it in the colours of the Buddhist art, to combine the familiar and the mysterious.

## Sarah Tinker

I'm minister with Kensington Unitarians here at Essex Church, where I have worked for nearly four years now. On the afternoon when I made this felt square I was struck by the peace of the room in which we worked and by the gentle yet focussed attention we were all giving to the task in hand. As always here there was noise from outside in the busy London streets; I heard the church phone ringing. But in that room there was stillness.



The spiralling swirl of colours represents all that goes on in this building, the great array of spiritual and community groups that meet here and the individuals who make up this community of communities. At the centre of swirling spirals are stillpoints. My square reminds me that part of my task here and in life generally is to find those stillpoints for myself, to help create them with others, and to remember to treasure both silence and stillness as pathways to the divine.

## Michaela von Britzke

I have been a member of Essex Church for about 15 years now. It feels like home – a place to rest, reflect, absorb spiritual nourishment – and also a place where friends gather, who then come and visit me in hospital! I belong - and that gives me delight and a feeling of containment, and that stands for always being held in the hands of God.

My square represents that part of me that is determined to try new things! Experimenting, confronting limiting beliefs about myself, experiencing challenge and excitement. As Merlin says to the young Arthur: "When you are sad, learn something new!"



## Deborah Moran

I am an Australian who has now spent a third of my life living in London. I am an ex-primary school teacher now working as a macrobiotic / wholefood cook. I am interested in travelling, cooking, reading, walking, art, music – all in the broadest sense – and all things green.

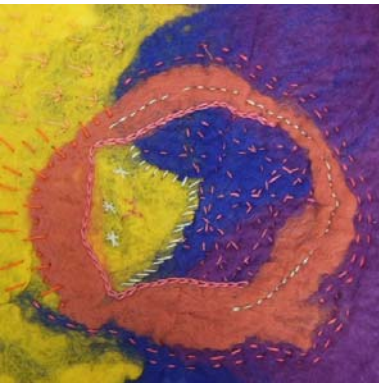


My felt square is 'the homemaker'. The bright colours came from my beloved aboriginal print by the amazing Jimmy Pike, which I have at home in London. The brightness of the pink and the orange reminds me of the light and heat of my birthplace. The green was added as a type of sea grass, as I love being by the water, but it also represents that rich, deep green of the countryside in the UK, my current home. I guess this square represents a way of blending both homes.

## Charlotte Illingworth

Charlotte is a fine art textile artist and member of Rosslyn Hill Unitarian Chapel. She says: "Patterns are repeated in nature in different scale. These pieces all started with a very distinct circle covering layers of bright colour. They were later embellished and cut through to reveal the surface and deep layers in the felt. This overlay and underneath information can be found in the individual and community and wider world. It is up to us to investigate what we believe we can see."

'Myself'



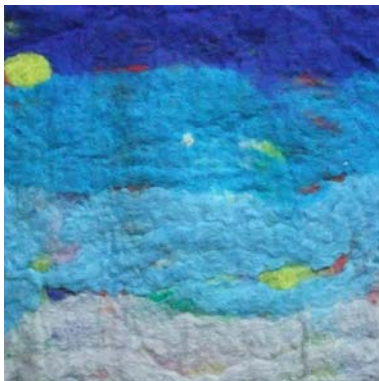
'Community'



'The World'



## Sophie Illingworth



Sophie Illingworth (Charlotte's daughter) is 9 years old and a London Unitarian.



## Jenny Moy

I've worked as Warden here at Essex Church for nearly three years now, before that I was doing a similar job at a Quaker Meeting House in Bradford-on-Avon. I grew up in London, but this is the first time I've come back to live here since leaving for university. It feels like a real privilege to live in such a peaceful place but be so close to central London. The flexibility of this work gives me lots of time to explore creative interests, particularly in dance.

My original inspiration for this square was a sunset and the sun is definitely still one of its main associations for me. The light yellow strands around the edge feel satisfyingly like the eruptions of plasma that you see coming out of the sun in science fiction movies. I also feel it's a bit like a cosmic egg - and perhaps because of that association - a bit like a fertilized egg. The dark material inside the red centre feels a bit like a growing embryo. This is a particularly poignant association at the moment because my sister got pregnant at Easter and I'm very aware of the little niece or nephew bursting into life inside her.





## Mary Spurr

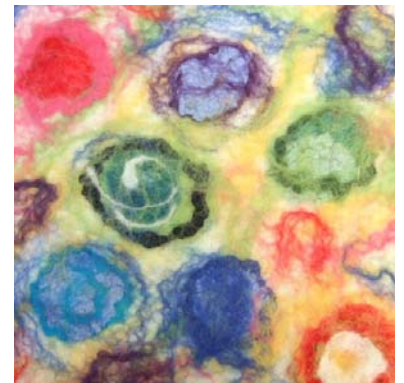
Last autumn I tried my hand at something I wouldn't have thought of doing on my own: felt-making. I'd rarely done much in the way of crafts so this was truly a learning experience, to take part in a Community Art Project at the Unitarian Church. I was born and raised a Unitarian in Nova Scotia, Canada, having only moved to London in 2008. This move represented a major turning point in my life: challenging myself to realize a very long-held dream to live abroad. Essex Church has given me a tranquil harbour during a time of considerable upheaval, so far from home. I was kindly welcomed into a community of music and services,

creative exploration and new friendships. These nourished my spirit, giving me a sense of belonging and active participation, making a very real difference in my life here.



I created a square that had three cell-like shapes within it, a dot of red in each. This represented the Self and an internal dichotomy with a third impulse that pulls one towards growth and change. In this aspect it also represents one-to-one Relationship.

A second square represents Community. Swirls or circles of differing colours represent individuals within a community... any of the many communities we find in our lives: work, neighbourhood, church, interest groups, friendship and family groups. Coming together we influence each other, weaving subtle new tones, hues and textures into the fabric of each other's lives.



The third square represents a timeless and interconnected web of life. I created a background in hues of browns, blacks, gray, white, etc.. representing shades of hair of the people of the world. Then I superimposed a coil of rainbow colours, a spiral that represents a spectrum of perspectives. Unexpectedly this square became a collaborative effort. A young girl (Sophie) attending this particular session with her mother added the red heart. This became the centre of this square, tying the theme together poignantly.

## Eliza Kentridge

Mary says: "I enjoyed trying my hand at feltmaking through participating in the Community Art Project at Essex Church. Enthused by the experience, I wound up sharing what I'd learned with others, including the young niece and nephew of my friend Eliza. Some time later the idea came up to try felting with Eliza's mother, who had been an artist for many years but was no longer physically able to paint.

I was very pleased that Eliza agreed to contribute her square to the wall hanging. To me Eliza's square represents a beautiful interconnectedness, as much in community as among the generations of her family. It represents a sharing of the creative process, giving to one another opportunity, encouragement, interest and care."

Eliza Kentridge is an artist who was born in South Africa but has lived in England for over 20 years. Eliza uses fabric and stitch to convey her drawings. This was Eliza's first time trying felting.

Eliza said "Felt making seemed an approachable process. The idea was that my mother could participate in a creative process without having to do the labour. She chose colours that appealed to her. I did the physical work to make the square." When I asked Eliza about her design she said, "I often use leaf motifs in my work."

