

# CETG ARCHIVE

## Outing to Warner Textile Archive

**8th July 2016**

On Friday, 8th July at 9.15 sharp, 28 ladies (25 members and 3 guests) left Old Amersham bound for Braintree where the Warner Textile Archive is located. I had known about this particular place for many years but, like many of my friends, did not know what to expect. One member confessed that she thought she might see Warner Bros. cartoon characters on fabric! The journey was much quicker than expected and we arrived at 10.40 to a warm welcome and were ushered into the Gallery for tea, coffee and biscuits.

Charlotte, a volunteer with an archaeological background and a special interest in textiles, showed her exceptional knowledge of the history of the Warner Mill in an interesting, lively talk that held our attention for about 45 minutes. East Anglia was a natural place to have a weaving industry with the large number of sheep in the area. It generated a good deal of wealth and the wool merchants left a legacy of fine houses and mills. There was a mill on the site from around 1800 which relied on steam power as the river was too distant. It specialised in fine strong cloth suitable for military purposes so there was a constant demand!

The Warner family was of Huguenot extraction, based in Spitalfields, London. In the mid 1800s Benjamin Warner developed his father's jacquard engineering business into silk weaving, and through the merging of several family firms built up a highly successful business catering to many illustrious clients. By 1895 he had acquired the Mill in Braintree and moved the business out of London. Warner & Sons produced silk and velvet for all the English coronations from 1902, and the business flourished as other aristocratic customers followed the royal lead. Of course this changed with WW1 but they continued to make military uniform cloth and after the war moved to upholstery fabric, both printed and woven. In the 30's, they made the fabric for the Cunard liners; during WWII, parachutes and utility fabric. The company was known for encouraging new talented designers, producing both traditional and modern designs (e.g. space themed fabric for the moon landing in July 1969). By the 1950's, demand for fine woven silks was restricted to the church and the Royal family and some of their work was used on the Royal yacht, Britannia.

The company did embrace change but in 1990 had to sell out. It passed through several owners until, in 1971, it ceased trading and the name was bought by a German firm who still have a Warner range but they didn't want the archive. Fortunately in 2004, the Heritage Lottery Fund awarded a significant sum for the Archive to be preserved in part of the New Mills site where the original Warner & Sons Mill operated. Nowadays, the Archive holds an inspiring and unique collection of more than 60,000 textiles, 10,000 paper designs, pattern books, record books, photographs and documentary material.



After lunch, we were shown a selection of fabrics.....silks, velvets and brocades, jacquard cards and print blocks. We browsed the displays of patterns and information about the famous designers used by the company, then viewed some of the archive which is kept in special drawers, boxes and files in a large room with many movable stacks. We were able to look, not touch, various pieces including 2 wooden blocks used for printing part of a pattern. A different set of blocks is required for each colour so a good system of cataloguing is essential. Some fabric is specially commissioned (e.g. by the National Trust, a design called "floating magnolias" used at Sissinghurst) and velvet for coronation robes. Warners also made fabric for trains and bus seats!

Next was a visit to the shop and a wander round the gallery with more textile designs and a photographic record of the operational mill, giving an insight into the hardship endured to produce these rich fabrics.

We were served tea and delicious home-made cake before leaving at 3pm. The journey home was straightforward as for once the M25 traffic kept moving. From the buzz on the coach it was evident that the group had learnt a great deal and all agreed it had been an enjoyable, fact finding day, highlighted by some essential retail therapy.

We were not allowed to take photographs in the Archive for copyright reasons, but there are lots of lovely pictures on their [website](#) where it is also worth looking out for workshop days.

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