



## THE HORSE'S QUILT BY CARMEN WALTON

I believe old quilts have the potential to educate children in all areas of a modern syllabus in an inspiring, entertaining fashion. Everything from maths to manufacturing processes, and social history to graphic design is contained in quilts that warmed chilly beds and defrosted freezing knees. Such exceptional examples of practical domestic objects often found themselves, like suits bought for weddings, demoted from best to second best and finally hanging on a peg in the shed for gardening. In the case of quilts, some became stuffing for new quilts or wraps for animals in winter or the birthing season.

It was these impressions, whilst viewing quilts and considering their history, that inspired me to design 'The Horse's Quilt', a 152cm x 484cm (68" x 194") creation of twenty blocks, each containing a story. My initial idea was to make thirty-two blocks but I adjusted to a more realistic figure or I'd be sewing still. As it was I enlisted help from friends and members of The Quilters' Guild to help me with five blocks.

I've written plays for radio and stage and stories and articles for adults, but had less experience of writing for children. When I started The Horse's Quilt I wanted it to be for children so I searched for historical stories they'd enjoy and characters they'd engage with. All the stories contained in the quilt are presented in script form to be played by two actors. In total there are forty-one characters in the production and therefore a lot of doubling up and remembering what accent to use. Two children, essentially narrators, take the story from the moment of finding a vivid quilt that's been used by a farmer to keep his horse warm, into the worlds of Victorian characters. All the stories are based on real historical events. Some of the characters are real, such as Queen Victoria, but the majority had to be fictional to give me creative license.

I attend a playwriting group at Oldham Coliseum Theatre and members of the Education Team there helped me pull this project together with advice and script development. They also granted me professional studio space for rehearsals, which prevented me from having to cram this larger than life performance into the garage or dining room. I had wanted to create a quilt that told stories from all over the world and for all ages but was advised that if it was designed to be shown in schools it needed to be specific and relate to key areas of the primary school syllabus. Luckily, most of the pieces I'd designed could relate to Victorian times. A few sad losses included a block made by a fictional WW1 soldier and a recycled block woven from laminate floor insulation and bubble wrap!

Months into the project the quilt wasn't finished but the important rehearsal date and space I had been given drew near, so I found actors to help me put the piece on its legs, as they say in the theatre, and see how it worked. The two actors I chose had

experience of working in schools with children, which was helpful. Rehearsals revealed that the scripts needed more opportunities for children to participate and interact, to maximise the learning potential offered by the performance.

While rehearsing I realised how tough the quilt needed to be. It was used extensively as a prop, becoming a ship travelling to Australia, the cloak of a fearsome judge and the bed of a Crimean War soldier. Anything lightweight wouldn't stand up to being used as a prop before being stuffed into a bag after the performance. I spent many late nights sewing in order to finish my masterpiece in time for the performance day. As a quilt top it had been light, but finished, it weighed 3kg. I reinforced it with double seams and a heavy cotton backing so that it could withstand an invasion, but was then concerned that the actors wouldn't be able to move it! Actors are incredibly resourceful beings and of course they did move it, in all manner of inventive ways.

Our first trial performance was in a school made up of Pakistani and Bangladeshi children who spoke English as a second language. They showed interest, asking questions about history as well as the idea of using a quilt to tell stories. The second school, in which most people spoke English, and some Polish children were learning it, every child, including reception children gathered to watch. They paid great attention to the stories, joining in where asked. The head was pleased with the level of pupil attention and teachers were enthused by the unusual approach taken to familiar topics.

The Horse's Quilt has benefited since from some rewriting of scripts and additions to the quilt to make it ready to tour schools as an entertaining educational resource.

### Excerpt from 'The Horse's Quilt. The Potato Famine in Ireland 1845-51

- Dessie** Mammy I'm hungry. I'm hungry, I'm hungry. Mammy have you anything for me? Tugs at her.
- Clodagh** Pushes him away.  
I had a good job before the potato's failed.  
A quality house at the bottom of Ludd hill, two widow woman sharing the place. Mornings I'd take groceries, clean, light fires. Afternoons I'd do washing and ironing, mending linen. Easy work, the only work I know how to do.
- Desmond** Mammy! Mammy. I want something to eat.
- Clodagh** Puts her face in her hands. Chew your knuckles a while longer. They gave me sugar sometimes and barley twists for the children.
- Desmond** A barley twist Mammy, humbugs, or cinder toffee. Mammy.
- Clodagh** Bless their kind souls, they gave me a slither of ham and a bite of lunch of a Wednesday after family from Cork had visited and gone and there was food over. Pies, bread and cheese, fancy cakes with cherries and sugar toppings.
- Desmond** Stop it Mammy. (to children) Were you ever so hungry you'd eat a stale loaf or tripe crawling with maggots. Were you?



The Horse's Quilt



Penny Black stamp



4 blocks: Victorian nursery rhymes; highland clearances – tartan; north east miners – strippy; b/w stripes - wadded with newspaper for warmth as per poor house in David Copperfield by Charles Dickens



Rehearsals



Scary Judge



Performances

Actors Claire Wilson and Tim Richey perform with the Horse's Quilt



Sailing to Australia, to America



The quilt needs to be tough



Right: Pupils with the quilt.  
L to R: Nicole Harrison, Jonathan and Jamie Walton and George Parkin.  
(with parental approval for photograph to be published)