

July's Meeting

How to spin a silk hankie

July's Guild meeting started with a silk-spinning-from-hankies workshop run by Pene Blogg and Frances Fletcher; It was an amazing experience for all those taking part. The yarn building up on the participants' bobbins looked luxurious and glamorous! Silk spinning isn't for the faint-hearted but everyone seemed to be producing desirable results.

Ellen mastering the skill



Pene tutoring the group

This was followed by the EGM, where the committee gave us lots to think about before our AGM, along the lines of how we should distribute some of the money that has to be spent every year in order to keep our accounts in line as a charity rather than a profit-making commercial organisation, and stay true to our constitution. .

Then Nicky awarded the newly acquired Anita Furzey Trophy for Tapestry Weaving to Ali Pearce. The trophy is a piece of Labradorite mounted on an oak base made by Tim Parker.



Show and Tell Table

Yarn and fibre produced after the Solar Dyeing Workshop



Show and Tell

The 'Show and Tell' table was laden with a rainbow of gorgeous fibre and yarns produced following Nicky's Solar Dyeing workshop back in April, plus a fabulous felted fish, a beautiful felted marine picture, an attractive bag, matching washbag and a cushion woven from an old duvet cover on a rigid heddle loom, and a baby hat made from reclaimed yarn following last month's nalbinding workshop with Dr. Carey Fleiner.



Other items on the 'Show and Tell' table

Talk in the afternoon—the Story of Silk

Teresinha's talk was exceptionally interesting and entertaining. She started by explaining how silk is one of our oldest textiles, special for its look and feel, but also because only insects can produce a very long, smooth, extruded fibre, rather than the short individual fibres produced by plants or animals. Each cocoon can be up to 1km when the fibre is unwound. The resulting fibre is triangular in cross-section, which is why it reflects light so well and appears lustrous. It's so strong that it can even be used as protection from arrows and other weapons, and was used as under-armour in Ghengis Khan's time.



The most sought-after silk is now mulberry silk, produced by silkworms that have lost the ability to live in the wild. But they are not the only insects that produce silk; spider silk, which spiders can produce in many different "grades" like the gossamer silk baby spiders use for flying, has many uses. It's even used for fishing nets in Malawi, and as cross-hairs in microscopes; spider silk is also antiseptic and can be used in microsurgery. However it can't be farmed, as spiders are cannibalistic; we can produce spider silk proteins by gene-splicing but can't make it nearly as fine as spiders themselves do! For example, Tussah silk measures around 20 microns, 10 for mulberry silk, and just 2 microns for fine spider silk.

Mulberry silk weaving pre-dates Stonehenge by about 1000 years, with examples from that date woven at an incredible 135 epi. Europeans thought silk came from sheep sprinkled with water in the sunshine!

The term "Silk Road" is only about 200 years old, and isn't an accurate description, as it's more like a web of routes, covering 6000-odd km from China to the trading ports of Europe. Camels travelled 40-odd miles per day in back-and-forth stages, starting from Xian to the Takla Makhan (which means Land of No Return) then crossing the deadly Pamir mountains; an extremely dangerous journey. Only woven fabric, not threads, could be carried economically; 70% of the weight of the cocoon is the pupa, which will be humanely killed before hatching to preserve the full length of the thread.

The silk workers ate the deceased pupa for protein, also using some to feed fish to eat. Only a few would be allowed to hatch and breed to continue the business. Mulberry trees are now becoming rare in China because of population/land pressure. Silk worms are the only domesticated insects, no longer able to survive without people; adults have lost the power of flight. Keeping them is hard work! Edible mulberry leaves are not an ideal food for them; white mulberry is better as the leaves are more tender. The worms take 5 weeks to grow, moulting several times. Loo roll inners make great cocoon towers! They spin the cocoon in a figure of eight, which uses less energy, and it takes around 72 hours to complete a cocoon.



Silkworm Pupae

Adults live 3-4 days, and can lay 500 eggs. In the UK they will hatch in spring, although they hatch all year round in China. Silk is reeled off the cocoons, about 15 cocoons at a time (or 40 by hand) or softened and stretched over a frame to form hankies. Spun silk is thicker and not as shiny as reeled silk. Silk paper is a lovely thing, using the seracin as a glue and various additives for different effects. Grades of woven silk are Pongee for lightweight uses such as scarves, Habotai for silk painting and firmer fabrics. Crepes have extra twist, Dupion is used for clothing, and Shantung is a little thicker, used for jackets etc. Silk can be washed but the finish and/or stiffening will vanish.

Tussah silk is produced by different worms, usually growing into big moths. They eat plants with tannins like oak and hawthorn so Tussah is not white. The fibres are more oval in section, so not as lustrous, and it is darker, thicker and even stronger. It's still farmed, outdoors under nets, and sadly most moths are still not allowed to exit their cocoons naturally. Soy silk is a by-product of tofu production, in use since 1930s, and is suitable for vegetarians and vegans. At this point, Teresinha remembered that she had a train to catch; so ended a rare occasion when we were all utterly spellbound for over an hour!

Altogether, we agree that it was a day of silken splendour.