

RECOLLECTION OF WORKING IN HOLYWELL TEXTILE MILL

When I first started in the textile mill in January 1961 I was 16. I began in the spinning department at what was then known as top mill where the blending, carding and spinning took place. At the bottom mill the winding, warping, weaving, twisting and mending took place, the offices were at bottom mill, it now belongs to Halls Pop. The weaving room consisted of looms where worsted cloth, tapestry cloth and blankets were woven. Times were changing and bottom mill closed down.

The Top Mill was where Holywell Textile Mill ended its history. The building was three stories high, on the top floor there were four mules for spinning, four cheese winding machines and a testing department. The middle floor consisted of three rooms, one held 2 warping mills, 4 weft winding machines, 2 twisting machines, 12 looms for blankets 2 looms for tapestry and honeycombs and 1 loom for cotton, the second room was for storage and hauling the materials up from outside, the third was the mending room (there was also access to this room from outside). At the entrance to the middle floor is where you clocked in for work. The bottom floor was the carding room and the boilers. Outside was the blending house. All that remains of the Textile Mill today is the offices and the shop, these were across the yard from the middle floor.

The mill was a noisy dirty place to work, the top and middle floors were wooden and covered in oil which had accumulated over the years, large belts working the machinery would be whizzing above your head, everything was greasy and slippery, as all moving parts of the machines were oiled regularly to keep them in good condition. Shuttles could fly out of the looms at any time, health and safety was not a high priority. We used to eat our food at the side of our machines or we went to the 'canteen' which was outside and down the steps opposite the carding room, it did have a table and two benches and a Belfast sink and a boiler for heating water, there was a large grid outside which gave off a nasty smell, that is why we stayed by our machines. The hours of work when I was there were from 7.30am to 5.15 p.m. Monday to Friday and 7.30am to 12.00noon on Saturdays, half hour unpaid lunch break and two unpaid breaks one in the morning and one in the afternoon this was my working week and I was paid £2 3s 4d (£2.20p approx.).

Tapestry and honey combs were the top quality products that were made in the mill. Honeycombs were made into blankets and tapestries were made into ladies suits, coats, bedspreads, carpets etc. and sold in the shop. Later on the quality was reduced because of the high costs, I think this contributed to the downfall of the mill. G.S. (ground sweepings) blankets were made for the army, and many other patterned blankets made for sale to customers. We had a loom that wove the material for tennis balls a lot of fluff came off this loom

I started in the spinning department and went on to winding weaving and warping and when I left in 1965, I was on £10 10s (£10.50p) a week, a special rate as I was able to do all the different processes I had actually been through the mill so to speak. I met my husband Keith in the mill, we married in August 1962 and we bought a house across the road in Greenfield Street at the bottom of level lane, where the car park is today. The row used to be known as the barracks as they were built originally by the mill owners to house the workers. The property consisted of three floors, as you came in at the front door you came

into the main room where we lived, most of life's needs were catered for in this room, we washed, we cooked, we ate and we relaxed. The second floor was our bedroom and the third floor was just storage, as we could not afford to do anything with it, we had an outside flush toilet which was shared with our neighbours and when we moved in we had gas lighting! All this cost us £150.00. Keith's' Uncle Glyn installed electricity later on and we bought a washing machine which made life easier. It was great working just across the road as Percy who looked after the boilers in the mill used to knock us up in the morning for work. When Keith left the mill in 1964 he was on £10 per week, he left to go to Courtaulds in Greenfield for £15 per week.

The textile mill gave me a grounding as to my future working life. Working hard and long hours in bad conditions, no unions, no HR department but I enjoyed my time there and met some strong characters whose time was spent in doing the task allotted to them and doing it right. I have good memories of the people with whom I worked along side at Holywell Textile Mill.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE PROCESS FROM WOOL TO GARMENT

The main component of the product of Holywell Textile Mill was sheeps wool this would be sourced locally and elsewhere. The wool would be transported to the mill in large bags, measuring 6' x 4' weighing 1000 pounds, they were made of sacking which were sewn up with string.

BLENDING HOUSE

The bags were delivered to the blending house where four men worked, the bags would be cut open, two men would bring in the wool and two men would spray the soap oil. The good quality wool contained in the bags would be spread out on the floor about a foot in thickness and soap oil from a barrel would be sprayed on, another layer of wool would be spread out on top and another layer of soap oil this process would continue until layers of wool and soap oil reached 6' high 45 feet long and 30 feet wide, The wool and soap oil layers would then be cut with a pikel into approximately 2' wide strips and placed in a blending machine to mix the wool and oil together.

CARDING ROOM

The blended wool was then sent to the carding room, where there were four carding machines, the blend was placed in a one of the hoppers where a series of spiked rollers would clean out the wool, smooth it and the finished product which was called the drum ended on what was known as reels.

SPINNING MACHINES

Several of these reels would be taken to the spinning room and would be placed in the spinning machines called mules, the soft wool would be placed under the rollers and onto the spindles the mules would then drag out the drum spinning at the same time and putting the yarn onto the bobbins. If an end broke during this process you would get the end off the bobbin yarn and the new soft yarn off the reel and these would be spliced together between three fingers, while the mule was still in motion. The mules would be stopped only when the reels needed changing or when the bobbins were full. When full the bobbins taken of and put into skips for the winding machine.

CHEESE WINDING

The winder would chose one the filled skips hoping they had chosen a good batch, as the more you produced the more you got paid. The bobbins were placed on the winding machine brought up and passed around the stick and wound to approximately 6" in diameter, the end product called a cheese, these cheeses were used for the following two processes.

1) WARPING

The cheeses would then be placed on racks which were 7' high and 6' wide and depending on the pattern that was being made 15 cheeses to a row about 10 rows in 2 layers. The end of yarn on each cheese was fed through a reed 8-10 threads to the inch, the 150 threads would then be tied in a knot and hooked onto the warping mill and the warping mill would begin to turn until the necessary length was completed, making sure that no yarn broke, if this happened the warping mill had to be stopped the broken end found and tied with a weavers knot and the process continued. Several of these segments would then be done until the whole warp was completed. The warp would then be taken off onto a beam with a flange on each end to keep the warp in a straight line.

2) WEFT WINDING

The cheeses were also sent to the weft winding machines and made into long thin bobbins with cones on the end these then went on to the weaving looms.

WARPS

The beam from the warping mill would be set into the loom in one of two methods

- 1) tied into an existing pattern and pulled through the shafts (a minimum of four shafts)
- 2) put on the drawing in standing and drawn through the individual eyes on the shafts to match the pattern needed, drawn in through the reed and then placed in the loom.

The new warp was knotted onto the roller and the weaving began.

TWISTING

Several bobbins would be placed in the twisting frame and two would be drawn up together and twisted into one, on to a tube. The twisted yarn would then be taken to the hanking machine (if you could imagine wrapping the yarn around your arm) when the hank was full it would be taken off and sent away to be dyed. The dyed hanks would be returned to the mill and made into cheeses on another machine. These would then be sent to the weft winding. This yarn would then be used in the weaving of honeycomb and tapestry pieces only.

WEAVING

A wooden shuttle with sharp metal ends would be filled with the long thin bobbins from the weft winding and placed into the shuttle box, depending on the pattern there could be up to six shuttles in use, usually there were at least two on each side of the weaving loom. The warp would move forward slowly as each strand of weft was shot across at high speed, if the yarn in the warp or the weft broke the loom had to be stopped, the yarn repaired and the loom started up again, also the long thin bobbins in the shuttles would run out and some weavers used to catch the shuttles and replace with a new one and the loom looked as if it had not stopped, after each strand of weft the reed would come forward and compact the piece (the name given to the product at this stage - you would be paid on the amount of

pieces you wove hence the term piecework) this process continued until the blanket was the correct size and it would then be cut off and sent to the mending department.

MENDING ROOM

When pieces were brought in from the weaving shed to the mending room each piece would be hauled over a set of wooden rollers to check for faults and then passed onto the menders for any repairs. They would remove any imperfections that were seen .

FINISHING

The completed piece was sent to Yorkshire where the product would be finished into individual blankets.

The mill now has slipped into the past and is only vivid in the memories of the people, who spent some or all of their working lives behind its dark Victorian buildings, producing worsted cloth for mens suits, blankets for households and the forces, tapestry for expensive clothing and carpets, honeycomb for special blankets, they would lip read as you would not be able to hear above the noise of the machinery and work hard producing some of the best products in the world.

Keith and Gwladys Harrison - May 2009