Blackwork is the name given to embroidery worked in black threads on white background fabric. In its most traditional form it is geometric in design. It first gained fame in the reign of Henry the VIII. It is said Catherine of Aragon and her ladies brought the skill to England from Spain. However, this type of embroidery has its origins much further back in antiquity. It can be traced through the Moors and Arabs to the ancient Persians and Egyptians.

Hans Holbein the younger, who became known as the “King’s Painter” in the court of Henry VIII, painted in such detail that even the Blackwork embroidery was reflected in minute detail, as a result of this Blackwork is sometimes referred to as Holbein. The Elizabethans used embroidery extensively in their clothing and furnishing and Blackwork was among their favourites. They expanded their original geometric designs to include birds, animals, fruits, and flowers, etc.

**Material**
Either linen or lugana 25 count approximately 12” x 16”

**Threads**
Threads should be similar in weight to that used in the woven fabric. Black is the traditional colour but any colour may be used as long as it provides a strong contrast to the background. Pearl cotton # 8 or 12, stranded cotton or silk floss (2 or 3 strands) and metallic threads (for highlighting effects) can all be used.

**Needles**
Tapestry needle # 24 or appropriate size for fabric and thread

**Work frame**
Stretcher bar frame or embroidery hoop

**Transferring the design**

There are several ways to transfer designs

**Regular shapes**: For patterns that form a straight line or square, only the starting and ending point need to be marked. This is usually done by counting.

**Irregular shapes**: The shape can be traced using a marker that can be removed by either water or heat. Patterns can also be traced onto tracing paper and basted onto the ground fabric.

**Note**: If using a thread that is overdyed or space dyed, be sure it is colour fast.
Blackwork pattern stitches:

BACKSTITCH: Working from right to left bring the needle up at A and go down at B. Up at C and down at A. Continue this around the desired shape.

DOUBLE RUNNING OR HOLBEIN STITCH: Consists of a simple running stitch worked in two journeys. The thread emerges at A and goes down at B. Up at C and down at D. Continue travelling in the directions indicated by the design leaving spaces of equal space. When the end of the line is reached the needle is turned for its second journey this time filling the spaces left on the first journey. This stitch has the merit of looking the same on both sides.

Outline stitches Outlining the design can be done either before or after the design areas are filled. A sharp needle can be used to pierce the fabric in order to follow the design precisely. A variety of stitches may be used to do the outlining such as back, cross, outline, stem, chain, scroll, coral knot, split, etc.

Filling stitches Besides using blackwork patterns and designs, areas may be filled with other filling stitches such as satin stitch, blanket stitch, close herringbone stitch, whipped and woven spider webs, needlelace fillings, trellis filling, pattern darning, seed stitch, or pulled thread.
Shading There are several methods of shading that may be used:

1) The weight of the embroidery thread can be changed. Two strands versus one strand will give a darker effect.

2) The stitch length of the pattern can be changed. Shorter stitches make the pattern darker.

3) Different patterns have different weights; some appear much lighter or darker than others.

4) The density of a pattern can be increased by adding stitches in the motif and/or in the space between motifs.

It is important to have an idea of which areas of your design you would like to be light and which would be darker. Here are two ideas for the Tudor rose design plus blank rose and grid patterns for you to experiment with.