

Audlem and District History Society

History Shorts 46 by Beryl Cole

Macclesfield silk stripe

In 1991 when we moved to Macclesfield, you could still hear the clatter of the looms in James Arnold and Co's mill in Pickford Street. As a handweaver I found this very exciting. In 1999, as part of my HNC in Handwoven Textile Design, I carried out research on Macclesfield Silk Stripe. Before we moved to Macclesfield several older friends had told me how they remembered the beautiful colours of Macclesfield silk stripe dresses they had worn in the 1930s and 40s. To them Macclesfield meant 'silk stripe'. My aunt also gave me two of the silk stripe handkerchiefs.



One of the main selling points was that it was 'washing silk' or even 'boiling silk'. Some trademarks were *Maccleboil* and *Ucanboil*. This was very important before the days of detergent and biological washing powder. Today silk clothing is always labelled 'Handwash' or even 'Dry Clean' so it comes as a surprise that silk could be boiled in the 1930s. The silk stripe was a plain weave crepe. It draped well and was crease resistant because of its construction. The silk was spun and woven still containing the natural gum (sericin) produced by the silkworm, so boiling was necessary to remove the gum. The fabric was lowered into tanks of soda ash, then boiled for 6 to 18 hours in a tank of olive oil soap. Because of this processing it was known that garments made from the silk fabric would stand up to a boil wash.

Amazingly after this process the stripe was famed because the colours were so bright and clear. Silk takes dye very well and reflects light more than wool or cotton. One of the silk workers I talked to, Philip Arnold, a former manager in the silk industry, said that the silk stripe was so well made it didn't wear out, with a consequent depressing economic effect on the industry. It was said that the mill girls were the best dressed anywhere as they could make their clothes from cheap offcuts from the mills.

The silk stripe was in fashion in the 1920s and 30s, although it was woven from 1916 and was replicated much later. One of the advantages that Macclesfield had in the 1920s and 30s in silk weaving was that once the silk, mainly from China, had arrived by rail, all the processes, from yarn preparation, through spinning, dyeing, designing, weaving, finishing and making up could take place in the town.



Conditions for the workers in these factories would have been pretty unpleasant. Researchers from the Silk Heritage project in the 1980s talked to over 150 former silk workers. A woman who worked in the Gassing Room where silk thread was passed through a gas flame to smooth the thread said: "Conditions were unbearable when I think of it. Very hot (around 46 degrees C) the air full of fluff. They let us stand outside on Fence Avenue when it got too bad." The boiling room and dye works would have been similarly unpleasant. The mills had high ceilings and windows in the roof to allow extra light for threading the looms and weaving. You can still see old dye shed buildings on the Silk Road near the station, with characteristic steep sloping roofs with windows and vents to get rid of the steam. Good eyesight was needed for threading the looms. Silk stripe was threaded at 400 threads per inch and the cloth was 36 inches wide, so 14,400 threads needed to be put through the heddles individually.

The Silk Heritage Project also reported that it was obvious that former silk workers had a lot of pride in their skills and spoke of the silk with affection: "It used to look lovely when they were doing Macclesfield stripes and the silk was on the move - all the colours - like a maypole".



In the 1930s stripe production declined, due to competition from the Far East where wages were 25% of those in Macclesfield. After the war a small amount of silk stripe was woven but fashion had moved on and many silk companies were now using rayon and other artificial fibres. It became obvious the town could no longer rely on textiles and the Council made efforts to attract new industry, so ICI (now Astra Zeneca) and Ciba-Geigy set up large pharmaceutical plants.

In my research I concentrated on the Silk Stripe, but I would emphasise a huge variety of more complicated designs were also produced. For anyone who wants to know more about Macclesfield silk, a visit to The Silk Museum and Paradise Silk Mill would make a good day out when such visits are possible again.



Women workers at J Dunkerley's silk mill in the 1930s

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Silk bobbins in Paradise Mill, Macclesfield

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