

The lady seated at the centre of the casket panel holds a cornucopia, symbolising plenty, and is surrounded by both native and exotic species of animals, birds and insects. The maker plays with scale and technique to create effects such as the sheep's fleece and the lion's mane.

While biblical and mythical characters appeared in contemporary dress in seventeenth-century needlework, it was also fashionable, and patriotic, to depict the recently-restored King Charles II and his Queen, Catherine of Braganza. The man on the smaller unfinished panel holds a staff of office and the royal lion sits between the figures. The pencil outline of a building vaguely resembles Nonsuch Palace in Surrey, demolished in 1682, and shows how designs were built up from line drawings.

The panel is worked mainly in satin stitch, but miniature coiled wire, known as purl, has been used to imitate hair and the leaves of the central oak tree, a reference to Charles' escape from Parliamentary forces after the Battle of Worcester in 1651. Metal braid and laid metal thread couched with coloured silks create the rich clothes and the swirling sky above, while tiny needle lace stitches make up the collars, cuffs and the King's boot tops. Both figures and the lion are padded with wood or parchment over wool to give a three-dimensional effect.

Rachel Kay-Shuttleworth's family owned Gawthorpe Hall near Burnley in Lancashire.

She reminisced in 1930 that, "This is the way Blanche, Lady Shuttleworth (Rachel's mother) taught her daughters to do Embroidery Stitches... It trains their eyes to keep straight." Her collection is the basis of the Gawthorpe Textiles Collection and it is still possible to buy ticking samplers from their shop. See gawthorpetextiles.org.uk

The second sampler by Dorothea Commons expands on the first with the addition of text, a feature which became popular during the eighteenth century as literacy and sewing skills increased. Verses were taken from the Bible, moral publications, hymns, and poetry specially written for children with the idea that, in stitching the words and displaying the finished work, the instructions or morals would be exemplified in life. This sampler combines text from Psalms 3 and 145 and the Gospel of Mark.

A number of stitches are employed, including cross, chain, eyelet, satin and stem, mostly on a minute scale. Ann Irving's sampler is unusual in giving the date on which it was started and completed, giving a sense of how long it took to work such items, alongside other elements of a girls' education which might include reading, writing, arithmetic, music and dancing.

Margaret Reed was from a Weardale farming family and her sampler records that she was taught by E. Hopper, Durham. No school run by someone of this name has been found, but the addition of a teacher's name gives the sense that education, even for girls, was by now happening beyond the family circle.

While we do not know very much about Ann Gibson, Peggy Jackson lived in Newbiggin, near Middleton-in-Teesdale. She married a farmer named Dickinson and had children called Thomas and Mary Anne. Thomas became a farmer and gamekeeper and lived at Ash Hill, between Newbiggin and Ettersgill. The sampler was donated to The Bowes Museum by Peggy's great-granddaughter.

While both samplers are similar in style to those worked in the late eighteenth century by Dorothy Commons (displayed in the drawer above), Dorothy Askew has used Berlin wools for her sampler, made after the craze for Berlin wool work took hold in Britain from the 1830s onwards. At this date, wool dyed in Berlin and imported was thinner than British woollen thread and available in a greater range of colours.

As well as recording her name, age and the date, Dorothy has also included the place where her sampler was made – Hexham. Perhaps she was living there in 1843 or attended school in the town. Dorothy was born at Nineheads, Allendale Town and later married Matthew Fairless Pickering at Allendale Church.

The first embroidery pattern printed on squared paper where each square equalled a stitch on square-meshed canvas was produced in Berlin in 1804. It became known as Berlin wool work and was popular in Britain from the 1830s. Patterns appeared for everything from fire screens to slippers, and pictures accurately reproducing oil paintings. This sampler includes highlights in silk and the addition of beads for extra decorative effect. It may have been made by a professional embroiderer for an amateur to purchase and could be rolled and carried around, or stored in a workbox.

The stepped diamonds inside which Maria's work appears are often found on samplers made in Norfolk, while Margaret's sampler is very geographically specific, having been made in Leith. The use of red thread and the inclusion of lots of initials, presumably for Margaret's parents and siblings, are other indicators of this sampler's Scottish origin. While not all samplers record where they were made, those that do show that girls all over the country were learning to stitch in the same way.

The sampler on the right was presented to the Museum by Albert Frank Kendrick (1872-1954) who was the first Keeper of the new Department of Textiles at the Victoria & Albert Museum in the early twentieth century and is credited with laying the foundations of its collection. In 1924 he listed and dated the collection of embroideries and tapestry for upholstery at The Bowes Museum.