Mothers' Union Banners

A neglected British 'folk art'

Mothers Union banners:
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Bob Trubshaw

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S. KATHARINA

Introduction

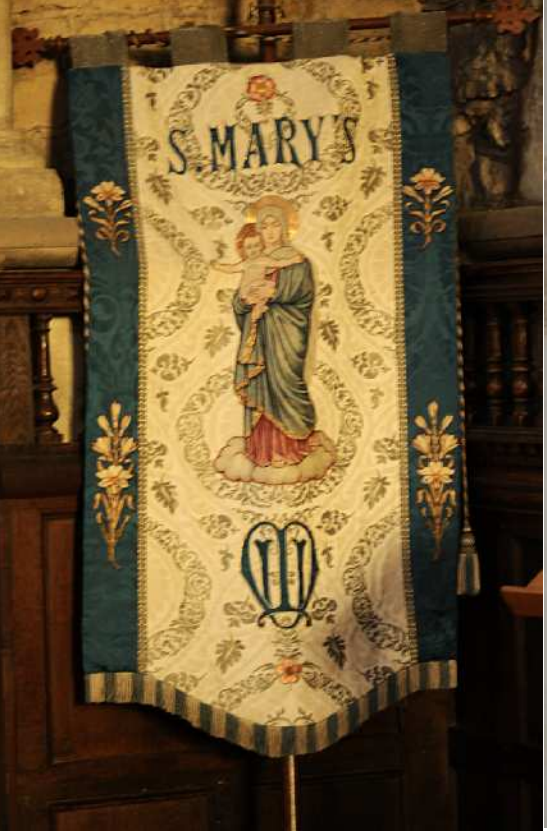
Look to one side of the altar in most parish churches up and down the country and there is likely to be a needlework banner mounted on a pole. Typically – although there are plenty of exceptions – this will bear a religious motif or a prominent flower, above which is the name of the parish and below either the words 'Mothers Union' or the initials 'MU'.

Although they are rarely, if ever, mentioned in church guides, when these banners are looked at close up the quality of the needlework is usually of the highest quality and comparable to the workmanship of altar frontals, pulpit scarfs and lectern hangings.

My interest in Mothers Union banners originated sometime around 2004, when I was seeking examples of British 'folk arts' for a revised edition of my book *Explore Folklore* (Trubshaw 2002). The revised edition has never come about – and almost certainly never will. In a chapter devoted to folk art in first edition makes the passing comment:

> There is also a whole field of popular religious art. There include tapestry kneelers and other needlework in Anglican churches, 'Jesus loves you' banners associated with more charismatic worship, and *rangoli* and other arts associated with Asian religions. Some of these overlap with folk performances, as with more 'involved' preaching styles.

Opposite page: *Standing to the right of the altar, by the piscina, this venerable Mothers' Union banner still graces the chancel of St Katherine's at Winterbourne Bassett in Wiltshire. There is no longer a branch of the Mothers' Union in the parish. As with so many of these banners, the names of the women who designed and produced this banner are seemingly unrecorded.*



St Mary with the child Jesus, white lilies and blue backgrounds – typical of Mothers' Union banners.

Left: *Adderbury, Oxfordshire.* Right: *Brigstock, Northamptonshire*

Clearly much more deserves to be said about this whole field of popular or 'folk' religious art – although, so far, no one seems to have stepped up to the mark.

Since the late 1980s I have been visiting parish churches regularly, looking mostly at medieval carvings but keeping my eyes open for other 'treasures'. However only in about 2008 did I begin to photograph every example of Mothers Union banners which I encountered. Since about 2010 the intention to prepare a brief overview has lurked at the bottom of my 'to do' list! This PDF booklet is intended merely as a provisional attempt to draw attention to these often wonderful largely neglected examples of British 'folk art'. If this somewhat threadbare

Left: *More often only one of these 'classic' motifs is used, as at Christian Malford, Wiltshire.*

Right: *There is also considerable overlap with banners created for the church rather than the Mothers Union. On the right is an ecclesiastical banner in St Mary's church, Bloxham, Oxfordhsire.*

attempt provokes someone to write something more accomplished then it will have served its purpose!

I use the term 'folk art' to describe those crafts where ideas and techniques are usually transmitted directly from one person to another, or by a person seeing someone else's work and being inspired by it. Most needlework falls into this category, as do such skills as painting 'castles and roses' on canal boats.

In recent years YouTube videos and such like have enabled craftspeople to share their ideas and skills with a great many more people. As such

they form a latter-day extension to the concept of 'folk art'. There are still a great many crafts which are not learnt principally from books and these mostly fall within this intentionally vague term 'folk arts'. Note these are not 'folk art' because the work is 'folksy' in style – although some might be. The term refers specifically to the way ideas and techniques are transmitted *directly* rather than through printed media or commercial DVDs, etc. (See the opening chapters of *Explore Folklore* if you need more details of 'folkloric transmission'.)

In America there has been extensive study of such 'folk arts', although in contrast British folklorists have all-but totally ignored this field of study. Rather than focusing on the skills, America folklorists have looked mostly at how the designs and motifs are passed on and evolve. With my folklorist's hat on, the wide variety of motifs and designs on Mothers Union banners cried out to be better known, and for better understanding of who designed them and where their ideas came from.

Whether locally produced or commissioned, considerable discussion would have gone into the preparations of the designs. The immense amount of stitching would have been shared among a convivial team of ladies. And there were probably a whole series of social fundraising events bringing together the Mothers Union members and, in all probability, other members of the parish. So, if nothing else, these banners are the focus of considerable 'social history' – although only rarely would the discussions, working sessions or even the fundraising have entered into written annals. Even the names of key people would have remained in the memories of the women involved, and then lost to old age and death. I suspect that details of the designers and makers of the oldest banners have indeed been lost to the proverbial mists of time. But where information is known then a useful 'local history project' starts to shape up – doubly so if someone with experience of family history research attempts to add basic bibliographical information to some of the names.

From about 2010 photographs of a few of the banners begin to appear on web pages. But the images were rarely accompanied by any supporting information about their design, or their makers, or the circumstances of their being commissioned. At the end of this booklet

Mothers' Union banners on the Internet.

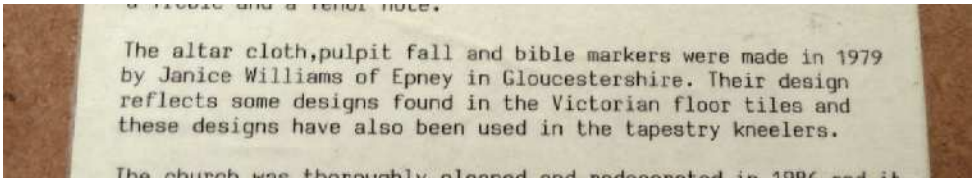
Top: A commercially-produced banner (from www.croftdesignshop.co.uk).

Right:

Bottom: The Mothers' Union Banner created by Wigan parish church needlework gild in 1934(from www.wiganparishchurch.org). Date and place of the photograph not stated, nor the identity of the two women.

Above: *Altar frontal at Christian Malford, Wiltshire.*

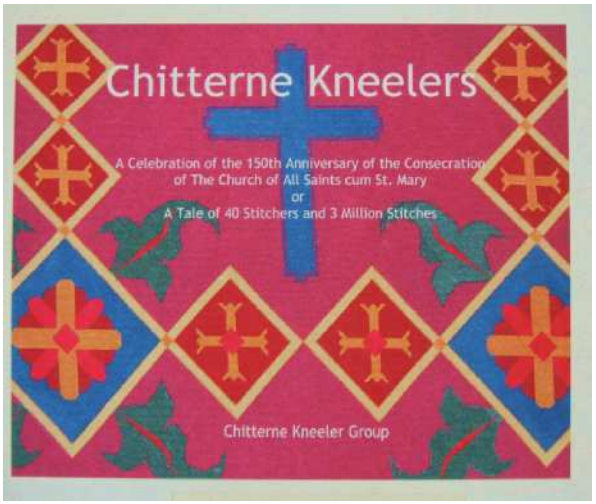
Right: *Pulpit scarf at Foxham, Wiltshire. For once the maker is recorded as part of the brief history available for visitors to the church (see below).*



The altar cloth,pulpit fall and bible markers were made in 1979 by Janice Williams of Epney in Gloucestershire. Their design reflects some designs found in the Victorian floor tiles and these designs have also been used in the tapestry kneelers.

I provide a 'questionnaire' which might usefully form the basis for adding such information to such photographs.

Needlework in churches is not, of course, restricted to these banners. Altar frontals, pulpit scarfs, lectern hangings and the ubiquitous hassocks are to be found in nearly every church. In contrast to the banners however, in most parishes of these are either sourced from specialist suppliers or – in the case of hassocks – the designs are mostly (though not always) commercially-produced. Cathedrals and maybe the more



As we passed the "two years to go" point in early November 2010, 24 individual kneelers were being made and we started on the first of the two nine-foot-long altar rail kneelers. With the clever frame and trestles arrangement up to 8 of us were able to stitch the long kneeler, sitting side by side, any both edges, maintaining a tradition of women stitching together that stretches back aeons. Conversation while stitching ranged over a variety of subjects. At one early session we thought harm were needed for each element of the altar rail design. Otherwise we spoke of "squiggly bit" and "cross when there were quite a few squiggly bits and several crosses. A heraldry book provided "cross the diamond outline, but those words didn't slip off the tongue and were not adopted. The leaves were just "leaves" and the flower was just a "flower"; but a throwaway comment about the border crosses looking like tree frogs stuck. There was great rapport among the stitchers. Stitching togethe was fun except when mistakes were made, as was inevitable, but we soon learned that we did not unpick our mistakes we reverse stitched!

Ann calculated that we needed to have stitched a foot a month of the long kneelers in order to complete them in time. This was, of course, completely impossible to measure with small patches of stitching scattered all over the canvas, but the idea was very motivating and a few of the group started meeting on Monday afternoons at Manor Farmhouse in addition to the regular Friday sessions at the Village Hall.

Chitterne in Wiltshire has a Mothers' Union banner (top left). To celebrate the 150th anniversary of the church's dedication in 2012 a group of parishoners decided to make a new set of kneelers. They sought the help of a local needlework designer, Ann Moody. Not only did they produce a set of interesting kneelers, they also self-published a book documenting the process of making them.

Anglo-Catholic parish churches are more likely to have individually-made altar frontals and such like, and maybe even vestments for the clergy. But these remain the exception rather than the norm for most parishes. Only the Mothers Union banners are the most consistent examples of local needlework. Even when the banners are seemingly made for, rather than by, the branch members, some local influence on the design seems probable.

As a provisional attempt to increase awareness and understanding of these banners this booklet briefly summarises the Mothers Union movement, the broader interest in the almost-contemporaneous Arts and Crafts Movement, before looking specifically at the banners themselves. The illustrations are mostly 'randomly' distributed through the text and the aim is simply to reflect some of the variety – and quality – of the work.

My 'folkloric' perspective on these banners might seem a little perverse to some people. However, as the questionnaire reveals, these banners are created as part of the complex social history of the communities. As such they can be approached from the more conventional perspectives of local or 'family history' – although here the researcher will be using 'family history' sources to discover information about women they may not be related to.

The Mothers' Union

The first Mothers' Union was founded by Mary Sumner in 1876 at Old Alresford, near Winchester, where her husband was rector. Sumner wanted to bring mothers of all social classes together to provide support for one another and to be trained in motherhood. The movement was promoted in other parts of Wiltshire in 1885; by 1892 there were 60,000 members in 28 dioceses. Although without any precedent, in 1897 Queen Victoria became the patron of the Mothers' Union. The movement gained further momentum during the 1920s when women were often left with the difficulties of raising children even though their husbands had been disabled or killed in the First World War.

According to the Wikipedia page:

> Mothers' Union is an international Christian charity that seeks to support families worldwide. Its members are not all mothers or even all women, as there are many parents, men, widows, singles and grandparents involved in its work. It main aim is to support monogamous marriage and family life, especially through times of adversity.
> (en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mothers%27_Union)

The Mothers Union's own website has, under the heading 'Our Focus', the headline 'Promoting stable marriage and family life' before outlining how members bring 'brings Christian care to families of all kinds'. (www.mothersunion.org/our-focus)

Members of the Mothers Union will normally regularly attend Church of England services. The terms of membership do not exclude women from nonconformist chapels or Roman Catholics, but – at least until recent decades and 'sharing' of services with, for example, Methodists – the denominational divides were too deeply entrenched. In line with the stated aims of promoting of monogamous marriages, divorced or separated women have, traditionally, been excluded.

Membership of the Mothers Union in Britain is declining in line with the falling numbers of Church of England members and the increasing number of unmarried or divorced women. In 1993 there were over 220,000 members; by 2003 this had nearly halved to 122,000 and the most recent figures for membership state 93,000. In contrast international 'offshoots' in Indian and Africa total over three million members.

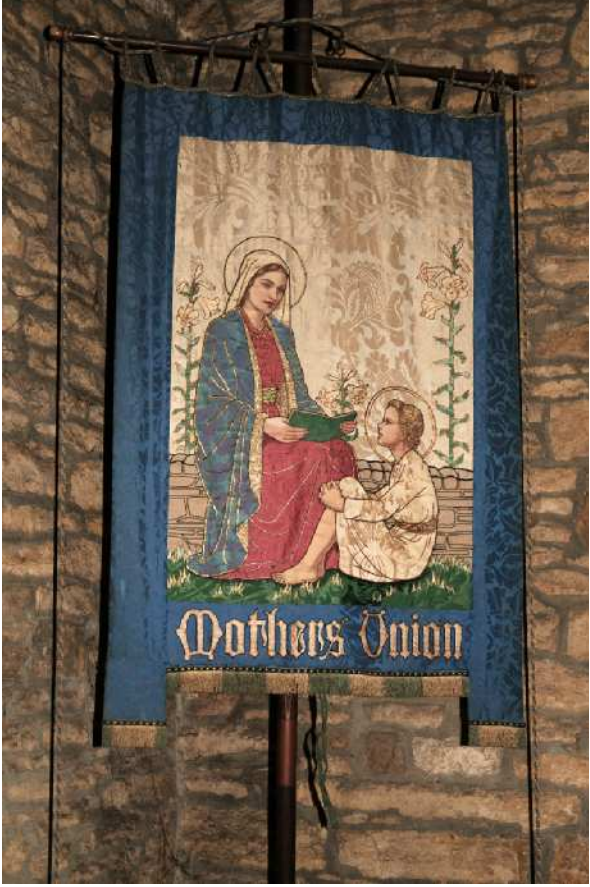
Women who are not part of the Church of England congregation are able to join secular organisations such as the Women's Institute (founded 1915) or the Townswomen's Guild (founded 1929). The WI initially concerned with revitalising rural communities and encouraging women to become more involved in producing food during the First World War; most rural villages had a branch until recent years. Because the WI was rural rather than urban in focus the TWG was created as a counterpart. However, so far as I am aware, neither the

WI or TWG branches normally created banners akin to the Mothers Union.

Although there is often little or no historical information, many of the older banners in churches seemingly date from the 1920s and 1930s. Others clearly date from more recent decades and, indeed, when a banner is deemed too fragile for further use then replacements are being made. Predictably, information about more recent banners is easier to acquire than for those created prior to the Second World War.

Mothers' Union banners being processed in Winchester Cathedral, 2009. Note that most of these banners have been made comparatively recently so do not resemble more traditional banners.

Photograph by Rachel Hartland from ramtopsrac.wordpress.com/2012/01/03/an-unusual-mothers-union-banner-all-saints-minstead/



Variations on the usual motifs.

Leftl: *The banner for Tattershall in Lincolnshire depicts Mary with the castle which dominates the village.*

Right: *Mary with Jesus depicted as a youth listening to his mother reading – 'aspiration motherhood' for the members of the Union. Moulton, Northamptonshire.*

As shown on pages 2 and 3, The older banners frequently depict either lilies, usually white, or Mary with an infant Jesus, especially if the church is dedicated to St Mary. More modern examples may depict family life.

A Gothic Revival banner in St Katherine's, Savernake Forest, Wiltshire. This church was built in 1861 following the principals of the Anglo-Catholic Oxford Movement. The date of the banner is unknown but perhaps 1870s–1880s.

Arts and Crafts Movement

The formation of the Mothers Union falls into the heyday of the Arts and Crafts Movement figureheaded by William Morris. All crafts relating to domestic and church interiors were revitalised, including various needlework techniques. However church needlework had already been revived as part of the Gothic Revival which took off in the 1840s. The Oxford Movement of the 1830s and the return to something closer to pre-Reformation liturgy had created demand for more 'medieval' ecclesiastical furnishings. Thanks to the influence of A.W.N. Pugin and other pioneers of the Gothic Revival there was a radical rebuilding, refurbishing and re-furnishing of parish churches between about 1840 and the 1870s. By about 1880 few English churches had not changed dramatically from their appearance (at least internally) since a century before.

A book called *Church Needlework* written by a Miss Lambert, published in 1844, was the first of a number of practical guides for needlework in the Gothic Revival style. While the suggested designs were restrained and often dull, they set the precedent for female members of the congregation working, singly or collectively, on re-furnishing their parish churches. By the time the Mothers Unions began to be formed nationally then the idea of the 'women of the parish' (at least those affiliated to the Church of England) getting together to work on sewing projects was simply part of a much wider ethos of 'good works'.

More information about needlework and the Arts and Crafts movement can be found in Rozsika Parker's pioneering study *The Subversive Stitch*. However Mothers Union banners are not part of her scope. This is hardly surprising as the conservative aims of the Mothers Union seem about as far removed from Parker's underlying approach, which is very much of 1980s Second Wave feminism (although her Introduction to the 1996 edition reveals her ability to see her own work as part of a broader development of ideas).

Why banners?

In the absence of any prior research into the history of the Mothers Union banners I have not been able to establish when the first banners began to be produced, nor what their inspiration might have been. The reasonable assumption is that they began to be created once there were annual 'get togethers' of all the branches at the local cathedral.

While 'church banners' made for processions within the parish and, subsequently, separate banners depicting saints become common in the late nineteenth century I am not aware of any research into their origins. Clearly at least some of the banners depicting saints reflect an acceptable Anglo-Catholic 'compromise' at a time when statues of saints (including the Virgin Mary) in parish churches would have been regarded as a stop too far.

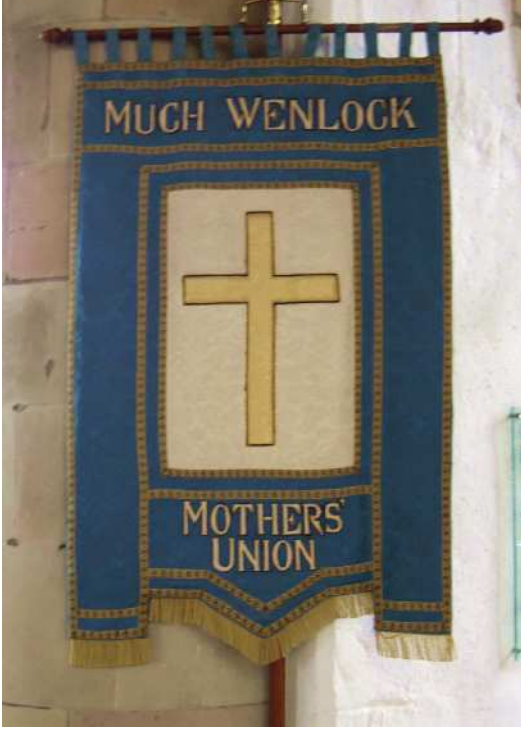
Presumably the origins of Mothers' Union banners are closely related to the fashion for processional 'church banners' and such like, but this needs further investigation.

Early photographs of Mothers' Union processions would shed more light on their social history. This shows the Mothers' Union of St Mark's, Levenshulme, Manchester taking part in a Whitsun walk of witness in 1927. Photographer unknown; image from www.levyboy.com/memories.htm; submitted by Rachel Mekic.

The only other organisations which I know to have been using banners at the end of the nineteenth century would have been associated with the emergent socialist organisations.

From the perspective of recent decades it seems improbable that an organisation such as the Mothers Union, situated at the conservative end of the modern day British political spectrum, would have been inspired by their political antithesis. But a hundred years previously, the Mothers Union was nothing like as conservative. This is the Mothers *Union* – a conscious 'alliance' with contemporary working men's pioneering attempts to create trades unions.

Any attempt to understand why the first banners were created requires a better understanding of the 'agendas' and affiliations of key members of the movement. The women's suffrage movement drew most of its



Two of the more clear-cut examples of 'home-grown' and commissioned banners.

Left:: *Melbourne, Derbyshire.* Right: *Much Wenlock, Shropshire.*

members from the same social classes as the Mothers Union so presumably, over the polite cups of tea, there may have been heated discussions about women's rights, as pioneered by John Stuart Mill in the 1860s and gaining substantial momentum by the 1890s.

Commercially-made and locally-made banners

One area of research which most certainly needs to be addressed is to what extent (if any) magazines produced by the Mothers Union and circulated to all members featured photographs of recently-completed banners, or even photographs of the annual processions of banners. The current magazine is called *Families First* although I have been unable to discover any details of corresponding magazines from, say, the 1920s or 1930s.

As already notes, Mothers Union banners seem to have either been commissioned from specialist workshops or designed and crafted by entirely by members of the local branch. The standard of needlework in both cases is high and the most obvious distinction between 'commercial' and 'local' banners is usually the more 'generic' designs of the former. Nevertheless there is no reason to be 'snooty' about either the 'commercial' or the 'local' examples being better or worse. Indeed, there is a considerable middle-ground where it is difficult to decide whether a banner is 'commercial' or 'local'.

The Mothers' Union banner at Minstead, Hampshire. Photograph by Rachel Hartland.

The main reason for making a distinction at all is that one of the fascinations of these banners is the variety of motifs used, especially on the locally-made examples. Where did the ideas and designs come from? Who decided which motifs and designs would be adopted?

Everything about these banners is about the women involved. Whether commercially or locally produced then many hours of highly-skilled work went into the making. Where the banner was commissioned from a workshop then there must have been numerous fund-raising events – bazaars, bring-and-buy sales, charity teas, and so forth – with all the organising and socialising which such activities entail.

Bringing the banners to life

When we do have some clues about the creation of banners then often they commemorate a specific event which is important either to the branch or, more probably, the parish as a whole. Sometimes we do know the names of the designer or the principal needleworkers; no doubt the usual 'lines of enquiry' for family history would shed light on their lives.

A key exception to the typical dearth of information, is the web page by Rachel Hartland about the banner for All Saints' church at Minstead in the New Forest:

> On more than one occasion I've been asked about the history of this particular Mothers' Union banner, so for posterity, here's what little I know:
>
> The banner was made in the 1930s and was designed by Mrs Horton the wife of Revd Henry Horton (who was vicar of Minstead from approximately 1933-1943). It was the gift of Sybil White in memory of her late husband Isaac who died in 1933.
>
> Sybil was still alive when I was a child, still living alone in the cottage she'd lived in since her marriage, but actively involved in village life especially playing the piano for things like the Queen's Silver Jubilee celebrations when all the children in the village maypole danced on the village green. She died in 1985.
>
> ramtopsrac.wordpress.com/2012/01/03/an-unusual-mothers-union-banner-all-saints-minstead/

Rev Hartland prefaces this account with the following information:

> … in Minstead, the church I grew up attending (where sadly there is hasn't been a Mothers' Union group meeting in my lifetime), the banner is rather different. For me it is quintessentially Minstead, and certainly reflects the surrounding countryside of the New Forest, if not its family life – though there will be local families who were raised under the spreading arms of an oak tree!

Right:: *A banner for the Guild of Servers in the parish church at Newark on Trent, Nottinghamshire.*

Following page

Top: *A 'general purpose' banner from Avebury, Wiltshire.*

Bottom: *Two banners in Cherhill church, a few miles from Avebury.*

This close personal association with a specific banner might be unusual now but would have been anything but unusual to earlier generations of women in the parish.

We should also note that just because a banner survives in a church this does not mean that parish's branch of the union is still extant. While no doubt the majority of the banners still have an 'outing' most years there must be a substantial minority which are now permanent features in the chancel or lady chapel.

Part of a bigger picture

While Mothers' Union banners are the most common banners to be found in English churches, they are certainly not alone. There may also be old banners for the church itself, the Sunday school, as well of depictions of local saints. In Newark, Nottinghamshire, there is a

AVEBURY ST. JAMES

He
shall reign

CHERHILL
ST. JAMES
SUNDAY SCHOOL

Bampton, Oxfordshire, has a 'church banner' with many of the motifs typically found on Mothers' Union banners and a Mothers' Union banner with more unusual motifs.

banner for the Guild of Servers; presumably there are more that have yet to come my attention. More modern banners fall broadly into those displaying more evangelical maxims (overlapping with the more prevalent banner-like paper posters) or are based on strong and clearly modern designs.

Documenting Mothers Union banners

While in many parishes the people who knew about the making of the Mothers Union banner have now all passed away, where information is known then it needs to be recorded. Ideally this information needs to be uploaded to a simple web page so that it is available to anyone

who cares to look. As a minimum I would like to have an email (bobtrubs@indigogroup.co.uk) which provides as much of the following information as is known.

If you don't know for certain then give a good guess! But indicate this as 'estimated to be… ' or similar wording. If there are written sources (published or unpublished) for information then provide relevant details. Sometimes the information will be passed on verbally; in which case ideally name who told you and provide an indication of how they came to know (especially if it is not first-hand knowledge) and an indication of how long the person has lived in the village.

- Where is the church? Which saint(s) is it dedicated to? Which diocese is it in?
- When was your banner made?
- Was it bought from a commercial organisation or made locally?
- Who designed it?
- Are the names of any of the people who did the needlework known?
- If not, was it likely to be have been made by the local MU's 'embroidery guild' (or a sub-group of members with a similar or informal name)?
- Do you know if these people also make other items for the church? (e.g. hassocks; other banners; altar frontals, pulpit scarfs, lectern hangings, etc; clerical vestments; etc)
- What is the significance of the design?
- Does the making of the banner commemorate a significant event? (e.g. end of First or Second World War; the millennium; a significant event for the local Mothers' Union; a major anniversary for the town, village or church; a locally-significant death; etc)
- Is there are reason to believe that the current banner replaces an older one?
  (If more than one banner still exists then please complete these

questions for *each* banner, even if little is known about older one(s).)

- Is there a service *at the church where it is normally displayed* in which the banner and/or the local MU 'feature' (e.g. an annual blessing or celebration)?
- Is this banner ever taken from the church? (e.g. annual MU gatherings at the diocesan cathedral; national MU events; local events; same banner shared between different churches in a combine benefice; etc)
- Is there anything else recorded/published about this banner or the people who designed or made it? If so please name the source (e.g. 'church guide published in 1975'; the title and author of a local history book; details of a web site; etc)

Even if you are unable to find answers to all these questions, email me (bobtrubs@indigogroup.co.uk) with what you do know – plus a photograph if possible. Or, better still, create a simple web page and email me the link.

At some point in the future I will create a page which combines links to other people's web pages plus summaries of otherwise unpublished 'biographies' of these banners. More importantly, I hope someone else takes on the challenge of researching these important examples of British 'folk art' and provides a much more substantial account.

Acknowledgements

My thanks to Lucy Wright for re-engaging my interest in these banners and for bringing to my attention Rozsika Parker's *The Subversive Stitch* Grateful thanks to Rachel Hartland for allowing use of her photographs and her thoughts about the Minstead banner.

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