

Dr. Geoff. Hide's talk on Whitchurch Silk Mill

Notes by Alison Stott

Dr Hide's Great-Grandfather and Great-Grandmother had arrived to run the mill in about 1860. Before then the mill had been bought in 1816 but the owner had gone bankrupt in 1817! In 1820 it was purchased by a London silk manufacturer and altered to have three floors rather than the original two.

A new leat, bringing a greater water supply to the wheel was added – it runs along the front of the mill and joins the main leat at the side.

Dr. Hide's family were originally drapers; they had eight sons and one daughter. Fortunately the Didcot to Southampton railway was planned, and then constructed. This meant that thousands of 'navvies' were needed to build the embankment which, of course, meant the need for food, drink and clothing.

His family bought the mill and modernised it by replacing the hand looms with power looms – driven by the waterwheel with line shafting and belts.

One of Dr. Hide's Great-Aunts had married a member of the 'Burberry' family (also in the 'rag-trade') and the well-known 'Burberry' material was woven at the mill.

Dr. Hide had many memories of 'Uncle James' who ran the mill for his entire life; he remembers him continually checking the speed of the waterwheel until eventually installing the first governors. Despite there being 21 – 27 nephews and nieces, none of them were allowed to work in the mill! After his death in 1955 the mill was sold.

He showed us a photograph of his Great-Grandparents in a very early car with hard tyres and tiller steering in which they had driven all the way to Glasgow at 11 mph!

The silk arrives at the mill in hanks or cones and then is wound onto bobbins. The threads for the warp (the length of the material) are attached to a beam; there are about 200 threads to an inch and this can take five or six days; they are wound onto it before being taken down to the second floor. This is then set up in readiness for the weft (which are the threads which are woven across the warp to give the width).

The silk is imported from China or Italy. The moth is a dirty yellow/white and lays its eggs on the mulberry leaves. They are pinhead size. The grubs hatch out and feed on the leaves (which must be fresh) and grow to about three inches long and are yellowish.

They have to have twigs to climb up (or be given twigs if being farmed) which they eventually climb. They extrude a liquid which is in fact a thread of silk with which they make a cocoon for themselves. Amazingly this thread can be two miles long! Unfortunately (for them) at this stage they are put into an oven to kill the grub inside. The thread is then drawn out and about six cocoons make up a hank of raw silk.

We were then shown many different silk materials produced at Whitchurch; organza, taffeta, moiré, satin, shot silk, twill and of course Burberry. Finally he passed round a mystery material which turned out to be parachute silk which is woven with the gum in it and washed afterwards.

This sparked off a lively discussion about wartime underwear made of parachute silk! (No-one admitted to being old enough to have worn it though).

Dr. Hide was enthusiastically thanked for this most interesting talk.