



Vera Selby MBE.

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## **New exhibition honours the life of a North East icon**

As fans prepare for the 2024 World Snooker Championship to get under way this weekend, a new exhibition has been staged at Northumbria University to celebrate the life of a multiple snooker and billiards world champion and one of the most inspirational sportswomen of her generation.

Vera Selby MBE was a trailblazer in many ways: as a pioneering sportswoman, equality campaigner, art educator and textile artist. She continued to play competitively into her eighties and died on her birthday in March 2023, aged

Born in North Yorkshire, she studied art and design in Leeds, and began her teaching career in schools and art colleges across the city of Newcastle. In 1972, Vera joined Northumbria University (then Newcastle Polytechnic) where she worked as a Senior Art and Textile Lecturer and then as Head of Art Education, until her retirement in 1983.

Her passion for creating unique textile and mixed media art from recycled and repurposed items used in day-to-day life led Vera to run outreach and training activities for teachers across the region and beyond. Her teaching notes, lesson plans and guidance were later published as an educational book called *Creative Textiles* in 2000, which is still used in classrooms today.

Vera's passion for billiards and snooker was something which played a huge part in her life, after she was introduced to billiards as a child, and picked it up again in the 1960s when she negotiated hard to be able to hone her skills in the toughest school of Newcastle's working men's clubs. It wasn't long before she was noticed by Alf Nolan, the former British amateur billiards and snooker champion, who offered to coach her.

At a time when many snooker clubs enforced a ban on women competing, Vera began operating in a man's world, with her drive to succeed and determination to inspire change seeing her through as she perfected her game – often for hours in the evenings after teaching all day.

Between 1970 and 1978, Vera won eight World Women's Billiards Championships. The first Women's World Open Championship in snooker was held in 1976 and Vera won the title, before repeating the feat in 1981. In the same year she was named Newcastle's Sports Personality of the Year. Throughout it all, she was immaculately dressed in trousers and waistcoats she'd made herself.

She went on to command respect as a professional snooker referee and was appointed chairwoman of the North East Billiards and Snooker Association. In 1982, the BBC made a decision that proved to be ahead of its time, and invited Vera to commentate on the World Snooker Championship that year at the famous Crucible Theatre in Sheffield.

Recognised as a pioneering figure in women's cue sports, Vera received an MBE in 2015 for her services to snooker and billiards. She remained a prominent figure within her work and sporting pursuits and proved to be a popular after-dinner speaker who was able to retell her many stories and experiences with confidence and good humour.

Anne Parker, Vera's friend of 30 years who has gone on to act as the executor of her will, said: "Through the mediums of art and sport, Vera has helped to both break down barriers and expand horizons. It is important to create a fitting legacy for a pioneer of women's sport; champion of creativity and forerunner of recycling. A fine example of how we should be living today.

"The exhibition at Northumbria University travels from an emotive tapestry of Jesus, through to knitted bin liners. We see beautiful batik work and exquisite embroidery alongside pictures, amazingly created, from repurposed paperclips and plug heads. All beautifully presented and all demonstrating Vera's imagination and eye for detail."

The exhibition, staged in [Northumbria's School of Design](#) building, was curated by Dr Heather Robson, Head of the School of Design, and Professor Anne Peirson-Smith, the University's Head of Fashion after they were given access to the life's work and collection Vera had amassed. Trophies from Vera's sporting successes are displayed alongside stories of her achievements, waistcoats she made and competed in, mounted wall art and scores of carefully preserved teaching materials she devised throughout her career.

Diane Greaves, another of Vera's long-standing friends and former colleague who worked with her on the publication of her *Creative Textiles* book, said: "Vera was and still is an inspiration to us all. She was very well known in such a wide spectrum of circles and was at ease in all of them.

"Many of Northumbria's students are seeing Vera's work for the first time and have taken aspects of her work into their own projects, which is wonderful to see. It is thanks to the vision of the University staff that the exhibition has been curated and here today for us all to enjoy."



Professor Anne Peirson-Smith and Diane Greaves discuss the educational book 'Creative Textiles' written by Vera Selby.

Dr Heather Robson said: “It’s wonderful that we have been able to support the celebration of Vera’s life in this way. Her story is a fascinating and inspirational story to tell, and one that our students will continue to learn from and engage with for many years to come. She was ahead of her time in so many ways. An ordinary woman who achieved so many extraordinary things.”

The exhibition *Vera Selby, MBE (1930-2023): A Champion's Life: Pioneering Sportswoman, Equality Campaigner, Art Educator and Textile Artist*, will be officially launched at an open evening on Thursday 18 April, between 5pm and 8pm.

It will remain open to the public until Friday 26 April at Northumbria University, School of Design, City Campus East, Newcastle Upon Tyne, NE1 2SU. Usual opening hours are between 8.30am to 5pm, Monday to Friday. The exhibition will also be open to visitors this Saturday 20 April between 9am and 3pm.

More than 120 items from the exhibition are involved in an auction which will run until Tuesday 23 April. The aim is to raise funds for [Sport Newcastle](#),

an organisation which works to support young people to achieve their sporting ambitions. For more information, visit the auction site online: <https://app.charityauctionstoday.com/auctions/vera-selby-mbe-auction--40054>

## Ends

For more information, contact Gemma Brown, PR and Media Officer at Northumbria University on [gemma6.brown@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:gemma6.brown@northumbria.ac.uk)

### Photo captions

- Images 1 – Vera Selby MBE
- Image 2 – Northumbria University team with Diane Greaves. Left to right: Technical Support Manager, Kenny Macrae; Head of Fashion, Professor Anne Peirson-Smith; Diane Greaves; Head of Northumbria School of Design, Dr Heather Robson and Department Administrator, Naomi Warne.
- Image 3 – Diane Greaves admires some of the items on display at the Vera Selby exhibition.
- Image 4 – Professor Anne Peirson-Smith and Diane Greaves discuss the educational book *Creative Textiles* written by Vera Selby.
- Images 5, 6 and 7 – Items on display at the Vera Selby exhibition.
- Further images available on request.

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--- Please contact [media.communications@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:media.communications@northumbria.ac.uk) with any media enquiries or interview requests ---

## Contacts



### **Rik Kendall**

Press Contact  
PR and Media Manager  
Business and Law / Arts, Design & Social Sciences  
[rik.kendall@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:rik.kendall@northumbria.ac.uk)  
07923 382339



### **Andrea Slowey**

Press Contact  
PR and Media Manager  
Engineering and Environment / Health and Life Sciences  
[andrea.slowey@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:andrea.slowey@northumbria.ac.uk)  
07708 509436



### **Rachael Barwick**

Press Contact  
PR and Media Manager  
[rachael.barwick@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:rachael.barwick@northumbria.ac.uk)  
07377422415



### **James Fox**

Press Contact  
Student Communications Manager  
[james2.fox@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:james2.fox@northumbria.ac.uk)

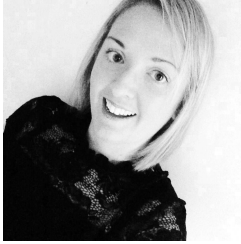


**Kelly Elliott**

Press Contact

PR and Media Officer

[kelly2.elliott@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:kelly2.elliott@northumbria.ac.uk)



**Gemma Brown**

Press Contact

PR and Media Officer

[gemma6.brown@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:gemma6.brown@northumbria.ac.uk)