

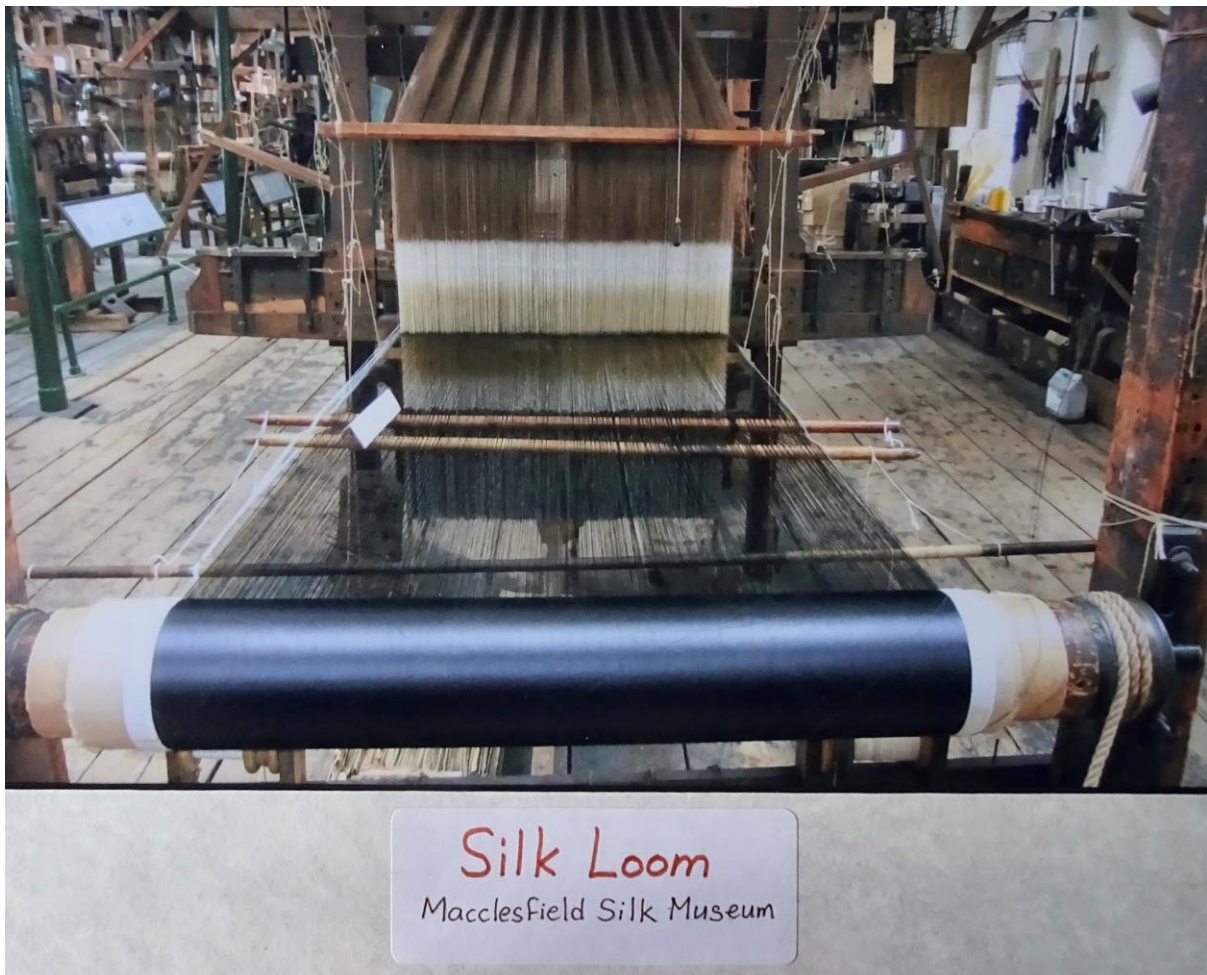
# THREAD OF TIME ~A HISTORY OF SILK

## Part 6: SILK IN BRITAIN

There had been several attempts to establish a silk industry in Britain dating back to the reign of Henry VIII (1509-1547) but they had all been unsuccessful. The climate in Britain is and always has been unsuitable for the temperamental Chinese silk moth, not helped when, in 1609, James I planted 100,000 of the wrong kind of mulberry bush. (Chinese silk moths are that fussy - they must have only one type of mulberry leaf or they won't produce the silk but more about that later).

However, it could be argued that Henry VIII paved the way for the establishment of a silk industry in Britain when he began to break away from the Roman Catholic Church in 1529. Later, in 1550, Edward VI granted a charter to allow the establishment of a French Protestant church in Britain. Both of these acts unwittingly gave French Huguenots good reason to believe that Britain would provide a safe haven for successful refugees fleeing France after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685.

Many Huguenot refugees from France set up businesses as silk weavers, at first in Spitalfields but later in other parts of Britain. They used hand looms to weave imported silk just as they had done in Lyons.



Soon, the craftsmen prospered and began to build large, handsome houses with glass-ceilinged workshops in the attics where they set up their looms. By 1713, less than thirty years after the Huguenot refugees had begun to settle in Britain they had established one of the largest industries in the country, worth more than £300,000 per annum, more than £31 million today. The guild of silk weavers successfully petitioned Parliament against a commercial treaty with France. This meant that the ban on imports from France would continue and it did so for another 100 years. I guess the Huguenots would have called it "payback". In addition, the quality of silk woven in Britain was equal to any produced in France and the cloth was equally suited to clothing. This meant that British silk was a direct competitor of French silk in other parts of Europe. A double whammy for the Huguenots.

The only aspect of the silk industry that Britain could not manage was sericulture, production of silk thread. British entrepreneurs had the knowledge and the technical skill but compensating for the vagaries of the climate was the challenge. In 1718, John Appletree, from Worcester, came up with an audacious plan for making Britain self sufficient in silk production. He successfully raised £1,000,000 (approximately £116 million today) of investment to plant mulberry trees in a secret location in Chelsea where a newly designed cocoon incubator called "The Egg Cheste" was to be located. The plan was put into operation but failed spectacularly, with investors losing everything and John Appletree disgraced. A year later, the weavers faced their first big challenge and I am sad to say they did not acquit themselves at all well. In 1719 the first imports of calico arrived from India. Calico was less expensive, equally as hard wearing, easier to clean and made a very suitable alternative to silk for everyday wear. Not good news for silk weavers. As the the new fashion grew, silk workers began to demonstrate. Ladies seen wearing calico had dye thrown at them to ruin their clothes. Riots ensued that lasted for two days before troops could regain control and restore order. Nevertheless, industry continued to thrive with some ups and downs for another 150 years.

After the Napoleonic Wars, relations between Britain and France began to improve and in 1860 it was decided the time was right to remove the trade embargo. The Coben Treaty was never intended to negatively impact the silk industry but the timing could not have been worse. Fashions were changing. American cotton was readily available, inexpensive and could be woven to create numerous weights and textures. In addition, French couture had always had a certain cache and so British silk began to struggle. The development of man made fabrics was the final straw. In 1831, the census shows half the population of Spitalfields, about 50,000 people, were directly involved in silk industry and the rest indirectly involved. By 1930, there were four silk weavers left in Fournier Street.