

Materials and Supplies for Textile Production

ReINVENT Workshop 1, Sir Alwyn Williams Building, University of Glasgow, 29th April 2013

The first of three workshops for the ReINVENT network was held on the 29th April at the University of Glasgow. With an excellent turnout of 24 delegates, the day kicked off with four presentations which dealt with different aspects of the theme of materials and supplies for textile production.

We were honoured to have a talk by Professor John Hume who outlined the developments and processes of bleaching and dyeing in Scotland from the eighteenth century up to the introduction and growth of synthetic dyes. He highlighted the importance of imports – raw materials needed for all stages of textile production – a theme which was to recur throughout the day.

Professor Hume was then followed by Richard Ashworth from the Society of Dyers and Colourists in Bradford, who took up where Professor Hume left off and went into detail about the development of synthetic alizarin and the impact this had on the madder trade in Britain and in Europe. Richard provided a great insight into the costs and losses involved in these developments for textile manufacturers – showing how the value of madder sharply dropped in just a few years after the introduction of alizarin.

The theme of alizarin and madder dyeing was continued with a presentation by Julie Wertz, a PhD student at the University of Glasgow. Julie's project involves recreating the Turkey red process and once again the problems associated with the importation of goods arose as she recounted her efforts to obtain the particular type of olive oil. Julie provided a fascinating insight into the trials and tribulations of these dyeing processes, particularly from a modern perspective which is hampered by many health and safety regulations that would not have had any bearing on nineteenth-century production.

Finally, Rebecca Quinton from Glasgow Museums took us a step back, giving an overview of the different fibres used in the textile manufacture in Scotland. Raising the interesting point that illustrative examples of nineteenth-century textile production tend to be from English mills and plants, she outlined the various processes required for preparing cotton, linen, silk and wool. These final two papers highlighted the labour intensive nature of all kinds of textile manufacture and how the materials used impacted this level of work required.

The afternoon was spent in break out group discussions. Some of the key points highlighted in the first discussion include:

- The need to be aware of textile manufacture beyond the central belt
- Importance of government impact on textile manufacture – how policies and initiatives can heavily influence the success or failure of an industry
- Scottish textile industry was led by the development of processes and technology and imported raw materials, rather than an abundant domestic supply of raw materials
- Related to the previous point – the importance of chemical innovation within Scotland. There was sufficient local supply of chemicals like benzene and aniline needed for the more complex processes and. These chemicals along with coal tar would have been exported and returned as imported synthetic dyes and other supplies for manufacturing materials
- Connections with business history – much can be learned about the businesses behind the industry, taking into account factors such as the location and addresses of the main offices of the various manufacturers
- Industrial secrets – as researchers how do we access this information and how do we handle potential disinformation?

- During times of European unrest when supply routes were disrupted , suppliers and manufacturers in Scotland and the UK took advantage of the opportunities to their benefit.
- Current projects on Turkey red are gathering momentum and connecting manufacturers, economics, design and production, providing good interdisciplinary models for other materials and products research.

The second group discussion was focussed more on the gaps in our understanding of the materials and supplies for textile production in Scotland. What would we like to know and what should be known about this aspect of textile production?

Rebecca Quinton started the discussion by suggesting we need a better understanding of the processes needed to get from the fabric to the finished product, specifically dressmaking in Glasgow and the surrounding area. With the establishment of sewing machine factories in nineteenth-century Glasgow there is room for developing our knowledge of the use of sewing machines, pattern and dress making – both in domestic and retail premises.

Dan Coughlan also raised the fact that certain areas could be extremely diverse in their textile production techniques and in their finished products – citing Paisley as a particular example – and that there must be other areas with similarly diverse and evolving industries.

With these themes as starting points the group discussions then highlighted the following issues:

- The need to remember or include utilitarian textiles in our discussions and possible future projects. Examples include sacking and bagging, canvas eg for sails, rope, tent, machinery belts and waterproofing of fabrics
- The furnishing fabric industry – Turkey red, carpets etc
- Greater awareness or understanding of the financial backing and already established infrastructure (such as shipping) which meant that the Scottish textile industry could take off

The workshop was a great start to the ReINVENT network and sparked many thoughts for the workshops to come.

Thank you to everyone who participated and put their two cents into the mix – particularly to our speakers, John Hume, Richard Ashworth, Julie Wertz and Rebecca Quinton.

Dr Sally Tuckett
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