

The Silk Road:

At the time the booking for our day out to the Silk Museum at Macclesfield opened we might have been watching Michael Portillo travel through Uzbekistan and encounter echoes of Silk Road traders who carried spices, porcelain, textiles and cultures between China and Europe.

Although there was no 'road' as we understand the word, silk weaving in China dates back to about 2500 BC when the wife of the emperor realised that the silk thread produced by the female moth [Bombyx Mori] could be woven on a loom to produce a material which was light – warm in cool weather and cool in the heat - and which shimmered as it caught the light..

The secret of silk production did find its way from East to West initially using silk thread imported from China but by the 13th century it was being manufactured in Genoa, Venice and Florence as well as at Tours and Lyons. For royalty and the aristocracy it was the 'must have' material and Montgolfier used an envelope of silk for his first hot air balloon in 1782.

The Jacquard loom of 1804 uses a series of punched cards to create the design – we should see something of this in the Paradise Mill – and this revolutionised the production of silk. In the UK Protestant weavers from the Netherlands and from France settled in the Spitalfields area of London [in particular French Huguenots following the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685] and silk weavers were incorporated as a City Company. As early as the reign of James 1 we find silk-worm farms with mulberry trees planted close to where today we find Buckingham Palace.

A 'Grantham lass' – daughter of the Rector of Knipton – Anna Maria Garthwaite 1688-1763 created the designs for the silk fabrics hand woven in Spitalfields. There was a silk ribbon industry which also produced bookmarks and sailors' hat ribbons with the name of the ship woven in gold.

Macclesfield produced silk buttons and silk manufacture was still thriving there in 1921 while silk shawls were manufactured in Paisley.

Mulberry trees and silkworms were sent to Virginia in 1623 and to Georgia in 1732 although initially the raw silk was sent across the Atlantic to be woven into cloth in England.

Silk could be dyed with saffron to create yellow and with indigo to create blue but then a factory in Harrow produced a liquid which could be used to dye silk mauve and this was endorsed by no less a person than Queen Victoria who attended the Great Exhibition at the Crystal Palace in a mauve silk dress. Attempts were made to create artificial silk – for example rayon by Courtaulds in 1905. But as hem lines rose in the 20th century so too did the demand for that most prestigious covering for the leg, the silk stocking. Silk has been called the 'Queen of Fabrics' and it seems it will reign for many years to come.

Notes extracted from 'Silk – the thread that tied the world' by Anthony Burton [2021]