WHY THE HANDICRAFT GUILD AT CHIPPING CAMPDEN HAS NOT BEEN A BUSINESS SUCCESS: BY ERNEST A. BATCHELDER

One learns with regret of the decline of the Guild of Handicraft at Campden, England. Much has been written about this enterprise, of its ideals, the conditions of labor found in its shops and of the social problem that it was trying to solve. It has been in existence for about twenty years. It was in a prosperous condition at the time it gave up its shops in London, and ventured out into the country. It was a development from a class in designs, coming about through a desire to make some practical application of the teaching. An opportunity came in which the workers coöperated in the decoration of a hall. The success of this work led to a definite organization, the enterprise grew apace from a handful of workers to a large workshop or series of shops. In the first years of its work the Guild came closer to the idea implied by the word Guild than it has since, if one may judge from the literature on the work of the shops and from the word of those connected with the venture.

In eighteen hundred and ninety-eight, I believe, a reorganization was effected on a basis that excited considerable interest. It was incorporated, as a matter of business, but with a number of unique provisions in its constitution. Briefly:—Each workman, or Guildsman as they were called, contributed a certain specified sum, one or two shillings, from his weekly wage to the capital of the concern, receiving in return a share of stock as soon as the sum of his contributions amounted to five dollars. The idea sought was to give the actual workers a constantly increasing share of the business with the avowed purpose, in time, of leaving its management largely in their hands. It was necessary for a man to work for at least six months in the shops before he was eligible for election to the Guild membership, and, according to the rules, he could not thereafter be arbitrarily discharged. The workers were to have a voice in the management at all times through the election at stated intervals of a labor director on the board of managers. The workers also shared, of course, in any dividends that were declared. It was expected through the above plan that the members would evince an unusual degree of interest in the work and in the welfare of the organization.

About six or seven years ago the Guild moved from its London shops out into the country. An old silk mill was leased in Chipping Campden, a town of many rare old charm, in Gloucester, on the line of the Great Western Railway. A salesroom was established in Brooks Street, London. At Campden, in the country air,
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each man might have his own cottage with a garden, where the work was done in large well lighted shops, it was hoped that the ideals of the Guild might be more fully realized than in the city.

Among the activities of the shops were jewelry working, silversmithing, enameling, cabinet making, iron working and printing. Here, under the name of the Essex Press, was continued the work that William Morris built up at the Kelmscott Press in Hammersmith. His presses were removed to Campden and with them came some of the workmen who were associated with Morris. What a charm this name has, by the way. Wherever you talk with a Morris workman, and I have talked with a number of them, at one time or another, you will find a man who speaks of his old employer with actual reverence. He was loved by every man who worked for him and when he passed away he left a big void in many lives. His men are scattered now, and work because, perforce, we must all work, but there is no longer the same incentive, the same real enthusiasm. One and all his workmen live back in the “good old days,” as they call them, pegging along at their present “jobs” because bread and butter must be provided. The joy of work has passed away.

DURING the year nineteen hundred and five I spent some time at the bench in the shops of the Guild at Campden and was much interested in observing the actual working out of the plan from the workmen’s point of view. At that time there were about fifty workers and apprentices employed, good, thoroughly trained craftsmen all for them, many of them having been associated with the Guild for several years, some of them from the start. The conditions for work were good, even though the hours were rather long. Fancy an American workman putting in an hour before breakfast! “If I am going to work before breakfast,” said Artemus Ward,—“I want my breakfast first.” In much of the work considerable liberty was allowed the workmen in the execution of the designs furnished him, and it was hand work throughout except in some instances where the machine might tide over some of the drudgery involved. The environment was of the best, sunshine and flowers,—and will one ever forget the charm of the old leaded glass windows with the mottled spots of sunlight across the floor of the shops!—the gardens at the rear, the quaint, rambling village street with its little market hall and stone roofed houses. Under the circumstances one would expect to find a spirit of harmony and contentment with men interested in their work and in the welfare of the shop itself. But during the time I was there I found, on the contrary, a spirit of discontent, what we in America would call “knocking.”
IT MAY be interesting to seek the causes of the Guild’s decline in numbers and importance. One cause no doubt may be found in the fact that its work is no longer unique in character of design and method of production. There are many competing organizations and firms doing equally good work. During its early days there was little competition in the line of the work done. Again,—it came into being at a time when Morris and his associates were arousing interest in a better and more thoroughly made product.

But the chief cause is from within and not from without. Today I found one of the old Guildsmen in the heart of London, down a crooked street, under an arch, up a rickety flight of steps in the court,—and at the top you must look out or you will bump your head. He was working at his bench and we enjoyed a long chat together. It is not my purpose to detail bench gossip; but as his views coincided with my own observations I believe it is well to express them. It is unnecessary to question the motives of those who were responsible for the management of the Guild; it may be assumed without doubt that they were of the highest. But owing to the fact that the Guild was, in its constitution, at any rate, offering an unique solution of the labor question, it is quite proper to seek a reason for its loss of prestige. In the first place it was a business enterprise and, in so far as could be seen, was conducted on lines not essentially different from any other business. There is little difference between “inviting” a workman to resign and “giving him the sack.” The payment of a percentage of the weekly wage into the capital of the concern was not voluntary; it was deducted from the wage. As many of the workers found themselves in time with, to them, substantial sums of money involved with no return in dividends from the investment, this again was a contributory cause for discontent. Moreover the organization of the managing board and the voting power were so adjusted that the voice which the workmen were assumed to have in the business was more fiction than fact. Now the average British workman believes that he is a socialist; he is blunt of speech too and likes to call a spade a spade. The workmen at Campden felt that the socialistic ideals of the Guild were well enough on paper, but that they were not practiced in fact. It is my belief that if the Guild had abandoned its scheme of coöperation three years ago and frankly organized on a sound business basis it might still be in a flourishing condition. Coöperation that does not coöperate breeds discontent among those who are coöperated upon. Shop jealousies and petty bickerings would have disappeared if some of the inoperative items of the Guild’s ideal constitution had been laid aside.