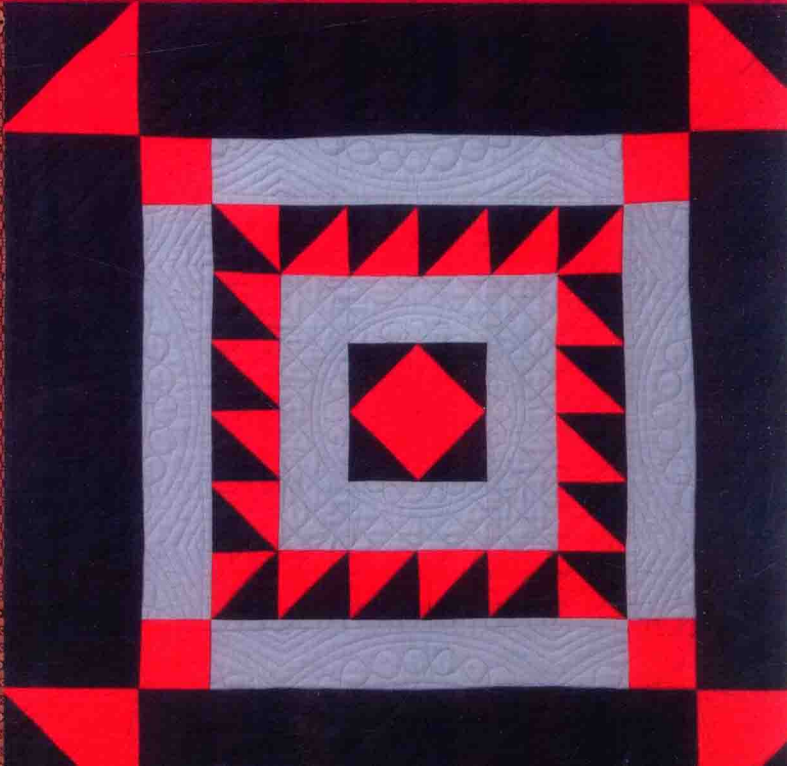
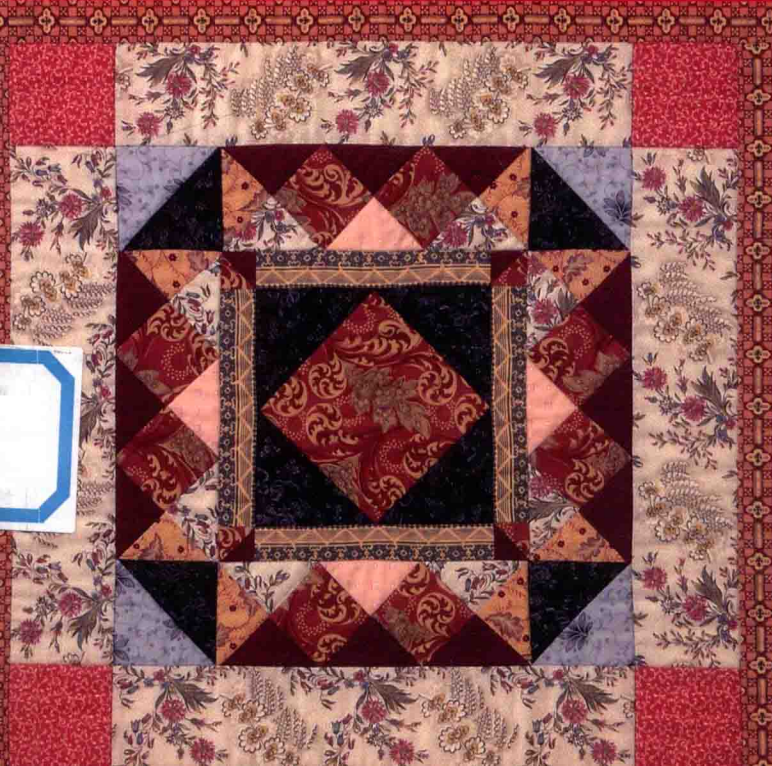




MAKING WELSH QUILTS

THE TEXTILE TRADITION THAT INSPIRED THE AMISH?

Mary Jenkins and Clare Claridge



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DEDICATION

To the women of Wales who made such wonderful quilts, many of whose names we do not know; we thank them for their diligence and inspiration and dedicate this book to their memory.

Text and designs © Mary Jenkins and Clare Claridge 2005
Photography and layout © David & Charles 2005

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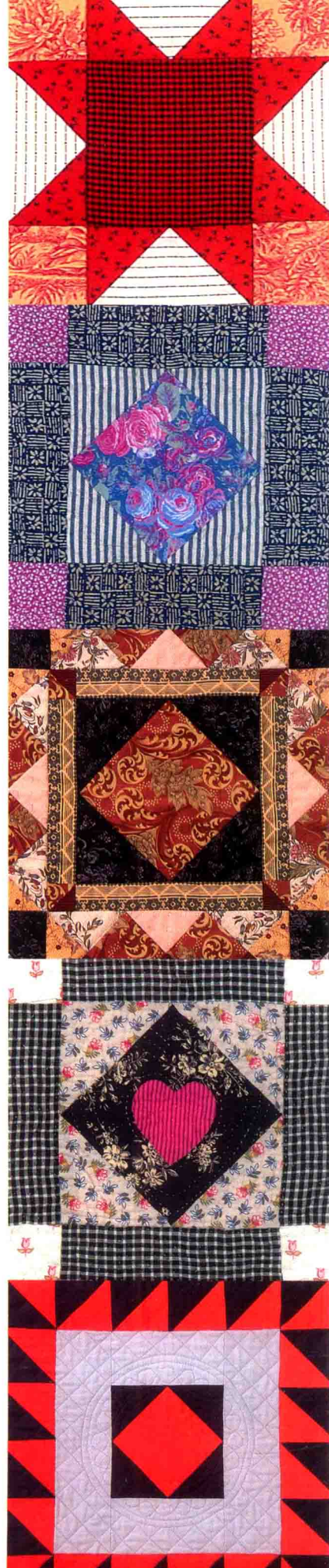
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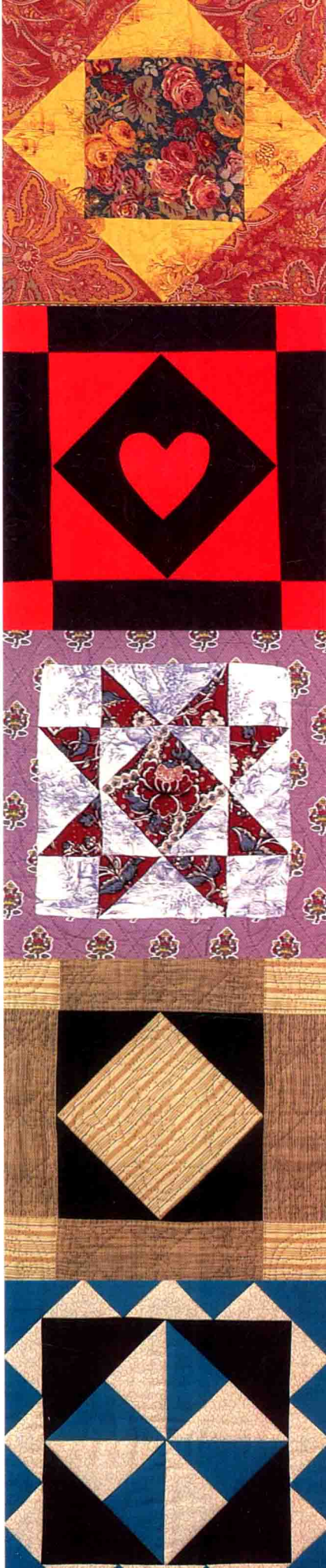
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National Museums and Galleries of Wales; page 29 Ceredigion Museum.

Frontispiece: The Brecon Star Quilt – see page 58.



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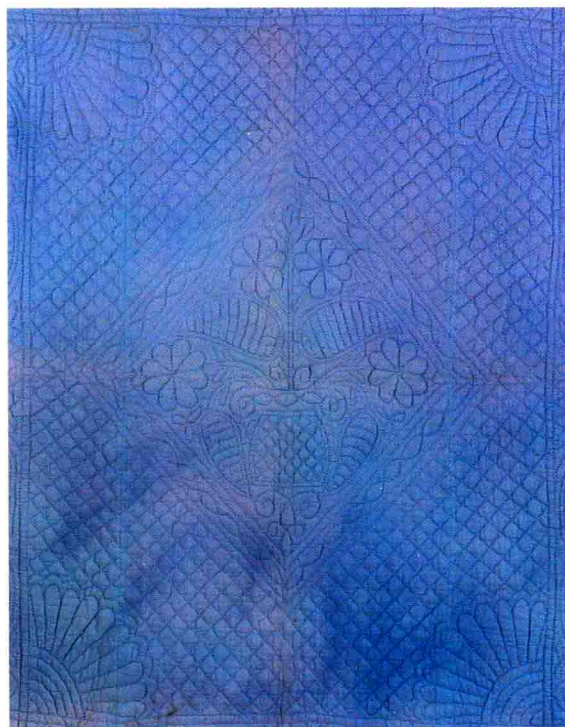
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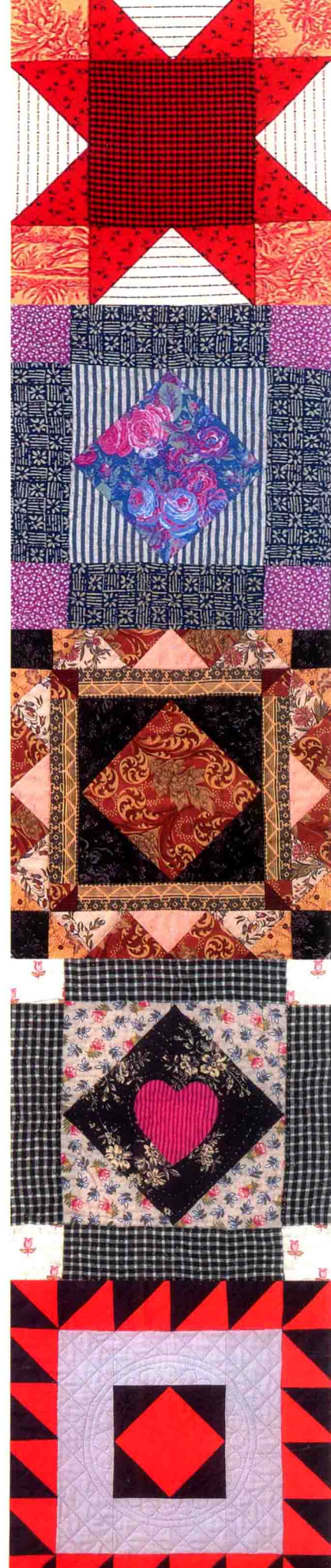
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INTRODUCTION

Here in Wales, quilts remind us of the homes of our parents and grandparents. We look back with nostalgia, as quilts were part of our lives then: useful, attractive but relatively unimportant and certainly not considered to be of any great value. How wrong we were! It has taken us many years to realize what treasures we have long taken for granted and to see that our quilting heritage is quite unique. We are lucky that many quilts have been saved from oblivion for us to admire and study, as a result of the foresight and dedication of a few enlightened people.

The aims of this book are to show you how Welsh quilts were made, and to inspire you to try quilting the Welsh way. We hope this will give you a greater understanding of Wales as a country, and if you can't actually travel here, that you will enjoy the quilts within these pages and even make one of your own.

THE DIFFERENT WAYS – A PERSONAL APPROACH

As you will see from the quilt projects, the authors of this book – Mary Jenkins and Clare Claridge – have very different methods of making quilts and a personal approach to selecting fabrics. You are presented with a choice: which way do you want to make your quilt? It is for you to decide.

Clare collects and lectures on Welsh quilts and has made a special study of quilting patterns; she is also known for her expertise in teaching rotary cutting. Some years ago, she began devising ways of making small-scale replicas of Welsh quilts using these techniques. Through day schools and demonstrations she has enabled many students to make a quilt very quickly and then take their time quilting it with the traditional Welsh motifs (see pages 104–112). The fabrics Clare chooses are as near as she can find to those of the original quilt, but the change in size means that the patterned fabrics may need to be smaller in scale.

Clare is a great admirer of Amish quilts and enjoys working with plain colours. Along with many other experts she has been struck by the similarity between some Amish and Welsh wool quilts, and many of her quilts reflect this fondness for simple shapes in plain and sombre colours used in a dramatic way.

Mary, on the other hand, rarely uses plain fabric. Her joy is mixing prints and she is fascinated by how one patterned fabric reacts to another. She always tries to use British fabrics in her quilts, if possible Welsh ones, and has a large collection of vintage Laura Ashley fabrics. These, together with Liberty of London fabrics, are her mainstay.

Mary's quilts are not replicas but they are made in the spirit of old Welsh quilts, usually based on the design layout of an original quilt, if not its actual colours, and using similar methods of working. As she uses small scraps of fabric, some left over from previous projects, others too small (or sometimes too precious) to use elsewhere, every piece is marked out separately. The more intricate sections are hand pieced.

Clare and Mary therefore have different ways of designing and making their quilts, which shows how Welsh quilts can appeal to quilters with different levels of expertise and experience. You may be a beginner who just needs to buy a limited amount of fabric to make something dramatic. Or you may have large amounts of fabric and be keen to try an unstructured approach – something very different, a change from working with blocks.



WALES AND ITS QUILTERS

Wales is a small country with a population of around 2.75 million. Lying to the west side of the British Isles, above the Cornish peninsula, Wales shares an eastern border with central England but is otherwise surrounded by sea. The beautiful Welsh countryside, rugged coastline, hills and mountains are kept green and pleasant by a high rainfall that sweeps in from the Atlantic.

This lovely landscape is scattered with strings of castles, more than 400 of them, giving a tangible clue to its turbulent past. Democratic and political struggles over the centuries mean that Wales lost a level of aristocratic patronage long ago, and this has had a considerable effect on its heritage and culture, including its textile heritage. England, a very close neighbour, is much larger and wealthier. The English Court and Church, always patrons of the decorative arts, commissioned artists and craftspeople to decorate and adorn their palaces, cathedrals and great houses and, as they required a constant supply of high-quality items, they kept a skilled workforce busy. Unfortunately, there are few great houses in Wales. Welsh cathedrals are few in number and very modest in comparison with those in England, and many of the castles fell into ruin. So there was no demand in Wales for high-quality textiles, and little opportunity for the female population to learn fine needlework.

The upper classes in England and Wales inhabited a separate world from the rest of the population. Only they had access to the finer things in life, including fine fabrics. The lower orders, unless they were employed to serve or supply the rich, had to make do with home-spun materials and had no idea of what they were missing. There are some references in inventories of Welsh houses to bed quilts, quilted clothing and so on, and there are certainly early pieces to be seen in Welsh museums.

The earliest quilt in the collection of The Museum of Welsh Life at St Fagans is thought to date from the 18th century, and was made in Newcastle Emlyn in Ceredigion. It does display patterns that are now recognized to be Welsh in style and these patterns are thought to have been in general use at the time. Although this quilt gives us an intriguing glimpse into our quilting history, it is only one example and we do not know how typical it was of its time or how its patterns evolved.

It may seem cavalier to dismiss so many centuries of Welsh history in so few lines but in terms of early textiles, prior to the 19th century there is so little evidence it is difficult to make definitive statements about a Welsh style of embroidery or quilting.

CHANGING TIMES

The Industrial Revolution at the end of the 18th century changed everything. Massive mineral deposits were discovered in Wales and great industries developed around these new resources. People flocked from all parts of Britain to work in the coal mines and in iron- and steel-making plants. Although this meant dreadful pollution of the environment and poor working conditions, people did have more money and more opportunity to buy as new markets opened up to them. They also had the chance to travel as the railways improved access to the large ports and to the ships that crossed to America and beyond. Many Welsh people travelled from the English ports of Liverpool and Bristol to North America. The new coal and steel industries there needed experienced workers, but many returned home later as there was plenty of work in Wales. There is evidence that this to-ing and fro-ing across the Atlantic had a significant effect on quilting in Wales and, as we shall see later, also in the United States.



Wales changed rapidly from a poor rural economy to a highly industrialized country, especially in the south. With this came a new stature and national identity. This certainly applies to the needlework heritage. Because enormous numbers of quilts and other textiles were being made at this time it became possible to recognize a Welsh way of doing things.

THE QUILTS

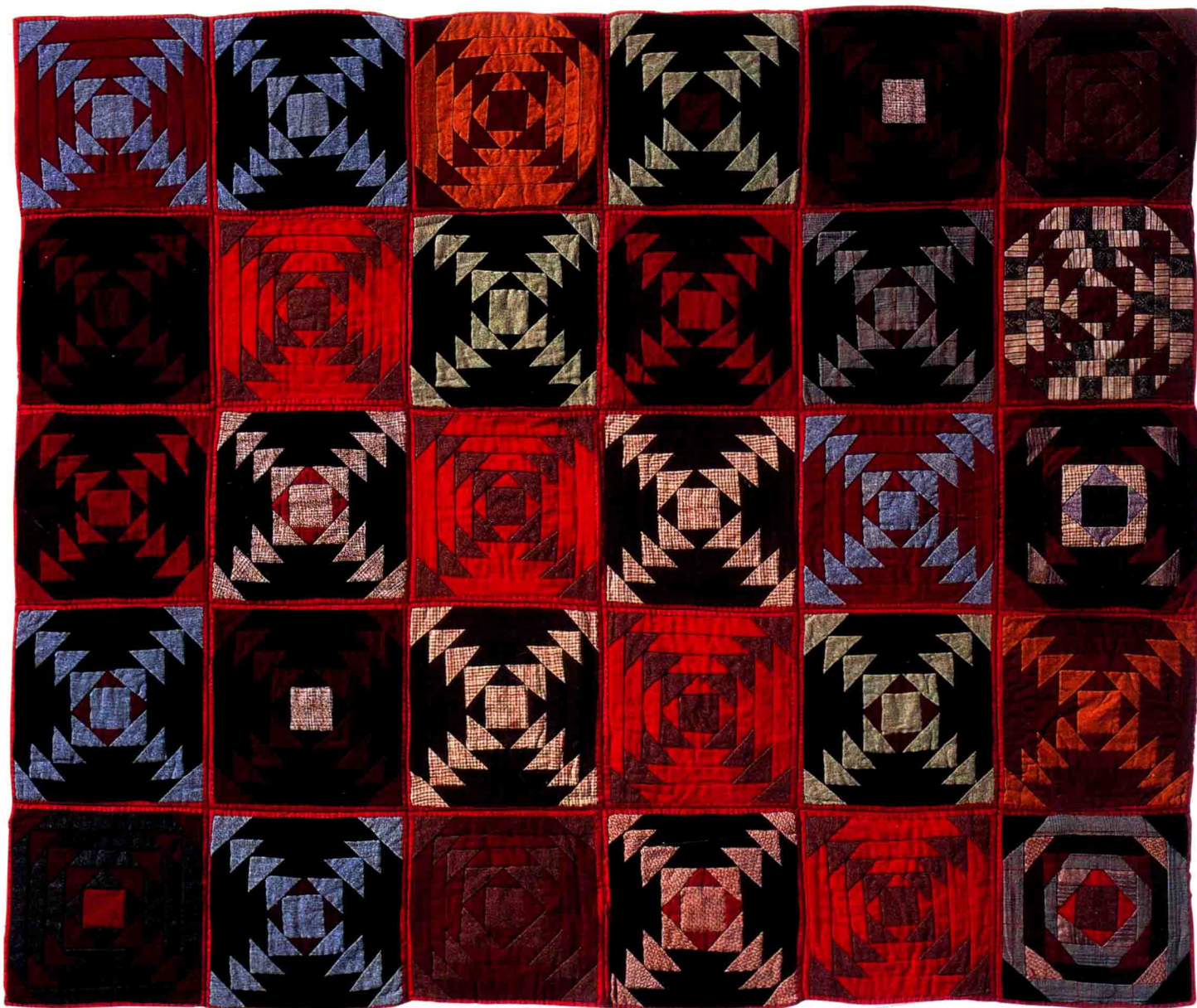
The bulk of Welsh quiltmaking began in the mid-19th century and continued almost to the middle of the following century. The quilts themselves can be divided into three main categories: woollen quilts, cotton and multi-fabric quilts, and wholecloth quilts. It is this last category, the wholecloth quilts, that is most associated with Wales, probably because these were the most recent and survive in greater numbers. However, the Welsh quilt heritage is much more varied than this.

Woollen Quilts

All Welsh quilts are now much sought after, but it is the woollen quilts that have had the most dramatic reassessment of their worth. They are 'Cinderella' quilts – from being left out in the cold, literally, they have now been elevated to being hung in galleries. Until quite recently they were considered too heavy for beds and were relegated to outdoor use, many ending up covering farm vehicles or being used as horse blankets or beds for dogs.

Those made of vivid flannels are strikingly similar to American Amish quilts. Indeed, experts believe that the Amish, who had no quilt-making tradition prior to settling in America, drew their inspiration from their new neighbours, the Welsh, who had also settled in Pennsylvania. The evidence for this link between Welsh and Amish quilts is strong. Both have the same simple format, and a graphic quality that appeals to today's quilters and collectors.

Above: Teacher and students at Aberdare Technical College (1920s). The quiltmaker, Irene Morgan (née Davies), is standing on the left of the quilt. The circular centre surrounded by swirling Paisley motifs is typical of the quilts produced in the Aberdare area at that time.



Welsh woollen quilts were made using cloth manufactured in the then thriving wool industries of mid and west Wales. The quilts were entirely home grown, made with local cloth from local sheep and filled with sheep's wool collected from the hedgerows. As a result, they were inexpensive to produce and warm to sleep under in cold, damp houses.

As many Welsh families crossed and re-crossed the Atlantic, the design influence was also two-way. This is demonstrated by the number of Welsh quilts made using American block patterns. Some were made in light fabrics as they would have been in their home country,

but the most characteristic are the block-patterned quilts made of Welsh wool. There is undoubtedly a shared quilt history between Wales and Pennsylvania and research is ongoing to give a clearer picture of that time.

Cotton and Multi-Fabric Quilts

Roller-printed fabrics became generally available around 1840 and after this date cotton quilts were made in great numbers. The medallion or frame quilt is the style that is most associated with Welsh patchwork. However, in Wales patchwork was considered the poor relation. For Welsh quilters the craft was in the quilting.

Above: A Welsh wool flannel quilt, made using an American block pattern c.1905, 80 x 96in (203 x 243cm).
Collection of Jen Jones.

It is the quilting patterns that identify a quilt as Welsh, for the fabrics were made in the cotton mills of England.

There are many categories of quilt within this group and the fabrics used in them give many clues to the social status of the maker. This is explored in *The Quilt Gallery* (pages 10–33) where specific quilts and their fabrics are discussed.

Wholecloth Quilts

From 1880, satin cotton in a range of plain colours became the favoured fabric for making quilts. The sheen on this fabric showed the patterns to perfection and must have encouraged everyone to improve their stitching.

Between the two World Wars quilting skills were given a boost by the setting up, in 1928, of the Rural Industries Board, an organization formed to encourage craft industries in areas suffering economic depression. The mining valleys of South Wales were one such area and the Board contacted all the skilled quilters it could find and asked them to recruit and train others. The object was to make high-quality quilts to sell as luxury items in wealthier areas. This raised the standard of quilting, as only the best work was accepted and quilters were encouraged to use the traditional patterns in new ways. It also created a structure within which to learn the craft and many quilting classes were formed. Competitions were held and keenly contested. Beautiful quilts were made, the ultimate goal being to receive a prize from the *Eisteddfod*, the annual national gathering for the promotion of Welsh arts.

During World War II production of the fabric necessary for making quilts ceased. Women's lives changed as they played their part in the war effort. When normal life eventually resumed after the war, only a few keen quilters continued with their craft and there were few new recruits. Aspirations had changed, the world had moved on and so a long era of quilting in Wales came to an end.

MORE RECENT TIMES

In the late 1960s the Laura Ashley company opened its first factory in Carno in mid-Wales in what was to be the start of a global business empire. Fortunately for quilters, Laura loved patchwork and had a collection of quilts that inspired many of her famous fabric prints. She knew that her fabrics appealed to quilters and catered to them by selling off-cuts at the factory. This was manna from heaven for quilters and

bags of Laura Ashley patchwork pieces were the basis of much of the patchwork produced at that time.

In the 1970s, a revival of interest in patchwork and quilting led to the creation, in 1979, of The Quilters' Guild. Many Welsh Guild members formed groups to promote the craft and encouraged others to join them.

In those days, obtaining suitable fabrics for patchwork was a challenge and the range of wadding (batting) and other specialist supplies was limited. Of course, Welsh traditions were ignored, as it was American quilts that everyone aspired to, helped by the seemingly limitless supply of fabrics, books and magazines produced in America.

THE QUILTERS

The reason for the distinctive style and consistently high standard of quilting found on Welsh quilts is that the majority of it was professional work. This was not a social activity shared by groups of women, as in North America, but a way of earning a living. In Wales it was the custom, if you could afford it, to employ a quilter rather than undertake the task yourself. Of course, housewives did make and quilt their own patchwork but few examples have survived as home-made quilts were used and worn out. Quilts that were paid for were kept for best, treated carefully, and have lasted.

Other quilters travelled around within an area, sometimes with an apprentice, living with the customer while making the quilt. These quilters worked quickly and it is said that they could produce a quilt in two weeks – which, if you examine their intricate designs, was no mean feat.

In the 20th century, under the patronage of the Rural Industries Board, quilting did become a group effort with up to four women working on one quilt. Again, this was not for social reasons but because they were under pressure to produce high-quality work quickly.

Though these later 20th-century quilts were undoubtedly beautiful and set standards for all quilters to aspire to, they do not have the boldness and vitality of the earlier quilts. The structure and discipline of a quilting class or a cooperative meant that the personality of the quilter was inevitably suppressed. When a teacher dictated the design and demanded perfect stitching from her students there was no scope for individual input. In earlier times it was the quilter's unique style that was admired – her quilts were sought after because they bore the stamp of her personality.

THE QUILT GALLERY

On the following pages is a collection of many different quilts made in Wales between 1820 and 1930. Some are drawn from museum and other large collections but many belong to individuals who have either inherited them or bought them because they wanted to own a piece of Welsh textile history. The aim in selecting these quilts was that they should reflect the wide range of quilts made throughout Wales at that time.

LLANDEILO CHINTZ QUILT

The quilt pictured opposite was made in Llandeilo in Carmarthenshire by Rachel Williams and belonged to Ann, the wife of William Williams, a maltster in the town. That is all the information recorded when the quilt was donated to The Museum of Welsh Life and we can only speculate about the relationship between the owner and the quilter. Although they have the same surname they need not necessarily have been related as so many people in Wales are called Williams. Indeed, researching family history in Wales is extremely difficult as so many people share a limited number of names and Williams is one of the most common. However, the quality and intricacy of the quilting suggests that Rachel Williams was a professional quilter and if it wasn't a gift to a family member, anyone commissioning such a high-quality quilt would need to have been fairly affluent to afford it.

It is a very simple medallion quilt, made with large pieces of expensive fabric, with a printed central panel surrounded by a series of borders in shades of beige, fawn and blue in printed floral cottons. The back of the quilt is unusual in that it is also of patchwork made with the same fabrics but in a much simpler form. Normally a quilt with such an elaborate quilted design would have had a plain backing in order to show the patterning to greater effect.

The quilting designs are very beautiful with a centre consisting of a large roundel quartered and filled with veined leaves and bordered with a diamond edging.

There are quarter circles at the corners of the centre field and a wonderful array of subsidiary patterns including ferns, leaves, hearts and spirals.

The deep inner border is filled with a bold chevron design with spiral infill. The outer border, which is now very worn, is quite narrow and again filled with a diamond pattern.

Opposite: Llandeilo Chintz Quilt
c.1800–30, 83 x 101in (207 x 253cm),
The Museum of Welsh Life, St Fagans.

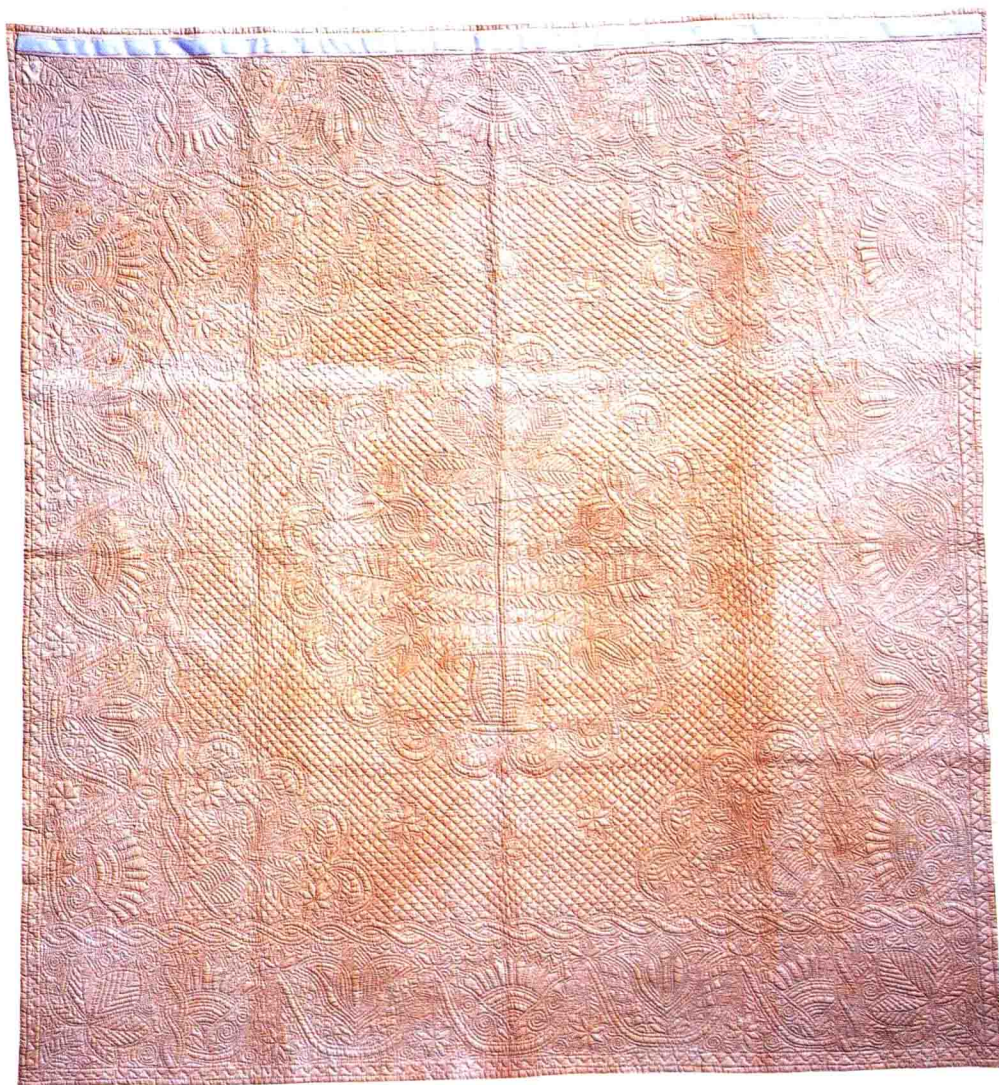


PEMBROKESHIRE CHINTZ QUILT

This magnificent quilt is made with large pieces of glazed chintz in a simple format, rather like one large block. However, the fabrics are worthy of their scale and have retained their colour and freshness so that they gleam as much as they would have done when the quilt was first made.

It is one of six quilts retrieved from England where they had been taken by a member of the Morgan family, originally from Pembrokeshire. They are now back in Wales, as this quilt, with another one from the same family, is part of Jen Jones's collection and is on regular display.

It has been exhibited all over the world, always showing its patchwork side so its reverse is seldom seen. This is a great pity as the wonderful quilting is certainly worthy of display, and its intricacy adds great richness and depth to the chosen chintzes. It has very sophisticated patterning, consisting of a central urn filled with a large five-leaved plant and other flower forms set within a circle of curved leaves. There are four smaller flower-filled urns at each corner of the quilt, all set within a twisted cable border. The space surrounding the central area is filled with cross-hatching dotted with star motifs. It is truly a tour de force of quilting.



Right: Pembrokeshire Chintz Quilt, reverse (quilted) side c.1820, 72 x 82in (183 x 208cm), Collection of Jen Jones.



Above: Pembroke Chintz Quilt – patchwork side. The flowery chintz and roller-printed striped fabrics of the outer border mask the wonderful quilting border design of swags filled with elaborate tulip and fan motifs (see page 12, bottom right).