

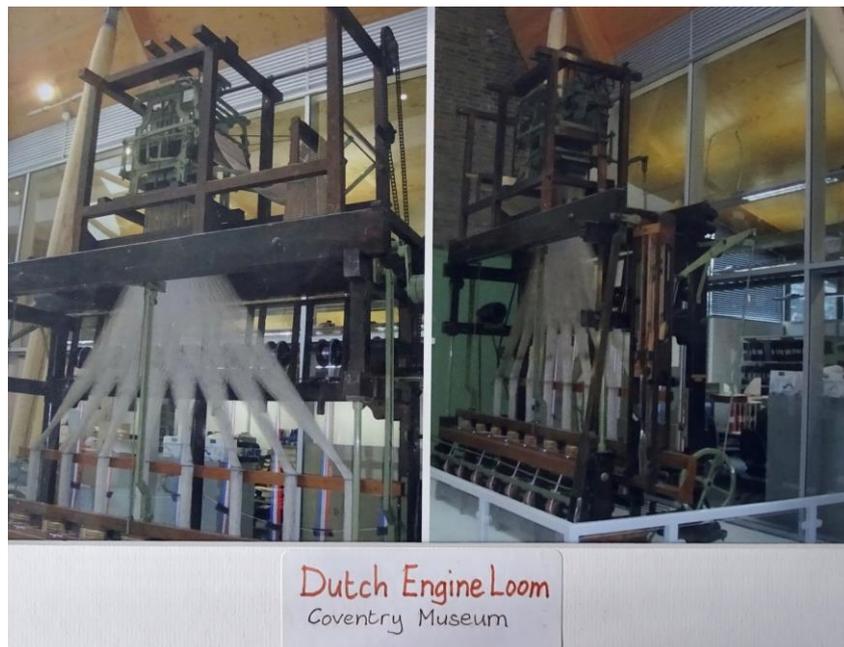
THREAD OF TIME ~A HISTORY OF SILK

Part 7: SILK RIBBON WEAVING IN COVENTRY

Since Medieval Times, ribbon weaving had been a cottage industry in & around Coventry. The area was principally a coal mining area and ribbon weaving enabled the miners' wives to earn a much needed additional income.

In 1703, Thomas Bird set up the first silk ribbon weaving factory in Coventry. His factory used the same type of hand loom that local women had used for centuries. Each loom produced one ribbon at a time. It was a slow process but Thomas Bird's factory was a success and others followed. Factory owners became known as Great Masters - their only interest was in buying raw silk from France and Italy and delivering ribbon to retailers in London. The preparation of silk was put into hands of middle men known as undertakers. Because of cost of silk, it was weighed at each stage of process and a fixed amount was allowed for wastage. In this way, the undertakers and their Great Masters could ensure that the weavers were not cheating them of their valuable silk.

In 1770, the introduction of the Dutch Engine Loom allowed for six ribbons to be made at one time, thus increasing profitability. However, there were limitations. The Dutch Engine loom was still a hand operated loom but heavy to operate so only men were used to work the machines. Also, the Dutch Engine loom could only produce plain weave ribbons. Nevertheless, engine looms gradually took over most of the work, while patterned ribbons continued to be made by colliery wives supplementing the family income on hand looms, one ribbon at a time, 36 yards long.



The Expansion of the silk ribbon weaving led to need for more housing but ancient laws forbade building on common land so new housing was crowded into existing gardens. With overcrowding, poor housing and insanitary conditions, the industrial revolution had well and truly arrived in Coventry. By 1782, 10,000 people were employed in the ribbon weaving industry in and around Coventry.

The Napoleonic Wars, which lasted from 1798 to 1815 brought unexpected changes to the silk ribbon industry. As weavers were recruited into armed forces there grew a labour shortage to operate the heavy Dutch Engine Looms. The Great Masters and their Undertakers had to exploit a wider labour market. Older men and boys too young to fight were employed but for the first time, so were women.

In 1813 a new fashion craze began. Purl edged ribbon became highly sought after and the Great Masters were quick to exploit the opportunities that arose. To create purl edged ribbon an additional warp thread made of horse hair was added to each selvedge. As the ribbon was woven, every so often the thread was looped around the horse hair, creating a scalloped edge, the Purl. After weaving, the horse hair was removed.



The war with France also made smuggling more difficult leading to an even greater demand for Coventry ribbon. As demand for ribbon reached its peak, at last women began to enjoy a boom in employment. However, it didn't last long. "Big Purl Time" came to an end in 1815 as quickly as it had arrived, simply due to a change in fashion. As it happened, this was just when the Napoleonic Wars came to an end. Anticipating peace and the need to reduce costs, the Royal Navy decreased manpower from 145,000 to 19,000. Many of the 126,000 men, returning home from war, some of them weavers, found fewer jobs available due to the down turn in business and what jobs there were, were taken by young men and women who were cheaper to employ. To top it all, the Great Masters, in their wisdom, decided to make matters worse by doing away with undertakers and maximise profits for themselves.

Fortunately, a few years later, the fortunes of the silk ribbon weaving industry were set to improve. In 1823, the first Jacquard loom arrived in Coventry. The Jacquard loom was most definitely a product of the industrial revolution, a marvel of modern technology. To understand the brilliance of the loom one needs to first understand the weave, otherwise known as "figured weave", whereby intricate designs and patterns are woven into the fabric rather than embroidered on. Before the invention of the Jacquard loom, figured weaving could only be achieved by hand and required unusual skill. The Jacquard loom used a series of punched cards joined together in a line and fed through a device to "instruct" a series of hooks to raise warp threads before the shuttle carrying the weft thread was passed through. So successful was the Jacquard loom that by 1829 there were over two hundred in the town. The ribbon weaving industry had a new lease of life and was set to get bigger.

Building on the success the Jacquard loom had brought to Coventry, in 1832, Josiah Beck opened his first factory but now using steam to power looms. However, there was huge opposition from hand loom weavers who thought that mechanisation would bring about the end of their jobs. During a riot, Beck's factory was set ablaze and destroyed and as a result the operation was delayed for another eight years. In the end nothing could stop industrialisation and by 1850 there were about 1,000 power looms in the city's factories and half of the population of Coventry worked in the silk ribbon weaving industry. Entrepreneurs like Eli Green and John & Joseph Cash took another approach to building factories. They started to build cottage factories putting a steam engine in a yard at the end of a row of terraced houses to power looms built in the attics of the houses, known as "top shops". There were now employment opportunities for almost everyone. Miners' wives continued to earn valuable extra income using their simple home looms. Journeymen, who had undergone an extensive seven year apprenticeship, could operate as self employed weavers. For those unable to afford the setup costs of self employment there were jobs in the cottage factories where there was good quality housing provided along with regular, guaranteed employment. For those who preferred to keep work and home separate there were the regular factories housing thirty to forty looms operating for twelve hours a day, six days a week.

Production was at its peak when, in 1860 the Cobden Treaty and changes in fashion started to bring the industry to an end. The Cobden Treaty brought to an end the embargo on trade with France thus allowing french silks to enter Britain freely. Many ribbon weaving companies diversified to produce other types of trim, silk pictures and labels but the self employed journeymen found this much more difficult and many fell on hard times. By the turn of the century man made fibres were beginning to appear and apart from high end fashion they were soon to largely replace silk as they were much cheaper to produce. Consequently, the silk ribbon weaving industry rapidly declined. Today, "Cash's" is the only company to remain from the golden era of Coventry ribbon.