

Golden tribute to a diamond occasion... let's just hope it doesn't rain too heavily

By Simon Usbourne

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

The artist has created a startling velvet banner adorned with half a million gold buttons to celebrate 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 cheeky 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 include Sir Elton John



Artist Ann Carrington with her Jubilee banner

and Gwyneth Paltrow, used pearl buttons to create a giant postage stamp. The works, called Pearly Queens, reveal another of Carrington's interests.

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.

Carrington decided to continue the theme when she received her royal commission. She also 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. "He was a bit huffy about some of it," she recalls. "He

suggested a few tiny changes, but after a few phone calls to Buckingham Palace, he came back and said it was fine."

The design approved, Carrington ordered more than £15,000 of buttons from China for the flag. 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.