

**The Litany of Loreto embroidered panels,
given to the Royal School of Needlework in the 1970's by the Mayfield community.**

Part I

In 1998 I received as a thank you in September a card from a couple and a priest friend of theirs, whom I had shown round the Chapel at Mayfield where I then lived and was province archivist part-time. It had been produced by the Medici society in 1995 as a Christmas card and showed two panels from a set of thirteen scenes of the life of our Lady as recorded in the Litany of Loreto, and depicted in beautiful embroideries housed in the Royal School of Needlework, by then at Hampton Court, London. The two depicted are the Annunciation and the Madonna and Child. They are dated to the turn of the century and attributed to the "nuns of the convent of the Holy Child Jesus in Mayfield, Sussex, after Pre-Raphaelite designs.

I was intrigued and in July 1999 wrote to the Principal of the Royal School of Needlework to enquire if I could see them and find out more about their provenance. A month later I received a letter from her inviting me to go and see them between 15th and 19th of September when 5 would be on show at the 1999 Exhibition of work and she herself would arrange to show me the other six. She added that 12 of the panels had been given in the 1970's unframed. A bit of puzzle here re numbers! According to an undated article from the 1960's in the archives of the Royal School thirteen panels were hanging in the Mayfield Convent. The author's comments are very interesting.

Mrs Elvin faxed a copy of this article to me afterwards.

Part II

The Principal of the Royal School of Needlework, Mrs Elizabeth Elvin, responded willingly to my request to see the panels because of the connection with our Society and the belief that some of our Sisters had embroidered them in the late 19th century. Five were to be on show during their 1999 Exhibition, 15 - 19 September. She arranged for the other 6 to be hung on the occasion of my visit. This took place on Sunday, 19 Sept. 1999 and I had an interview with Mrs Elvin before she took me to see the panels.

She told me that when the Royal School moved to Hampton Court, before she was Principal, a lot of their records went missing. The only information they have on the provenance of the panels is contained in a photocopied article from a needlework magazine describing the panels at the time when they were at Mayfield. Unfortunately, neither the title of the magazine nor its date were written onto the photocopy of pp.111 - 113. Mrs Elvin asked their archivist for a copy and what she handed onto me was a faxed copy, not very good quality. Probably the original photocopy was not too good. From internal evidence it is clear that that copy must have been made some time before the early 1970's.

The short article appears as text under black-&-white photos of three of the panels: fig. 126, "Mother Most Pure", fig.127, "Queen of all the Saints" and fig.128, "Refuge of Sinners". Over the top of fig. 127 on p.112 appears the heading The Litany of Lorretto [sic] The text reads as follows:

"In the Convent of the Holy Child Jesus in Mayfield, Sussex, hangs a most unusual set of thirteen exquisitely embroidered panels. Each of these represents an invocation from the Litany of Lorretto. [sic] Little is known of their history and origin. Whether they are the work of one person or a group, and where they were originally embroidered are matters of conjecture. It is thought that they may have been intended for a Lady Chapel.

Apparently the panels were a gift to an elderly nun [MM St. John Russell], who has since died, and were kept in her London convent, though never on exhibition. During the last war, with the constant risk of destruction by enemy action, the panels were sent to Mayfield for safe keeping, and have remained there ever since.

The designs obviously belong to the pre-Raphaelite school, but the subject treatment tends to be over-sentimentalised. The panels, each of which measures 19 in. by 13 in., are illustrations of the various titles under which Our Lady is invoked in the Litany of Loretto [sic].

They are worked on a rich cream satin background in shades of beige, fawn and brown silks as well as white, which is fairly freely used. These rather cool colours are warmed and enriched with gold threads. The embroidery is very fine and worked mostly in long and short stitch, though some outlines are couched with a thicker thread. It must have taken many patient hours to complete.

Work of the period, often worked from William Morris designs, was invariably carried out in smooth stitches such as long and short, satin, chain, stem and couching to achieve the moulding of the figures and the drapery. The colours were muted, though wool as well as silk and gold threads might be used, and the background was often of woollen twill."

(Helen Forshaw SHCJ, Archivist, 25 Sept. 2004)