

# Molly Curley remembers the early years....

In the early 1980's craft fairs were proliferating, which was hopeful for individual craftspeople needing to sell their work. Quality control, however, seemed to be non-existent, and those of us who valued quality decided to run our own events, after a particularly disastrous 'fair' at a local school which attracted no visitors. I organized an event in my local church hall, inviting about 16 makers whose work I admired. It was a huge success, and it was clear that people valued good design and craftsmanship. We decided to form ourselves into an organized body. Five makers came to the first meeting at the home of Linda Lazenby: Linda, Kathy Williams, Jane Mansfield (paper-maker), Lauraine Voisey (wood-turner) and myself - Molly Curley.

Our official inaugural meeting was held at the Friends Meeting House in Charles Street, and 22 makers turned up out of those who had been invited. The Makers Guild was born in February 1984. As the first chairperson I had a hectically busy year. We seemed to run an event each month, and ran several selections for new members, so the membership swiftly grew to 40. The (then) Design Centre in Cardiff invited us to put on our first exhibition, which had press and TV coverage, and a slot on the 6 o'clock news, no less ! I had stressed, to camera, that what we needed was somewhere to show our work collectively. The following day the manager of a large department store in Cardiff offered us space to demonstrate and sell our pots, and we also took up an offer of a tiny shop in Cowbridge to rent. This was our first retail venture. Ten Guild members ran it on a cooperative basis, but it was always completely separate from the Makers Guild. As a result of upsetting many craftspeople who were not successful when applying to join us 'founder members', who had been invited by each other, not selected by an independent panel, we felt that we should bare all and submit to a selection by an outside panel. This took place in the Reardon Smith Lecture Theatre in early January 1985. This turned out to be very bad timing as many had sold well before Christmas and not yet replaced their better stock. The selectors were ruthless and cut us from 40 to 19. We were shattered but determined to battle on, upholding our standards of high quality design and craftsmanship.

During those early years the Guild, needing exposure, exhibited all over UK, and ran very successful craft fairs at St. David's Hall in Cardiff. As a result, Michael Tearle, Director of the Hall, offered us space in Cardiff's old Library, recently vacated, of which he was in charge. I'll never forget that phone call, while at my wheel - up to my elbows in clay. I dropped everything and walked round the space, formerly the Music Library, with Michael - 1000 sq. ft. to equip, manage and afford, and run as a real craft gallery. Daunted, but wildly excited, the members rallied round, and we opened that Spring, and ran for 6 years, under the management of one of our founder members Lauraine Voisey (who had had to give up wood turning due to an allergy), with Anna Adam as our very able treasurer. We were greatly indebted to the WDA who have us a quantity of obsolete display equipment, as did the Design Centre which was just closing down. Lauraine and I bought second-hand flush panel doors to hinge together for wall display, and a second-hand till.

Based on our experience at the (still running) little 'Makers of Cowbridge' shop, we did well in the 'Old Library Craft Centre' for six years, until the building was closed for refurbishment in 1995. Needing new premises, we were lucky to make contact with Cardiff Bay Development Corporation which owned a 'tin shed' which had housed Techniquest for a few years before their move to new premises. We were offered this empty steel building in Stuart Street, Cardiff Bay, and trembled at the prospect of Equipping and fitting out a vast building. This was shortly after Lottery money became available to the Arts Council, who looked kindly on our application for funding. We were able to have a quantity of plinths made at workshops run for probationers learning carpentry, and they are still in use. Having become an educational charity we also created and equipped two teaching workshops for ceramics and textiles. The WDA once more came up trumps giving us lots

of spare hessian covered screens with which we lined the steel walls to create display space for hangings. All the chores of moving house, fitting out, organizing displays, advertising, stewarding, administration and even running the coffee shop, were cheerfully done by our members. Craftspeople are amazing folk to work with - they can do anything – and do.

The building stood in a gravel 'car park', and did well in spite of initial doubts about the wisdom of abandoning the city centre for the, as yet, undeveloped Bay, and for a while we were even able to afford a part-time assistant manager. After 3 years, CBDC sold off the site to Mermaid Quay developers, and once again we needed to move. The Cory's Buildings on corner of Bute Street was far from ideal, being the ground floor of an Edwardian office block, consisting of 4 rooms and a shared lobby. Relatively undaunted we packed up and moved in, creating a new coffee shop (including the plumbing), fitting out the walls as before, and creating a ceramic workshop area with partitioning. Already an exhibition program was in place where by work from elsewhere was shown, the most memorable being tapestry by the Wissa Wassaf weavers of Cairo. Our original manager, Lorraine, had left us, and we 'managed' with a series of members in charge on a daily basis, but Anna, and by this time Ron (Adam) who had joined the team, handled the accounts, and we stayed solvent. A succession of brilliant chairpersons had seen us through many hurdles, and the most crucial of these was cleared during the 4 years of our stay in Bute Street, with a successful application for funding to build our own gallery. With funding from Europe, the Arts Council of Wales and Heritage Boards, and a considerable contribution from members, and the offer by the Planning department of a site on the Flourish, where the old refurbished 'D' shed could be re-erected, we couldn't believe our luck. There were doubts about the wisdom of locating to a roundabout! but the Makers Guild went ahead. We would be close neighbors to the 'Opera House' when it was built, after all (now called the Millennium Arts Centre). The 'D' shed is a story worth telling. Standing on the side of a since filled-in dock, it had housed and dispatched goods from all over the world. (These are now commemorated in bricks (made by a member) set around the present building.) Being the last transit shed of its kind in the Bay, it had been listed - the metal structure being unique - but had become derelict. Owned by the Pierhead Authority, it stood on the site designated for the Millennium Arts Centre and needed to be moved (not scrapped). It was given to the Guild. Our architects, the Noel Partnership, of Cardiff Bay, cleverly used the original cast iron columns supporting the roof, and the steelwork which can be seen still, clad the space with glass and timber, and added an extension to house cafe, conference room, workshops and offices. Amazingly, even the 'waterside location' requirement in the listing, is met with the fountain beside us !

As project leader, Ron Adam had a traumatic time between builders, architects, planners, CADW and the funding bodies, but in June 2002, with a few builders still on site, Lorraine Barrett AM performed a topping out ceremony for us and we finally opened to a packed floor, and a speech by Alun Michael MP who had helped us greatly. A few days after opening, now 7 days per week, it became clear that visitor numbers would require extra stewarding. A personable young man, halfway through his fine art degree course, walked in looking for a holiday job. I snapped him up, and he's been with us ever since, and now is our General Manager. Our tiny staff could not be better, they are all outstanding, -- what luck we have had! Our progress over the last 25 years has been miraculous, starting from a small group of individuals with no money but a lot of talent, and unbelievable energy and enthusiasm. Well done all of us.

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