

THE FORGOTTEN SEAMSTRESS

by Liz Trenow

reading group guide



“A page-turner with eye-opening details about the conditions of mental hospitals in the 20th century, as well as the provenance of royal fabrics, the art of quilting, and the vagaries of modern interior design.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“A heartrending tapestry of tragedy and resilience.”—*Booklist*

“Trenow meticulously stitches each piece of this engrossing story into a unified—and heartwarming—whole.”—*Kirkus*

discussion questions

1. *The Forgotten Seamstress* was inspired by a single piece of beautiful historic fabric. Is there anything in your life which could inspire you to write a story or poem, or paint a picture?
2. The two main characters in *The Forgotten Seamstress* were born more than a century apart. What does the novel tell you about how the class system in Britain changed in that time? Can you identify any parallels in the social history of the U.S.?
3. Maria was locked away because she threatened the rules of a rigid society. Have we become more tolerant and humane today, or are there still certain social improprieties that attract similar punishment? How do you think our views will have changed a hundred years from now?
4. What does Maria’s story tell us about progress in the treatment of mental illness over the past century? Is the present-day use of “care in the community” really best for some patients?
5. Maria is a very “unreliable narrator.” To what extent did you believe her story, or were you, like Caroline and Professor Morton, doubtful of her fantastical claims?

6. At the start of the novel, Caroline has been laid off and is newly single and desperate for a new direction. How does the quilt help her find a new path in life?
7. How does the novel hint at the contrasts between urban and suburban/rural life in present-day Britain? How do these differ between the UK and the U.S.?
8. Caroline feels agonizingly guilty about putting her mother into a residential home and compares her actions with how the Kowalski family cares for “old Sam” at home. If you found yourself in Caroline’s circumstances, what would you do?
9. Should Caroline have told her ex-boyfriend about her pregnancy and her decision to have an abortion? What were his rights in this issue versus her rights? By not telling him, was she just being selfish or was she guilty of a more serious moral deception?
10. Discuss how you might respond if your beloved husband returned, like Arthur, from war and you discover that he is unable to participate in a full sex life?
11. Caroline’s grandmother is so desperate for motherhood that she accepts a baby even though she knows that there may be something untoward about the baby’s arrival. What does the novel tell us about the psychological corrosiveness of guilt?
12. Caroline loved her Granny Jean and feels a very special bond with her. What are the differences between a mother-daughter relationship and a grandmother-granddaughter relationship?
13. Adopted children meeting blood relatives for the first time often report that they immediately recognize them as “family.” What does the novel tell us about blood-bond affinities?
14. Had Caroline, as an adult, been able to meet Maria, what do you think she might have said to her?
15. The novel touches on the issue of homelessness. Apart from providing single-night hostels (called “shelters” in the UK), what else needs to be done to reduce the problem of homelessness? Should society intervene? Or should homeless people be responsible for sorting out their own problems?
16. Two forms of first-person narrative are used in the novel. Discuss the differences and what effect they have on the reader.
17. Why do think the author decided to use the device of telling Maria’s story through recorded cassette tapes?
18. If you met Maria as a young woman, what would you tell her about what life would eventually teach her?

19. What would your reaction be if you discovered that you had “royal blood”? Who would you tell? What do you think would happen if the news reached the royal family?
20. Will Caroline and Ben eventually get together?

maria's quilt – a project from liz trenow

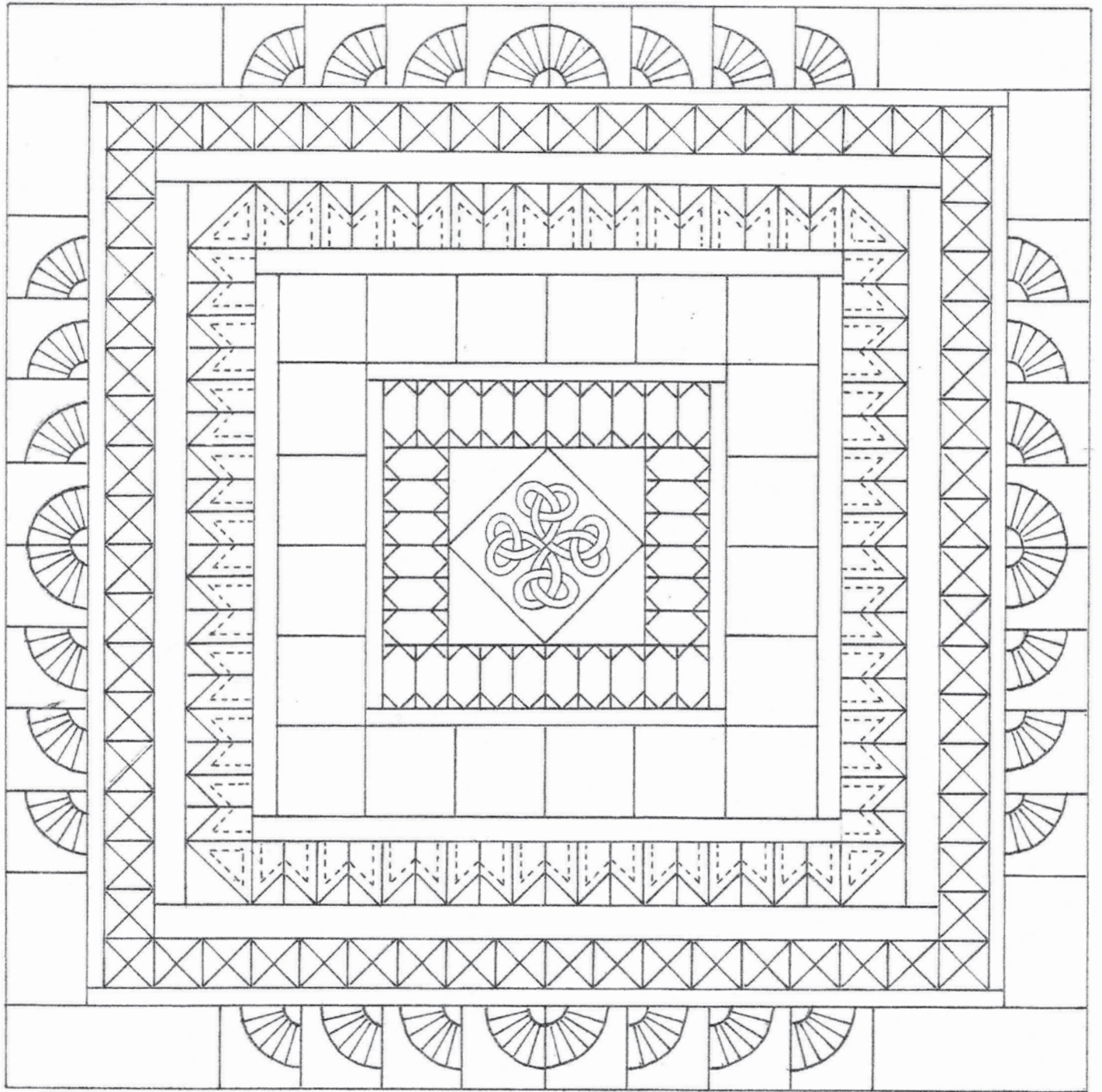
Many might think it a foolhardy enterprise for a non quilter to write a novel with a patchwork quilt as one of its main “characters,” but I was incredibly fortunate to be introduced to a true expert, teacher, and fellow author Lynne Edwards, MBE, who embraced the project with such enthusiasm, I knew at once that our collaboration would produce something remarkable.

With her years of experience and expertise, Lynne knew precisely what fabrics, techniques, and other influences Maria would have had during the various stages of her life, and we had great fun creating her “virtual quilt.”

Lynne has now kindly created the instructions for making this quilt, and we would both be thrilled should anyone be tempted to try it. Of course Lynne has not prescribed any color scheme, and the blocks in the second frame from the center, which Maria used for her appliqué figures, are left blank for you to personalize.

Quilter Judy Baker-Rogers has already started her interpretation of the quilt, so please do get in touch by emailing me at liztrenow@hotmail.co.uk if you also decide to have a go—I would love to find out how you get on. Of course, any technical inaccuracies about fabrics, quilting, and patchwork in the text of the novel are entirely mine.





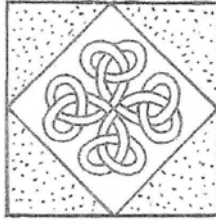
Maria's quilt



A Practical Guide to Making the Quilt

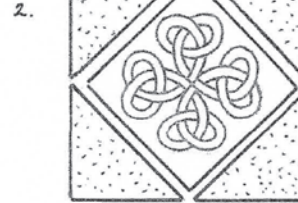
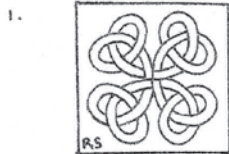
The way each frame was stitched is part of the plot development, but new quicker and more efficient ways of cutting and piecing are commonly used by today's quilter to create the same designs, so I have used those in the quilt instructions as well as glancing at the traditional hand-stitched piecing over papers known as English pieced patchwork.

The Centre Block – finished size 12" x 12":

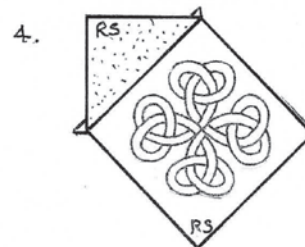
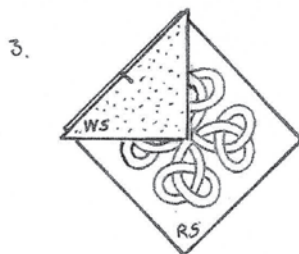


1. From the fabric chosen as a base for the Lovers' Knot design cut a square 9" x 9". From the fabric chosen for the 4 corners of the block cut 2 squares each 7" x 7". Cut each square in half diagonally to make 4 right-angled triangles.

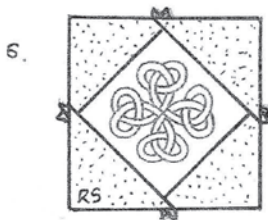
2. Trace the Lovers' Knot design (see pattern section diagram 1) onto the front of the cut square of fabric, arranging it centrally as in Fig.1. Stitch along the traced lines by hand with chain stitch using 2 or 3 strands of stranded embroidery thread.
3. Arrange the 4 cut triangles of fabric around the embroidered square with the longest side of each triangle closest to the sides of the centre square (Fig.2).



4. Fold the centre square in half along one edge and pinch it to mark the centre. Fold a triangle of the corner fabric in half along its longest edge and pinch it to mark the centre.
5. With right sides facing, place the triangle on to the square, matching centres and edges (Fig.3). Pin and stitch the two pieces together, sewing a scant 1/4" seam at all times. Finger-press the triangle back from the centre square with the seam towards the triangle (Fig.4).



6. In the same way pin and stitch the opposite triangle to the centre square. Press both triangles back, ironing from the front of the work and taking care not to stretch the outer edges of the triangles of background fabric, as these are cut on the bias and are very stretchy.



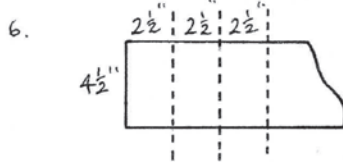
7. Finally pin and stitch the remaining two triangles to the centre square (Fig.5). Press the seams away from the centre as before.
8. Trim off the small triangles of fabric that extend beyond the outer edges of the block. Trim the block if necessary to an exact 12 1/2" square.



First Frame – Long Hexagons:

This pieced frame was originally made using the English pieced patchwork method – folding the fabric over pieces of firm paper cut exactly in the long hexagon shape. If you wish to use this method, see diagram 2 in the pattern section for the templates for the papers and the fabric shapes. As an alternative, a very efficient quick machined method of making the design is described below.

1. **Cutting the fabric** – 32 pieced long hexagon blocks are needed for the frame.

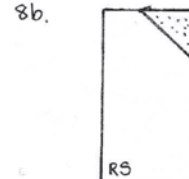
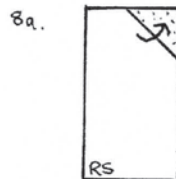
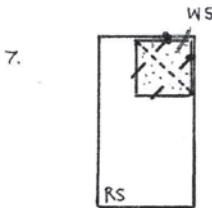


If you are using a selection of fabrics for the hexagons, use rotary cutting equipment to cut a strip from each fabric 4 1/2" wide and any length (a 10" length will make 4 hexagons, so the length of strip will depend on how many hexagons you wish to cut from each fabric). Cut each strip vertically into pieces 2 1/2" wide (Fig.6).

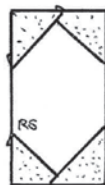
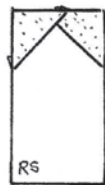
From the background fabric 128 squares each 1 1/2" x 1 1/2" are needed for the frame, which can all be cut from a 1/4 yard or metre of fabric.

Cut the fabric into strips, all 1 1/2" wide and as long as the fabric will allow. Cut each strip into squares each 1 1/2" x 1 1/2" until you have 128 squares.

2. To make one hexagon block, take 4 cut squares of background fabric and on the wrong side of each square draw a diagonal line.
3. Pin one small square of background fabric on to one corner of a cut rectangle of hexagon fabric, right sides facing and matching the outer edges exactly, with the drawn line positioned as shown in Fig.7. Stitch along the drawn line.



4. Fold back the triangle of fabric to make the corner of the block (Fig.8a). The raw edges of the folded small square should exactly match the edges of the original underlying rectangle of hexagon fabric. If the edges do not match, adjust the stitched diagonal seam until they do.
5. Once you are happy with the seam, unfold the small square to its original position and trim the excess fabric 1/4" beyond the stitching line. Press the triangle of fabric over to make the corner of the rectangular block, ironing from the front and pressing the seam out towards the corner (Fig.8b).
6. Take a second square of background fabric and pin it on to the other top corner of the rectangle of hexagon fabric, overlapping the first stitched triangle, with the drawn line positioned as shown in Fig.9. Stitch along the drawn line. Follow steps 4 and 5 above to trim the seam and press this second triangle into place as shown in Fig.10.

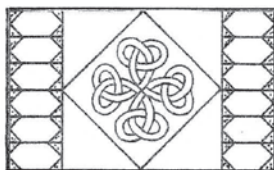


7. Turn the rectangular block around through 180°. Repeat steps 3 – 6 to stitch the remaining 2 marked squares in place as in Fig.11.

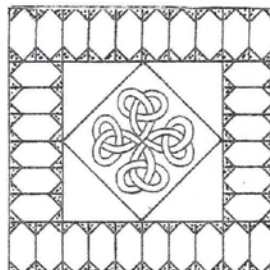
8. Make a total of 32 hexagonal blocks as shown in Fig.11.

9. Join 6 hexagon blocks together with the usual scant $\frac{1}{4}$ " seams. Press the seams to one side, or open – your choice. Repeat this with another set of 6 blocks. Pin and stitch a row of blocks to either side of the centre design (Fig. 12a).
10. Join 10 hexagon blocks together in the same way. Repeat this with a second row of 10 blocks. Pin and stitch a row of blocks to the top and a row of blocks to the bottom of the centre design as in Fig.12b. At this stage the quilt should measure $20 \frac{1}{2}$ " in both directions.

12a.



12b.



Bordering Frame 1:

I felt that a narrow border of fabric around the quilt at this stage would separate the pieced hexagon frame from the next significant framing section of the quilt. The strips for the border are cut $1 \frac{1}{2}$ " wide and added to the quilt. Cut 2 strips each $1 \frac{1}{2}$ " x $20 \frac{1}{2}$ ". Pin and stitch these to either side of the quilt. Press the seams outwards, away from the quilt. Now cut 2 strips each $1 \frac{1}{2}$ " x $22 \frac{1}{2}$ ". Pin and stitch these to the top and bottom of the quilt. Press the seams outwards, away from the quilt.

Second Frame - Appliqué Blocks :

1. Cut 20 squares of the chosen background fabric for the appliqué blocks, each cut 6 " x 6 ". (Finished size of each block will be $5 \frac{1}{2}$ " x $5 \frac{1}{2}$ "). The choice of appliqué designs is personal to the maker – that is what makes the quilt special to both maker and recipient.
2. Once the appliqué blocks have been completed, arrange them around the quilt with 4 blocks along each side and 6 along the top and bottom of the quilt. Stitch the 4 left side blocks together into a strip and join these to the left side of the quilt. Repeat this with the 4 blocks on the right side of the quilt and join them to the right side of the quilt.
3. Stitch the 6 blocks for the top of the quilt together, then join them to the quilt. Repeat this for the 6 blocks for the bottom of the quilt and join them to the quilt. At this stage the quilt should measure $33 \frac{1}{2}$ " x $33 \frac{1}{2}$ ".

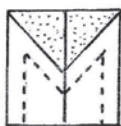
Bordering Frame 2:

A second bordering strip is used here to frame the appliqué blocks before the next pieced design. The strips for the border are cut 2 " wide and added to the quilt. Cut 2 strips each 2 " x $33 \frac{1}{2}$ ". Pin and stitch these to either side of the quilt. Press the seams outwards, away from the quilt. Now cut 2 strips each 2 " x $36 \frac{1}{2}$ ". Pin and stitch these to the top and bottom of the quilt. Press the seams outwards, away from the quilt.

Third Frame – Pieced Initial M blocks:



13.

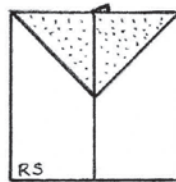
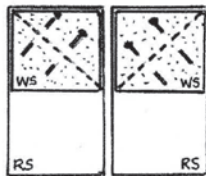


The next frame is the one that contains the hidden initial M. This is achieved with a repeating block made from a selection of fabrics used for the large letter M and with one background fabric used throughout for the small triangles that make the top edge of each block. The initial M is shown again by a stitched line added to each pieced block (Fig.13).

If a scrap quilt effect is wanted, use as many fabrics for the letter M as possible, or keep the design simple by using just two fabrics in alternating blocks. The background fabric is the same for each block - 1/2 yard or metre of fabric will be plenty.

1. **Cutting the fabric** - 36 blocks are needed for the frame, plus 4 corner blocks made from half-square triangles. From the chosen letter M fabrics cut strips all 2 1/2" wide - cut these into pieces each 4 1/2" long, 2 pieces for each block, 72 in total. From the background fabric cut strips 2 1/2" wide. From these cut 72 squares each 2 1/2" x 2 1/2".
2. To make 1 block take 2 squares of background fabric and draw a diagonal line from corner to corner on the wrong side of each square.
3. Take 2 cut rectangles of the same letter M fabric. Pin a marked square of background fabric to each rectangle, right sides facing, in the arrangement shown in Fig.14. Make sure the diagonal lines are placed exactly as shown in Fig.14.

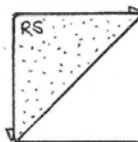
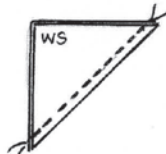
14.



15.

4. Follow steps 3 - 5 from the Long Hexagon instructions to stitch and trim the corner triangles. Press the seam of the left hand block towards the background triangle. Press the seam of the right hand block in the opposite direction, away from the background triangle.
5. Pin and stitch the 2 halves of the block together with the usual scant 1/4" seam, matching the seams at the centre exactly (Fig.15). Press the seam to one side, ironing from the front of the work.
6. Make a total of 36 blocks, following steps 2 - 5 above.
7. Join the blocks into 4 rows, each of 9 blocks. Press the seams to one side.
8. Pin and stitch a row of blocks to either side of the quilt. Press the seams in towards the quilt.
9. To make the 4 corners of the frame, cut 2 squares of letter M fabric and 2 squares of background fabric each 5" x 5". Cut each square in half diagonally. Match 1 triangle of letter M fabric with 1 triangle of background fabric with right sides facing and pin and stitch them together along the diagonal seam (Fig.16a). Open the triangles to make a square and press the seam to one side (Fig.16b). Trim the block if necessary to a 4 1/2" x 4 1/2" square. Repeat this to make a total of 4 square blocks.

16a.



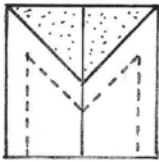
16b.

10. Pin and sew a square block to either end of the remaining 2 strips of 9 letter M blocks in exactly the arrangement shown in Fig.17a. Press the seams towards the square blocks.

17a



11. Pin and stitch the strips of blocks to the top and bottom of the quilt, matching seams carefully. Press the seams towards the quilt.



12. Once the frame of blocks is stitched in place, mark a stitching line on each block $1/2$ " from the seams to form the letter M as shown in Fig.17b. Stitch the line on each block in chain stitch or back stitch in a thread of a contrasting colour.
The quilt should measure $44 \frac{1}{2}$ " x $44 \frac{1}{2}$ " at this stage.

Bordering Frame 3:

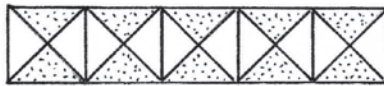
A third bordering strip is added to the quilt now before the next pieced frame. The strips for the border are cut $2 \frac{1}{2}$ " wide and added to the quilt. Cut 2 strips each $2 \frac{1}{2}$ " x $44 \frac{1}{2}$ ". Pin and stitch these to either side of the quilt. Press the seams outwards, away from the quilt. Now cut 2 strips each $2 \frac{1}{2}$ " x $48 \frac{1}{2}$ ". Pin and stitch these to the top and bottom of the quilt. Press the seams outwards, away from the quilt.

Fourth Frame – Quarter Square Triangles:

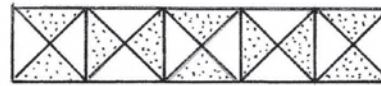
This block would have been made traditionally by cutting the chosen fabric into small triangles and joining them into squares. More efficient and accurate methods now exist, and that is what I have described here.

You may wish to use just 2 fabrics for the blocks as in Fig.18a, or go for a scrap look with as many fabrics as possible. It can look very effective to sort the fabrics into 2 teams of lights and darks and arrange them as in Fig.18b. If only 2 fabrics are used (or 2 teams of light and dark), 1 yard or metre of each will be plenty.

18a.

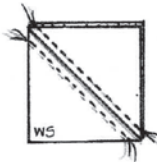


18b.

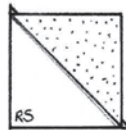


1. **Cutting the fabric** – 68 blocks are needed for this frame. From the chosen 2 fabrics or 2 teams, cut strips $4 \frac{1}{4}$ " wide. From these cut a total of 34 squares from each fabric or each team of fabrics, each $4 \frac{1}{4}$ " x $4 \frac{1}{4}$ ".
2. Take 1 cut square of the first fabric and draw a diagonal line on the wrong side of the fabric square.
3. Place this square with right sides facing onto a $4 \frac{1}{4}$ " square of fabric 2. Match the edges carefully and pin together.
4. Machine a line of stitching on either side of the drawn diagonal line a scant $1/4$ " from the line (Fig.19).
5. Cut along the drawn line on the stitched square through both layers. Open out the stitched triangles to make 2 squares (Fig. 20). Press the seams from the front towards fabric 2. Trim the overhanging seam allowances back level with the edges of the square. Both squares should now measure $3 \frac{7}{8}$ ".
6. Take one of the pieced squares and draw a diagonal line on the wrong side as in Fig. 21.

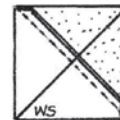
19.



20.

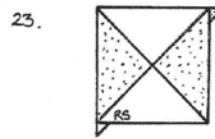
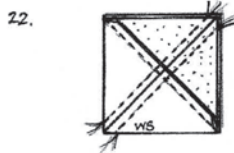


21.



7. Place the marked square on top of the unmarked square with right sides facing and edges matching. The diagonal seams should be lying exactly on top of each other and pressed in opposite directions. Check that the top triangle of fabric 1 is lying on top of the triangle of fabric 2. Pin the squares together.

- Stitch a $\frac{1}{4}$ " seam on either side of the drawn line as before (Fig.22). Cut along the drawn diagonal line and open out each stitched triangle to make 2 squares as in Fig.23. Press the seams to one side from the front.



- Trim the overhanging seam allowances level with the edges of both squares which should now measure $3\frac{1}{2}$ " x $3\frac{1}{2}$ ".
- Follow steps 2 – 9 to make a total of 68 blocks.
- Stitch the blocks into 4 rows, 2 rows of 16 blocks and 2 rows of 18 blocks. Press the seams to one side.
- Pin and stitch a row of 16 blocks to either side of the quilt. Press the seams in towards the quilt. Now pin and stitch a row of 18 blocks to the top and to the bottom of the quilt. Press the seams towards the quilt. The quilt should measure $54\frac{1}{2}$ " x $54\frac{1}{2}$ " at this stage.

Bordering Frame 4:

A fourth bordering strip is added to the quilt now before the final frame of Grandmother's Fan. The strips for the border are cut $1\frac{1}{2}$ " wide and added to the quilt. Cut 2 strips each $1\frac{1}{2}$ " x $54\frac{1}{2}$ ". Pin and stitch these to either side of the quilt. Press the seams outwards, away from the quilt. Now cut 2 strips each $2\frac{1}{2}$ " x $56\frac{1}{2}$ ". Pin and stitch these to the top and bottom of the quilt. Press the seams outwards, away from the quilt.



The Final Pieced Frame – Grandmother's Fan blocks:

Each fan is a quarter circle of six segments within a 5 " x 5 " square block. 8 fans are arranged at the centre of each side of the quilt, with the corners of the frame left as plain 5 " wide strips. The fan design is most accurately made using templates. The 3 templates (the fan segment A, the background area B and the fan corner C) are given in the pattern section diagram 3. The usual $\frac{1}{4}$ " seam allowance has been added on all sides, while the stitching line is marked with a dotted line.

Use one fabric throughout for the background to each fan block and for the long strips at each corner that complete the frame. 1 yard or metre of background should be enough. For the fans, use a selection of fabrics for a scrap quilt, or just 2 or 3 repeated in each block- a total of $\frac{1}{2}$ yard or metre. For the 32 little quarter circles that make the corner of each fan, use 1 fabric throughout, all easily cut from a quarter yard or metre.

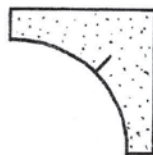
- Make templates from the 3 shapes in Diagram 3 by tracing them and sticking the traced shapes onto card, or use template plastic instead. When cutting out the shapes, cut just inside the drawn lines as this keeps the measurements accurate as you draw round each template on the fabric.
- To make 1 Fan block, draw round template A on the wrong side of each chosen fabrics to make 6 segments for the fan. You will also need 1 of shape B and 1 of shape C.
- Cut out each shape exactly on the drawn lines.



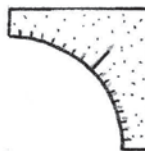
- Arrange the pieces for the block in your chosen design. Pin and stitch the 6 fan segments together along the long seams with a scant $\frac{1}{4}$ " seam. Press the seams to one side, ironing from the front of the work (Fig.24).

- Fold the large B shape in half along the curved edge and crease it at the curve to mark the centre (Fig.25). Clip the seam allowance at intervals along the curved edge (Fig.26).

25.

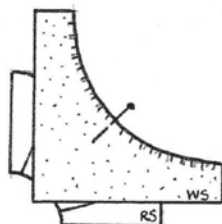


26.

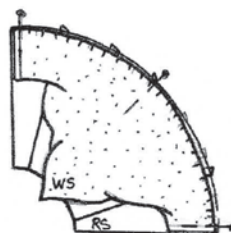


- Place the fan and the background shape together with right sides facing and the background fabric on the top, matching the centre of both shapes as in Fig.27.
- Swing each corner of shape B round and pin in position at the corners of the fan, lining up the edges of both pieces (Fig.28). Add more pins along the curved edges, matching the edges exactly. Stitch together with the usual 1/4" seam. Press the seam towards the background fabric, ironing from the front of the work.

27.



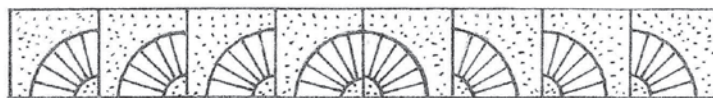
28.



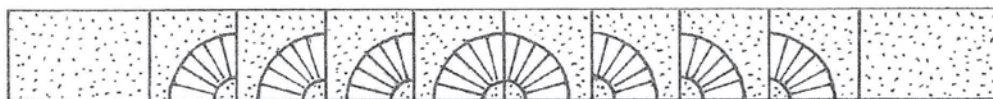
- The small quarter circle piece C is then stitched to the fan to complete the block. It can be joined using the same method as was used to join the fan to the background, clipping the seam allowance of the fan segments and stitching them to shape C with a quarter inch seam as before. Because the quarter circle is small, it can be fiddly to stitch the sections together in this way, and you may prefer to appliqué the curved edge of shape C onto the fan block instead. The block should measure 5 1/2" x 5 1/2" at this stage.

- Follow steps 2 to 8 to make a total of 32 Fan blocks.

- Arrange the fan blocks into 4 rows each of 8 blocks as in Fig.29. Stitch each row together, pressing the seams to one side.



- From the background fabric cut 4 strips each 5 1/5" x 8 1/2" and 4 strips each 5 1/2" x 13 1/2".
- Stitch a shorter piece of background fabric to either end of 2 Strips of Fan blocks (Fig.30). Sew these to either side of the quilt. Press the seams in towards the quilt.



- Stitch the remaining pieces of background fabric to either end of the other 2 strips of Fan blocks.

(Fig.31). Sew these to the top and bottom of the quilt to complete the Fan frame. Press the seams towards the quilt as before.

31.



Completing the Quilt:

A simple frame or even several frames may be added to the quilt if desired, to suit the maker. Once the quilt top has been completed, it may be layered with batting and a backing fabric and quilted as desired.

Diagram 1

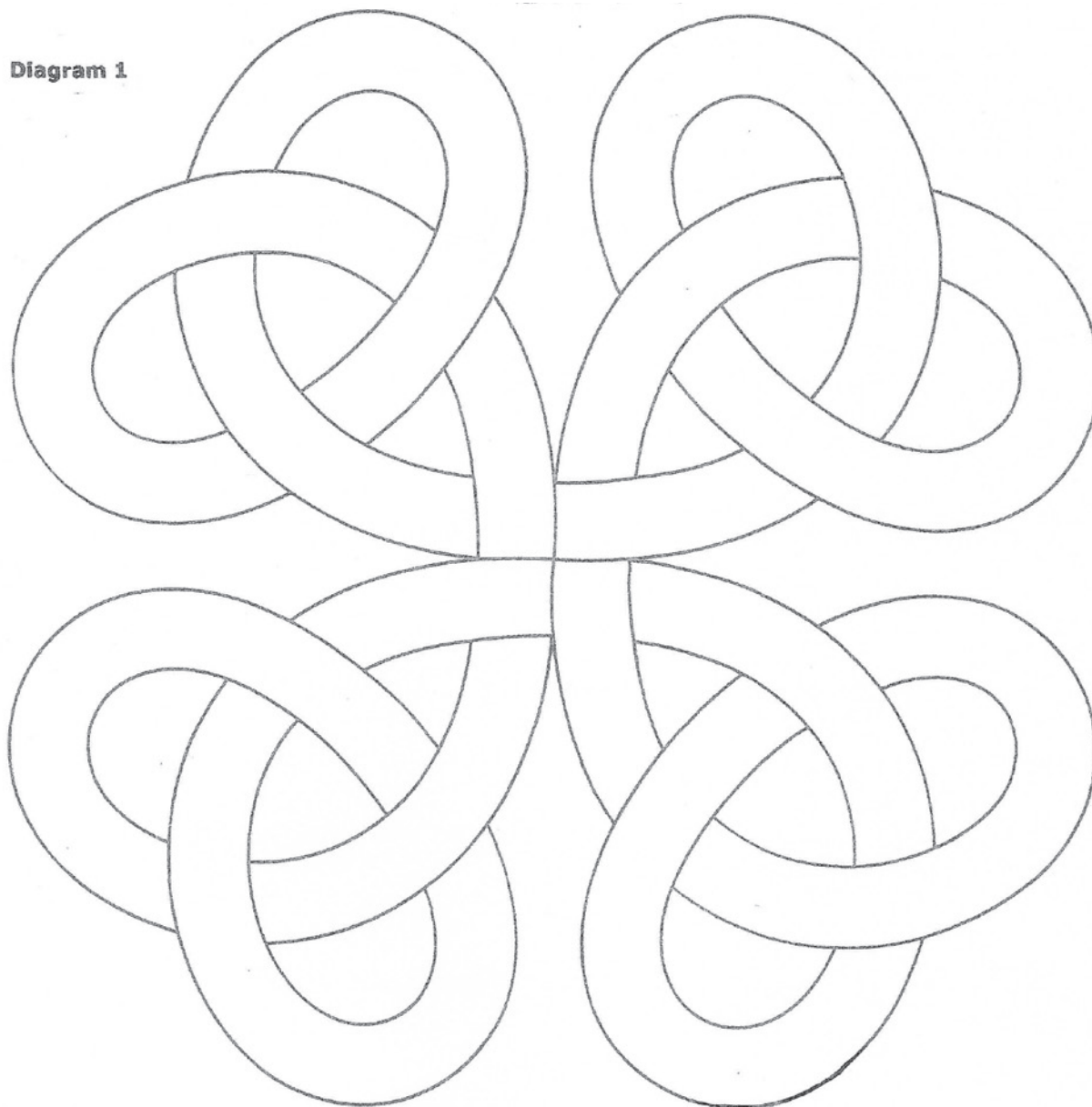
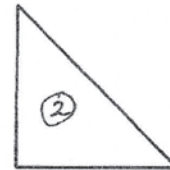
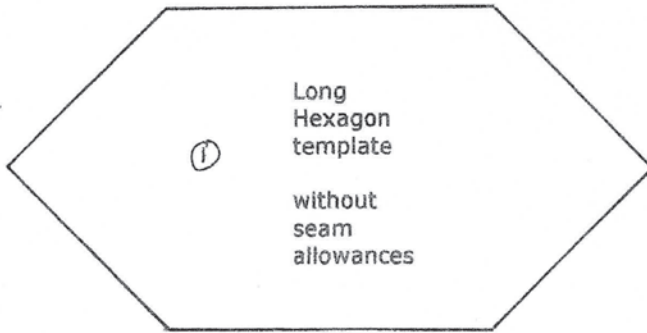


Diagram 2

These templates are for the papers for English Pieced Patchwork.
Add 1/4" on all sides for cutting the fabric shapes.



Long Hexagon corner triangle template
without seam allowances

