

For Those In Need

Since she was a teenager Princess Alexandra has worked tirelessly for charities and for two decades Queen Mother's Clothing Guild has been very special to her. INGRID SEWARD reports on a day with the guild at St James's Palace ►



IT WAS ST JAMES'S PALACE as you have never seen it. Instead of the usual throng of luminaries and members of the royal family meeting and greeting people, the state rooms of the historic building were piled high with bags of clothing all carefully labelled and wrapped. It was an extraordinary sight: plastic carrier bags of children's clothing covered the floor in several rooms while the huge crystal chandeliers twinkled from the ceilings and some of the finest paintings in the Royal Collection adorned the walls.

It was spectacularly ornate and royal and at the same time completely down to earth as this was all in the name of charity – Queen Mother's Clothing Guild – for what is known as Packing Week. This is when items knitted and made by volunteers from all over the country come together to be sorted and packed.

They supply more than 40,000 items of new clothing and bed linen to the homeless and those starting a new life after unemployment or addiction. Each garment is 'handmade with love' by generous ladies who use their considerable stitching and knitting skills and their creativity to produce thousands of items, especially for children. Deliveries are made to more than 40 charities, hence the packing marathon.

Lady Wolverton established the London Needlework Guild in 1882 and it grew rapidly. In 1885 her friend Princess Mary, Adelaide Duchess of Teck became its patron and after her death in 1897 the royal patronage continued under her daughter, the Duchess of York, later Princess of Wales and Queen Mary.

In 1910 the charity was renamed Queen Mary's Needlework Guild and in 1914 it moved to a new base at St James's Palace, where it has been ever since.

At the outbreak of the First World War the guild was organised to supply troops with much-needed warm clothing and branches were established throughout the British Empire and beyond. Their invaluable services were also used for donating surgical items and continued through the Second World War and subsequent conflicts on a smaller scale.

Queen Mary while Duchess of York often helped the Duchess of Teck where mother and daughter would spend hours sorting through great piles of calico shirts and unbleached linen underwear. Every parcel had a specific destination and in most cases a note had to be written and sent to the head of the hospital or charitable institution for which it was intended.

At the time of the Durbar in India in 1911, King George V and Queen Mary spent Christmas in Rajputana. In order to entertain their celebrated guests a tiger hunt was arranged. Seemingly oblivious to her unusual surroundings, Her Majesty sat in an elaborate tree hut and occupied herself with her knitting. After some time, there was a loud cry from the Queen Empress and everyone looked up to see her pointing at the undergrowth with one of her needles and shouting at the lord chamberlain, 'Look, Lord Shaftesbury, a tiger!'

Queen Mary was active in the guild and nothing was too much trouble for her – or so it seemed. She would personally preside over Packing Week, sitting at a big table, entering the numbers of the many garments received.

A cold luncheon of meats and a fruit flan was brought from Buckingham Palace and set out by footmen on trestle tables so everyone could eat in comfort.



LEFT: In a London hotel, ladies working for Queen Mary's Needlework Guild make clothes for front-line soldiers following the outbreak of war in August 1914

BELOW LEFT: In 1910, the year of King George V's accession, Queen Mary renamed the charity of which she had been patron for 13 years

BELOW: The Duchess of Teck, patron of the London Needlework Guild for 12 years



Queen Mary remained with the guild for the rest of her life. On 23 March 1952, shortly after the premature death of her son King George VI, she invited the presidents of the guilds' group to Marlborough House for the annual general meeting. The grieving queen was not present, understandably, and sadly she died the following year.

It was then that Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother took over as patron of what would become one of her favourite charities, so much so that members of the guild took part in Her Majesty's 90th birthday pageant on Horse Guards Parade. The ladies of the guild were looked after by a sergeant-major from one of the Scottish regiments who showed them how to march in line. The then Lord Lieutenant of Banffshire, Clare Russell, who is the Lady Laird of Ballindalloch Castle on Speyside, had to carry the QMCG flag, which, she recalled, 'was not an easy thing to do'.

'I shall always remember,' she said, 'the sergeant-major shouting directions at me, but he had no idea what to call me, so the order came out as "General, Sir, Lord Lieutenant, Madam – hold your flag straight!"'

The Queen Mother visited Ballindalloch Castle when the Scottish knitters had their View Day there. Her last visit was when she was 101 years old and the doughty old lady decided she would have lunch at the castle, as she always did. She insisted on climbing the stairs that led to the dining room.

A few days before her visit, Clare recalls, 'Her lady-in-waiting telephoned to ask whether we could have a nice young man positioned by Her Majesty's side as she ascended and descended the stairs, as she was apt to wobble to the left, but Her Majesty was not to know of the arrangement. Our son Guy was eventually persuaded to take on the duty and despite our fear and trepidation all went well and without incident. Guy received a lovely thank-you letter from Her Majesty but I think she must have been aware of our little plot!'

Queen Elizabeth came to every View Day at St James's Palace and with her customary enthusiasm greeted visitors and looked at the stalls piled high with exquisitely made items. When the time came to leave, her corgis appeared through a connecting door from Clarence House with a lot of barking. ▶



ABOVE: Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother, for almost 50 years the irrepressible patron of the charity that now bears her name

OPPOSITE, FROM TOP: Linda Thompson, Chief Executive Officer of Queen Mother's Clothing Guild in 2021, introduces artist Ann Carrington to the princess

Vice Executive Chair Victoria Spendlove shows Her Royal Highness the beautiful knitted blankets that had been donated

'Sadly I have to go now as the dogs obviously need their supper,' she would always say as she made a gracious exit.

When Jane Fitzgerald, a former chairman and now a trustee of the guild, accompanied the Queen Mother to an annual general meeting at St James's Palace, she too encountered a stair problem. Queen Elizabeth had to go along corridors and then up a steep set of stairs.

Jane recalled: 'The Queen Mother turned to all of us behind her and said, "I have not been up a set of stairs since my operation [she had recently had a hip replaced], so I am not sure that I will make it."

'She set off with typical determination, refusing help, and finally got to the top. It must have hurt but she just smiled and said, "I made it!"'

When Jane's grandmother-in-law Violet Fitzgerald once stayed with the Queen Mother at Clarence House, Jane arrived to find her and Queen Elizabeth hopping up and down the corridor to see who was the fastest.

'The equerries were trying to catch vases and other priceless things to prevent them from falling on the floor as the two old ladies hopped up and down,' Jane remembered.

'The Queen Mother was much the best as my grandmother could not hop properly as she had very bad feet. They were both laughing so much it was a simply wonderful moment to see. The Queen Mother was one of the most extraordinary people I have ever met, so very funny and with such a dry sense of humour.

'She was a wonderful friend to my grandmother and it was a privilege to share these moments and memories.'

In 2003, a year after Queen Elizabeth's death at the age of 101, Princess Alexandra, the Hon Lady Ogilvy agreed to take over as patron of the guild – supposedly as an interim measure. However, when she discovered it

complemented the work she was doing with several of her other charities the princess agreed to make the arrangement permanent.

Her Royal Highness has now been royal patron for 20 years. She takes a great interest in what is going on and has attended many of the packing sessions and open days.

Always amusing and with an interesting story to tell, Princess Alexandra has regaled some of the ladies with memories of how her grandmother Queen Mary taught her to do tapestry – and to smoke!

Princess Alexandra was unable to attend last October's Packing Week due to health problems but instead sent a wonderful letter of support to the volunteers.

'QMCG is a practical charity,' the princess wrote. 'This year we are supporting some new charities. One example is a charity that works with women after coming out of prison and adjusting to civilian life, offering them a safe home and helping them find employment.

'QMCG has recently been focusing on women's refuges. These charities offer a safe place for women to stay and look after their children whilst rebuilding their lives.

'Bravely facing a new start, a new job and a new school, one client said, "being given a new dressing gown is like putting on a hug".'

As the guild's founder Georgiana, Lady Wolverton once said, 'Old garments pauperise, new garments equalise.'

Additional reporting from *Musings and Memories Knitted Together Across the Years*. For information about Queen Mother's Clothing Guild: www.qmcg.org.uk

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