

# Lifelines of early Bedalians

*An exercise in tapestry weaving, design and history.*

This is a first attempt at representing the lives of the earliest Bedalians in a graphic form, using Bedales Jacob wool to create a tapestry.

Each pupil is represented by two 'picks' of weft yarn, to give a solid line of weaving across the tapestry. The width of the tapestry equates to the years 1870-1925. From left to right each pupil's lifeline is divided into:

Before birth—white

Birth to starting school—brown

Years at school—white again

After school—brown, unless we have no further information about them, in which case grey

Red—for those who died before 1925



Further details about the project can be found in the folder on the table under the Memorial Book

I hope this article will answer any questions you may have about my first attempt at representing the lives of early Bedalians in a tapestry, and give you some background on tapestry weaving, the problems that I encountered, and my plans for the new improved version 2!

### Tapestry

As an Old Bedalian, who was fortunate enough to learn to weave at school, I have always been interested in various styles of weaving. More recently, I have focused more on tapestry weaving, and I've been privileged to join a course at West Dean College over the past 18 months during which I've learnt a great deal.

For those of you unfamiliar with tapestry, it is defined by the British Tapestry Group as a *weft-faced textile with discontinuous wefts, hand-woven on a loom*. What does this mean?

The plain **warp** threads are those wound on to the loom at the start of the process – they will normally be completely covered by the weft, and will not be seen (except perhaps as a fringe at the ends) once the tapestry is finished.

The **weft** threads are those that go across the warp, usually in an over, under, over, under sequence one warp at a time. They are packed tight, so that they form the design and the result is **weft-faced**. In tapestry-, as distinct from cloth-weaving, the weft won't usually go all the way across, but different sections will be woven in different colours i.e. a **discontinuous weft**. One **pick** of weft is the name for one complete row of weaving; coming back in the opposite direction the threads take the opposite over, under path, so that after two **picks** (or one **pass**), each warp thread has a weft thread on both sides.

### Lifelines project

As Librarian and Archivist here, I've been wondering for some time how I might combine my interest in textiles with a project that would relate to the history of the school. Bedales opened at Haywards Heath on 27<sup>th</sup> January 1893, so we

are now celebrating our 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary, and this seemed a good opportunity to create something.

I was keen to use only the wool from our Jacob sheep, which was spun in three colours: white, brown and grey. My course at West Dean included a session on dyeing, so I took the opportunity to dye some of the white wool red. I wanted, however, to restrict my palette to these four colours.

I wove some small samples to help determine the spacing of the warps, and experiment with the colour scheme. These led me to decide to weave the period before a person's birth in white, then from birth to school in brown, school years in white, and from leaving school until 1925 (the limit of the tapestry timescale) in brown again. However, there were, of course, some people who died before 1925, and for these I used red from the year of death to 1925. For those with whom the school lost touch, and we had no information after they left school, I used grey. For a few, we didn't know their dates of birth, and these are represented by grey lines at the start of the tapestry.

The width of the tapestry was largely determined by the size of my loom, and the decision to have one warp thread representing one year. This made 1870-1925 a convenient time span. The length was not constricted in the same way, but I decided to include all those pupils born up to the end of 1900 – some 650.

I experimented with changing the sequence of colours to distinguish between the girls and the boys as I'm sure it would be interesting to see how the proportion of girls increased over time. However, it proved too confusing at the scale of this piece, and will be something to revisit in future.

Having determined the parameters for the weaving, I then needed to get the information into a suitable format.

## **Data**

In the archive, we have a number of past editions of the Bedales Roll, which list everyone who attended the school, with as much key biographical information as we could learn. The last edition was compiled and published in hard copy in 1993. Since then, the records have been held electronically. I started by trying to transcribe the information I needed from the Roll, and quickly realised

that this would be a mammoth task, so instead tried to extract names, dates of birth, death and school attendance from the current version of the database. To my delight, this worked, and I was able to generate a list of everyone born up to the end of 1904, which seemed plenty for my purposes. The first real problem came when I realised that Excel won't sort on dates before 1900, which was extremely annoying. My aim was to put the pupils in order of their dates of birth, rather than alphabetically, or in order of their arrival at school. Having worked around this problem, I was able to print out my sheets and start weaving.

## **Results**

Once the weaving was completed, I found it interesting to see what a high proportion of pupils we had lost touch with after they left school, as indicated by the grey rows. (This interpretation may not be correct, as explained below in 'Problems'.) It was also sad to see how many died young, before 1925, and not just because of the war.

The other interesting aspect of displaying the data in this way was to see how varied the lengths of pupils' school careers were. If one were to plot/weave the school careers of recent pupils, I think the pattern would be much more regular. The majority of students born in a given year would arrive at fixed entry points, and leave at the end of Block 5 or 6.2.

## **Problems**

Technically, I learnt some useful lessons with this project, which have encouraged me to do it again in a slightly different way. The white yarn proved to be very different from the brown and grey in the way it handled, and I think this is due to a difference in the way it was spun. The white yarn which I had dyed red was not nearly so difficult to handle, probably because it was washed in the dyeing process, and so I will wash the white before using it in the second version. I will vary the timespan of the tapestry – probably starting in 1875 and finishing in 1930, to capture more information about the younger pupils. The major change in the weaving will be to use two warp threads to represent each year – this should allow, I hope, for cleaner joins between each section of an individual lifeline.

In planning the second attempt, I decided to look more closely at some of the information I used first time around, and this has thrown up some anomalies. I should have anticipated some of these, as we have long known that there are discrepancies in the information printed in the different editions of the Bedales Roll. What I hadn't appreciated was that imprecise dates, particularly dates of death, where we know only the month and year, or year alone, were not carried across to the database in a format that I could use. In assuming that we had no information about certain pupils after they left school, I was mistaken – we did know approximately when most of them died. Unfortunately for me this means that I can't cut corners by using the database alone as my information source, I will have to consult the Bedales Roll as well. The second version of the tapestry will therefore have far fewer grey lines.

