

# An Exhibition in Lockdown

Marianne Wilson (Livingstone)

## INTRODUCTION

When asked to put together an exhibition for 201 Telephone Box Gallery in Strathkinness, Fife, I was excited. I received funding via VACMA for a proposed project using the laser cutter at Dundee Contemporary Arts print studio.

My initial ideas had to change when I lost access to the print studio during the Covid 19 lockdown. I had to work from home, around my family, using a small home studio shed and garden. With limited access to the exhibition site and research material, I managed to find a topic of interest that I hoped would form a connection to the community of Strathkinness. Using site visits, historical research, and critical reading, I became interested in the Covenanter movement, one event, a specific place, and the notion that a space can be both physical and metaphysical. I produced an exhibition titled Heterotopia.

I had to simplify everything and use trial and error to work out how I could still translate my ideas into a print-based installation. As a papermaker, I made 100% plant-fibre paper using homegrown crocosmia and created a large 'fake' blind emboss in a small space, without a press. I could prepare for quick-fire screen-printing when restrictions were eased between the first and second lockdowns and used my kitchen table to put everything together so it was easy to transport and quick to hang.

I was eventually able to travel out to Strathkinness, where 201 Telephone Box Gallery's Curator, Lada Wilson, and I, installed the exhibition. Once locked, the phone box provided 'Covid-safe' viewing for anyone in the local area.

## FINDING INSPIRATION

I had managed to get to Strathkinness and walk around the area just before the first lockdown. This visit helped to inspire me, and the book *Strathkinness, A Glimpse of a Scottish Village* by Nelda Sneed, which was luckily available online, became an important reference. It gives an account of the 17th-century murder of Bishop Sharp by Covenanters on a moorland close to the town.

I was aware of the difference between the Episcopal Church and the Church of Scotland but had not really been educated about the Covenanter movement or the Presbyterian faith and so began to read about it.

The Covenanters were people who in 1638 signed the National Covenant, a document swearing to uphold the Presbyterian faith. These people were opposed to King Charles the First becoming head of the church. In their faith, this was a position reserved for Jesus Christ. Charles the First declared the Covenanter view to be treason, punishable by death. Ministers had to leave their churches and Covenanters were forced to worship outside in secret services called conventicles. Members of the congregation were given tiny tokens to present upon entry to a conventicle and to obtain communion. Nelda Sneed wrote of two boys finding old tokens in a fallen tree at nearby Kincapple. Early tokens tend to have the initial of minister and parish and a date. An interesting feature is the incorporation of text from the Bible.



Image 1



Image 2

Image 1: Covenanter tokens

Image 2: The Covenanter memorial at Bishops Wood

As lockdown restrictions eased, I travelled to the memorial for Bishop Sharp and further to the Covenanter grave on the edge of Bishops Wood. In contrast to the violent murder that took place on exposed moorland, this is a quiet, secluded space. Close-knit trees open onto a sunny field and lead the viewer out to a large gravestone, inscribed on both sides and surrounded by a low wall topped with metal railings. Nothing else is around except fields and a view of Strathkinness in the distance. The sound of the wind in the tall grass was all I could hear, and I spent a long time reading the inscriptions and quietly contemplating. I had seen paintings that showed the Covenanters holding their services outside in woods, glens and fields. This place recalled those images of congregations brought together to worship outside.

### **THE WORD**

I learned that the Church of Scotland set great store on reading the Bible and teaching people to read. The focus was on religious worship through words rather than pictures or decorations in the church. This distaste for icons made text particularly important, and it was used to a significant effect on the graves of the faithful. The text was used to spread information about the Covenanters' beliefs and struggles.

The grave at Bishops Wood avoids ornamentation and is shaped like an open book with text on both sides. The reverse is inscribed with a rhyming verse that tells a tale of Covenanters who were executed because of their beliefs. This ekphrastic poetry is used to vividly describe real or imagined scenes and can commonly be found on the graves of Covenanter martyrs, where the verses promote a Scottish identity that is 'scrappy, resilient and resistant to English domination'. We know sympathy for the Covenanter cause was kept alive because this memorial at Bishops Wood was valued and cared for. An interesting feature of the Covenanter grave is the graffiti carvings on the protecting wall and the stone itself. Visitors have left their mark and, like the little worship tokens, these show initials and dates.

### **HETEROTOPIA**

When reading Connie Michelle Steel's paper, I came across a reference to heterotopia. Philosopher Michel Foucault used this concept to describe the theory that people create spaces, both physical and metaphorical, which can become 'other' to the world around them. These spaces become worlds within worlds that 'one can only enter with a certain permission and after having performed a certain number of gestures.' Foucault states that graveyards, churches and religious spaces have this quality and discusses the ability of a space to manifest multiple functions at one time. It was intriguing to think of the Covenanters entering a heterotopia when they met outside in their conventicles. Members of the congregation had to obtain access by using the tokens and, once everyone had gathered, this space became something different and had a new function. When it was over and people had left, nothing would indicate that anything had taken place there.

I felt that by bringing elements that describe the process of Covenanter

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worship into the 201 Telephone Box Gallery and using the Covenanter grave as a reference point, I could create a place of 'other' within this small, enclosed space. I aimed to have the viewer share that experience of outside worship and feel the influence of the Word as it might have fallen on someone within the Covenanter movement during the 17th century. I hoped to bring a sense of the Covenanter memorial into the town and encapsulate this inside the telephone box.

### PROCESS NOTES

I imagined that austere as their environment was, these people might at least have nature around them to provide ornamentation. Native plants such as heather, thistle, bluebell, and grasses might surround them. As a papermaker, it was natural for me to use handmade paper with plant material as a reference to landscape and nature. I wanted to use paper and incorporate scrolls as a nod to the importance of books and the covenant document of 1638. The underlying subject of exhibitions shown at the 201 Telephone Box Gallery is 'communication'. As 'the Word' was especially important for communicating faith in Presbyterian worship, I began to focus on that, concentrating on the Covenanter tokens.

I was fascinated with these tokens but could not visit any museums to look at them, so I bought three on eBay and studied others online. They were tiny, precious objects and, at a time when few shops were open and research facilities were limited, a valuable resource. As a form of communication, the tokens worked in three ways, as a secret sign for the faithful, a means for teaching the Bible and a ticket of entry. It was important to recreate this text somehow and to use these memorable phrases that would have been familiar to the congregation. Had I had access to a laser cutter, I would have cut the letters into wood or acrylic and blind-embossed them into paper. This would have given the look of gravestones and the smooth surface of the little tokens. As it was, I had to improvise and spent time trying out ways to create raised text without a press. I tried making rubbings using graphite, charcoal and Takuhon, which makes an impression using dampened paper dabbed with ink to produce a print that holds the shape of the object used. I made impressions by moulding silicone, plasticine, plaster and small linocuts. Image 3

It became apparent that to fill the telephone box I needed to think on a much larger scale. During my time at the NGS, I learned a technique called inlay, which is used to protect and display delicate artwork. It occurred to me that I could cast the letters in paper pulp and inlay them into my handmade paper. Pulp-casting is an interesting process that combines elements of papermaking and papier maché to produce a relief or 3D object. A plaster mould is used to contain the pulp because it carries the water away using capillary action. This allows the pulp to dry without too much shrinkage. The dry pulp can be released gently from the mould as it does not stick strongly to the plaster. The image used needs to be negative, so to create a decent-sized positive, I made the letters in plasticine and cast them in plaster. The plasticine was something I already had in the house; it was easy to shape and remove from the plaster cast. I then used layered strips of dampened paper



Image 3

and archival wallpaper paste to build up each letter inside the mould. This dried into a light, crisp piece of cast paper. Using my letters as a template, I cut out negative shapes from the paper and chamfered the edges with a scalpel, adhering the two with archival wallpaper paste. I used fish tank pebbles in little drawstring bags to weigh the paper sheets down and glued them together to create a long hanging piece. I did the gluing on the kitchen table once homeschooling was over for the day. Image 4



Image 4

After I visited the gravestones and the site at Bishops Wood, I was interested in old carved graffiti that marked the wall around the grave site and the stone itself. These initials and dates were reminiscent of the tokens and a record of the devotion of visitors. I had taken impressions of the carvings using plasticine and used that to make more plaster casts. I had a number of these fragments by the time I finished but was unsure how to use them. Once the other elements of the exhibition were together, I selected some to place at the bottom of the phone box. These were on a bed of earth, forming another connection to the grave site and the notion of outside worship. Image 5



Image 5

## PAPER

To make high-quality, large sheets of paper, I renovated an old paper mould. I straightened it out and glued everything back in place so that it was strong again and bought a fine stainless-steel mesh from an online shop to attach to the front. I used the mesh because it is strong and gives texture to the paper without being rough. I used a staple gun to fix the mesh to the mould. I made a deckle from wood that I had been keeping in my studio. This is a frame that sits on the mould to catch the pulp and create a deckled edge. Once varnished, the frame was water-resistant and ready to use. I bought a huge plastic tank online and sewed J-cloths together to make big blankets to lay the paper on.



Image 6

I made the paper pulp from a store of two years' worth of crocosmia that grows in my garden and cooked it with washing soda to release the cellulose fibre, later bleaching it to make a lighter paper. John Easson had lent me a Hollander beater just before lockdown, and I beat the plant fibres using this equipment. A Hollander beater contains a large drum wheel covered in blunt metal teeth that macerate the fibres rather than cut them. A reservoir holds the pulp and allows it to pass under the drum multiple times. The drum is lowered incrementally, increasing maceration to create a finer pulp with long fibres for a high-quality finished paper. I also added an internal size as I wanted to print onto the paper. Image 6

Everything was set up in my garden, where I could pull and couche the large sheets of paper without worrying about water going everywhere. The outside tap and hose in my garden came in handy to fill the large tank, which had to sit on the ground as it was extremely heavy when full. A gate leg table was set up to build my paper stack on, and I pressed the water out using two large boards secured with G-clamps. Luckily, the sun shone, which made the task pleasant. Ideally, I would have laid the paper flat to dry but instead used my rotary dryer and pegged the paper onto it while still attached to the J-cloths. This worked

Image 4: Gluing sheets of paper together, inlaid letters  
 Image 5: Graffiti carvings, selection of test pieces made from plaster, paper, lino and moulding silicone  
 Image 6: Cooking plant fibres, bleached fibres, Hollander beater, and beaten fibres sus-pended in water

surprisingly well, and I soon had sheets of handmade 100% plant-fibre paper. Image 7

## PRINTING

To create decorative elements, I produced drawings of native Scottish plants using photographs as a reference. My initial thoughts were to create a lino cut as this could be hand-printed, but we could go back to work between lockdowns and my options opened a little. I scanned these drawings and combined them in photoshop to make a screen-printing separation. I did not know how long I would have access to the print studio, so it was one colour and a repeat pattern. This was decorative with a traditional feel while quick and easy to print. I played around with the design, varying the printing to create a couple of different images. Dundee Contemporary Arts Print Studio has Kippax screen beds, and I used one of these. My image was made by coating a screen in emulsion, taping a photographic positive to this and exposing it to ultraviolet light. The image can then be washed out of the screen to produce a stencil. After printing, I decided to make a double-sided banner to hang on the window of the phone box so that it was visible from the outside while still a part of the work inside. Discussions with the curator, Lada Wilson, highlighted the need to create a connection for the residents of Strathkinness that would help them recognise my use of the Covenanter grave and Bishops Wood as my starting point. We decided to include a large screen print of the gravestone and chose to use the side with the ekphrastic poem. Anyone local would be likely to understand what it was and who it was about. I enlarged one of my photos and made a large screen print, again in one colour as this was effective and saved time. The handmade paper was too small for this one, but Heritage Woodfree paper allowed for a print measuring 83cm x 114cm. This provided impact at the back of the phone box. Image 8 and Image 9

We installed the exhibition in November 2020 and tried to be as prepared as possible because Lada and I would be doing this outside. This was the nature of the phone box but also a useful coincidence because we could comply with Covid regulations for this reason. My car is quite small, but at that time we were only supposed to travel for work so I could not ask for anyone else to help me. By rolling the scrolls carefully and planning out where each element would go beforehand, I kept the packing to a minimum and got everything in. I tried to make it quick and simple to hang, using magnetic strips to hold the scrolls and Velcro strips to hang the large screen print. Not everything went smoothly; it rained terribly, and we had to resort to a hammer and nails when the Velcro strips refused to stick. Wearing masks and raincoats and trying to social distance ourselves, we eventually got everything inside thanks to Lada, without whom it could not have been done. A newly fitted lock installed by Lada's husband, Scott, secured the phone box to protect the paper inside. This provided Covid-safe viewing for the residents of Strathkinness. Image 10



Image 7



Image 8

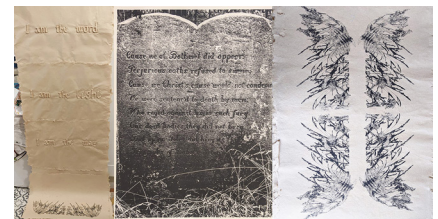


Image 9



Image 10

- Image 7: Papermaking in the garden
- Image 8: Plant drawings and final collage for a screen print
- Image 9: Finished scroll, large screen print, screen print on handmade paper (not to scale)
- Image 10: Artworks installed in 201 Telephone Box Gallery

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## NOTES

1 Find out more at 201 Telephone Box Gallery - Posts | Facebook.

2 Visual Artists and Craft Makers Award.

3 Sneed N. (1986).

4 Sneed N. (1986), p25.

5 In Scotland, the Episcopalian church is commonly referred to as the English Church.

6 Scottish Covenanter Memorials Association (no date), This website describes the history of the Covenanter movement.

7 National Museums of Scotland (no date). This web page (see references) shows covenanter tokens in the collection of the National Museum of Scotland.

8 Sneed N. (1986), p141.

9 North Lanarkshire Council (no date).

10 Steel C. M. (2016) p.26. Steel writes 'The Covenanters made the construction of primary schools a national goal. Thus, one finds that as art and images were dashed down, the word rose to take its place.'

11 Steel C. M. (2016), p.43. Steel writes that 'Many graveyard epitaphs look strikingly like title pages. They announce stories of the dead [...]'.  
12 Historic Scotland (no date). 'the grave of five men who were taken prisoner at the Battle of Bothwell Bridge in June 1679. Condemned to death for protecting the murderers of Archbishop Sharp, they were hanged 25th December 1679.'

13 Steel C.M. (2016), p5.  
14 Craven J. (2018), Craven writes, 'Epic poets used ekphrasis to help audiences visualize legendary battles [creating] a vivid word painting [transforming] the visual into the verbal'.  
15 Steel C. M. (2016), p3.

16 Historic Scotland (no date). 'The first gravestone to the five martyrs, Thomas Brown, James Wood, Andrew Sword, John Weddell, and John Clyde was erected in 1728. In 1877 John White Melville enclosed the graves with a substantial wall and a new gravestone designed from and bearing the inscription of the original was erected.'

17 Steel C. M. (2016), p25.

18 Dahaene, M. and De Cauter (2008), p21.

19 Dahaene, M. and De Cauter (2008), p18-19.

20 Dahaene, M. and De Cauter (2008), p16. Foucault references a train here. With his words in mind, I think of an outdoor conventicle as somewhere that 'can be passed through yet take the occupier on a [spiritual] journey and then disappear when no longer occupied.'

21 Yabuta K. (2001), This paper gives a description of the Takuhon process.

22 I worked in the conservation department of the National Galleries of Scotland for five years.

23 When using inlay, a delicate artwork is strengthened by inserting it into a more robust paper, thereby allowing the viewer to handle the inlay paper and not the artwork. The inlay paper is carefully cut to the exact outline of the artwork and the edges are chamfered to create a thin ledge on which the artwork can sit. When glued, only a tiny edge of the inlay is attached to the artwork, giving the appearance of a seamless join.

24 The chemical name for washing soda is sodium carbonate.

25 Cellulose fibre is the inner part of the plant that will absorb water and knit together to create paper.

26 This was done using a solution of household bleach in water and leaving the fibres to soak overnight to produce varying shades of creamy fibre.

27 John Easson runs Quarto Press in Coupar Angus, a wonderful working museum of letterpress. [www.quartopress.co.uk](http://www.quartopress.co.uk)

28 Auro wallpaper paste in powdered form is added to water and allowed to sit until it forms a clear paste. This can then be diluted and stirred into the vat. If too much is added, the solution can become soapy and sticky, so only a small amount is needed.

29 Size or glue is important to create a crisp, non-absorbent paper.

30 A papermaking term from the French, meaning 'to lay down.'

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Marianne Wilson (Livingstone) is an artist/printmaker/papermaker based in Dundee. Marianne has a BDes Hons in Illustration and Printmaking from DJCad Dundee and an MA Art Hist from The Open University. She has been Studio Technician, and later Studio Coordinator at Dundee Contemporary Arts Print Studio since 2007, where she teaches workshops and works with artists to edition prints. Marianne has worked for DCA Learning Department, Tayside Healthcare Arts Trust, Headway - Edinburgh, and Glow for schools as a freelance art worker and exhibited her own work in locations across Scotland, Europe and America. Most recently her solo show, Heterotopia, was at 201 Telephone Box Gallery in Strathkinnes from early 2020 to spring 2021. Her interest lies in exploring her environment through practical and historical research and using this information to create artwork involving printmaking, papermaking and installation.

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IMAGE GALLERY



Image 1: Covenanter tokens

Image 2: The Covenanter memorial at Bishops Wood

IMAGE GALLERY



Image 3: Plasticine letters and plaster casts, pulp cast lettering  
Image 4: Gluing sheets of paper together, inlaid letters

IMAGE GALLERY



Image 5: Graffiti carvings, selection of test pieces made from plaster, paper, lino and moulding silicone  
Image 6: Cooking plant fibres, bleached fibres, Hollander beater, and beaten fibres suspended in water

IMAGE GALLERY

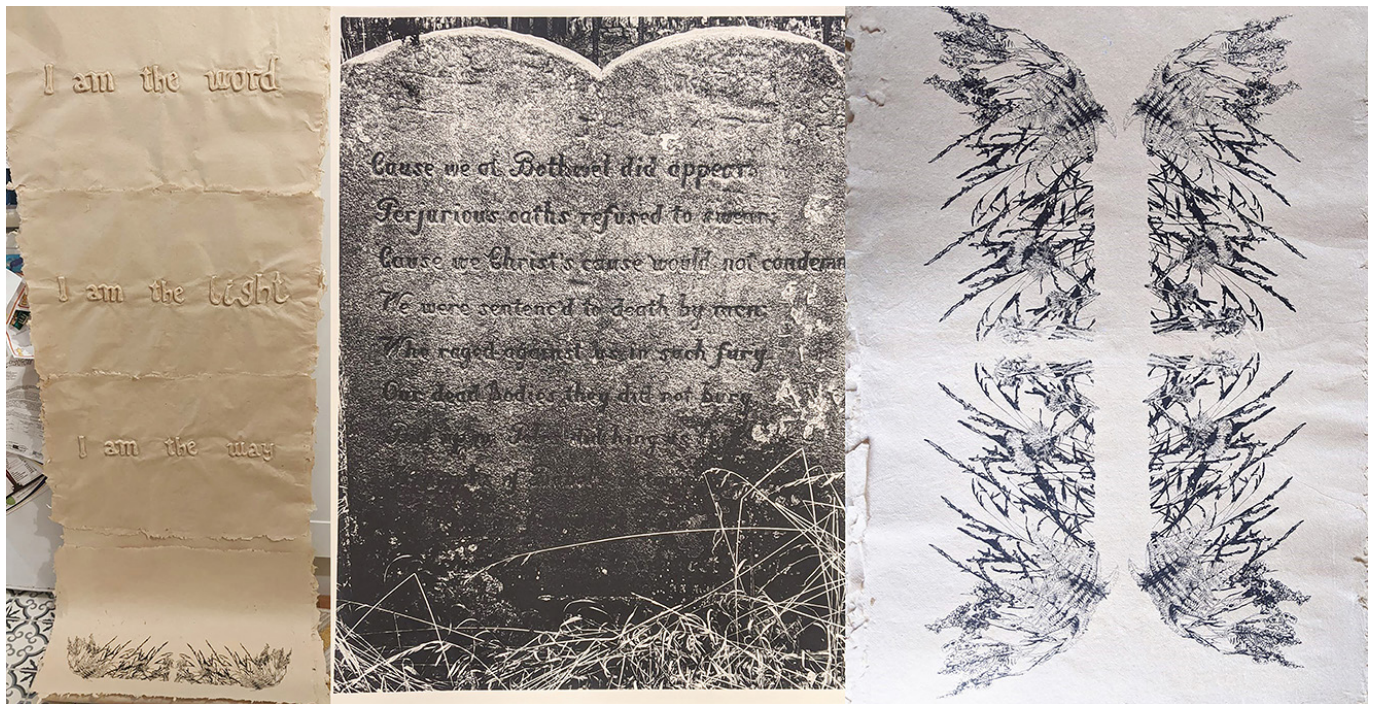


Image 8: Plant drawings and final collage for a screen print  
Image 9: Finished scroll, large screen print, screen print on handmade paper  
(not to scale)