Rajah Revisited Project

2018- 2020

West Australian Quilters’ Association Inc.

The booklet presents photos of Rajah-inspired quilts made during 2018-2020 by 20 members of the West Australian Quilters’ Association:

Debra Costarella
Julie Cruden
Helen Dalgleish
Merle Fellowes
Val Gorey
Sandra Jorgensen
Leanne Lazarus
Jill Linton
Cherie Mincherton
Kerry Moore
Avril Mullins
Paula Nichols
Glenda Olesen
Cheryl Price
Jan Reid
Pippa Savell
Wendy Stacey
Ann Thomson
Robynne Vallence
Edwina Woodin

Glenda Olesen, Kerry Moore and Helen Dalgleish provided information for this booklet.
Pat Forster compiled the booklet.
**Background**

In 2017, the Quilters’ Guild of South Australia included a Rajah Quilt display at their annual show. Members had made quilts that resembled the historic ‘Rajah’ quilt held by the National Gallery of Australia. In association with the SA Guilds’ Rajah project, a scaled-down pattern for the quilt had become available in 2015 as a Block of the Month through the Quilt Show.com (Ref 1). Lessa Siegele, a South Australian quilter and teacher was instigator and creator of the pattern and had obtained permission for it from the National Gallery.

It happened that long standing WAQA member Glenda Olesen was a judge at the 2017 Quilters’ Guild of SA show and, on entering the show, was “amazed by the wall of Rajah quilts. Such a sight!”. She had seen the Rajah quilt several times, and knew the story of convict women making the quilt while being transported to Australia on the Rajah barque, arriving in 1841.

Kerry Moore, another a long-standing WAQA member, was also at the 2017 SA show. Talking together, Glenda and Kerry thought that there might be others in our association interested in a Rajah project. Glenda spoke at a sewing day and arranged with Lessa to supply the patterns. Forty WAQA members took up the offer! Kerry found a venue at Manning and the project was launched in January 2018. Kerry then organized a night group, and planned and facilitated a display for 2020.

Ref 1. Quilters’ Guild of SA Facebook, October 31, 2015

**Story of the Rajah Quilt**


In 1841, 180 women prisoners and 10 children were transported on the Rajah barque from Woolwich, England, departing on 5 April, to Hobart, Van Diemen’s Land (Tasmania), arriving on 19 July. The British Ladies Society for the Reformation of Female Prisoners, a Quaker group formed by Elizabeth Fry, had donated sewing supplies, including tape, 10 yards of fabric, four balls of white cotton sewing thread, a ball each of black, red and blue thread, black wool, 24 hanks of coloured thread, a thimble, 100 needles, threads, pins, scissors and two pounds of patchwork pieces (or almost ten metres of fabric). The purpose was to offer the prisoners useful tasks to keep them occupied.

When the Rajah arrived in Hobart on 19 July 1841, a patchwork, embroidered and appliquéd coverlet now known as the Rajah quilt, had been finished. It was presented to the Lieutenant-Governor’s wife, Lady Jane Franklin. Its complexity suggests the construction would have been overseen, possibly by Miss Kezia Hayter, from the Millbank Penitentiary. On the recommendation of Elizabeth Fry, Hayter had been sent to assist Lady Franklin in the formation of the Tasmanian Ladies’ Society for the Reformation of Female Prisoners. The quilt includes the inscription:

To the ladies of the convict ship committee, this quilt worked by the convicts of the ship Rajah during their voyage to van Diemen’s Land is presented as a testimony of the gratitude with which they remember their exertions for their welfare while in England and during their passage and also as a proof that they have not neglected the ladies kind admonitions of being industrious. — June 1841.

At some stage, the quilt was returned to England, to be presented to Elizabeth Fry. Whether she received it is unknown. It was rediscovered in Scotland, purchased and brought to Australia in 1989, by Les Hollings and the Australian Textiles Fund 1989, and gifted to the National Gallery of Australia.
Conditions on the Rajah

While conditions on the Rajah certainly allowed sewing of the quilt, they were also trying. For example, the Rajah surgeon’s report on the journey (Ref 1) states: “in the variable space, the heat between decks at night was very oppressive, but happily it produced no other ill effects than severely trying the temper of the women”. The same report describes how some women seemed to feign sickness in order to move from their own berth into a more comfortable one in the ship’s hospital, albeit temporarily.


The Replica Quilt Pattern

The original Rajah quilt measures 337 cm x 325 cm. The replica pattern yields a quilt that measures 170 cm x 170 cm. The pattern is presently (10/10/2020) available for download from the Etsy online shop. Search on ‘2sewtextiles rajah’. The pattern encourages use of old or modern fabrics, traditional and/or modern methods of construction, and alternative designs for the central block.

Rajah Quilt Display
West Australian Quilters’ Association Inc.

Seventeen ‘Rajah’ quilts were finished and offered for display at the WAQA Annual General Meeting held on 7 October, 2020. Quilt frames were installed along the side and back walls of a large meeting room at Stirling Adriatic Centre. The quilts were photographed as the makers brought them in, and then were hung so that colours of different quilts complemented each other.

Some quilts quite closely resembled the original Rajah in appearance, including the centre. Many had centres designed by the maker, including one with an embroidered barque like the Rajah. One was made entirely with modern fabrics. Predominant colours were beige (as for the original quilt), off-white, grey and red. Several included the inscription from the original quilt (see Story of the Rajah Quilt, above). Kerry Moore provided an interesting talk and slide show, describing the Rajah quilt and the historical context which led to women prisoners being transported to Australia.

The display and talk attracted a larger than usual attendance at the WAQA Annual General Meeting and everyone also enjoyed a delicious supper. The event was truly a celebration of quilt making and friendship through quilt making.
Glenda Olesen (left) and Kerry Moore (right) at the Rajah quilt display, 2020 WAQA AGM, 7 October, 2020

Quiltmakers: Sandra Jorgensen, Paula Nichols, Wendy Stacy, Cheryl Price, Cherie Micherton, Glenda Olesen, Helen Dalgleish, Ann Thomson, Kerry Moore, Deb Costarella at the front, Jan Reid at the back, Edwina Wootten.
by Paula Nichols
by Pippa Savell
by Merle Fellowes
by Edwina Woodin
TO THE LADIES of the
Convict Ship Committee
This quilt worked by the Convicts
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June 1841
Responses from WAQA Rajah Revisited Quiltmakers

I was wanting a new project to sew when I saw the wall of Rajah quilts at the 2017 Quilters’ Guild of South Australia show. The original Rajah quilt I have seen several times and, as my family had arrived on the 'Petrel' in 1849, the history of the Rajah quilt interested me. When Kerry Moore and I took the Rajah Revisited project to WAQA, my aim was to educate people that Australia has a long quilting history.

Glenda Olesen

I joined with Glenda to make the Rajah Quilt initially for the historical context. I have worked for quite a while in a museum in Fremantle and learnt and delivered so much information to visitors. There was never an occasion when the awe on peoples' faces wasn't amazing. The stories of our early settlement are in some ways too incredible, the stuff of a horror story. This quilt is one tiny snippet of something good that came out of all that horror. While we had more and different fabrics and colours to choose from, we felt connected in stitch in some ways and many times I heard snippets of conversation about how hard it would have been on the ship. We tried to give a little bit of information about the ship and convicts while we were going along. It inspired others to do their own research and we were then entertained by others' discoveries.

I realised early on that some people were challenged with some of the technical components of the quilt making so took on the task of showing them how to achieve the right applique shapes, the perfect half square triangles, the perfect hourglass squares and so on. Little did I realise just how challenging it was to get some of the pieces right. I even had to take off two borders to figure out what went wrong and found that I had miscounted the number of squares so was able to correct that.

In the end, it was so rewarding to see all the different quilts that were taking shape, all different in colour, centres individual, and each person really did 'make it their own'. I am so pleased to have been a part of this shared journey.

Kerry Moore

Just a few words on why I wanted to take part in the Rajah Quilt project. Glenda is very enthusiastic and persuasive and the whole history of the quilt intrigued me. The thought of women convicts sitting on board a possibly heaving sailing ship and cutting small pieces of fabric into even smaller pieces boggles the mind. I wanted to see if I could match their persistence, I was nearly found wanting. With the luxury of modern technology and the stability of a non movable sewing room I managed to complete the task. I was determined to use what I had in my stash and therefore my finished quilt has a distinct Japanese flavour. I enjoyed being involved and was delighted to see a sample of the finished quilts at the recent AGM, they are all beautiful.

Ann Thomson

The Rajah quilt was the first piecing pattern I attempted after joining WAQA. I struggled with the accuracy required but it soon became less about perfect seams and more about the story of the 179 convict women travelling on the Rajah vessel. I was sewing my quilt in comfort at home but they would have endured cramped, anxious, uncomfortable conditions. Sewing the Rajah quilt on board, stitch by stitch, would have been a positive distraction for the convicts and given them something to look forward to each day. My choice of colours revolve around the bright pink border fabric and its barbed wire print (representing convict women and incarceration). Nine members of my extended family have worked at sea so my quilt centrepiece had to be the Rajah vessel.

Helen Dalgleish
When Glenda first mentioned the Rajah Quilt pattern that Lessa Seigle had produced, I was very interested in joining a group to make it. Had already decided to do it in reproduction fabrics. Enjoyed making the centre to my own design but fast lost interest when I reached the tiny half square triangles and matching seams. I dyed some of my shirting fabric with red crepe paper to get the colour pink that was needed. Did quite a bit of unpicking on the outer borders (pieced) and was ready to throw it in the bin, but with encouragement from Glenda I persevered to finish it. Machine quilted it in traditional pattern of Baptist fan to finish it off quickly. Now that it is finished I am happy to have a reproduction of some of Tasmania's history as I come from Hobart where the Rajah arrived with the women who made the quilt.

Pippa Savell

I only heard of the Rajah quilt’s existence at the WAQA sewing night and saw the pattern. I love to quilt and when it was a group of like minded ladies sewing together, that enticed me to join up. We met each week and swapped stories and lessons on ‘how to’ and ‘what not to do’. Sharing this time together made making the quilt a little less stressful. We shared pictures on our facebook page and I loved the friendships that this quilt has created for me. I love the diverse colours and styles that each of us made. Thanks for the opportunity to be part of this and the history learnt from it.

Debra Costarella

Having always admired the original quilt, and been lucky enough to attend a lecture in Canberra on its humble beginnings, I loved the idea of joining the group to make this scaled down version. I decided to bring mine into the 2000's.

Robynne Vallence

Although I've been quilting for 35 years or so, I was having some time off a couple of years ago when Glenda showed me the pattern for the Rajah Quilt. As it happens I had seen the original years ago when it was brought to Western Australia. Also, at that time I had been in Hobart and visited the Women's Prison, and seen the photo of the quilt top. So it all seemed to tie together and it was obvious to me that I needed to make this quilt. As I had reduced my fabric stash considerably I prevailed upon my friends Kay Dowling, Glenda Olesen & Pippa Savell for the fabrics, plus a few of my own. I absolutely loved making the Rajah Quilt, machine pieced & hand applique, plus machine & hand quilting. It also brought back to me that my father's family came to Perth in 1842 and lived at Rottnest as the Pilot for the whale boats.

Val Gorey

As regards to a little story about my quilt. I have always loved the look of it and the history behind it and how the convicts on the ship coming to Australia made it by hand. Amazing really. It really makes me appreciate what all the great conveniences we have today to make our own quilts. Unfortunately, I have been unable to see the real quilt only in photos and as it is not on show anymore because it is too delicate I probably won’t get the opportunity. Not to worry. I really enjoyed making the quilt despite a few mistakes in mine but I am glad I have done it and hope to hang it up on the wall at home for my family and friends to see what I have achieved.

Sandra Jorgensen
I enjoyed stretching out my abilities to make my Rajah flimsy [quilt top]. Piecing small blocks to obtain correct border lengths was a challenge. Note to self, always sew on the same machine. The centre is embroidered and painted to give it a life. I followed a blue colour suite, maintaining gold as a feature. It was a challenge with so many smaller pieces. The project was placed in the “corner” on more than one occasion. I’m glad she is finished and I admire the prowess and strength of the original makers.

Julie Cruden

I went to Canberra some years ago and was lucky enough to see the Original Rajah Quilt on display and I said to my daughter ‘one day I am going to make that quilt’. A very bold statement because I had only just started my journey of patchwork quilting. The quilt and the story of how it came into being interested us both. I then came across the book ‘My name is Lizzie Flynn’, it is a children’s book about a young girl who was sent to Tasmania on the Rajah Ship, I purchased this book for my oldest granddaughter’s birthday, she loved the story and read it several times. Again, I said I am going to make that quilt one day, I did not have a clue how I was going to do it.

At the end of 2017 Glenda Olsen WAQA sent out an email to say they were going to run a group making the Rajah Quilt did I want to join. I jumped straight on email replying a “YES FROM ME” I was so excited that I bought the pattern on line PDF form and downloaded it so I could get my fabric sorted. The next thing I did was contact a couple of friends who also like this kind of history quilt making and roped them into the group as well. We had a great time sharing the drive to the group and stitching along side other ladies doing the same project. It is so much more enjoyable doing a project together with like minded ladies. We shared ideas and gave encouragement and listened to each other’s journey. Towards the end we cheered each other on encouraging one another to finish the quilt.

I followed Lessa Siegele (who created the Rajah revisited pattern) in that I only used fabric that looked old fashioned and the fabric would come from my stash, I bought just one new fabric for this quilt because I did not have any flower fabrics for the centre piece. I am not super keen on a scrapy look so I choose to do some of the borders in only two fabrics and to repeat some of the fabrics throughout the quilt. The process for me was to sew each border then place on my design wall to evaluate the colours and fabrics. I did make some blocks that I later discarded, this is where your friends come to your aid and give their opinions and advice. I choose to blanket stitch the cross’s because my needle turn is not very good and I quilted the quilt using cotton batting on my Q’Nique long arm

I was delighted when my granddaughter visited me while I was half way through making the quilt and it was hanging on my design wall she exclaimed that’s the Rajah quilt. She was very taken with the whole process and explained about the voyage on the ship to her younger sisters.

Making a quilt is a wonderful way to capture and remember our history and to celebrate that society has come a long way from transporting young people for stealing food so they can survive.

Edwina Wootin

When I first heard about this project I was very intrigued both by the quilt which looked very difficult (I have been quilting since 2012, mostly on my own) and by the history of it.

I have 3 convict ancestors, two of whom were women. Who knows, one of them may have put some stitches into the original. I felt the pull and compulsion to add my slant to such an important part of our Australian history. As I joined the evening group I felt privileged to be part of the group. I could imagine the ladies in 1841 helping each other in the same way, giving advice and encouragement.
As the project moved forward I was literally amazed at the skill and creativity that surrounded me. This was not just a process of learning and completion, but an experience of sisterhood and kinship, which I thoroughly enjoyed.

Wendy Stacey

I have really enjoyed making my Rajah Revisited Quilt. There were some techniques that I hadn’t done beforehand as each border was made I became obsessed with getting on with the next one. Fun and very satisfying.

Avril Mullins

When I started the Rajah journey it was to be part of a group with a common goal but as I continued my quilt it brought back memories of my immigration to a foreign country, with its hardships and loneliness and I kept thinking how those women would have felt being on those ships for months and months and their amazing ability to turn the hours and hardships into doing what they did. I needed to finish the quilt and on many occasions wanted to throw in the towel, but I continued for my self-satisfaction and to truly understand what they went through.

Leanne Lazarus