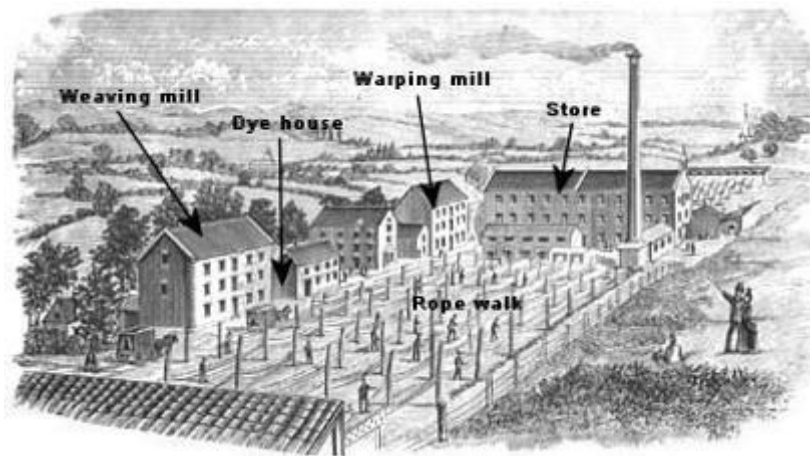


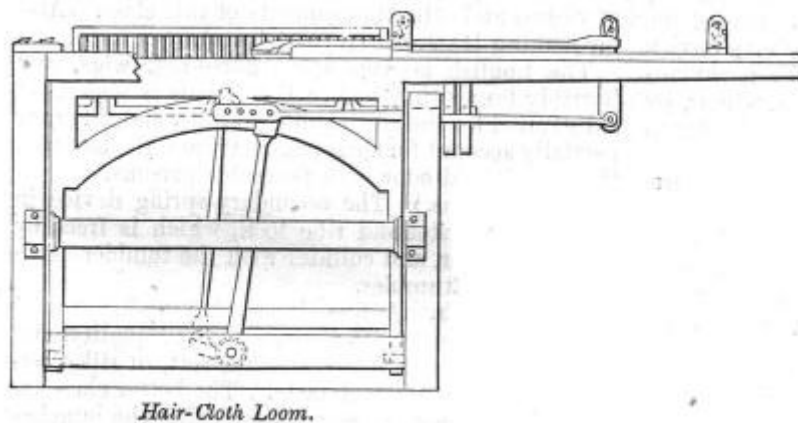
## A Hairy Visit to Somerset by HMG by Martin Gregory



Haircloth, cloth woven with animal hair has been around for centuries, but horsehair cloth made using linen/flax thread for the warp and horsehair for the weft came to prominence in the eighteenth century. Only hair from the tail is used and so the width of cloth produced is limited to about 60 cm.

Proven to be very resistant to wear, horsehair cloth is strong with a beautiful lustre, which improves with wear.

Thomas Chippendale used it as a covering for chairs and sofas because it was as lustrous as silk but much more hard wearing. Its popularity grew both here and on the Continent, including within the Prussian royal apartments at Potsdam. In the second half of the nineteenth century it found more widespread use as covering the seats in trains and tramcars.



Other diverse uses in the nineteenth century were in the brewing industry and in ladies fashions. Horsehair cloth was spread on the floor of drying kilns in breweries to prevent grain being scorched or falling through the holes in the flooring. Dresses for the fashionable lady of the time had large voluminous skirts which used haircloth as stiffening to make them stand out. It gave us the English word 'crinoline' (first used in 1830) from the French 'crinoline' meaning haircloth from the Latin *crinis* (hair) and *linum* (flax thread).

In November last year, we visited John Boyd Textiles in Castle Cary, Somerset, where, by 1800, handloom weavers began to weave a horsehair cloth using a cotton warp. The horsehair came from cropping the tails of local live horses, a fashionable practice at the time. John Boyd, a travelling textile merchant from Scotland began weaving horsehair cloth in Castle Cary in 1837. In 1851 he moved to his own purpose built factory in North Street to expand his output. The building is still there with his name over the entrance.

Prior to the 1870 Education Act which introduced compulsory primary education, children were part of the weaving scene. In Andrew Ure's Dictionary (1846) we read "*The weft is of hair, and is thrown with a long hooked shuttle; having a catch at its end. The length of the shuttle is about 3 feet; its breadth half an inch and its thickness one sixth. It is made of boxwood. .... The workman passes this shuttle through the threads of the warp with one hand when the shed is opened by the treddles (sic); a child placed on one side of the loom presents a hair to the weaver near the selvedge, who catches it with the hook on his shuttle, and by drawing it out passes it through the warp.*" (Figure 5 shows a cross-section of such a loom in Knight's Dictionary) The loss of child labour necessitated the invention of a mechanical loom.

C. Bradley patented (No. 3066, Nov 29<sup>th</sup> 1865) a loom for weaving 'horse-hair fabrics' in which '*single hairs are selected automatically from a bunch of prepared hair, and are presented to a weft inserter which draws it through the shed.*' The mechanism is complex as it has to allow for the picker failing to pick up a single hair. John Boyd took out his own patent in 1872 for his mechanical loom. His looms were made in a small foundry in Bruton, Somerset and are still in use in the Castle Cary mill!

By 1900, horsehair fabric was so popular that he employed over 200 people and was one of the main employers in the town. His fabric was used for Charles Rennie Mackintosh's Argyle St. tearoom chairs, and for the Lutyens designed 'Napoleon' chair.

John Boyd died in 1890 but his company lives on. In the 1930s the company moved to some old flax mills on the other side of town, buildings which they occupy today. The new site had a ropewalk which is now covered in and used for storage. One mill had a waterwheel and the site had a central steam plant, now demolished. John Boyd Textiles is now one of the last surviving mechanised horsehair weavers in the world. Horsehair fabric is now used for restoration and for upmarket designer handbags and interior décor.



A building used for storage and offices - The present weaving mill

Our tour started in the warping mill where the cotton warp is wound onto beams to supply the looms. In the nineteenth century, the horsehair came from docking the tails of local horses but now it is imported from Mongolia having been processed and sorted in China. We visited their modern dyeing plant. In addition to using natural colours and hair dyed black, they can now dye horsehair almost any colour for specific orders. The warping beams and bundles of dyed horsehair are taken to the weaving mill. There is a dedicated team which keeps around twenty of the old looms operational. Fabric is woven in 50 metre lengths; the maximum width of 60 cm is determined by the length of the individual hairs. The looms are slow, only producing about 3 m of cloth per day. They have dobbies fitted so that simple patterns can be woven: some dobbies use pegged drums and looked original to the looms whilst others were supplied by a well respected Lancashire maker. After weaving, the cloth is taken to the top floor of the weaving mill to be calendered: pressed between heated metal plates to put a shine on the cloth. A peep into the stockroom showed what a wide range of patterns and finishes is available today.

Our guide, Duncan, was most knowledgeable and we spent a fascinating couple of hours in an almost unique environment; well done John Boyd Textiles. Our thanks, also, to Andy Fish for organising the visit and the transport.

Martin Gregory.



The ropewalk, now used for storage. (The large water driven mill is behind) - Hanks of dyed hair ready for use