**Oxburgh Hangings -** embroidery by Mary Queen of Scots while in captivity.

**What are they?**

Embroidery panels made by Mary Queen of Scots and her companion, Bess Talbot, Countess of Salisbury, during Mary’s 19 year captivity in England.

Linen canvas was embroidered with coloured threads, including silver and gold.

Panels like this were sewn together to form hangings to decorate walls, windows or beds. Sometimes they might later be disassembled and made into something else.

Mary also sent embroideries as gifts to friends and supporters including Elizabeth I.

The hangings consisted of a wall hanging, two bed curtains and a valance.

The V&A have several panels that came from another hanging which was unpicked.

**Mary’s imprisonment and death**

Bess was Mary’s companion when she stayed at the various properties owned by her husband, George Talbot, Earl of Shrewsbury.

Mary had to flee Scotland in 1568 after the murder of her husband, Lord Darnley, and her marriage to the man suspected of doing the deed, James, Earl Bothwell.

Mary was always a threat to Elizabeth because she was the focus of Catholic conspiracies to put her on the throne of England and restore the country to Catholicism.

Elizabeth I allowed her to come to England but had her imprisoned for 19 years before executing her in Fotheringay Castle in 1587 for her involvement in the Babington Plot.

Contrary to the story told in the film, the two queens never met.

Wealthy, high born women spent much of their time on embroidery. Especially if they were under house arrest!

*I asked her Grace, since the weather did cut off all exercises abroad, how she passed the time within. She said that all the day she wrought with her needle, and that the diversity of the colours made the work seem less tedious, and continued so long at it till very pain did make her to give over.*

Nicholas White, an envoy of Elizabeth I, reporting a conversation with Mary

**Closer look**

There are animals and fish copied from a contemporary book called C. Gesner Icones Animalium. He was a Swiss physician and naturalist who sought to catalogue all living creatures on Earth.

Some of the creatures are mythical such as unicorns and dragons.

The hangings also feature coded messages. **A phoenix r**epresents regeneration - perhaps Mary still hoping to be restored to her throne? In another **a ginger cat toys with a grey mouse** - does this represent red-haired Elizabeth cruelly toying with Mary’s fate?

It’s very rare to be able to identify the work of a royal embroiderer but this one bears Mary’s initials and cipher. M and A over Greek letter phi (pronounced fie)

**Where are they now?**

After Mary’s death the hangings were given to Ann Dacre, Countess of Arundel. (See Dacre beasts on staircase)

Later on in C18th through marriage they ended up in Oxburgh Hall in Norfolk, home of the Bedingfield family but now owned by National Trust.

The four main hangings are on permanent loan there.

Another hanging was broken up into individual panels some of which we see here.