



# *Blackwork* *Journey Blog*

August 2019



Summer is here in all its splendour in the north of England and for once we have had some glorious sunshine. During the summer we try to visit some of the many historic houses and palaces that are scattered across the country. When we go, I am always looking for evidence of embroidery, either in portraits or sculptures, samplers or costumes. However, I was rather taken aback recently when I was asked 'What is embroidery and why do you stitch?' To answer this in a few sentences would be difficult because needlework is so much a part of my life that I never really think about it. I cannot remember a time when I did not stitch and I know that many of my readers are the same.

### **What is embroidery?**

Embroidery is the art of decorating fabric or other materials with needle and thread or yarn.

The origin of embroidery can be dated back to 30,000 BC. In Siberia, around 5000 and 6000 B.C. elaborately drilled shells stitched onto animal hides were discovered. Chinese thread embroidery dates back to 3500 B.C. where pictures depict embroidery of clothing with silk thread, precious stones and pearls.



Studying sculptures and paintings from different periods of history and looking at preserved fragments can give us an understanding of early embroidery and as civilisations have developed so has the urge to embellish and decorate embroidered clothing, religious objects and household items.

Whilst the basic materials may stay the same, the threads we use and the way we interpret design have changed over the generations, but the underlying need to display our skills through the needle remains the same. I have been teaching needlework for over 40 years and have only explored a few of the numerous techniques available, not for lack of enthusiasm, but the time needed to truly do justice to the different aspects.

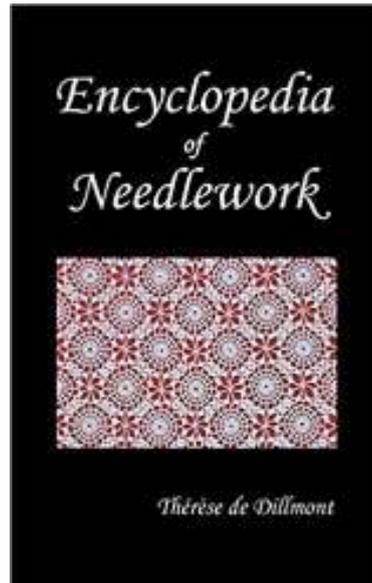
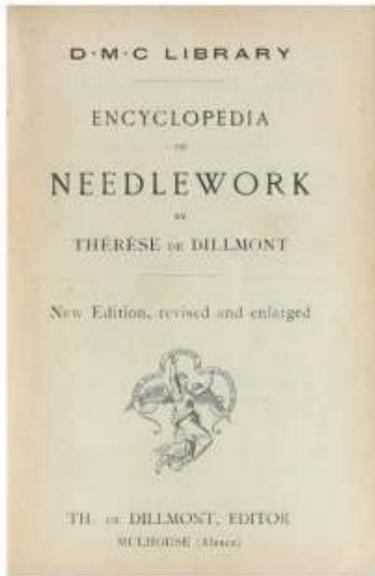
*The Needlewoman*  
Diego Velázquez c1635 - 1643

I have been fortunate in that I have travelled to many countries and worked with and explored different cultures and seen first-hand the embroideries of many different countries. It has led to a profound respect for the craftsmen and women who devoted their lives to their art, both in the past and the present.

We also owe a debt of gratitude to women such as Thérèse de Dillmont (10 October 1846 – 22 May 1890) who was an Austrian needleworker and prolific writer.

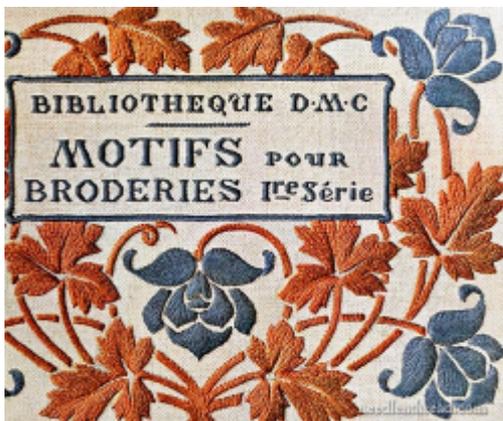


*Thérèse de Dillmont*



Dillmont's Encyclopedia of Needlework (1886) has been translated into 17 languages. She was one of the most important pioneers in the international and multicultural enterprise of hobby needlework in the late nineteenth century. It can be downloaded for free from Project Gutenberg, a website that offers over 50,000 free e-books, most in the public domain that have been digitised by volunteers.

I found my copy of her book in a second hand book shop over 40 years ago. It has since been republished and is available from websites such as Amazon.



I also own a number of her other publications and return to them again and again for inspiration. Many of them contain line drawings as well as instructions.

Exploring old needlework books has led me to a greater understanding of the role of embroidery both in the lives of women and the society and cultures in which they lived. There are many free on-line resources to explore and all the major museums have links to their websites, so if there is an aspect of embroidery you want to research type the subject into a search engine such as Google and see what is revealed.

<http://www.antiquepatternlibrary.org/>

This site scans craft pattern publications that are in the public domain, to preserve them. Most of these scans have been graphically edited to make the images easier for craft workers to see. They are available for free, to anyone who wants them, for educational, personal, artistic and other creative uses.

In 1631, John Taylor published *The Needles Excellency. A New Booke wherein are divers Admirable Workes wrought with the Needles*. The designs included in the book are preceded by a long poem and a series of five sonnets, all relating to the decorative art of the needle.



The Prayse Of The Needle - Poem by John Taylor

*To all dispersed sorts of arts and trades  
I write the needles prayse (that never fades).  
So long as children shall be got or borne,  
So long as garments shall be made or worne,  
So long as hemp or flax, or sheep shall bear  
Their linen woollen fleeces yeare by yeare,  
So long as silk-wormes, with exhausted spoile,  
Of their own entrails for man's gaine shall toyle,  
Yea till the world be quite dissolv'd and past,  
So long at least, the needles' use shall last.*

Many of us are familiar with the first part, The Prayse Of The Needle, but I rather like the sonnet about Catherine of Aragon.

Catherine of Aragon (1485-1536) was the first wife of Henry VIII (1491-1547). She was a talented embroiderer and continued to make shirts for her husband during his divorce proceedings against her. Here Catherine's white linen shift is decorated with blackwork, a style of embroidery believed to have its origins in the geometric Moorish designs found in Spain.

The popularisation of both blackwork in England and the so-called Spanish farthingale, a stiffened cone-shaped underskirt, are often credited to the arrival of the Spanish queen and her entourage.

Catherine wears an English or gable hood, consisting of a piece of white linen fabric edged with a jewel-set band, beneath red cloth of gold lappets set with pearls pinned up over each ear. Two pieces of black fabric hang from the crown of the head down her back. The geometric shape surrounding the face is achieved through the use of a wire support.



*Portrait of Catherine of Aragon attributed to Johannes Corvus (c. 1510-20)*

Katharine, first married to Arthur Prince of Wales and afterward to Henry the 8, King of England.

*I Read that in the seaventh King Henries Raigne,  
Faire Katherine, Daughter to the Castile King,  
Came into England with a pompous traine  
Of Spanish Ladies, which she thence did bring.  
She to the eight King Henry married was,  
And afterwards divorc'd, where vertuously  
(Although a Queene) yet shee her dayes did pas  
In working with the Needle curiously,  
As in the Tower, and places more beside,  
Her excellent memorials may be seene:  
Whereby the Needles praise is dignifide  
By her faire Ladyes, and her selfe, a Queene.  
Thus for her paynes, here her reward is just,  
Her works proclaime her praise, though she be dust.*

*John Taylor*



Note: Catherine is sometimes spelt with a 'C' and sometimes with a 'K' depending on the source.

The tradition of needlework was reflected in the portraits of Elizabeth I who became one of the greatest monarchs England has ever seen and also Mary, Queen of Scots. Much of Mary's embroidery is still on display in Hardwicke Hall, Derbyshire.

*Portrait of Elizabeth I of England in stomacher and petticoat embroidered with roses, birds, and honeysuckle in goldwork and blackwork sleeves, c. 1600.*

*Artist: Unknown British School*

### **Exploring new ideas for embroidery - Marbling**

My love of embroidery is steeped in my love of history and old books, but new ideas and techniques must be explored or one gets stuck in a rut. With that in mind, I bought the equipment necessary to marble fabric for embroidery. Marbling has been used for centuries to create decorative papers for bookbinders and I wanted to use the same idea to create some fabrics for embroidery.

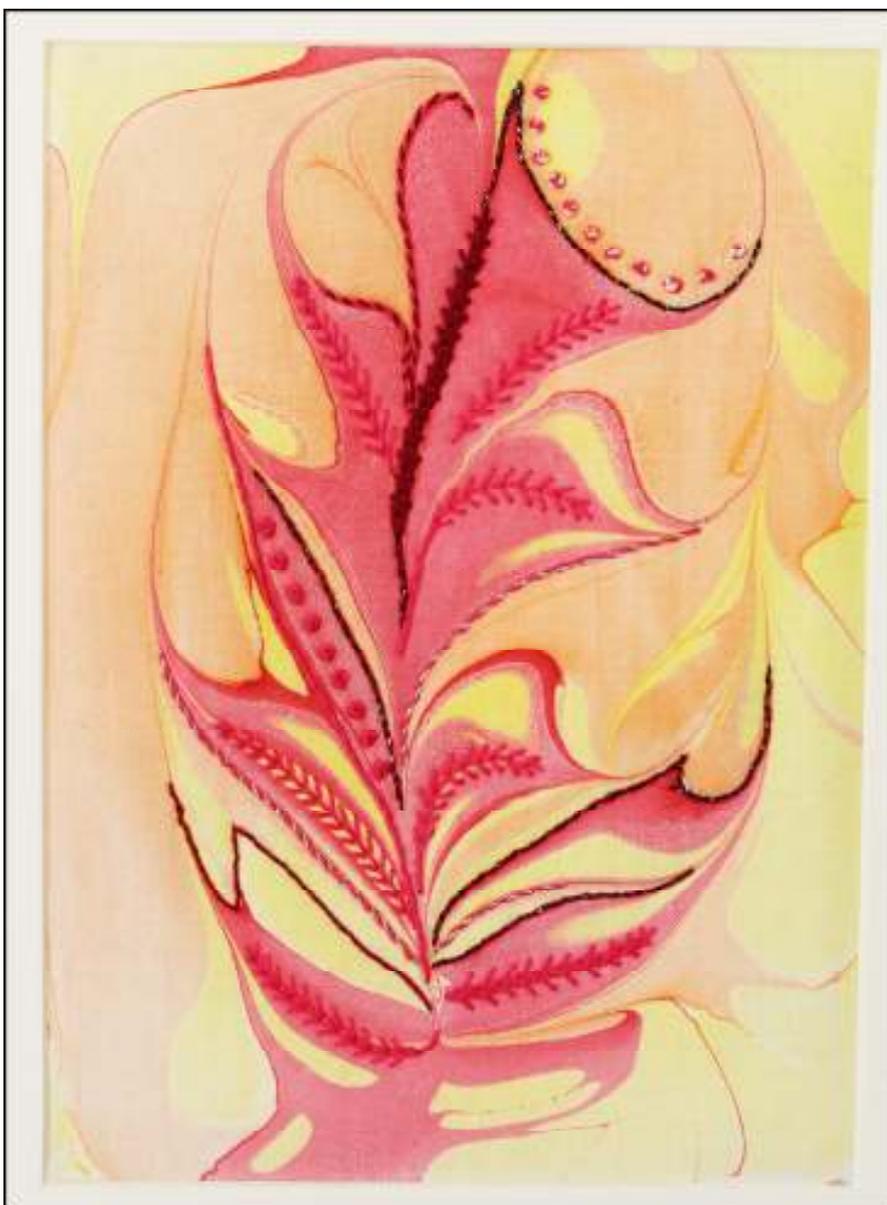
Marbling is the process of floating paints on the surface of a thick cellulose solution (called 'size'), rather like oil on water. The floating paints are manipulated or swirled into patterns. The material or paper is then gently laid on to the size and lifted off transferring the pattern onto the fabric. Dropping the ink onto the size and swirling the patterns into different shapes is fascinating. No two patterns are alike and the colours can be as delicate or as bold as desired.

The fabrics used were natural fabrics, calico and cotton and they were prewashed to remove any stiffening products. Fabrics are treated with products known as mordants, which make the paints adhere to fibres. Without a mordant, most paint would wash off. Alum was used as the marbling mordant.

It takes time to make the necessary solutions for treating the fabrics in alum and water and to create the 'size' which is made up of carrageenan and water. They both need to be lump free and the correct consistency. Carrageenan is a seaweed extract and is the traditional marbling size. It is non-toxic and used as thickening agent in the food.

Methocel can also be used to make the size. It is less expensive and has a longer storage life than carrageenan, which spoils quickly in hot or humid conditions. Carrageenan also tends to become contaminated by acrylic paints after several prints of fabric. Try both types of size to see which you prefer.

It is a matter of trial and error knowing just how much ink to use, how to create the patterns, what kind of patterns work well and how strong to make the colours. As the material is laid on the 'size' the patterns transfer onto the fabric. Rinse off the 'size', dry and press ready to use.

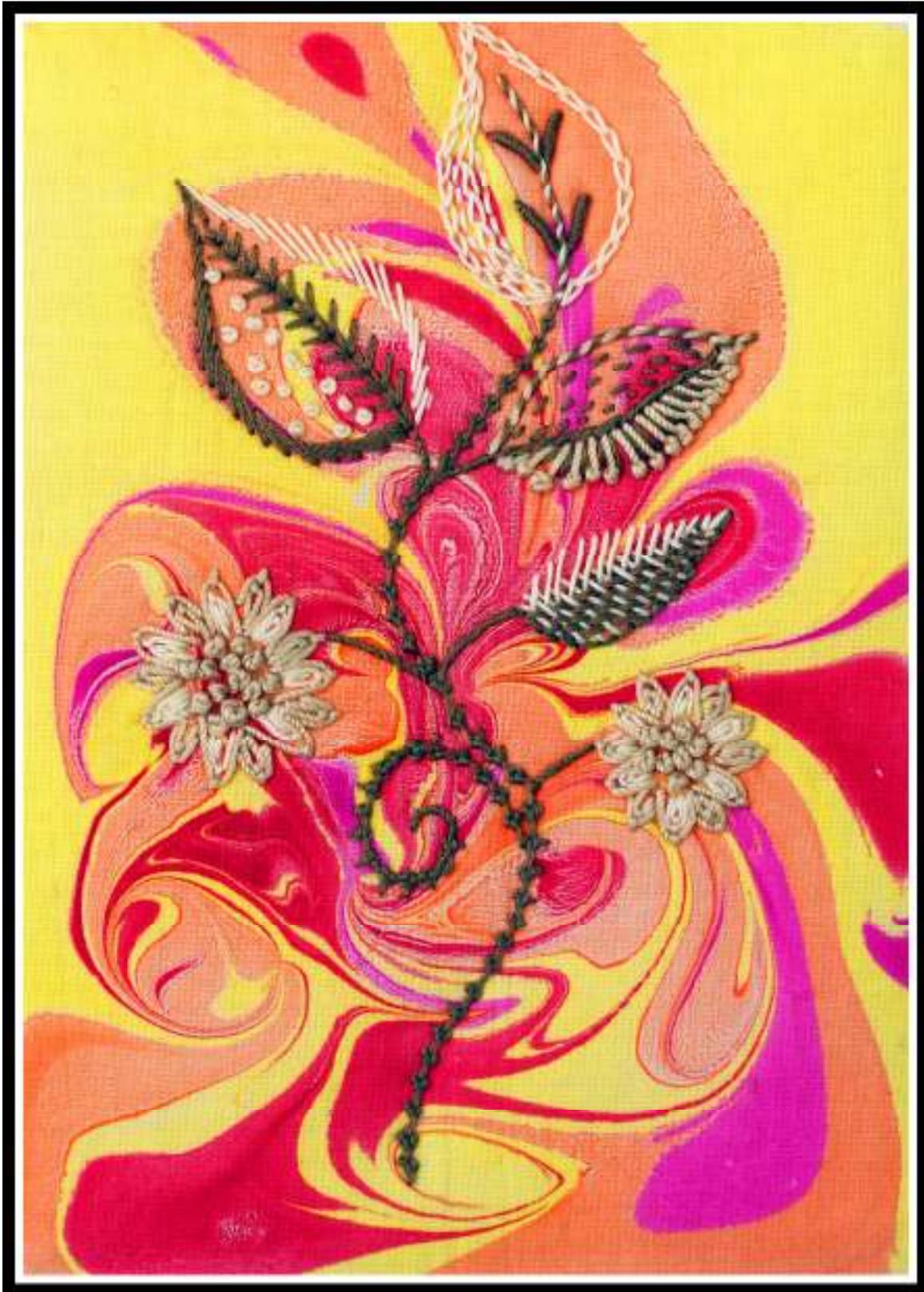


Having prepared a number of small pieces of marbled cotton I followed the shapes and added embroidery stitches in different thickness of thread, ranging from floss to crochet and knitting cottons, to see how well they would work.

This pattern reminded me of a feather so I stitched some of the main lines and added beads.

If wadding had been tacked to the back it could quite easily have been used for quilting since the inks are colourfast and the fabric has already been prewashed so there would be no additional shrinkage.

*Feather worked on marbled cotton*



*Less ink was dropped onto the size to create the delicate colours in contrast with the one below.*



*If there is any ink left on the surface of the size more than one print can be made. This will be much softer and more delicate.*

Using a toothpick to create the swirls and stronger colours reminded me of a 1960's design, so I added textured embroidery stitches in different thickness of threads and colonial knots for the flower centres. Often the pattern itself determines what shapes will be stitched. It is not necessary to stitch all the lines to create an interesting result.

Evenweave and Aida, delicate and bold this technique is going to provide hours of fun and inspiration and some unusual backgrounds for my embroideries.

To try the techniques for yourself or to find out more about it, explore the numerous videos on YouTube. To see modern marbled book papers go to:

<https://store.bookbinding.co.uk>

This is a technique I will explore much further with different fabrics and colours!

### **Christmas in August**

**CH0393 Christmas Creation**, the first of the 2019 Christmas designs.

I know that many of my readers start their Christmas stitching early in the year so I have included the first Christmas design of 2019 in 'Charts' on the Blackwork Journey website.

Small pieces that can be completed quickly and used in a variety of ways are always popular. One of my friends has a large family and every year she stitches them a personal Christmas ornament. They all look forward to receiving them and are treasured possessions to be admired and passed on to future generations. There are numerous Christmas designs available on the website and I have listed them here. Many of the small designs in 'Freebies' can also be used for Christmas decorations.

CH0110 Celtic Christmas

CH0179 Happy Christmas

CH0272 Blackwork Christmas

CH0273 Peace on Earth

Ch0292 Blackwork Noel

CH0335 Christmas Ornaments

CH0346 Elegance

CH0364 Yuletide Memories

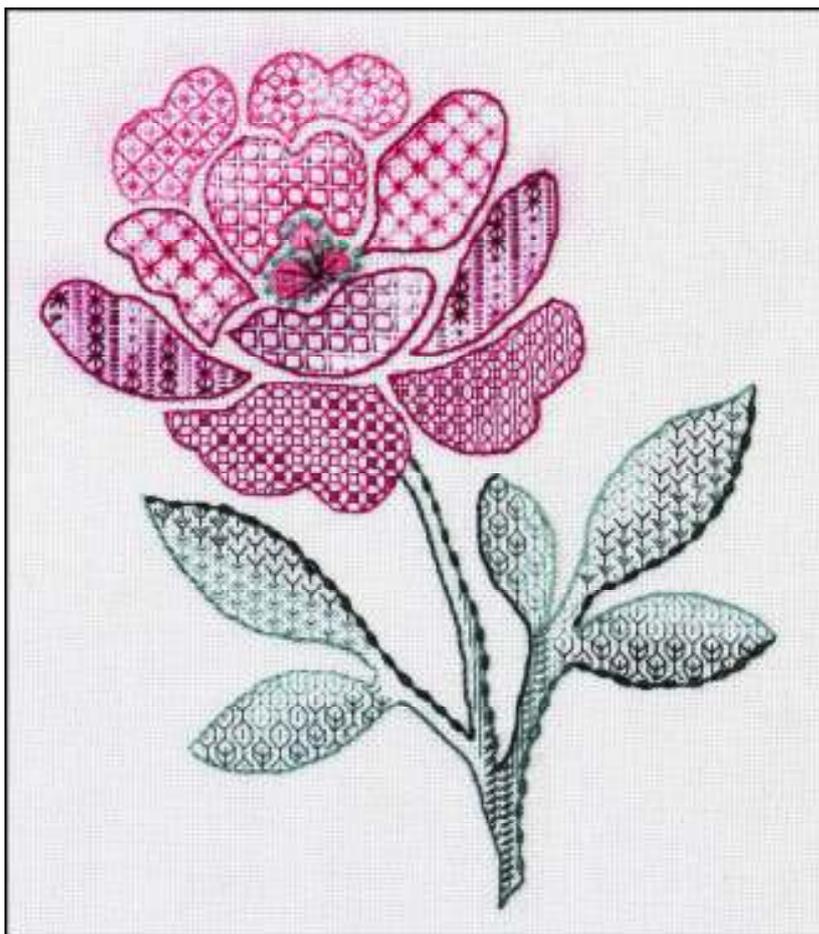
CH0382 Silver and Gold



*CH0393 Christmas Creation*

Two other designs have been added this month in 'Charts' and 'Projects'.

**PR0053 Peony** is a free style design drawn onto the fabric and then filled with blackwork or pulled thread work stitches, the other is a blackwork design **CH0392 Japanese Brocade** which reminds me of the kimonos I saw in Kyoto.



### PR0053 Peony

In the language of flowers, peonies represent romance, prosperity, good fortune, a happy marriage, riches, honour and compassion.

This design is worked on Zweigart 28 count evenweave, 10 x 10 inches  
Threadworx variegated floss was used to embroider the flower head and DMC floss was used to create the blackwork leaves.



### CH0392 Japanese Brocade

Japanese Brocade was stitched in DMC floss in shades of black and grey with copper metallic thread to add sparkle and interest.

The design was stitched on Zweigart 28 count evenweave, 12 x 12 inches  
Note: If Aida fabric is used be aware there are some split blocks. Use a sharp needle.

### **‘Tiny Treasures’ project**

Many readers are working on the ‘Tiny Treasures’ project and finished embroideries are being posted in the Facebook group.

I like the way different people have interpreted the design both through their use of colour and the ways in which they have used the design. Amy has made her evenweave design into a small cloth whereas Cliffside Stitches has worked her design on Aida fabric. The project is suitable for both types of fabric.





'Tiny Treasures' by Linda Graham, Zoe Snatt, Maggie Jarvis and Joycelyn Mallinson  
Thank you ladies for contributing to this month's Blog.

Happy stitching, *Liz*