

Boyd's Mill Castle Cary

One of the last remaining mills in the world that weaves horsehair

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Question: What have the Pump Rooms in Bath, plains of Mongolia and Boyd's Mill in Castle Cary got in common? Read this article to find out.

In Bath many tourists visit the Roman Baths, sample the health giving waters and sit and enjoy the elegance of sipping coffee in the Pump Rooms while listening to music. But, what an increased dimension they would have if told, that they were sitting on a chair upholstered with fabric, made from tails of horses that are currently galloping across the plains of Mongolia.

The horses tails are cropped (harvested) and sent to the John Boyd Textile Mill in Castle Cary where they are woven into a hard wearing, elegant fabric with unequalled lustre that is used in upholstery and for manufacture of handbags (*see Figures 1 and 2*). Some have been used for royal weddings.

The 12th May excursion to John Boyd Textile mill was fascinating and should it ever be offered again, put it on the priority list. The highlight was watching the original looms, built in 1871, in full action today. They have been working for 140 years and are maintained by the resident engineer and occasionally new parts are built at the local foundry.

Castle Cary was already a well established textile town, weaving coarse count linen fabric and rope manufacturing as early as 1327. In 1468 the town was granted a charter to hold weekly markets, therefore increasing the number of people and horses visiting the town. By 1800 cottage workers had begun to weave a horsehair cloth with a cotton warp. At this time the horsehair came from live local horses as it was the fashion to crop horses' tails. The hair was then cleansed in the local pond. John Boyd, who was a travelling textile merchant from Scotland, settled in Castle Cary and started a small scale weaving cottage industry. He built his first factory in 1851 and by the end of the century employed 200 people.

Figure 1
Horsehair fabric being woven. (Image Marek Lewcun)



The horsehair fabrics were initially woven by hand. This would require a weaver to stand at a loom all day and a small child would sit in the loom with the horse tail, serving one hair at a time to the weaver. The Elementary Education Act of 1870, ensuring that all children went to school, and the 1874 Factory Act, preventing under 10 year olds from working in factories, led to the development of mechanical looms patented by John Boyd. A mechanical picker was able to tease one hair at a time from the wet horse tail.

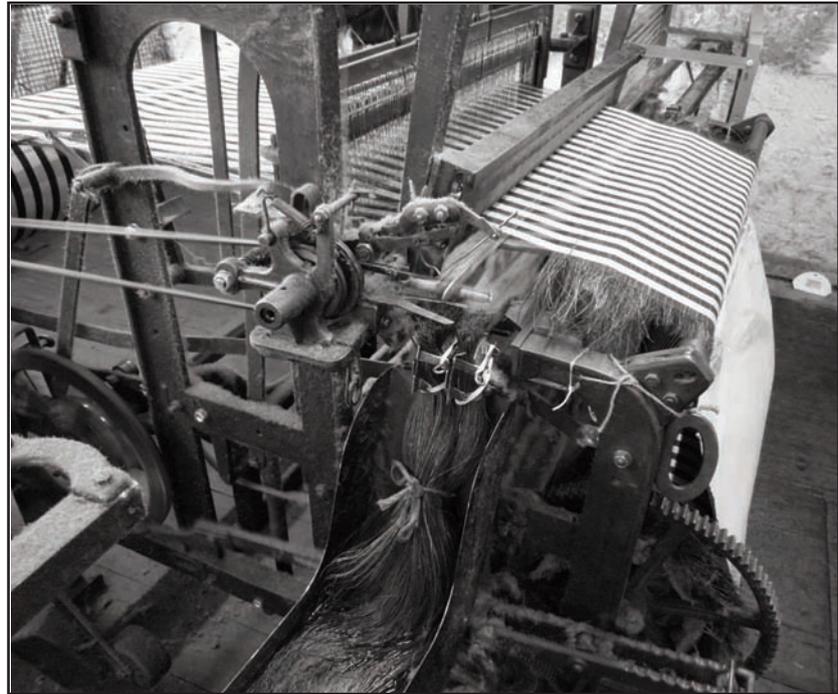


Figure 2
A loom in action

The weaving process.

The warp of the fabric is made of silk, linen or cotton. It is measured out into bolt lengths on a large drum (see Figure 3).

The number of warp threads depends on the width of the fabric. Black horse tails are usually longer and coarser than white and will produce a wider fabric approximately 62 inches wide. The warp is then set up on one of the many looms. They started out being manual and then became mechanised using the water mill and later electricity. The design of the fabric is controlled by wooden cogs.

The tail must be carefully mixed and drawn through teeth of a large comb before being woven. To ensure uniform colour of the hair black is also dyed black and white is first bleached and then dyed the required colour in large vats. Completed fabric is cut with pinking shears to ensure that it



does not fray. The front side is rolled inside and the fabric dispatched for high quality upholstery. The horsehair fabric was originally used by famous furniture designers such as Chippendale, Hepplewhite, Lutyens and Rennie Mackintosh.

Figure 3
In the background - the warp of the fabric is measured out on a large drum into bolt lengths. (Image Marek Lewcun)