

Madam Chair and Fellow Members

I must first of all apologise for my absence today. I have been looking forward to being with you, meeting up with old friends and being immersed in all things felt, but unfortunately unforeseen events have prevented me at the very last minute from joining you.

I feel very honoured to have been invited to take up the position of President of the International Feltmakers Association. I did not accept the invitation lightly but have given it a great deal of consideration before agreeing to take up the role. As you all know the IFA has only had one President since its formation over thirty years ago...Mary Burkett OBE. It was due to Mary that the Association of Feltmakers was founded and from small beginnings right up to her death in 2014, at the age of 90, she was the driving force behind the Association. She travelled widely in Central Asia studying and recording the history of felt in many countries, amassing a huge knowledge of all aspects of felt which she was always happy to share. She had an infectious love of all things felt, not only from its beginnings but also the contemporary felt scene which is developing and growing in all its different forms so that now there are skilled feltmakers all over the world.

I will not in any way attempt to step into Mary's shoes - that would be too big a task. She was unique. What I will endeavour to do is to work hard for the Association to increase its profile and to uphold the aims of our constitution and the standards of feltmaking.

I joined the Feltmakers Association, as it was called then, in the spring of 1986; not one of the founding members but it was still in its infancy and I have been a member ever since. In the early days I read the magazine and occasionally attended regional meetings until I plucked up courage to attend an AGM in Frome in Somerset. From that moment I became more committed to felt and began to take a more active part in the Association. I served on the committee for several years and was elected to the Chair in the late nineties. Along with an excellent supporting committee I helped to organise the first big conference in the Lake District in the Millennium year 2000. Along with the conference there was an important exhibition in two venues in Kendal, one of these venues Abbott Hall Museum and Art was Gallery where Mary Burkett had previously been the Director and wherein 1979 she had organised the pivotal exhibition The Art of the Feltmaker which started the interest in felt in the UK. The making of Mille Fleurs Carpet, designed and led by Inge Evers, from Holland also took place in the Brewery Arts Centre in Kendal at this time. It was an international project with contributions of felt flowers from many countries. The carpet making team included members from several countries. This carpet was completed in a week and was presented (still slightly damp!) to Mary at the end of that conference as a tribute to all she had done for the IFA

In the years since then I have been closely involved in the Association and along with Melanie Birmingham and Ann Ross devised the study programme of feltmaking techniques, now known as CiFT, The aim of CiFT is to spread an understanding of wool and the felting process to encourage high standards within our membership.

As I take up the reigns of the Presidency I am very aware of the importance of the role and will endeavour to fulfil the expectations of the Committee and Members. I thank the Committee for their trust in me.

With very best wishes to you all.

Sheila Smith