

## Queen Mary's Carpet

Over 12 hours, from 10:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m., on Wednesday, January 17, 1951, 2,200 curious visitors shuffled through Perth Town Hall taking advantage of an opportunity to view what the *Perth Courier* called “*the Queen Mother’s needlepoint masterpiece*”.

Although actually a tapestry, the embroidery was variously known as Queen Mary’s ‘quilt’, or ‘carpet’, or ‘dollar rug’. The exhibit was staged under auspices of the Perth-Upon-Tay chapter of the Imperial Order of the Daughters of the Empire (IODE). The admission fee of “*25¢ adults, children 10¢, pupils accompanied by teacher free*”<sup>1</sup> went toward recovering the \$100,000 paid by the IODE to purchase the royal “*needlepoint masterpiece*”.

Queen Mary (Victoria Mary Augusta Louise Olga Pauline Claudine Agnes of Teck) was born at London in 1867, the daughter of Francis Duke of Teck (1837-1900) and Princess Mary Adelaide of Cambridge (1837-1897). As the wife of King George V (1865-1936), she had been Queen of the United Kingdom and British Dominions and Empress of India from 1910 to 1936. She was the mother of two British Kings; King Edward VIII (1894-1972), who reigned from January 1936 until his abdication that December, and King George VI (1895-1952) who occupied the throne from 1936 until his death in 1952. As such, Mary was also the grandmother of Queen Elizabeth II (1926-2022) and great grandmother of King Charles III (b.1948).



*Queen Mary (1867-1954)*

Shortly after the outbreak of World War Two, Queen Mary moved from London to Gloucestershire in western England where she lived at Badminton House, the home of relatives, and stitched the war away. Over nine years between 1941 and 1950 she embroidered 12 separate fire screens<sup>2</sup> panels measuring 68.7 X 58.4 cm (27” X 23” inches). Stitched in ‘gros point’ (large petit point) wool on canvas, the panels were then sewn together to produce a carpet or rug measuring 304.5 cm X 195.0 cm (119.9 X 76.8 inches or 10’ X 6’4”). The royal signature ‘Mary R’ and the date 1944 appear on one of the corner carpet panels.

*Each panel is a perfect picture, each an individual arrangement of flowers and birds in the traditional 18th century English design. The colour is of lovely pastel shades of pink, blue, green and mauve, with every now and then a splash of vivid white or yellow.”*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Perth Courier*, January 11, 1951.

<sup>2</sup> Before the days of central heating, English houses were often warmed by coal burning fireplaces. When not in use during the morning hours, or warmer weather, the fireplaces were not a pretty sight. An ornamental piece was placed in front of the empty fireplace and the lady of the house made sure that it enhanced her living room.

<sup>3</sup> *Montreal Gazette*, November 28, 1950

*Embroidered in varying but harmonious Victorian-style flower patterns, against a solid beige background, rich shades of rose and green and blue predominate.<sup>4</sup>*

It was estimated that completion of the carpet demanded more than 1,000,000 stitches and that the Queen worked on it for up to six or seven hours per day. According to a British Information Service Press Release,

*Although many British Queens have been skilled at needlework the 'dollar' rug worked by Queen Mary is probably the largest in size to be completed by one pair of royal hands.*



*Queen Mary's Dollar Rug*

While Queen Mary embroidered, World War Two devastated Britain's economy, forcing heavy borrowing for the war effort and subsequent rebuilding, but with industrial production still tooled to meet wartime needs there were few export sales to cover the costs. In 1950 Britain owed more than £21 billion, roughly 270% of its GDP. This included massive debts owing to the United States and Canada denominated in dollars; \$3.75 billion in reconstruction loans and \$586 million in Lend-Lease loans taken from the US in 1945, and a \$1.19 billion reconstruction loan taken from Canada in 1946.

It had been the Queen Mother's original intention that the carpet would be hung among the Royal Family heirlooms at Windsor Castle, but to help pay off this debt and fund desperately needed imports, 82-year-old Queen Mary donated her embroidery to be auctioned, with the stipulations that it be sold for dollars and that it eventually become the property of a public institution.

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<sup>4</sup> *New York Times*, March 23, 1950.

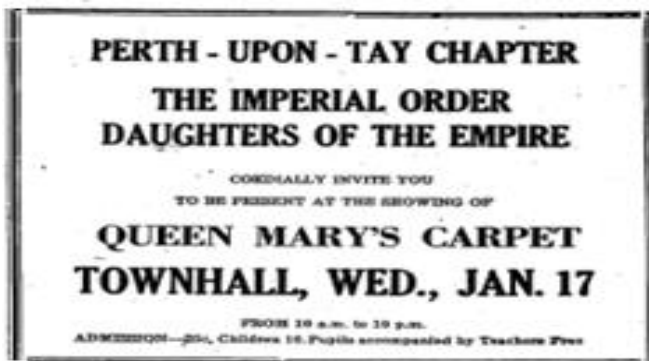
In the spring of 1950, the carpet arrived in New York<sup>5</sup>, appropriately enough aboard the British liner *Queen Mary*, packed in “a solid oak chest with a velvet lining and brass legs”.<sup>6</sup> It was the centerpiece of a reception at the Manhattan headquarters of the English-Speaking Union attended by former U.S. First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt (1884-1962), and Sir Alexander Fleming (1881-1955). The Queen’s handiwork was then exhibited at the New York Metropolitan Museum and taken on a tour of 16 American cities<sup>7</sup> before being flown to Toronto, first stop on a tour of six<sup>8</sup> Canadian cities.

Prospective purchasers of the rug were requested to send their bids to the Governor of the Bank of England, marking the envelope ‘Queen Mary’s Rug’. Only seven serious bids were received, four from the U.S. and three from Canada. The highest bidder was Canada’s Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire (IODE), offering 100,000 Canadian dollars [£32,500] for the carpet.

For the IODE, purchase of the carpet was an act of fealty to the Empire. Founded in 1900, with the motto "One Flag, One Throne, One Empire", in the jingoistic language of the day, the organization had been created as a vehicle for women to “*place themselves in the front rank of colonial patriotism*” with the objectives of

*... promoting in the Motherland and the Colonies the study of the History of the Empire [and to] stimulate and give expression to the sentiment of patriotism which binds the women and children of the Empire around the Throne.*<sup>9</sup>

Still active today, shorn of its imperialist objectives, the IODE supports community service, education, and citizenship programs; provides nutritious snacks to school children, supports hospitals, shelters, crisis centers and seniors' care facilities; provides scholarships and bursaries, promotes literacy, supports military families and presents community service awards.



Having secured the carpet, the IODE sent it on a cross-Canada tour to recover the purchase price, ultimately raising \$104,350.

The rug arrived at the Perth CPR station accompanied by Mrs. R. W. Walkey, National Organizing Secretary of the IODE, and was met by local chapter Regent Ethel King-Lightford (1894-1964). Wrapped in

three linen sacks and an aluminum container, it was escorted by the town police car to overnight storage in a local bank vault and then put on display the following day, under police guard.

<sup>5</sup> See 1950 Movietone newsreel reporting the carpet’s departure from England at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dCDi9a2gcrk>

<sup>6</sup> *New York Times*, March 23, 1950.

<sup>7</sup> New York, Washington, St. Louis, Kansas City, New Orleans, Dallas, Houston, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle, Minneapolis, Chicago, Detroit, Boston, Philadelphia and Baltimore.

<sup>8</sup> Toronto, Ottawa, Montreal, Victoria; the remaining two cities are unknown.

<sup>9</sup> In its early days the IODE also aimed to actively discourage the immigration of visible minorities and people of colour to Canada.

The exhibit was officially opened by Mayor Harold Edward Burns (1893-1977) and Dr. William Gourlay Blair (1890-1957), MP for Lanark, who spoke of *“the beauty of the carpet and the characteristics required by the Queen Mother to finish this work of art”*.<sup>10</sup>

When the artifact reached Ottawa, it was presented to the National Gallery where it was hung in a ceremony attended by Princess Elizabeth (later Queen Elizabeth II) during her 1951 Canadian tour.

The royal needleworker turned over the \$100,000 earned from the sale to the national exchequer as her contribution to Britain’s dollar drive. (Final payments on Britain’s war debt were not made until December 2006.)

Queen Mary died at London 1954. Today, her carpet is in the collection of the Canadian Museum of History (artifact #2017.148.1.2).



*Princess Elizabeth presenting carpet to Canadian History Museum on behalf of the IODE - 1951*

*Ron W. Shaw (2026)*

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<sup>10</sup> *Perth Courier*, January 25, 1951.