Ebb’n’Flow uses contemporary bobbin lace to perpetuate ephemeral features from a fragile landscape in the forefront of climate breakdown. From a daily walk on Stanpit Marsh, Christchurch, Jane Atkinson has used linen to recreate cherished memories of delicate natural phenomena that flourished there and looks for practical steps to safeguard the future.

An accompanying international showcase demonstrates the potential that bobbin lace offers when used imaginatively in other materials such as gold, silver, horsehair, paper, silk and wire.
There was a lace pillow in her grandmother Flo Teal’s drawing room when Jane Atkinson grew up, as a conversation-piece. Three previous generations had made Downton lace on Salisbury Plain in the 1920s through the WI, before Flo turned her attention to running a garage, but it wasn’t thought likely Jane would have the patience. When Jane was 10, Flo moved, throwing pillow and pillow-horse on the bonfire.

It was a stranger, Kathrine Mackley, who introduced Jane to bobbin lace at 25, and as soon as she touched the bobbins ‘I felt I saw stars’. Four decades later, Jane still derives as much enjoyment from making lace as she did at the beginning – more, in fact, since she has long since found the way to make it personal rather than traditional.

The lacemaking was largely self-taught, alongside Jane’s first career in journalism. Trained in commercial languages at the Institut Français, London, followed by a journalism apprenticeship on the Gloucestershire Echo, Cheltenham, Jane moved to Dorset with her new husband, Terry, in 1975 which is where she finally found out how to make lace. Kathrine was just moving away, but Jane had got started.

Since there were no classes in lace design, she sat in on a City & Guilds creative embroidery design course with Gisela Thomas. She later studied Open College of the Arts art and design, a college certificate in Fine Art (latterly with Brian Graham) at Bournemouth and Poole College of Art, and a Cert Ed through Southampton University. Awards have included Lace Guild exhibition trophies and a Southern Arts bursary mentored by the weaver Ann Richards. A former chairman of 98 Lace, Jane also serves on the committee of Bournemouth Arts Club.

She has written Pattern Design for Torchon Lace (Batsford, 1987, translated into German for Haupt of Bern, 1989) and Contemporary Lace for You (Webfoot, 2011), as well as numerous articles for national and international magazines. She has exhibited in the UK, France, Spain, Germany, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Poland, Hungary, Croatia and Austria, and taught in France, Spain and Switzerland, across Australia and around the USA. This is Jane’s second solo show.
Author’s note

This publication was edited in February 2018, when signs of spring were becoming visible on Stanpit Marsh, and birders were flocking to see rare Continental visitors: a spoonbill and a stilt sandpiper (only seen 12 times before in the UK). Then came warnings of the ‘beast from the east’, a sudden reversal of wind-flow bringing Siberian weather to the UK.

Someone reading my manuscript also warned that the statistics I had included looked inaccurate, possibly including the error of an extra digit in the surprising finding of the previous winter’s weather records in Siberia, showing temperatures at one point 33°C above normal. This did prove to be out of date – figures reported before the Arctic blast hit the UK in early March showed that this had now reached 35°C above what is normal. Weather experts went on to explain the phenomenon of sudden stratospheric warming above the Arctic, which can cause the westerly winter polar vortex, which should keep the cold air in place, to reverse to its summer direction, bringing freezing easterlies down to our latitude.

Another reader queried the composition of the air bubbles from which I had drawn inspiration for some of my work. One might expect marsh gas to be methane, but I had found that some Cambridge University studies had shown air bubbles rising from salt marsh they examined in Norfolk to be a mixture of oxygen, nitrogen and carbon dioxide, although the composition varies from place to place.

The space limitations in a publication of this nature do not allow full referencing, which I had hoped to add in an annotated version online after the exhibition, and on disc during it. This I shall now definitely do. There is a limit to what individuals can do against a massive problem like climate breakdown, other than joining advocacy like Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth. But the consequences of the ‘beast’ were huge – among them a mass die-off of sea creatures, and the decimation of the insects that returning migrant birds like the wheatear and sand martin need to recuperate from their long flights. Two successive visits of snow and rain that month upset the arable and livestock timetables on which farmers rely.

On our first walk round the marsh after the icy blast, we found the corpse of the spoonbill. We have to change; or the changing planet will destroy the life we know.

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Jane Atkinson
Ties & Tides

Like the tide, rising and falling, so move the fortunes of lace, closely tied to the whims of fashion and industry. From its golden age during the 17th and 18th centuries when lace was the product of a precious collaboration between designers and skilled makers, the industry has waxed and waned. In recent years we have seen a renewed interest in lace which takes two distinct paths: the reinterpretation of traditional lace as seen in Dutch designer Joep Verhoeven’s Lace Fence, and a wave of new lacemakers exploring the limitless possibilities of these old techniques.

Jane Atkinson’s work is something of a paradox; it is both traditional and contemporary. It is brackish, occupying a sort of estuary where the long river of history merges with the infinite possibility of the ocean. Atkinson’s lace is traditional in its linen thread construction and in the destination of many of her pieces either to be worn or to be used in furnishing, but within this framework it continues the stylistic development of the technique rather than clinging to a past aesthetic.

In this new body of work, Atkinson has taken her intimate knowledge of bobbin lace and of the marshes near her home and developed her work in a new direction. Her lacemaking is so intrinsic to her creative expression that she employs it as a drawing tool to explore a sense of place and the subtle changes it is going through. This new work is akin to the beautiful lace drawings of Thessy Schoenholzer Nichols, or the powerful industrial landscapes of Elodie Antoine which are entirely sketched in bobbin lace.

Of the eight other artists who are exhibiting alongside Atkinson, the work of South African artist Pierre Fouché resonates most closely with this; both Atkinson and Fouché use their bobbins to translate what they see and what they want the viewer to see, each telling their own independent stories, but together showing that there is a language of lace which is eloquent and varied and which can be learnt.

‘Ebb’n’Flow’ brings together the fruits of one artist’s creative journey with those of her peers, looking out to the future while being firmly grounded on our home shore.

Angharad Rixon is a technical textile historian specialising in lace and passementerie; her studies in Italy, Switzerland and Spain have led to her skills in a variety of off-loom techniques. Angharad lectures in Milan and Florence and consults for museums and universities around the world. She is the director of TextileSupport.

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Introduction

What an honour to introduce this publication of the work of my friend Jane Atkinson. We started talking in a queue at the first Lace Guild Convention in 1991, and have never stopped. This exhibition builds on a conversation we had while on a European road trip in 2012, exhibiting and demonstrating at international lace events. The conversation challenged every aspect of lacemaking: the ‘why?’, ‘how?’ and ‘what with?’, concluding with ‘what is the holistic commitment of the maker?’

Atkinson is a pioneering artist with decades of experience, always questioning, experimenting and pushing her work forward to achieve her goal of making lace relevant to today. This has created an internationally-recognised style that is uniquely hers, where maximum effect is created with economy of stitches, which has resulted in a body of work of large-scale pieces, which is unusual in lace art.

A most prolific designer, who has folders of unworked designs because the next idea is always pressing and needs to be resolved, Atkinson uses mainly Torchon lace techniques and grids, but is not afraid to add whatever technique is needed to achieve the desired result. Through her books and teaching she has made an impact on the lace created around the world, by inspiring in others the joy of ‘big’ lace; what was once a radical idea is now commonplace.

This exhibition charts the progression of her work inspired by walking daily on the salt marsh near her home. There are pieces that changed her thinking on how original artwork is translated into lace. Bobbin lace uses areas of stitches without pins (solid areas) within a more open background created by the use of pins (open areas) to form the structure. By rethinking the techniques and by making a considered decision at each pinhole, freedoms have developed that allow a greater integration of solid and open areas, creating movement and a sense of flow through the work.

This work transcends anything Atkinson has done before; freeing herself from the need to create repeatable patterns has resulted in contemporary works of distinction and virtuosity.

Denise Watts
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Oxygen 1 – 4

Oxygen captures a benign and transitory formation of bubbles, probably oxygen and nitrogen, from Stanpit Marsh in Christchurch Harbour. Wetlands like this are globally important ecosystems that help us fight global warming by locking carbon into their waterlogged soils, inhibiting the rotting process; they are termed ‘carbon sinks’. By contrast, nearby 20th-century landfill is releasing methane, 86 times more potent than carbon dioxide (CO2) for climate change.

The realisation that if we take care of nature, it will take care of us, lies at the heart of 'Ebb’n’Flow'. Culled from a daily walk around what remains of Stanpit Marsh, the beauty represented by these bobbin lace pieces is our salvation; it is the 20th-century damage there that may be part of our downfall.

This is a fragile landscape, already slipping beneath rising waters resulting from climate breakdown. It can be difficult to visualise the insidious effects of global warming, but if we develop intimate experience of a particular patch of land, comparing what we see with what we remember makes it personal.

I began using natural phenomena to push an innovative and contemporary approach to lace nearly 30 years ago, when scientists were concerned about the newly discovered hole in the ozone layer over the Antarctic. That concern led to the 1987 Montreal Protocol, which led to the slow reduction of the hole.

Scientists now believe climate change is the major threat. Despite the 2015 Paris agreement, CO2 levels continue to soar throughout the world; this concerns everyone of us. ‘Ebb’n’Flow’ may have started as a personal challenge, but every feature that inspired these pieces is now just a delicate memory of a lost experience, a friable landscape reflected with this fragile medium.

This landscape has also changed the maker, initiating discoveries that have revolutionised her working practice. Wetlands have always been no-man’s-land – dry today, wet tomorrow, uncontrollable, edge-lands at the fringe of civilisation. Once seen as a portal to the afterlife for our ancestors, and as a source of food for our grandparents, now they are a vital part of the fight to heal our planet.

‘The realisation that if we take care of nature, it will take care of us, lies at the heart of Ebb’n’Flow.’
Caring for systems that care for us

Healing the Planet: One London/New York return ticket accounts for enough CO2 to melt 3 sq m of Arctic ice.

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Take one less flight or offset the carbon it produces with www.climatecare.org.

Oxygen 1
2015 – 2016
Czech and handspun linen
31 x 56cm
Caring for systems that care for us

Oxygen 2, 3, 4, clockwise from top, previous page
2015 – 2016
Czech and handspun linen
2, 25 x 36cm
3, 32 x 38cm
4, 29 x 35cm
Caring for systems that care for us

Oxygen 2, 3, 4, clockwise from top, previous page
2015 – 2016
Czech and handspun linen
2, 25 x 36cm
3, 32 x 38cm
4, 29 x 35cm
Caring for systems that care for us

Oxygen 1 – 4
2015 – 2016

Czech and handspun linen
1, 31 x 56cm; 2, 25 x 56cm; 3, 52 x 38cm; 4, 29 x 55cm
Caring for systems that care for us

Oxygen 1 – 4
2015 – 2016

Czech and handspun linen
1, 31 x 56cm; 2, 25 x 56cm; 3, 32 x 38cm; 4, 29 x 55cm
Adapting tradition to modern life

Cupid With His Piercing Dart

(‘deeply wounds my tender heart’)

Heart-shaped poplar leaves in whorls of lush green and gold have been translated in bobbin lace made of linen and hemp weaving yarn, to recall those just bursting into bud when an imposing tree, Populus nigra, was torn down by Storm Katie in 2016.

Traditional lace equipment, like the early 19th-century Honiton bobbin which carries the inscription from which the title of this work was taken, was made for fine thread. ‘Cupid’ was made with large Continental bobbins and a ‘pillow’ the size of a kitchen table. Traditional pillows were filled with straw, modern ones with synthetic foam.

The medium used for this hanging is Torchon bobbin lace, traditionally designed on a square grid as a utilitarian trimming, a peasant lace made by the yard which gets its name from the French for ‘dish cloth’. Its simplicity makes it a suitable lace for the learner, but also gives it enormous potential for experiment, exploited through ‘Ebb’n’Flow’ in various ways.

Bobbin lace is made by weaving and twisting pairs of threads together. Unlike in weaving, where many warp threads are aligned and then woven together with a single weft thread, in lace each individual thread is wound onto a wooden or bone bobbin; two of these are held in each hand as the work proceeds. This allows threads to be worked in all directions: to the left, right, backwards, forwards or over the top of others.

The British lace industry once employed hundreds of thousands of workers, with lace being a key component of fashion for both men and women, such as the Elizabethan ruff or the Georgian cravat. When import levies were imposed to protect British workers from foreign competition, Continental laces would have been smuggled with brandy and tobacco up the creeks on Stanpit Marsh.

Traditional lace is slow to make, so the lace machine was the holy grail of 19th-century mechanisation, but this cannot cope with the wide variety of yarns and filaments available to the hand-worker. The contemporary lacemaker can make use of gold, silver, horsehair, paper yarn and all other filaments that can be wound onto a suitable bobbin.

Hemp with linen tow
121 x 76cm
Cupid With His Piercing Dart

(‘deeply wounds my tender heart’)  

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Adapting tradition to modern life

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Weep Not For Me

(‘tiz all in vain, we only part to meet again’)

Weep Not For Me takes its title from an inscribed antique Honiton bobbin, and plays on the symbolic depiction of loss and grief often applied to the willow, weeping by the Waters of Babylon in the Christian Bible. These days we seem to have lost touch with the symbolic meanings used by those who could not read.

Colours remain a potent part of the Christian year, Western mourners still wearing black and grey, while Eastern ones wear white. Made after the loss of two much-loved companions, this is a contemplative piece intended as a reminder to ‘seize the day’, which might have been denied to others.

Plant material found on Stanpit Marsh is the starting point for a number of exhibits: willow, poplar and birch trees from its windbreak, thistle, teasel and fennel from along its paths.

Modern scientific understanding has stripped out the romantic associations concocted by our ancestors. Poplar leaves are dark on one side, light on the other, which shows when they shiver in the wind, and the Greeks explained it thus: ‘When Hercules went into Hades to capture the dog Cerberus, he wrapped several poplar branches around his head. When they came into contact with his sweat-covered brow, the leaves of the lower part turned black from the infernal smoke.’

The Roman philosopher Pliny also recounted that the dead used to be covered by the leaves of the black poplar. In the Celtic language Ogham, each of the 22 letters in its notched alphabet alluded to a tree – E for eadhadh, the poplar, symbolising victory and vision, while S for soil, the willow, denoted vision, imagination and intuition.

The medieval mind would have understood the thistle as referring to the Crown of Thorns, and symbolic of long life and tenacity. Drops of water caught at the base of teasel leaves, known as The Bath of Venus, were used to treat weak eyes.

Ancient iconography flooded medieval understanding of rural features. We can still benefit from being reminded of this richness when we stray through nature, which can ground our busy lives in peace and renewal. Now the emoji helps us speak once more without words.

Weep Not For Me 2012 Linen tow 136 x 70cm, two layers
Using symbols to speak without words

Weep Not For Me

(‘tiz all in vain, we only part to meet again’)

Weep Not For Me takes its title from an inscribed antique Honiton bobbin, and plays on the symbolic depiction of loss and grief often applied to the willow, weeping by the Waters of Babylon in the Christian Bible. These days we seem to have lost touch with the symbolic meanings used by those who could not read.

Colours remain a potent part of the Christian year, Western mourners still wearing black and grey, while Eastern ones wear white. Made after the loss of two much-loved companions, this is a contemplative piece intended as a reminder to ‘seize the day’, which might have been denied to others.

Plant material found on Stanpit Marsh is the starting point for a number of exhibits: willow, poplar and birch trees from its windbreak, thistle, teasel and fennel from along its paths.

Modern scientific understanding has stripped out the romantic associations concocted by our ancestors. Poplar leaves are dark on one side, light on the other, which shows when they shiver in the wind, and the Greeks explained it thus: ‘When Hercules went into Hades to capture the dog Cerberus, he wrapped several poplar branches around his head. When they came into contact with his sweat-covered brow, the leaves of the lower part turned black from the infernal smoke.’

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Healing the Planet: The private car is symbolic of personal freedom, as well as wealth and status – but 5,000 miles a year contributes 1.02 tonnes of CO₂ to the atmosphere. Could we do without?
Willow, Glade

Sunlight filtering through the pattern of leaves hanging from one of the willows (*Salix fragilis*) bordering the marsh on a summer’s day seemed to underline the sense of reassurance that nature brings us, by its rhythmical repetition over time and space. The re-emergence of willow’s familiar pattern of growth and the return of its catkins are important heralds of spring.

As bobbin lace is made, it is initially anchored into place by pins placed through holes in a prepared design called a ‘pricking’. This hanging has been constructed using a kit of laminated repeating pattern components tiled over a 132cm-wide lace pillow. Pattern is central to the life of the lacemaker because its traditional forms involve repeating designs. Bobbin lace is a complicated technique to learn, but by repeating the lesson taught by a new pattern, we master a new skill and settle it into our continuum of learning. By repeating the movements, our muscles come to remember them and the process becomes automatic, as with driving a car.

When we make lace in colour, we gain a new understanding of the way our threads move through the fabric, especially when simple motifs like those in Glade start to generate their own colour patterns through the work. Without the yellow threads added to represent the sunlight, the same six pairs of threads in each column would have repeated down the length. The experience of analysing growth patterns in plants in order to simplify designs for lace teaches us to appreciate the order that often lies beneath nature’s apparent disarray. Or as MI5 put it when advertising for intelligence officers: ‘Where others see chaos, you see pattern’.

Understanding pattern helps us to see the bigger picture – we have been using pattern to communicate ever since the modern mind evolved to share abstract thought. Crossed lines appeared in ice age caves inhabited perhaps 30,000 years ago, and were still being used into the modern era in the coded messages tramps left for each other, using sticks, stones and chalk to denote bars, as in ‘police may be called’. Now we use the hashtag # to categorise content on social media.
Using the power of pattern

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Healing the Planet: Patterns of life need to change – Britons took 48m foreign holidays in 2016, 68% more than in 1996, often at weekends. London – Istanbul x 2 = 1.66 tonnes CO₂