



Oxford Guild of Weavers, Spinners & Dyers

Newsletter

February 2020

The rise and fall of British wool - Part I

I have a feeling that wool is very close to the hearts of all our Guild members! This has also been true in more ways than one for the peoples of our islands for very many centuries.

For thousands of years, sheep have performed their marvellous double duty of feeding and clothing us and, throughout history, the complexity and versatility of this unique woollen fibre has led



to an amazingly broad range of fabrics.

Wool is something we all recognise as a valuable fibre in our crafts, something we enjoy using, appreciating its variety of form and function. Unfortunately, it is no longer held in such high esteem in the general population. That, of course, has not been the case in the past. Vast fortunes were made on the back of sheeps' wool throughout the UK, probably more so than anywhere else in the world. Most of the Cotswold towns own their existence and character to the wool trade, as do many other areas of the country. Sheep and wool were the equivalent of present day financial institutions in Britain, they raised merchants to the titled classes and provided copious taxes for the monarch and government.

Despite the fact that animal fibres do not normally survive long term, evidence has been found at archeological sites throughout the UK of the crafts associated with these fibres, for example loom weights at many pre-Roman sites and metal beaters at medieval sites. Must Farm in the Fen lands has revealed weaving

equipment from 3,000 years ago, while in York the Coppergate excavations carried out in the mid-20th century uncovered wool fibres, textiles, cords and yarns from all periods from 9th-16th century. So we know that our crafts were always an important part of life.

Some of Britain's earliest major exports were woollen carpets and rugs in Roman times. The Romans highly valued our wool, which at that time was short and coarse, and there is evidence of Roman factories for weaving, dyeing and fulling at Silchester, Winchester, and other major towns. However, from then until the 8th century when there are records of wool cloth exports to the continent once again, there is little direct evidence of a woollen industry on a non-domestic scale, although it may have continued; we do know that sheep were kept for manuring crops during this period. This was a time of invasions and instability to it is unsurprising that the industry declined.

Following the Norman conquest in 1066, sheep breeding was introduced from the near continent, resulting in a finer fibre fleece and once again our wool was an important source of income, though now as a raw product rather than a processed one. Much of the wool was exported to Flanders for weaving into fine cloth and the value of these fleeces was now so high that wool was often used as money. By the height of this trade in the 12th century, these exports were closely controlled by merchant guilds that operated an exclusive monopoly and ultimately the profits went to the merchants rather than the wool producers. This period lasted until the late 14th century when firstly the plague and then the 100 years war between England and France resulted in insufficient herdsmen to care for the sheep or to process the wool and the whole industry went into decline.

Liz Mitchell

REMINDERS

- As many of you may know, Amy Gibbs is planning a major trip to Costa Rica after her GCSEs in 2021 and has been working hard to raise the necessary funds. Among other schemes she has, Amy has been dyeing and preparing beautiful batts for us to buy from the Sales Table. These are mostly a mix of fibres but with quite a lot of alpaca from their own animals. So, if you need some beautiful fibre for spinning, have a look at these.
- It's that time of year again and our wonderful daffodils will soon be everywhere. These delightful flowers make a wonderful yellow dye and they can even be frozen for a dyeing session later in the year.

MY PROJECT - Towards my own hand spun socks

My mother once told me that knitting socks was "very difficult"; she didn't know from direct experience, it was something she had "heard". That was a challenge! I knew how to follow a pattern, understood abbreviations, had pretty even tension. So I bought some sock yarn and needles - I was surprised to get five of them, tiny and double pointed.

There were many challenges ahead. Firstly, knitting 'in the round', but after initial twisted joins and dropped stitches, all went well. Then the heel flap and heel turn. They were more challenging with straight knitting and slip stitches on all these little



needles. Next came the heel turn and something called 'German short rows'. Thankfully Google took me to Very Pink Knits website and wonderful videos which put me right. Another great website for me is Knit

Purl Hunter. We're now at a fourth challenge: the gusset and back to knitting in the round. I found it tricky picking up and then decreasing stitches and was happy once I was past this bit (after another Google to understand what the 'instep' referred to). Finally, I thought it would be plain sailing now - until I got to the end of the toe and discovered Kitchener stitch. This is a kind of knitting/sewing torture designed to confuse. For this the Knitting for Dummies website tutorial on- 'How to Knit a Basic Round toe' was needed.

Hurray! One sock finished (it took months to do) and I thought I'd never knit another sock, but what use was one sock? So I knitted a second and it took slightly less time.

Another couple of pairs later and fed up with trying to manage 5 needles, more Googling revealed the 'magic loop'. Knitting with one circular needle surely had to be easier? I discovered it wasn't but again Google was my friend. I loved being able to knit without worrying about dropping stitches or having gaps in the round when I switched from one needle to the next.

Three years on and I knit socks all the time. To get over the dreaded 'second sock syndrome' I knit socks two at a time - on different needles (using one circular needle it is difficult to stop them tangling). So, by the time I complete the toe on one sock I just have the toe of the second sock to finish. So far this year (Oct 2019) I have knitted 27 pairs of socks. There is something comforting about wearing socks you have knitted yourself. The fit is always perfect and the colours are so different from shop bought socks. I never have cold feet in the winter. I love choosing new patterns and rarely knit the same pattern twice. Learning lots of new stitches has



given me the confidence to knit more complicated lacey shawls. I knit more socks than shawls as my one absolute hate is blocking the finished shawl. Whilst socks should be blocked too I have never bothered. I mostly use hand dyed sock yarn from a range of different indie dyers from the UK, Australia and USA or yarn I have dyed myself. I love seeing the difference between a skein and finished sock. As a relative beginner spinner I hope to one day spin my own sock yarn.

Melanie Odell

After Anni Albers

Having been interested for some time in the designs of the Bauhaus, I found last year's exhibition of Anni Albers weaving at Tate Modern fascinating and inspiring. I am in awe of her complex weaving skills; I spent the whole day gazing at the pieces in amazement. The exhibition reaffirmed that I will never be a weaver, but as a machine knitter, the boldness and simplicity of her designs inspires me.

I knitted this scarf using Bluefaced Leicester wool, which I had dyed in shades of madder and indigo.



I used the same design for a cushion using only the indigo dyed wool, with different intensities on back and front.



These cushions are knitted using Shetland wool from Jamieson and Smith. They are based on a design by Gunta Stolzl, a colleague of Anni Albers' in the Bauhaus weaving workshop, which was productive 1919-1933.



Liz Roberts

Using an embroidery hoop as a loom

Remove the outer ring and set aside. Firstly, tie your warp thread to the embroidery hoop with a slip knot and pull the warp thread straight across and under the hoop opposite the tie. Then bring the warp thread back over the hoop, across and under the other side of the hoop about 2cm clockwise of your knot. Continue in this way, always moving about 2cm clockwise both sides of the hoop and so making a figure of eight with the cross in the centre. You will end up with the warp looking like the spokes of a wheel.



When you have completed the last cross, pull the warp thread over the hoop, under and back towards the center, then feed it between the threads in the centre to even them up, wrap tightly around the centre a second time. Finally, bring the warp back to the hoop and tie off at the beginning thread. You can now replace the outer hoop and tighten it, this will hold your warp firmly. You are ready to weave.

Starting at the centre, plain weave with a thinner weft (eg sock yarn) will give a better coverage of the central warp threads which can look a bit messy if not covered up to some extent. It is also difficult to work out which is which of the threads, so weaving away from the centre, then pushing and tensioning the weft back into place at the centre can be a solution. As you weave out from the centre, you will see that the spacing of the warp becomes wider and is something which will need consideration as you weave. Do try weave structures other than plain weave. Twills (ie over 2, under 1) give a lovely spiral when woven on a circular loom.

Adapted from: <http://www.theweavingloom.com/weaving-lessons-how-to-use-an-embroidery-hoop-as-a-loom>

Byssus (or sea silk)

When we think of silk, its the beautiful fibre from the silk moth that immediately comes to mind. However, until relatively recently, silk was also produced from a sea mollusc, *Pinna nobilis*, the noble pen shell or fan mussel found in the Mediterranean. It is the largest bivalve in the Mediterranean sea but unfortunately is critically endangered mainly due to a parasite and so no longer being harvested for its silk.



The shell, which is sometimes almost a metre long, adheres itself to rocks, pointed end down, with a tuft of very strong thin fibres called byssus (think of the "beard" on a mussel). The byssuses (each fibre of which can be up to 6 cm long) are spun and, when treated with lemon juice, turn a wonderful golden colour which never fades. Sea silk has been greatly valued by fashionable ladies (and gents) throughout time, the earliest mention is in the 6th century, and apparently Nelson ordered a pair of byssus gloves for Lady Hamilton. The spun yarn is thinner and lighter than that from silk moths and a lady's turban which

recently went to auction in New York weighed a mere 83g, but would have taken about 80 molluscs to produce. Due to the devastating collapse of this species, there is now thought to be only one lady alive who can spin this beautiful thread.

It is hoped that its protected status will allow the mollusc to recover over time, but as there is no-one to process its byssus, this wonderful silk probably is lost to us now.

Liz Mitchell

Spinning for Lace: A Test

I recently noticed a lovely article in *Ply* by Barbara Bundick (plymagazine.com/2019/12/spinning-for-lace-a-test/). Barbara wanted to find the best fleece, and its preparation and spinning method for a lace yarn. She had heard the old wives' tale "Knit lace with a 2-ply yarn. Knit cables or stockinette with a 3-ply yarn". So she set about trialling three different fleeces: Merino, Cotswold and Montadale (a US fleece). These represented fine, medium and longwool breeds. She prepared each of them by combing and by carding, so she had two samples of each. Next each was spun on a drop spindle using a method somewhere between worsted and woollen. The spun wool was then plied as 2 ply and as 3 ply.

The yarns were knitted using the same lace pattern and same size needle. As could be expected the 2 ply lace was finer, which was its main benefit, however the 3ply yarns did seem to give a slightly better stitch definition, although they were more bulky. 2ply combed Merino produced the finest fabric, which would have passed the wedding ring shawl test. The Cotswold gave a very good defined lace in combed 2ply, but was too scratchy. Carded Montadale resulted in a beautifully soft, fluffy and warm fabric, but the lace pattern was muffled by the halo of the yarn.

In summary, it seems that you have to do some sampling first before starting on your heritage shawl, though probably Cotswold (well at least Barbara's sample) is not the way to go if you want something soft and drapey.

Additional finding: It is best to spin from the butt end as the scales on the wool catch each other if spun from the tip and this makes drawing out the fibre more difficult.

Liz Mitchell

Patron saints of our core crafts

I have been invited to join a group for Artweeks at St Blaise Church, Milton (just south of Abingdon). They asked me because they thought that St Blaise was the Patron Saint of Weaving. I did some research and found that he was the Patron Saint of throat illnesses, animals, wool combers, and wool trading.



I also found that Saint Maurice "is considered a patron saint of weavers, dyers, and clothmaking in general". Saint Anastasia is known as a healer and the "deliverer of potions." She is also the patron saint of weavers, widows and martyrs.

I tracked down one reference to Saint Catherine of Alexandria being the patron saint of spinners but other references say she is the patron saint of wheels. As she died in 305 AD the connection cannot have been made at the time because the spinning wheel had not been invented.

Angela Pawlyn

Meeting Reports

October: This wonderful HAGD had many of us trying out knitting techniques that, at least for me in the case of steeking, we hadn't even heard of. Chris Maclean had instructed us to knit a Fair Isle pattern in the round in advance of the session. We were shown how, after crochet reinforcement, by cutting through the length of knitted stitches, an opening can be made. Chris had brought many examples of this technique, some far in advance for what we were doing. I could see how this technique would make a jumper knitted in the round into a cardigan, but how it was used to make the armholes etc is still a puzzle to me. Whilst we were busy cutting up our knitting, Linda Whiter was demonstrating the complexities of cable knitting - a technique whose varieties are well demonstrated in Aran jumpers etc. I noticed that there were some lovely first attempts and am sure we all went home with the beginnings of yet another skill.

January: The talk on textile conservation by Alison Lister was fascinating and gave an insight into the range of work undertaken by her team. Alison runs a company specialising in textile conservation and has the privilege of caring for a wide range of textiles, cleaning, repairing and advising on their upkeep. An especially interesting project was Coventry Cathedral's exceptionally large altar tapestry, designed by Graham Sutherland, which is in need of cleaning. Alison and her team spent time clipped onto scaffolding behind the tapestry to evaluate what needed to be done and then carefully hoovering the tapestry. Alison also told how large tapestries are woven on large, usually horizontal, looms, and the image is woven sideways. The large tapestries are extremely heavy and prone to damage from their own weight. I'm sure now we shall all be viewing old textiles with new eyes.

Dates for your diary:

OGWSD Programme 2018/2019

- March 21** 11.00 am AGM + Show of work & HAGD Spindle spinning (Sarah Allan & Janet Farnsworth)
- April 18** 11.30am Talk "Willow Weaving" + HAGD (Deborah Jones)
- April 19** HAGD Tablet Weaving (Anne Hughes)
- May 16** Talk "Spindle Spinning" (Peter & Carol Leonard)
- May 17** Workshop: Spindle spinning (Peter & Carol Leonard)
- June 20** Talk "Summer School and beyond" (Liz Mitchell)
- June 21** Workshop: Loops, knots and 3-shaft inlays in weaving (Liz Mitchell)
- July 18** HAGD Embellishment (Janet Farnsworth)
- July 18** Workshop 1: Acid Dyeing (Katie Weston)
- July 19** Workshop 2: Acid Dyeing (Katie Weston)
- Sept 19** Talk "Beaker Buttons" (Jennifer Best)
- Sept 20** Workshop: Beaker Buttons (Jennifer Best)
- Oct 17** HAGD Fleece Fibre prep (Sarah Allan)
- Oct 18** Workshop: What can you do with a drum carder? (Freya Jones)
- Nov 21** Talk "Needle Felting" (Cath Smith)
- Nov 22** Workshop: Needle felting – Funky Sheep portrait (Cath Smith)
- Dec 19** Christmas lunch; Exhibition of work + Chair's Challenge
- Jan 16** Talk "Design, Success and Business" (Connie Granger)
- Feb 20** Talk "Durham Weaver" (Susan Foulkes)
- Feb 21** Workshop: Sami band weaving (Durham Weaver)

Other Events

- Tapestries. Now - Feb 23, Whitworth Art Gallery, Oxford Road, Manchester M15 6ER
- Hidden Fabric: Women Textiles Collectors. Now - April 19, 2 Temple Place, London WC2R 3BD (twotempleplace.org/exhibitions/hidden-fabric/)
- Japanese Textiles and Craft Event. March 13-15, Isle of Dogs, London. (freeweaver.co.uk/japantextilesfestival/)
- Wingham Wools Weekend. March 14/15, Snells Hall East Hendred OX12 8LA
- Fabric: Touch and Identity. March 14 - June 14, Compton Verney, Warwickshire, CV35 9HZ. (comptonverney.org.uk)
- Heritage Crafts Association "Craft Uprising". April 4, Oxford Town Hall (heritagecrafts.org/craftuprising)
- Window on Weaving. April 14 - May 2, Haslemere Museum, 78 High Street, Haslemere, Surrey GU27 2LA (www.btg-wovenart.org.uk)
- Shadows and Reflections. The London Guild of Weavers, Spinners & Dyers exhibition. April 29 - May 3, Southwark Cathedral, London Bridge, LE1 9DA (londonguildofweavers.org.uk)
- Association's National Exhibition. Sept 5-20, Leigh Spinners Mill

A useful source of craft courses:

www.craftcourses.com/categories/spinning-weaving-dyeing

Committee (until AGM)

Chairman (Acting)	Sue Clegg
Treasurer	Kate Prinsep
Secretary	Jacqueline Smee
Membership Sec.	Jenny Butler
Outside events	Chris Crowley
Members	Louise Summers-Matthews Pauline Travis Sue Clegg

Other responsibilities

Sales Table	Kate Prinsep / Caroline Goss
Guild Equipment Librarian	Anne Hughes Linda Whiter
Newsletter Editor	Liz Mitchell
Website	Anne Hughes

Notes from the Editor: I am in always in need of items for future issues. Please keep your eyes and ears open for interesting pieces from any source and also please write up anything you've been doing related to our crafts. E-mail to newsletter@oxfordwsd.org.uk or give me your copy at a Guild meeting. Deadline for next issue is 6th May.

To catch up on events between newsletters, check programme etc, visit our website www.oxfordwsd.org.uk or Facebook.