

The Peredur Tapestry

Martin Weatherhead, Snail Trail Handweavers, Wales



School visit to the Makers Guild, Cardiff. The silk robe that Martin is wearing is ikat and was woven after his Winston Churchill Travel Fellowship to Central Asia to study ikat
Photo: Weatherhead family

Some thirty years ago I first read *The Mabinogion*, a series of Welsh myths and legends, and I was immediately struck by the story of Peredur, a medieval knight. In the course of Peredur's travels, he chances upon a magical valley with a tree half in flames and half with leaves unconsumed by the fire. A river runs through the valley with a flock of white sheep grazing on one side and a flock of black sheep on the other. When a white sheep bleats, a black sheep crosses the river and becomes white and when a black sheep bleats, a white sheep crosses the river and becomes black. The colour-changing sheep can symbolise the possibility for change, that the dark can turn towards the light, but that the light can also veer towards the dark. An apple tree symbolises temptation.

The story of Peredur inspired me to weave a tapestry illustrating the magical valley. A medieval style seemed appropriate for this ancient tale. Above and below the tapestry, I have used words to describe the scene in Welsh and English that mirror the script in the fourteenth century manuscript *The White Book of Rhydderch* where this story was first recorded. Medieval tapestries usually feature flora and fauna in the millefleur style and on the dark side the plants are toxic or mind-altering.

I first wove a small sample of flames and leaves, telling all my students that one day I was going to weave it the size of the showroom wall! Time went on and life was busy. It has finally taken retirement from teaching to give me the time to make whatever I like. It took me over a year to finalise the design,



Heron and Ripples (study)



Sheep Changing Colour (study)



Water's Edge (study)

Photos: Martin Weatherhead



Martin at work

Photo: Weatherhead family



Woven initials (detail)



Photos: Martin Weatherhead

first going down a dead end trying to make a magic Escher-style transforming sheep. Then, I finally got down to the practicalities. I planned that the tapestry would be two metres tall and four metres wide. What about a loom? The only big tapestry I had previously woven was on a loom I had constructed from scaffolding and Acrow props just over one and a half metres wide. Could I build a two-metre loom and how heavy would the beams need to be to avoid bending? Fortunately, fate stepped in. Taking my son to visit a forestry project, I mentioned the

problem to Alison Lochhead, a sculptor. She offered an old loom hiding in a barn. Weeping woodworm dust, it was just the right size!

I have never known obsession until I started this project. Rugs and scarves are enjoyable, hangings an interesting variety, but nothing quite like this has ever hit me. Once I had started, I couldn't wait to weave the next bit. Each motif, flower or animal, tree or leaf was a challenge; ever changing and stimulating. I began early in the studio every morning and only came in if I started making mistakes. Pandemic isolation was barely noticed. I was in the studio every moment and my son-in-law did the shopping.

In the end I dyed over fifty different colours. Weaving with three strands of Weaversbazaar's worsted wool on a medium cotton warp at 8epi, I blended, hatched and most of the time used an eccentric weft. On the way, I wove a dozen samples to test out problems.

After innumerable hours of weaving, it finally came to an end. On the final border, I invited the whole family, nine of them in three generations (from 4 to 76), to each weave a leaf to recognise their extreme patience in putting up with my total obsession. Each of their initials, including mine, is woven into the turn-over at the edge of the tapestry.

The tapestry was on display at the Senedd (Welsh Parliament) Cardiff until the end of April 2024 and is looking for other venues to show.

There is a short video showing the making of the tapestry:
youtube.com/watch?v=B0cJGE4LV40
facebook.com/SnailTrailHandweavers

About the author: Martin's interest in weaving began as a schoolboy. After graduating with a degree in zoology, he returned to weaving and founded Snail Trail Handweavers. Starting with rugs and offering residential courses, he later travelled to Asia to study ikat. The Peredur Tapestry was created after his retirement from teaching. It was selected for the Hay-on-Wye Association Exhibition.



Martin and daughter, Raphaëlle and granddaughter, Tanwen

Photo: Weatherhead family