

Let's Go Shopping

with Edwina Mackinnon



Gail outside Abigail Crafts



Lots of nooks and crannies to explore

Abigail Crafts, Stonehouse, Gloucestershire

It was while Gail Smith was working as a Customs Officer in Sutton Coldfield in 1984 that she discovered embroidery. She was working in the parcel depot where her job was to open boxes and check the contents for working out the duty and VAT. There appeared to be a rather large number of interesting packages coming from America, destined for a local needlecraft shop. So, one day, Gail visited the shop and became instantly hooked on all the wonderful colours, threads and kits that met her eye. "I began by making up cross stitch kits," Gail explained. "I stitched birth samplers for friends having babies but then found others asking me to make special pieces for them, so I started to charge for my work. I found full time work too much so I left the Civil Service and took a part time clerical job so that I had plenty of time to continue with my stitching. Unfortunately I was made redundant and when I visited the Job Centre I was asked what kind of job would I like to do. I explained that I would really like to run my own business. I produced a business plan and was given an Enterprise Allowance and Abigail Crafts was created. At first I was selling cross stitch pictures made from kits, at craft fairs with my friend Andrea, who made soft toys. Then a local children's farm asked me to make some hobby horse pencils for them to sell in their gift shop. These comprised a stuffed horse's head attached to the end of a pencil. I made a lot of these but, there again, I was quite happy to make whatever was popular at the time.



Inside the shop



Plenty to choose from



Judy, Jen, Gail, Jean and Madeleine



Everything from sewing machines to threads

My next venture was to buy fabric from a wholesaler and therefore extend the range of articles I was making. I visited people's houses and did craft parties for them. I sold a good range of items, some of which were made by other people, including wooden toys, knitted jumpers and cushions, all of which I sold on a sale or return basis. I also took orders and one year I had 200 orders to make up in the 2 weeks before Christmas. I would sit up into the early hours of the morning to make sure I completed them all.

It was when I was approached by a mail order catalogue which sold personalised gifts for children that my business really took off. 'Letterbox' concentrated on specialist items and I was asked to design and make personalised sponge bags. My one problem was that I didn't have a sewing machine capable of embroidering names. I made the decision to invest in a suitable machine that cost me £1300 and by the end of the first year I had made and sold 500 sponge bags and paid for my sewing machine. I still provide the company with sponge bags, I now have 5 different designs with matching flannels, but I have outworkers making them these days as I am now busy with the shop. I provide about 3000 a year."

When Gail and her family moved to Gloucestershire in 1994 she looked for a sewing group to join. "I had only dabbled in patchwork from magazines," Gail continued. "My next door neighbour told me that a lady named Jean Hunt was teaching embroidery classes in the next village, so I went along. Jean was



just getting into patchwork and we very quickly became good friends.

In 1996 my third child was born and I decided to start a City & Guilds course in embroidery at Gloscat having seen a friend's portfolio. I had been looking to do a design based course for a long time and this seemed ideal as there was crèche available for Dominic. Throughout the course Jean and I were holding patchwork and embroidery workshops in our own homes and in the village hall. When I completed part one of my course in 1998 my husband told me that a small lock up shop had become available in Kings Stanley, the village where we lived. It was an opportunity not to be missed so I opened the shop in October of that year. I think he will always regret pointing it out to me!

On the day of opening I had 20 bolts of fabrics, kits, panels and some threads. It just so happened that one or two needlecraft shops were closing down and I was fortunate enough to buy my till, some tables, threads and stands from them.

Patchwork had become very popular in the area so I quickly increased my fabric range and when the bed sit became available at the back of the shop, I turned it into a workshop and Jean, who had a good following of students, taught in there several times a week.

We held our first exhibition of 'Hunt Stitchers' in 1999 and raised about £1000 for the South West Children's Heart Circle and Multiple Sclerosis by making and raffling a quilt." Abigail Crafts went from strength to strength. They brought out a workshop leaflet, invited well known teachers, offered a mail order service and Gail embarked on her teacher's certificate, with the hope of doing more teaching in the shop. By 2001 they were bursting at the seams and Gail realised that to encourage quilters to visit the shop she needed to offer an exciting range of fabrics. "All of the new fabric that arrived was stored under the one large cutting table in the shop. When the ladies came for Jean's class they would want to know if any new fabric had been delivered and if it had there would be lots of scrabbling under the table to 'take a peek!'" Gail started to look for larger premises and in September 2002



To visit the shop

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she moved into this shop in Stonehouse. It is easy to find, just 4 minutes along the A41 9 from junction 13 of the M5, in the direction of Stroud. Parking outside the shop can be a problem so give Gail a call for further instructions.

The shop is on two levels with a few steps separating the main shop from the workshop area. It is divided into several small areas each revealing fabrics and other 'goodies' to tempt. Gail has a good selection of fabrics including the Thimbleberries, Moda Marbles, Fossil Ferns, Lumineries and Hoffman ranges and she has just started to stock silk. She admits to liking blue fabrics and has to restrain herself when choosing for the shop. There is also a good variety of threads and other quilting notions including beads, buttons and wadding. Knowing people like a bargain she always provides a basket of remnants for sorting through.

"Last year I decided to sell sewing machines in the shop as I was always being asked to recommend one," continued Gail. "Brother sewing machines did a launch day with a very professional presentation and Jean was at hand to help students make their decision." Also for sale in Abigail Crafts are mounted images, calendars and cards of her husband, Andy's, photographs of local landmarks and buildings which he develops using the computer to create an interesting textured look.

To help with the smooth running of the shop Gail has several ladies helping out throughout the week. Jen, Alex and Judy all work part time and Madeleine is available to step in whenever Gail needs her. Sister Nicky, is involved with designing kits and also was involved with the shop before her return to Ireland. On Saturday, daughter Lindsey and her friend Louise work in the shop. "I have been very fortunate to have so much support from everyone. My husband has always supported my business ventures and he and Peter, my other son, have designed and developed the website which is looking great. As to the future; I have just undertaken Part One of the City & Guilds Patchwork & Quilting course with Di Wells" Gail continued. "So when I'm not completing my course work I hope to be designing new kits and developing the range of fabrics and stock. It has made such a difference having regular help in the shop; it is far less stressful these days."

I think Madeleine summed up the feelings of the staff about Abigail Crafts when she said, "We don't like working here, we love it!" It certainly is worth a visit and don't forget to check out their website for further information. p&c