



Clare Clensy, from Vine Embroidery

When the sad moment comes, and the Queen shuffles off her mortal coil, the nation will undoubtedly go into a period of mourning.

But embroiderer Clare Clensy may find herself rushing for a train to London.

From the moment Her Majesty has been laid to rest, the wheels of state will be set into motion as preparations get under way for the first coronation in more than half a century.

As one of the tiny community of graduates of the Royal School of Needlework, it is likely that the 31-year-old from Bradford on Avon could be called upon to work on the new king's coronation robes.

The great robes – which are individually designed for each new monarch – were one of the many formal projects studied by Clare during her three years as an apprentice hand embroiderer at Hampton Court Palace.

"It is one of the things we concentrated on during my time at the palace," Clare says. "We even had to produce replica sections of design from the Queen's own robes as part of our coursework. These were worked on velvet



using 18 different types of gold thread.

"The gold for the project was supplied by the Worshipful Company of Gold and Silver Wyre Drawers, which is the historic livery company that has been practising in London since the 15th century.

"With just five or six apprentices taken on by the Royal School at a time, the tradition is that graduates of the apprenticeship may be called upon to work on the new coronation robes when the time comes.

"It will be quite a responsibility," she adds.

Thankfully, the Queen has remained in fine fettle throughout the last 10 years, since Clare graduated from the palace-based apprenticeship – which has its roots in Victorian society.

After graduating, Clare returned home to her native Bradford on Avon and set up her own company, Vine Embroidery, later finding a workshop at Marsh Farm near Hilperton, in Wiltshire.

Today her workshop is filled with the colourful and elaborate hand-stitched samples that have kept her busy over the last 10 years.

To celebrate a decade of stitching since leaving the palace, Clare is currently preparing an exhibition of her work. It will be held in the upstairs space at Bradford on Avon library through September.

"When I first came home, after my three years at Hampton Court, I put on an exhibition at Bradford on Avon library of all the work I'd done during my time at the palace," she says.

"So I thought it would be nice to mark the

It's not a stitch up

Tim Davey meets Wiltshire embroiderer Clare Clensy, and discovers how this ancient craft is enjoying a real resurgence



decade that has passed since with another exhibition at the same venue."

It may sound more like the occupation of a Victorian lady, but being an embroiderer can be a busy existence, as Clare explains as she shows me around some of her work.

"There are lots of different elements to the job," she says. "I do private commissions, teach regular classes each week, I design and stitch a lot of hand embroidery projects for embroidery magazines, work with local couturiers stitching details on wedding dresses, and also do a lot of antique restoration and clerical embroidery – I've designed and stitched many stoles for vicars over the years."

Three years ago, Clare produced a book for Search Press – *A Beginner's Guide To Silk Shading* – which was published under Clare's maiden name, Hanham.

"Traditional hand embroidery continues to become more and more popular all the time," Clare says. "I run regular Saturday workshops as well as my weekly classes, and the places get snapped up within hours of putting the details on my website.

"I think people are keen to go back to learning these traditional skills. There are so many different techniques to learn – things like goldwork, silk shading, stumpwork, white work, crewelwork and black work – enough to

keep even the keenest embroiderer busy for a lifetime. I also produce my own range of hand embroidery kits, which include the design, the step-by-step instructions and all the threads and materials needed to stitch the designs yourself.

"In the evenings, I give a lot of talks to local groups about my time at the Royal School. People are always interested to hear about what life was like in the Palace," Clare adds.

"It was a very Victorian existence. We apprentices spent most of our time in a sewing room high up on the third floor, and some of our tutors were very strict. For example, we weren't allowed to play music while we sewed,

and were supposed to remain silent all day. We weren't even allowed to cross our legs while we worked, as it was bad for our posture.

"In fact, the Royal School of Needlework no longer takes old-style apprentices. They recently updated their system, making it more like a 21st-century university degree course. So in a way, we were lucky to have experienced a way of life that hadn't changed in more than a century."

Clare Clensy's exhibition *10 Years On*, runs at Bradford on Avon library from September 3-16, except Sundays. Admission free. For more information about Clare's work, visit her website at www.vine-embroidery.co.uk.