



Dr Karen Finch OBE

1921-2018

As a representative of the Early Textiles Study Group (ETSG) it is a great privilege to honour Karen Finch in this way. I first met Karen in 1980 when I was a young curator at the Petrie Museum at University College London. I went to a workshop at the Textile Conservation Centre (TCC), chatted with her afterwards, and we immediately set up an arrangement whereby the TCC would conserve the Petrie's Egyptian textiles *gratis*. Things were easier in those days, but it was Karen's vision that ensured it happened so quickly and so smoothly. It was an arrangement which lasted for the next 18 years until I left the museum, and saw the conservation of a range of unique textile treasures including a bead-net dress, a sprang cap, still *in situ* on the head of a female mummy, a rag doll's wardrobe, and an inside-out sock.

Karen was a most loyal supporter of ETSG, and regularly attended and contributed to our bi-annual conferences in Manchester. Hero Granger-Taylor, one of our committee members, remembers that it was her mother – Barbara Granger-Taylor – who, when secretary of the standing committee on Museums and Galleries, was able to help Karen set up the TCC. Hero recalls that Karen had a wonderful understanding of techniques, particularly of what we now call minor techniques. For example, she remembers Karen explaining to her how warp twining was done when the ETSG visited an exhibition at the Museum of Mankind. Karen painstakingly followed this up by sending Hero a photograph of Danish children doing warp twining.

Karen's legacy lives on in the library which she began. Our secretary Susanna Harris is using the TCC library in Glasgow, in her capacity as lecturer in archaeology there. This is what Susanna has to say: "I certainly think of Karen when I go in those stacks. It is not only me using the TCC library but all the archaeology Cloth & Clothing students. It is invaluable to have a library with many fundamental and now rare textile

books, journals and leaflets that have been collected over decades. It's not possible to build this from new. It is a wonderful legacy and the archaeology students are benefitting from the TCC collection."

Karen's legacy also lives on in the conservation students – now professional conservators – who she trained over the years. To quote a personal example – a couple of years ago, it was suggested that a large 25 ft tapestry in the Dutch Church in London needed a good clean. My colleagues on the church council would easily have resorted to a vacuum cleaner, but I, of course, told them that it needed highly specialised conservation. The name of Poppy Singer and her colleague Annabel Wylie, two of Karen's 1980s students, immediately sprung to mind. I re-established contact, and thanks to their expertise the tapestry was transported to Belgium for cleaning at the De Wit Royal Manufacturers in Mechelen. It was then returned to Poppy's studio in St Albans for the painstaking hand stitching of its new cotton backing. Both conservators attended our reception to mark the re-hanging of the tapestry, and I gained a few Brownie points with my Dutch

colleagues on the church council in the process. When I emailed Poppy last week to tell her about Karen, this is what she wrote: "The end of an era! What a woman – she did so much!"

I can do no better than to conclude with the words of another of our ETSG committee members, Ruth Gilbert.: "Having started on textile history later in life and without any formal qualification, Karen was one of the people who took me seriously from the start and encouraged me to carry on. She was always generous with her knowledge and time and she radiated enthusiasm. Karen's smile was hers alone."

Thank you, Karen. You were inspirational, much loved, and will never, ever be forgotten.



Image: Kirstie Buckland
www.knittinghistoryforum.co.uk

Rosalind Janssen