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The Great Morsbag Giveaway

Since 2007 Claire Morsman has been encouraging people to stop using plastic bags and to create reusable Morsbags, here she shares her story

What is a Morsbag?

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A Morsbag always has a label sewn on with our website address so that the recipient can find their way to the simple free pattern, rummage through their fabric stash, make a Morsbag and so the cycle continues!

Was there any particular event that made you start Morsbags?

A combination of things, we lived on a houseboat in London and I was getting increasingly concerned by the endless flow of plastic bags in the canal. I naively wondered where they might end up. When I did a bit of research and found out how fatal plastic bags can be to whales, turtles and other marine wildlife, all for the sake of a one-use bag, I couldn't believe it. I also went home to Devon and saw a sea bird entangled in a plastic bag and it felt like a message, so I vowed never to use a plastic bag again, but needed to think of an alternative. Serendipitously, my great aunt had just left me her sewing machine which I didn't know how to use! It was a portable Elna on which I made all the first Morsbags.

I felt as if my eyes had been opened to a needless and easily solved problem, and many Morsbaggers also write to us saying that too...

Who received the very first Morsbag?

I kept it! The seams were so wobbly due to my terrible sewing! It's proof of how durable Morsbags are though, as it's still in use after 9 years... I found the vintage material in a skip in London and washed, cut and sewed it and have been using it ever since.

Who designed your original pattern?

My mum, Val Morsman. After I had the idea of making my own reusable bags, I realised I didn't have a clue how to make one! I phoned her for advice and she designed a very simple pattern so that anyone could follow it. We put it on the website for anyone to help themselves: www.morsbags.com/get-involved/pattern-download-links/ and there's a step-by-step video too: www.morsbags.com/get-involved/pattern-download-links/video/

Mum's pattern, the one on the website, forms the basis for a very sturdy practical Morsbag but we welcome clever stitchers adding their own adaptations – pockets, longer handles, box bottoms, to fit wheelchairs etc. As long as it replaces the job of a plastic bag, can carry the shopping and has a label, then it's a Morsbag.

What are Pods?

Pods are simply the name for groups who make Morsbags. We have about 1500 pods all over the world. Morsbagging groups of all sizes meet in halls, front rooms, schools etc. and we have 'solo podders' too who make Morsbags at home by themselves. We have pods that are

school classes, prisoners, WI groups, scouts, nuns, students etc. but many are individuals who want to stitch as part of an online community.

We wanted Morsbags to be a sociable and community activity if possible and that has certainly happened – new friends have been made in pods all over the globe as stitching is the perfect way to have a chat, share fabric, a cup of tea and some cake. We also wanted people to take the idea and run with it locally and that has been successful too, there are pods that have grown in strength and number and they write to us about the amazing events they hold (usually involving cake!) Morsbaggers are extraordinary people and it's lovely to see so many friendships develop when people might only have had Morsbags in common to begin with.

We ask people to sign up as a pod on the site so that they can add the number of Morsbags they make to the main tally. This is a way of being part of the bigger picture and really seeing how everyone's small efforts of making a quick Morsbag can add together to make a huge difference which is inspirational and keeps the momentum going too.

We also have pods in Mexico, New Zealand, Russia, Japan, India, Singapore, Taiwan and all over Europe and America.

There's a podmap on the site: www.morsbags.com/pods/ where you can browse to see if there's a pod nearby and whether they are recruiting or not. If not, please set one up yourself and join in!

Have you got any super makers, and if so how many have they made?

The most prolific maker is the 'Trusty Bags' pod in Leicester. This pod is given community payback orders by the courts, taught to use a sewing machine and make Morsbags. They have made a whopping 50,000 Morsbags which have been given away in Leicestershire at public events, to community groups and hospital volunteers, farmers markets, food banks and shoppers. This has all been coordinated by Rosie Eley – a Morsbagging star! 'Sazbags' is another extraordinary pod as she's a lone Morsbagger with a tally of nearly 5000 and 'Cuckoo' is a husband and wife pod who have an amazing tally of 9311 Morsbags. There is a 'leader board' of pods on the site, but every single Morsbag made helps, so it's not all about huge numbers.

Can you tell us about guerilla handouts?

Morsbagging is a bit like a 'random act of kindness' or a 'pay it forward' idea where bags are given away to strangers. We arrange a date so people can coordinate to get a stash of bags together and then set them free into the 'wild'. This can be arranged in a local pod, perhaps standing outside a supermarket, on a high street, a theatre, anywhere busy. Giving someone a useful and unexpected free gift is a joy and they usually want to know 'what's the catch', but of course there isn't one.

For those who don't feel so comfortable with this, pods have told us they guerilla Morsbag people through letterboxes, on cars in car parks, through book groups, even left hanging on public statues. Morsbags also make great wrapping paper by the way.

'If you've made a handmade Morsbag with love and your own fabric and time, chances are you won't forget to take it to the shops, and the whales will be thankful to you for that.'



Clockwise from above: Morsbags fabric donated by Buckingham Palace and Clarence House; Morsbags in the wind; Sarah Jessop handing out bags from the 4th plinth in Trafalgar Square.
Opposite page: Morsbag made from an old Liberty curtain.

Can you share stories of some unusual handouts?

Morsbags have been handed out from the fourth plinth at Trafalgar Square, from horseback, at the Houses of Parliament, at a Royal Garden Party, the national community choir festival, to witnesses in court. There are heartwarming and amusing stories from every handout. The Royal Family have been Morsbagged and Prince Charles very kindly donated their old curtains from the palaces. Giving them out to the general public is a great way to get people talking and seeing a Morsbag out in the wild is a fabulous feeling.

What type of fabrics do people use to make them?

The best kind of fabrics tend to be from curtains and bedding such as duvet covers and pillow cases as they don't stretch and they are strong, washable and easy to sew. It's a good excuse for a de-cluttering session of the airing cupboard – tea towels, dresses and shower curtains make good Morsbags too and even hot air balloon fabric and dinghy sails have been used.

Can children get involved in making these bags?

Yes! This is our next major project, we'd love to get all schools involved. We do already have many schools taking part but it's down to an individual enthusiastic teacher and we'd love to see it compulsory to make a Morsbag at school as it teaches valuable skills and raises awareness of environmental issues. We've had older classes make bags for the younger ones to draw on with fabric pens so that they get involved too.

Do you need to be a stitcher to take part?

No, we need wonderful people to source material, cut the fabric (there's even a lady called Mary Scissorhands in Leicester as she's such a cutting whiz), spread the word through talking about it, provide a place to meet, make the tea. Anyone can join in and we're thrilled when they do!

You sell labels to put on the bags, why is this?

We sell labels at cost price because when a Morsbag is given away for free, people want to know why. The label has the website on it so people can read about our ethos and see the bigger picture, see how many people are involved and hopefully feel inspired to join in. We hope they will help themselves to the free pattern and so the cycle continues. This is the only way that Morsbags is promoted and the cost is small – approximately 5p per label. Pods often arrange local sponsorship to help with the cost. Ideally we'd like to offer the labels for free to everyone, but that's a funding issue at the moment.

Have you noticed a change in attitude towards re-usable bags since the 5p charge was introduced?

It's a positive step in the right direction but it isn't nearly a high enough price to deter people and there are too many smaller shops that it doesn't apply to anyway. It hasn't made a huge change to us as people still want a better quality bag that will last for years and is far more attractive than a plastic bag anyway. We're tackling the problem from a consumer point of view rather than the retailers as we think they are being slow to act and we're shamefully behind many other countries that have an outright ban on plastic bags such as China, Bangladesh and many African countries. It's

a small and solvable problem in comparison with other environmental issues which I find frustrating as we could provide everyone with reusable Morsbags and then ban plastic bags altogether. I'm optimistic!

How do you fund your website?

We pay for it ourselves. The website build was funded by the Big Lottery Fund, which we were very grateful for, but we pay the ongoing costs. Fundraising is something we need to look into but we want to keep the Morsbagging ethos away from money as much as possible so as not to muddy the waters of the FREE bag idea.

Can you tell us about some of the awards you have won?

We've been lucky enough to win 3 awards – the Green Apple community environment award at the House of Commons in 2010 and Best Newcomer and Most Innovative Green Product at the Green Awards in 2007. I'd like to give all Morsbaggers an award for being amazing as they quietly sew 1000's of Morsbags around the UK and make a huge difference in a joyful and positive way. I'd love to give them all a hug at least.

What does a typical week look like for you?

Busy! We have an 11 month old baby, I'm doing a full time PhD, we run a guesthouse in Morocco and my husband works full time. Morsbag label orders come in thick and fast on a daily basis, so I'm usually cutting, packaging or running to the post office as well as answering many emails with queries, requests, donations of fabric etc. I feel like I'd like to do much, much more to make Morsbags successful and have plenty of ideas, but time is always an issue. The sewing machine is out but doesn't get used as much as I'd like it to!

Are you a stitcher?

I can sew now and would love to do more but if I do get time, it's usually to make Morsbags as it's strangely addictive and of course I want

to keep giving them away. I did find time to make a quilt each for my mum and my daughter from all the tiny scraps that weren't usable for Morsbags though. I had no idea that sewing could be fun from my experiences at school so am grateful to Morsbagging for that. We often receive emails from people saying the same – that our simple pattern has helped launch them into sewing projects when they'd never sewn before. There's certainly a fear of sewing machines that many people tell us they've overcome with Morsbagging. I'm sure we've boosted sewing machine sales judging by the emails we get!

We love handmade bags, so you are preaching to the converted, but why should people make and use a Morsbag?

Morsbags also help keep waste fabric out of landfill, (1000's of tonnes dumped per year) and unlike new fabric bags being sold or given in shops and supermarkets, Morsbags are sourced and made locally so no air miles and the material has already been produced so no more pesticides and water pollution, cotton farming is incredibly harmful. They are fun, simple and quick to make, added to which you can make them to your own taste and needs.

If you've made a handmade Morsbag with love and your own fabric and time, chances are you won't forget to take it to the shops, and the whales will be thankful to you for that. ♦

www.morsbags.com

