

Who paints the house? Scotswomen as Housepainters and Decorators from 1820

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Abstract

In the early 21st century it is still considered unusual to find a woman in paid employment as a skilled housepainter and decorator. Tradeswomen, in these most domestic of building trades, were working throughout Scotland during the 19th and 20th centuries. The women were those whose work self-identities were sufficiently strong to be recorded in directories and census returns. These are women who worked, not middle class or amateur women interior decorators dabbling in the arts and crafts because it was fashionable. The historical record is compared with contemporary records of women taking paid employment in these fields and also with the strong market created in modern times by the many TV DIY programmes encouraging women into DIY. The high level of present and past involvement of women in house-painting and decorating shows that the aptitude and ability exists at both the professional and amateur levels. The factual reality is compared with perception and prejudice within the industry and the barriers that were and are placed in front of women wishing to do this work.

Introduction

In the early 21st century it is still considered unusual to find a woman in paid employment as a skilled housepainter and decorator. This research sought tradeswomen, working in these most domestic of building trades in Scotland during the 19th and 20th centuries. The women sought would have to be those whose work self-identities were sufficiently strong to be recorded in directories and census returns. The research looked at women who worked, not middle class or amateur women interior decorators dabbling in the arts and crafts because it was fashionable. The historical record was compared with contemporary records of women taking paid employment in these fields and also with the involvement of women in the strong market for Doing It Yourself (DIY) created recently by the many TV lifestyle programmes. House-painting and decorating are “default” career choices for young men with low academic achievement at school, while their female equivalents often choose lower-paying occupations such as hairdressing, retail, cleaning or catering work.

This research asks the following questions:

- Is there a hidden history of Scottish women working as painters and decorators in the 19th and 20th Centuries?
- What is the extent of women’s involvement in DIY, now?
- How might this evidence influence women’s employment choices?

The paper aims to show that the level of present and past involvement of women in house painting and decorating indicates that women have aptitude and ability, at both the professional and amateur levels. Uncovering the hidden histories of women at work is worthwhile, not just intrinsically, although it is hoped that both labour historians and gender historians will find the information of interest, but also for the potential to shed light on the present situation of women at work and illuminate possible paths to better future opportunities. The factual reality of women working will be compared with perception and prejudice within the industry and discussed in the light of the barriers that were and are placed in front of women wishing to do this work. It is hoped that the paper will not only bring to light the hidden histories of Scottish tradeswomen and DIYers, but also provide another small step towards normalizing painting and decorating as a career choice for young women, by using the historical to inform the contemporary.

The house-painting trade in Scotland

Who is a painter and decorator? In this context, I was interested in women doing house painting, decorating and paperhanging. Because of the variable way census data were collected and trade directories categorized, at different times, this category of work has also sometimes included glazing work, so I have included such women. I have not included middle and upper class women interior designer/decorators, mainly art-school trained, who decorated homes and even walls in high style. Women such as the Glasgow Girls (e.g. Frances and Margaret Macdonald, Phoebe Traquair etc) (Burkhauser (1990)), and Agnes and Rhoda Garrett's London-based interior decorating company of the 1890s (Crawford (2002)), I regard as essentially artists, even when they painted the walls themselves, and are, in any case, well-documented elsewhere. This art school training in the decorative arts was, however, generally the only route for women to gain practical skills in the field until the "second wave" of feminism in the 1970s enabled women to get some trade training in FE colleges. The only other possibility would have been to acquire skills informally from family members. Art schools generally taught tradesmen skills in the evenings on such subjects as house painting and woodworking, but only offered women the option of the "gentler" equivalents of mural painting and wood carving, during the day (Swift (1999)). In medieval times workers could not describe themselves skilled tradespeople unless admitted to one of the trades incorporations and, even latterly, the entrenched male domination of the field has acted as a gatekeeper to exclude women from access to training and employment as far as possible.

However, women have often been involved in their male relatives' businesses and could even be an essential route for potential new customers to make contact, whilst the man was away on a job. As Mackie (2001) shows for larger firms in the Kirkcaldy area, all members of the family could become involved in successful firms and women acquired skills denied them in the formal training schools. Women acquired business and technical skills informally through such family contacts and could sometimes carry on after the death of the male head of household. Owens (2002) points out that it was rare for a man to choose to pass on the family firm to his widow unless confident of her ability to carry it on successfully and hence provide for the children until their majority. It would be far more usual for a will to call for the sale of the business and for the proceeds to be invested to provide for the family. Therefore, even where it is clear that the husband was the previous proprietor and his widow took over only on his death, a trades' directory listing in her name, reinforced with evidence from the wills and inventories of husband and/or wife, can be taken as showing that the woman was a competent business woman in the house painting trade.

Trades incorporations and unions

The Trades' Incorporations in Scotland, from their beginnings in medieval times, had a mixture of roles: political, welfare and control of standards and entry. They were not directly comparable with modern trades unions, as membership included both employers and employees. They began in order to give the skilled trades a measure of democratic say, alongside the merchant burgesses, in the Burgh councils (A Scottish Burgh was a town with a royal charter entitling it to hold markets and raise taxes. It would be run by a council of burgesses.). The trades' burgesses, through their Dean or Dekyn, acquired the power to approve planning applications, known as "Linings" in Scotland until recent times. These political roles were removed to the local authority councils in 1847 but the trades' organisations continued to control entry to the trades and to provide a measure of welfare support until the advent of the modern trades unions. However, there has been a continuity of attitude, rigidly opposing the entry of women to the skilled trades, which transferred directly from the medieval trades' incorporations into the modern trades' associations and unions of the mid-20th Century. The only exceptions were widows, sisters or daughters of members who were occasionally permitted to trade on their own account after the male's death, where the woman was known to be competent. In this regard, Scotland may be seen as being even more sexist than England, where a parish apprenticeship system admitted some girls to the trades and where records of medieval masons include mentions of women working in that trade (Knoop & Jones (1949)). Control of apprenticeship and qualification remained in the tight grasp of men who resisted every attempt, by individual women and even by governments during the crises of two world wars, to increase opportunities for women to enter the skilled manual trades.

The painters were, and are still, regarded as a relatively low status trade compared to the other building trades and were amongst the last to be admitted to the trades' incorporations and then to set up their own unions. At this time a (male) painter could expect to earn about 25 shillings (£GB 1.25) per week for a 40-hour week (in Dundee (Lennox)), which was at the low end of the wage rates for skilled male building workers. I have not found equivalent rates for women workers, but we can probably assume that the prevailing culture of the time meant they would have been a lot lower, regardless of skill. In 1861 (UK First Annual Trades union directory) there was a multiplicity of Scottish building trades' unions, but only in Glasgow were painters recorded as meeting – at 34 Hutchinson Street. In 1887 the Scottish National Federation of House and Ship Painters was established, becoming the Scottish Painters Society in 1889. This was eventually subsumed into the Union of Construction, Allied Trades and Technicians (UCATT), which now covers all the building trades. If women are rarely to be found in the formal institutions of the painters and decorators this is not to say that women were not doing this work. It is not a closed shop trade and is indeed one where many householders choose to do the work themselves, avoiding the expense of employing a professional.

The growth of DIY and its popularization in the leisure culture

Perhaps a reluctance to engage with professional interior decorators and other people's imposed ideas of what is good taste is as much at the heart of DIY as the desire to save money. Women's desire to create a home environment for the family is also a different motivator for DIY than men's, which is seen as more associated with adding value to the property (Cross (1997)). An architect expressed horror at the "all manner of decorative trappings, ornaments and lace" with which the wife of a famous Soviet architect had "messed" up the "symphony of architectural geometry" of the house her husband had designed (Rendell (1999)).

This demonstrates that taste in home decorating can vary widely between the “professionals” and the end-users. The history of DIY on the TV dates back to the very beginnings of that medium, when a radio DIY presenter, W.P. Matthew, gave the first TV DIY programme in 1939 and continued to his death in 1956. His place was taken by the more famous Barry Bucknell and Harry Green, in the 1950s and 60s. These programmes very much echoed the expectations of the times, that a man on the TV was showing a male viewer how to do things. More recently, this type of programme has been reinvented as the “lifestyle” programme and aimed steadily at the female audience. The success of lifestyle TV programmes since the 1990s has paralleled the surge in the level of home ownership and value of private property in the UK (Giles (2002)). In many ways these programmes echo the personal “Make over” commonly seen in women’s magazine, but transferred to the physical domestic sphere. The public participants in these shows are by no means always delighted with the “Expert’s” taste imposed on their home.

However, the willingness of homeowners, of either sex, to undertake decorating DIY has, in the same period, contrasted with a noted reluctance to do, or get done, essential repair and maintenance work. Munro and Leather (2002) noted that the 40% (in 1996) of the Scottish housing stock was in need of urgent repair, to an average of £4,000/home, but that most were unaware of the need due to lack of technical knowledge about property. DIY is often regarded as a recreation, especially when associated with second-home ownership: part of our recreational space and time, so excluding more “serious” tasks that continue to be passed to outside contractors (Chaplin (1999)). Davidson and Leather (2000) found that only 17% of all UK households were willing to tackle major work by DIY and that female-headed households were even less likely, generally due to perceived lack of skills. Paradoxically, poorer households did less DIY than wealthier ones, because they were either too poor to even afford the materials or because the poverty was due to ill health or old age.

Methods

Archive and census searches

The decennial census statistics for Scotland give detailed occupations, disaggregated by sex from 1841. These are available in detail to the town level and some actual census returns are available, although the latter are arranged by street address and would require the researcher to read the whole set in order to pick out named women in given occupations. So, in order to identify individuals I have turned to the less complete sources of the Postal and Trade Directories, which are similar to “Yellow pages”. These only list people operating as professionals or traders and those listed would have paid to be included. Neither employees, nor smaller “sole traders” would be listed. However, the earliest directories list firms by the proprietor’s full name, making it straightforward to find the women in a given trade. By the late 19th Century many firms’ names had become anonymous (e.g. “Partick Painters”) and it is no longer so easy to identify who owns what. Hudson argues that, although the directories vary a good deal as to reliability,

“Counting the numbers or proportions of female names listed under the classification of various trades should always be regarded as an underestimate of the extent of female proprietorships, particularly as many part time or multi-occupational traders may have escaped listing.”

Therefore it is reasonable to assume that the named individuals in the directories were the most stable and confident women and represent only a proportion even of proprietors or employers, let alone female casual workers or employees in these predominantly male trades. However, trade directories have the benefit over census

returns, in that a woman mentioned therein will have arranged for the entry herself and hence we can know that this is the trade “identity” that she sees herself in. In contrast, the census returns were generally filled in by heads of households or by the census officers themselves. Neill (1996) found that census data often excluded women’s work, because the people completing the forms did not regard it as significant, particularly if it consisted of a wife “helping” her husband in his own work, from time to time. The irregularity, lack of an external employer, lack of a formal wage, and the expectation that “helping” somehow did not count, were all factors in disregarding what women did apart from their domestic tasks. Women rarely got to self-describe, unless they were literate heads of households and, in any case, the mores of the time encouraged women to style themselves as more “respectable” by their lack of paid employment outside the home. It is sometimes the case that an entry will indicate that a firm is being operated by the executors for the will of the deceased former proprietor. The case of Isabella Twaddle, who took control of her late husband’s plumbing firm in Glasgow in 1883 and ran it successfully for many years, in the face of the derision and suspicion of the rest of the trade community, is an example of a woman refusing to hide behind a man’s name or the controls of male executors (House (1948)). Hence, I have felt confident in assuming that, where a woman is listed in a Trades’ Directory as the proprietor, she really was doing that work herself.

In both census returns and directories the categories change frequently, so that direct time-series comparisons are often difficult. “Painters” may include glaziers on one occasion and paperhangers on another and neither on a third. The most recent census reports give less detail than earlier ones and statistics are given as 10% of returns.

Where there is enough detail I have attempted to track named women through genealogical databases. The Latter-day Saints’ online resource sometimes gives census data indicating if an individual came from a family in the same trade. Up to 1901 the online databank of Scottish wills and inventories is an invaluable source of information about relationships and finances of families, giving insights into the otherwise generally unrecorded lives of working people. Inventories list all debts so they can be used to track the work the deceased had been doing just before they died. Hence, I have, in a few cases, been able to identify specific buildings that women were contracted to decorate. Wills also indicate if the firm was to be handed over to the widow, to do with as she thought fit, or if executors/trustees were to be imposed.

DIY stores counts and surveys

Base data is available from market reports on the % of women purchasing all DIY products, so the counts I undertook were to see how many women entered the painting and decorating section at large DIY stores in Glasgow. This was done by means of several walkthrough counts in the paint, wallpaper and tiling sections at each store on during the Easter weekend (this was identified by B&Q as the peak decorating sales weekend). Total counts of all adult members of the public were recorded with a hand tally and counts of female adult members of the public recorded per walkthrough. The stores selected were:

- A very large B&Q warehouse in a retail park.
- A B&Q superstore: a smaller local store.
- A Wickes Extra store.
- The Untouchables, an independent, specialist decorating supplies store.

In order to analyse the effort to which DIY stores and product manufacturers are going in order to attract the female market, I collected all available literature in the relevant

sections: paint brochures and “How-to” leaflets. These were analysed for numbers of male and female images, how many women or men were shown as actively doing some DIY task or as just being present in the room designs. The paint brochures were also assessed as to the level of technical content, use of imagery and language to create a “male” or “female” feel.

Findings

Women as professional housepainters and decorators



Figure 1: Emblematic figures: Painting

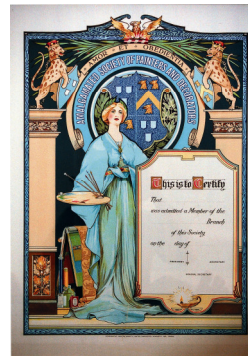


Figure 2: Membership scroll from the Amalgamated Society of Painters and Decorators (courtesy of UCATT).

At first glance, it would be easy to say that women are not housepainters in the UK. They are not to be widely found advertising, particularly outwith the south east of England, and you do not see media images of them at work. However, from earliest times, a woman has represented the occupation of painting, at least in its iconography (Figure 1, Orgal (1979)). When the modern trades unions were creating their banners, it would still have been unimaginable that women could join and be equal with men in the trade, yet the Amalgamated Society of Painters and Decorators' banner (Figure 2) prominently shows a figure of a woman painter, holding an artists' palette and with the equipment of a house decorator at her feet. She wears the blue robe that signifies purity and innocence and the society's motto translates as “Love and obedience” which surely must have represented the qualities expected of the dutiful housewife more accurately than those of the common house painter. Perhaps they meant to instill a love of work and obedience to the client's wishes in their members.

There is very little existing research on women in the contemporary or historical UK construction industry and none that I have found relating to Scotland. Clarke (2004) summarises the historical position of women in the building industry in England, from feudal times to the present. She shows how the regulated system in feudal times sometimes enabled some women to enter the full range of building trades. Under the capitalist system, she shows that it was generally only during times of war that strict public control forced the industry to accept women workers and that the intervening periods of unregulated free enterprise rigidly excluded women as much as possible. In the same book, Pedersen describes the attention attracted by female housepainters in Denmark in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and how later safety legislation

changed attitudes in the industry so that housepainting in Denmark is now about 30% female.

Hewlings' (2000) list, of 69 women working in building-related trades from medieval times onwards, yields only one in Scotland: Apollonia Kickius (1669-95), the daughter of a Dutch natural history artist, Everhardus Kickius. She lived in Scotland from the age of 8, and worked as a decorative painter, presumably of murals, for various noble houses, including the period after her father left in 1687. Her time and work are both outside the scope of this paper, but she is the earliest documented woman I have so far identified in this general area. Beyond the formal records of trades guilds and incorporations, there are few documents available that tell us about the work of ordinary people from that period, let alone people who were working informally as women in a trade would have had to then.

The postal and trade directories for the nineteenth century offer the opportunity to identify individuals by name and trade and have yielded 21 women painters and decorators between 1820 and 1882 (Table 1). By the late 19th century it becomes more difficult to identify female proprietors, as businesses start to have more anonymous names.

Table 1: Some women listed in Trades' Directories as being in the house painting and decorating business

Isabel	Craig	Painter and decorator	1821, 1837	Candleriggs, Glasgow.
Elizabeth	Aitchison (nee Umpherston)	Painter and decorator	1837	Nelson Street, Edinburgh. B. 1800 Lasswade, m. Hugh 1826, widow of Hugh Aitchison who died 29/9/1836
Ann	Coulson (nee Boyd)	Painter and decorator	1837	St James square, Edinburgh, widow of Thomas Coulson, who died 1834.
Agnes	Murray (nee Middleton)	Painter and decorator	1837	Croy Place. Glasgow. Widow of Angus Murray, who died 1/8/1829.
Isabella	McMurray	Painter and glazier	1837	King St, Castle Douglas, Dumfries and Galloway
Mrs.	Craig	Painter and decorator	1844	St Vincent Place Glasgow. Widow of John Craig.
Elizabeth	Hastie	Painter	1846	Hutcheson street, Glasgow. Widow of William Hastie, who died 1840
Mary	Paterson	Painter	1846	Canning street, Glasgow
Jean	Hay (nee Cruickshanks)	Painter	1851	Taylor Street, Glasgow. Widow of William Hay.
Christina	Rankin	Painter and decorator	1857	Garscube Road, Glasgow. Widow of Archibald Rankin, but he was not a painter, just a navy.
Margaret	Bryan	Painter	1861	Dale St, Glasgow
Ellen	Pringle	Painter	1861, 1872	High St, Perth. Widow of James Pringle, who died 1858.
Sophia	Carse	Painter	1867	High street, Musselburgh. Widow of Edward Carse, who died 1858
Mrs.	Mercer	Painter	1867	Lasswade. Widow of Thomas Mercer, who died 1863.
Mrs. D	Kerr	Painter and decorator	1876	Copeland St, Govan, Glasgow

Jane	Robertson (nee Moffat)	Painter and decorator	1876	Gallowgate, Glasgow. Widow of William Robertson
Ann	Beveridge	Painter & paperhanger	1882	South Back Canongate, Edinburgh
Isabella	Kerr	Painter & paperhanger	1882	Govan Rd, Glasgow
Margaret	Wilson	Painter & paperhanger	1882	Gallowgate, Glasgow, widow of Hugh Wilson, who died 1870.
Mary	Meikle (nee Picken)	Painter and glazier	1882	Catrine, Ayrshire. Widow of William Meikle. Firm founded in 1833.
Mary	Middleton (nee Ramsay)	Painter and glazier	1882-1914+	Robertson St, Glasgow. Widow of Matthew Middleton who died 1877.

The census reports, of course, only give nameless statistics, particularly for the later period. However, we can see that women considered themselves to be housepainters and decorators in numbers which broadly increased until the 1960s (Table 2).

Table 2: Painters and decorators: numbers from decennial Census of Scotland reports

Year	Women			Men Total
	Total	Sole traders	Employers	
1841	24			4,054
1851	-			5,571
1861	32			5,362
1871	23			7,341
1881	54			10,373
1891	144		11	11,451
1901	161	5	20	14,354
1921	262	6	13	17,348
1951	676	14	22	
1961	1200			25,390
1971	440			20,890
1981	350			21,140

In some years the tables in the Census reports are sufficiently detailed to identify the towns and counties in which housepainters were living at the time and hence have an idea of geographic distribution of women in the trade (Figure 3). As you might expect, women painters are concentrated in the central belt, where the greatest amount of building work was being done. However, women housepainters were also working in the northeast and the borders, which is interesting because these areas were far more conventional in the gendered division of work, and fewer women normally worked outwith the home or family farm in these areas.

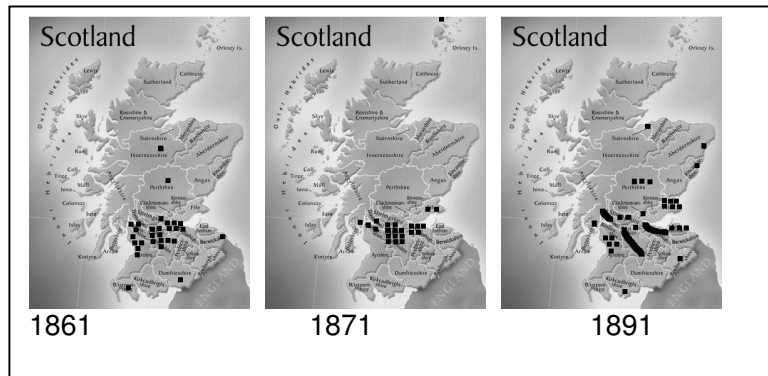


Figure 3: Distribution of women working as housepainters, paperhangers or glaziers, from Census records 1861-91

During the First World War, nearly every conceivable trade experienced shortages of skilled manpower as men went off to war and did not return. Although virtually no house building took place in Scotland during the war, there was still a demand for other types of building work, not least building or extending the factories for munitions and other war-related construction. This manpower shortage was addressed by the Government imposing “dilution” in the trades. Initially the dilution promoted unskilled boys and men to semi-skilled or skilled status, but eventually even this did not meet the demand and female dilutees were also imposed. All trades unions resisted this aggressively. Scottish Painters’ Society (SPS) complained violently against the discovery of women dilutee painters (“women in trousers to do whitewashing and painting at MacFarlane Lang & Co Bakers’ factory”) at various factories and works in Glasgow and Aberdeen (Scottish Painters’ Society (1916)). Members were expected to boycott such works and their products. The Ministry of Munitions Inspectors repeatedly obliged companies to take in female dilutee painters only for the union to object and the women to be withdrawn. SPS saw their failure to resist dilution effectively as due to poor organization on their own part and called for higher union dues to enable more resistance. In World war2 women again worked as housepainters (Figure 4) and as industrial painters, painting ships and steelwork.



Figure 4 Six women painters at work on a Ministry of Supply site (location not known), where houses were being built for arms workers. (courtesy of Imperial War Museum, negative number P243)

More recently, women have been taking trade courses at colleges of further education, often as council apprentices, and a few are starting to be seen working as employees of building companies or on their own account, as sole traders. The most famous painting job in Scotland, the famous Forth Rail Bridge, has only ever had one woman working on it as a painter: Lisa Pringle (Hay).

Some Case Studies

Ann Coulson (née Boyd)

Ann Coulson was a house painter and decorator who worked and lived at 5 St James Square, Edinburgh. Her husband, Thomas Coulson, a house painter, died intestate in 1834, owed over £750 in “recoverable debts” (Thomas Coulson’s inventory), presumably mainly from the business. Looking at the larger sums in the list of debts in his inventory, it is clear that many are attributable to members of the gentry and nobility of the area. For example, they were owed £488 for work done for Alexander Falconer at Falcon Hall (see Figure 5), Morningside, a smart area of Edinburgh.



Figure 5: Edinburgh Geographical Institute in Duncan Street, Edinburgh. Falcon Hall was demolished in 1909, but an idea of its grandeur can be gained from its classical portico, which was rescued and now fronts the EGI building above.

Over £50 was owed by the 14th Earl Roseberry for a smaller amount of work, on his stately home, Dalmeny House. Many smaller, but significant, debts indicate that the firm worked for a wide range of gentry. The inventory of debts owed to Mary Boyd Coulson at her own death in 1837 (Ann Boyd Coulson's inventory), indicates that she had kept the firm going, in her own name, and had gained further contracts. The inventory shows that she had done work for the Dr Kennedy on his house at 6 Albany Street, Edinburgh (£20 19s 5d) and for the Earl of Caithness on his home at Denham Green, amongst many others, including some further work at Falcon Hall. The Coulsons' home and workshop, in the now-demolished St James Square in central Edinburgh, featured in a complimentary article in the Scotsman (1832), which noted how they had converted their garden into a "beautiful little parterre", with faux ruins and classical memorials. The latter included a 5m high monument to the late Sir Walter Scott, whose own taste this garden and home clearly reflected. Following Ann's own death, the house and workshop were auctioned off (Scotsman May & July 1837), with descriptions of how beautiful they were and the amounts of stock in trade to be sold. Her estate was considerable, but she had no children and most of it went to churches and charities. The evidence seems to indicate that this was a well-respected firm doing important decorating work for the local middle and upper classes.

Agnes Middleton and Mary Ramsay

The Glasgow Post Office Directory of 1844 lists Agnes as a painter and decorator, living and working from 4 Croy Place, Glasgow. She was born in Irvine in 1786 and married Angus Murray in 1806. In 1829 Angus assigned 5 male trustees to take charge of all his assets on his death (Angus Murray's trust disposition). One of the trustees, Matthew Middleton, was also a painter and the shared surname suggests that he was related to Agnes. The trustees were instructed to sell the business and assets and to invest the money to provide for Agnes and the children. They were to keep a close eye on Agnes and make sure she spent her allowance in ways that met with their approval. She

“...obliges herself to maintain, clothe, upbringing and educate the children of our marriage under the direction and superintendence of my said trustees”

said this somewhat untrusting document. If she remarried, her allowance would be reduced to £10 a year and she would lose other benefits. Despite these controls on her freedom of choice (as we would view it), we find her 15 years later going to the trouble of paying to have her own name listed in the Directory as a painter and decorator. Unfortunately, there are no posthumous inventories for either Agnes or Angus, so we do not know for whom the firm worked at the times of their deaths.

Interestingly, a housepainter Matthew Middleton (trading from 116 Union Street in 1846) (Slaters 1846), who may be the named trustee in Angus Murray's papers, married a Mary Ramsay (or Ramsey), in Ayr in 1866 (Middleton family records). He died in 1877 and by 1882 his widow was listing herself in Slater's Directory as a housepainter and glazier at 74 Robertson Street, Glasgow. It is possible to surmise that, having known that her female relative, Agnes, had kept her husband's painting firm trading after his demise, Mary felt it feasible to do the same in her turn. She is next recorded as still having her decorating business and workshop at 74 Robertson Street in 1914, now aged 71 (Valuation rolls 1913-14), but died the following year. As the common practice throughout the period was for residential and business tenants to from change tenancies annually, it would seem that this business was unusually stable and hence, presumably, prosperous.

Women and DIY house-painting and decorating

Whereas I have collected data on women professional housepainters of the past, for the present day contrast I have chosen to look at women's involvement with DIY activities in the same field.

Key market report

Women participate in purchasing materials and carrying out the DIY tasks in lower, but similar, percentages to men (Table 3). Scotland has a lower overall uptake than the rest of the UK, possibly due to poverty or the higher percentage of people living in social housing, where the decorating may not be the responsibility of the residents.

Table 3: Gender and regional DIY uptake data

(2004 Key Market Report for DIY & Home Improvements Industry)

	% UK population participating 2004		%Scotland (all)
	Male	Female	
Internal painting or woodcare	66	59	54
Wallpaper	33	25	29
External painting or woodcare	34	23	28
Floor or wall tiling	33	21	20
Paint use	66.26	56.2	60.55
Woodstain use	61.94	38.05	9.41
Wallpaper purchase	10.34	10.87	12.27
Tiling purchase	4.72	4.28	4.39

The major UK DIY companies are B&Q, Homebase, Wickes and Do-it-all, with the DIY superstores taking 42% of the market share (European DIY retailing handbook, 1998), and 70% of all customers in Scottish DIY stores have come to buy paint (Pahllo (2002)). “Ownership” of such supplies at home shows little difference between the sexes. The market for paint now targets women because it has found that 70% of women in the 30+ age group are planning on doing some DIY decorating and are in any case the decision-makers, regardless of who does the work (European Paint and Resin News, 2002). The industry is restyling itself as more akin to the cosmetics industry: “selling beauty and personality”, as applied to the home. In the UK, the Scots are the keenest to redecorate, although their overall DIY spending is lower than other parts of the UK (Mintel 2004).

DIY store data

My survey of DIY stores in Glasgow (Table 4) showed that female shoppers were in the majority in all stores, with the highest proportions being in the two stores (B&Q superstore and The Untouchables) nearest to residential areas and public transport. Significantly lower numbers of women were found at the Wickes, which is difficult to find (even for car users) and in an isolated industrial location.

Table 4: Results of paint section surveys in Glasgow DIY stores

Store	Total adult shopper count	Female adult shoppers	% Females of total
B&Q Warehouse	108	70	65%
B&Q Superstore	21	18	86%
Wickes Extra	49	25	51%
The Untouchables	38	29	76%

Location aside, there is also a cultural difference between the two chains (B&Q and Wickes). B&Q has been able to establish a strong reputation for anti-ageist and anti-sexist employment policies and environmental responsibility. Within the constraints of size, both B&Q stores have room layouts and female technical shopfloor staff. The larger B&Q’s paint counter was staffed by women who were seen to be giving technical information to customers. In contrast, Wickes is about the same size as the smaller B&Q and with a similar amount of space devoted to decorating materials, but the overall ambience was of a workshop environment, more akin to trade outlets such as Jewsons.

Analysis of Brochures

Paint and instruction brochures relating to decorating were collected in each store. There were no brochures relating to wallpapers or tiles. Wickes was the only store with a general brochure.

Taking an emphasis on feelings rather than technical information as evidence of attempts to appeal to female purchasers or users, those from Crown and B&Q were the most obviously “feminised” in orientation (Table 5). Dulux, Wickes Naturals and Master (!) collections, and Craig & Rose were neutral, using few images of people but having a balance of room sets and product information. The paint brochures with the least feminised style were those from International and Sandtex, both of which are known particularly for their external paint products. In the paint brochures the only image of a

person doing a decorating task was a woman rolling in the Crown brochure. All other images were of people passively using the room sets. In the Wickes general brochure there were 4 men and 1 woman shown doing tasks.

Table 5: Survey of Paint and Instruction Brochures

Brand	Brochure type	Male Images	Female Images	Style	Number of pages
Wickes	Master colour collection	None	None	Mixture of room sets and colour panels	16
Wickes	Extra, general brochure	4 doing tasks, 1 using room	1 doing task, 5 using rooms	Technical information about products	134
Wickes	Instruction leaflets in painting and decorating	All images of men or male hands doing tasks	None	Heavy on text with some sketches of tasks/processes	2 or 4 sides each
Wickes	Naturals Colour card	None	None	2 room sets	6
Dulux	Contemporary blue	None	3 using rooms	9 room sets interspersed with colour cards. No images of people doing tasks.	20
Dulux	Editions	1 designer	3 designers and 2 room users	7 pages of room sets interspersed with colours and product information.	20
Sandtex	Exterior paints	None	None	3 pages of cottage-style exteriors. Quite technical presentation.	8
International	Paints	None	None	Heavily technical presentation.	16
International	10 year exterior gloss	none	none	Heavily technical presentation.	A4
Craig & Rose (Edinburgh)	Authentic Period Colours	none	none	Emphasis on luxury and antique. History of architectural styles, some product information.	8
Crown	Colour collection	2	5, including woman rolling	"What colour do you want to feel?". Colours arranged according to feelings, colour panels peripheral to room settings.	36
Crown	Neutrals	none	none	Similar to above	2
B&Q	RHS Garden colour	none	none	Based in Inspirations. Half page of product information.	8
B&Q	Paint colours	none	2 using rooms	Feelings: "relax with calming colours". Colour wheel and 1 page product information	16
B&Q	Colours outside	none	none	Colour wheel and product information. Quite technical	4
B&Q	Coving, dado and skirting	none	none	Room images corporate rather than	16

				domestic. Information rather technical but no task advice.	
B&Q	Architectural mouldings (2000)	none	1	Masculine hands showing tasks	A4
B&Q	Exterior decorating (2003)	none	none	Neutral hands showing tasks	A4
B&Q	Artex and plaster (2003)	none	none	Some masculine hands some neutral or gloved	A4
B&Q	Painting problems (2003)	none	none	Neutral hands showing tasks	A4
B&Q	How to transform your career in 30 minutes	1	1	Career booklet with no sexist language	A4
B&Q	Trade account leaflet	none	none	Yellow and black industrial style. Sample card image is for a male.	A4

The instruction leaflets obtained from B&Q seem to be available in 2 series: an older one from 1999-2000 with an image of a man or woman on the front and a more recent one (2003+) with no image of a person. In all cases the tasks and processes are illustrated with disembodied hands, which seem to be less obviously male in the more recent leaflets. The Wickes leaflets are larger, more detailed and only show images of men or male hands doing the tasks.

B&Q also had a careers brochure with an image of a man and a woman on the front and careful use of non-sexist language describing available roles, e.g. "Trade Expert" instead of tradesman or craftsman. However, their leaflet inviting applications for Trade Accounts is presented in a totally different style from anything else in their stores, being in industrial yellow and black stripes. Its only image is of the sample trade card in the name of a man. The chains are not aware of women registering at their trades' counters.

For comparison, the BBC lifestyle webpages on DIY do not show any images of women painting and decorating, and a female "expert" is only provided for single activity: mural painting. On the other hand, a commercial DIY webportal, www.diy.net.com has a whole section called "DIY Women", hosted by women experts.

Discussion and conclusions

Is there a hidden history of Scottish women working as painters and decorators in the 19th and 20th Centuries? Paradoxically, the history of the most recent times is also the most difficult to pull out from its hiding places. The hidden history of 19th century women in building trades has been easier to shine light upon, mainly due to the resources available in archives and online databases. For data protection reasons, these predominantly cover the periods from which it is expected that all those mentioned are long-dead. Nevertheless, there is abundant evidence from the whole Victorian era to show that women were working in house painting, decorating, glazing and gilding trades even towards the end when gender roles were at their most constricting. This evidence of women's competency in a "male" trade is not so surprising when considered in the light of how they probably functioned at a day-to-day level. Most firms would be very small, probably a man and an apprentice. If work pressure built up on a particular job, the firm could not risk employing another permanent employee but could call upon family members to help out. Thus female members might be involved on an occasional and

informal basis. Even more commonly, they would be the administrative base, taking orders, bookkeeping etc. Indirect evidence, such as the diatribes against the introduction of women to “men’s” work during the world wars, also indicate that women were employed in this work in the 20th century, even if personal case histories are harder to find in this period.

What is the extent of women’s involvement in DIY? It is clearly the case that women are doing a lot if not the majority of DIY decorating work in their own homes. This seems to be turning into “women’s stuff”. DIY stores and manufacturers seem to be recognizing this in their literature. Data from the DIY stores confirmed B&Q’s reputation as a company trying hard to be equally welcoming to men and women both as employees and as customers. They recognized the benefits to themselves as employers, well ahead of their competition, in employing older people and this lesson in diversity seems to be transferring to all areas of their work. Contrastingly, although BBC website’s DIY section is mainly pink, all the people are men. Considering that TV lifestyle shows are credited with igniting the (mainly female) public enthusiasm for DIY and redecorating in particular, it is interesting to see that they do not use women as exemplars. It would be interesting to know their decision process that lead to this – did they assess that the target female audience would prefer to look at wholesome young men rather than replicas of themselves? As the commercial website DIYNet does feature women and seems to take a similar line to B&Q, perhaps it is the case that those who wish to sell to the DIY market have the clearest vision of who the target audience is.

How might the evidence uncovered by this research influence women’s employment choices? This research indicates a potential for women to move into this for employment instead of a leisure activity: they have the aptitude and interest to acquire the skills informally. Women have done this type of work as paid employment, demonstrably for at least 150 years. There is no social prejudice against women doing painting and decorating as DIY and it is possible that this particular area of construction work might therefore be the least difficult for women to move into.

Potential further research in this area would include:

- Searching for examples of women who worked in building trades during wartime, either still living or from memories of their families and friends.
- Investigating memories of families’ involvement in DIY prior to the current “boom”, especially in the pre-WW2 era, possibly by visiting old peoples’ groups/homes.
- Surveying how DIY experience in the home has changed young peoples’ attitudes to decorating as an employment choice.
- The potential for home economics classes in secondary school to move from cookery towards home maintenance.

This paper has brought to light evidence that women have worked as painters and decorators in Scotland, for nearly 200 years and have shown themselves able to do the practical work of decorating, both as professionals and as amateurs. The main barriers inhibiting the transfer to the formal employed sector, must therefore lie in actually obtaining employment and in some perception that what is appropriate for an unpaid woman in her own home is not appropriate in the paid, public sphere. The historical and contemporary stories combine to demonstrate that painting and decorating can be work for both genders.

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