

Button artist reveals her plans to float the royal boat

Half a million buttons will decorate banner on barge carrying the Queen on her Jubilee Pageant

By SIMON USBORNE

When the Queen floats at stately speed along the Thames next month, Ann Carrington won't be looking at the Jubilee girl but at the back end of her barge.

The artist has created a startling velvet banner adorned with half a million gold buttons. Her work, revealed by The Independent, will hang from the Spirit of Chartwell at the centre of the Diamond Jubilee Pageant.

The buttons, which took Carrington and six assistants more than four months to sew, will shimmer in the light as 1,000 boats sail to Tower Bridge on 3 June. She plans to watch from the Millennium Bridge, and hopes it doesn't rain. "Nothing bad would happen," she says. "It'll just get wet and heavy and sink the boat."

Carrington's joke betrays a mischievous streak. A royal commission is a departure for a contemporary artist best known for blowing up the Queen's head. Born in Birmingham and trained at the Royal College of Art, Carrington, 50, went on to embrace objects of the sort we ignore: coins; clothing; safety pins.

In perhaps her most striking, the artist, whose clients have included Sir Elton John and Gwyneth Paltrow, used pearl buttons to create giant depictions of a postage stamp. The works, called Pearly Queens, reveal another of Carrington's interests: the mythic origins of a peculiar East End tradition.

The story begins, ominously, with a Thames barge that capsized under the



weight of millions of pearl buttons.

Legend has it that, in around 1880, Henry Croft, an orphan street sweeper who collected money to support working class families, came across the washed-up consignment. He cleaned up the buttons and sewed them onto a suit and top hat, incorporating slogans to draw attention to his fundraising.

The Banner is adorned with £15,000 of buttons which took seven people four months to sew on

Hesitantly, Carrington decided to continue the theme of pearly kings and queens when she received her royal commission. "I was quite surprised they



Ann Carrington, above left, and a colleague work on the banner that will decorate the *Spirit of Chartwell*, below



agreed because it's almost acknowledging that there are two royal families," she says.

There were other hurdles of the state. Carrington wanted a crown at the centre of her coat of arms, where typically a shield would appear. For this she would need the Queen's approval, via her Garter King of arms, an office instituted by Henry V in 1415.

"He was a bit huffy about some of it," she recalls. "He suggested a few tiny changes - the lion was a bit too far to the left - but after a few phone calls to Buckingham Palace, in hushed tones, he came back and said it was fine."

The design approved, Carrington

ordered more than £15,000 of buttons from China from her studio at Margate in Kent.

She drew the outline of her design using chalk on velvet before the sewing could begin. As the Queen continues her course along the Thames, Carrington hopes the threads hold tight. "If not I can always throw her a sewing kit," she says.