



A retired lawyer
needlepoints his
way into
Westminster
Abbey and
Windsor Castle.

On Her Majesty's Service



BY DENISE DIFULCO

PHOTOS BY GABRIEL COONEY

When C. Gorham Phillips '43 retired in 1990 as chairman of the management committee of Dewey Ballantine LLP, he began to think about the footprints he would leave behind. He had a successful career as a merger and acquisitions lawyer, drafting one of the first "golden parachute" contracts for executives and helping to develop "poison pill," "white knight" and other defenses against hostile corporate takeovers.

But as he looked back over his achievements, he already could see his work fading into obscurity. Larger conglomerates had swallowed some of his biggest clients, including American Can Co., Beech-Nut Life Savers and Sinclair



Marty and Doc Phillips '43 are among the group putting in 1,250 hours and 295,100 stitches to complete a commission for kneelers and cushions for St. George's Chapel at Windsor Castle.



Oil. And merger and acquisitions procedures were changing so rapidly that his skills had become obsolete.

"I noticed that there is nothing permanent about this world," says the 85-year-old, who goes by "Doc." "I didn't want fame or anything, but I thought it would be nice to leave something on earth besides a tombstone."

A needlepoint enthusiast and self-professed Anglophile, Phillips got it into his head that he would undertake a needlepoint project for Westminster Abbey, the shrine of St. Edward the Confessor, King of England, and the site of every British coronation since 1066.

"I knew that the life of something like that could be several generations," he says. "Short of a revolution, it might last for 500 years."

Getting Westminster Abbey to commission a needlepoint project is no easy task. While Phillips was a serious hobbyist, he certainly wasn't among the well-known ecclesiastical artists in the field. He started working with fibers as a boy when his grandfather set him up with a "Knitting Nancy," a cylindrical device that creates

knitted tubes that are then fashioned into trivets or appliqués. "Grandfather didn't think there was anything sissy about weaving and stitching," Phillips recalls.

He didn't begin needlepointing until much later in life. One night in 1972, while watching TV with his wife, Marty, to whom he's been married for 64 years, he leaned over the canvas she was working on and asked, "Do you think I could learn that?"

She bought him the pattern for a coaster, not exactly taking him seriously, but it turned out that he had a gift for the precise hand that needlepoint requires. "I like fussy work," he says. "I might have been a happy librarian."

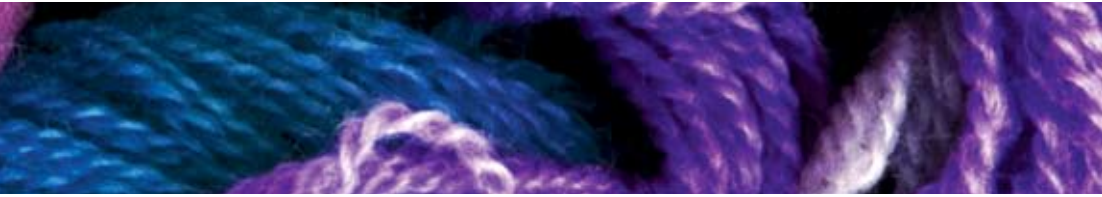
At the time, needlepoint proved to be the perfect antidote to Phillips' stressful job and Type-Double-A personality. But one thing got in the way of his complete mastery of his newfound hobby: He couldn't see colors accurately. Phillips is so color-blind, in fact, that when he was in the Army Air Corps Weather Service he was sent up 10,000 feet in a plane to test whether he could see through camouflage. He couldn't.

Even though his wife had to choose and lay out his yarns for him, Phillips

became such a good stitcher that he exhibited his needlepoint at shows. At one New York City exhibition, a child's chair he completed was displayed next to a wall hanging by Henry Fonda and a cushion by Van Johnson.

But getting Westminster Abbey to take notice required more than just a fine stitch. A great deal of persistence and a bit of serendipity certainly had a hand in his eventual success. After three years of unreturned phone calls, he managed to get an appointment with Westminster Abbey's verger—an assistant to the abbey's dean and the person responsible for all of the "textiles," to use the church's word. At a meeting that took place during a trip to London in 2002, the verger inspected the fronts and backs of Phillips' canvases (the quality of the back, where mistakes become obvious, is considered especially important) and reviewed a portfolio of his work. She then commissioned him to create three cushions, each 19-by-13 inches, for the abbey's main altar.

While Phillips could stitch, he couldn't design. So he asked Trubey Walker, a friend and the founder of a needlepoint shop in his hometown of Vero Beach,



Fla., to help him. It just so happened that Walker had been doing ecclesiastical designs for churches across the U.S. for nearly four decades. “He didn’t know I had done any church work,” she says.

Walker designed the three cushions—one red, one green and one ivory—with all of the appropriate ecclesiastical symbols, which were then approved by the verger. Phillips stitched the green cushion, which is decorated with vines, red grapes and the biblical symbols of the Alpha and Omega, and upon which the abbey’s Book of Worship will rest most days of the year. Two fellow stitchers, William Hutchison and Patricia Morse, assisted with the other cushions—the red for Advent and Lent and the ivory for Christmas and Easter.

Phillips, his colleagues and more than 70 of their relatives and friends attended the dedication of their work in October 2005, which occurred in conjunction with the 1,000th birthday of St. Edward the Confessor, the founder of Westminster Abbey.

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” Phillips says of the ceremony. “There was the full men’s and boys’ choir and the clergymen in their resplendent regalia.”

You would think that was the end of the story. But it isn’t. Phillips, never quite satisfied with good enough, had his sights set on one more target: Windsor Castle. Through a titled British friend from his law days, he sent Queen Elizabeth II an article from *Vero Beach Magazine* explaining the Westminster Abbey project. The correspondence led to a meeting

with the chapter clerk of St. George’s Chapel at Windsor Castle, where Prince Charles’ marriage to Camilla Parker Bowles was blessed.

The clerk explained that kneelers for both the dean and canon and two cushions for the choir loft needed to be replaced inside the chapel. Phillips and his colleagues jumped at the chance to accept the commission. The project will take at least a year and a half and require the efforts of six to eight people, including Phillips’ wife, Hutchison, Morse and Walker, who estimates that the completed kneelers and cushions will require 295,100 stitches and 1,250 hours of work.

Phillips and his wife will squeeze the work into their already active retirement, which includes regular bridge games, golf outings and dinner parties, where Phillips is known for being a gregarious dinner companion. “Sometimes I think he’s overdoing it,” says Marty, “but it’s the way he is.”

Certainly his recent achievements will provide plenty of fodder for dinner conversation. But already Phillips is looking for other ways to leave his mark.

“Who knows?” he asks. “Maybe we’ll volunteer to needlepoint chair seats for the State Dining Room in the White House. I believe there are 50 chairs, so each chair’s design could commemorate a different state. Now that would be a footprint!” ■

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