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# Within The Guilded Cage

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## Introduction

The establishment of the 20th Century Craft Guilds in the South West of England including the Dorset Craft Guild [[1]](#footnote-1) brings together business and geographical as well as artistic concerns. Craft makers gathered together as local Guilds in their rural communities, recognising that collective effort would enable their work to be seen and sold more effectively and efficiently. This was camaraderie based upon economic and cultural concerns. In Gloucestershire, for example, The Cotswold Handicraft Guild was established in 1923 to include numerous craft materials, exhibit them within the county, and develop a relationship with the Cheltenham Museum and Art Gallery that exists to this day. The Guild was strongly connected to rural community councils and the work of the State in attempting to sustain rural industries. As the Guild developed further, it added London shows exhibiting for instance at Olympia in 1931.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The Guild of Gloucestershire Craftsmen was set up in 1933. It was created by means of a merger of ‘Guilds and Societies existing under the aegis of the Gloucestershire Community Council into one body’.[[3]](#footnote-3) Its remit was advocacy, marketing, selling and exhibitions, and in common with all of the Craft Guilds, it was established as a membership organisation. The Guild acted as the guardian of the quality threshold to select members - open, in the earliest days ‘to all who can satisfy its committee of their standard of workmanship and who can pay an annual subscription of 5/”. [[4]](#footnote-4)

D.W. Herdman, who acted as Honorary Adviser to the Gloucestershire Guild cemented the relationship to the Cheltenham Museum and Art Gallery by his role as Curator. He noted the impact of this collecting-together of practice and organisational support into the s Guild. The bigger organisations would manage the problem of isolation and fragmentation and sing for craft in a unified choral voice. The Gloucestershire Guild, he observed ‘brought together’ a wide and diverse group of makers ‘on a scale never before attempted – an appropriate climax to the many smaller annual displays customarily held at Camden, Camberley, Cirencester, Painswick, Badminton and Cheltenham’.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The gathering success of the Guild of Gloucestershire Craftsmen was observed in neighbouring counties, and the Somerset Guild was the next to be created. By the time that the Dorset Craft Guild had got well into its early and vigorous stride, South West Arts, the regional arts association, was able to observe in a policy paper (1984) that:

Through the South West a dozen Guilds provide support systems of various types to craft workers. Activities vary, but most stage exhibitions of members’ work; some ‘export’ exhibitions to other regions. Significantly the Dorset Craft Guild is experimenting with exhibitions abroad, and plans to develop a Dorset Craft Centre. The Cornish Craft Association based at Trelowarren has already been mentioned as an important regional centre. There may be scope for increased liaison with the Guilds particularly since they seem strongest in the predominantly rural counties. [[6]](#footnote-6)

The South West Craft Guilds were all committed to present their members work by the means of collective exhibitions. As their programmes developed – and especially as some Guilds were able to move these programmes into dedicated buildings – the exhibition activity diversified. [[7]](#footnote-7) It gave a visible testament to the enduring skill of its makers and this provided a ‘guarantee’ of quality and expertise to add intangible value to the sale of craft objects. An exhibition of the Federation of British Craft Societies in 1975 remarked on the need ‘to enable the public to become conversant with the high standards of workmanship flourishing in the County’.[[8]](#footnote-8) The guiding principles of The West of England Association of Craftsmen (founded in 1974) gave a conventional summary of Guilds’ programme and intentions: workmanlike, rather than at the cutting edge of practice. They included the need to improve the standard of design of local craftsmen; to stimulate interest in the crafts and to work for the recognition that good design and craftsmanship are essential to the wellbeing of the community and an influence for the improvement of industrial design’.[[9]](#footnote-9)

By the time that the Dorset Craft Guild was established in 1978, then, its members would look across the county boundaries in the South West and observe some 45 years of member-led craft exhibitions. Dorset and the adjoining county of Wiltshire were the only two counties in South West England that had no Craft Guild. The time was ripe for change.

Modern Craft Guilds across England reach back to these fundamentally rural roots. They fall into two main categories: they are either grass root organisations, based around a county boundary or boundaries; or they are subject-specific, often linked to an umbrella National organisation. In the South West region of England, for example, The Devon Guild of Craftsmen is a generalist, county-based Guild and in 1975 it was presenting work from 21 ‘craft groupings’ including weaving and fabric painting,, lace making, clock making, mosaic, ceramics, glass engraving, silverwork and jewellery. In the same region, and at the same time, specialist societies included The West Country Embroiderers or local weaver’s guilds connected to the National Association of Weavers, Spinners and Dyers. There is also a pattern of the Guilds and Societies lasting the course as sustainable organisations. The Devon Guild is of major strategic importance in today’s craft infrastructure, regionally and nationally. The West Country Embroiderers held its 40th anniversary in 2013. The Dorset Craft Guild, the focus of this essay, did not survive as an organisation, although it had an influential history.

The establishment in 1978 of the West Dorset Craft Guild, as it was first called, was predicated on the need to exhibit, sell and distribute contemporary craft objects in a collegiate manner, and unusually at first, serve part of an English County. The Guild was renamed ‘The Dorset Craft Guild’ as ‘within six months, the numbers of members far exceeded expectations and it was wrong to limit its scope and activities, even by implication, to West Dorset alone’. [[10]](#footnote-10) The Guild hoped that its membership would find the effort of these exhibitions both profitable – in the short term through selling, for example at weekend fairs; and in the longer term through the marketing support provided by the Guild’s increasing activities. A variety of exhibition strategies were adopted by the Guild: some of these were, of necessity, makeshift: the ‘Well-Turned Wood Show’, for example was described as ‘somewhat random’ by one reviewer. Other exhibitions had to adapt to spaces never intended for the display of craft. The Guild was, however, increasingly able to adopt a professional approach to design.

The history of the Dorset Craft Guild in 1980 is one of collective exhibitions and sales endeavours undertaken by makers representing a very wide range of craft and craft-related practice. [[11]](#footnote-11) The delivery of this programme was undertaken by highly individualistic makers often ingrained with the necessary habits of lone studio working. The approaches to exhibiting craft by the Guild are the same as the exhibition strategies adopted by the county-based Crafts Guilds in South West England – Cornwall, Devon, Gloucestershire and Somerset [[12]](#footnote-12) and indeed by Craft Guilds across England.[[13]](#footnote-13) The Dorset Craft Guild searched out semi-public space from 1978 – hiring space in halls and cafes before making a fateful decision to enter into partnership. This union enabled the Guild to sell exhibit and proselytise in a renovated building adopted for these specialist purposes. The efforts to manage this building, Walford Mill Crafts Centre, in Wimborne, Dorset, laid the seeds for the demise of the Guild at the same time as enabling the continuation, survival and thriving of sale, exhibits and educational programming by Walford Mill Crafts which succeeded the Guild.

The Dorset Craft Guild developed what was described as an ‘innovative’ temporary exhibition programme, once it set up in its permanent home. The bread and butter of the exhibition programme was the annual Full Members exhibition, and these remained at the heart of the Guild’s programme throughout its existence. But exhibitions put a very particular strain on the organisational capacities and abilities of what was a voluntary, charitable organisation. The Guild membership began to fray at the edges, and the exhibitions were on the front-line of these gathering tensions. They were the visible face of the membership; the symbol of its efforts for promotion and professionalism; the record of contemporary craft objects and the gathering realisation that more imaginative approaches to interpretation and curatorship were required to keep this exhibition programme refreshed. This set a challenge for an organisation that was by necessity introspective (established to serve a selected coterie of makers) and individualistic. The strength of the members perhaps led directly to the weakness of membership. An analysis of the exhibition programme needs to be set against this narrative of organisation and the bureaucracies of running the Guild. The particular tension between the Guild and the successor organisation, Walford Mill Crafts Centre led to the closure of the Dorset Craft Guild in the year 2000.

The Dorset Craft Guild adopted a number of approaches to the exhibition of craft works. With very few exceptions, these were invariably selling shows; and the majority of the programme featured the work of the membership. It was only with the inheritance of a building for the Guild that a wider exhibition strategy was adopted, and externally-curated exhibitions were booked into the Guild’s exhibition space at Walford Mill. The Guild promulgated, effectively, a do-it-yourself exhibition approach: depending on the technical resources of individual makers rather than the professional exhibition designer. In many circumstances the exhibition of craft took place in venues far removed from the white-box environment of the professional visual arts galleries. Craft was shown in a conference centre, a tent in an agricultural fair or a mediaeval hall. There was a very strong reliance on the voluntary effort of the Guild’s exhibitions organiser, a role that Shirley Barham filled to the long standing gratitude of the members in addition to her roles as Deputy Chairman and selection meeting organiser. She was sorely missed after her retirement from this position, with the retiring Chairman, Chris Donmall commenting how ‘the exhibition programme was maintained with difficulty without an exhibition officer, largely due to the impetus imparted by Shirley Barham when she stepped down last year’. [[14]](#footnote-14)

Craft work exhibited in the domesticated or working space has a special resonance for Guild members. Selling from home - or adjacent to the home or garden – gives the purchaser the sense of how that work might look in their own private rooms or spaces. The work, at heart individualistic, is seen in the most personal of contexts, unmediated by designer or the grammar of the formal exhibition. The values of display were established in a very specific area – that of subjectivity, place and personality. The maker is a silent curator. This silence, however, is inevitably disturbed once the membership comes together for the collegiate exhibition and the gallery is a more contested space. The objects might have to battle for position; the exhibitor-organiser-members have to be scrupulously fair to their theme or the harmony of presentation.

The story of the craft exhibition programme created by the Dorset Craft Guild over 22 years is inevitably interlinked with the narrative of managing the Guild, and the tensions that finally got the better of the membership. And yet what has survived, perhaps because of the very reason for that demise, has been the increasing professionalism and diversity of the exhibition programme, and the dogged and rather moving determination to show craft objects against these odds.

## The founding of the Dorset Craft Guild

John Varley, sometime Chairman of the Guild) issued a message to the early gathering of members.

The stated aims of the Dorset Craft Guild are to promote in Dorset and surrounding counties furtherance and appreciation of fine crafts, craftsmanship and design through education, exhibitions and the promotion and sale of quality craftwork. [[15]](#footnote-15)

The linkage of these elements enshrined the notion of a quality standard into the DNA of the Guild. The Guild’s regular Newsletters were punctuated by comments on the role of the Founder Members to maintain the excellence of their work. Peer review was at the heart of this process. A craft maker wishing to join the Guild had to see their work scrutinised by a group of established makers and sometimes face rejection or the lower threshold of acceptance as an associate member. If they chose to show their work in a Guild exhibition they were reminded that ‘all exhibits are subject to selection to ensure the highest possible standard’. The exhibitions organiser, the potter Shirley Barham (who was controversially never admitted as a Full Member of the Guild), reminded her colleagues that ‘even Full Members’ group exhibitions are subjected to selection to keep an eye on quality and to balance exhibition displays’. [[16]](#footnote-16)

It was the members’ job to patrol this standard, so that no object that was not ‘fine’ or of ‘quality’ could embarrass the Guild and damage its reputation. The Dorset Craft Guild insisted that the majority of its selectors, for example, came ‘from outside’ in order to ‘avoid accusations of bias or cliqueiness’ even if this policy was ‘expensive and difficult to organise’. [[17]](#footnote-17) In common with its companion Guilds in the South West, the apogee of its public-facing work would be the Annual Full Members’ Exhibition which Varley mused ‘will be increasingly viewed by Full Members as an important occasion to exhibit their work and that collectively it will increasingly set standards for all that’s best in craftwork from this area’.[[18]](#footnote-18) The stone carver Tony Viney commented that the selection panels were required to ‘judge to a national standard of overall excellence. They therefore looked not only for skilled craftsmanship, but also evidence of individuality, a consistency of style and an awareness of current thinking and trends’. [[19]](#footnote-19)

The Full Members’ exhibition was a key event for the Guild. The fact that objects were exhibited publically, clearly judged by a jury of makers, and set out for comparison, and provided a yearly challenge for the Guild’s members. As Varley said of a later thematic exhibition, there was important work to be done to change public perception of craft. *Creative Interiors* set out to kill the

misconception that often occurs when people think of craft guilds as a place where you get a lot of pots and quilting… there is only a thin line which divides craftsmen from artists, and our show features craftsmanship of the highest quality.[[20]](#footnote-20)

Chairs by John Makepeace, a chess table by David Ballantyne, an award-winning collector’s cabinet by David Savage (of Bideford, Devon) would espouse this case of quality, through rigorously-assessed procedure. Here was a robust, object-led response. The Guild focused its attention on technical excellence. The work that it considered was essentially made for domestic or garden use, or for human adornment. There was no presumption that the craft would radically alter the boundaries of each craft discipline. The ‘standard’ would change incrementally rather than with a violent leap forward into new terrain. This work was more suited to the province of the Arts Council with its focus on the relationship of craft to public art or conceptual work which ‘is essentially issue driven and uses materials and processes to pose questions and challenge perceptions. Makers in this area will be aware of trends within fine art practice and will use what have traditionally been seen as ‘craft materials to interrogate meanings and relationships’. [[21]](#footnote-21)

The exhibition programme then had significant work to do. A Dorset Craft Guild sponsorship leaflet circa 1986 laid out the parameters of a policy, and was content to name drop one of its most celebrated participants, the internationally-renowned furniture designer maker John Makepeace, who loyally supported the Guild and Walford Mill Craft Centre from the outset:

A wide ranging programme is presented throughout the year. The content and themes are chosen to show a full review of the work of the whole Guild selected for the excellence in each sphere. There are exhibitions by outstanding individuals, such as John Makepeace of Parnham OBE.[[22]](#footnote-22)

## The Exhibition Programme

In the first years of the Guild, although its membership was buoyant and steadily growing, premises had to be secured for the inaugural programme of exhibitions, and partners sought to enable the public display and sale of these craft objects to represent the range as well as the skills of craft practice. This was a new Guild, unlike the well-established County Guilds in the surrounding region, with aspirations for display and no permanent place in which to display craft. The very first newsletter of the West Dorset Craft Guild in May 1978 noted that ‘the Guild has got off to a flying start with membership now in excess of seventy and still growing, which gives us a sound basis, especially financially’.[[23]](#footnote-23)

The Guild’s first exhibition was an annual craft market in the summer of 1978 in Bridport. A winter market was then held, this time in the rented space of the Sea Scout Hall in the town, a venue chosen, no doubt, for its central location and modest cost. It was not a location that would offer glamour to the craft object, but that was not of primary concern. This was cheap, serviceable, friendly community space. 3200 people visited the first summer show. Others quickly stepped in to offer support to the fledgling exhibitions of the Guild. The Curator of the Bridport Museum, John Sales, offered an area with display cases ‘which would enable us to stage a series of small specialised exhibitions, at various times throughout the year’. In order to build on the success of this first venture, a larger Annual Exhibition was hosted in 1979 ‘and enquiries are being made to find a suitable venue’. The members could look further afield and begin to dream about where the exhibition programme might take them, since ‘there is also the possibility that in the meantime we may be able to obtain premises which would be used as a permanent Craft Centre, available throughout the year’.[[24]](#footnote-24) Professional supporters came forward, and a Bridport-based architect, David Hedworth, offered his own attractive premises on the ground floor a grade 2 listed former Water Mill to rent for Guild objects that would be exhibited on a weekly basis in the centre of Bridport.[[25]](#footnote-25)

The Guild began to search out for exhibition spaces that would reflect contemporary craft work to the best advantage. This required good directional lighting and a more neutral environment where the regular assemblage of white plinths would seem most appropriate. Urban exposure seemed important too, as a means of bringing often rural craft into the city. The annual exhibition of the Guild in 1979 was held not in the small (albeit highly attractive) market town of Bridport, but in the larger metropolitan rooms of the Seldown Gallery of the Poole Arts Centre. The Guild had come to town. This exhibition, held from 14 July to 11 August 1979, was intended ‘to introduce the new Guild, its members and their work to the people of Dorset’.

But even here, the issues of relevant display bit at the heels of the members. . Display issues were still a challenge to the exhibition organisers:

The exhibition designers task was made extremely taxing by limited resources of display material and practical help. Roy Sanford not only overcame the problems, but designed and mounted an exhibition which was a joy to look at well-spaced, well lit, and straightforward in plan. Of course there were things that could have been better done given more money and more equipment – jewellery and silver in upright cases with dark backgrounds perhaps. Practical difficulties of hanging work on the gallery walls prevented some objects from being displayed perfectly.[[26]](#footnote-26)

Notwithstanding these practicalities, 5000 visitors saw the exhibition and a selection of work was sent in some triumph back for display in the Bridport Museum for a further two weeks, so as not to neglect the first ‘home’ base.

The Guild took a proactive approach to finding venues for the display of members work. Circumstances of place, the *modus operandi* of the Craft Guild as well as economic factors (the need to keep expenditure to a minimum) must have all played their part. There was no museum infrastructure of any significance in the county of Dorset to enable a natural public home for the display of contemporary craft. The exhibition programmes of most Dorset museums ran in accord to their status as small scale local history venues, and craft, in so far as it featured in these museums, would have been regarded as one aspect of social history. The Dorset button, some farmhouse crockery or an embroidered smock would have been shown without contention but perhaps not much else. The visual arts programme of the sole major county museum, the Dorset County Museum, was in its infancy and outweighed by the key and primary archaeological and historical constituency that supported the institution The one museum with a growing interest in the visual arts, the Russell-Cotes Art Gallery and Museum in Bournemouth might have still been regarded as an interloper, and not really located in Dorset at all, since it had only transferred to the county (from Hampshire) in 1974 after a major and rather controversial local government reorganisation.

The Dorset Craft Guild looked to other spaces – public-facing but hardly subject specific. One small display was attempted in window space in the Weymouth branch of the Bradford and Bingley Building Society in January 1980, and was organised by means of a rota system, each maker taking turns to arrange their work. Guild members supplied ‘a permanent screen and boxes of varying sizes on which to stage the display’.[[27]](#footnote-27) This small-scale ‘pop-up’ exhibition was a companion for a stand taken out at a local agricultural show in Dorchester in September 1980, a favoured location for the South West Craft Guilds keen to represent the members’ work to large audiences at major county events. This exhibition at the Dorchester show is important as it reveals a gathering interest in the need to expend considerable care on the design of the stand, so that members’ work would look at its most effective – as well as to counterpoint craft objects amongst the displays of animal husbandry, rural tools and the like. Cecil Colyer ‘has very kindly given us a specially constructed stand, and we shall be displaying all the Guild literature, together with a small exhibition of crafts’.[[28]](#footnote-28) The lure of the Bridport Sea Scout Hall was fading by now, ‘once again … [it] was dirty and in a worse state of wear than last year’.[[29]](#footnote-29) The Guild needed to move on, in order to meet the needs of its growing membership, and to place their works into more hospitable or reputable venues: to maximise sales and to attract new members to the fold.

Their chosen venue for the exhibition *Craftwork ’80* to advance the goals of the Guild was in the Abbot’s Hall of Milton Abbey School, an extraordinary set of Gothic buildings accommodating a public school.[[30]](#footnote-30) The Hall had heritage-appeal-a-plenty. The original collegiate church could trace an ancestry back to its founding in the year 933 by King Athelstan of Wessex. The Abbey itself, although much restored in the 19th century, was rebuilt after a violent lightning storm had destroyed the original buildings sometime after 1309. These were premises with considerable space as well as the demonstration of medieval craft skills of stone carving, glass and wood carving. It had an educational ethos underneath high church sentiment. The drive to the school was glamorous, taking in the manicured and symmetrical village of Milton Abbas, set in some of the county’s most beautiful landscape. This was a world apart from the Seldown Gallery and its intractable white walls; or the Bradford and Bingley Building Society and its inflexible screen and white plinths. Here, craft could resound in history.

At first the members were ‘struck by the attractiveness of the venue’, though, quickly, ‘various snags made themselves evident’. The ceiling was high and inaccessible, the walls so solid that nothing could be fixed to them. Worst of all, the lighting may have had a gothic charm, but there was only one 13 amp socket to serve the whole of this cavernous space. Craft had a fight on its hands. But the membership approached the challenges in a creative and resourceful manner.

All was not lost, however. The Guild is extremely fortunate in having Roy Sanford as its graphic and exhibitions Designer, who has the rare gift of viewing unpromising empty spaces and visualising them fitted out with display equipment, completed work, and visitors. After much work on his part and much skilled labouring by Cecil Colyer and Selwyn Holmes, the white cubes were designed made and transported by Euan Williams and his enormous trailer to the Abbey. The ugly walls had been freshly painted and were now sparkling white gloss. Colyer’s wife Sheila sewed away at huge lengths of material to hang over the end wall…cable and extension sockets …ran from another room and incidentally….all the stands made for jewellery cases. Beverley Marshall borrowed display cases from Yeovil Art School and all that remained was to arrange the assembled clutter into something that resembled Roy’s original vision.[[31]](#footnote-31)

*Craftwork ‘80* represented a highpoint in the exhibition history of the young Guild: the collegiate cooperation of the Full Members, allied to a designer’s vision. The President of the Guild, the letter carver Richard Grasby, wrote to the Chairman, the potter David Eeles to say ‘how much I appreciated the work and the marvellous atmosphere which seems to surround this event….I detect an overall increase in quality, and variety of work for sale’. [[32]](#footnote-32)

A very different space was taken up by the Guild’s indefatigable exhibitions team in 1984. Shirley Barham led the exhibitions programme with determination. It was due to her foresight that the Guild held its first (and only) exhibition in the larger town of Bournemouth, locating it in the highly commercial setting of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition promoted by the local authority-managed Bournemouth International Centre. The room here was of a commercial scale (suitable for trade exhibitions) and of a contemporary, albeit cavernous, setting, as appropriate for a hall that would be staging Arts and Crafts fair one day and a rock concert the next. It was about as far removed ideologically and practically from the Abbot’s Hall as it was possible to go. Shirley Barham had to work to a very pressing deadline. She was experienced, if daunted, remarking that:

I have helped to set up some very big exhibitions but for these there were many days set aside. Now I had what I supposed would be about three hours in which to set up a display stand with exhibits numbering about half the quantity in the Milton Abbey show, all of which had to be fitted into a seventh of the space.

The Dorset Craft Guild’s first exhibition programme was delivered as it were, peripatetically. Ad hoc decisions were taken to set up the all-important member’s exhibitions in a variety of locations – as if to test them out. These were driven by opportunity and worked so long as the principle of self-help and low cost could be brought to bear. The exhibitions were, as the etcher and educationalist Robin Tanner remarked in relation to another exhibition ‘an immense labour of love’.[[33]](#footnote-33)

Tanner’s refrain of ‘my nightmare job of having to *envisage* every tiny detail and every single item in the exhibition … long before we ever start to mount the show’,[[34]](#footnote-34) would have struck a chord with Barham and her colleagues. Each exhibition was hard work – intractable setting up, followed by intense periods of concentration to staff the exhibition, and then a speedy departure. And the Guild didn’t always come out on top. Tanner was a particularly keen observer of the Gloucestershire Guild of Craftsmen, and he wrote waspishly to his friend Tony Heald (an artist and Headmaster of a Yorkshire primary school) in 1983 about one such experience. It is a primer for any Guild exhibition organiser.

I constantly return to thoughts of your Arts and Crafts Gallery dream, dear Tony; and I’m sure it will come true. There are far, far too many so-called Craft Galleries everywhere, purveying the most spurious stuff which should never be offered for sale. You four will, I’m sure, vet everything before you decide to include it. Here, I think, you have to be quite fierce and uncompromising. Last week we attended the private view of the 50-year-old Guild of Gloucestershire Craftsmen annual exhibition and sale, at Painswick, and we were dismayed to find that even that august body had admitted some things that were trivial, gimmicky, useless and offensively ugly and ill-conceived. It will help you if you know you can rely on a few really good painters, engravers, spinners, dyers, weavers and knitters, a potter or two of repute and perhaps a calligrapher, and certainly an able wood turner and a furniture maker. They would establish a standard below which you would refuse to fall.

I’m sure you’ll consider carefully the texture and colour of your walls, and the kind of basic equipment and furniture you require. I, personally, would keep the entire environment simple, neutral (mostly white and greys), home-like, light ad unostentatious. If you admit craftsmen actually at work you will very greatly increase your load of responsibility and you will also change the nature of the enterprise. Better, I think, to start, at any rate, as a place to receive, display and sell local work.[[35]](#footnote-35)

The Dorset Guild made other efforts to find more permanent spaces to exhibit and sell the work of members. The exhibition was a short-term effort for the purposes of advocacy, sale and standard-raising but each members’ show was over in a few hectic days, the white gloss of the Abbot’s Hall still fresh, so to speak, on the wall. The Guild made some efforts to support selling (based on its loyal volunteer support to keep costs down) through ad hoc shop spaces in the county. A Dorset Craft Guild shop was first established and managed by Francis Richards for a time in rented space on the top floor of a Dorchester café the *Potter In* (the name was intended to suggest a hungry visitor might stroll in; there was no reference to the café being a one-time pottery studio)[[36]](#footnote-36) It was (and still is to this day) an attractive room, with an imposing brick fireplace, Georgian windows, roof beams and panelled flooring. The room had history on its side, giving an architectural distinction to the displays of craft.[[37]](#footnote-37) The volunteers kept the Dorchester shop open for nearly six years from 29 May 1982 until 26 March 1988, when the efforts to keep it profitable proved beyond the voluntary resources of staffing and the on-going pressures of finding the rental income, even on the basis of three days a week. It had been ‘a very professional looking craft shop’ but it could no longer be supported out of the accumulated surpluses of the Guild.

Following on from the closure of the Dorchester enterprise a second shop was established for a period of around 2 years in The Old Timber Yard Studio, West Bay, Bridport managed and overseen by Francis Richards. It was felt that this venture – which paid homage to Bridport’s significant role in the Guild’s founding years – would provide ‘a new outlet in the west of the county’, although it was acknowledged that it ‘will take a little while to establish, but… we hope it will succeed’.[[38]](#footnote-38)

## Walford Mill, Wimborne

The Dorset Craft Guild might have looked enviously across the county boundary, especially to Devon and observe how these Guilds developed by locating their exhibition and selling functions in permanent Guild-owned and managed buildings. The Dorset Craft Guild had dreamed of such an outcome for many years, even, as early as 1983 considering a possible opportunity for a ‘Craft Centre’ near Thomas Hardy’s birthplace outside Dorchester, although this came to nothing. But a more realistic prospect was emerging in Wimborne, north of the Bournemouth-Poole conurbation. The county gravity was to move east for the Dorset Craft Guild, and its future was to change in dramatic fashion.

There was an underlying hope – expressed in this peripatetic search for premises and shops – that a single site would enable the Guild to refocus its activities, give them a sharper purpose, create a unique sense of place for craft and galvanise the membership around a shared, common purpose. If the Guild could find a home, it could forge a new identity. It could relieve this peripatic wandering and make its own spaces for the selling and temporary exhibition of craft. As chance would have it, a building was available at Walford Mill in Wimborne, an attractive small town, embraced by the River Stour and the River Allen (the mill stream) on the edge of farmland, with the Minster and town centre five minutes’ walk away. A prospectus for Walford Mill with a forlorn photograph of the building in poor repair, with natural vegetation engulfing it (a la Detroit) laid out the ambition of the Dorset Craft Guild.[[39]](#footnote-39) An existing plan to turn the building into a working museum had proved impractical, and Wimborne District Council, who had purchased the site from The National Trust, was casting around for creative ideas to unlock the potential of this cultural asset. The Guild seized the moment, in the same way some 30 years earlier the Devon Guild of Craftsmen had acquired Riverside Mill in Bovey Tracey as their headquarters. The prospectus argued ‘a pressing need for a permanent home [to] be run as a co-operative for all its members… After studying many sites for a Craft Centre, the committee believes that Walford Mill is quite exceptional and offers a real opportunity for the advancement of the Guild’.[[40]](#footnote-40)

The Mill needed to fulfil inter-related functions to take the Guild forward. Optimistically (but not practically) exhibition space was earmarked for ex basement and first floor rooms within the historic building. When the building refurbishment works added a pitched roof to a later extension to the side of the Mill, this was devoted to temporary exhibitions. First floor space was allocated for a time to the Ballantyne Gallery which offered a commissioning service. Office accommodation, storage areas, and a meeting room, plus the crucial sales outlet, completed the vision of the future. In the yard adjacent to the Mill, it was intended to reflect the heritage of the site by ‘displays of rural craft and Mill/farm equipment’.[[41]](#footnote-41) The furniture-designer and Chairman of the Guild John Varley rallied his members for the great task ahead. 1985 would be a crucial year for the plan to be put into operation:

‘The Guild has established itself as a flagship of craft standards. The building and site are there waiting! Perhaps never again will all these factors come together at the same time. I fully commend this project to YOU! If we got a poor response, the Guild committee will close the chapter of a craft centre and assume the members are not or never will be ready for such a venture’.[[42]](#footnote-42)

As the refurbishment plans were finalised and exhibitions were located for maximum impact in the dedicated gallery and main entrance to the building, the Dorset Craft Guild poured new energies into the consideration of the programme. They now had a room which was perhaps fitter for purpose than any room they had ever used before. The gallery was serviceable rather than glamorous. Tall windows on two sides enabled attractive vistas to the Mill courtyard and the meander of the River Allen (although they reduced hanging space). A pitched roof created scope for larger suspended work and an integrated lighting track. A concrete paved floor was installed for easy maintenance, exact level, and high durability – and the Guild hoped optimistically for 200,000 visitors a year. It was a room that could be easily screened, partitioned, plinthed or cased, as each show required. It was a modern room for craft, set in the context of a rural trade and a heritage building. All of this was set in a site of significance for biodiversity and a fine river habitat in which otters had made their home. Craft was surrounded by nature and the echoed memory of milling flour. By 1986, installed in its new home, a new private limited company was formed, Walford Mill Crafts Limited, to run the building, with the objectives ‘to carry on all or any of the businesses of manufacture, exporters, importers, exhibitors and agents for the sale of … arts and crafts works’.[[43]](#footnote-43) The Duchess of Gloucester officially opened the new Craft Centre on 29th June 1986.[[44]](#footnote-44)

The new exhibition room, serviceable, spacious and at last permanent, enabled the Guild to focus its programme into one space. But this was also a demanding room: how to fill a year-round exhibition calendar year in and year out? This laid out heavy, repetitive challenges. The Guild was committed to this change, however, and set about constructing a programme that interleaved the magnetic centre of the Full Members Exhibition in the autumn with a mix of shows of educational and community intentions. . One of the earliest thematic exhibitions presented work by the youngest Guild member, the silk weaver Debbie Kirby (who has a studio in Walford Mill to this day) and the oldest, the wood turner Cecil Colyer, amongst others in *Silk Silver and Wood* (the title chosen by Shirley Barham). 1989 was a representative year: eleven exhibitions (so a monthly turnover) with a ‘Dorset Schools Craft Show’, subject based exhibition on glass and quilting, ‘Fabric and Fashions’, as well as a bought-in exhibition reflecting the Centre’s ‘habitat’ from the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds.

This latter exhibition indicated that the Guild was prepared to hire in shows: to add the external eye to the programme (perhaps, as well, to offer a momentary relief from having to curate). The scope of pubic-sector craft-exhibition providers was not large in the 1980’s (it is not much more advanced in the 2010’s) but pertinent exhibitions were fitted into the programme from time to time - ‘Natural Resources: Making Connections. Contemporary Crafts from S.W. England’ from Plymouth Museum and Art Gallery in 1991, for example. The main independent external provider of small-scale craft exhibitions was the innovative and high-quality organisation, the Southern Arts Touring Exhibition Service managed with revenue funds from the regional arts association, Southern Arts, and based in the Winchester School of Art. This brought a number of self-contained, thematic exhibitions into the programme such as ‘Stars by contemporary British Makers’ (1993) although the Touring Service also presented solo exhibitions such as ‘Woodcarvings and Woodcuts by Anthony Lysycia’ (1990). These introduced something of a sharper edge to the Guild’s programme. They broke out of the inevitable intention to focus the programme on the work of members of the Guild (although, on occasion, Guild members’ work was selected by the Touring Service). As the exhibitions were completely self-contained (and set up by Touring Exhibitions staff) they also looked different to the Guild’s self-curated exhibitions. The white boxes remained in store.

The rationale for the exhibition programme, and the weight it put on the shoulders of successive exhibition organisers, was intimated by Chris Donnall in 1988. He observed that:

The exhibition programme was maintained with difficulty without an exhibition officer largely due to the impetus imparted by Shirley Barham when she stepped down last year. The most outstanding exhibition, also organised by Shirley, and the one that attracted most attention, was that of the work of one of our patrons, John Makepeace …

Exhibitions are very important to us as a Guild including those which show the work of other people and organisations They attract visitors to the Centre and are a potent influence in spreading the appreciation of good craftsmanship and design to everyone’s benefit.[[45]](#footnote-45)

The basic strategy of the exhibition was to place work on white boxes (plinths) and to complement this open display system with closed cases for small, precious items such as jewellery. The limited wall space in the gallery was used to hang work such as textiles, and the room was divided as required, by screens and partitions. This system formalised the work, giving the piece a ceremony by plinthing it – isolating it in the manner of the public art museum.

But craft practitioners principally sold their work for domestic interiors, and on occasion, the exhibition deliberately drew attention to this imperative. ‘Living in Style: out of the ordinary interiors’ (1994) drew on a convention of room settings, espoused in the great British Council ‘Exhibition of Modern British Crafts curated by Muriel Rose, in America in the Second World War [[46]](#footnote-46) (although without that pioneering exhibition’s patriotic intentions). [[47]](#footnote-47)

The call for the exhibition to the membership by exhibition organiser Jane Hayward requested ‘various items of furniture and fittings to give a context to the craft work. If loans can be arranged… we will have a bath, a sofa, table and chairs, Kitchen units and beds’.[[48]](#footnote-48) Walford Mill was to become the crafted home for a month.

A complementary exhibition ‘Crafts into the Garden’ was designed, built and sponsored by Brian Sellers, a landscape gardener and builder, and gathered work by Nick Barberton (wood and furniture), Anthony Hedgecock (metalwork), Jonathan Garratt (ceramics) and others.

The notion of an exhibition to replicate the craft-vision of home (a potential place, not a real place) was behind another signature show in 1990. ‘Creative Interiors’ was curated by the Dorset Craft Guild in partnership with an interior design shop based in Wimborne, Obelisk Interiors. It was regarded as a venture of ambition, ‘setting members the challenge of working with an interior designer to create room sets which display craft work at its most practical and desirable’. The designer Fronz Fartash drew together work from some of the Guild’s best-known members. A cherry wood bookcase by John Makepeace was the centrepiece for ‘the study’; Tony Viney displayed a polished Purbeck marble fireplace and was ‘left largely to [his] own devices once the basic idea had been accepted’. John Varley showed his own work on the fireplace, remarking that the exhibition needed ‘to make a real impact on the interior design of [people’s] homes’[[49]](#footnote-49) . The exhibition idea eschewed the plinth in favour of the room set. Craft was domesticated, functioning in the service of the home of distinction and value: for the practitioner as well as the purchaser. ‘Creative Interiors’ was perhaps the high water mark of the continuous, driven programme of the Dorset Craft Guild. It revealed a growing desire to set out craft objects not in aesthetic isolation in the manner of the fine art gallery; but in the context of their destination into private homes. It was a shift, perhaps, from modernism to domesticity.

## The demise of the Dorset Craft Guild

If ‘Creative Interiors’ marked a high-point, it also stretched all of the exhibition resources that the Guild could muster. Managing the complex programme, keeping the building busy, overseeing a café, negotiating with the local authorities were all demands on an amateur membership organisation. The running of this programme began to take its toll, and passing on the directorship of the building began to seem attractive An independent consultant’s report to the local council and South West Arts noted that ‘the Centre is run by an honest, sound, small and poorly resourced team on behalf of the Dorset Guild of Craftsmen [sic]’.[[50]](#footnote-50) The report noted that the exhibition programme despite its ‘open layout and easy access’ was not the attraction it should be. Only 13% of visitors came specifically to see exhibitions, and many were put off by the entrance fee of 50 pence. The report commented further that ‘the exhibitions should be of a National calibre to bring interest to the Mill rather than simply being a vehicle to give our members a second chance to sell. The Crafts Council have touring exhibitions. This will promote the Mill as a valid alternative to London for the discerning collector’.[[51]](#footnote-51)Further advice on enriching the exhibition programme was taken from the crafts consultant Rosalind Marchant, who recommended ‘a series of six to eight exhibitions a year that, in the main, deal with ISSUES and THEMES’ The interior design show you’ve just done is the sort of thing I have in mind’.[[52]](#footnote-52)

But, in truth, the baton for exhibitions was slowly and inexorably passing over to the management of Walford Mill, and its own establishment as a separate charity and trading company. The Dorset Craft Guild had been worn out by its efforts. The Guild relinquished the lease and handed over its last funds to Walford Mill Crafts Ltd. There was some dismay amongst the membership: the Guild ‘will never have another chance’, it was said. But others were relieved of an ‘albatross’.

In truth the Dorset Craft Guild had done an extraordinary thing: it had promoted, exhibited, sold, and championed contemporary craft and placed it inexorably on the County map. Walford Mill Crafts exists to this day because of, not despite, the Dorset Craft Guild. Its exhibition programme, delivered by a redoubtable, committed and rather noble group of craft practitioners was one visible symbol and manifestation of a passion for craft. The Dorset Craft Guild may have formally closed – it did so at a brief, sad meeting on the coast at Eype in 2000 with ‘the final coup de grace’ as he recalls, performed by the last remaining Trustee Selwyn Holmes ; but it had changed the course of craft in the County.

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West Arts 1984)

1. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See the outline history of the Dorset Craft Guild in “Mapping the crafts in Dorset”, *Dorset Art Weeks* (2008), pp. 62-63.There is a significant on-going project by Nicola Thomas, University of Exeter, “Situating Craft Guilds in the Creative Economy: Histories, Politics and Practices”, which considers Guilds in the South West of England. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Robinson, Stuart. *A Fertile Field: an outline history of the Guild of Gloucestershire Craftsmen and the crafts in Gloucestershire* (Gloucestershire, UK: Guild of Gloucestershire Craftsmen 1983), p.9. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., p12. 5/- is roughly equivalent to £7.50 today. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. D.W. Herdman, ’Introduction’, in *An Exhibition of Cotswold Craftmanship.* Montpelier Rotund, Cheltenham, 2-14 July 1951, p.4. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *A Survey of the Arts Associations in the South West 1984: a consultative document*. (South West Arts 1984) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. D/DCG [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. In 1986 the categories of membership for the Guild included, for example, book binding, Dorset Buttons, Flowers/Herbs, Lampshades, Musical instruments, Graphics, Enamelling as well as ceramics, textiles, furniture and calligraphy. In all there were 39 specialist categories and some 496 members. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The Cornwall Crafts Association established in 1973; The Devon Guild of Craftsmen, established in 1955;   
    The Guild of Gloucestershire Craftsmen established in 1933; The West Dorset Craft Guild was renamed the Dorset Craft Guild in 1980; The Somerset Guild of Craftsmen established in 1933.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. D/DCG Minutes of the 10th Annual General Meeting 30 June 1988. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. D/DCG [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. D/DCG [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. D/DCG [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. The Real World: a prospectus for the crafts in the South West, South West Arts, 2002. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. D/DCG John Makepeace established a private, postgraduate school near Beaminster Dorset, in 1976 . [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. D/DCG [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. D/DCG.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. The Mill, West Street, Bridport . [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Newsletter no.6, October 1979 D/DCG.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. D/DCG Newsletter no.7, 1980. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. D/DCG Newsletter no.9, Summer 1980. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. D/DCG Newsletter no.10. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. D/DCG Review of Craftwork ’80 Newsletter no. 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. D/DCG Newsletter 7 October 1980. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. D/DCG. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Fenn Tim (ed.), *0ld Chapel Field: selected letters of Robin Tanner 1920-1988*, Impact Books, 1991, p. 227. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Ibid. Tanner is referring to his curatorship of a major exhibition of work by the printed textile artists Barron and Larcher at the Royal West of England Academy, Bristol. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Ibid, p.241. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. I am indebted to Martin Dickson for this observation.

    [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. The shop, 19 Durngate Street, Dorchester, is now operated as a café although the ceramic association has been made extant. The café is now called ‘Potter’s Café’. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. D/DCG [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. ‘Working forwards a Centre for the Dorset Craft Guild’. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. D/DCG From the certificate of incorporation. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. She returned to celebrate 25 years of Walford Mill Crafts Centre in June 2011. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. D/DCG Report of the Guild’s 10th Annual General Meeting, 30 June 1988. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Modern British Crafts organised by The British Council, opened at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, in 1942, touring in America with huge success until 1945. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. See Tanya Harrod, *The Crafts in Britain in the 20th Century* pp. 194-196. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. D/DCG letter to members 27 January 1994. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. D/DCG [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Roger Quinton Associates ‘initial working draft’ D/DCG. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-48)
49. D/DCG letter from Rosalind Marchant to Jennifer Pitts Director of Walford Mill, 11 April 1990. [↑](#footnote-ref-49)
50. [↑](#footnote-ref-50)
51. [↑](#footnote-ref-51)
52. [↑](#footnote-ref-52)