

# A ripping yarn... 4am special ops of the covert crocheters

**Dominic Hauschild**

At 4am on a July morning in Hertford, a group of about 20 female pensioners crept out of their houses and gathered in the town centre.

After a silent nodded hello, the clandestine group donned head torches and set about their work, moving quickly and efficiently in the early morning chill.

This was not an act of septuagenarian sabotage, although it is a grey area whether they are acting strictly within the rules. The women were part of a "yarn bombing" crew – a craft group which covers local structures, such as postboxes or bollards, with decorative

knitted or crocheted creations. While harmless, the catch is they do it in secret, without official approval.

The ringleader of the Hertford Yarn Bombers, Jo Baily, 64, a retired marketing professional, helped found the club in 2017 after a friend saw a display in Herne Bay, Kent. "I thought, 'Bloody hell that looks really good fun,'" she said.

Baily's crew now numbers 150 members and is one of dozens across the country participating in the trend, which has fast become a British cultural institution. Believed to have originated in the US, it first made its

way to the UK in 2009 when the graffiti knitting street artist Lauren O'Farrell, who operates under the pseudonym Deadly Knitshade, formed a group in London called Knit the City.

The practice went mainstream around Christmas 2012, with knitted postbox toppers popping up across the country.

This is no small enterprise. The Hertford Yarn Bombers meet three times a week and have a committee of 25 people. To date, the group has raised £190,000 for charities including a local hospice, the Royal British Legion and Mudlarks, a charity for young adults with learning disabilities. They raise the cash by auctioning off their creations, taking donations and selling small knitted toys at Christmas.

"We basically found our closest friends and asked, 'Can you knit or crochet? Do you like to knit or crochet?'"



Can you keep a secret?" If they said yes to all three, then we said, "Right. We've got a little project in mind," Baily said.

The first project was to decorate 27 postboxes in Hertford for Christmas, but their plans kept getting bigger. In 2018 the yarn bombers knitted 15,000 individual poppies to cascade down the side of Hertford Castle, using more than 170 miles of wool to create the installation. The covert operation at 4am was for an "enchanted wonderland" scene.

"By 7am everyone's



saying, 'Wow, that's appeared overnight.' One of my members always says that when ladies get to a certain age, there's not many chances for going out and being naughty at four in the morning."

Another big crew is the Rugby Yarn Bombers, led by Ceri Line, 62. The group boasts 200 members, who meet in small groups in their homes, churches and town halls around Warwickshire throughout the week.

Line, a shopkeeper, said she launched the club in September after visiting an installation by the Cosby Yarn Bombers, which included a crocheted tea

party and an enormous knitted octopus. "Honestly, I drove away from Cosby thinking, 'That's what I want for Rugby,'" she said.

The first project by the Rugby Yarn Bombers – an *Alice in Wonderland* display of epic proportions – will launch in June. "*Alice in Wonderland* is full of all sorts of wonderful things like griffins and dodos and we are curating it to the books and the original illustrations by John Tenniel," explained Line.

On the whole, people are positive about the yarn bombers, although it is not always plain sailing. "Some people were like, 'Oh, I don't like yarn bombing.' I think the objections were that it's just a load of grannies making granny squares," said Line. "But I went ahead and did it anyway." Granny squares are what an absolute beginner crocheter may make: a simple square of woven yarn.

Sally Simic, 75, said her biggest problem is theft. As the leader of the Stanstead Abbotts Yarn Bombers, an offshoot of the Hertford group, she has been making postbox toppers for her village since 2018. For Easter this year, she crocheted a white bunny next to a basket of multicoloured eggs. "Sometimes youngsters think it's funny to take a prize on their way home from the pub on Friday nights," said Simic.

Ayla Lyall, 6, peeks at a yarn bomb in Hawick in the Scottish Borders; a green goddess in Avebury, below, and an Easter topper in Windsor, far left



"I don't care too much, but some people have spent days and hours on things which get spoiled."

The other challenge is the weather. Baily said that for the poppy cascade on Hertford Castle, the group had to work out what 15,000 knitted poppies would weigh when wet. "Of course we didn't want Hertford Castle to fall down and for everyone to hate us."

For Simic, a retired business owner, the issue is solved using synthetic wool stuffed with waterproof material, such as shredded plastic bags. "The postbox toppers in my village tend to come back as perfect as when they went out," she said.

Royal Mail, which has about 115,000 postboxes across the UK, said it "appreciates the passion and care that goes into" the crocheted toppers, but added that the decorations should not "hinder other customers from posting items, or our posties from collecting mail".

Ultimately, the fun is in bringing joy to the public. "Sometimes they're a little bit roughly crafted, but it's to make people laugh. To bring a bit of humour and a bit of colour to the community, to make people smile," said Simic. "But also, it gives us a bit of an outlet because I think we were all fed up with making jumpers that didn't fit anyone."