

A Life at the Loom: The Work and Practice of Janet Phillips — Teacher, Weaver, Author, Designer

Jo Andrews, Dorset and London Guilds

In 1968, a teenager from Edinburgh sat down for the first time at a weaving loom and discovered her calling. Like most weavers, she has a clear memory of the moment: 'It was a simple four-shaft colour and weave sample blanket woven on a 24-shaft Dobby loom – I have it still.' Fifty years later Janet Phillips is an accomplished designer of original cloth, a respected teacher and the author of a number of key texts on weaving.

'It was a fluke in a way. My grandparents came to stay one summer and we went on a day trip from Edinburgh to Galashiels, and we visited the mill of Bernat Klein, who in the late 1960s was revolutionising the Scottish tweed industry. I just found his mill so exciting. There was so much colour and so many wonderful fabrics. Suddenly, there was this notion that maybe you could earn your living doing this! This was just a 16-year-old thinking... Whoah!! And next door to Bernat Klein's mill was the Scottish College of Textiles. So, I decided I wanted to go there.'

Weavers tend to divide into those coming from the colour corner or from the structure corner. Janet began with colour, but four years studying in Galashiels gave her a structural understanding and a professionalism that has governed her approach since, working and teaching from her garden studio in West Somerset. And for more than half a century, Janet Phillips has made her living as a weaver.

When she went to the Scottish College of Textiles (now part of Heriot-Watt University), Galashiels was a thriving centre of tweed production, with up to 20 working mills employing a third of the local workforce. 'I was entering an industry: there was no question for my parents of this being a trivial thing to do. I was going to work. I was being trained to work in a mill to design fabrics.'

But lives have unexpected turns and by the time Janet graduated in 1972, the mills were closing, production moving abroad and automation increasing. There were no jobs in the Scottish Borders so she found herself on the train to London with a job to design coat and suiting fabric for a high street chain. Dealing with Yorkshire mill owners was tough for a very young woman.

Three years later, she took the plunge and bought herself a 16-shaft George Wood dobby loom, moved to Oxfordshire and began life as an independent commission weaver.

'I was married by this time, so I had a shared income. I was also living in Henley-on-Thames, an area of the country where people, maybe, have a bit of spare money. There were also no other weavers doing it... almost no competition. So, you weave something, you go to a craft fair, you get an order, they tell their friends, and you get another order. It just happened.'

For the first ten years, Janet wove floor rugs. It was hard physical work, but she earned an income. 'A craftsman, they say, has to be a master of their materials and master of their tools.'



Bubble Polka Dot: stitched doublecloth with areas of 1/3 twill incorporating elastic yarn with a thick fancy slub yarn in warp and weft for raised texture

You mustn't let the tools or the materials rule you. Use them and then you will produce individual things that are beautiful and functional and that people will want in their homes.'

Then a new career opened up as a teacher. 'In Oxford, there was a community education class that had been running since before the war. It had this Portakabin with about 50 looms in it. They were looking for someone who could teach those classes and it suited me very well. My daughter was about three and still at home. So every Thursday morning and every Thursday evening I taught a class in Oxford. There were 18 students in the morning and 18 in the evening and we had a wonderful time.' She taught there for nearly 20 years until the classes were closed in 2000.

This was where she shaped her skill as a teacher and developed an approach which supports students to not just use a loom and follow a pattern, but push themselves further to design their own fabrics and make something unique.

This is the key to Janet's approach to sampling. 'I see weaves in everything I look at – that's how my brain works as I have been doing it so long. I just look at something and I can see a shape. Once I can see it in my mind then I'm off, really.'

At the start of the design process, Janet weaves a multiple-section sample blanket: 'My first sample blanket will be the shapes and the colours I am thinking will be most successful, but while I am at it, I'll do it in a couple of other colours. Then I might try it in other yarns. My first sample blanket is usually quite wide and it's quite long because, invariably, I'll decide to cut the warp and re-sley it... do a different sett. I might decide to re-thread different sections and it's a messy but exciting process. Usually by the end of this really quite expansive multiple section sample blanket I'll have a tiny square in one corner where I'll think: Yes, that's the bit I like! And then I will take that one again and do it as a much smaller sample blanket now. You just refine it, refine it and refine it again until you think, Yes, I know what I am going to do now.'



Teaching session with Janet

Photos: Nigel Phillips

Janet says many weavers have a terror of making a mistake, but sampling is different. 'It's just exploration. It's exciting because you can't go wrong if you are sampling. You can't make a mistake. The only mistake you can make is not to try something.' This moves most weavers into new territory and it takes them time to find their feet.



Diatom is a four-shaft double plain weave using mostly 20/2 nm silk: 60/2 nm silk in 8:1 ratio front:back

In search of a broader audience, she wrote *Designing Woven Fabrics* (2008), which to date has sold over 4,000 copies. At its heart is the creation of a four-shaft multi-section sample blanket, which acts as a weave library for the students who make it. The book goes on to show how designs can be drawn from this single sample. To research it, Janet spent eight years weaving only on four-shaft looms. 'People who feel they are very new to weaving come up with 500 patterns so simply and easily. And they know exactly how each pattern is made, and they are immediately in a position where they think: "I can do something that is unique to me."'

In the new book, *Exploring Woven Fabrics*, she takes the same weaves that are used in *Designing Woven Fabrics* and puts them onto eight shafts. 'I have spent the last eight years weaving only eight-shaft cloths – and coming up with things that I couldn't possibly believe I could get. It's very exciting.'

Through her books and classes, Janet Phillips has reached weavers round the world who have understood new ways of working and designing. She survived the collapse of the industry she was trained to join and thrived as a commission weaver and a teacher, and now sees new inspirations in this oldest of crafts. 'There is a lot of interest in handweaving at the moment. There are a lot of people wanting to do it. I sometimes wonder if it is the fast, computerised world we live in that makes you want to get away from a computer and sit at a loom. People are also very appreciative of things that are different when there are so many commercialised textiles about. There is an appreciation of all the hand crafts now'.

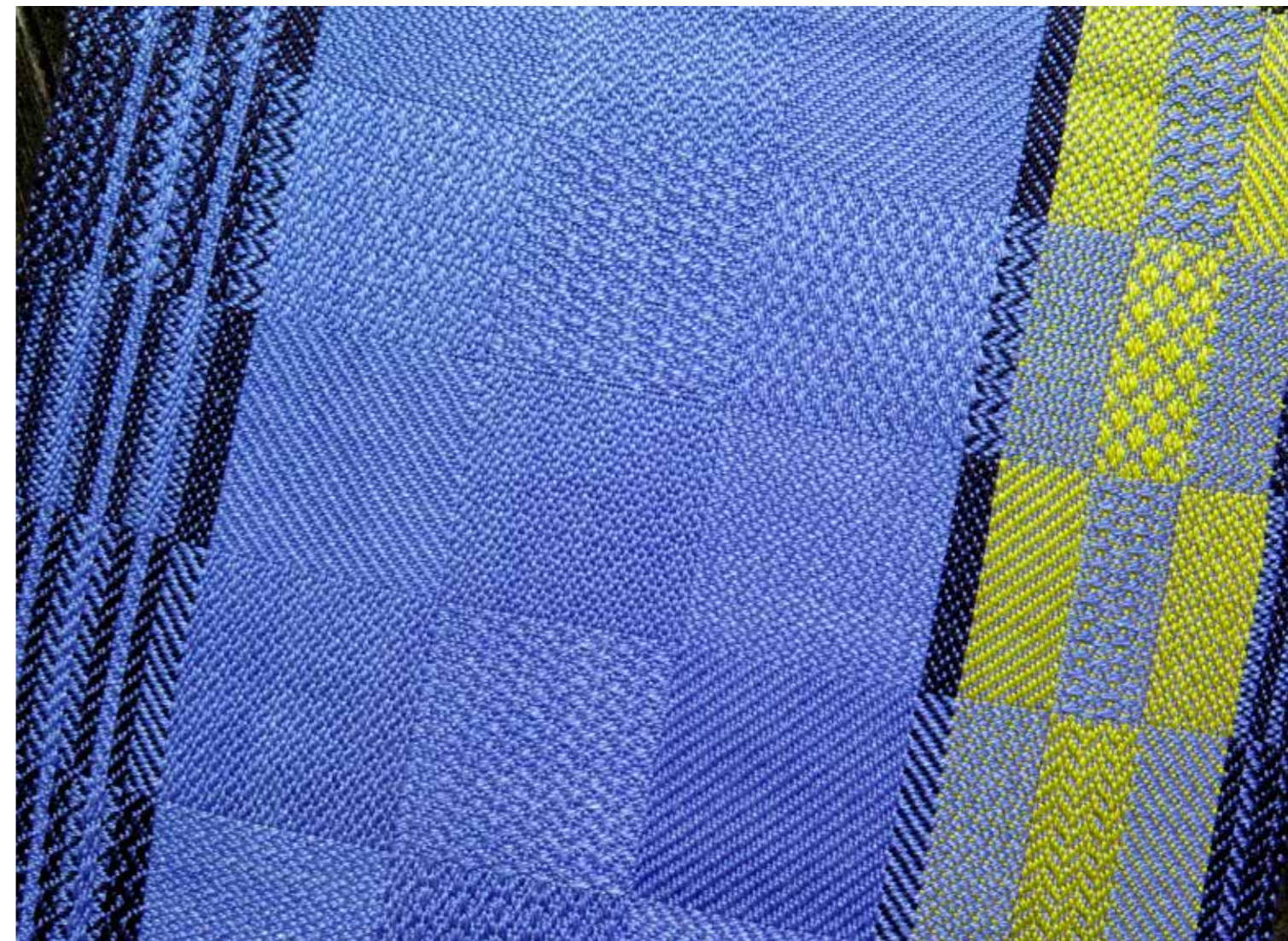
After more than 50 years, her passion for weaving is still there: 'For some reason it hasn't flagged. I have so many ideas in my head and don't think I have got enough time in my life to make them happen or to see them.'



Lakeland Landscape bag



Parisian Pink bag



Regal Tang is woven in 20/2 nm silk, hand dyed. Turned twill tie-up on different threading plans.

Further reading

Phillips, Janet (2008) *Designing Woven Fabrics*. Somerset: Natural Time Out Publications.
 Phillips, Janet (2020) *Exploring Woven Fabrics*. Somerset: Natural Time Out Publications.
www.janetphillips-weaving.co.uk

About the author: Jo Andrews is a writer and podcaster who looks at how textiles cast a different light on the story of humanity, drawing on history, trade and culture through her website www.hapticandhue.com

Exploring Woven Fabrics
 JANET PHILLIPS

£39.95 plus p&p
 Purchase from
www.janetphillips-weaving.co.uk

Seven multiple-sectioned sample blankets to weave exploring Colour and Weave Effect and Block Weaves on four and eight shafts. Double Cloth, Summer and Winter, Shadow Weave and Repp, Stitched Double Cloth, Deflected Double Cloth. Included are 40 finished designs developed from the patterns created on the sample blankets.

Haptic & Hue Podcasts
 Tales of Textiles
www.hapticandhue.com/listen