

Background to the Royal School of Needlework

The RSN began as the School of Art Needlework in 1872, founded by Lady Victoria Welby. The first President was Princess Christian of Schleswig-Holstein, Queen Victoria's third daughter, known to the RSN as Princess Helena. She received help from William Morris and many of his friends in the Arts and Crafts movement. The School received its royal prefix in March 1875 when Queen Victoria consented to become its first patron. It was also an inspiration to Dora Wemyss, who founded the Wemyss School of Needlework in Scotland in its image. The word "Art" was dropped from the school's title in 1922.

Its initial premises was a small apartment on Sloane Street, employing 20 women. The school grew to 150 students, moving in 1903 to Exhibition Road, near to the Victoria and Albert Museum. The purpose-built building was designed by a group of architects, including prominent British Arts and Crafts architect James Leonard Williams (d.1926).

The RSN established a Studio which works with new bespoke embroidery commissions and replicas of antique textiles as well as restoration and conservation projects. The work of the Studio has been used in many important events, including a joint effort with Toye in producing the velvet cushions on which the Royal Crowns were carried into Westminster Abbey for the Coronation of King George VI.

In 1953, the School created the gold embroidery on the Purple Robe of Estate, part of the coronation robes of Queen Elizabeth II.

The school moved from Princes Gate in Kensington to Hampton Court Palace in 1987, occupying rooms in Christopher Wren's construction.

In 2011, the school was responsible for hand appliquéing machine-made floral lace motifs onto silk net (tulle) for the wedding dress of Kate Middleton, now Her Royal Highness The Duchess of Cambridge.

Relationship with the Needleworkers

Dr Susan Kay-Williams, liverymen and Chief Executive of the RSN has been researching the history of the RSN and uncovered details of an association with the Worshipful Company of Needleworkers dating back to 1910:

"The RSN had sales in summer and at Christmas. These were usually led by Princess Helena who would come and man a stand herself usually from 3-7pm for three days at a time, so passionate was she at getting the RSN - as we were then - supported.

In 1910 the summer sale still took place, but following the death of Edward VII Princess Helena was unable to attend and she delegated her role to the Lady Mayoress Lady Knill. The Westminster Gazette of 2 June 1910 reports that the important personages there included Sheriff Ralph Slazenger and Miss Slazenger and that Mr Slazenger was there in his capacity of Master of the Needleworkers Company."

Court Assistant Angie Lewis was appointed charity liaison for the RSN in 2016, having been actively involved in supporting the RSN for several years. Angie notes that we are not the only Livery supporting the school but we seem to be the most consistent in terms of physical support. Sometimes she has been to their student/tutor awards only to find that the Needlemakers has been the only Livery represented.

Visits to the RSN at Hampton Court are arranged on a regular basis, giving the opportunity to see examples of work in progress by students, as well as items from the collection. And livery members have taken RSN courses, one of the notable benefits of which is this gilt framed Needlemakers Coat of Arms embroidered and gifted to the Company in 1995 by Past Master Sue Kent.



Scope of Activities

Based at the magnificent Hampton Court Palace the RSN offers a thriving education programme for every level. Teaching is conducted online as well as at venues across the UK in Hampton Court Palace (London), Bristol, Bath, Birmingham, Durham, Lancaster, Portsmouth and Glasgow as well as internationally in Dublin, America and Japan. The renowned Embroidery Studio creates stunning bespoke embroidery for fashion, art and royalty, as well as expertly restoring and conserving valuable and historical embroidered pieces. World famous for its highly-skilled professional RSN hand embroiderers, customers come from all over the world, including fashion and interior designers, Oscar nominees, cathedrals, private individuals and the Royal Family. The RSN publishes regular updates on its work via a monthly e-newsletter, to which liverymen are encouraged to subscribe: <https://royal-needlework.org.uk/newsletter/>

Needlemakers Bursaries

The Needlemakers sponsors deserving bursary students and contributes to initiatives such as the stitch bank, which keeps a record for teaching and archive purposes of dozens of stitch types. Our bursary students were featured in the Master's virtual Company Meeting in October 2020 and the April 2020 Livery Newsletter included a feature on our award-winning bursary student Jess Vale regarding her work during lockdown.

Response to Covid

Due to Covid-19, the RSN are currently running a wide choice of Live Online Day & Evening classes.

Since December 2020 the RSN has offered talks presented by Susan Kay-Williams entitled "*Curator Talks to discover more about the RSN*". These exclusive talks focus on life at the RSN throughout the years, its acclaimed methods of teaching, the embroidery techniques the RSN is most famous for and, of course, its unique Collection containing over 4,000 objects donated from all over the world. Future talks can be accessed via the following link: <https://royal-needlework.org.uk/events-exhibitions/online-talks/rsn-curator-online-talks/>

It is planned to make the entire series of talks available online later in 2021. Before that, however, **Susan will be our speaker at the upcoming livery webinar on Tuesday 9 February at 6.30pm (invitation from the Clerk to follow).**