

Early Findings: Schoolgirl Samplers from the Royal Masonic School for Girls, London

A concise summary of the School's history and the significance of the surviving samplers

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This summary brings together the main early findings from our research into samplers made at the Royal Masonic School for Girls. The unique style of Masonic School samplers reveals how they were influenced by the school's charitable status, its religious and moral framework, and the principles of the Freemasons themselves. The records preserved by the Freemasons are unusually rich, allowing the history of the school, its staff, and individual pupils to be traced in detail from the late eighteenth century onward.

The School and Its Historical Setting

The Royal Masonic School for Girls was founded in the 1788 in London on the instigation of the Bartholomew Ruspini, a prominent Freemason, and the patronage of the Duchess of Cumberland, and was to be supported by Masonic patronage. It aimed to support daughters of Freemasons who had died or fallen into poverty. The School's purpose was to educate and morally protect girls who might otherwise be vulnerable. In practice, this meant that the school functioned for much of its early history as part school, part orphanage, and, like many other charitable schools for girls at the time, focussed on training the girls for domestic work, rather than as a place of academic learning.

The school occupied several sites over time, beginning at Somers Town in Camden, but quickly expanding to a larger building at St George's Fields in Southwark, then to St John's Hill in Battersea, and finally to Rickmansworth in the twentieth century.

One of the most striking features of this research is the quality of the School Minute Books and their thorough documentation of the life of the school. Financial accounts, newspaper reports and other contemporary Masonic publications also add to the evidence base. From these it has been possible to identify significant celebrations in the life of the school (several of which were commemorated in the needlework), reconstruct the day to day life of the school, special events for the pupils, admissions processes, staff roles, and the stories behind the pupils and how they had arrived in the care of the school.

School Life, Discipline, and Education

Admission to the school was via a very structured and regulated election process. Girls had to prove both eligibility and respectability through petitions, certificates, and medical evidence. Only the daughters of Freemasons were admitted, with priority given to orphans, but other girls whose family had fallen upon hard times were considered too. Elections were also influenced by committee voting and patronage.

Daily life was structured. Girls rose early, attended prayers, learned reading, writing, arithmetic, and needlework, and were expected to mend clothing and take on domestic tasks as they matured. This was all supervised closely by Matron and her assistants. The records

show that health and welfare were taken seriously and compassionately, with medical oversight given freely by Freemasons employed in the London hospitals. Uniform, conduct and personal hygiene were all carefully monitored, reflecting an aim to produce employable and morally upright young women. At the end of their time at school, girls were either returned to their parents or carers, or an apprenticeship was arranged at a suitable employer, such as at a milliner, draper, or in domestic service.

Needlework at the School

Needlework played an important part in the School from its earliest years. It served several purposes at once: it occupied the girls, trained them in practical domestic skills, and generated income for the institution. References from the Minute Books show that sampler-making and other forms of sewing were already established by the late 1780s, with the initiative being led by the Matron. No known attributable needlework has been identified as surviving from this early period. The surviving samplers date from the 1820s to the 1850s and although not using a wide variety of stitches, they show an accomplished level of accurate needlework, using very high-quality silk threads, and often following formal architectural design not often seen on other samplers of the period.

Most of the samplers were stitched at the school at St George's Fields, with only one confirmed example associated with the later Battersea site. This spike in sampler making perhaps reflects the influence of the leadership of Matron and School expectations, and access to needlework resources. It might also reflect the contemporary fashion for needlework as a decoration for the interior walls of the school. The quantity of samplers produced from this period might also have been better preserved than the earlier samplers, as such time, cost and care was taken on them.

The pieces fall broadly into two categories: large commemorative works made to commemorate public or ceremonial events, and individual named samplers stitched by pupils. Both types of needlework are easily recognisable as having been produced at the School stylistically. Almost all of them have a bold satin stitched verse or commemoration which is framed in either a stitched architectural arch, or a border of alternating blue fleur-de-lis and a pink four petalled barbed rose. They are all very formal in appearance.

The earliest sampler by Patience Smith, 1824, is perhaps the sampler that shows more conventional characteristics of contemporary non-Masonic School samplers in its depiction of a pastoral scene at the bottom of the sampler and a floral border. It does, however, show the beginnings of the formal placing of text using satin stitch for the lettering and use of Masonic symbols. Perhaps this piece represents an early stage in the development of the school style, before the more severe and standardised layouts seen later. None of the Masonic needlework has the standard rows of alphabet and numbers, suggesting that such needlework was practised in the school room and not retained. It would have been a given that the girls who attended this school did not need to show that they were literate and numerate.

Early Findings and Research Implications

Several early conclusions emerge from the current evidence. First, the School produced a small but very distinctive quantity of needlework. This needlework reflected the ethos of the Masons in its inscriptions which celebrated educational achievement, reflected moral

guidance, and honoured ceremonial events. Second, the relatively short period of time in which the needlework was completed suggests a strong influence, probably by the Matron, but perhaps also by the School leadership who requested that this formal type of needlework be produced. Third, the technical quality of the embroidery is exceptionally high. Fine wool grounds, high-quality silks, and a relatively small number of different types of stitches were used to a consistently high standard across all pieces of needlework, indicating either excellent teaching and careful supervision, or partial adult authorship in the most ambitious works.

There is still further research to be undertaken. It is unknown if other Masonic samplers and needlework survive outside the School in private collections. Research into the designs of the commemorative pieces needs to be investigated, in particular regarding how much pupil/teacher input there was in their stitching, or if these pieces were not stitched by members of the school at all but commissioned elsewhere.

We continue to review and work on the evidence, and a longer paper or book summarising our findings will be forthcoming in the near future.

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