

Chris Berry looks at one of the treasures in the Embroiderers' Guild Museum Collections

A Treasure Trove

The Embroiderers' Guild Museum Collections contain wonderful embroidered treasures, many of them thanks to a number of generous benefactors, including Mrs St Osyth Mahala Wood, whose unusual Christian names came from her grandmother, Mahala Howard from St Osyth in Essex. A philanthropist and generous local community supporter, Mrs St Osyth Mahala Wood (1886-1970), was secretary of her local branch of the Women's Suffrage Movement and in 1918 she was awarded the OBE for her work as Honorary Secretary with the Essex Local War Pensions Committee.

Mrs Wood donated a number of items to the Guild, including the sumptuous 17th-century crewel work hanging (EG 1282), which is one of the Guild's most precious embroideries, a Chinese dragon robe (EG 343), and samplers. She was also a self-taught embroiderer and in 1972 the Guild received a bequest from Mrs Wood, this time consisting of her own skilfully worked embroideries.

Married to the composer Dr Thomas Wood (1892-1950), her embroideries are full of references to her husband's early childhood years, which were spent at sea among the last of the sailing ships

with his master mariner father, and to their shared interests, which included crosswords, codes, maths and smoking. One of the items in the bequest was this wooden casket (right) adorned with embroidery, designed and beautifully stitched by Mrs Wood between 1934 and 1939. The imagery is based on historical themes, particularly of the Tudor period, but it also contains many personal allusions. The lid of the box and all four sides have embroidered insets of dark red velvet, and a goldwork border with goldwork cartouches on cream silk containing embroidered portraits of well-known 16th-century Elizabethans, all copies of painted portraits.

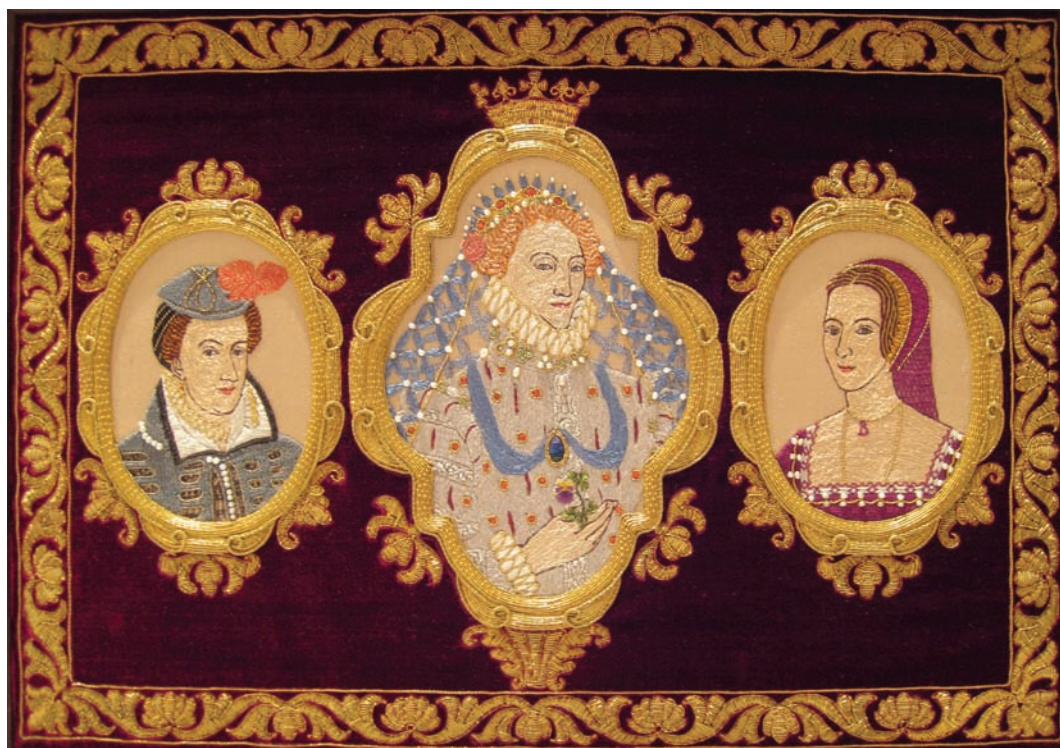
The red velvet and cream damask are the same fabrics used for the academic robes of Exeter College, Oxford – Dr Wood's alma mater. The embroidered portraits are in silk with metal thread details in long and short, satin, and chain stitches with areas of detached buttonhole stitch. The cartouches are couched metal thread with various gold purls and twists outlined with red thread matching the velvet.

Depicted on the lid, Mary, Queen of Scots, Elizabeth I and Anne Boleyn are all copies of portraits in the National Portrait Gallery in London.

The likeness to the original portrait of Mary,

Below right: The top of the box shows: Mary Queen of Scots; Queen Elizabeth I; and Anne Boleyn.

Below: Elizabeth I (detail)





An old coloured photograph shows Mrs Wood inside her home, Parsonage Hall in Bures, with her box.

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Queen of Scots is very striking, right down to the stitched blackwork detail on the chemise (see page 16). Perhaps it was this 'royal' connection that caught the eye of one of Queen Mary's ladies-in-waiting who saw Mrs Wood's work in an arts and crafts exhibition in Blakeney, Norfolk in the 1950s. Queen Mary subsequently invited her to lunch at Sandringham and she was requested to bring her embroidery. It is thought that she may have worked an embroidery similar to the portrait of Elizabeth I for Queen Mary.

Using similar techniques to those for the portraits on the lid, the front of the box shows three Elizabethan statesmen, Sir Thomas Gresham (1519–79), merchant &



Casket. Given by Mrs St Osyth Mahala Wood. EG??





The likeness to the original portrait of Mary, Queen of Scots in the National Portrait Gallery is very striking.

Below: The MAB dedication

Right: the Astrology layer

Bottom right: The statesmen on the front of the box

financier, founder of Gresham College and the Royal Exchange; William Cecil, Lord Burghley (1521–98), Lord High Treasurer; and Sir Francis Walsingham (1532–90), Secretary of State – William Cecil and Francis Walsingham together established a covert network of spies during the reign of Queen Elizabeth.

Other figures represented are courtiers Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, Robert Devereux, 2nd Earl of Essex, Walter Raleigh, Philip Sidney, William Shakespeare, Francis Drake and Richard Grenville, whose images are also accurate depictions of portraits.

Inside the lid is an Elizabethan scene which, according to notes in the box, is entitled 'Courtiers awaiting the arrival of Queen Elizabeth to see the new plant tobacco'. This was an interesting choice as Mrs and Dr Wood were smokers as seen in the photograph of her smoking a pipe while embroidering. The woman sitting next to her is her mother's former companion, Miss Madge Anderson Brock, whose initials appear in the dedication on

the astrology layer of the box, 'To MAB who sowed well but did not live to garner her sheaves'.

The Elizabethan scene is full of flora and fauna motifs reminiscent of late 16th /early 17th-century embroidered pictures though it is thought that many of the motifs have personal allusions such as the large house, said to be her childhood home, Wormingford Hall, and the small house top right her home, Parsonage Hall. The dog is thought to be their dog, Hitler, and the plants to be symbolic of her love of gardening.

There are three trays with compartments, all of which have flat fabric-covered lids with ribbon tabs. The top tray is the astrology layer. The fourteen compartments show twelve signs of the zodiac plus the figures of Time and Fate on the two central lids. The design is voided with some design lines outlined in back stitch and the ground filled with speckling on cream damask. The scrolling borders are Pekinese stitch with detached chain, stem and French knot details.

Once again on a silk damask ground, the middle tray, which appears to be a tribute to her husband's love of the sea, shows two Elizabethan sailing ships worked in flat stitches such as split, stem and satin. The *Ark Royal*, present at the battle against the Armada, is on the left and Sir Francis Drake's ship, the *Golden Hind*, on the right. The sea teems



Mrs Wood smoking a pipe while embroidering





With thanks to Margaret Blow for sharing her research regarding the details of Mrs St Osyth Wood's life and love of her husband, the composer Dr Thomas Wood.

Thanks also to Annette Collinge who searched the Museum Collection files on my behalf.

For further information on Mrs St Osyth Wood's life: www.bures-online.co.uk/TW/Osyth.htm

Left: An Elizabethan scene inside the lid

with sea creatures, both real and imaginary, and raised detached buttonhole stitches are added for some of the creatures.

The Guild has some drawings by Mrs Wood and these include images of the merman and fishes.

The lower tray has five compartments based on a scrolling Tudor rose design with symbols of Tudor monarchs: the thistle and rose of James I/VI; the crowned white falcon of Anne Boleyn holding a sceptre; a white greyhound, sometime supporter of



Left: The lower tray, based on a scrolling Tudor rose design, has five compartments

Far left: The middle tray shows two sailing ships and the sea teems with sea creatures, including a merman (sketch and detail).



the arms of Henry VIII; the white unicorn of Scotland; and in the centre the royal arms of Elizabeth I.

The underside of the central lid bears the cross stitch inscription: "This box was planned and worked by Osyth Wood of Bures Essex for her own pleasure and to show her gratitude to all those English needlewomen who made a great tradition. July 1934 to June 1939'.

There is no doubt that Mrs Wood was a talented designer and an accomplished, gifted and expert needlewoman. She freely acknowledged the skills of previous embroiderers but also wished to assist in the education of future generations by giving classes and talks on embroidery and by leaving her own embroideries and samplers to the Embroiderers' Guild.

Another fascinating embroidery that she left to the Guild is a Sampler Book worked just after the Second World War... but that is another story.

