

The Sark Community Tapestry Weaving Project

Members of the Sark Tapestry Weaving Group

This is a fascinating account of how an island community embraced the idea of learning to weave a tapestry and of working together to create the Sark Tapestry. The tapestry was unveiled in August 2025 and now hangs in the Sark Art Gallery and Museum.

Sark is an island in the southwestern English Channel, off the coast of Normandy, that forms part of the archipelago of the Channel Islands. Known as the Jewel of the Channel Islands, Sark has about 550 residents, a high proportion of whom are very creative in a variety of fields. At the start of this project, there were no tapestry weavers on the island, but that has all changed in the ten years since the *Sark Tapestry* weaving project came into being.

It all began in the spring of 2015, with the arrival of a newsletter from weaversbazaar which included a call for projects for sponsorship to promote tapestry weaving in communities around the country. Specifically, the offer was aimed to encourage a community to actively participate in tapestry weaving and to support the development of novice tapestry weavers. A few like-minded creative people in the Sark community explored the idea, the general response was enthusiastic, and the ten-year Sark community tapestry project was born.

Diana Scarth, a regular visitor to Sark, and LouLou Morris, both tapestry weavers, happened to be on holiday in Sark for two weeks at that time. They both embraced the idea of a communal tapestry woven by the islanders. Diana provided a design, which was taken from the Sark land- and seascape, featuring the sea stacks, known as Les Autelets ('the altars' in French) and part of the coast that can be seen from Port du Moulin, which is a bay frequented for swimming, fishing and picnics.

By September of that year, the technical design of the three-panel project had been completed. LouLou kindly offered to produce the cartoons (the plans) which a tapestry weaver works from. Sponsorship from weaversbazaar for the threads required for the project was dependent upon the skills of tapestry weaving being taught to people within the community, particularly those who had no previous knowledge of the skill. Indeed, no one on Sark knew how to tapestry weave at that time, but there was considerable enthusiasm for the project and a willingness to learn. The sponsorship by weaversbazaar was crucial to the success of the project, as there was no extra money in any possible kitty for expenses.

The next question was how to find a tutor. Matty Smith, Lin Squires (both formerly of weaversbazaar) and Margaret Parker were very supportive and came up with a list of potential tutors. Five local people were involved in arranging the practicalities of the course, which included securing venues, such as the Island Hall, the Sanctuary Centre or the Medieval Cider Barn, advertising the course and encouraging people to learn to tapestry weave. The handweaver, Hilary Charlesworth, agreed to come at minimal cost. She too was interested in the project and in the idea of sharing her weaving knowledge with people on an island who did not know how to weave. In fact, she has been hooked by the magic of Sark and has visited each year ever since, passing on other textile skills at the Creative Sark events each June.



Original painting of Les Autelets by Diana Scarth



Learning to tapestry weave



Selecting the yarn

All photos: Sue Daly



Beginning to weave the Sark Tapestry

Practice tapestry frames were made by a local craftsman and more than a dozen residents subscribed to 'Learning to tapestry weave'. The group included men, women, young and older. They came from all walks of life. Some had a tradition of working with textiles from childhood; many were born on the island – one of whom was a child on Sark during the Second World War. Others were from the EU, and a few were planning on staying on the island for only a few years.

Hilary encouraged everyone to choose colours and to weave a sampler using basic techniques. She is an empathetic tutor, and confidence grew until each member of the group used their own design for the final set of samplers and became more adept at weaving. Indeed, Hilary was surprised by how much was achieved in a relatively short time.

The picture and cartoons for the *Sark Tapestry* panels, together with the samplers the students had woven went on display at the first ever *Sark Tapestry* weaving exhibition in a local hotel. A further six people expressed an interest in learning to tapestry weave and over the next few months when the original group met, others started to learn. Tony Dunks, one of the weavers, became quite an expert and created some imaginative and interesting pieces. He also assisted newcomers to the group who had not done tapestry weaving before. By December 2015, there were 15 people who had learned the basic techniques and were ready to start weaving on the main tapestry frames.

The aims of the original sponsorship had been achieved, as there was now a group of competent tapestry weavers on the island. The next challenge was to become accustomed to

using the finer wools for the project and to mix the colour strands to create the variety of shades required for the full tapestry. The practice looms had been warped at five threads to the inch (2.5cm) for the samplers, but subsequently three of them were warped six threads to the inch (2.5cm) to experiment with the new thinner threads. Fortunately, our techniques improved a great deal with continued practice.

The group settled down to working each winter every other Friday afternoon; the knitting group met the other weeks. The original optimism of achieving a community tapestry in two years was shelved from necessity. Some members of the group were attracted to the challenge of the rocks, others, the sea or the sky. One member worked on mixing the threads required by the weavers and supplied a cake each meeting to have with a cuppa.

The summer months were always difficult for the group to get together to work on the tapestry. Gardens need far more attention, and more than half the weavers were involved in the tourist industry and other seasonal occupations. Nonetheless, Sark parliamentarians who work on the island and a variety of volunteers made time to work on the tapestry. Of course, not all visitors coming to the island to relax recognise how many hats people wear during a normal working week and how much of the work is voluntary.

Despite the busy summer season, at least three sessions were organised each year at public events to showcase the work of the tapestry weavers. Visitors and residents were invited to learn more of the process of tapestry weaving as well as to add a few stitches of their own. Children were encouraged to take part. In the winter the frames were moved to one house or another and the group met and progressed the work further. Over the years, there were some changes to the membership of the group, but progress continued and the tapestry gradually took shape. In 2017, there were three new recruits who wanted to learn to tapestry weave, creating a core of regular weavers. Regrettably, there were others who no longer had the time, but knew they were still welcome at the group meetings. A routine developed – public events during the summer months when many weavers were busy, more regular weaving sessions in the winter when people had more time.

In 2019, Diana came back on holiday to Sark for the first time in two years. She had not seen the tapestries. On returning home she wrote, 'I was back visiting Sark again this August, seeing all



Open day at the Medieval Cider Barn

my favourite places and people. Especially... to see the progress of the Sark Tapestry and meet some of the weavers who have been working on the project. Very impressive! As it takes shape it's becoming a bright and lively tapestry. The colour blending of the separate threads gives the necessary gentle subtlety, balancing the whole image.'

Diana found Sark creatively inspirational and yet simultaneously relaxing. Sadly, Diana passed away in 2024 and did not see the finished tapestry.

Work continued apace, until March 2020, when COVID-19 caused the group meetings to be put on hold. Nonetheless, several weavers continued to work on their piece of the project at home during lockdown. By the end of May, we were able to meet again to work outside. Luckily, the weather was fine, and everyone benefitted from being able to work again as a group, notwithstanding the constraints of social distancing. One of the tapestries was completed in 2021 and each of the others were completed over the next three years.

While the work has been carried out by a core group of Sark weavers, people from all walks of life and ages ranging from four to ninety with varying weaving skills have been encouraged to contribute, even if just a few stitches. Nearly everyone who has helped will have signed the 'visitor book' which stands as a record of those who have contributed. We would particularly like to mention Linda Williams, Debbie Guille, Tony Dunks, Liz Stevenson, Shakira Christodoulou and Amanda Petrie.

In addition to the 'official' woollen threads that make up the finished design, wool from a sheep named Persil has been included (to give the 'fluffy' bits in the clouds), while some of the tail hairs of a carriage horse called Ronaldo have been used. There are other contributions, of some favoured pet, that have been included, the details of which are known only to the contributing weaver.

Renowned weaver, Margaret Jones agreed to 'finish' the tapestries ready for hanging. She prepared a video instruction of how to hang them. They were unveiled at an evening event in the Art Gallery on the Avenue in Sark on Thursday 21 August 2025 to much acclaim.

This project owes its success to the dedication and commitment of several members of the Sark community who assisted with fund-raising, creating posters to advertise the events, providing newsletters to keep everyone informed and, of course, to the weavers themselves.

Acknowledgements

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Friday afternoons in winter



Friday afternoons in winter



The completed Sark Tapestry