

The Banners of the Scottish Women's Guild

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The banners of the Women's Co-operative Guild in Scotland form a distinct group. Many familiar Co-operative Guild motifs are used but new ones are introduced, some with a Scottish flavour. The regional flower symbolism is not operative but the emblems of white heather — for good luck, and the thistle, as a national symbol are occasionally deployed. Some examples contain images of Scottish labour heroes such as Keir Hardie or Robert Burns. Another motif that seems to be particular to Scotland is the full-sailed galleon with its inscription 'Co-operation is the people's galleon' — a lovely metaphor and an elegant image but not an easy one for an amateur artist to design or reproduce. In fact there is clear evidence that many of the Scottish banners were commissioned from the signwriting department of the giant Shieldhall works of the Scottish Co-operative Wholesale Society as they have a similar format, poles and boxes. This seems to be a major distinguishing factor between Scottish and English banners.

A large group of banners date from the immediate post-second world war period. The banners are painted and close similarities can also be seen in the letter forms and scroll work around the outside of the main motif. The central oval usually takes the form of a painted landscape in a fairly bland realist style, some are signed by 'Milner'. The images may have been taken from photographs and many represent surprisingly unglamorous views of water towers, streets or pit-head buildings. Industrial scenes are not untypical of inset images on trade union banners but usually they show people at work rather than views. The Scottish banners celebrate the contemporary landscape of industrial Scotland, an alternative to the romantic landscape tradition of 'Scottishness', of castles, mountains and lochs although these are also represented on some banners when appropriate to a particular area.

Mrs Hannah Trotter of Macmerry Branch of East Lothian remembered how her branch, founded in 1946, decided to commission a banner in the late 1950s. A collecting box was put out at every meeting where members could drop in their spare pennies. After two years, enough had been saved up to pay for a banner which cost around £20. It was commissioned through East Lothian Co-operative Society and the guild members proposed the symbols — the sheaf of corn depicting farming, and the pick and shovel for mining. The central feature is a painted view of pithead buildings, the winding engine and the railway to transport the coal, but with fields and hills in the background to represent the farming section of the community. The painting does not represent a precise view but is rather a general image incorporating the subjects the members suggested.

Why is there such a difference between the Scottish banners and those in England which predominantly rely on embroidery skills and emblematic imagery? The English banners show a greater individuality in style because, I would suggest, the English banners were produced by individual women or groups of women using skills they had themselves. Many of the Scottish banners were produced by a specialist who adapted the elaborate banner making tradition of a large firm such as Tutills to the more modest needs of local branches of the Co-operative Women's Guild. Painted images and landscape views are rarely found on women's banners in England.

One possible reason for this difference is the period in which banners were commissioned. Embroidery and sewing skills were generally widely available to women in the earlier part of this century when more of the English banners were made. By the second half of the century when most of the Scottish banners were made, such skills were more scarce. Furthermore in Scotland, the Co-operative Society itself acted as a convenient intermediary for the commissioning of banners. In either situation, whether made by a member or members of the group or commissioned, it is clear that branch members took an enthusiastic interest and pride in their banners many of which are still in regular use today at branch meetings and rallies.

Scottish Co-operative Women's Guild

Margaret Marsden, General Secretary

The Scottish Co-operative Women's Guild was formed in 1892 under the title 'The Association of the Women's Guilds in Scotland'. The Co-operative Movement quickly realised that the Guild provided a source of energy and commitment as well as enthusiasm and loyalty, and supported its expansion. The Scottish Co-operative Women's Guild became a part of the International Co-operative Women's Guild when formed by the ICA in the 1920s.

Today, the Scottish Co-operative Women's Guild has approximately 1,400 members in 48 branches. It still receives active support and encouragement from the Co-operative Movement, and continues to play an active part in the life of the Co-operative Movement in Scotland.