

How was the quilt made?

The Busy Bees must have shared out tasks among themselves in order to make the quilt. We assume that they worked co-operatively and met as a sewing circle whenever they could – perhaps at the Scots Church, or perhaps in someone's home.

They used a sewing machine to hem the frill and to piece together the individual squares, but the rest of their needlework on this quilt involved hand-stitching.

The white fabric is a strong cotton twill. The backing cloth is a thinner, plain-weave cotton. You can see its Turkey Red colour through the lace insertions.

The quilt is constructed from 213 separate squares that were embroidered individually. The Busy Bees would have used pencil or chalk to design each square before starting the embroidery. One remnant of pencil drafting is still visible on the forehead of the cyclist at [G15].

Machine-made Torchon lace insertions were available at this period, but the Australian Lace Guild (Victorian Branch) advises that the Torchon lace used for these four sashings appears to be hand-made.

Three squares on the quilt acknowledge the Prahran wholesale and retail drapers, *Read & Co* [G16] which in early 1896 became *Read & Dougall* [A16 and B8]. This firm may have donated the fabrics for the quilt.

Like many signature quilts, the quilt has no internal wadding, and no over-stitching or tie-stitches to bind the upper and lower layers of fabric.

The finished edge of each small square measures about 11 cm. The lace insertions are 3.3 cm wide. The gathered frill or flounce is about 25 cm deep.

The quilt has 13 small squares across the width and 17 small squares down the length. Overall, including the frill, it measures 213 x 247 cm.



The main part of the quilt is backed with a plain red cotton fabric.

The frill, however, has no backing, as can be seen in this 2018 photograph.



You can glimpse the red backing from the front of the quilt. Look through the inserted strips (or 'sashings') of white lace: the red fabric that lies behind is the backing cloth.

This example is on the right of [B8].





Who were the Busy Bees?

The eight names around the beehive in the Central square can all be identified as women in the Scots Church community when the quilt was made.

We assume that they were the key members of the Busy Bee group, responsible for publicity for the project, fund-raising, design and needlework.

Their use of initials rather than full names makes it hard to identify every person. There are several possibilities for *I* and *M Donaldson* and for *I* and *J Smith*, but we are confident of the other four. The group included both mature and younger women: mothers, daughters, aunts and cousins.

We don't know whether the group had a leader or chief designer or organiser. We think that the quilt project would have offered a supportive network for women going through tough times because of a violent marriage (Margaret McCracken), bereavement and the disruption of house-moving (the Frasers), and family divisions caused by the Templestowe church rift (the Smiths).

C Smith is Christine, the daughter of David and Ann, dairy farmers from Templestowe.

Aged 26, Christine was unmarried and teaching in the Scots Church Sunday School. Her eldest sister Annie, *Mrs GR Cumming* [K13], may have organised the contribution of squares from Williamstown. The other Busy Bee Smiths (*I Smith* and *J Smith*) are probably her cousins, although *I Smith* could be her aunt Isabella (Mrs George Smith) who had attended the inaugural meeting of the Busy Bee society in March 1895.

L Fraser is Charlotte (known as Lottie), daughter of the Scots Church minister, Reverend Duncan Fraser. She was aged about 21 when the quilt was finished.

AE Fraser is Lottie's mother, Mrs Anna Elizabeth Fraser, aged about 50. This was a tumultuous year in her life. In January 1895 her daughter Alexandra had died at the age of 22. Later that year the family moved from a manse at Northcote to premises in Heidelberg, and commenced building their own home in Banksia Street.

M McCracken is Margaret, aged about 37 and wife of Adam McCracken who leased and managed *Banyule House* from 1891 until the late 1890s.



How long to make the quilt?

It is likely that the quilt project started in August 1895 when a deputation of two ladies attended the Heidelberg Shire Council meeting to invite contributions.

The lace insertions could have been prepared at an earlier time. The embroidered squares, however, must have been made in response to the contributions received after the ladies commenced their fundraising efforts.

Five squares within the quilt [C7, E15, H5, H11 and J1] include the date 1895.

This probably records the year when the contributors paid their subscriptions.

It is also possible that the embroiderers expected to finish the quilt during that year.

The square at [A17] is probably the final piece made for the quilt. It records the finishing date, February 1896, and gives cheerful credit to the Busy Bee group.

The quilt project appears to have taken the group about six months to complete.



Embroidering the quilt

All embroidery on the quilt uses Turkey Red colour except for the outer edge of the frill where the thread colour is pink.

The Turkey Red dye process was used for both thread and cloth in the 19th century. Its bright red colour made redwork embroidery very popular.

Some of the embroidery on this quilt is worked in single strands of cotton. Double strands provide a bold effect.

Herringbone stitch is used decoratively to conceal the seams. It is the most common stitch used on the quilt. Other stitches, in order of frequency, are Stem, French Knot, Satin, long and short fill-in stitches, Running and Chain.

The sampler in the display case shows the main stitches used. It has been kindly created by a member of the Heidelberg Historical Society.



Signatures or interpretations?

Signature quilts of this period were also known as Autograph quilts. Are we looking at an individual's formal legal signature, or an embroiderer's interpretation?

This quilt has 45 squares with contributors' initials and 139 squares with complete names. Some names are in decorative or ornamental lettering. Some appear to be distinctively personalised signatures: look for *JH Lavery* [J12]. Many demonstrate a cursive script used often in this period for business signatures.

In 1918 Elizabeth Anna Fraser, daughter of the late Reverend Fraser, sent information to *HJ Price* [F12], Shire Secretary, about early church services in Heidelberg. Her signature is written just as clearly as the text of her covering note and letter, displayed here.

Elizabeth may have contributed several squares to the quilt. In [K4] *EF* the letters match her script. In [J1] *EAF 1895*, however, the letter A is not characteristic of her writing. Did someone else have the same initials?



The Williamstown embroidery

A wide range of embroidery skills is evident on the quilt – some very proficient, others less so. Diverse graphic styles are also obvious, involving the use of different scripts or fonts. Occasionally, decorative elements embellish a name.

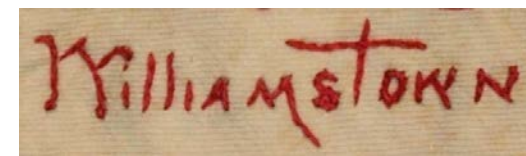
The most heavily decorated squares represent people from Williamstown, a suburb in south-west Melbourne. These squares are at D3, D7, D10, D14, G2, J8, K3, K6, K9, K13, K16 and L8.

There is a strong consistency of design in the 12 Williamstown squares. Nine place the personal name within the outline of a banner, banderole or scroll. Similar squares from Point Henry [D16] and Geelong [C15] suggest that their contributors had Williamstown connections.

Every decorated square is oriented on the diagonal and includes graphic imagery that appears to convey characteristics of the person named on the square, often with imagination and humour. Look for the saw and bone on [G2] *Andrew Honman* – ‘sawbones’ is a common nickname for a surgeon.

Look also for the steam locomotive embroidered on square [D7]. Parallel horizontal lines in the letters A and T mimic the rail tracks at the Newport Railway Workshops where *Archibald Cameron* was employed as a foreman.

Seven decorated squares use a distinctive mix of capitals and lower case letters for the word ‘Williamstown’ and therefore may have been designed by the same person.



The detail shown here comes from [K13], the square of *Mrs GR Cumming* (née Annie Smith, of Templestowe). In 1895-96 Annie and Captain George Cumming were living in Williamstown with their three young sons. Perhaps Annie organised the squares from her new community. *Geo R Cumming* was in the merchant navy – look for the anchors at [K9].

John Caldwell [G14] was the new Presbyterian minister at North Williamstown and had previously assisted at Scots Church, Heidelberg. His square is quite austere and lacks the decoration typical of the other Williamstown embroidery.



Floral tributes

Images of flowers, including patriotic floral emblems, are frequently incorporated in needlework and other forms of textile crafts. Our quilt and its frill carry the embroidered images of several flowers and also some flower names.

Floral emblems are [G4] *Rose* of England, [H4] *Shamrock* of Ireland and [F4] *Thistle* of Scotland. More thistles are at [D3], [D16] and in the Central square, emphasising the identity of the Scots Church.

For another illustration of flowers, look for the lily at [D10]. Perhaps more roses are at [J8] and [K3], and more shamrocks at [E14] and [H14]. Decorative florals accompany [A8] *Ferrar Phillips*, [C17] *Juliet*, [D5] *Romeo*, [D12] *L Fielding* and [E6] *Fritz*.

Two flowers have their own signature squares: [G17] *Peony* and [H15] *Cyclamen*. Perhaps these were anonymous contributions from a keen local gardener, James Donaldson of *Wellington House*, Ivanhoe.