

A MAN *of the* SEA

JOHN CRASKE, A FISHERMAN WHO PAINTED
WITH HIS NEEDLE. CZ

John Craske was another man of the sea, living in a different century, descended from a long line of north Norfolk fishermen. In 1917, while training for the Front, he caught influenza and fell into a 'stuporous state'. A spell in an asylum followed, from which he was rescued by his wife Laura, who, with the help of a kind local doctor, undertook to look after John at home. 'Only the sea will save him' was the verdict of the doctor, and so Laura moved

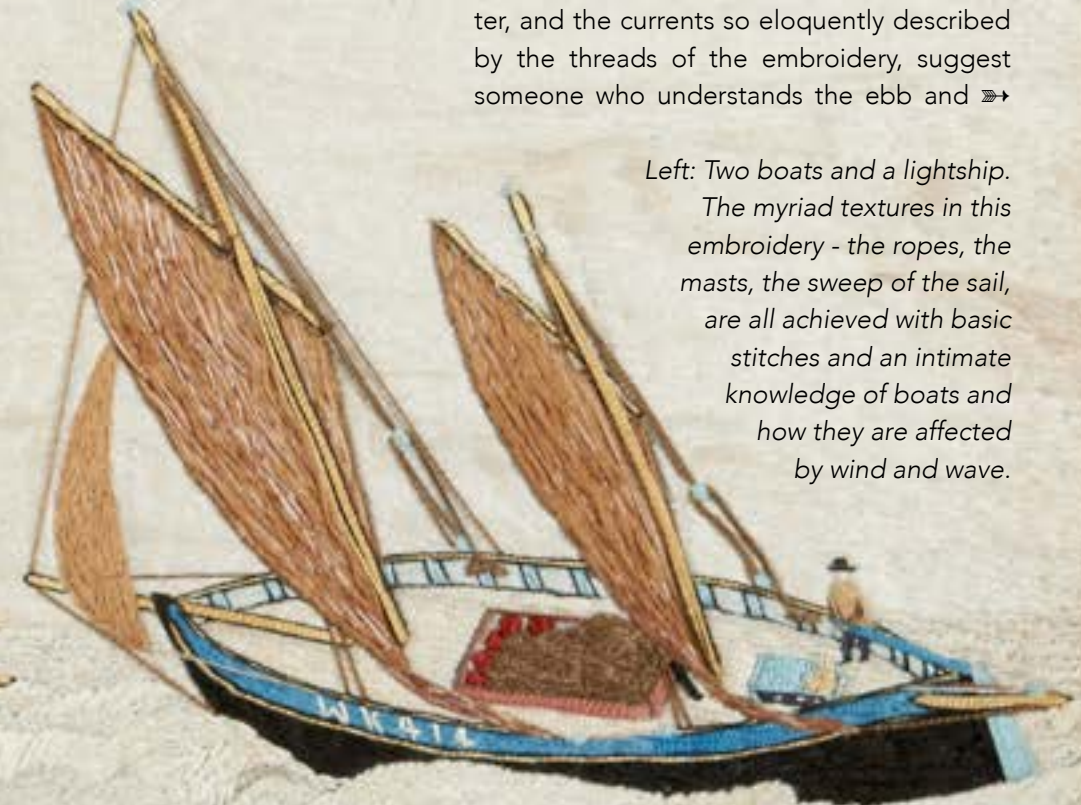
them to Blakeney, on the North Norfolk coast. They bought and restored a little skiff and, when John was well enough, they went on gentle expeditions exploring the coastline he would later embroider in such detail. When he was anxious and depressed, Laura encouraged John to paint, thinking that it might soothe his nerves. Too poor to buy materials, she foraged cardboard, a hat box lid, a bait box or brown parcel paper for him to paint on.

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When illness forced him to bed, she suggested he try embroidery and taught him some basic stitches. His first embroidery was created on the calico put aside for the Christmas pudding, tacked onto the frame of a deck-chair.

Whether working with brush or needle, Craske does not sentimentalise the sea: he knew its dangers only too well. In his paintings it is often a grey, sludgy colour, with the fisherman depicted struggling against the currents and winds. The way his boats lie on and in the water, and the currents so eloquently described by the threads of the embroidery, suggest someone who understands the ebb and ➔



Left: Two boats and a lightship. The myriad textures in this embroidery - the ropes, the masts, the sweep of the sail, are all achieved with basic stitches and an intimate knowledge of boats and how they are affected by wind and wave.

‘Craske uses stitches like paint... changing the direction of the thread just as a painter would use his brushstrokes’

flow of the tide and the undercurrents of the water, and the perils of being alone and isolated on a boat in rough sea. Craske uses stitches like paint, stitching long, close rows of stem stitch, occasionally padded and whipped to create the crest of a wave, changing the direction of the thread just as a painter would use his brushstrokes. Indeed, later in life he described his work as ‘painting in wools’. He used few formal stitches. Most of the effects are created by altering the length of his stem or straight-stitches – short stubby stitches for the flint wall of a fisherman’s cottage, long, uninterrupted straight-stitches for a lugger’s sail. The energy of the sea and scudding clouds are captured by constantly changing the colours and directions of the stitches.

Like all those who depended on fish from the sea, the Crasques were very poor, so John’s paintings and later his embroideries provided an invaluable source of income. Indeed, crafts provided a means of supplementing income for many fishermen and sailors, and the results are the subject of a major new exhibition – *Folk Art: Time on our Hands* at The Sheringham Museum in Norfolk, running until 27th October.

The exhibition celebrates a range of craft work by sailors, from the ‘ship-in-a bottle’ to embroidered seascapes known as ‘woollies’; from ‘pierhead’ paintings - ship portraits for seafarers - to the basket maker, the net maker,

the rope-splicer, and the wood-carver - among many others.

For embroiderers, the main reason to visit this exhibition is the display of Craske paintings and embroideries, and in particular his panorama of the evacuation of Dunkirk, on loan from Norwich Museum and rarely exhibited. He painted this while ill in bed, listening to the accounts of the evacuation on the wireless. It is his last and unfinished work, and testament to his artistic imagination. While you are in Norfolk, make time to visit The Shell Museum in Glandford, where my favourite of John Craske’s works resides. Pottering in Norfolk a few years ago, I happened upon this pretty hamlet, part of the Bayfield estate, whose owner built the Museum to house his collection of shells. I wandered in, curious to see the shells, completely unprepared for the embroidered panorama of the North Norfolk coast stretching nearly five metres along the frustratingly high wall of the Museum. Inlets and creeks of rippled sand puddled with sea-water; dunes, fishermen’s cottages, boats beached, anchored and on the far horizon. This is Craske painting with his needle what he knew and loved, stitching his way by memory along the familiar coastline he could no longer enjoy in reality. ❖

Where to see John Craske’s work:
www.sheringhammuseum.co.uk
www.shellmuseum.org.uk
www.brittenpears.org (The Red House)



Above: Revenue Cutter 1860 - note the tautness of the rigging.
Others: Details from JC Madge Lifeboat with the charming choppy wavelets stitched in close rows of stem stitch.

