

A Visit to the Paradise Mill, Macclesfield, England

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As a wannabe jacquard weaver, I have less to write about than most real jacquard weavers. Someday soon, things will change; today, I'm still a wannabe. So rather than write about adventures in designing for and weaving on a jacquard loom, I'm going to tell you about visit to a town with a long history as a silk weaving center, and the wonderful silk museums there.

In 2004, my husband, Mike, and I traveled to England to visit friends. During our stay, we rented a car and drove north from London in search of mill end shops and textile museums and other places of interest (primarily to fiber junkies). I had done some Internet research beforehand, and had a list of places to visit. In Macclesfield, we hit the jackpot. Not only is Macclesfield the home of H.T. Gaddum & Co., Ltd., a supplier of high quality silk yarn (definitely *not* mill ends!), it also contains a wonderful group of museums.

According to the official website (www.macclesfield.silk.museum), "The Silk Museums in Macclesfield tell the definitive story of silk. Compelling exhibits on three sites show a working Victorian Silk Mill, costume and silk manufacturing displays."

The part that drew me in was the working silk mill. "Working" is somewhat of a misnomer, or at least it was when we visited in 2004; more of the machinery may be in working order now.

Paradise Mill was built in 1860, and was in operation until 1981. One day, the mill closed. The workers finished their shifts and left the building. The contents of the weaving area on the upper floor were left pretty much as they were when the workers clocked out. Looms with warps still on them. Warping drum with warp in progress. Machinery that wound 24-denier silk from skein to bobbin powered down and left as was.

On the morning we visited, Mike and I were the only people on the tour, and when I told the docent I was a weaver, he switched into "detailed" mode, and we got the long version of the tour. First, the room where the cartoons were drawn and colored, and beyond the glass, the card cutter.





Here, the docent is demonstrating the use of the card cutter.

One area in the museum was dedicated to the tapestries woven at the mill. For each piece, both the original cartoon and the finished weaving were on display. Here's one example of a cartoon (human included only for scale):



And here's the tapestry, about postcard size:



Next, we went to the weaving area, where the array of equipment made me drool. There was a machine that took skeins of yarn and wound them onto wood spools:



Next to this, a creel with bobbins of yarn ready to be wound onto a warping drum with heck block:



The white drape is there so that you can actually *see* the warp thread. At 24 denier, in a darkish room, it's about as visible as frog hair!



A view of the rows and rows of foot-powered jacquard looms. The first machine in the right-hand row is a tying machine – it was used to tie a new warp onto an old one. Before this was developed, it took a child worker (they've got the smallest hands) three days to tie on the new warp; with the machine, the task could be accomplished in half a day.



I was amazed at the cloth (mostly men's necktie fabric) that had been left behind, still on the looms. Some of the designs were very traditional and some were strikingly modern.



On another loom, the docent demonstrated the fly shuttle, which had a horizontal pull; there was no cord suspending the handle from the loom's castle. Then the magic words: "Would you care to try?"



There's only one possible answer to that question. "Yes, please!"



After weaving about an inch of cloth, I tore myself away from the jacquard looms, and we continued on to another part of the museum, where we found an elderly gentleman clad in rumpled, stained coveralls up to his elbows in grease and metal parts, restoring this behemoth of a power loom:



Oh, look – I'm not the only weaver who breaks warp threads.



Then, to our delight, the mechanic asked, “Would you care to see it go?” Again, “Yes, please!”

My word, what a racket it made! Hearing protection is advised. The mechanic had been an employee of the mill in his youth, and was spending his retirement rebuilding, refurbishing, and researching the various machinery in the museum, from the power loom to automatic stocking knitting machines and lace making machines, plus several gadgets whose purpose nobody in the museum quite knew, about which research was being conducted at the Patent Office. I imagine that by now, they're probably well documented and in fine working order.

I highly recommend that any weavers who find themselves in Macclesfield, just south of Manchester, spend a day or two in this fascinating town. Visit the mill when it's not busy, and you might just get an opportunity to experience the mill weaver's day job. You'll definitely find it interesting and informative.