

Making 'Old Chestnuts'

At the outset, I tried to prepare carefully by thinking through the whole project and selecting objects to be used at an early stage so as to be sure the pages would be big enough. Nevertheless some modifications and changes were needed on the way along.

I used a piece of plastic canvas as the basis for each page. At a specialist quilting shop I bought material for padding both sides of each sheet, and plain cotton/linen union fabric for the background of every page, which I hoped would provide good contrast for the various textures and materials of the objects to be attached. Remnants of good quality soft furnishing fabric for the covers were provided by a 'well-wisher'.

After working out measurements, I used paper patterns to help me cut the different elements accurately:

Plastic canvas: 23cm x 18cm

Padding: 23cm x 37cm (allows for doubling over and easily trimmed if too big)

Fabric: 25cm x 34cm (allows 3cm for turnings and 4cm extra on spine edge)

(NB The page, once padded, measured 23.5cm x 18.5cm. I kept checking that the three elements would fit each other neatly.)

The padding was folded over the canvas and sewn all round the other three sides. The turnings of the fabric were pressed, then tacked, checking all the time that the sizes were correct and matched each other.

Once the text was printed and brailled, the labels were stitched onto the fabric pages using the sewing-machine. I took care to place the riddles for right-hand pages with spine allowance on the left; and to place the answers, for the left-hand pages with the spine allowance on the right, leaving enough room to attach the object in the correct place!

The pages for the tactile illustrations were tacked to the padded canvas pages.

Page 1

The abstract pattern in sisal string was sewn to the fabric (not right through the canvas) as an after-thought, when I realised there would be no tactile illustration on this first opening, to make a sort of 'endpaper'. Perhaps it could give rise to conversation about another 'old chestnut' of a question - 'how long is a piece of string?'

Page 3

For safety, pieces of tape were sewn over the sharpish ends of the model railway track (00 gauge) then the whole piece was sewn firmly to the page through all layers, using extra strong thread.

Page 5

A doll's knitting pattern was used to make a woolly jumper which I sewed to the page through all layers in such a way that fingers could discover it is a real jumper, wearable by a small enough person!

Page 7

The envelope was made out of Vilene so as to be more durable than paper. The letter is manila, attached to the envelope by means of a ribbon threaded through a hole strengthened by adhesive plastic.

Page 9

The towel is part of a new flannel with raw edge bound , and attached to the page at the top only, so that it is free to be handled and the label can be discovered.

Page 11

I originally intended to use a rubber glove but I couldn't bear the smell! A generous market-stall-holder gave me this beautiful leather one when I told her why I was looking for an odd/damaged/shop-soiled one! I sewed it carefully to the page so that it can be explored inside as well as out and the fingers can be moved.

Page13

This is the second attempt at the door-bell page! Two sheets of plastic canvas were needed, each padded on only one side. The bell-push, buzzer, battery and connector were joined to each other by soldering and then attached to the canvas side of one sheet with strong thread. Layers of 'sponge wipes' were attached to the canvas around the components to just below the top of the bell-push. A window was cut in the other canvas sheet to allow the bell to show and be pressed. The fabric was cut to fold down around the edges of the hole. Buttonhole stitch all round the edge made it fit well and some stitches were placed through all layers, using a very long needle! As it was such a thick page the two sheets had to be joined by a piece of tape, about 1cm wide, I think.

Page 14

Sponge wipes were used again, to create a hollow in the centre of the page to prevent the door-bell buzzing continuously when the book is closed. The fleecy fabric was sewn all over as a kind of tactile endpaper, contrasting the one inside the front cover.

Covers and Fastening

The title was embroidered on even-weave linen and the braille was attached before the whole label was sewn onto the cover fabric through the canvas. The chestnuts are padded with felt and covered with leather, and the button attached before joining the cover to page 1. The elastic for the loop had to be sewn to the back of page 14 before sewing on the back cover.

Construction

Each question page was joined to its answer page, oversewing by hand all round three outside edges with matching thread. A running stitch in natural linen thread was used through both layers of fabric at the edge of the canvas on the spine side.

Joining all the pages together was the most challenging part of the whole project for me. I have not found a strong, painless, elegant solution. I used an extra long needle and linen thread to sew through all layers but it was very hard work and looked very untidy. I had to neaten the result with very small stitches joining adjacent pages but I don't know how durable this will be.

Finally, the outside of the spine was covered with a piece of the furnishing fabric.