

A Year's Weaving – Learning to Weave on Home-Made Looms

Coral Newton, Hampshire Guild



*Private exhibition of my
first year's work*

All photos: Coral Newton

This is the story of my first year of weaving, mainly on home-made looms. I celebrated it with an exhibition of my work for friends, neighbours and members of the Guild. Sixty people came over three days and gave me lots of wonderful feedback which will inform what I do over the next year and more.

When I gave up work in 2015, I knew I wanted to do something with textiles. My Nan had encouraged my sister and me to sew as kids. We were both comfortable with textiles, though demanding careers meant we never had much time to be creative.

First steps in weaving

Eventually, I decided I wanted to make a rug for our conservatory. As a child I spent a year in New Mexico and remembered seeing the Navajo women weaving blankets. Surely I could make a simple loom which would enable me to do that? I experimented with picture frames, trying out patterns I had seen online. I trawled the web for ideas and, using a spare slat from a new bed, made a simple loom with poles and string heddles, tensioned using the straps from an old rucksack. After a few experiments I made a Navajo style table rug.

Although the string heddles worked fine, the weaving had a tendency to pull in. Also the length of the rug was limited by the length of warp I could wrap around the frame and tension. I did try making what I later learned was a reed, and then realised I could fit a rigid heddle reed to my frame and this would make it easier to avoid pulling in as well as replacing the string heddles, but to handle longer cloth, I needed rollers.



*Navajo style rug on home-made
string heddle loom*

Saori weaving

The eureka moment came when I signed up for a Saori weaving workshop with Amanda Edney at Whitchurch Silk Mill. The looms were already warped, leaving us to experiment with weft, choosing yarns of different colours and textures. I soon got into a rhythm and the piece grew quickly as I tried different weights of yarn using the clasped weft technique, adding some shredded cloth for texture. After two hours I had piece 70cm long and I knew I had to have a loom with foot treadles.

Building my own floor loom

I started looking around for a floor loom, but space was limited and I soon realised I couldn't afford a new one. The second-hand looms I saw were too big, and I still wasn't quite sure what I wanted. Maybe I could make one? I studied lots of images, looked for assembly instructions, photographed looms at museums and shows. I wanted a loom with a weaving width of about 24cm, what I now know are called treadles, and it needed to fold. I figured I would start with two shafts, but leave open the option for adding more if it worked.

I made my own drawings, listed the timber I needed and headed off to the local wood recycling centre. The new loom started to take shape. The heddle frames were a bit clunky but I managed to find some aluminium bars to mount the wire heddles I had sent off for. The reed arrived. Then all ground to a halt. I needed ratchet wheels for the rollers, the same point I had reached with the original table loom. I didn't think wood would be strong enough, metal would be better. I tried my local blacksmith, but it was clear it wasn't his sort of thing.

I scoured the internet again, and eventually found a Kromski upgrade kit for its rigid heddle loom which included metal ratchet wheels. I also found a plastic 24 tooth clutch ratchet wheel for a washing machine, so I bought a pack of five.

The metal ratchet wheels worked a treat on my floor loom, and the plastic ratchets were surprisingly sturdy and just the size to fit over the rollers I had for my table loom. I strung up the shafts and connected them to the treadles with nylon cord from the DIY store. Everything moved smoothly and with a few adjustments, it looked as though I was in business – I had two two-shaft looms!

But I somehow knew that two shafts was not going to be enough. Before going any further, I wanted to get a good idea of how a four-shaft loom worked, and what I could do with it. I booked a day in the studio with weaver Sarah Beadsmoore. I

Silk scarf inspired by Janet Phillips' Henley Regatta



Home-made four-shaft loom with summer and winter towels

hoovered up information – how her looms worked, yarns, sett, warping, threading and reference books.

Looking at her beautiful scarves confirmed my direction – I needed to add shafts. I came away with loads of photos, half a scarf in a random point twill and renewed drive!

My neighbour offered to make me four heddle frames. More treadles and heddles, tying and re-tying and the half finished scarf was re-threaded onto my own loom. I made some boat shuttles, and a bobbin winder from an old hand drill, and my weaving journey was truly underway.

Books

Two books became my weaving bibles: Anne Dixon's *Handweaver's Pattern Book* and Pattie Graver's *Next Steps in Weaving* – which takes you through various weave structures with detailed instructions for samplers and projects to make.

My new year's resolution was to sample a new weave structure every month, and Pattie's book provided a useful guide through colour and weave, overshot, summer and winter and lace weaves. I followed on with a table runner and mats in rep weave, and then treated myself to some silk for a scarf inspired by Janet Phillips' *Henley Regatta* design.

The Guild and the National Exhibition

Eventually I discovered the Guild, where I have great support and encouragement and made new friends. It has led me into exploring inkle, tablet weaving and kumihimo amongst other techniques, and you won't be surprised to read that I have built a couple of inkle/tablet looms!

In 2016 I visited the Association National Exhibition. I was blown away by the amazing variety and quality of exhibits, and truly inspired to find some really lovely pieces from novice weavers who had been practising the craft for less than three years.

In praise of rigid heddle

I firmly believe that the rigid heddle loom is underrated.

In my search for inspiration and supplies for my early looms, I came across an end of line 8in SampleIt loom. I made it up to 12in by making new warp and cloth beams and cutting down the rails from one of my 24in heddles to fit. I started to collect rigid heddle panels of various dents.

Again two books were instrumental. I warped up and went through many of the patterns in Jane Patrick's *Weaver's Idea Book: Creative Cloth on a Rigid-Heddle Loom* and Syne Mitchell's *Inventive Weaving on a Little Loom*. I was taken by the versatility of these looms, particularly if pick-up sticks are added. The item most popular at my open weekend was a cushion made from a scarf length woven in 5/1 spot lace on my little 'lap loom'.



Rigid heddle cushion in 5/1 spot lace with Dorset buttons



Jacket fabric on home-made rigid heddle loom

The jacket

The SampleIt loom came with three balls of variegated merino yarn in blue and rust, which I thought would be lovely for a jacket. Encouraged by the improvements to my table loom with its rigid heddle and rollers, I thought I would have a go.

I found a sewing pattern where the widest piece was 39cm (15½ inches) and made up a trial jacket in cheap canvas. If I added in plain yarn and used the variegated as a highlight I figured I could warp my table top rigid heddle with 7m at 43cm wide, which should give me enough plus about 80cm to spare. The problem was that I had used the warp to sample on the little loom, so would have to join the warp threads to get 7m. Not ideal, but I figured I could probably work around this. I studied my books for instructions on joining warp threads.

I was nervous about cutting my lovely woven cloth, for fear of it all unravelling. But every cutting line was machine stitched beforehand, and every seam taped on each side. I cursed the impulse to weave horizontal stripes as I matched the various pieces, but eventually the jacket took shape. I was spurred on to finish it in time for the next Guild meeting.

Looking back, I can't quite believe this was one of my first weaving projects!



Finished jacket

Open house exhibition

Another new year's resolution was to hold an exhibition where friends and neighbours could come and see what I had been doing. July would be the anniversary of my first projects on my home-made four-shaft loom, and I thought a good opportunity to celebrate a year's weaving.

This kept my focus on sampling weave structures, and by July 2017 I had completed and documented 21 projects, with two further projects on the looms for demonstration.

I decided I wanted to give some of my first year's work a wider airing. So I put four pieces into the *Touch of Silk* exhibition at Whitchurch Silk Mill which coincided with the 2017 Summer School, and some pieces into the local open art exhibition at King John's House.

Where next?

I think I can safely say I'm hooked. When people ask me what I do, I say I am a weaver. At the time of writing I have seven looms – three rigid heddle, two inkle/tablet looms, my original four-shaft and a shiny not quite new eight-shaft floor loom acquired from Sally Parker of Mingled Yarn on a visit to Somerset in the spring. I am now making an eight-shaft table loom to sample on, and so that I can take a loom to workshops and learn from others. I'm hoping to bring it to the 2019 Association Summer School.

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Open house exhibition

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About the author: Coral took up weaving in 2016, and is largely self-taught on her home-made looms. She is a member of the Hampshire Guild. She also teaches people to make Dorset Buttons and has opened an Etsy shop for some of her smaller handmade items: CoralsHandmade.etsy.com

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