

## How It All Began: A Life in Textile Conservation

By KAREN FINCH

This article is published in honour of Karen Finch OBE on the occasion of her ninetieth birthday on 8 May 2011.



FIGURE 1. Karen Finch, in the late 1990s  
*Photograph: author's collection*

*In this paper Karen Finch describes her early life in Denmark and how she became interested in textile conservation. Her career as a textile conservator and teacher culminated in the foundation of the Textile Conservation Centre at Hampton Court Palace in 1975.*

How DID I become a conservator? I am not really sure. Perhaps it is built in — perhaps through my interest in the stone axes used as paperweights on my father's desk? They all came from the field north of our farmhouse at Meldgaard (Figure 2). We know that this field had once contained nine Bronze Age tombs. The first farm buildings on our land were built from recycled granite boulders. All except the stables had been replaced with brick by my father. Before him, in 1889, my grandfather had a new farmhouse built, on traditional lines, of course, with a *storstue*: a big, empty corner room by the entrance, used for visitors. It was only furnished with tabletops on trestles for family celebrations: weddings, christenings, confirmations, harvest home, funerals. This was where neighbours came to pay their last respects and from where family members left on their last journey — through the two doors directly opposite each other for a dignified passage.

When I was very little I spent winter afternoons with my mother and our two maids round the family table, caring for household linen and making new clothes. Our maids, who were from similar farms to ours, were engaged by the year from November to November and came to learn from my mother how to become good



FIGURE 2. Meldgaard, Karen Finch's family home in Denmark. The farm is near the village of Rødding, about nine kilometres north-east of the county town of Viborg

*Photograph: author's collection*

farmers' wives. Some were very good at sewing and embroidery. One taught me some of the traditional embroidery stitches when I was about five, a bit hampered perhaps by my insistence on doing my own design. I was given a dolls' house which I thought needed rugs on the floor, so I made a loom in a cigar box around a rigid heddle. It worked quite well. A cousin taught me pillow lace and a dearly loved, near spherical neighbour taught me crochet.

For special occasions my aunt, who was a skilled dressmaker, would come to make our party dresses. I watched it all and pored over her fashion magazines and begged all the scraps for my dolls, which were the best-dressed in the family and the envy of my cousins. So I took commissions on barter and sneaked the sewing machine when no one was watching; it was considered too dangerous for a little girl. I just thought it was faster.

In 1929 my mother decided the farmhouse needed modernizing — and democratizing. Probably because the new cowshed already had electricity, she had that put in the main house, too, and the kitchen and larder made into a dining room for daily use by everyone who lived on the farm. The ancient, long table with its benches under the windows was moved there from the old *folkestue* (servants' hall). The *bryggers*, or brewery, now became the kitchen. Suddenly everything changed.

School began at seven, and besides the three Rs it included handwork for the girls: first, an embroidery sampler with all the techniques seen in much earlier samplers, and eventually dressmaking. I am afraid handwork has gone now, but learning to read and write is still considered best begun between the ages of six and seven, depending on your birthday. I certainly did not take long to learn and to find my way round the ornate bookcase that had belonged to my uncle Poul, who had died in the Spanish flu epidemic along with his sister, Sørine, three years before I was born. That was when my grandmother had the telephone put in (Rødding No. 4 — the Pastor had No. 1, the School No. 2, the Co-op No. 3), so she could always be in touch with the rest of her children.

I soon got through every book in my uncle's library — mainly Danish history and Norse mythology. Some of the books were quite old and in Gothic print, not easy for a young reader, but I wanted to know what they said. My uncle had also subscribed to a popular science work in instalments, called *Frem* (Forward). Everything was new to me and fascinating and the illustrations amazing. My brothers liked me to read to them from *Frem* (Figure 3). They much preferred popular science to history. I began to borrow books from the village library after school. It was housed in the vicarage, with our young pastor being the librarian.

Pastor Scheller-Nielsen was not a country person, but he wanted to get to know his parishioners and to understand Jutland farmers and their very dry (and wry) humour. He loved our ancient church and would tell us about its history when we began confirmation class. He explored the roof space above the church and that was where he found the embroideries that started my abiding interest in textiles old and new and how their purpose and creation has shaped our world, from agriculture to industrialization.

There were two pieces: firstly, a long, narrow, lined piece with beautiful embroidered flowers and a coat-of-arms at either end (Figure 4). I later learned that it had been a valance from a four-poster bed, probably from Sødal, the baronial estate



FIGURE 3. Karen Sinding-Møller (top right) with her family in 1935. This was taken at the time of her confirmation, when she was fourteen

*Photograph: author's collection*

which once owned our village and had been split into smallholdings after the First World War. The valance could have been given by the couple whose portrait still graces the church. She was pretty and young, with a daring *fontange* making her nearly as tall as her tubby, middle-aged husband.

The other embroidery was very different, with a number of saints set in heavenly portals, each with their attribute, and worked with coloured silk on a linen ground. The pastor had them sent to the National Museum in Copenhagen for conservation and identification. At that time the actual repair work was carried out at Rosenborg Castle. The embroideries were returned before my confirmation and our class was given a preview before they were put back in the church. I used the opportunity to make a close study of what had been done, and of the fairly simple embroidery techniques.

The time had come to decide what I was going to do. I wanted to learn about weaving and design, but my father could not imagine any of his children outside a farming environment. At the very least I would have to do a domestic science course first, to learn about nutrition and hygiene and the modern organization of a country household with live-in maids and farm workers, and, in due course,



FIGURE 4. Detail of an embroidered altar frontal in Rødding church. Polychrome silks on a linen ground. This was originally a late seventeenth-century bed valance, probably from Sødal, the baronial estate which once owned the village of Rødding. Karen's interest in this embroidery eventually led to her to the Kunsthåndværkerskole (School of Art, Craft and Design) in Copenhagen  
*Rødding Church*

children. Meanwhile, there were lovely parties, a visit to Sweden, dances, and all the other fun of being young.

I was invited to join the young farmers' executive committee and I tried to take an interest, but few of us had much — except in parties. Like my friends, I knew nothing of the outside world.

On 9 April 1940 everything changed. We woke to the sound of heavily-laden transport aircraft flying low over our heads. It was still dark. My siblings and I went to our parents' bedroom. Our father realized what was about to happen: the German army was on its way to occupy Norway. We now became aware of other sounds and that the ground was rumbling and shaking under our feet. Our parents knew that these sounds came from very large army trucks on the old army road running alongside the watershed that stretches from the German border to Viborg, just south of the Limfjord. Both Denmark and Norway were being occupied.

I am the eldest of eight. My four brothers came next and then my three sisters. All my brothers joined the Resistance, even if they were too young. Their leader was the bus driver, until the day a passenger quietly sat down beside him and said

he needed to leave with the passengers getting off at the next stop. He did and was got safely to Sweden. Someone else drove the bus on. My little brother distributed illegal papers from the age of twelve, once by the novel method of sending them on the wind from the church tower. When public meetings were forbidden, I thought a sewing club would be innocuous enough to cover other meetings. We met at Meldgaard, my home, with our ongoing embroidery or knitting; we still meet when I go back home — those of us who are left.

Our father suffered a fatal heart attack in 1942 and my mother and brothers had to get used to running the farm. We were all near-paralysed with grief and by the unexpectedness of it all.

Our mother helped us not to abandon our dreams; in my case it was the Kunsthåndværkerskole (School of Art, Craft and Design) in Copenhagen, although it was still wartime and there was a curfew. We knew the pastor would be there should I need advice. He and his family lived in one of the Commandant buildings in Nyboder, the Navy's houses built by King Christian IV in the 1630s. Nyboder is also close to the Kunstmuseum (the Danish Museum of Decorative Art) on Amaliegade, the street that runs from Langelinie through the Royal Palaces alongside the harbour.

The Museum housed two departments of the Art School. The Furniture School was led by Professor Kaare Klint, the architect who had transformed the eighteenth-century Frederik's Hospital into a beautiful museum whose proportions added stature to all the displays. His was also the inspiration behind the Danish furniture that swept the world in the 1950s.

The leader of the Weaving School was Gerda Henning. Her imaginative work and teaching was imprinted on all her students and helped to make artists of many of us, as has been shown in *The Art of Weaving* (2004) by Charlotte Paludan, leader of the Decorative Art Museum's Textile Department until recently.

Fru Henning introduced me to Gerda Heerup (later Klint), the librarian at the Museum, who invited me to live with her and her young daughter in return for being there after school. A very happy arrangement. Through the librarian I met the then leader of the Textile Department, Rigmor Krarup, who was greatly interested in conservation and in the knowledge built into every historic object. She herself unravelled the story of one particular Greek embroidery she had found in a sorry state in the Museum store. She wrote it up for the *Yearbook* of 1964, after a very comprehensive exhibition entitled *Greek and Turkish Embroideries*. I translated it for my teaching because of its cultural implications.

On a Weaving School visit to Rosenborg Castle we saw a group of embroiderers working at the top of one of the towers with windows on all four sides, restoring the Royal tapestries from Kronborg (known in Britain as Elsinore) — but not using tapestry techniques, and I went to Rigmor with my doubts about what I had seen. This was when I learned of PIETAS, the Swedish organization set up in 1908 by Dr Agnes Branting and her niece Dr Agnes Geijer, for the purpose of 'teaching textile conservation under scholarly control'. Their great pioneering work for us all is described in the *Festschrift* for Agnes Geijer, edited by Dr Inger Estham (which I passed on to the Textile Conservation Centre).<sup>1</sup>

Meanwhile the war went on and I grew closer to two friends from home, one a Royal Navy cadet, Knud Kaergaard, who had been interned with the rest of the Danish armed forces in 1943, but exempted for not joining the Resistance. Of course, he knew that promises made under coercion were invalid, but he was on dangerous ground. He took a job pedalling a three-wheeled bicycle delivering shoes around Copenhagen, and found it perfect for transporting weapons as well. We all worried about him and were only briefly reassured when we heard his authentic piercing messenger's whistle as he passed us on the street.

The other friend from home, Peter Mørup, was in the police force and we were all (particularly my brothers) in the habit of calling on him in any kind of trouble because of his immense law-manipulating skills, in German, if necessary. However, the war was coming to an end and the occupying forces were restless.

On 19 September 1944 a fake air raid, intended to force all civilians under cover, was used to mount a round-up of all police on duty. They were forced into trucks and taken to the harbour to be shipped to concentration camps in Germany — including our friend. Fellow students and I had recognized the sound of the lone, captured British Spitfire flown on such occasions and had, as usual, escaped to the café across the road from the Museum when the first truckload of captured policemen came past. Without a word we put down our mugs and ran down the side of the Museum to the Royal Palace to help build barricades. The street was already nearly blocked, because those of the police who had not been caught (they had been warned by a milkman at dawn) had already reached the Palace; the way had to be unblocked to let the Queen through. It was all done in an eerie silence. Seconds after the Queen was safe, the first contingent of German marines turned from Langelinie into Amaliegade. Shooting from the houses on both sides of the street began and we had to get out of the way.

I was with a group of fellow students, five or six boys and girls. We saw an open door and went up the staircase to the first landing. I suddenly became the responsible elder sister again and told everyone to lie down on the stairs, as flat as they could; but I then felt compelled to stay by the window to keep watch. I saw a man who had taken refuge on the cellar steps of the house opposite get up. Perhaps he had felt unsafe and wanted to get away? Too late: he was shot dead by the advancing marines and his body just lay there.

Another man, a German marine, was caught in the crossfire. The Resistance, appearing from nowhere, had taken over the houses on both sides of the street closest to the Palace. His helmet rolled off. The five years of occupation had conditioned me to not see the enemy as people, so what I saw then was just the crimson lake spreading from under the orangey-red hair over the grey paving stones. Much later, years later, when all the other memories of the war had receded, this sight came to haunt me and to force me to acknowledge that the motionless figure I had seen bleeding had been just a boy, sixteen at most, whose mother might have received his dog tags as the only notice of his death.

This first part of the battle lasted about twenty minutes. Not long as battles go, in fact hardly noticeable to later historians, who only really consider the second part, which went on for two or three hours in the afternoon. We used the interval between to get back behind the gateway of the Art School; and since I lived in the

flat off the landing shared with the Art School, and knew the way through the Museum to the parallel street — where less than an hour earlier we had sat in the café with our coffee — I could show my fellow students the way to safety and get myself back to the comforting presence of the librarian.

The war was nearly over (for the Danes it ended on 5 May 1945) but fears for our friends in captivity continued; until hostilities ceased and we were all free and only needed to fret about exams.

A dear friend among my fellow students was Ninna Rathje. She had done volunteer work with Margrethe Hald, whose research into Bronze- and Iron-Age dress became the subject of her PhD thesis, published in Danish in 1950 and in English in 1980, under the title *Ancient Danish Textiles from Bogs and Burials*. Margrethe Hald had analysed the yarns and techniques of every find — bog or burial — and now encouraged Hans Ole Hansen to set up the Historical-Archaeological Research Centre at Lejre in 1964. His sister, Mette Lise (later Rössing) and Ninna Rathje were involved and were eventually asked to run the Textile House. That is how the Textile Conservation Centre Reference Collection came to have several examples of their reconstructive work.<sup>2</sup>

I met my husband, an Englishman Norman Finch, during the joyous liberation of Denmark after the war. In 1946, we were married in Copenhagen but decided to settle in London where Norman's parents lived. I had learned English in my teens, but it took some time to adjust to English culture. I gradually deciphered such intricacies as 'please' meaning 'yes' and 'thank you' meaning 'no'. It was inconceivable to me not to work, but it was by chance that I wandered into the Royal School of Needlework and was offered a job restoring tapestries. I was placed under the direction of Barbara Longhurst who had been taught at the tapestry workroom at Hampton Court Palace. As a weaver, I instinctively sensed that the darning techniques used were not right but it was to be some years before I could put my own ideas into practice. When our daughter Katrina was born I left and tried to get back to design and weaving, but found no one was interested in my work. When Katrina started school I began work at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) in London, where I tried to convey my conviction that the objects in our museums should be treated as historical documents, to be read by historians, scientists and conservators together. Sadly, my colleagues in the Artwork Room did not agree, not even to keep records of their work — which was their secret, they said.

Since I have never been one for flogging dead horses, I left the V&A in 1959 to return to weaving and design, but I got waylaid by requests to conserve really wonderful objects such as Tipu's Kit from the Lord Chamberlain's Office and the *Esther* tapestries at the V&A. I carried out this work at my home in Ealing, West London.

In 1962 the Keeper of the V&A's new Conservation Department, Norman Brummelle, asked me to teach one more tapestry conservator because the two I had previously taught had left. The person he sent to me was Janet Notman, who had been taught weaving by Marianne Straub. She helped me to put together the course I later taught to six more V&A staff. Suddenly, requests for teaching came from all



FIGURE 5. Karen Finch at work at the Textile Conservation Centre at Hampton Court Palace, c. 1975  
*Textile Conservation Centre*

over the world — 300 by 1970 — and all with funding, mostly from the museums who employed them.

The rest of the story is already known. But I would like to mention a few of the people who helped to make the Textile Conservation Centre happen. Besides my family, there were V&A staff led by Donald King, who with John Nevinson and Alun Thomas, put together our application for charitable status to the Charity Commission in 1971 (it was approved in 1975) to enable us to raise funding. Others who worked with us in Ealing were Greta Putnam, Danielle Bosworth, Genitha Halsey, Heather Campbell, Doris Bradley, Dinah Eastop, Susan Grabowska, Michael McGreal, Valerie Evers and Eva-Louise Pepperall (née Svensson), who also led the group who helped to conserve the United Nation's tapestries in New York which had been woven in Sweden.<sup>3</sup>

In 1975 the Lord Chamberlain's Office warranted the Textile Conservation Centre the first of three Grace and Favour Apartments at Hampton Court Palace in order to get started. The Courtauld Institute of Art had already helped us, since 1973, to get the teaching put together; and on 14 April 1975 students and staff, led by Danielle Bosworth, Edward Maeder from Deerfield, Massachusetts, Julia Woodward-Dippold from Baltimore, and Nicky Smith from Guatemala, helped the

Textile Conservation Centre to move our equipment from Ealing to its new home at Hampton Court. I shall always be grateful to them and all the charities that helped us to take advantage of our good fortune.

## REFERENCES

<sup>1</sup> *Opera Textilia Variorum Temporum to Honor Agnes Geijer on her Ninetieth Birthday 26 October 1988*, ed. by Inger Estham and Margareta Nockert (Stockholm: Statens Historiska Museum, 1988).

<sup>2</sup> Five years ago a new organization was set up at Copenhagen University under Professor Marie Louise Nosch and has just been given further funding, namely the Centre for Textile Research (CTR) which has recently taken over the editorship of the *Archaeological Textiles Newsletter*.

<sup>3</sup> See 'On the Damaging Effects of Flame Proofing on a Tapestry Hanging', *Studies in Conservation* (1969), pp. 132–35.

KAREN FINCH OBE, DLitt, FIIC, FRSA, studied weaving and design in Copenhagen before marrying and moving to the UK in 1946. After working at the Royal School of Needlework and the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, she taught textile technique, history and conservation to V&A and other museum staff and Courtauld History of Dress students before founding the Textile Conservation Centre in 1975.