

A study of the North East England Quaker sampler tradition, with a focus on York School

Ruth Taylor, crowsfeetstitching, 2025.

Introduction

In October 2025, the Sampler Guild is running a retreat at Ackworth School. Ackworth is well known in the sampler community for the samplers that were designed there and the styles that evolved at Ackworth and were used across other Quaker schools.

Ackworth was the largest of the Quaker schools, but many of those who worked at or helped to set up and fund Ackworth School, were also closely linked to York School. My work is partly focussed on York School. York School was smaller than Ackworth, and ran for just under 30 years years on two sites, during which time girls at the school sewed samplers in different Quaker styles.

Previous studies of Ackworth samplers have included York school samplers as part of the study of the development of Quaker samplers. However, none have looked specifically at the samplers from York school, or other samplers stitched by Quakers in North East England and in depth at the families to whom the girls who stitched the samplers belonged.

I have been looking afresh at the extant body of York School samplers in the light of some recent samplers which have been found. These samplers allow for further assessment of what can be interpreted about how the samplers reflect the differences in the curriculum between York and Ackworth and the expectations on the girls in their time at York and Ackworth and the significance of the different types of sampler.

In this summary note, I have briefly highlighted some of the findings from my work on York School quaker samplers.

York and Ackworth samplers are linked, and their styles developed in parallel

In my studies, I have analysed the types of sampler found across the period of York school, but where we now have an enhanced evidence base of the use of the style through the life of York school. These are:

- Oval samplers
- Darning samplers
- Medallions
- Map samplers

Like Ackworth, there are many oval samplers from York, although here the layout does not change over time. In the review, I will discuss the significance, motivations, sources, techniques, and what this type of sampler can tell us about Quaker needlework.

Another style that was common at York and Ackworth was darning samplers, both “white on white” darning samplers, and “black on black” damask darning samplers. At York, both types of sampler exist and the “white on white” samplers are by far the more common and are found through the lifespan of York school.

Black damask darning samplers are found over a similar period to that at Ackworth school. However, there are no examples from the later years of York school, although “white on white” darning samplers were still found.

There are also medallion samplers from York school. These medallions are similar to ones found at Ackworth. I will discuss the links that can be seen by comparing these samplers and also what their purpose, relevance and significance could be in the few that exist from York School.

Finally, I have identified a wide range of map samplers. Map samplers have not been found at Ackworth School to date. The breadth of map samplers at York school illustrates the range of how these samplers were used in the girls' education, and the quality of work that York school girls were able to produce.

I have looked in more depth at the families of the girls, the links between the families and how that might have shaped the school.

How York, alongside Ackworth, influenced the development of samplers

As well as York School itself, I have been looking at the way in which the style and patterns of York and Ackworth samplers spread out across the region including to non-Quaker samplers. I have also looked at what happened before York school, and how previous Quaker samplers may have influenced teaching and sewing at York school itself. I have also identified several Quaker samplers that are not readily identifiable as Quaker and investigate what this could mean.

I have shown examples of samplers which have not been linked to York or Ackworth but which mirror the core designs from the school, particularly the oval and medallion styles. This also includes links with Irish Quaker schools.

There are many more samplers from across Yorkshire which feature elements of York samplers, including alongside more traditional Yorkshire designs, often by girls with no obvious links to the Quaker community. I have reviewed these samplers and considered possibilities as to how the Quaker symbols may have moved into the wider sampler tradition.

As well as studying the samplers from York and Ackworth Schools, I have looked at the history of education in other Quaker institutions around the region and where needlework was or may have been taught.

Thanks and acknowledgements

I could not have produced my review of York School samplers and other North East English samplers without the help and generosity of a number of organisations that hold York School samplers including Ackworth School, The Mount School, York, and York Castle Museum, and also a number of auction houses and smaller museums that have allowed me to use their images in my presentation at Ackworth. Particular thanks to Rebecca Scott at Witney Antiques who has collected a number of York School samplers at present and in the recent past. These have really helped to improve the evidence base for York school samplers.

I have begun my work using Carol Humphrey's work on Ackworth samplers, and since its publishing I have been able to add and expand the survey. I have also relied upon the exhibition catalogues produced by Rebecca Scott for Witney Antiques.

After presenting my work at Ackworth, I am hoping to develop this research further next year. If you have ideas or questions on samplers at York school and beyond, please feel free to get in touch: via crowsfeetstitching@gmail.com, or via @crowsfeetstitching on Instagram.