# ON SAMPLERS.

By H. A. LEDIARD, M.D., F.R.C.S. Eng.

To give an account of the child's sampler is not a difficult task, because up and down the country there may still be seen in farm-houses and in cottages many examples of this kind of work, framed and hanging on the walls of the kitchens or parlours.

There is a great likeness in all these children's samplers, but great variety in design is evident. That all so-called samplers were the work of children is difficult to understand, and the collector soon finds that there are obvious samplers of a much older period, the work of which is very superior to that seen in any child's sampler.

The design of these older samplers is more definite, and the work is more elaborate, so that the question naturally arises why this fine work came to be called a sampler at all.

The answer is not far away, and in this short paper I shall attempt to sketch the connection which undoubtedly exists between the child's sampler and the samplers of the seventeenth century.

To give a history of the origin of the sampler is almost an impossibility, for not only is there no literature dealing with the subject from which the needful information can be gathered, but the effort to rescue this kind of work from destruction is of very recent origin.

In attempting then to build up the story concealed in the variety of old samplers extant, we are forced to use some conjecture, a proceeding which adds not a little to the interest of the study. There is no mystery, so far as I can see, in the matter, and if we cannot mark the date of origin, we can at least mark the date of the decline of the custom, for a custom it was in years gone by to work samplers.

At the outset it can be assumed as correct that the

oldest sampler was the best, and that the youngest sampler was nearly the worst. This decline may be well described as a sort of degeneration from a type. The beauty of the early sampler gradually merged into the ugliness of the nineteenth century school production. The interest of the subject is enhanced when it is found that the custom of working samplers was not confined to England, and probably did not originate in this country, for samplers are to be seen coming from Germany, France, Spain, Portugal and Holland, as well as other European countries.

In all probability the first sampler was introduced into England from a religious establishment on the Continent at a time when needlework was the chief pastime of the nobility. As to the date this is not capable of proof, but the sampler was probably known in England long before the sixteenth century, for Milton and Shakespeare both allude to samplers, the former in "Comus" and the latter in "Midsummer Night's Dream," and Herrick in the "Wounded Heart" has it:

> "Come bring your sampler and with art
> Draw in't a wounded heart."

In the sixteenth century various kinds of needlework were practised by English ladies, as may be gathered from some of the poems of the laureate Skelton.

> With that the tappettis and carpettis were layd,
> Whereon theis ladys softly myght rest,
> The saumpler to sow on, the lacis to enbraid;
> To weve in the stoule sume were full preste,
> With slaiis, with tauellis, with hedellis well drest.[1]

John Skelton was Poet Laureate, born 1460, died 1529.

Many other poetic allusions to samplers may also be found, but that by Skelton is the oldest I have met with.

The working, therefore, of a sampler was a common occupation among the well-to-do three or four hundred years ago.

The oldest sampler in the S. K. Museum is dated 1666, but I expect that older dated examples may yet be found

The material upon which the sampler was worked did

[1] "Garlande of Laurell." ll. 787-91. Ed. Dyce, 1843.

not vary much, as the old samplers were done on either linen or canvas.

The school sampler was, so far as I know, always worked on canvas, some fine and some coarse.

In a recently published work on Point and Pillow Lace by A. M. S. (John Murray) 1899, the authoress makes brief reference to samplers under a chapter dealing with English and Irish lace.

"Linen cut work," she states, "was made in England very extensively during the sixteenth century, and besides articles for use domestic or otherwise a considerable number of samplers have come down to us. They were worked at schools or kept as collections of patterns of embroidery by industrious housewives."

Under the heading of Buckinghamshire and Bedfordshire Lace in the same book, it is stated that "a tradition exists that Catherine of Aragon taught the Bedfordshire women cut work or reticella made out of linen, an art which we know to have been practised in Italy and Spain at the time, and which the early evidence of old English samplers proves to have been also made, though with less taste, in England."

The patterns and designs were worked with thread, silk, and wool, plain or in colours. Drawn work is done with thread, but some of the embroidery on linen is done with coloured silk; most of the fine canvas work is done with silk, but the modern child's sampler is sometimes done with wool. With coarse canvas and thick wool in brilliant colours, the sampler lost its interest and its popularity.

The early samplers were generally long and narrow, all done on linen; there was, however, a tendency to broaden out, and some samplers may be seen rather broader than they are long, and some were worked in squares.

The object for which the sampler was worked has clearly been changed, and this leads to the statement that sampler work was originally work done to fix and retain a pattern, considered of value, but that in recent times the sampler was done to exhibit the skill of a beginner. If these two objects are kept in mind some of the confusion surrounding the sampler may be cleared away.

The upper classes in old times worked at samplers from old sampler patterns as an occupation, but the child was set to work a sampler as a part of the educational scheme of the eighteenth century. In either case the knowledge gained proved to be a mastery of the art of needlework.

When the sampler was at its best, probably embroidery and needlework generally was the chief occupation of women of the upper classes. The modern eighteenth century sampler was worked either at home or at school; in either case there was the copy to take the pattern from, and school mistresses kept a stock of samplers, which were used by the scholars, who practised letters and patterns before they were transferred to the sampler. In this manner the sampler took a long time to finish—perhaps a year—and possibly much unpicking was done before the work was completed. A child worked at her sampler for perhaps half an hour a day, and perhaps not more than two letters were worked in the time. Great efforts were made to complete the sampler by a certain age, and the name and age of the child were worked as well as the date.

Much variation is found in the age at which the school sampler was finished; in my own collection of samplers the ages run from five to fourteen years. It is somewhat marvellous that a child of five, six, or seven could give sufficient care and skill to execute even a poorish bit of sampler work.

On some samplers the name of the school is worked, thus showing that the sampler formed a part of the school curriculum, and that the sampler when finished, framed, and hung up was retained as a sort of diploma. Not being an expert in the art of needlework I can only indicate generally the kind of stitches found on samplers. Some samplers show cross stitch throughout, others show short satin and cross stitch: tent, stem, and cushion stitches are also seen, as well as drawn work.

It is with regard to the subject of the sampler itself that the greatest variety is met with. On the oldest and best samplers will be found bands of various patterns throughout the work, with or without the alphabet in a subordinate position, and in these old samplers the

patterns run across the linen or canvas from edge to edge, so that the sampler seems to have been cut out of a larger piece of work.

This characteristic is not found to be lasting, for when the sampler became a sort of picture to be framed an elaborate border was invariably added to enclose the work.

I believe that the samplers without borders were those which were retained as real patterns of work from which others might copy. English and Spanish samplers worked in these numerous and successive broad or narrow bands of patterns show the best designs and the best work; they are more valuable for that reason. If the alphabet and numerals so frequently met with in the work of a modern sampler occupied only a subordinate position, in the oldest samplers extant a time came when more attention was paid to this kind of work, and in the seventeenth century alphabets and the names of the sampler workers may be found. The letters of the alphabet in capital and small type were made to share the bands of patterns of scroll or floral design in equal proportion, and the numerals, generally up to ten, also found a place.

The period of the beautifully worked bands of patterns was now over and the sampler began to degenerate. Perhaps the patterns were too intricate for the child into whose hands the sampler was now put, and to meet the case broken up and isolated bits of pattern were introduced, together with zoological and botanical specimens.

The sampler was now a thoroughly mixed affair, obeying no order except in certain particulars. "Busy fancy fondly lent her aid" in the execution of houses and cherubs, stags and frogs, birds and ships, windmills and gateposts, the Garden of Eden with our first parents, Solomon's Temple, or the House that Jack built; the animals clearly were copied from a child's Noah's ark, and to crown all, verses began to appear, some good, but many bad and indifferent.

It is not surprising then to find that the sampler worked on fine canvas and with silk thread is now a thing of the past. That the sampler should not always

remain a dead letter is the subject of an article in *The Studio*, written by Mr. Gleeson White in 1896, entitled "The sampler: an appreciation and a plea for its revival."

Mr. White holds that the sampler is of educational value, and that its revival might exercise a very important influence on the art of embroidery.

In spite of the destruction of the original type of the sampler pattern, it is possible to trace in the modern sampler the final extinction of these bands, for on many samplers will be found divisional lines going across the work to separate the letters of the alphabet, the picture scenes, or the verses.

These lines are often worked with different patterns, and as many as eight or nine different divisional lines may be counted on some samplers.

In the seventeenth century the Lord's Prayer and Ten Commandments are to be found worked on the sampler, alone or associated with alphabets, numerals, floral decoration and the like. The working of these small letters must have proved a hard task to the child who bent over the canvas; from the look of these samplers, the design was taken from the church in which the Lord's Prayer and Ten Commandments were formerly seen placed at the East-end.

A distinctly religious or moral tone came over the sampler, because the Psalms were sometimes chosen for working, and at others verses like Dr. Watts are often met with.

There was one use the sampler was put to but infrequently. I allude to the family register; in some samplers may be seen the names and ages of births and deaths of the members of a family.

Another variety of sampler is the needlework picture.

I do not suppose that these old needlework pictures were done by children, and in them no name, age, or date is given, but there can be no question of their dating from the seventeenth century.

That the alphabet came to occupy a commanding position on the sampler there can be no question, any more than there can be little doubt that the alphabet lost its influence and gave way to the working of objects

calculated to amuse and interest a child in the course of her work.

Where the alphabet has a place in the sampler I can quite readily believe that the letters when worked must have taught a child for ever after the way to mark household linen of all kinds, but I am not disposed to admit that the child was taught her letters at the same time. I suspect that the alphabet and writing were taught in the usual manner, and that Mr. Tuer's suggestion as to the association of the sampler and the hornbook is not entirely well founded.

The sampler, according to Mr. Tuer, taught letters and stitches at one stroke. "It served in fact the purpose of a hornbook to many generations of little girls."

If this view is correct it certainly cannot apply to samplers on which no letters are found, nor to those on which texts, verses, pictures, and maps are alone seen. Of the eleven illustrations in Mr. Tuer's Hornbook only five of the samplers show an alphabet, and two of the illustrations show needlework pictures.

I stated at the opening of my paper that there was no literature from which anyone could build up the history of the sampler, but several papers have been contributed on the subject, to which reference must be made.

Mr. Tuer's Hornbook contains a long reference and some well chosen illustrations.

Mr. Gleeson White, in a paper in *The Studio* for 1896, has contributed a very useful and interesting article, by far the best I have seen, on samplers; illustrations are also copiously given.

In the *Reliquary*, 1898, and in the *Architectural Review* (February, 1900), much information in two papers has been given by Miss Peacock.

In the *Lady's Realm* for August, 1897, is a short note on samplers by Mrs. Wilson Noble.

The whole subject is now ready to be dealt with in a monograph, and I have little doubt that someone of sufficient leisure and interest in the subject will be found to write it.

[1] Winter number, p. 58.