

Handweavers and Spinners Guild of Victoria

Guild History

By Elizabeth Paramanathan

Meeting Places over time

The very first Guild meeting was held in the Public Library Theatre in Swanston Street on 21st April 1954. By June, meetings had reverted to Wednesdays 8pm at Emily McPherson College in Bowen Street. This was the place where the Guild had met for its last meeting in March 1954 as the Branch of the NSW Guild. Now part of RMIT University, the Emily McPherson College was then a Home Economics College. Meetings continued there until in November 1957 they moved to the Women's Christian Temperance Union at 46 Russell Street, (since demolished). The next move was to the Methodist Young Peoples Centre, Kurrajong House, at 177 Collins Street opposite the Athenaeum Theatre. The building is still there and one can see on a Monday, at 8.00 pm, the thirty or so members going to the 4th floor rooms, in an old wire elevator, for formal meetings chaired by Fred Ellis.

There was a brief change to Saturday afternoons on the 4th floor McEwan House, Little Collins Street in June 1963. Then the Guild moved to the Loyal Orange Lodge, 524 Elizabeth Street in August and reverted to Thursday evening meetings. This was under the guidance of Betty Reidy. The building still stands, just opposite the Victoria Market and as the meetings were held on the second floor all materials had to be carried up the stairs. Meetings were still conducted formally, with a speaker to follow. This venue was used until in 1971, when the membership had grown from 100 to 1,000 and a permanent home was sought.

Nairne Butchart and his Committee, especially, Dora Buckley and Alwina Siebel found the Horticultural Building, 31-33 Victoria Street, opposite the Trades Hall building, now carefully restored, but then rather run down. Classes, library and office were upstairs. From then on activities were held on the third Saturday in the huge room at the back, with activities in the morning and meetings beginning at 2.30pm. The Horticultural Society used the rooms once a year, so the Guild did not meet that month. Everything progressed well and many members recall these rooms and the comradeship with fondness.

After the Australian Fibre Conference in 1981, some people felt the Guild should become part of the Meat Market Craft Centre in North Melbourne. The Guild moved into rooms above the hotel in November 1985 and had to fit in with the MMCC management. The office, kitchen, library, weaving and spinning rooms were along a narrow corridor. The Craft Outlet was downstairs at street level. Saturday meetings were held in the Centre's Conference Room. In mid-1983 the Craft Council moved out and the Guild was able to obtain their rooms, over the Conference room, plus a Gallery in the main Hall. There was one large room for classes, but space was at a premium, so all groups had to be creative. This worked well until the MMCC closed suddenly on the May 1999 meeting day. The Guild continued much diminished for the rest of the year.



Handweavers and Spinners Guild of Victoria Inc

Barbara Dalziel and others contracted the move the North Carlton Scout Hall in Shakespeare Street. So much work had to be done to prepare the hall for the first meeting in February 2000. It was a huge room, which had been allowed to run down. There was a lot of water damage, but the walls were sound. There were two drawbacks - one being it out of the way for tourists and secondly, there was no heating. However, for the first time there were no staircases, public transport was close and everyone was together. The members said it reminded them of Victoria Street. Saturday Meetings continued, with a workshop or talk in the morning with the Meeting starting at 1.00pm. The room was so large that four Summer School classes could again run together. Later swinging doors and gas heaters were installed to create a comfortable atmosphere.

In 2011 the Guild was advised that its home in Shakespeare Street was no longer available and this called for some swift research to find a new location. After considering a range of alternatives it was decided to relocate to a location in Nicholson Street which provided a retail shopfront, thereby giving greater prominence to the Craft Supply and Gallery whilst providing room to house the library and other Guild equipment.

Exhibitions and Demonstrations

Exhibitions and demonstrations have always been part of the Guild, providing members with an outlet for their craft and encouraging new people to join. Indeed, the Guild began with Mrs. Heughan's demonstration at Myer's city store in 1952. The next year the Victorian Branch sent items to Sydney for the Handweavers' and Spinners Guild of NSW annual exhibition. In October 1954 the new Victorian Guild joined the Arts & Craft Society's Annual exhibition. And this continued for a decade. At one Lady Casey bought one of Nan Gye's rugs. In 1956, when Malvern celebrated its centenary and Val Marks and Karen Wigan organised a Guild display. Jess Brooke visited the Town Hall and met Val, who worked on a packed fleece rug frame every day for a week. In May 1959 there was a special Exhibition held at the National Gallery, which was opened by weaver, Rachel Grieve. The adjudicator, Leonard French, approved one of Val's fleece rugs, although others did not consider that it was true weaving!

In May 1963 the first of many exhibitions and demonstrations were held at Chadstone Shopping Centre. Many people, like Jean Greaves and Monnie Fenner, remember seeing Guild members at the Chadstone Auditorium. The first solo exhibition of the Guild was held on 21st November 1962 for the Tenth Anniversary Exhibition at Kurrajong House. In November 1965 there was an Exhibition with Aboriginal crafts. When Jean Plummer was in charge of an exhibition at the Loyal Orange Lodge, she organised new display furniture. In 1968 an Exhibitions Committee was established, with Nairne Butchart and Molly Shrimpton in charge. The idea was always to display work of excellent quality with a creative edge, but they found that one day exhibitions were too much work. An exhibition was held in the new Guild premises at Victoria Street in November 1971.

During the next decade the Guild participated in the 49th Eucharistic Congress, at the Wool Corporation Gallery, February 1973 and regular exhibitions began in the AMP foyer each April. As membership grew to 1,700, Jess Brooke wrote that the Guild should have an exhibition and the decade concluded with the Guild's 25th Anniversary Exhibition at Georges' Gallery, Collins Street, collated by Jess. Georges' was the elite department store at the time. Meantime, Lilija Duks held a retrospective exhibition at the Meat Market Craft Centre in 1975



In the eighties there were a number of exhibitions at Wool House in Parkville. An Exhibition linked to the Fibres and Beyond Conference in 1981 was held at the Meat Market Craft Centre, convened by Shirley Larkin and Carol Davidson, displays, exhibitions and a book were produced. In 1985 a 30th Anniversary Exhibition was held at Caulfield Arts Centre. The Exhibition committee was busy in 1988. Carol Beattie and Sandra Waugh convened three exhibitions linked to Victorian historical places. In February From Billy to Bushells, held at the Meat Market Craft Centre celebrated tea cosies. Then in April Winter Warmers featured traditional seamen's jumpers at the Polly Woodside Museum and in August lace shawls were exhibited in A Labour of Love at Como House. Members did complain about having to pay an entrance fee as well as commission, but few items were sold so costs had to be met.

The MMCC had continuous exhibitions to promote the crafts. Marie Williams and her committee organised. Opulence -1990, featuring silk; Spring Fling -1991; Breaking with Tradition - 1993; Rags to Riches -1994 and the Autumn Collection -1995. These had to fit in with the MMCC schedule and as the Guild now had the Gallery, members found they could sell their items without the restrictions of an exhibition, so Guild exhibitions lapsed. Joan Bacon held a retrospective in the Friend's Gallery and the last Exhibition to be held at the Meat Market Craft Centre was a retrospective of Val Marks work in 1999.

Demonstrations continued, especially at the Royal Agricultural Show each September and the Sheep Breeders and Woolcraft Show, in July. Guild members helped organise the Woolcraft Shows and participated in the judging. Affiliated groups took stalls and many entered the five items category. The Guild never held meetings in July because everyone was at the Flemington Showgrounds. In 1999 when the MMCC was closed the Guild was one of the featured societies at the Melbourne Exhibition Centre - South Bank. People wanted to buy yarn that was part of the display and this gave the committee the idea of selling handspun yarn. The Guild also participated regularly in the Stitches and Craft Show at Caulfield Race Course. These always created interest and gained students and new members.

Some groups have held exhibitions. For example, the Ngeri Weavers' annual exhibition was held at the AMP between 1980 and 1998 and at the Galleria, Elizabeth Street from 2000. Weavers' 10 and Dianella are two weaving groups that have held regular exhibitions. The Serendipity Spinners and Heritage Spinners, both organise demonstrations and sale of their high quality handspun work. Plus many Affiliated groups support their local Agricultural Show and hold regular exhibitions. The Yarn Spinners, for one, have been at the Hawthorn Craft Market for 25 years. The Sale of Textiles, which allows members to sell their work each May and November, has recently been re-introduced.

After the MMCC closed there were no exhibitions until 2001. However, the Guild continued to demonstrate at Craft Exhibitions, including the RAS and the Sheep and Wool Craft Show, now in Bendigo. The Scarf Exchange, plus Wrapped was held in October 2001 at the Fitzroy Gallery. Marie Williams staged Animal Magic based on children's book characters at the Collingwood Children's Farm in October 2002 and Yarn in the Barn, May 2003. In 2003, the Guild returned to the RAS, manning a children friendly stall next to the Animal Nursery. Finally, the Guild Golden Anniversary Exhibition is being held in April, at the Clifton Creative Arts Centre in conjunction with the 50th Birthday celebrations.

Curating an exhibition is a great deal of work. Firstly, a theme is selected and a venue and opening speaker booked. Secondly, the Show must be advertised. Thirdly, the exhibition items have to be selected. Fourthly, the articles need to be displayed to advantage and the exhibition staffed. Fifthly, the show has to be dismantled, often under a very strict timetable and articles returned to members



or buyers. Finally, one must sort out the bookkeeping. Demonstrations are almost as difficult to organise and often the two are combined. Congratulations to all the Guild members who have taken part and helped stage exhibitions and demonstrations over the last fifty years.

Teaching and Workshops

Although Workshops were a feature of Guild meetings from the start, classes did not commence until 1970, because weaving courses were available at many Technical Schools, especially the Melbourne College of Textiles from 1949 in Pascoe Vale. All early members trained at Colleges, either in Melbourne or overseas.

When textiles handcrafts became popular, Anne Greenwood started classes in rented rooms at 177 Glenferrie Road, Malvern in March 1971. There were three spinning classes run by Nancy Price, Claire Greaves and Ruth MacKay and two weaving groups taught by Marie Zoethort and Sue Colvin.

In addition, Anne Greenwood took Rug weaving, Jess Brooke, Tapestry weaving, Kerst Zoethort, Weaving Design - cost \$15. Teaching was off to a good start. Once the Guild moved to Victoria Street, the big room upstairs became the teaching room and soon day and evening classes were running. By 1976 there were four six-week spinning classes, run by Monnie Fenner, Jess Begg and Ruth Mackay for \$18 and two ten-week weaving classes taught by Joan Bacon and Alwina Siebel for \$30. In addition there were five other weaving classes. Equipment had to be purchased and courses developed. It was a huge task for the Teaching Convenor and committee. Spinning classes were designated beginners and intermediate, with an occasional two-year Advanced Spinning course. Weaving classes were for beginners with rug and tapestry weaving as separate courses.

Various members have run the committee, but the longest serving was Ev Potter who continued until her death in 1993. She was also a teacher who introduced many to the delights of spinning and related crafts. Monnie Fenner taught for many years as have Sylvia Mason and Sandra Waugh. At the Meat Market Craft Centre the teaching rooms were not so spacious and especially spinning numbers were restricted by the size of the room. There was one large room in Blackwood Street, but only one class could be held at a time. Thus evening classes were rather isolated and during the day, classes interfered with ordinary Guild activities in the room, so people had to very tolerant. Running Summer School classes was very difficult, because the whole point was to have three or four groups gathered together so that they could interact and this was not possible.

In the late eighties class numbers had reduced dramatically, as people became interested in other crafts. Nevertheless classes continued to be offered, although expensive advertisements in Age were discontinued. With the move to Shakespeare Street, the old feeling returned, along with more students. Multiple classes could be conducted in the Hall, the kitchen had a gas stove for dyeing and the garden across the road provided opportunities to dry material and spend some time outside. In many ways it was the best venue yet for teaching. Gelinda Binnings introduced a 2-year Certificate of Weaving course in 1999, which has run three times.

The Shakespeare Weavers Group was formed from her students. In 2004 Kaye Cooper established a similar Spinning Certificate course. Two years is a big commitment for both students and teachers, but the exhibition of work at the end of each year is inspiring.

During the years, activities other than classes have been organised by the Teaching committee. Firstly, the Summer School began in 1978, followed by the Lorne Residential School in 1980 and then the Harrierville Mountain Spin-in in 1985. All these provide members and others with opportunities to teach, learn or more probably both, about our craft. Lorne was an intensive five



days of work, often into the evening. Annemaire Pincus taught double-weave dolls and felting was introduced. In 2000, Dolores Anderson and others organised the Lorne Re-visited - Country Conference, as a twenty-year anniversary. Harrierville continues each year on the last weekend of March with many activities, not all related to spinning. Photography, calligraphy and painting have been included on the roster. Summer School is held in January, has re-commenced and is enjoyed by all. Recently, in 2002, Teresa Bennett started a Saturday Experimental Spinning Group, to encourage spinners to try novel yarn creation. This also has been well supported and is a fun afternoon. Dolores Anderson re-introduced Needles & Hooks, a knitting a crochet group. In August 2004, An Experimental Weaving Group began. Successful Children's Workshops were held for the first time in July 2004, introducing spinning, knitting and felting to 7-14 year olds. Workshops continue too, often with overseas or interstate tutors. A few names from recent years are Anne Field, Prudence Mapstone, Randall Darwall and Margaret Stove.

This is a big commitment for the Guild, as they have to underwrite the cost of the tutor, before they can advertise for participants. Ruth Williams, the Teaching Treasurer has had many worried times, but the members support the Workshops handsomely. I particularly remember the Danish lady, who introduced fine felting. In the last few years they things have gone well and the Guild has been presented with sizeable cheques. Teaching is a vital part of the Guild as it not only introduces new members, but also helps maintain excellent standards.

NB. Thank you to the members, Jean Parris, Nancy Duncan and Jean Greaves, who pointed out the valuable work done by Shirley Larkins in preparing our Newsletter. In the early seventies she did the typing, the addresses and collating. She continued with collating for as long as she could. Like many members there is no record of her contribution in either the Minutes or the Newsletters.

Special Events

There have been a number of Guild related activities, such as Country Conferences. One of the most ambitious was held in 1981.

WOOL & BEYOND - FIRST AUSTRALIAN FIBRE CONFERENCE 1981

The planning began in 1979, at a time when the Guild was at its most active. Marg van Roy and others attended the Handweavers Guild of America's Bi-Annual Conference, Colorado 1978. Subsequently, the Victorian Guild hosted a National Conference with 30 Workshops, three Exhibitions, a Mannequin Parade and a banquet. It required a Steering Committee and 16 working committees to organise the various activities. Marg van Roy was the co-ordinator, Joyce Hobday took charge of hospitality, Joan Golding Country Tours, Helen Webster co-ordinated the Mannequin Parade and Colleen Matriske workshops. Meetings were held twice a month, and it all happened January 11-23, 1981.

Coming at the time when handweaving and spinning were popular, the organisers had a large membership on which to rely. Marg van Roy decided to incorporate many fibres, thus including basketry and dyeing. Victorian Guild members took workshops, but there were also interstate and overseas presenters. Frank Gerber spoke on Natural Dyes, Anne Field on Maori Weaving and Janet de Boer on Cotton in Australia. Afterwards, the Wool and Beyond. Conference book was published in 1982. Unfortunately, as no other Australian Guild took up the challenge the second Fibre Conference never occurred.



COUNTRY CONFERENCES began in 1974. Each year an Affiliated Group hosts the Conference. It is a large undertaking, very similar to the Fibre Conference. In 2000 the conference was held at Erskine House, Lorne as tribute to all the Lorne Residential Schools, run between 1976-89. In the Golden Year Cobram hosted the 30th Country Conference.

HARRIETVILLE MOUNTAIN SPIN-IN began in 1985, as a relaxed weekend. For many years the Teaching Committee with Virginia Harrison as the Convenor and Ruth Williams as Treasurer looked after the Spin-In. Now the committee comprises Ruth McLaine, Ruth Williams and Lynne McHutchison. Guild members teach spinning, weaving, dyeing and related crafts.

SHEEP & WOOLCRAFT SHOW - although separate from the Guild, the Committee includes many members. The Woolcraft Competition began in 1972, although the Sheep Breeders have a much longer history. Held at Flemington Show Grounds it was one of the highlights of the Guild year. Ethel Stephenson and Joan Dever are long time members, and when it moved to Bendigo, Marie Grylls became the Convenor. The Committee meets at the Guild rooms, starting two weeks after the previous Show. Because of the distance between Melbourne and Bendigo, most communication now is by computer and fax. Members have grown to enjoy the trip to Bendigo and Affiliated Groups continue to win the five articles competition.

FIFTH WORLD CONGRESS ON COLOURED SHEEP 1999 was held in Geelong at Deakin University. Again many Guild members were on the organising committee. Each State Guild provided a felted representation of their state and these were combined to create a map of Australia.

GOVERNMENT HOUSE TABLEMATS were presented in a wooden chest in 1988. A number of Guild members wove both the mats and serviettes for use by HM Queen Elizabeth II.

THE WALL HANGING was the idea of Monique Wilson and celebrated Affiliated groups. It was begun in 1994, with the spinning of the background wool and dyeing it blue and green, next, members wove each section. It was completed in 1996, when all the group's motifs were sewn on and the whole raised on Ron Blyth's wooden support.

There are many other groups, activities and people who have worked tirelessly to make the Handweavers & Spinners Guild of Victoria what it has become today. Not all have been mentioned, but we have done our best to acknowledge as many as possible. Naturally, the Presidents, Secretaries and Treasurers have played an enormous part in keeping the Guild steady and moving forward. Without their dedication the Guild would not exist. Likewise, many people who do not appear in Minutes, Newsletters or other information have played a part. Their contribution is valued and acknowledged with thanks.

History of the Guild's Newsletter

The Guild Newsletter was published from the start of the Guild in 1952, probably edited by the Secretary, Mrs. Charlton. It was typed on quarto pages, with a quotation for each issue.

First was:

"God loveth Sinners, Dyers and Spinners. Weavers may also hope for Heaven"

Another was:



Handweavers and Spinners Guild of Victoria Inc

"The day the Chudder weaver sings at this loom He makes a perfect shawl" (Indian proverb)

Mr. J W Russell was the first person designated as Editor, then Mrs. Dempster. During the early years members' names, addresses and telephone numbers were published annually. Jess Brooke, took over when Betty Reidy became President in 1963 and later Val Marks. Then new member, Nan Gye took on the onerous task of preparing a monthly edition for 167 members. Everything had to be done at home, with family helping to fold the newsletter into the envelopes. Before Whiteout and computers any mistakes meant re-typing a whole page.

Jean Greaves joined in 1971, just when the membership rose to over 1,000 and she offered to work on the Newsletter. Nancy Duncan drove from Kinglake twice a week to address the envelopes at the Horticultural building, so Jean helped, using an old Addressograph. When it became too much for Nancy, Jean took over, updating the new members once a week and addressing the envelopes once a month. Things got a bit out of hand, with one member "writing in desperation regarding the cancellation of (his) membership, plus discontinuation of the two Newsletters". When Diana Skillern was employed as office worker in September 1975, these problems were overcome. Jean still continues to work on the Newsletter, collating, addressing and posting. Every month she rises early to bake a fruit loaf to feed the troops.

In 1976 the Guild logo appeared on the newsletter for the first time and has appeared on each issue ever since. In July 1981 the Newsletter took on its current format. A printed folded A4 with a picture on the front page. No more membership lists were published, but new members were acknowledged. Editors often did a year or two then moved on to other positions on the Committee. Marg van Roy worked from 1975 to 1980, and became President in 1981. No one took over and a sub-committee kept issues coming, until Margaret Milburn took the job in November 1983, publishing the 30th Anniversary Celebration issue the following October. After two more editors, Conny Brandt (White) was appointed in 1991 and continues to this day. As a printer, she has been an excellent link with the various companies the Guild has employed.

When the Guild bought a computer in 1993, Conny became an expert in preparing copy at the Guild rooms. Before that time it was 'cutting and pasting' with the assistance of very capable typists preparing the copy. Recently, members e-mail their contributions straight to her home. When Conny takes a trip to see her family in Holland, others have taken on the task of preparing the material. We thank all those who have taken part in producing the Newsletter over the years. Copies are stored at the ANL (Australian National library) in Canberra and at the Victorian State Library, as well as in our own Library.

In 2000 it was decided to create a name for the Newsletter. It had to reflect both weavers and spinners crafts and could not copy other groups' names. In May Treadles was instituted as the Newsletter name. Each issue contains details of the month's meeting, the President's letter and the Convenors' reports. Workshops, classes, exhibitions and sales are advertised. The Library lists new books with a brief synopsis and the Show & Tell items are recorded. Often there are one or two articles of interest written by a member. Finally each issue has Dates for your Diary and a page of advertisements. The Newsletter has been an invaluable resource for writing the history, because some things that are never put into the Minutes get into Treadles! It even continues with the tradition started in 1952. Last year this poem was published



Handweavers and Spinners Guild of Victoria Inc

*"I've gotten a rock, I've gotten a reel,
I've gotten a wee bit spinning wheel;
An' by the whirling rim I've found
How the weary, weary warl goes round."*

Susanna Blamire-1747-1794

Origins of the Guild Logo

At the 50th Birthday I was asked about the origin of the Guild Logo. A little research has uncovered that during the Committee meeting of May 25th 1964, it was suggested that a competition be run for a small design incorporating a shuttle and spinning wheel in conjunction with organising both a letterhead and a membership name badge. Previously, a shuttle lying horizontally was used on some Guild material.

On 15th August there was a discussion on who was to judge the competition. By February 1965, only four entries had been received and at the March meeting Val Marks, judged the winner, received a year's free subscription. However, the next day the March Committee meeting decided to employ an artist to design a motif, based on the winning entry. The design we know today was chosen by 5th May. By July 1965 the motif/logo was printed on the letterheads and two small brochures, one of the Constitution, the other a promotional folder denoting Mrs Kate Bromilow as President. The name badges were also made for members. However there is no record of who the artist was who finally created the design, and no record of payment.

The Logo has stood the test of time, incorporating a shuttle, and two spindles, it is small enough to be used on our 20-year badges or on the large banner.

A spinning wheel would be less easily depicted on a tiny badge and have overpowered the weaver's shuttle. It is an excellent design and has only been altered once. Originally, there were lines depicting threads on all three items. In 1976 it appeared for the first time on the Guild Newsletter. It has been used on aprons and bags in the early 1980's, windcheaters, tea towels and spoons in late 1980's and pens and tumblers for the 50th Birthday. As well it is on most Guild stationery and publications. If anyone has further information that can be verified, please write to the Guild.



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