I first saw the straw-embroidered altar frontals of Nozeroy Church on 4 June 1996, never dreaming that nine years later I’d be returning to try to decipher how they had been made, which was 355 years ago in 1650 by fifty very skilled Annonciades Nuns who lived at the convent at Nozeroy.

Nozeroy is a small medieval town in France, situated in the Jura in the East, near the Swiss border. The seat of the house of Chalon, Prince of Orange and steeped in history, the castle (Now in ruins) was built on the Mont de Noisettes to keep watch over the Val de Mieges (after 1237).
Today, with its 451 inhabitants, Nozeroy is still a little town, untouched by the outside world: during the nine year gap between my visits nothing much has changed. At an altitude of 796 metres, Nozeroy is covered in snow during the winter. The snow came in November 2004 and stayed until April 2005) and bathed in hot sunshine during the summer months. Late July is the festive season when the medieval banquet is re-enacted along the Grand Rue to the Plan des Annonciades square, the meeting place for many activities.

Although Nozeroy is small it is very compact with all the facilities – hotel, tavern, restaurant, post office, shops, bank, hospital and school. It is tranquil, yet bubbling with the life of happy children. In fact, you can set your watch by the school coach that stops by the clock gate at 3.15 every afternoon and blocks the traffic into the town, enabling the children to get their transport home to outlying villages. Within 10 minutes the coach is gone and traffic can once again enter Nozeroy by the clock gate.

My stay

In the mornings at 8am I would look out of my bedroom window, from which I had a birds eye view of the tavern and centre of town, and see the younger children with their luncheon boxes being escorted by their parents to the Kindergarten a few doors from my hotel, skipping and chatting.

Life is very cordial: everyone gets on with what they have to do, with respect for each other. Even the dustman seems happy and caring, no matter what the job. Respect for fellow man was very evident. The people were a very strong group, down to earth and no-nonsense, with their own code of standards.

For the first week, Nozeroy was a warm and friendly place. I felt “looked after” despite being a foreigner and not speaking the language.
Some young ladies living in the village asked to visit me, to see what I was doing. The newsagent always greeted me with “Bonjour Madame Barbara”. He got to know me because he was developing my films on a daily basis!

My four week trip started at 7am on Tuesday 17 May 2005 with the train from Woolwich Arsenal station to Waterloo. From there the Eurostar to Paris Gare du Nord and then a short taxi trip across Paris to the Gare du Lyon, which took me nearly an hour due to roadworks. French rail took me to Dijon and then the local Champagnole train, where I arrived at 6.35pm and a car took me to Nozeroy (which is served by neither bus nor train). Although I was travelling for eleven hours, it was a very pleasant journey.

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Staying in Nozeroy for four weeks (except for my five day trip to Lyon and Le Puy-en-Valey museums) on my own, was a wonderful experience. I ate at the local tavern, which was very much like an English working man’s club. The food was excellent and so very plentiful that I could not finish a single meal! I worked in my room, the church of Nozeroy or out in the open air, enjoying the wonderful scenery.

I only completed a quarter of the work, which was a shock. This work might take a full year to complete before it is available to display, promote or share, especially the visual study samples that I hope to complete for interested people.
The Good Shepherd Frontal

The Good Shepherd Altar Frontal has a medallion at the centre, surrounded by embroidery of wheat straw, worked on heavy white silk fabric. The medallion depicts the Good Shepherd carrying the lamb across his shoulders, surrounded by sheep and pasture land. Embroidered with tiny coloured glass beads, I found the eyes of the good shepherd very compelling. The embroidery of wheat straw around this medallion consists of seven techniques.

1. Two-straw plait, consists of two whole damp wheat straws, plaited together by using three positions at 120 degrees clockwise. This creates a triangle, which enables the embroiderer to insert the sewing needle between the folded straw without damaging the stalk. The two-straw plait surrounds all the motifs. Some very fine straw stalks are used. Others are thicker in diameter so the two-straw plait is heavier. This plait is worked with damp straws.

2. The two-straw plait in undone leaving a dry zig-zag straw stalk that can be couched down to form a contrasting zigzag straw. This can be couched down to form a contrasting zig-zag work pattern. This must be kept dry at all times otherwise it will lose its shape. All other straw techniques used in this work need to be worked damp so they are supple and bend into the design. The straw stalk can be split lengthways into splints of various widths, using a straw splitter or a craft knife. Mother nature has given the wheat straw stalk a raincoat. It is called Silica. The rain runs off into the earth, the moisture is taken up from the roots only the outside of the stalk has this shiny silica coating. The inside is pithy and dull. Care must be taken to always work with the shiny silica side showing and always dampen straw splints.

Straw is brittle when dry. When moisture is added, it can become a flexible, natural fibre, to make this happen. The splint needs to be milled. This can, and used to be done by passing through two wooden rollers under pressure to crush the straw stalk whilst damp (called going
through the mill). You can get the same desired effect by passing a single splint over a closed pair of scissors whilst damp, with pith side touching the closed scissors to make lots of little folds in the straw splint. These folds will remain after the straw has dried. It then becomes a very flexible splint.

3. Couching is used to hold the wheat straw plait or the split splint of the straw stalk to the surface of the fabric. Couching is used for all work on the Good Shepherd. This means that all the straw is laid on the surface of the fabric and stitched into place using fine silk or linen sewing thread, both natural fibres that would be compatible with the natural straw. Synthetic threads, such as polyester cotton are never used as this would cut through the straw splint like a knife. Only the sewing thread goes through the fabric to hold the plait or splint to its desired position.

4. Laid work. This is where the straw splint is laid on the surface of the fabric. A fine sewing thread is stitched over the splint so only the sewing thread goes through the material. Often gaps are left between the straw splints to show the fabric as well as the straw splint. The straw splint can be laid on the fabric vertically, horizontally or diagonally to create various designs.

5. Or Nue is where the straw splints are laid side-by-side without seeing any fabric. Couch the first splint into place on the fabric, leaving a space between each stitch. Lay the second splint beside the first splint (without leaving any gaps between splints). Make stitches exactly mid-way between those used for the first splint. Lay down the third splint (again without any gaps) and make these stitches exactly mid way between those used on the second splint. The stitches should match up exactly with the line of the first splint stitching. Repeat splint stitching to form a brick-like pattern with the sewing thread. The straw splints can lay in any direction. Horizontal, vertical or diagonal. Splints must always lay close together.

6. Padding is when sheep’s wool is felted into a desired shape, stitched onto the fabric to add depth to the embroidery. The Or Nue technique is then worked over this padding to add the depth and padding to the design.

7. Raised darning over cord. A linen cord (1/16” or 2mm) is stitched onto the fabric with just a needle space between each cord. Straw splints are then couched down with sewing thread, over two cords, couched down, over two cords, repeat to end of pattern. The second straw splint is stitched beside the first but only goes over one cord and couched down, then over two cords and couched down. Repeat couching over two cords to end of pattern. The third straw splint row is the same as the first. The linen cord can be stitched onto the fabric in any direction to form a pattern, to be followed and covered with the straw splints, which are usually the widest splints in the embroidery. This gives maximum impact on the design.

These are the seven techniques to be found in the Good Shepherd Straw Embroidery at Nozeroy Church. I believe this to be the first Altar frontal made.
The Good Samaritan Altar frontal has a medallion in the centre surrounded by embroidery of natural wheat straw. Worked on dupion slub-type silk fabric, the medallion depicts the Good Samaritan a woman by a well giving to a less fortunate, Jacob. This Good Samaritan medallion is also worked completely in small coloured glass beads. The Good Shepherd and Good Samaritan are almost twins except that the Good Samaritan’s wheat straw is more compact. It also has more advanced work at the two sides. A large scroll motif of raised darning with inlaid smaller motifs of padded Or Nue half way up on both sides and another motif in each corner is more advanced work than that of the Good Shepherd.

In the centre above the medallion is a small motif using satin stitch worked over a horseshoe-shaped cord. This is the first piece of work where the straw splint has been taken through the fabric, making 8 techniques. The Good Samaritan has been restored. A two inch band surrounds all edges to give strength to the fabric. This work was completed about 15 years ago by a lady in Toulouse. Apart from the two large motifs at both sides and corners and the first time satin stitch has appeared the Good Shepherd and Good Samaritan could be twins.
The Red Altar Frontal has a repeat pattern with no bead work, just wheat straw embroidery on a cotton-type velvet which leads me to think that this is the youngest of the three altar frontals. It also has more advanced straw work, maybe as new techniques were discovered (9 techniques in the red altar frontal). I traced the design by using white tack on the perspex cover which held heavy-duty plastic in place. This pattern was broken down into five A4 panels to complete the pattern. I hope to write a more detailed report on this work for text: For the Study of Textile, Art Design and History, the textile society of which I am a member.
Trip to Lyon and Le Puy-en-Velay

This five day trip started at 7am on Wednesday 25 May with a car ride from Nozeroy to Champagnole station. Not without its problems, this was a wonderful trip, thanks to Isabella Christophe who I now think of as a great friend but whom I had never previously met.

I arrived in Lyon, in 33 degree heat, after nearly five hours of travelling to discover they were in the middle of a bus and metro strike! Isabella, 15 years my senior, walked to the station to meet this perfect stranger of an English woman. She spoke perfect English. We found each other, she took my suitcase home and I walked to the museum of Art Decoratifs with my heavy bag of cameras and notebooks. I arrived early and found a shady seat in the courtyard until 2pm for my appointment. Sadly, nobody was expecting me! Small embroidered items in two glass cabinets which were locked and could not be opened was all I was offered. Better photos are in Lison de Caune’s new Book “Marqueterie be Paille”

I gave a copy of my book to Claudette, who worked in the entrance ticket office, book and gift shop and spoke English. I visited the study section and asked if I could have photocopies of certain texts as I neither spoke nor read French. After a long wait I was told I could not have photocopies for security reasons! I could, however, buy copies of the students study guides, which I did and found that the fee was wavered at the cash desk. This seemed crazy to me if I could read French I would have understood the content of the records. As a straw worker and researcher the techniques are already in my book so there was nothing new for me. A very long, very bad day.

The next day I took a 2 ½ hour train journey through rugged countryside with ravines and gorges to Le Puy-en-Velay, which is something I shall never forget. There was a party of school children on the train, sitting three to a seat. I think it was someone’s birthday as they were very excited. They were well behaved and seasoned travellers, I think.
There was also a young Canadian girl going to spend five weeks in Ireland having spent time in France, before heading home. She was a little homesick and was counting the weeks until she would be back at home on the farm, whilst also planning to climb the rock to Chapel St Michael!

I was planning to visit Museum Crozatier, located in the Henri Vinay public gardens. Called the horseshoe because of its shape, it was built in the mid 19th Century with a large legacy from Charles Crozatier (1795 – 1855).

Before I left the station I used the telephone to phone home and let them know I had arrived and was well.

I went outside to look for a taxi. There was no taxi and in fact no people bar a policeman and policewoman giving a parking ticket to an abandoned car. They checked the taxi box for me but the phone was vandalised. They laughed and told me to get in the car. This I did, and was taken to the big iron gates that are the entrance to the Henri Venay Public Gardens. At the end of a tree-lined avenue was the massive museum Crozatier.

The gardens held a zoo, children’s play area, pools, swans, fountains, formal gardens, climbing frames to challenge older children, a café for lunch and communal toilets in the museum building! Opposite the café, it had everything, including the children from the train (reminding me of Greenwich park).

Museum Crozatier made up for the previous bad day.

I was expected and warmly welcomed by M. Gilles Grandjean, conservatuer en chef. The museum has a lot of marquetry and straw embossed work but they only have a few small pieces of straw embroidery, which were in display cabinets. These cabinets were opened for me and items were taken down for me to study. This included a small cap, made of six sections, round edge, one in centre, embroidered with flat darning, porcupine quill technique, wrapping and two-straw plait, couched one straw zigzag laid work, couched onto green silk. This was a first for me. I had never seen anything like it. The owner had been M. Antoine Lambert, Consul de Puy between 1756 and 1765. It was in perfect condition.
I took up Isabella's offer of two extra day's stay and went sightseeing in Lyon, which was a wonderful bonus. We ate in and out at the bistro de Lyon and Giovanni's restaurant. We visited the old part of Lyon, with its 12th century buildings with pink washed walls. We took a boat trip along the Saone round the peninsula and part way up the Rhone and then a walk in the Park de la Tete D'Or, coming out by Winston Churchill bridge, followed by a slow walk home. We visited St John's cathedral, with time to sit and listen to the choir practicing and see the beautiful astronomical clock on the banks of the Saone. There was also a trip up the cable car to Place de Fourviere with the wonderful views over the treetops to the town of Lyon followed by a lovely slow walk down through terraces of old varieties of roses full of perfume. I was so lucky to meet Isabella, she gave me a mini holiday as well as being able to study the straw-embroidered cap at Museum Crozatier in Le Puy.
Back in Nozeroy

I continued to work on my straw samples and looked forward to the 9 June when M. Jean Francios Ryon, Minister for Culture in the Jura region had offered to take me to Salin-le-Bain, to see the vestments embroidered with straw at St Antoil. Unfortunately this was not to be as the key holder was sadly in hospital. We spent the time in Nozeroy church instead, looking at all the various treasures in the sacristy, not just straw work. It is hoped that the left-hand side of the church, by the porch, will be converted to display the three sets of vestments that are at present locked away. This will be a big job as security is important but access to the display area and good visibility is also important. A great deal of money is needed for this venture, which the President of Nozeroy Historical Association, M. Roger Martine, has been striving for for many years. Nozeroy has the most straw embroidery I have ever seen, all in very good condition. Seeing is believing. No photographs can do it justice. It should be displayed to the world because I do not think there can be anything better than these straw embroideries of 350 years ago.

I returned home on 14 June, tired but happy. The gift of straw stars given by Anny Hopler-Keusch of 8919 Rottenschwil Switzerland on my 1st visit on 04-06-1996 were still hanging in the sacristy. My very grateful thanks to Mr and Mrs Martine and Mr Germain (the church warden) of Nozeroy for all the help and support they gave me during my stay. Thanks also to Isabella Christophe of Lyon and M. Jean-Francois Ryon, Minister for Culture in the Jura. Last but not least, Winston Churchill Travelling Fellowship for making me a fellow in 2005 and giving me my Chance of a Lifetime.

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Email: barbarafitch9029@gmail.com