

A Pilgrimage to Macclesfield on the Silk Route

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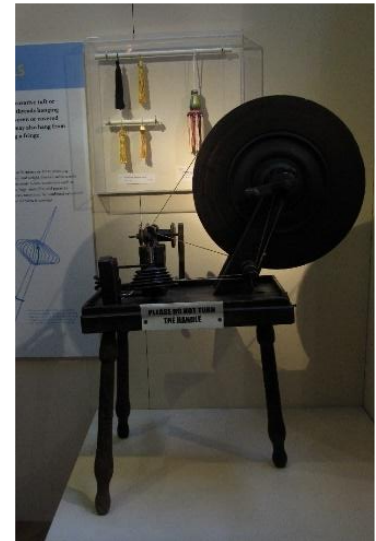
Oh little town of Macclesfield, how you called to me time and again through the years 'til at last I came, saw, and was bowled over by the small pudding hill clustered with a cacophony of diversely sized Victorian and Edwardian buildings – shops, houses, and small industrial places whose uses have been surpassed; but because of its oddities it was enchanting. Why were we here? Because Brian Redhead told me about it, singing its praises several times over, on Radio 4's *Today* programme. In fact, until then I'd never heard of Macclesfield. That was in the 1980s and I knew I had to see it for myself; and now as part of my current interest in learning about textile mills and enquiring about the Billinge Brothers from Macclesfield who built the silk mill at Twyford, Berkshire, the time was ripe for the visit.

After checking in to the Travelodge beside the railway station and, needing to stretch our legs after the lengthy drive from home, John and I set out to explore our way to the Silk Museum as we were only in Macclesfield overnight. Explore we did, as there are no signs to the museum, and the various locals we enquired of gave us different directions. Having been up hill and down dale a few times, we plodded down another slope to where the 21st century bypass neatens the edges around the pudding and found the 1879 School of Arts building which houses the museum and the 1860s Paradise Silk Mill next to it.



Machinery in the Silk Museum charts the mechanical progress that helped to transform the 17th century cottage industries of silk throwing and weaving, said to be largely introduced to the area by Huguenots, into factories of huge output of fine quality silk products. A bold display, curling around the walls, relates how silk is obtained from silk moth cocoons and how very early industrial spies (Marco Polo?) somehow purloined some heavily guarded cocoons, rustled them out of China to Italy and later France. After many decades the trade made its way to England.

Macclesfield became a thriving centre for the silk trade, with its proximity to the docks of Manchester and Liverpool, coupled with ample labour and a healthy supply of water power from the River Bollin. Handmade silk buttons had long been a mainstay of cottagers' livelihoods under the direction of the Mottershead family but the industry gained pace with the introduction of progressive machinery; it was expanded by the Brocklehurst family who later joined forces with the Whiston Company to form BWA (Brocklehurst Whiston Amalgamated), who went on to greater successes with newly installed Jacquard machines.



Above, left to right: Spool winder, Cord twister, Tassel former
Left: 'Rice' – Wooden device with 2 shaking arms used to prepare hanks of silk for transfer to skeins

Some of the museum's machines are worked for visitors, but as we were there on a Monday, they were silent. In fact, the whole place was quiet, due to no guides or helpful written explanations of how the machines worked. However, the sight of the massive machines which could weave wall hanging 'paintings' in a multitude of coloured silk threads left me in awe.

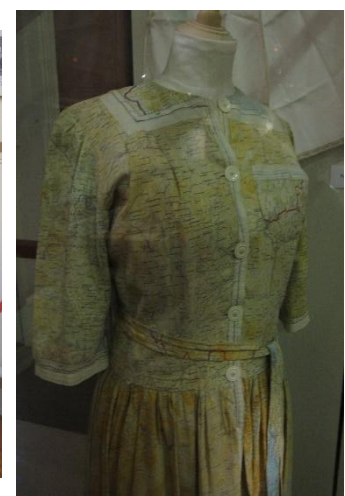
A bit more down-to-earth was the manufacture of parachute silk during the war and a 1940s wedding parachute dress was on display patterned with a coloured Ordnance Survey map. The museum also holds a very impressive collection, on display, of Jacquard cards, plus a pattern book collection of around 1000 volumes from local textile factories, each with hundreds of examples of different woven and printed designs and colourways. The pattern books date from the mid-19th century through to the 1950s.



Jacquard machine and cards



Picture weaving looms



Wedding dress made from parachute silk

Next to the Silk Museum stands Paradise Mill, regularly operated weaving silk and open to visitors (by guided tour only, pre-booking advised) but not, sadly, open or weaving on our day. No one at the museum knew anything of the Billinge Brothers of Macclesfield either, but despite some disappointments, I am very glad to have made it there at last and do hope that one day I'll return – on another day of the week though! I certainly commend it as worthwhile to see such a complete story of the silk trade's fascinating industrial history, especially in context with our own Whitchurch Silk Mill.

We are so lucky, though, to have the commercially thriving Whitchurch Silk Mill on our doorsteps where we can experience a variety of activities and exhibitions – and probably have more chance of seeing the wonderful machines in action.

The Silk Museum and Paradise Mill are at Park Lane, Macclesfield SK11 6TJ.

For information, directions, opening times, and admission charges visit silkmacclesfield.org.uk email info@silkmacclesfield.org.uk or ☎ 01625 612045.