



Inspiration at your fingertips

Valerie Nesbitt talks to Elizabeth Betts about her quilting career, from using the first rotary cutters to running an online TV channel

How, and when, did you start making quilts?

Sewing is in my blood; my mother loved her sewing machine and I come from an era when sewing was taught at school. However it was probably in the mid 1970s before patchwork came into my life in the form of hexagons and English paper-piecing, which back then was a great way of using up scraps, both of fabric and recycling Christmas cards as we cut out our own paper templates.

What was the first quilt you made?

It was an appliqué quilt, I bought the pattern and the fabrics from Village Fabrics as I lived close to Wallingford at that time. Kathy and Arthur Warner were the owners and I ended up working in the shop. Appliqué has always been my first love and I used to do lots of hand embroidery too. Back then hand quilting was also something we all did as machine quilting hadn't really caught on.

When did you open your own shop, Creative Quilting?

Creative Quilting was opened in October 1989 at 3 Bridge Road in East Molesey, which is just a stone's throw away from the Thames and Hampton Court Palace and not far from 32 Bridge Road where it is today. At that time Kathy was a wholesale importer of fabrics from

customers to new skills and gadgets, as this industry is constantly evolving, but also to showcase the fabrics that are on sale. After all a small 6in square looks very different to a bolt that is 7in wide x 22in, so yes we always ran workshops.

The biggest single change in patchwork I think has come about with the introduction of the rotary cutter, this allowed us to cut our patchwork pieces quickly and accurately and then sew our patchwork quilt tops by machine. One of the earliest day classes I ran was the Log Cabin Quilt in a Day from Eleanor Burns; this marriage between the sewing machine and quilting has now become second nature and machine sewn quilts maximise this technique to great effect. However, the patchwork world continues to evolve and expand and now includes not only gadgets designed to help but a wide range of threads and waddings specifically designed for quilters. How different from those early days!

Why did you decide to sell the shop and to move on?

It was the advent of the internet and all that came with it. It seemed to me to require someone at the helm of Creative Quilting who was more competent than I to take the shop into the next era and Isa Saulet joined my team just at the right time.

'I am very proud of the fact that the little shop I started back in 1989 has stood the test of time and continues to thrive; and I obviously continue to get great pleasure from sharing Justhands-on.tv...'

Concord as well as running her own shop in Wallingford and it was with a bit of guidance from her that I filled the shelves with light, medium and dark coloured fabrics with also a variety in the scale of the prints. We were only just being introduced to the American style of patchwork, without papers but still drawing around templates and sewing our pieces together with a running stitch. As well as the fabrics, which had been designed for the craft trade, we also had a lot of pre-printed panels, mostly picture panels to make up into cushions but there were some that depicted patchwork blocks too. I can remember when we used cardboard cut-outs to give us an idea of what the fabric might look like in a small piece, now usually only done if you want to fussy-cut. Another trick we used to employ to help when thinking of making a quilt from strips, say a Log Cabin pattern, was to stand the bolts on end so you are looking at the spines as this becomes much more representational of the proportions for the finished block.

There was very little in the way of gadgets and habby; it was very early days of the rotary cutter and we certainly hadn't understood just how versatile and indispensable that would become. Even the wadding was only 36in wide and puffy polyester, indeed we were very excited when we found a supplier of quilt-size wadding!

Did you run workshops from Creative Quilting?

I believe that education was and remains the foundation stone for a quilt shop. It allows the shopkeeper to not only introduce her quilting

Do you still have links with Creative Quilting?

Yes I do, I am still part of the teaching team which means that I am there most weeks and I just love it!

How did the idea for Justhands-on.tv come about?

The idea came about as it was a way for me to continue to share my love of patchwork and quilting. Not everyone is as fortunate as I am to work in a quilt shop and see all the latest gadgets and fabrics. Plus it became apparent that fixed class times and busy lives mean that sometimes we don't get to do the things we want to do, but with the help of the Internet, this doesn't have to be the case. It was born from the idea that education and inspiration can be at your fingertips any time of the day or night anywhere in the world. And there is no need to dress up – PJ's are fine!

When did you start working on the channel, and how long did it take to launch?

Like all bright ideas, the devil is in the detail, back when we launched a lot of the country was still on dial-up internet, Many of our viewers didn't have email, the smart phone was rare and the iPad hadn't been invented!

We went live in July 2009 with our first film, which was a series of films highlighting the work of a textile group called 'Diversity' who are from the greater Wokingham area when they were on show at Norden Farm, Maidenhead.





Left to right: Kaleidoscope quilt; presenting with Jennie Rayment; with guest tutor Sue Rhodes

Since then the website has undergone several rebuilds and upgrades so that our videos can be viewed on all platforms (an expression my tech team tell me I should use!). But the structure remains the same with new patchwork and textile workshops, tips and techniques and tours and interviews loaded every week.

In the early years, how did you promote the website in the early years?

The website is not all about me but about UK tutors and contributors so they have been a big help in spreading the word, as have the local quilt groups and members. Promotion of the site remains high on our agenda and we give out thousands of promotional bookmarks at events such as the Festival of Quilts.

Did it take a while for quilters to come round to the idea of video content?

Not really, it was more about technology catching up with us. People love to watch demos and online you get the added bonus of being able to rewind and watch it again.

Has the content changed over the last seven years?

The basic format has remained the same, we film workshops in a studio location and then go out and about to visit shows and exhibitions and other items of interest. For me that's the best bit as I get to go too!

You run Justhands-on.tv with Jennie Rayment, how did you start working together?

Jennie and I have been friends since 1989, the early days of both our quilting careers. I used to escape from time to time to attend one of Jennie's workshops and she was the one who first persuaded me to tackle the Trip Around the World 'quiltinaday' quilt. This is the one that you have to unpick on purpose and I always claimed I did enough of that already without adding in some intentional unpicking! However, as usual Jennie was right, and this patchwork quilt construction (also called the cylinder method, and used for bargello) remains one of my favourites.



What type of quilts do you like to make?

I have now been sewing for more than 50 years and the reason I sew has changed over that time. I still sew mostly for work in that I need samples for students to see. Sometimes I will make a sample to share in the shop which showcases a range of fabric (just an excuse to use the fabric really!) and of course I also make samples for the workshops that I present; so most of these quilts have to be reasonably quick to make and therefore rotary cut and sewn by machine -but it's not a hardship as I love being able to use my sewing machine and have real withdrawal symptoms if I have a couple of days away from it.

What are the biggest changes you have noticed in quilting since the 1980s?

Well I think all aspects of patchwork and quilting have changed since I opened the shop in 1989. There are always new ideas coming through and the world of patchwork and textiles is so vast there is something for everyone. We now have huge ranges of fabric that have been specifically designed and printed for quilters, including a couple of UK design houses with is brilliant. We also have a wide range of waddings that have been developed specifically with the quilter in mind and there is also now a wonderful choice and range of threads – even polyester has changed!

How do you feel technology has changed quilting over the last decade?

Moving from hand quilting to being able to quilt with the sewing machine; free-motion has transformed our quilt making and then there is the whole area of giving your quilt to someone else to quilt. The whole industry of Long Arm Quilting has evolved in such a short space of time, and of course there is the internet. Indeed the very core of our channel is that we can come into your home when you want with the workshops and patchwork inspiration.

Can you share a highlight (or two) from your career?

I am very proud of the fact that the little shop I started back in 1989 has stood the test of time and continues to thrive; and I obviously continue to get great pleasure from sharing Justhands-on.tv, but I think any quilt tutor will concur when I say that the biggest pleasure is in the sharing of my passion of patchwork and quilting with others.

What quilts, workshops or plans are on your to-do list?

Running your own business means that you have to be quite disciplined with your time and not too houseproud! I continue to make resolutions to be a) tidier – but then maybe I won't be so creative! b) make sure I have time to sew each week and c) take workshops with some of the inspirational contributors we have filmed – or maybe just invite them to be part of a Justhands-on.tv retreats then I get to go too! ◇

www.justhands-on.tv