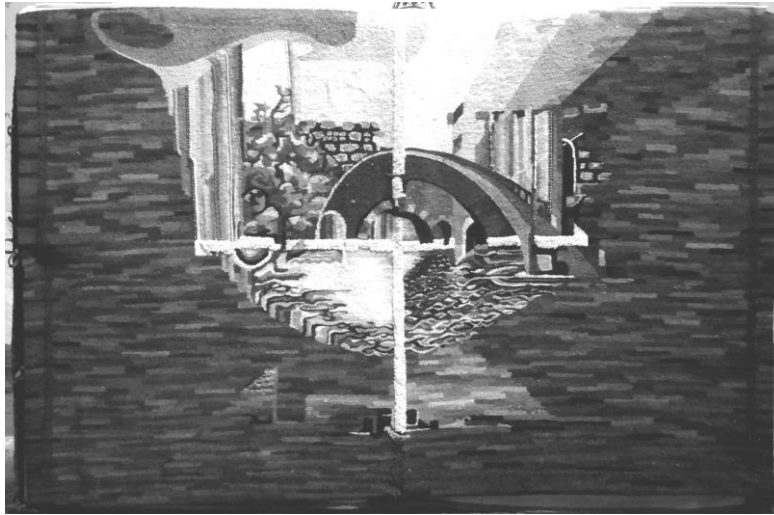


# TAPESTRY FRONTAL AND LINEN CLOTH FOR THE CHURCH OF ST SWITHUN-UPON-KINGSGATE, WINCHESTER

made by the Hampshire Guild of Spinners,  
Weavers and Dyers, 1990 - 1992



## The Tapestry

The coverings are made in traditional woven tapestry: cotton cord is wound vertically on to a frame loom to make the warp. Each coloured weft is then “darned” into the warp, backwards and forwards within its own patch, and beaten down, so that the warp is entirely covered and only shows as vertical ribs. The coloured yarns are integral to the structure of the fabric, not applied to the surface with a needle, as in embroidery. The weaving was done on four looms, set up in members’ homes in Hindhead, Romsey, Southampton and Winchester.

The weft yarns were spun and dyed by Guild members. The wool (white and brown) came from local sheep and from the Wool Marketing Board; the silk and ramie are imported from the Far East. Ramie is a fibre which comes from the stem of a Chinese nettle; it is much whiter than wool, and we used it for the raised cross. We used modern acid dyes which will not fade or wash out.

The braids were designed and woven by one member, using a Japanese technique called “kumi-himo”, from a variety of machine-spun silks and man-made fibres.

## The Linen Cloth

A linen cloth is traditionally used on the Communion Table. This is partly because of its beauty - it is lustrous and elegant and cool to touch, and becomes whiter with age and washing; it symbolises purity. But the use of linen was also practical: cotton was of course unknown in medieval England, and the heavy damasks and embroideries of traditional altar-frontals, in silk and wool and goldwork, were not easily washed. This cloth was designed and woven by one member, using commercially spun yarn.

## The Design – the brief

The only specific request from the Rector was for a central Cross. But the simplicity of the church building made other demands. Its colours are neutral - cream and clear browns, and it was felt that the frontal needed to have a positive, rich colour, to give the church a focal point. The detail should refer to St Swithun.

## The Design - the details

**THE CROSS** dominates the tapestry because of its tenure and colour and because many other design lines meet at its centre - the spiral of the bridge and the water shadows under it, for instance, and the rays of light. The empty Cross is the centre of the Christian faith.

**THE BRIDGE:** Swithun, Bishop of Winchester, built Winchester's first stone bridge over the Itchen, where the 19th Century City Bridge now stands. Swithun was educated in Winchester, and became a monk and then a priest in the city and, eventually, King Aethelwulf's chaplain, friend, and adviser. In 852 he was made Bishop of Winchester, one of the chief ministers of the Saxon kingdom of Wessex. While the Bishop of Sherborne led the army, it seems that administration was carried out competently by Swithun. Aethelwulf was not a strong king, and his eldest son rebelled but it was almost certainly Swithun who made peace and organised the wise political compromise which kept the kingdom whole. Metaphorically too, he was a bridge builder.

It is thought that Swithun died about 862. Three of Aethelwulf's sons were kings after him. The youngest was Alfred the Great, who became king in 871. Swithun accompanied Alfred to Rome when he was a child.

St Swithun's church is built over the arch of a city gate; medieval chapels were often built on gates and bridges, thus claiming God's blessing for travellers, pilgrims and homecomers. Kingsgate can be seen on the tapestry, on the right-hand pier of the bridge.

**THE CUP:** The spiral of the bridge and its reflection make a cup shape. At the Communion Table, Christians celebrate Jesus' death and resurrection by sharing bread and a cup of wine. In this design, however, it contains water. Flowing water is used as a metaphor for healing, refreshment, cleansing and forgiveness, and God's Spirit moving among his people.

Swithun was made a saint a hundred years after his death, by popular demand, after a number of healing miracles.

**THE RAIN:** The saying is well-known:  
St Swithun's day, if then dost rain,  
For forty days it will remain,  
St Swithun's day, if then be fair,  
For forty days 'twill rain no more.

In 971 St Swithun's body was moved from the churchyard to a shrine within the Old Cathedral, and during the ceremony there was a great storm. The saying grew from an eyewitness report of the event.

**THE APPLE TREE:** When it rains on St Swithun's day the saint is said to be christening his apples (how do apples manage when it doesn't?). This may be something to do with the many orchards that the monks planted in this part of England, although the written references to the saying are recent. The apple tree reminds us of God's provision, of growth and harvest.

**THE WALLS AND ARCHES:** Swithun was involved in the building of new churches. The Saxons were pagan when they settled in England in the 6th Century, and Wessex was only partly Christian in Swithun's time. He also encouraged literature and literacy - the foundations of learning.

**THE LEFT SIDE TAPESTRY:** Within the arch, which echoes an arch from the main design, is a coin. It is the reverse side of a penny from Swithun's Wessex, which was minted in Rochester between 839 and 843 AD. It is one of about 150 coins found in the excavation of the Saxon town of Hamwic, at Six Dials in Southampton. At its centre is a cross and around it is the name of the mint. On the face side is the name and portrait of King Aethelwulf. Swithun ran the economy of the kingdom of Wessex, as well as his church.

**THE RIGHT SIDE TAPESTRY:** This is a Saxon design, specifically from a carving on a stone cross at Hexham, although it was a popular idea which appeared quite frequently. In the original design, the centre of the swirls contain bunches of grapes symbolising Jesus the True Vine; instead, in our tapestry are the flowers and fruits of St Swithun's apple tree. There is an old song which likens Christ to the apple tree:

The tree of life my soul hath seen,  
laden with fruit and always green;  
... under the shadow I will be  
of Jesus Christ the apple tree.

A great debt of gratitude is due from all who see, appreciate and meditate before this beautiful work of art with its intricacy and Christian symbolism, to the 50 or more people who undertook to spin, dye and weave the frontal, and to other members of the Hampshire Guild of Spinners, Weavers and Dyers who donated money, bought fleeces and dyes, and fund-raised generously.

Ro Bailey, Feb 1993

Edited by Chris Pilgrim, July 2015