

FLAGSTONE DESIGNS :

Some Details of the Collection being made by

“ Scottish Home and Country.”

BY

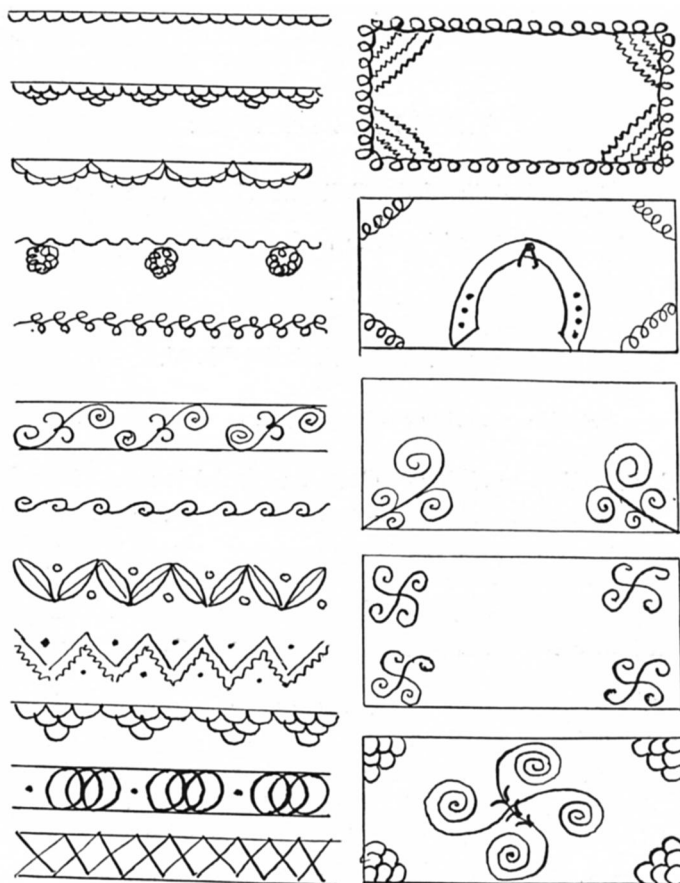
MISS R. MUNRO DENHOLM.

Read to the Society on Thursday, 19th December, 1935.

“ Scottish Home and Country ” is the official journal of the Scottish Women’s Rural Institutes, a movement with about 1000 branches and some 50,000 members. The branches, or Institutes, as they are called, stretch from the border hills over the face of Scotland, including the Western Isles, Orkney and Shetland, so that their magazine is peculiarly well fitted to collect information from country places.

In February, 1933, an effort was first made to collect the beautiful designs drawn by Scotswomen on flagstones with ease and accuracy by means of pipe clay or limestone. These designs are dying out and it seemed to us that it would be a good thing to collect as many of them as possible before they finally vanish. The patterns are almost always found in country places but, in my childhood, I have seen them decorating the flagstones of certain closes in Glasgow and I have heard my mother, alas, forbidding her charwoman or Highland maid to draw them. They used to be drawn on doorsteps, on hearthstones, and on the floors of kitchens, dairies and byres. Their origin is believed to be of great antiquity and they are said to have possessed ritual and magical significance. It was always women who drew them and those few who still continue to do so know nothing of the history or meaning of the designs. They simply say that they have always drawn them and that their mothers and their grandmothers drew them too.

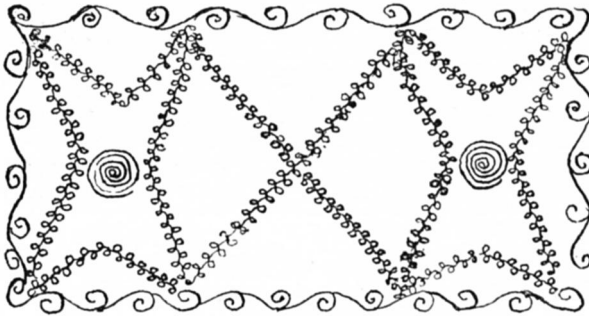
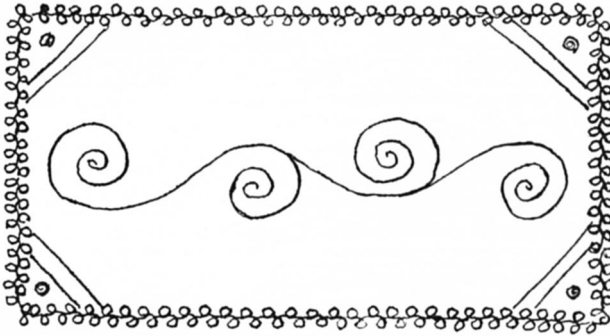
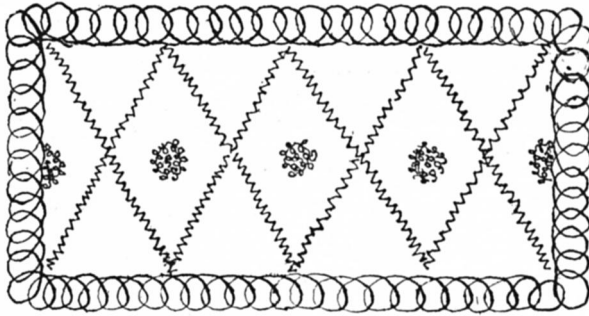
N.S. VOL. IX. PART II. C



BORDERS AND PATTERNS USED ON FLAGSTONES OF
MILK-HOUSES AND DAIRIES.

One of our Moray correspondents was informed long ago by a student of folk-lore that the designs were first used by the Celts for tattooing themselves as a protection against evil spirits ; when the Celts became Christianised they were forbidden to tattoo themselves, so they transferred the designs to the doorsteps of their huts, thus making the best of both beliefs in the time-honoured way.

The same correspondent claims that the designs are peculiar to the last strongholds of the Celts and have been seen in Cornwall, Isle of Man, Galloway and parts of Wales. They are certainly to be found in Galloway, but I have not yet been able to trace their appearance in the other districts mentioned.



DOORSTEP DESIGNS FROM LANARKSHIRE.

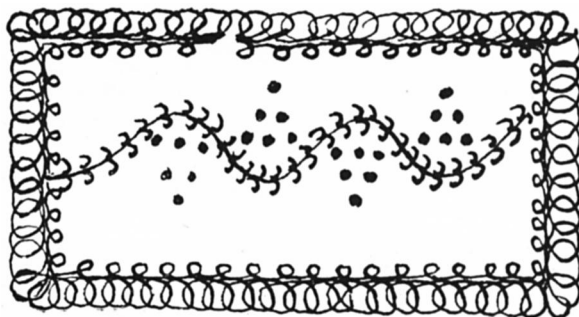
One of our magazines came into the hands of a Parsee lady who was good enough to write me regarding doorstep patterns in India. Apparently, on occasions such as marriages, birthdays, etc., every Indian housewife, after cleaning the courtyard, draws designs over it with different coloured chalks. Miss Genie, my Parsee correspondent says—I quote her letter—“ In India, doorstep designs are popular with the idea of expressing joy, the idea of decoration and that of sanitation . . . Chalk, being a deliquescent substance, sucks up the moisture from the atmosphere and leaves the courtyard dry and healthy.” The Swastika, which in its curved form is found in many of our patterns, appears in two forms in the designs this correspondent sent.

To return to Scotland, several of our members vouch for the tradition that the patterns were made to keep away ghosts. In this connection it may be noted that prickly plants are used against witches in many lands, and that the thistle, which is prickly enough in all conscience, appears occasionally in the designs.

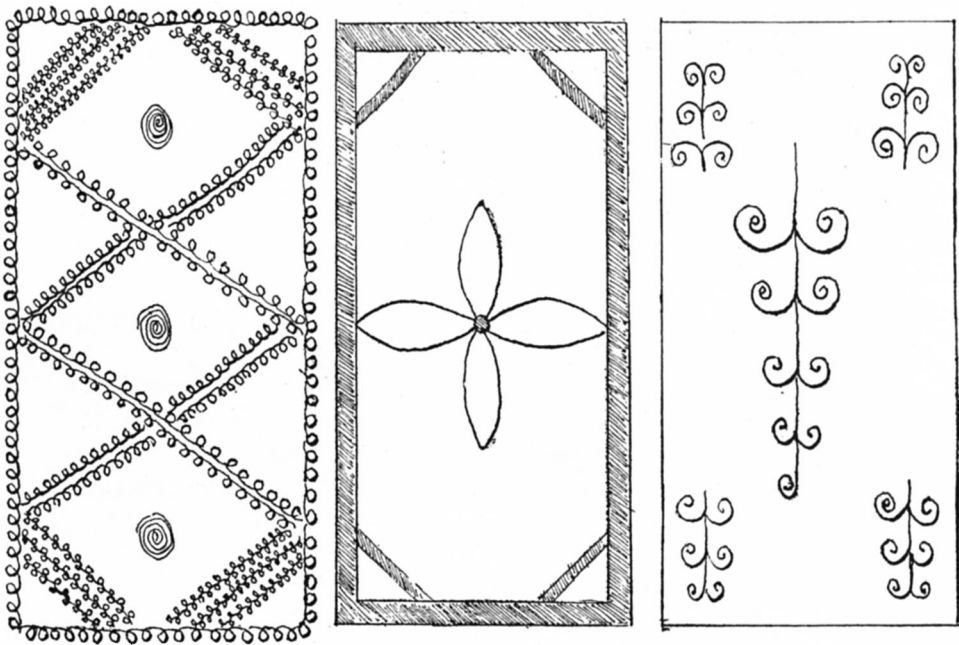
From Galloway came an extremely interesting little rune :

“ Tangled threid and rowan seed,
Gar the witches lowse their speed.”

This couplet was given to one of our Castle Douglas members by an old woman who heard it from her grandmother, and the “ tangled threid ” referred to comes into most of the patterns. It is used in several ways and is known in folk-lore circles as the “ interminable line.”



“ TANGLED THREID ” PATTERN.



DOORSTEP DESIGNS FROM DUNSYRE,, LANARKSHIRE.

In all, our collection of designs now numbers some 100 patterns, and it is still growing—but more slowly now. Designs have been sent from :

Argyll.
Ayrshire.
Dumfries-shire.
Lanarkshire.
Fife.

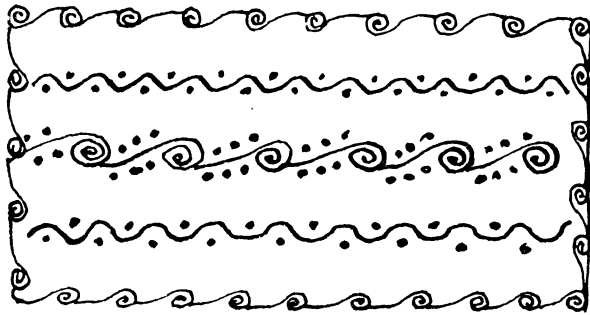
Midlothian.
Renfrewshire.
Stirlingshire.
Wigtownshire.

One of our members assures me that such designs—especially the “tangled threid” one—were very common in Angus when she was a girl, but they seem to have died out more quickly in the North East, for none of our members resident there sent in any.

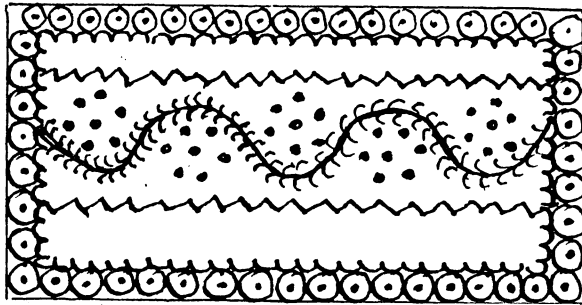
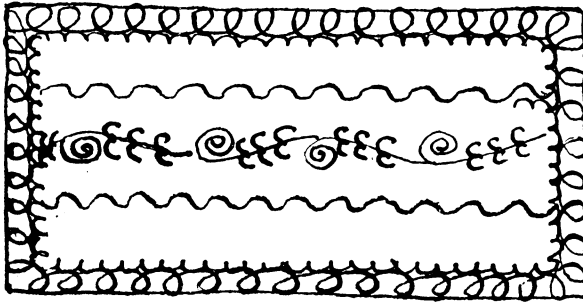
In the collection being made by our magazine are some photographs of special interest. One shows an old Scotswoman, in snowy mutch and tartan shoulder-shawl, photographed actually standing on one of the "tangled threid" designs. It was taken about forty years ago on the doorstep of her own farm house at Deanhead, Dunsyre, East Lanarkshire. Another is also of great interest: it is a fine photographic study of an old Ayrshire kitchen taken by one of our members some eleven years ago, and on the hearthstone, clear and unmistakable, is another "tangled threid" design.

A member of the Folk-lore Society got into touch with me some time ago about our collection, and through her I secured the use of a photograph showing a threshold design traced in sand at a bride's doorstep in Knutsford, Cheshire, in 1908. The design is one traced before the door of a bride leaving home for her wedding. The sand pattern is usually done by an old man who collects a few pence for his services.

Most of the patterns, as will be seen from the illustrations, are built up from a few simple motives and in this connection it is interesting to compare them with seven of the early symbols given in Mr. John G. Mearn's "Handbook of Celtic Ornament."



SIMPLE SPIRAL PATTERN.



HEARTHSTONE DESIGNS.

Our collection of these designs is, I imagine, the most complete ever made, but our information about them is still very meagre. If, therefore, any member of this Society gleans further details of their origin and significance, I should be most grateful to have any information passed on to our magazine.

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