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Mapping the crafts in Dorset

The history of modern crafts in Dorset has been written through maps. Ever since the foundation of the first craft association in the county (the 'West Dorset Craft Guild', established in 1978, its first President the graphic designer and letterer Richard Grasby), collective activity has been expressed through the dissemination of a county road and rail map, marking the names and addresses of self-selected craft practitioners and craft-based companies in Dorset. A reflection on this history reveals something of the health of the crafts in the county: cartography of development as well as of the occasional dashing of hopes.

In 1980, the renamed Dorset Craft Guild was full of hope and confidence. It benefited from the guidance of a highly capable Honorary Secretary, the designer-jeweller Mavis Hollingworth. The informal association of makers, as well as establishing a newsletter, published a map *Craftsmen of the Dorset Guild*, noting that 'the development of Dorset as an important area for craftsmen underlined the need for an organisation to promote and encourage the highest standards of work and design, promote outlets for their products, arrange exhibitions of the work of professional craftsmen and ... foster among the young, an awareness of the crafts'. These aims are entirely typical of the generalist craft guilds across England. Dorset was, in fact, rather late in the day in developing a guild, certainly in comparison with its south west neighbours such as the Devon Guild of Craftsmen (established in 1955), the Gloucestershire Guild of Craftsmen (1933) or the Somerset Guild of Craftsmen (1933). The *Dorset Craft Guide* listed some forty-two individual practitioners and small craft businesses. The fluidity of the term craft meant that the first membership included individual potters such as David Eeles (the Guild's first Chairman), significant private-sector institutions such as John Makepeace's influential 'Workshops and School for craftsmen in wood' and companies that today might be seen as marginal participants in the world of contemporary crafts, such as West of England Crafts Ltd from West Milton, 'makers of model horse-drawn vehicles available in ready-made or in kit form'.

The map confers legitimacy to what in this first case in Dorset, was an essentially amateur effort. A free association of like-minded practitioners had come together for a common purpose: to celebrate crafts and to advertise them to the buying public. The new Dorset Craft Guild aimed to confer a brand of quality on the products sold by peer-reviewed members. The map reflected local distinctiveness through the special resonance of place. Here was craftwork that, even if it bore, physically, no trace of a Dorset heritage of craft, at least could represent for the purchaser the wholesome memory of the special trip to the country, and the discovery of a craft maker deep in the chalk fold of a memorable Dorset village. The Guild enthused that 'the publication of the guide has been a resounding success...many members [have] benefited from their advertisement'.

The craft map was both inclusive and exclusive. It paraded a wide membership across many craft forms and at a variety of levels, but of course only those who wanted to join (and who passed the thresholds of membership) did so. A voluntary-run craft shop in Dorchester was the first physical manifestation of the Guild's desire to promote year-round craft activities. The members who appeared in the first map could see commercial advantage in a shared marketing tool, as well as companionship and debate in the meetings of the members. But craft membership organisations are famously difficult to organise: mercurial, individualistic makers who prefer to break rules in the cause of progress do not always warm to collective decision-making. This is especially the case when the workload becomes demanding. The Dorset Craft Guild pressed on with formal organisational change. It became a registered charity in 1987. In Richard Grasby's words in the first Guild newsletter, the bravado of its 'flying start with membership in excess of seventy and still growing' proved hard to sustain. The Guild, perhaps at the very point when it was losing a degree of momentum, faced its biggest challenge. On the face of it, this challenge sowed the seeds of the Guild's demise.

The Dorset Craft Guild, perhaps looked enviously at the success of the building-based progress of the Devon Guild of Craftsmen, established, albeit rockily at first, in Riverside Mill in Bovey Tracey. It sought to bring its own diverse range of activities under one roof, finding the pressures of events year-round across Dorset increasingly difficult to manage. By the summer of 1986, Lady Digby, newly installed as the Guild's second (and last) President observed that its members had been looking around for suitable premises (including, at first, a barn close to the Cerne Abbas Giant). Circumstances were to lead the members to Walford Mill, Wimborne, and the offer from the local authority of a lease at a peppercorn rent. Walford Mill had fallen into disuse in the 1980s and had been taken into the ownership of East Dorset District Council, which was looking for public facing uses of the premises.

The Dorset Craft Guild took the chance, seeing the opportunity to establish Walford Mill as 'a regional centre of excellence for contemporary British craft and design'. The next ten years were to prove a tough challenge for the membership. But it is greatly to the credit of the Guild that they took the challenge on in the first place, since in doing so they gave the crafts a second specialist organisational base in the county: a long-term home for the crafts in Dorset. The members set about the demanding task of delivering a year-round programme of exhibitions, educational activities, fostering maker's studios on site and retailing Dorset crafts. All of these activities were consistent with the Guild's first 'manifesto' and the charity's 1987 objective 'to promote...and improve the standard of crafts both ancient and modern, preserve and improve craftsmanship and foster, promote and increase the interest of the public'. Mavis Hollingworth was amongst the four founder Trustees to give continuity to the Guild's efforts in this sea change of responsibilities. Jennifer Pitts, the first Managing Director, 'gave the enterprise form and made it into a viable form' and as the makers Nick Barberton and Syann van Niftrick go on to recall 'it would be a long list of energetic generous people who put their all into the Dorset Guild and Walford Mill Craft Centre. Together they made it a lively, interesting and supportive group...they made things happen'.

In an undated note in the Dorset Craft Guild's archive, ambitious activities for the new venue are described: 'an innovative programme of exhibitions...a complementary education programme [reflecting Walford Mill's] position as a centre of both regional and local importance'. Delivering this

programme (essentially funded by member's subscriptions, income from a restaurant, shop and exhibition sales and eventually a small annual grant from the Council) took willpower and huge efforts of voluntary work as well as money. There were highpoints: the annual Reynolds Stone memorial lecture, with eminent speakers such as Ann Sutton and Stephen Bayley. The annual members' exhibition, first held in Bridport, was a flagship event at the Mill. The first focus of the Guild as a resource for members was diverted by the sheer pressure involved in the myriad decisions required of a public building with a complex cultural offer. The Guild was weighed down by these pressures, and over the next five years the programme at Walford Mill seemed to some of the membership to be growing apart from the Guild, creating its own identity and focus. Margaret Woodhead, the second Director, recalls that 'the impetus for change came primarily from Walford Mill's stakeholders and funders rather than the silent majority of the Guild membership'. The storm clouds gathered. The Guild looked to separate off the membership activities from the management of the business, and promulgated the idea of a separate independent trust for Walford Mill. The Guild seemed 'to be beset by image, organisation and communication problems'. Some spoke of what they perceived to be 'a lack of warmth emanating from the central core'.

Ironically, Walford Mill's success became the Guild's central problem, at a time when there was a new interest in the crafts in the county. Both South West Arts and Dorset County Council offered revenue funding in view of the strategic significance of craft activity in Wimborne, and the Mill's shop was selected by the Crafts Council, appearing on the *Crafts* 'magazine guide to the National List of Craft Shops and Galleries'. A new map of the crafts, *Decorative & Applied Arts in Dorset* was initiated by Southern Arts and widely published in 1992. It demonstrated the significant progress in the crafts in the county since the first map some twelve years earlier. Key makers were still at the heart of the information (now professionally designed and in full colour) such as William Walker (glass), Petter Southall (furniture) and Jonathan Garratt (ceramics). The new map indicated for the first time the influence of the public-sector players, strongly influencing craft development through education and exhibition activities. This was a key enrichment of the craft narrative in the county. The Russell-Cotes Art Gallery and Museum in Bournemouth embarked on a strong programme of craft commissions, with signature pieces by the glass artist Sasha Ward and a remarkable craft-led cafe. Craft-based courses in ceramics and lettering for example were delivered by the Bournemouth and Poole College of Further Education (taking over the mantle after the closure of the ceramics course at the Bournemouth Municipal College of Art). Weymouth College offered stone carving and letter cutting in the long shadow of the Purbeck quarries. Major commissions in the public arena were delivered with the imaginative support of Common Ground in the pioneering New Milestones project. The private sector played a key role, too. The commercial gallery network promoted the sale of craft objects occasionally at the Chesil Gallery in Portland and notably at the Alpha House Gallery at Sherborne. Walford Mill's role as the sole specialist craft organisation in the public domain in Dorset carried symbolic and practical force to the development of the crafts in Dorset in the 1990s. Most recently, in 2007, under the directorship of Christine Lawry, the Mill was the successful venue for a new summer craft fair *Create*, a regional companion to the Crafts Council's *Origin: the London Craft Fair*.

By the time that the map of *Decorative & Applied Arts in Dorset* was published, the Dorset Craft Guild was ceding responsibility, and passing the baton for Dorset's crafts on to, Walford Mill. Its Trustees authorised the transfer of the lease 'and all associated responsibilities for the Walford Mill

Craft Centre' to the newly constituted Walford Mill Education Trust, noting that 'the Guild members have neither the business expertise nor the time to run what has become a thriving enterprise'. In April 1996, craft activities at Walford Mill were finally taken over by the new Trust. If this was meant to unlock a new future for the Guild, unburdened by the responsibility of running a building, the opposite, in fact, occurred. Disappointingly, a 1998 paper 'Options for change' was sent to the whole membership of sixty and even then only one third replied. There was no consensus on the future direction of the Guild. The Trustees concluded that the Guild 'was no longer viable as an organisation'. Its remaining funds were gifted to Walford Mill and the Guild was dissolved after a final meeting of the Board on 29 April 2000.

The 1992 map was intended to focus attention on six materials-based craft trails across Dorset. It proposed a year-round opportunity for the craft visitor. At the same time, the creation of the Dorset Art Weeks open studio festival led to a new and time compressed cultural tourism offer. This model has had a powerful effect in promoting a season of the crafts within the context of the visual arts in the county. Its programme demonstrates that the craft narrative in Dorset is still strong and sustainable. The publication of a 2007 *Artists & Makers Map* recalls the first map of the Dorset Craft Guild. The substantive change is in content and context. Dorset crafts take their place in the listings of painters, sculptors and print makers. Jewellery and silversmithing are much more dominant in the new guide and the presence of key furniture designer-makers indicates the special place of that craft form and the ongoing ripple effect of Parnham long after the College's closure in 1997.

When the founding members of the Dorset Craft Guild first met in the late 1970s, they cannot have foreseen that a modest map of the crafts could have had such a symbolic force. It was a precursor of today's rich and regular mapping of the crafts undertaken by Dorset Visual Arts; setting the crafts in the wider context of visual arts activity and in doing so giving it the life blood of publicity and rich contemporary credence. In doing so, Dorset Art Weeks have helped to establish the climate for other progressive artist and creative industry-led events in Dorset such as the work of Coastal Creatives the Bridport Open Studios, and Purbeck Art Week. They reveal the crafts in strong voice throughout Dorset.

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Draft 6

14 February 2008