

From loom to boom

The industrial revolution transformed Bradford forever, creating a textile powerhouse that once reigned as 'wool capital of the world'

Information

BRADFORD TEXTILE ARCHIVE
Bradford College
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Opposite: Peacock Turkey Red from the
Society of Dyers and Colourists' collection

Below: 'Columbia' printed on coarse plain
weave fabric from the American
collection pattern books

The Bradford Textile Archive first opened its doors to the public in January 2004. Part of Bradford College, the archive was at that stage housed in rooms that had once been warping sheds. The combination was entirely apt: the collection and its location reflecting both the importance of textiles to the city and the significance of the College to the district's weaving industry.

The archive represents 150 years of textile manufacture in Bradford and products as diverse as fine silk jacquards, rayon, velvets, mohair and worsted cloth. Pattern books, colour cards, student workbooks, company documents, trade journals: these are the strengths of the collection. There are no pieces woven in their entirety but then none are needed, for these fragmentary details – in cloth and text – together create a picture of a larger whole.

The roots of the Bradford Textile Archive – and the college where it resides – are closely connected to those of the local textile industry. The college itself grew out of the Mechanics Institute – an organisation founded in 1825 to support those working in textile manufacture. By 1863, the Institute had established a School of Industrial Design and Art and was employing teachers full-time to improve the skills and knowledge of its students. The provision of this training was not without controversy. Local manufacturers were initially reluctant to support the initiative, preferring to keep trade secrets in the family. It took competition from abroad to force a change of regard.

At the time the Institute was founded, the European textile market had come to be dominated by the soft, draped cloths of France. These were qualities required by the country's increasingly popular fashion industry. That most British manufacturers were unable to produce

Workbooks and samples produced by students... form a unique resource illustrating not only the skills of the makers but also the training they received





Above: Denholme Velvet. Although predominately velvet manufacturers, Denholme velvet collected pattern books to reflect trends, and right: Argentinian Printed Dress Fabric, 1946

Below right: Woven furnishing fabric, wool and cotton c1940s labelled 'Technical College of Bradford, Department of Textile Industries: student competition entry'



comparable textiles excluded them from a potentially lucrative market. The 1867 Paris Exhibition highlighted this disparity and made evident the need for greater indigenous skill and creativity in British cloth manufacture.

Vocational training became a priority and within a decade the Institute had founded a School of Weaving, 'in which designing and harmony of colour should be taught'. Five years later, a Technical School (the precursor of Bradford College) was opened by the then Prince of Wales. The teaching of weaving and design – including the renowned Bradford Certificate – was to be an integral part of its education provision from then onwards.

The Textile Archive developed as a natural adjunct to the Technical School's day-to-day teaching. Much of the material derives from students and local manufacturers. As such, the Archive reflects the strength and diversity of production in the city, as well as the quality of the instruction the College offered.

The Curator's Choice

'Dancing nymphs – a rayon sample – is just one of thousands contained within a 250-volume series dating from 1943-1956. The samples were collected from international trade exhibitions and provide a remarkable record of that period, fabric styles and technical developments.

Attributed to Salvador Dali, this fabric came about as a result of his collaboration with the textile designer Wesley Simpson. This is one of 20 patterns that Dali created for Wesley Simpson Custom Fabrics in 1946 (seven of which are held at Bradford Textile Archive). The sample offers a rare insight into the commercial work of the surrealist Dali and certainly stands out as unique within the collection.'

Madeline Betts
Textile Archivist, Bradford College



Salvador Dali Fabric designed for Wesley Simpson. Has price per yard on the sample ticket. American collection pattern books



Workbooks and samples produced by students are well represented in the archive. These form a unique resource illustrating not only the skills of the makers but also the training they received. Most date from the mid to late Victorian period when Bradford's weaving industry was probably at its zenith. The wider significance of the manufacturing that took place in the district is evident in one of the archive's most recent additions: the Society of Dyers and Colourists collection. Founded in 1884 to 'promote the science of colour', the SDC headquarters are still based in the city. Its archive has been assembled over many years and includes dyers recipes and notebooks as well as fabric samples. Of particular interest is a section

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of material devoted to Turkey Red – a bright orange-red colour, which was introduced to Scotland in 1785 and gained widespread popularity during the 19th century. Produced on cotton cloth using alizarin dye, the examples in the Archive include images of peacocks, a motif frequently found on Turkey Red designs.

The wide-flung search for design inspiration is reflected in one of the BTA's other major acquisitions: its Indian Collection. This consists of 18 volumes of

'Textiles of India': a set of reference material donated to Bradford in the 1860s as part of a broader initiative that embraced 12 other textile manufacturing centres in the UK. Published in 1865-6 by Dr Forbes Watson of the India Museum, each set contained some 700 working samples of cotton, silk and woollen textiles demonstrating traditional techniques used in various regions of India.

The sources of the material varied. Some were acquired by the East India Company and date from the 18th century; others formed part of the Great Exhibitions of 1851 (London) and 1862 (Paris), whilst still more were gifted to the project by wealthy colonials. A form of textile compendium, the



Above: Bilbille & Co catalogue of 'mid-season haute couture colourings' November 1950, and colour predictions for summer 1951

Below: An etching of Bradford Mechanics Institute





Above from left: No 407, No 422 and No 416. Kincobs, 1872. All from *The Textile Manufactures of India. Second Series No 401-458 Kincobs*. No 508 Imroo, 1872. From *The Textile Manufactures of India. Second Series. No 459-525: Mushroos & Imroos*. Silk & gold fabric, probably purchased as part of a dowry

Opposite: Turkey Red, Society of Dyers and Colourists

The Collections

Textiles

Collection of textile samples produced in Bradford or manufactured elsewhere and used as reference samples. Highlights include: Turkey Red collection and the India Collection c1868: 26 bound volumes with 700 samples of cotton, silk and woollen textiles manufactured in India ranging from tent cloths to ornate gold thread fabrics, (1700s-1860s). Also student workbooks 1890-1969, relating to courses offered at Bradford Technical College.

Pattern books and cards

Over 300 large bound volumes from 1855-1956. Highlights include: Hind Robinson and Denholme Velvets with designer reference samples from around the world and textile designs produced by Salvador Dali. Also colour prediction material including Les Tissus (1895), Bilbille (1929-77) and Italtex (1980s onwards) plus collection of pattern cards (1850-1925) used to identify fabrics in teaching.

Archive

Archive of the Society of Dyers and Colourists, including dyers notebooks and recipes. Also papers documenting the day-to-day dealings of various textile trade organisations in Bradford district (minute books and cash records) plus text books and trade journals such as Wool Record (from 1913) the Journal of the Textile Institute, Textile Month, Wool Science Review and Textile Horizon.

set remains a rich resource and include examples of simple tent cloth alongside intricate gold and silver thread cloth, itemised as costing £6 a yard when it retailed in 1860. As with other items in the archive, the albums are valuable references for costume historians as well as manufacturers. Its moment of greatest celebrity to date came in 1995 with the BBC production of *Pride and Prejudice*, whose costumes were inspired by these fabrics at the Textile Archive.

By contrast, the focus for the Bilbille Collection was provided not by extant textiles, but rather by the textiles of the immediate future. Bilbille was a Parisian sampling house who predicted textile trends. Each season they would produce shade cards, market prediction texts and books of fabric samples. The BTA collection includes examples of this material from the 1930s to the 1970s. Of these, perhaps the most interesting are those dating from 1947-57 and used by Hind Robinson – a local company whose designers have supplied critiques of the material.

Denholme Velvets are another Bradford firm whose work is a highlight of the Textile Archive. Founded in 1938 and still in existence, the company specialises in velvets for clothing and furnishing markets. The examples held by the BTA reflect the subtle colours and complex textures of these fabrics, most notably in the chiffon velvet for which the company gained international renown.

Recently re-housed in a part of the College known simply as 'The Old Building', the Bradford Textile Archive's new setting is as pertinent at its first home. This was a place built in 1882 for the purpose of 'imparting to youths, artisans and others, technical and scientific, artistic and general instruction' in textile manufacture. The industry may no longer be as vibrant as in its heyday and the demand for practical training less intense, yet the Archive remains true to that original function. It exists today as a teaching and research tool: a record of weaving excellence from which those who wish to, can still acquire knowledge.

Although physical access is restricted, the Archive is actively seeking out new ways by which the public can engage with its collection. Students, staff, researchers, specialists, designers, businesses, schools and community groups are all encouraged to draw on the archive for information and inspiration. Much recent activity has focused on exploiting the potential of digital access with the aim that the collection will be accessible via the internet in the not too distant future. A grant from 'The Clothworkers' Company is currently funding the digitisation of much of the collection to enable the provision of digital surrogates and remote access. Whilst there is no substitute for seeing the real thing, the digital solution seems entirely fitting for the Bradford Textile Archive: an archive founded in response to the need to explore new ideas and broaden horizons. ●

June Hill

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