

'A Friendship In Stitch'

When I was at school, as well as studying the academic subjects, girls were given the option of doing 'cooking' or 'sewing'. Boys had the choice of metal work, woodwork and technical drawing, and this was a 'progressive' Grammar School! My Mum was an excellent cook but not an accomplished seamstress, so the choice for me was obvious. I went on to study 'home economics with fabric' as one of my 'A' levels.

These lessons, both practical and theoretical, engendered a life-long interest in fabric and sewing so I was very keen to visit the exhibition, 'A Friendship In Stitch', held at St Andrew's Church on the last weekend in June.

The exhibition featured work by the designer Joan Freeman, who was a member of St Andrew's congregation and is now in her 80s, and the embroiderer Clarissa Robinson (1925 – 2009). Both women lived and worked in the area. Their individual stories are fascinating, and apart from the exquisite work that was the product of their collaboration, they both have fascinating life stories.

This exhibition of ecclesiastical embroidery featured pieces from a number of local churches, including our own Lady Chapel frontal and the Trinity frontal and vestments. Also on display were the five sets of frontals and vestments which were embroidered by the St Andrew's Church Embroidery Guild, (and that is another story) as well as other pieces from St Andrew's, St Paul's Bedford and St James' Biddenham.

Whilst it is easy for our congregation to 'get up close' and appreciate the beauty, art and execution of the altar frontals as pieces of embroidery, I am not sure the clergy would be happy to stand still long enough for a very close inspection of the vestments they are wearing!

It was therefore rather awe inspiring to be able to closely scrutinize the pieces that were on display. To be able to appreciate the fineness of the stitching, the variety of embroidery techniques used and the materials employed to achieve the best effect and see at close hand the symbolism encompassed in these works of art.

In addition to the worked pieces some of the original sketches, paintings, photographs and tracings (the method used to transfer the designs to the fabric) were on display accompanied by good written explanations. There was also a short video interview with Joan Freeman which was very informative and entertaining. All in all it was a fabulous (in the true sense of the word) exhibition to have on one's doorstep.

Christine Chapman