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## Praxis and Poetics: Research Through Design

### The New Saint Cuthbert's Banner

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#### Abstract

This research narrates the design development and realisation of the *New St. Cuthbert's Banner*, an ecclesiastical banner for Durham Cathedral (North East England), which replaces the original, destroyed in the mid 1500's.

After my commission to design the new banner, the process began with historical research offered by a description of the original artefact in the *Rites of Durham* (1503) (cited by Fowler, 1903 p.26). The creative process encompassed the research and development of floral pattern in the pursuit of a simple 'pleasing aesthetic'. The final version was chosen from over thirty 'variations on a theme', and was an innate response to the variables of materials, labour costs, and the one that just 'felt right'. Craftsmen drawn entirely from North East England completed the four-year project by undertaking the embroidery, woodwork, silverwork and leatherwork to bring the project to realisation.

On 20<sup>th</sup> March 2012 - St. Cuthbert's feast day – the banner was processed through the streets of Durham before being presented to the Cathedral. It now enjoys permanent public display at the entrance to St. Cuthbert's shrine and is used at the discretion of the Dean and Chapter in processions and worship. The Very Reverend Michael Sadgrove, Dean of Durham Cathedral speaks of the banner's timely addition to the Cathedral as "*making history*", and knowing that, "*like its predecessor, it will bring inspiration and pleasure for years to come, and be a source of particular pride to*

*the people of North-East England, Cuthbert's Land*" (Sadgrove, 2012).

The new banner can only hope to represent the zeitgeist of the original. Like the historic and symbolic textile artefacts of the Durham miners' banners, the new St. Cuthbert's banner symbolises the ideals and aspirations of those who rallied under it, becoming "*the visual memory of a movement*" (Williams, cited in Gorman, 1973 p.19).

#### Author Keywords

*Design; Banner; St. Cuthbert; Ecclesiastical artefact; Community; Reflection-in-practice*

#### Research Imperatives

My involvement with *The New Saint Cuthbert's Banner* (Fig. 1) was the result of a design commission from the Northumbrian Association<sup>1</sup> in 2008. The association cites words such as 'identity', and 'community' as the impetus for the banner's creation 500 years after the original was destroyed. They believe the new banner is a

<sup>1</sup>The Northumbrian Association is a registered charity whose patrons include; His Grace the Duke of Northumberland and The Bishop of Durham. The Association exists to maintain and advance the Northumbrian culture, heritage and traditions. Their annual House of Common's dinner uses this platform to present their visions for the future, one such being the permanent re-instatement of the *Lindisfarne Gospels* to the North East.



Fig. 1. The banner being processed on St. Cuthbert's Day, 20th March 2012. Photograph: Tony Griffiths

rallying-cry to the people of the North East to support the fight to bring the Lindisfarne Gospels permanently back to the North East, and comes at a time when the loan of the gospels to Durham in 2013 sees St Cuthbert's Gospel, the Lindisfarne Gospels and the relics of St Cuthbert come together under one roof for the first time since 1104.

The life of St. Cuthbert (c.635-687) is widely documented, with accounts of both his living years and his posthumous spiritual presence serving to maintain the 'cult' that surrounded him. Cuthbert is regarded as one of the most significant saints in England in the Middle Ages (Bliese, 1998, p.215). Documentation suggests that the Lindisfarne Gospels, written by Eadfrith, his successor as Bishop of Lindisfarne, were written to celebrate his beatification. More importantly in terms of this paper, Cuthbert's banner was also posthumously created as an embodiment of his protection of 'his people' against both Scottish and foreign armies. *The Rites of Durham* tells of the banner accompanying the armies Richard II, Henry IV and Henry VIII into battle, where victories were 'afforded' by the presence of the sacred relic. It also recounts the description of the first manifestation of the original banner, used in 1346 at the Battle of Neville's Cross. In a vision, the then prior of the abbey at Durham, was instructed to take St. Cuthbert's corporax cloth "and to put the same holy relic like unto a banner cloth upon a spear point and on the morrow after to go and repair to a place on the west part of the city of Durham called the Redhills and there to remain and abide till the end of the said battle..." (Fowler, 1903, p.23)

Of relevance here is the fact that *the Redhills* now sites the headquarters of the Durham Miners' Union. With a recent resurgence in attendance at the Durham Miners' Gala, the North East's legacy of banner-bearing and the representation of shared values should be highlighted (see Stephenson, column opposite). Stephenson & Wray (2005) reference how the lodge banner, at the centre of all post-mining community activities, is perhaps even more significant for the continuance of the well-being of their

communities than when the mine was in operation. Wray suggests that "to some extent, it is as if the banners have gone through some anthropomorphic process and become individuals who possess the collective memory of the community they were created to represent" (2009, p.162).

## Research Process

The *New Saint Cuthbert's Banner* project was realised over a four-year period. This section broadly chronicles the creation of the ecclesiastical artefact. The preceding section revealed 'community' and 'identity' as main influencers for the research. However, the showcasing of the talent and quality of North East England craftsmen in the creation of the banner was also an imperative.

October 2008 - June 2009 | It was important for me as the newly-commissioned designer of the banner to define that my work was based on the contemporary interpretation, or *creation* of a new banner, rather than the attempted *recreation* of the old. Therefore, although historic tapestries and embroideries were appraised for techniques to be used in the new embroidery, the design was not intended to follow a medieval style. With a fairly tight brief afforded by the description in the *Rites of Durham* (see side column, p.3), my research question really centred around the production of meaning - how the design could represent the *brand* of Cuthbert, with the banner becoming a *logo* to embody the effort to reinstate the gospels to the North East. Although parallels have been drawn with the banners of the Miners' Lodges, these historical textiles tended towards a "visual representation of religious scenes, iconic union leaders or simply the depiction of a life that could be" (Gorman 1973, p.13). The new St. Cuthbert's banner in contrast, is a symbol of a narrative, rather than being a narrative in itself.

The start of my creative design work centred around research into wildflowers that Cuthbert would have encountered during his life in ancient Northumberland. Foxglove (*Digitalis purpurea*), Wood Avens (*Geum urbanum*), Cowslip (*Primula veris*), Sandwort

"Much modern social theory refers to isolation, alienation and the breakdown of community – but also the need for collective support and identity in a world dominated by neo-liberal strategies where there is much danger for the individual. The banner comes to represent shared values and the collective sharing could be seen to offer a sense of protection" Stephenson (2013).



Fig. 2. Photographic wildflower research; hand-rendered drawings; digitisation and colouration of floral pattern

*"The banner cloth was a yard broad and five quarters deep... and made fast with all about with red silk and gold. And also the said banner cloth was made of red velvet on both sides most sumptuously embroidered and wrought with flowers of green silk and gold... and so sumptuously finished and absolutely perfected, was dedicated to holy St Cuthbert to the intent and purpose that the same should be always after presented and carried to any battle as occasion should serve" (Rites of Durham, cited by Fowler, 1903, p.26).*

(Arenaria), St. John's Wort (*Hypericum perforatum*) and Ferns (*Dryopteris*) were chosen to represent the widespread Northumbrian common flora. Hand-rendered sketches of these flowers were made in order to generate original work, and these were then scanned and traced using Adobe® Illustrator® to enable colouration (Fig.2). Once the flowers were digitised, I was able to follow the description to create the banner's 'structure' in terms of size, colour and positioning of pectoral cross, and to start manipulation and generation of pattern design work in response to the description of *"wrought with flowers of green silk and gold"*. Early 'playful' experimental pattern work revealed that an intertwining aesthetic was the most 'natural' and 'poetic', and intuitively I knew of no real alternative worth considering. Schön (1987, p.25) can be referred to here to support my claim for 'knowing' being tacit in our practice and implicit in our actions. My creative process here was an inherent response as I searched for a simple 'pleasing aesthetic' and balanced the considerations of both material and labour costs (embroidery).

Over thirty 'variations on a theme' were produced over an eight-month period to be reviewed by the Dean and Chapter, and also the Fabric Advisory Committee of Durham Cathedral. The final version was unanimously accepted and was the obvious choice of all involved in the decision-making, as it most closely echoed the key word *"sumptuously"* from the description.

August 2009- January 2012 | The task of realising the banner then passed to the commissioned embroiderer who elected to undertake the task single-handedly using medieval ecclesiastical Opus Anglicanum embroidery techniques, split stitches and goldwork embellishment for richness. Whilst the embroidery was underway, other local craftsmen were commissioned to undertake the woodwork for the poles, leatherwork for the harness and silverwork for the 'sacring bells' and finial cross (fig. 3). I also undertook to film these processes between April and November 2011, to record the communal journey and to help narrate the

emotional attachment the artisans had for their involvement in the project.

Whilst the banner project was not in its truest sense a 'community project', the artisans worked discretely, but towards a shared goal, therefore functioning as a 'virtual' community. Stephenson (2013) talks of the 'not doing what', but 'how' in developing a community. She promotes the notion of the fundraising (£35,000 was needed to subsidise the project) and the developing of the ideas as being key;

*"The process of the production and the creation of the banner in itself created common purpose, builds skills, creates 'community'. Here I am thinking of 'community' as a verb not a noun – community is something that is done, people are bound together in a common purpose". (Stephenson 2013)*

## Research Outcomes

In referencing the practicum, Schön states that; "Emphasis is placed on learning by doing, which John Dewey described a long time ago as the *"primary or initial subject matter"* (1987, p.16). As a 'student' of ecclesiastical design myself, I entered into the banner commission with a curiosity and an open mind. Schön speaks of *exploratory* experiment as *"probing, playful activity by which we get a feel for things"* (1987, p.70), and whilst it is tempting to call my experimental approach 'trial and error', Schön elevates this to what he calls a sequence of *"moments"* in a viable process of reflection-in-action, where we reflect on each *"trial" to inform the next* (1987, pp.27 & 158).

Although there were distinct processes involved with my design work such as research, sketching and design development, I have a barrier to overcome when trying to explicitly describe it as part of my reflection-on-action (see Biggs, side column, p.4). In considering my role in the production of artefact, I have also been led to the writings of Nimkulrat (2007, p4). She identifies herself as practice-based rather than practice-led creative, able to focus on



Fig. 3. final embroidery, woodwork & silverwork for the pole & banner attachment, leatherwork for the harness and a silver 'sacring' bell.

"Have we somehow conspired to arrange matters so that knowledge is always what we say about something rather than what we show about it? If so, it would account for the difficulty of using objects as constituting or communicating knowledge. Is the problem that the whole concept of knowledge and research arises out of words rather than actions, or do we simply have too narrow a range of examples, i.e. only lexical examples? Have we defined ourselves into a corner?" (Biggs, 2002, p.1-2).

her role once the product is exhibited. She sees herself as a practitioner-researcher who takes the researcher's stance to analysis and contextualise the earlier creative process. Conversely, this role is then reversed again in a practice-focused creation of artefact until the research question is answered. She refers to Mäkelä (2003), who used "*retroactive gaze*" to denote the retrospective process of considering one's own practice to find answers.

Of particular interest in terms of the public display of the banner in Durham Cathedral, were the writings of authors concerned with product semantics and material culture studies, in particular, the artist-spectator relationship. As Duchamp et al (1957, p2) claim, the creative act is not a sole performance by the artist alone, but the spectator adds to the creative act when he "*brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualification*" whilst also determining the aesthetic value.

Andrew (2008) writes about textiles as "*cultural signifiers*", and uses the term "*textile semantics*" to examine the communicative qualities of textiles between the practitioner and spectator. She cites Tilley (1989, p.189) in her work who recognises that material culture can be an individual output, but that "*it is always a social production*". Andrew (p.40) also cites Jackson who suggests that studies of material culture should realign the focus of the physical production and also the production of meaning by the *maker*, towards the meaning the *viewer* derives from the artefact itself. Considering this in the context of a public display of banners, Jackson's theory suggests that the social and cultural signifiers results from both the physical environment where it is consumed and also the use to which it is put.

Like it's miners' banner counterparts, it is anticipated that the New St. Cuthbert's banner will impact further than that of a mere textile. With the banner's annual parade through Durham on St. Cuthbert's Feast Day planned as an annual event, it will hopefully revive a historic ritual absent from Northumbria for five-hundred years. My

research is on-going - to understand historic and contemporary textiles and their power to connect to a community. In asking these questions, I hope to understand my role as a practitioner-researcher, how my design work can play a part in rallying a sense of community spirit in the North East of England.

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