

Tapestry presented to City of Launceston

It was all over at precisely 11.05 am on a pleasantly sunny Thursday, October 26, 1989, a day which had a light festive air for Northern Branch members. At that moment a short ceremony ended and the tapestry the branch had created to mark Australia's Bicentennial Year became the property of the City of Launceston.

The Deputy Mayor, Ald. Beams, accepted it on behalf of the people of Launceston and for permanent display in the Town Hall. In presenting the tapestry to the city, the Northern Branch's president, Carlene Dickson, said that the branch had undertaken to begin during the bicentennial year to spin and dye the yarn for the hanging

Mr Terry Woodward, formerly lecturer in child art education at the TSIT's Department of Teacher Education, had been asked to create a design which had originality and did not include sailing ships, convicts and other reminders so often associated with the nation's first 200 years. The result was a stunning sketch depicting the sandstone carvings at Mt Cameron West, near Marawah, and embodying the browns and blues of the Australian bush and the vibrant yellows and oranges of the continents centre. And, equally important, it paid tribute to Tasmania's original inhabitants.

To create this robust 3.2m x 1.2m tapestry, Carlene said, branch members began the long task of spinning fleece from various breeds of Tasmanian sheep (some of it coloured), dyeing the yarn, warping up three upright looms and, finally, weaving the seven panels of the design. The result was a hanging in a modern 3D format, rather than a traditional smooth-faced, finely detailed tapestry.

Twenty four branch members spun six fleeces, weighing about 18kg. The fleece used for the three front panels was Romney Marsh, which gave 'life' or sheen, to the rock carvings in black on a background of yellows, oranges and white.

While some spun and others dyed, yet other members spent many hours weaving the panels in what was essentially the Gobelin tapestry technique. The weaving sessions took place at the branch's Windmill Hill Memorial Hall meeting place or at members' houses. Full-sized painted cartoons were made of each panel, and from these the weavers interpreted faithfully the seven panels in the sketch. The four back panels had deep slits at the top and bottom to avoid monotony, while the front ones were shaped irregularly to represent the rocks on which the carvings appear along a beach of Tasmania's far North-West Coast. Sometimes up to four strands of different but toning yarn had been used in the weft to give a lively, or 'readable' appearance, Carlene said.

At the rather special handing-over ceremony for the Northern Branch it was most pleasing to welcome four guild members from Hobart, who later were among 20 seated in the relaxed atmosphere of a local watering hole for a congenial celebratory lunch. Four members of Launceston's bicentennial authority executive and an equal number of city council members, in addition to Mr Woodward, the artist, also attended the ceremony.

As in all such enterprises, many members were involved in creating this impressive tapestry – a few over many anxious, brain-teasing moons and others over not so many moons. But all contributed to the creation of a tapestry which the Launceston City Council, from the mayor downwards, is delighted to display conspicuously as commemorating a milestone in Australia's history.