



Behind-the-Scenes Special Edition by Nicky Reynolds

The Wigmaker's Tale: Three Women, Three Wigs, One Very Busy iCord Machine

When I agreed to create the wigs for the Longest Yarn: Britain at War exhibition, I thought I was simply going to be making hair. What I actually made — somewhere between the whirr of the icord machine, the dining room table, 500 knitted rats making mischief and a growing pile of yarn trimmings — were three women with stories stitched into every strand.

Each wig became its own journey. Each one carried a whisper of the real women who once wore these styles not for fashion, but for work, duty, and the small act of holding onto themselves in the middle of wartime Britain.

And of course it all began with Daphne.



Daphne — Victory Rolls and a Nod from History

After seeing the astonishing items being created by the supertalented crafters — turning blackandwhite photographs and 80yearold kit into accurate woolly replicas — I realised that Daphne Hedges, the Land Girl rat catcher, needed hair with attitude to match. Not glamorous attitude — capable attitude. The sort of hair that says, “Yes, I can catch a hundred rats, drive a tractor, plough three fields, and still make it to the village dance.”

I had a wonderful idea that I could somehow create her beautiful, bountiful long brown curls that Id seen in so many of her photographs from wool. But as I am certainly no knitter, and can’t even begin to qualify as a crocheter, being barely able to tie a decent knot, I was decidedly on the back foot for this particular challenge. Then, by sheer chance, I came across a YouTube video for an icord machine. What a revelation! That was it. I had to have one immediately.

If you’ve never used one, imagine a tiny, overenthusiastic mill that spits out knitted rope like ticker tape. I bought an electric one, which does all the hard work automatically. My contribution was to hold the ball of wool whilst it was clamped to the edge of the table like a limpet on a rock at low tide. It cranked and ticked until warm brown cord snaked across the dining room floor like a woollen python. Then came the sculpting: rolling, pinning and coaxing the yarn into those iconic victory rolls on the polystyrene head form so I could darn it all together. It didn’t always behave — wool has a mind of its own, and after repinning and stitching for the third time, I found myself talking to the wig as if it were a slightly stubborn local councillor on my doorstep.

And then, when every curl and coil was in place, every loose thread trimmed, and every securing pin removed, there was a moment of stillness. The wool became hair, and the head became a Land Girl.

As I held up the fully formed wig, I glanced out of the kitchen window and saw ‘Other Daphne’ the tractor sitting quietly in her usual spot. She’s named for Daphne

Lake, one of the first Suffolk Land Girls to earn her tractor proficiency badge. Seeing the tractor there, keeping silent watch while her woollen soilsister took shape, felt like a small nod from history itself. A reminder that these weren't just hairstyles; they were lived lives, muddy boots, cold mornings, and real women who stepped up when the country needed them.

When the wig finally sat on the mannequin's head at Southwell Cathedral the day before the exhibition opened - jaunty, proud, unmistakably the Land Girl I knew so well I felt that quiet click of recognition. *'There you are'*.



Lillian — ATS Curls with Purpose

Next came Lillian, our ATS gal. She needed a short, blonde, curly bob, the kind that looks effortless but is, in truth, a feat of engineering.

Making Lillian's hair was slightly easier, as by then I had a better sense of how to plan my approach. But I was nervous too, because this was Tansy's beloved grandma taking shape, and I wanted so much to get it right. We sifted through samples until we found the shade of blonde that most resembled "Granny" in Tansy's memory.

Then it was back to feeding the icord machine for its next marathon. I fed it metre after metre of wool until my hands felt like they'd joined the Auxiliary Territorial

Service themselves. Then I uncurled, straightened, pinned, darned, clipped, curled, and pinned again. And again. The curls bounced. Then they flopped. Then they bounced again. It was like styling a naughty toddler made of yarn.

But as I worked, I kept thinking of the thousands of ATS women who lived their wartime lives in a blur of duty rosters, kitchens, supply stores, command centres, motor pools and friendships forged over enamel mugs of tea. There was something wonderfully defiant about giving Lillian her curls; a reminder that even in the middle of war, women held on to small rituals of identity.

Each curl became a nod to the real ATS girls who kept the country ticking while the world shook around them.

When she finally went on duty in the display, in her wonderful service dress and superbly crafted hat and stockings, Lillian looked ready to take a message, calculate a trajectory, invade a small principality or organise a tea dance; all with brisk efficiency.



Gillian — The Quiet Strength of the AFS

Finally, Gillian of the AFS. She needed a light brown middy cut — tidy, practical, absolutely nonsense. This wig was all about discipline: even lengths, clean lines, a shape that said, “I can handle a hose, a helmet, and a night shift.”

As I fed the icord in long, calm stretches, carried along by the gentle clicketyclick of the needles, I found myself thinking in contrast of the AFS women who worked through the Blitz - the ones who didn't have glamour or recognition, just grit, courage, and the constant smell of smoke in their clothes. Shaping Gillian's wig felt quieter, more deliberate, almost meditative.

Her smooth, rolling quiff at the front, hidden beneath her hat, is a secret tribute to the quiet calm possessed by all those women who worked in chaos, heat, and destruction. Her hairstyle became a small tribute to their steadiness - a silhouette that says, “I'll be where I'm needed.”

When she took her place in the exhibition, she brought a grounded, beautifully rounded dignity to the trio.



Three Wigs, Three Women, One Story

What surprised me most was how each wig took on the personality of its wearer long before it reached the exhibition. As I modelled them at home alongside each other, Daphne was bold. Lillian was lively. Gillian was composed. And all three reminded me that craft is never just craft... it's storytelling in stitches.

Visitors to the exhibition will see the amazing panels and be struck by the presence of the lifesize mannequins. I hope they take away even just a fraction of the creativity, craftsmanship, and love woven into every stitch of the exhibits and the stories they tell.

I'll remember the hours of stitching, darning, uncoiling, recoiling, muttering, lamenting, laughing, and shedding the odd tear when the wool was soft in my hands - quiet moments of intensely personal connection with the women who lived these histories

My heartfelt thanks go to every single person who helped bring Daphne so gloriously to life. Dessie, Daphne's daughter — who was very much the star we sailed our boats by in this wonderful journey said “Mum would have absolutely loved this.”

So did we, Daphne... so did we. x

In Our Next Issue : The Longest Yarn D-Day is coming home!

On 23 February, we'll unlock the doors to its permanent Carentan home—a historic church where its stories will inspire for years to come. After touring the US, the D-Day exhibition and lifesize hero Reg return, and volunteers are ready to bring it to life.

Stay tuned!

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