

The power of an image: The banner of 'The Grain Millers of Glasgow' and its historical context

by Mildred Cookson and Daniel Sanchez-Villavicencio

Often the most unexpected encounters can result in an investigation that leads to a fruitful exchange of information. Such is the case of the two authors of this feature, an expert in grain milling and a researcher in painted banners. After discovering interesting, yet initially unrelated historical information, they found common ground due to a particular image. The resulting collaborative study helped to understand the meaning of a 19th Century banner from Glasgow.

The banner in question, The Grain Millers of Glasgow is a painted trade union banner held by Glasgow Museum's Collections. As with many other trade unions in Great Britain, the records of this particular society were lost after mergers and amalgamations over the years.

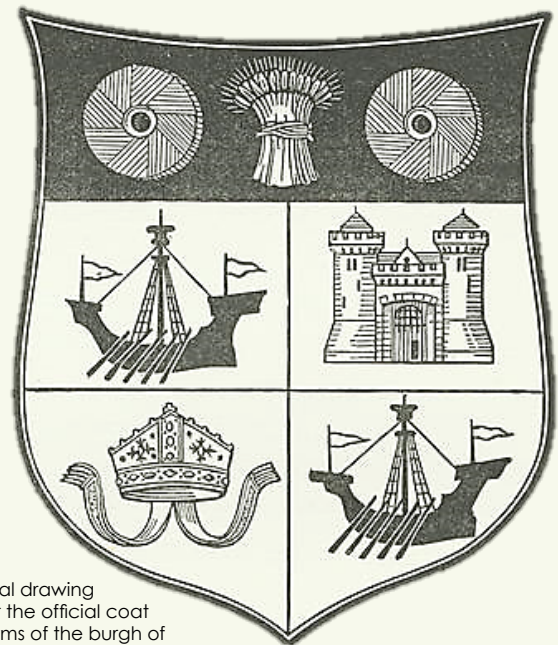
There seem to be no records explaining why the banner was created. So we have investigated the purpose, meaning and date of making such a socially significant object. Much could be deduced from the images portrayed, the same distinctive imagery that powered the Trade Union movement in the UK.

Provenance

Records of the banner's provenance in the museum archives show it entered the 'People's Palace' collection of Glasgow Museums on the April 8, 1988, having previously been kept at the Congress House building of the Trade Union Congress (TUC) in London.

The banner was donated by their librarian at the time, Ms Chris Coates, who found it during the refurbishment of their Russell Street building.

However, there was no indication of how the Scottish banner came into



Digital drawing after the official coat of arms of the burgh of Partick

possession of the TUC. It was judged only sensible to keep it in Scotland, rather than London, with the 'People's Palace' as its ideal keeper.

The Grain Millers of Glasgow banner had actually been entrusted to Glasgow Museums back in 1973, as part of the historical display 'Banner Bright: An Exhibition of Trade Union Banners from 1821'. It was lent by its owner at the time, the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU), and remained at the former Glasgow Art Gallery and Museum, (today's Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum), from the August 22 to September 24 that year.

Not much is known about the Society of Grain Millers themselves, although information published in the exhibition's catalogue and other sources indicated that they became part of the Workers' Union in 1917, which in turn amalgamated with the TGWU in 1922.

The banner was made by the English manufacturer George Kenning, who was a very successful regalia and banner maker from the second half of the 19th until the first half of the 20th Century. He founded his company in London in 1861, where all of his products were carefully manufactured.

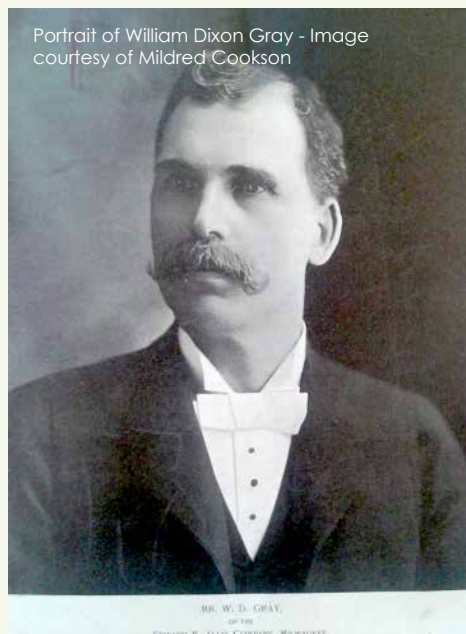
By 1875, he opened a branch in 'the second city of the Empire', Glasgow, with the purpose of linking his Scottish clientele with the London headquarters and offering the same prices.

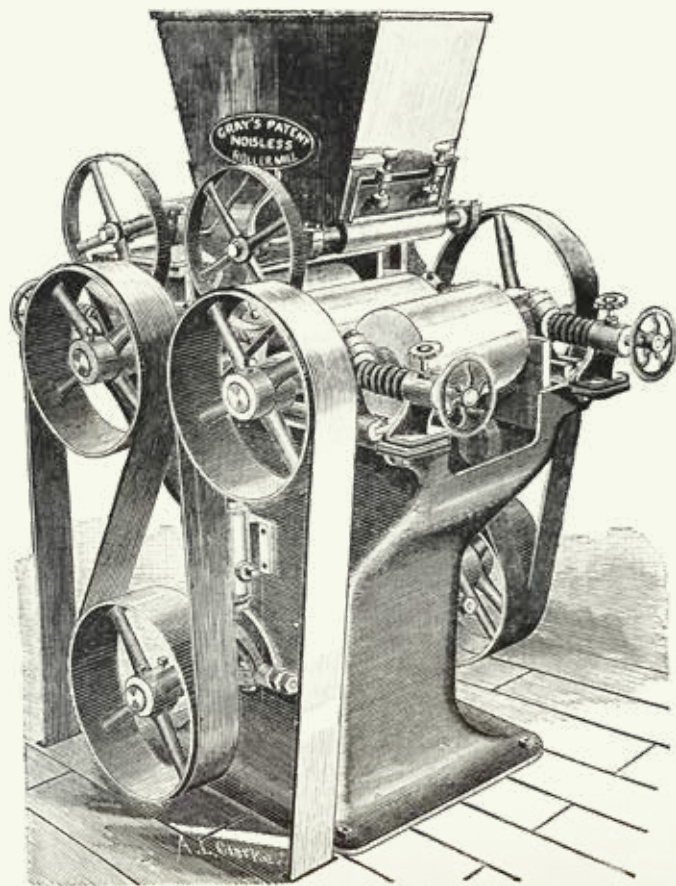
From 1895 onwards, Kenning joined his son to start a new firm by the name of George Kenning & Son, which lasted as such until 1954. As The Grain Millers of Glasgow banner is signed by George Kenning and not by George Kenning & Son, it could have only been manufactured and supplied between 1875 and 1895. We investigated the images to determine when the banner was made.

Meaning and purpose

As many other British trade union banners, The Grain Millers of Glasgow is symmetrically painted on both sides, with the same areas painted on the front

Portrait of William Dixon Gray - Image courtesy of Mildred Cookson





GRAY'S PATENT NOISELESS ROLLER MILL.

corresponding with those on the back.

However, the images are often different on each side, and the Glaswegian banner is no exception. The front represents the three periods of milling and how they were powered; on the left there is an octagonal brick-built windmill, typically associated with Scotland, and on the right, a traditional water corn-mill. Both of these would have used millstones for making the flour. In the centre is the latest stage of milling with a steam powered mill, which could still have used millstones before the roller-mills took over towards the end of the 19th Century.

The rear of the banner also portrays the history of milling, but in a different manner: contrasting the two ancient millstones with the modern roller-mill.

Additionally, these elements relate to a specific area of the City of Glasgow, known as the burgh of Partick at the time. The change in design on the rear side of the banner allowed better positioning of the society's motto: 'The Grain Millers of Glasgow' together with 'The Golden Grain. God's Gift. We Grind.' It is elegantly placed above the three figures of the back. This preferred use of the rear side in this type of banners is seen in other exemplars by Kenning's companies.

A list of members of The Grain Millers of Glasgow was published by The Miller on March 5, 1883, representing the main flour mills in the city at the time: Mr James Marshall of Ibrox Mills; Mr James Snodgrass of Washington Mills; Mr James Glen of Cheapside Mills; Mr John Ure Primrose of Centre Street Mills; Messrs John and Matthew White of the Scotstoun Mills; and Mr David Murdoch of Crown and John Ure & Sons Mills.



The Grain Millers of Glasgow banner (Front) - image © CSG CIC Glasgow Museums Collection



The Grain Millers of Glasgow banner (Back) - image © CSG CIC Glasgow Museums Collection

In another article dating November 5, 1883, there is a detailed account of The Grain Millers of Glasgow participating in the ceremony of the laying of the foundation stone of Glasgow City Chambers. The event happened on the October 6 of that year and a trades' parade was organised as part of the massive celebration, attended by an estimate of 50,000 people.

The Millers were part of the Group Four on the official program of the celebration, given to the 'Miscellaneous Trades'. The society of Grain Millers of Glasgow put on an impressive display of models and decorated trolleys to depict the history of milling through the years, including the latest piece of equipment that would be implemented in the Glaswegian mills as early as 1881: the roller-mill.

The prominence of millers at the ceremony would have been aided by the Lord Provost who officiated at the event. He was the Honourable John Ure, the senior owner of two important mills in Glasgow, as well as a member of the Grain Millers society.

However, the society lacked a banner of its own, as indicated by the reporter. "While the others had their special emblems [banners], the millers had their models of flour dressing machines, milling stones and other adjuncts connected with their art". In this way, the millers found a different, yet equally striking tactic to be noticed during the parade.

Made in 1884

By the following year the society would have needed its own banner, to represent them in the massive demonstration supporting the third electoral reform to be approved in 1884: the Franchise Bill. This explains why their banner includes the year 1884 without the wording "instituted" or "established" next to it, as frequently seen in other trade union banners.

The Grain Millers of Glasgow were active as early as 1860, as they celebrated their 23rd annual festival on the March 5, 1883.

Therefore, it is fair to say that 1884 indicates that their banner was made then; contrasting with other trade union banners in which the year depicted is usually that of their establishment or institution.

The design of The Grain Millers of Glasgow banner could have been influenced by the model of The Scotstoun Mills of Partick.

Their device is described in the 1883 article as "the [grain milling] art in its progress from the earliest times down to the most recent roller mill", which is essentially what is represented in the banner.

The Scotstoun Mills were acquired in 1833 by John White, member of the Grain Millers of Glasgow, who erected a new building in 1877 where the previous Waulk Mill stood since 1701.

He kept the name of his hometown Scotstoun, until the building had to be rebuilt following an explosion in 1909, renaming it as John White & Sons Mills. In the commemorative catalogue of his renewed business, a photograph from 1897 shows the previous steam mill resembling the one in the banner. Incidentally, both the son and grandson of John White functioned as Provosts of the burgh of Partick. The mills owned by John Ure, alongside the river Kelvin, were known as the Regent Mills in deference to his position.

It is evident that the Grain Millers of Glasgow wanted to include references to the burgh of Partick in their banner, as a section of the official coat of arms approved in 1872, got incorporated on the rear. The two millstones are portrayed likewise alongside a central element, only substituting the original wheat sheaf with the latest piece of machinery of their trade: a belt driven roller-mill.

Altogether, the banner's design emphasised the modern approach of the Grain Millers of Glasgow and the role of that particular area of the City in achieving it.

The US connection

Finally, the inclusion of that particular roller-mill could have also had an underpinning purpose, as to even state a sense of pride for Scotland. Due to the precise depiction of the object, not only it was possible to locate the exact same device, but also the information about his maker, who surprisingly turned out to be a Scottish-born inventor named William Dixon Gray.

Known as the Scottish-American engineer, Gray became in 1876 the chief engineer of the American company Edward P Allis based in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. There he produced his first belt-driven roller mills, around June 1878, for the Kern's Mill of the equally American company JBA of the same city.

Gray travelled to Europe between the autumn of 1878 and the spring of 1879, visiting amongst other places his native Scotland. During his stay in Glasgow, Gray met with none other than the 'soon to be' Lord provost of the city: John Ure, and learned about his recently completed mill, the Crown Mills, built in Washington Street in 1865.

This encounter established an initial connection between the American-based inventor and the Grain Millers of Glasgow, which continued with their attendance at the International Millers' Convention of 1881, held in Cincinnati, Ohio.

Many orders for Gray's patented belt-driven roller mills were taken at the event, including two by other members of the Grain Millers of Glasgow: Andrew and William Glen of Cheapside Mills.

Evidently, John Ure also placed orders for his mills, as by 1883 he "... adopted the same methods of flour making, and by similar machinery, as is used in Minneapolis"

With that decision, the Grain Millers of Glasgow equalled the quality of the flour coming from the leading American city using local manufacture.

Hence, the choice of including in their banner the revolutionary design of Gray, praising his Scottish heritage and the impact of his invention on the developing of the trade in America, Britain and Scotland.

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