

# Great Yarn

WI members across the UK have wholeheartedly embraced yarn bombing, as *Sue Bradley* discovers

**M**ove over woolly jumpers: knitting has a new lease of life, and this time it's got serious attitude. Yarn bombing – also known as yarn storming, knitted graffiti and guerrilla knitting – is all about raising awareness, celebrating events or just putting a smile on people's faces by using needles and wool to create colourful decorations.

Whether it's a scarf wrapped around the necks of all four lions guarding Nelson's Column, or a cosy for a steam locomotive, these pieces of art make a real impact, especially when put up under the cover of darkness ready to greet an unsuspecting public.

Yarn bombing has its roots in America, where textile artist Magda Sayeg used knitted cosies to encourage people to look at things in a different way. And in Holland, the group Knitted Landscape leaves woollen flowers, toadstools and covered rocks in random spots in the countryside.

Britain's foremost exponent is London-based Lauren O'Farrell, whose work has included the giant scarf for the Trafalgar Square lions, made in conjunction with the group Stitch London, and a phone box cosy in Parliament Square, created with the Knit the City collective.

'It makes people smile, stop and look at the world around them,' says Lauren, who coined the term 'yarn' ▶

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ABOVE AND LEFT A robin and a butterfly by Princes Risborough WI, Buckinghamshire Federation, brighten a bollard; they also knitted this blanket FAR LEFT The Thirsk Yarnbombers showed the way to last year's Tour de Yorkshire cycle race



WI Tea & Tents campers knitted a bountiful allotment to celebrate work by the Women's Land Army  
 BELOW Bertie Bassett by Thirsk Yarnbombers



LEFT Pompoms and bunting by Fairford WI, Gloucestershire  
 Federation 'bomb' a post box  
 ABOVE Tiny knitted figures by Saltburn by the Sea WI, Teesside



Federation, perch on the pier rail  
 BELOW Tree binding and bluetit topping by Princes Risborough WI  
 FAR LEFT An inviting tiered cake stand, again by Thirsk Yarnbombers



Photographs RICHARD DANIELS



Photograph: MICHELLE CHAPMAN

storming' as a less violent way to describe the activity. 'There is something about knitted street art that people tend to connect with,' she says. Lauren started knitting while receiving treatment for cancer. In 2007, she decided to make a scarf for one of the lions in Trafalgar Square to celebrate being in remission. 'In the beginning, I planned to wrap a scarf around the neck of one of them and then run away,' explains Lauren, who also goes by the name Deadly Knitshade. 'Then people volunteered to help. Altogether 150 of us were involved and the scarf was five times the height of Nelson's Column. We raised £3,000 for Cancer Research.'

Graffiti knitting has become a common sight. The Thirsk Yarnbombers created a stir when they decorated their town to mark its inclusion in the Tour de Yorkshire. Organiser Sam Spence and a team of more than 300 knitters made flags and door hangers relevant to businesses in the area and put them up overnight. Unsurprisingly, the yarn-bombing idea has been wholeheartedly embraced by the WI, with members using knitting, crochet and sewing skills to make an impact. In 2012, the Shoreditch Sisters, Essex Federation, used knitting to cover



scaffolding poles on one of the levels of Diarmuid Gavin's seven-storey Westland Horticulture Magical Tower Garden at the RHS Chelsea Flower Show. Last year Gloucestershire Federation WIs took part in a competition to yarn bomb their towns and villages to mark the 90th birthday of HM The Queen. From pompoms and knitted decorations festooning Ebrington and Hartpury, to a mini Queen Elizabeth II, Duke of Edinburgh and corgi in residence at the post office in Bisley, members let their imaginations go wild. Members of Mitcheldean WI invited elderly people from a residential home to get involved and donated what they had made to charity. The best-display prize was won by Fairford WI, which brightened the town with beehives, spiders, caterpillars, ladybirds, chevrons, bunting and pompoms. 'It made people smile and we had three new members join, all of whom mentioned the yarn bombing,' says committee member Angela Taylor. Last November, Gloucestershire Federation's graffiti knitters returned with a display of thousands of poppies to mark Remembrance Day in Cheltenham. Yarn bombing has become a popular feature at the annual Tea & Tents festival, a camping weekend for WI members, which has seen displays themed on *Alice in Wonderland*, *Wizard of Oz* and a Women's Land Army allotment. Clare Collier, a founder member of Cam City WI,

Cambridge Federation, set the ball rolling when she invited attendees to get involved. 'We ran it from a Facebook page,' explains Clare, who worked closely with Carole Donovan, President of North Cove & Barnby WI, Suffolk East Federation, on the project. 'We had individual pieces and items knitted by groups; some people hadn't knitted for years. One lady got her knitting group involved and others roped in elderly relatives. Yarn bombing helped to establish a sense of community and it meant we got to know each other before the festival.' Clare is now looking forward to the next yarn bombing artwork, planned for Tea & Tents in 2018, having secured permission from the estate of the late author Terry Pratchett to base it on characters from the *Discworld* novels, and raise funds for Alzheimer's charities at the same time. Nurse Theresa Lloyd was so inspired by the yarn bombing at Tea & Tents that she encouraged parents, play leaders and staff to join her in knitting scarves and legwarmers for large metal giraffes that stand in the garden of The Noah's Ark Children's Hospital in Cardiff. They also made several pompoms to hang from the trees. 'It was lovely to see people smiling as they passed by,' says Theresa, of Penarth Peers WI, Glamorgan Federation. The knits stayed up for six months, and were later donated to a shelter to be turned into blankets for the homeless. Along

with celebrations and commemorations, WIs are using yarn bombing as a gentle way to raise awareness. Social Lites WI, Cheshire Federation, made 150 knitted and felt hearts to hang in the centre of Urmston to draw attention to the Time to Talk organ donation campaign. Each of the hearts had a label containing a statistic and the donor website address, and people were encouraged to take one home with them. 'Greater Manchester has a particularly low number of donors on the register,' explains President Caroline Myers. 'Yarn bombing is a way we can reach people who are just going about their daily business. 'The hearts were really eye-catching, and we also gave out leaflets, Jammie Dodgers biscuits and Love Heart sweets, and talked to people about signing up.' Three WIs in Princes Risborough, Buckinghamshire Federation, knitted and crocheted items on a country-garden theme for the town's annual festival to promote a daycare facility that was suffering falling numbers. 'Afterwards people didn't want us to take it down,' says Kim Edwards, of Princes Risborough Evening WI. Lauren O'Farrell sees yarn bombing as 'craftivism', a force for good. 'I like people to feel able to take the knitting home, for it to have an extra life,' she says. 'Yarn bombing involves thought and time and it shows people really do care about something.' WI

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