



Intro: The village of Calverley with its neighbor Farsley were once at the hub of the cloth trade in northern England. At its peak there were 12 mills in the area, this gradually reducing until today only one remains working. Sunny Bank Mill, renowned as being one of the finest cloth producers in the world, sadly closed in 2008. But owners William and John Gaunt were determined that this should not be the end of the story for the mill and today the site supports a myriad of small business, many of them creative and still involved in textiles in one form or another. The site also boasts an archive – which holds an important collection of mill related machinery and documents. Rachel Moaby is the Curator there:

Rachel: The archive was created when the mill closed basically. The last employee made a stand which I'm so grateful for, and said no, you can't chuck all of this in a bin because normally when a mill closes it is chucked in the bin and it's lost forever. There may be one a little bit that goes to say the West Yorkshire Archive or something, but the majority of the whole collection of cloth that was produced is just chucked. And luckily, William and John are passionate. They have a long history with Sunny Bank Mills going back over 100 years, so they had that hold to keep it, to not destroy it all completely. And, they moved it all up in 2008 into the old Warping Shed and just piled it all there. And I found the archive on site and they'd moved it all up there and closed the doors. They didn't know quite what to do next. And I came in and said 'Oh, we can't just close the doors, this needs to be... people need to see this. People need to experience this'. It's just an amazing collection because it had everything. It has Guard Books, it has peg plans, it had machinery, it has cloth on cloth and wage books, cash books. And its pure heart and history of the mill that has just been encapsulated in this one room and is still in the heart of buildings of the mill. So it just feels special when you walk in. I guess I was the first person that showed interest and I volunteered and I grew a little gang of volunteers that were as passionate as me at trying to make it accessible. To find out what's there to start off with, and learning from William and John as well through their knowledge and history.

Guard Books are lovely. They're really fantastic for research because they hold everything about cloth. So a Guard Book is an enormous big leather ledger and Guard Book in its technical term, it's just a store, a file. And the Guard Books in a textile mill are just the store of all the cloth that was made either by season - because it's a fashion line. So it's fine suit cloth material they were making so it's a fashion line so you have it by seasons spring, summer, winter, autumn collections. Or by year or by the country that the cloth is going to. So they just encapsulate a period in time. And if you're lucky they have Weaver's tickets so that you can actually find out who actually produced the cloth as well, which is quite exciting to follow the full line of cloth and the social history related to it. Specifically, they are the filing system of a textile mill.

So it built from 2008. I wandered in and we started to make it accessible to the local primary school and sort of work with them. So the focus to begin with really was bringing in the children whose parents probably used to work in the mill before it closed in 2008. There's this tie with families, which was really nice to see, that local history. It was part of the local communities. Sunny Bank Mills is... when you go down Town Street, it feels like it's just this one building, the Sandsgate entrance. It's a massive site. It goes far, far back. You know there was Sunny Bank Mills but in the Calverley and Farsley district area that was up to 12 Mills at its peak, all producing textiles. And it's when you think of all the knowledge and expertise of all the individual departments, so from, from the wool coming in to the cleaning, scouring the dyeing departments, the designers, the menders and finishes and all

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of those skills that took many years to perfect. But then all the other industries that keep a textile mill going, you know, the wicker industry was really important - the skeps and skips that were used to transport things. There's many other elements that were... even bookbinders creating the Guard Books. They were all linked precariously together.

So what I've done is I've delved into areas that a) we need help and preservation, but also what we can build on and research what can help local education and community groups to get them engaged. We've looked into the Industrial Revolution as well, with Agnis working with local schools coming to learn about basic weaving. But also in its context in the mill so that they can see a hand loom in action and how noisy it is. And there's another tired little corner of the archive collection which I would love to protect and preserve, research more and develop into a bigger project in relation to dyeing. So we have these very, very tatty and fragile Guard Books that have got dye samples in, and they show the crossover from natural to synthetic dyes. And I wanted to delve into the history of where all these dyes came from. How it adapted from the natural to the industrial synthetic dyes and that development. The Industrial Revolution, and work with secondary schools. We're going to go into the secondary schools and look at how the sustainability of the development of the textile industry and how it reflects on the past and how it looks going forward. So we're developing that. We have a little dye garden in the back. So that the links with the archive, the collection and its heritage is still part of the context of what's happening today. You know, looking at how we are sustainable with cloth and textiles in the future

Kasia: As well as establishing this nationally important archive, the Gaunts also wished to see traditional hand looms return to use in the building. They sourced some vintage hand looms from Dewsbury – which arrived at the mill in pieces, having been redundant for many years, and crucial components were missing. It took many hours of devoted attention, and the services of a local wood turner to recreate missing parts, and reassemble and bring back to life eight beautiful looms. Once assembled, they had to be re-recorded and warps made for each of them. Then volunteers were needed to help run and test them before they could be used again for teaching workshops.

I was lucky enough to be part of a small team of volunteers who spent a morning at the mill working on the looms. As a rookie weaver, it was a real joy to participate in this way and take the first steps towards learning a new craft, on looms that had such a long history and a personality. As the group settled in to our work, we explored different weave patterns, discussed colour choices and generally fell into a creative, collaborative melee as the shuttles passed to and fro – all under the cheerful and masterful eye of Leeds based weaver Agnis Smallwood. Agnis had helped to re assemble these looms and her quick eye for spotting problems with them was impressive. But then as a practiced weaver, her skills are well honed.

Agnis: And so I think for me, I really came to weaving. By accident if I'm honest. I finished school, and I was doing my A-Levels and I did Art and Design and I did Product Design. And I went off to do an Arts Foundation course. And it was there that I went into the Constructed Textiles department. And that's kind of when I fell in love with weaving. And I just couldn't stop really, I just kept going

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back and, but I just loved it. And so then I kind of went on to do a degree in Contemporary Applied Arts and that kind of focused on printed, constructed and stitched textiles, along with ceramics. And by the end of my third year I'd specialised in weave and ceramics and I just yeah, have fallen in love with the way of weaving really. It's kind of hypnotic in a way. It's kind of repetitive, its rhythmic, its logical. But at the same time, there's kind of loads of scope to be creative. And there's loads of scope to kind of push the boundaries to change things, and to not be restricted by kind of the rules of weaving - although there are some of those as well. And I think for me, as a weaver, I'm really drawn to colour and to texture, to combining different yarns to bringing different colours together. Seeing how when they are in the warp and the weft, and then they come together, how they work together.

Well, there's lots of looms, and I guess I use a whole range depending on the projects that I'm working with. I've got a large floor loom, a table loom, but then I still spend quite a bit of time using peg looms when I'm in workshops, or even a cardboard loom. In my opinion, there's nothing wrong with a good simple cardboard loom. It's still able to use a warp and a weft and create a textile pattern, use colour to great effect. But the two main looms I've got - I have a table loom, and so that's about 50 centimeters high and about 60 centimeters deep and 60 centimeters wide. And it's got a wooden frame, it's been very well loved. So it's a little bit bashed in places, but I think that's what makes it charming. It has four shafts - so the shafts are the part of the loom that lifts some of the threads up and depending on how you've threaded it up, the pattern that you're using, depends on which of the warp threads lift up and down. But four shafts means that you can have some pattern possibilities, but not kind of infinite. But yeah, it's a loom that I am able to put in the back of my car. So it's done hundreds of miles with me and it's travelled to lots of places. And lots of people have had the opportunity to use it as well, which I think is really lovely. And it's not a really jazzy loom or very kind of exciting, but it's the first loom that I had outside of college, and it's the one that I you know, I still use it today. It works really well and I love it really. And then my second loom, is a big floor loom. And that's not really going anywhere in a hurry. It's about 230 centimeters high and 140 deep, and 125 wide. That's all in centimeters. And so it means that I can weave much wider widths. It's also got 16 shafts, so the kind of combinations of patterns that I could do is more. And it's also got a metal frame, which is a bit more unusual because often looms have wooden frames. It has a traditional kind of dobby mechanism. Which means that there's just one pedal on the floor that you use. And as you press that, the dobby mechanism kind of rotates. And there's this peg and lag system, which means that the...you kind of input the pattern ahead of your weaving. You're doing this all manually, but it's almost like a computer, it's storing that information on these little pegs. And then once you press the pedal down, it rotates and means that it, kind of the pattern moves on. And the reason that this is good is because once you have put the pattern and stored it, as it were on the dobby, it means that you can then just concentrate on your weaving. You can think about your edges, think about what you're doing with the weft, and you don't have to kind of remember the pattern and think about...Other looms might have lots of pedals underneath. And then you don't have to think about, you know which ones you're pressing down all the time. And obviously if you've got a really complicated pattern, you almost run out of feet at some point in trying to press so many of the pedals down at the same time. So from that point of view, it's easier as well.

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I think I can sometimes forget that I'm working in a kind of traditional heritage craft. And for me, it's the job I've done ever since I left University. I've been really lucky that it's been my career. But yeah, you can't escape the kind of heritage, the history of that craft, that comes before. And I guess I'm reminded of that when I go to places and I, you know, talk and engage with people that, you know, it is kind of a bit unusual now. So there is a history and a heritage to share with people, as I'm working on my loom. There's, examples of weaving all across the globe and done in all different ways. And through all kinds of periods of history, there's been different ways of doing it. But essentially, we've been manipulating materials with our hands as humans for thousands of years. And definitely weavers have their own style, they have their own thing that they like to weave or, you know, the colours they use, or the patterns, textures, all those sorts of things. So there's definitely the ability to make it personal. And I think that comes across when I do workshops is that I teach a workshop to a group of people in the same way, but what comes back at the end is everybody's own interpretation of that, which I think is really lovely. So there is that freedom to interpret it in your own way and have that meaning and that kind of...

For me at the moment, I don't think I would go down a more digital route as my kind of main practice. But there are lovely examples of where that is happening. And there are lots of computer aided...where you would do your pattern and you're designing on software on the computer, and then you almost kind of plug it into an electronic version of a doobby. And then that would kind of store the pattern for you. I don't see it as cheating. I don't think there's like, it's the wrong way of doing it. It's just for me that I have stuck with that slightly more traditional route that doesn't really involve that. But weaving has just evolved over the years. You know, at one point, the doobby mechanism would have been thought to be a bit too revolutionary. And so it's just kind of an evolving process.

A lot of my work now is actually weaving with other people, in collaboration, working on community projects, in schools, museums, galleries. So I really love that. Weaving I think is brilliant, because it can be done on all different levels, like we were talking about different types of looms. And it can be done with all ages, and with all abilities. There's lots of ways that it can be accessible to all, which I think is really important. And yeah, principally you need a warp and a weft and you need to bring those two and interlace them together. So there's lots of possibilities. It can be a really quick small project, using paper, for example. Or it could be an incredibly detailed project using fine silk or wool or something and take hundreds and hundreds of hours. And it uses loads of skills like, it's great for hand eye coordination, improving dexterity. It involves a lot of maths when you're setting up a loom and working out the, how you're going to set up your loom - how many ends you need, what the pattern is going to be like, the colour combination, there's lots of science as well. And for me, I think people pick it up quite quickly. I think, I've seen and noticed that people can relax into it quite quickly. It's a repeating process so you're constantly getting better as the more you do it. The more you repeat the process of weaving, using your shuttle, bringing the beater forward - that repeating process just enables you again and again to practice your skill. And I think the more we learn about things, the more we understand things, the more we have an appreciation for why things take a long time to make or all the background that goes into producing a scarf, for example. It doesn't just happen instantly. There's lots and lots of hours of background, sampling and, trying out materials, and then obviously, the time that it takes to make a product or a piece of art.

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I definitely think there is a market for weaving for hand woven products. It's certainly more niche than I would like, but then I'm rather biased and rather passionate about weaving. It's something that we still need to celebrate, we need to kind of shout about the skills and the talents that we have. I guess COVID is going to have a bit of an impact at the moment. But hopefully that will be a shorter term impact as opposed to much longer. Weaving has been going thousands of years so I'm sure it will continue beyond this COVID blip.

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