

Pioneers of Fair Trade

The Story of the Third World Centre

Where would you look for the headquarters of an Aberdeen organisation committed to changing lives by altering the conditions of trade? In an ultra-modern office maybe, alongside other commercial whiz kids? Well, you would search in vain! In fact the Third World Centre, whose activities have made a substantial difference to many producers throughout the developing world, normally conducted its business from one of the oldest buildings in Aberdeen.

St. Mary's Chapel, in the Kirk of St. Nicholas, was founded around 1430 by Lady Elizabeth Gordon, as a place where mass might be said for the repose of her soul and those of her family. Naturally, with the coming of the reformation, such purposes were no longer in favour and St. Mary's Chapel, shorn of its religious function, embarked on a very chequered career, being used at various times as a witches' prison, a storehouse for "instruments of correction", a plumber's workshop and a soup kitchen.

In 1898 the chapel was restored and during the first half of the twentieth century it was used mainly for baptisms and marriages. Just as one woman had been responsible for its beginnings, it was another woman who was to bring about a change in its use, thrusting the church in Aberdeen firmly into the world of today. Ann Wigglesworth, the wife of a Church of Scotland agricultural missionary, spent 12 years in India, where she became involved with an organisation that helped the women of low income group families to establish the production of handicrafts for sale. Having seen the immense difference that regular sales could make to the women's lives, she determined to continue helping when she returned home.

She persuaded the Kirk session to let her use St. Mary's chapel as a base for a fair trade shop and as a result, in 1983, the Third World Centre was born. The enterprise was backed by the Aberdeen District Council of Churches, representing the different Christian traditions in the city. Five years earlier, the alternative trading organisation, Traidcraft, had started to import goods from developing countries for sale. They worked on the principle that all their producers were paid a fair price for their goods and the profit-swallowing middleman was eliminated. They were also prepared to pay for orders in advance and give financial and design advice freely in many cases. With food, crafts and recycled paper products from Traidcraft and similar organisations, together with items imported directly, the Third World Centre was soon able to mount a very attractive display of goods for sale. Posters and information about issues of justice, peace and development were also available. Of course, not everyone was convinced that this was a good idea. One particular American tourist wrote a vitriolic letter to the newspapers deploring "the offences committed against St. Mary's chapel" with the "arrogant, vulgar display of garish, politically-propagandistic posters and cheap merchandise". Happily, he (or she) was in the minority.



There had been much discussion about what to call the business, since people were beginning to think that the term "third world" was pejorative. The obvious choice was "One World Centre", but locally this was seen as having connections with the Moonies, an extreme religious sect. So "Third World Centre" was the name registered at Companies House when the business eventually became a limited company in 1988 and, despite several attempts to acquire a more "politically correct" title, that's the one that remains.

Right from the start, the Centre depended on a team of committed volunteers to keep the enterprise running and a fruitful source of these has always been the student population. Student volunteers have joined enthusiastically in extra-mural activities such as leafleting, tastings of fair trade food in public places and especially as models at fashion shows of fair trade clothes. As interest grew, church, school and community groups began to take regular sale-or-return consignments of goods. All sorts of people can be persuaded to work for fair trade - even Aberdeen's ecumenical choir, The Acclamations, who held a memorable night in the Kirk of St. Nicholas. The audience heard about mother of pearl jewellery and delicate glassware from Palestine, chocolate and exotic jam from Ghana, honey from Tanzania, soapstone carvings from Kenya, mirrorwork embroidered clothes

from India and basketware from the Philippines, just to name a few. And for each country mentioned, the choir provided an item, taking their listeners "Around the World in Song".

Alerting people to injustice in the world and illustrating possibilities for change are part of what development education is all about, so the Third World Centre had always been involved in this. Aid agencies were increasingly producing teaching resources for development education and when stocks of these outgrew the available space in St. Mary's vestry, the education section of the business acquired separate premises. It was set up in the Kirk House, Belmont Street and offered a free resource loan and advice service to schools and community groups, including workshop and activity sessions tailored to suit individual needs. The collection was renamed Montgomery Development Education Centre in tribute to one of the early education workers and is now housed in Queen Street Church. Despite its separate name, it remains very much a part of the Third World Centre. The remit of the MDEC is to enable active global citizenship throughout the community although the availability of funding has meant that currently this is more often confined to work within the formal education sector. The subject area is much broader than fair trade, but nevertheless there has been much work carried out on supporting and enabling teachers and schools in developing fair trade activities and embedding these into the curriculum.

Others have set up fair trade enterprises in Aberdeen. In 1993 Zanzibar was opened in Little Belmont Street, specialising in larger fair trade items such as furniture and textiles, but the shop ceased trading early in 1998. Oxfam have also had that coveted asset, a shop window on Union Street. Their attractive fair trade shop was closed when Oxfam changed their trading initiatives. The Third World Centre remained the only retail outlet in Aberdeen dedicated exclusively to fair trade. In 2009, the management group took a leap of faith and the shop moved into commercial premises in George Street, with the support of Aberdeen Council. Sadly, the move coincided with the start of recession and the two-year grace period of lower rent expired, without a significant increase in sales. Reluctantly, the shop was closed at the end of Fairtrade Fortnight in 2011. The organisation survives in the Montgomery Development Education Centre and in support given to the Fairtrade City campaign. It is hoped that retail activities will continue, although the form that these will take is still unclear.

The future of fair trade must inevitably lie with the supermarkets, where the majority of people do their shopping. Since the establishment of the Fairtrade Foundation, the UK's Fairtrade Labelling Organisation, there has been an explosion of goods bearing the Fairtrade Mark, an independent guarantee that the product has been fairly traded. Campaigning to promote sales of these goods is now an important part of the Centre's work. In 2002, the Centre joined with Aberdeen City Council to host a fair trade breakfast, attended by local businessmen, councillors, MSP's, voluntary organizations and school children. Following on from this, a proposal was made to the Council that Aberdeen should declare itself a Fairtrade city, with a fair trade policy and encouragement for firms to use fairly traded products in canteens and restaurants. As a result of the proposal, a working group was set up to achieve the necessary goals, a resolution passed by the Council in support of fair trade, and an application for Fairtrade City status made to the Fairtrade Foundation at the end of September 2003. In March 2004, during Fairtrade Fortnight, Aberdeen became joint first city in Scotland, along with Dundee, to achieve the title of Fairtrade City.

Since then the award of Fairtrade status has been renewed three times, a testament to the work that has been carried out within the city. Many events have taken place and various initiatives with partners from business, education and community groups throughout the city to promote the use and spread of Fairtrade products in the area. The city has played host to a succession of Fairtrade producers from Ghana, Chile, Saint Lucia, Kenya, Malawi and Palestine, all bringing news of the importance of Fairtrade in their lives. The Centre has played a key role in the celebration of Fairtrade Fortnight each year and is also involved with the independent Steering Group that exists to maintain Aberdeen's commitment to Fairtrade. As part of this commitment, the Centre that was the pioneer of fair trade in Aberdeen continues in its mission to draw attention to the difference fair trade makes between living and merely existing for thousands of producers all over the world and also to suggest ways in which we can all help to improve matters.

In 2014 the organisation was re-named Aberdeen for a Fairer World and it is now a SCIO (Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation)

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