

The Silk Industry in Spitalfields

The silk industry was one of the later developers among England's great textile trades. It originated in the weaving of ribbons and other trimmings, and half silks (fabrics made from a combination of silks and other fibres), which had been made in London from the Tudor period¹, and it was here, in the east of the city, that weaving of pure silk developed after the mid-seventeenth century. Until then, fashionable English men and women had worn and furnished their houses with silks imported from France and Italy. That time also saw increasing enthusiasm in England for more exotic textiles imported from Asia by the East India Company². The enormously lucrative market for these imported goods acted as a keen stimulus for an English silk industry to develop. The market was helped by returning political stability under the restoration of the monarchy following the Civil War³, and the affluent consumerism of King Charles II's Court. Huguenots, arriving from the continent as refugees from religious persecution⁴, played an integral part in the development of the English silk industry, contributing both textile skills and business acumen. They were among large numbers of textile workers, from abroad and within Britain, attracted to London, in particular the area around Spitalfields. Mercers and master weavers inhabited grand premises in the Old Artillery Ground, controlling the journeymen weavers⁵ who worked from their own more modest homes in neighbouring streets. Manufacture in this area developed as the mainstay of the English silk industry, and the combination of technical innovation and excellence in design contributed to a flourishing production and trade.

Between the 1680s and 1730s, the London Weavers' Company – the trade organisation that controlled weaving in the capital – had nearly 6,000 members. The industry was organised in branches, within which individual weavers specialised, mostly weaving silks for clothing rather than furnishings. By the rules of the London Weavers' Company, a boy entering the profession had to serve an apprenticeship of seven years, before he could be admitted as a journeyman weaver. Most journeymen would work for more than one master and would specialise in a type of weave, like damask⁶, or silks with metal thread. For the production of the most intricate designs, drawlooms were used, requiring a drawboy in addition to the weaver to operate them, until their eventual superseding by the Jacquard loom in the nineteenth century. The drawboy controlled the lifting of the particular warp threads required for the weaver to create the design,

and with this complicated procedure, less than a yard a day might be woven. This was in addition to the weeks it could have taken to mount (set up) the loom for the chosen design, all of this labour adding to the expense of the finished product. In 1765 *The Gazette and New Daily Advertiser* reported the words of a weaver: ‘before his loom will be ready to weave in, it will be three, four or six weeks before it will be mounted, in all of which time he earns nothing but has the additional hardship of keeping his drawboy in pay and victuals’.

Both Francis Rybot and Nicholas Jourdain, the mercers who retailed silks from the shops above which they lived at 3 and 4 Raven Row (now 56 and 58 Artillery Lane, the buildings of Raven Row), also had experience as weavers, which was very unusual for the time. Rybot described himself on his trade card as ‘Weaver and Mercer who makes and sells all sorts of rich brocaded silks...’ (see image opposite). This background would certainly have been an asset in the understanding of their commercial trade. Typically, a mercer would give his order for a particular type and design of silk to a master weaver. Knowing his market, and the taste of his customers, he may have commissioned the original design himself, from a local pattern-drawer like Anna Maria Garthwaite. The job would have been allocated by the master weaver to a journeyman specialising in that particular type of silk, who would return the woven length when completed. The silk could be sold in London from the mercer’s own premises, sent out of town, or exported to destinations across Northern Europe and America.

Silk was an intrinsically expensive commodity, and was not always produced for stock, but often to order, particularly if it incorporated gold or silver thread. The more expensive silks were also very exclusive. In a House of Commons Report of 1765 investigating the state of the industry, a weaver testified that normally, only a sufficient amount would be woven of a dress fabric in a particular pattern for four gowns. A woman’s gown would take between nine and sixteen metres of material, in the standard width of a half-ell, which was the equivalent of about 50 cm. This was a relatively tiny amount in relation to the time and labour expended in preparing the individual design – whereby the point paper⁷ had to be squared up for transferring the pattern – and the loom. A fashionable Englishwoman, having paid a very high price for her silk, would presumably appreciate the relative exclusivity of its pattern, knowing that she was unlikely to meet another woman dressed the same.

For much of the eighteenth century, the cut of garments changed relatively slowly, so the designs of the silks were an important indication



Francis Pybot

WEAVER and MERCER,

At the Cat, in Raven-Bow, & further end of Smock Alley,
Spittle Fields, LONDON.

Makes & Sells all Sorts of Rich Brocaded Silks,
Dutch, Genoa and English Velvets.

Rich Damasks.	Armoz eens.	Mantuas.
Padufoys.	Ducapes.	Strip'd Tobins & Clouds.
Flow'd Water ^d &	Rich Sattins.	Luftrings.
Unwat ^d Tabbys.	Pelings.	Black Silks.

Brocaded, Strip'd & Plain Mezzinetta,
Norwich Crapes.

Dresdens	Burhazeens	Worst ^d Damasks	Strip ^d & Plain
Poplins	Venetian Poplins	Camblets	Callimanco

Rapels, Hair-Pruncellas & Princes Stuffs.

N.B. All Merchants, Captains & others may be immediately
supply'd wth the greatest Variety of Stuffs, Norwich & hutch
Silk goods made purposely for the Foreign Trade.

of the wearer's style and knowledge of the latest fashion. The complex patterns and variety of surface effects in the silks were fully exploited in clothing for both men and women. Satins, damasks, lightweight taffetas treated to achieve a high lustre (known as lustrings, or lustrings), the heavier paduasos and gros de Tours, cut and uncut velvets and tissues (complex weaves) with different textures of gold and silver thread. All of these could be brocaded, or 'flowered', in brightly coloured silks or with more gold and silver for extra visual impact. Women's sack-back gowns with their pleated lengths of silk falling from the shoulders, and men's long waistcoats – often the focal points of their suits – allowed the intricate, balanced designs to be seen to full effect. The Spitalfields designers and weavers, and the mercers who commissioned them, had to keep up with changes in fashion and technical advances in France in order to earn a share of the market, but English silks came to develop their own individual style. At the wedding of King George II's eldest son, the Prince of Wales in 1736, *The Gentleman's Magazine* noted that 'most of the rich clothes were the manufacture of England, and ... the few which were French did not come up to these in richness, goodness or fancy'.

Benevolent state intervention on behalf of the English silk industry, together with powerful and sometimes violent lobbying by the weavers themselves, secured some important trade legislation to support this home market. In 1699 the importation of Indian silks had been prohibited, and in 1721 a prohibition on the use and wear of printed calico was passed and was enforced the following year. Brightly coloured and colourfast calico had been extremely popular at the beginning of the eighteenth century for dress and furnishings, and had provided serious competition to the silk and wool industries.

More significant legislation was introduced in the second half of the century. In 1766 a total prohibition on the import of foreign woven silks became law, although the many French silks that managed to reach English customers after this date are testimony to the ingenuity of smugglers. In 1773 the first Spitalfields Act was introduced. Under this legislation, rates of pay for particular classes of work were agreed by deputations of journeymen and masters, and then ratified by magistrates. Lists of prices were published to guarantee the agreed rates of pay. A series of these Acts were passed, and they helped to secure years of relative industrial peace.

This stability occurred despite changes in dress fashions, which provided the principal market for the Spitalfields weavers' and mercers' wares. Alongside the developing taste for Neoclassicism in other forms

of decorative art, there was a move away from rich, heavily patterned silks towards fabrics that were more loosely woven, that would drape easily, and permit a more informal style of dressing. This requirement for softer, more lightweight dress fabrics directly affected the industry, which suffered financially from the fashion for smaller patterns and lighter fabrics, as rates of pay were dependent on the complexity of the weave. Nevertheless, reasonable stability was maintained until 1824. In that year the Act prohibiting the import of foreign silks, which had been in force protecting the market for the Spitalfields weavers for sixty years, and the Spitalfields Acts protecting their rates of pay, were repealed under Free Trade reform. This legislation, which was effective from 1826, marked a complete break in the history of the industry. It had immediate and crippling results. French silks immediately came onto the market, with a novelty and price that made them enormously attractive to customers, and the Spitalfields industry collapsed, with many facing bankruptcy. Partial recovery had to wait until much later in the nineteenth century, and the area was never again to regain its former pre-eminence in the production of fashionable silks.

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1. 1485–1603.
2. Trading company that controlled trade between Britain and Asia from the seventeenth to mid-nineteenth centuries.
3. Civil War (1642–1651).
4. As a result of the revocation of the Edict of Nantes by Louis XIV in October 1685, which declared Protestantism illegal in France and led to an influx of Huguenots in Great Britain.
5. Weavers who had served their apprenticeships and were qualified to enter the trade.
6. Figured textile with one warp and one weft in which the pattern is formed by a contrast of binding systems. In its contrast form, it is reversible, and the contrast is produced by the use of the warp and weft faces of the same weave.
7. Point paper was by definition marked with squares, and the pattern copied onto a grid, so that the weavers could see square by square (thread by thread) how to proceed.