

A Journey along the Silk Road and a Visit to Hall Place

JOAN LIGGETT

On 21st June as we drove through torrential rain along the M20 towards Crayford. Would it be a repeat of our 1995 Arras drenching? Fortunately our luck changed as we reached the David Evans Craft Centre of Silk and in the dry we walked the few yards to the entrance.

The site of the silk-printing works beside the River Cray was chosen in 1829 to satisfy the need for large quantities of clean water. The old buildings now house a craft centre with museum exhibits telling the story of silk production in graphic detail, from the cocoon spinning by millions of silkworms to the unravelling of the strong, fine threads after a boiling water bath and the spinning and weaving of the natural fabric ready for its shipment to England.

A retired worker, now one of the guides, demonstrated the original processes of colour mixing and careful building up of the pattern on a length of silk with heavy, hand-held blocks carved from hand-drawn and printed designs. He could remember the time when the river was coloured by the various dyes as the silk was washed – a practice no longer permitted.

We had a brief taste of current conditions in the modern processing sheds where the heat and humidity, noise and smell were overwhelming. Printing of the computer-drawn designs is still controlled by hand before the screen is mechanically lowered to cover a square metre at a time. A keen eye and a steady hand are still necessary for touching up if the dye fails to take at pattern junctions. It is skilled work and buyers must be prepared to pay craft prices. Most of the production goes for scarf- and tie-making in the USA and Japan, where exacting customers will reject a whole order, worth thousands of pounds if there

is the slightest deviation from the stipulated colour or design.

After a visit to the factory shop – to buy inexpensive remnants rather than top quality garments! – we repaired to the little restaurant for a tasty made-to-order snack eaten during a deluge which pounded the glass roof over our heads.

The weather relented for our afternoon visit to Hall Place only a mile away. This attractive sixteenth century rubble masonry house with its seventeenth century red brick addition is a Grade I listed building standing in extensive grounds. It was originally owned by a succession of wealthy London merchants, but it is now the property of the London Borough of Bexley and houses Bexley Museum, Bexley Local Studies Centre and several exhibition galleries. What a wonderful place for employees and students to work in – a haven of peace and tranquillity set in 160 acres untouched by noise and pollution of the adjacent A2!

Some of the party explored the interior, viewed the current displays and admired the bridal party being photographed against a backcloth of the house. Others enjoyed the afternoon sunshine in the grounds, appreciating some of the 4000 roses, the colourful bedding plants, the herb garden with its Braille labels and the rock and heather gardens across the river. The apiary section with heraldic animals from the Royal Coat of Arms planted in 1953 for the Queen's coronation provided an interesting and unusual feature. A few of us even had time for a fleeting visit to the glasshouses and model gardens beyond.

Combining two such different visits made for a most satisfying and enjoyable excursion, even enhanced perhaps, by the absence of flaming June temperatures.