



# The warp and weft of mill life

Tracy Spiers takes us on a journey along the A46, between Stroud and Nailsworth, and discovers the changing face of the valley's mills

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I remember going on a school visit to Lodgemore Mill and watching rows of women working the looms. The noise was deafening and it was very claustrophobic. I would have hated to work there."

My mum's memories come back as we walk past the very same mill building almost six decades after that initial trip as a young girl. Pull back the years further to Victorian times and history books tell us that woollen mills were dusty, dangerous places and the noise so terrific, some mill workers went deaf.

Yet whilst working conditions were long and arduous, employment itself was bountiful and the landscape of the Stroud valleys was a patchwork quilt of mill buildings, water wheels and chimneys. Historic experts from Stroudwater Textile Trust, a charity set up in 1999, to promote awareness of Stroud's woollen industry and celebrate contemporary textiles; believe at the peak of its textile prowess, the five valleys had 170 mills - originally fulling mills thumping the cloth to shrink into dense hard-wearing material.

Thanks to the continual water supply from the River Frome, Stroud and its surrounding villages and towns became a hub for the textile industry. Dyed cloth could be seen drying in fields.

Today the landscape of Stroud is very different. Whilst many original mill buildings stand as a monument to the past, they are alive with new sounds - the sounds of people keeping fit, dining out, bidding at auction, polishing motor cars, printing, welding, sawing or just living.

My task today is to take you on a journey along the A46, from Stroud to Nailsworth, revisiting some of the mills running along the River Frome and seeing what they are now used for. It takes me five hours to travel just three miles due to the enormity

of what I find. This is but a snapshot of the eclectic mix of industry and independent businesses that abide in these amazingly historic buildings.

Yet right at the start, I must pay tribute to the one mill that stands alone. Lodgemore Mills in Strachans is the only mill (along with its sister Cam Mills) out of the original 'string of pearls' (the collective name for the mills) to still be doing what it did all those years ago. It specialises in manufacturing high performance woollen cloth for billiard sports and tennis ball coverings. The names of founding mill owners Messrs Winterbotham, Strachan and Playne are recognised by the brand names. Today whilst the Stachan brand dominates the snooker and pool markets, the Playne's tennis ball cloth can be found on Dunlop, Wilson, Head, Babolat and Tretorn tennis balls and is used at many worldwide tournaments including Wimbledon, the Australian Open and Roland Garros. It means Stroud has continued to produce cloth for 800 years - which must be unique to Britain, if not the world.

"Cam Mills is where we produce the woollen yarn and where the raw wool is woven. Lodgemore Mills is our finishing plant, where we finish the cloth and carry out all the necessary tests to ensure the tennis balls for example, bounce and perform in the precise way they should, depending on the end use," explains Stuart Gardiner, Senior Account Manager.

He has been working here for 30 years and tells me that the last two years have been the best on record in terms of sales.

He gives me and Mum a tour of the mill, where streams of snooker cloth are being finished. The sound is relatively quiet. Gone are the days of shuttle looms, spinning mules and the incredible sound that comes with it.

The yellow, green and traditional Stroud Scarlet cloth is still alive and well, and I leave feeling quite proud that our local woollen heritage is a world-wide success.

Before I journey on to Lightpill Mill, I take a detour to the former Dudbridge Mills, which up until a few years ago was Redlers Factory. From the mid-18th century, it comprised of a corn, gig and dye house before being used for wool and cloth making; whilst nearby Kimmins Mill, in Sainsbury's car park was built in 1849 to mill flour.

Not far away, the former Lightpill Mill - a cloth mill from the 17th century (and later where the first plastic was made in Britain in 1914) - is now a small industrial estate that is buzzing with activity. One family-run company which has been based in the mill building for the past 27 years is Stroud Office Supplies, owned by Bob Cook. His two daughters and grandson work there and provide office furniture and stationery to offices and schools.

"I love being in the mill, it is very cold in the winter but it's a great place to work. So many local companies are based here and I am not sure what would have happened to the mill if we didn't use the space. I guess it would have gone to ruin," admits Bob.

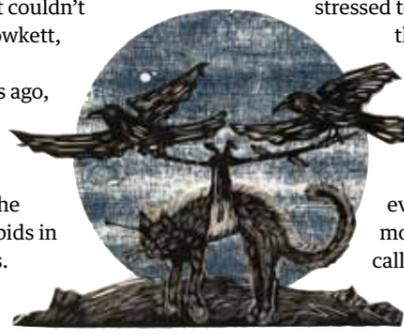
As well as florists, marquee and tent manufacturers, metal polishers, fine artists, engineering, labelling stamping service and an MOT centre; Bath Road Trading Estate is also home to Stroud Auction Rooms, which has featured on television. Established in 2004, it opened up a permanent base here three years ago and hosts regularly monthly two day auctions (January dates are January 14 and 15) and valuation days every Friday and on Saturday mornings where valuers with specialist niche expertise can advise customers.

Stroud Auction Rooms appeared on BBC 2's *Celebrity Antiques Road Trip* when Judith Chalmers took on her son, television presenter Mark Durden-Smith.

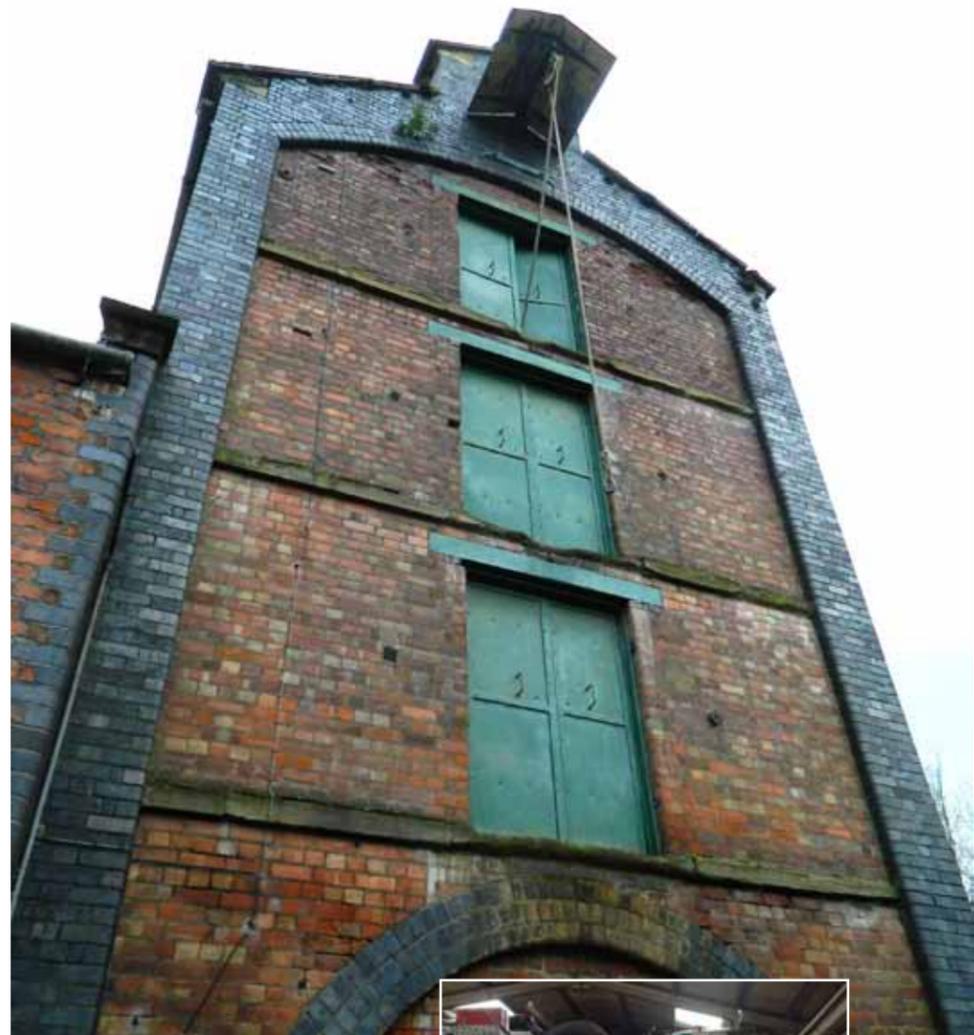
"We had just had our website updated and within five minutes of the programme going out, our entire commuters crashed as we had so many hits it couldn't take it," recalls Lyn Bowkett, one of the directors.

"Four and half years ago, we started holding on-line auctions and had 13,000 sales last month, which is the most on-line auction bids in the country," she adds.

I arrive as evaluations take place and staff get



'Mars Cat' by Jen Whiskerd, based at Frogmarsh Mill



Merrett's Mill

ready for their next big auction of silver, jewellery, coins, watches and clocks. Looking round, I notice one perfect for New Year - the most gigantic bottle of Champagne I have ever seen. I sadly leave it on the shelf for someone else's bid.

Another key event for New Year is the good old pantomime. Nearby Chinnick Theatre Services provides every kind of theatrical lighting and equipment for schools hosting Nativity plays and end of term shows as well as professional acting and musical productions such as the *Everyman*, currently showing *Sleeping Beauty*. Equipment, be it gaffer tape to a complete sound system, provided by Chinnick will be on stage somewhere. For

stressed teachers and thespians, the technical support which comes with the equipment, is at times much needed.

"It means that can call us whatever time even if it is at 2am in the morning. Generally we get called to assist with something that is not working. One school couldn't get their



Alex Clark, director of Maynard Engines Ltd, Merrett's Mill Industrial Estate

projection screen to come down and we ran out to help fix it before their production started," explains Gwyn Williams, administration manager.

Further along the A46 are Rooksmoor Mills - recorded as a cloth mill in 1729. Based in the adjoining Bently Shed, Ironworks manufacturers functional and ornamental ironwork. Nearby Woodchester Mill, originally a grain mill, major fulling mill and later a piano factory, is now occupied by two companies, both related to textiles. Upstairs award-winning and successful business Lewis & Wood, has recently closed its shop showroom to make room for a larger development studio where it creates stunning fabrics and wallpapers.

There's no excuse for the perfect look if one combines their service with that of Sofas and Stuff downstairs. Here in this inviting, calm, open plan showroom, there



ABOVE: Woodchester Mill

RIGHT: Pamela Miri, managing partner of Sofas and Stuff, Woodchester Mill

is no evidence of cold mill air here. Rather I just want to sink into the warmth of the comfortable chairs and sofas surrounding me.

"We love working in this environment, it is such a peaceful setting and the mill windows are fabulous letting in lots of light," says Pamela Miri, managing partner of Sofas and Stuff.

"I am amazed how far people travel to come here. We get customers travel up from Cornwall and all over the shires. We have also got two interior designers who can help advise them. At the weekend it is always really busy."

It lends itself perfectly to a show room, where by people can choose from a wide selection of British made sofas in the fabrics they want - including Harris tweed, Yorkshire Wool and a dizzying choice of hundreds of others. Many sofas have local connections in terms of name - the Amberley chair, Kentwell, Campden and Coates.

Keen to support the arts and creative talent in the Stroud valleys, for the past two years, Pamela has been hosting art exhibitions and enabling artists to take part in the annual Open Studios in May, and donated the first prize for Art Couture

**Here in this inviting, calm, open plan showroom, there is no evidence of cold mill air**

Painswick. Later this year she will host the launch of the SIT, Stroud international textiles festivals, the brainchild of Festival director Lizzi Walton. One of my favourite artists, Kerry Phippen will be amongst those exhibiting at the launch and exhibition in Sofas and Stuff.

Talking about Open Studios, one place which is always a popular venue for artists is Frogmarsh Mill. It provides a permanent studio space for artists such as portrait artist Lucy Milne, watercolour artist Richard Callingham; Barbara Webb, who does traditional black and white etchings, and Jen Whiskerd, artist, animator and printmaker. Businesses specialising in bikes, fitness and drinks are also here. The latter being Bottlegreen Holdings Ltd - famous for the Bottlegreen drinks range made originally from local elderflower.

Back in the mill building, upstairs I find Hayley Walters, a director of Get Casual



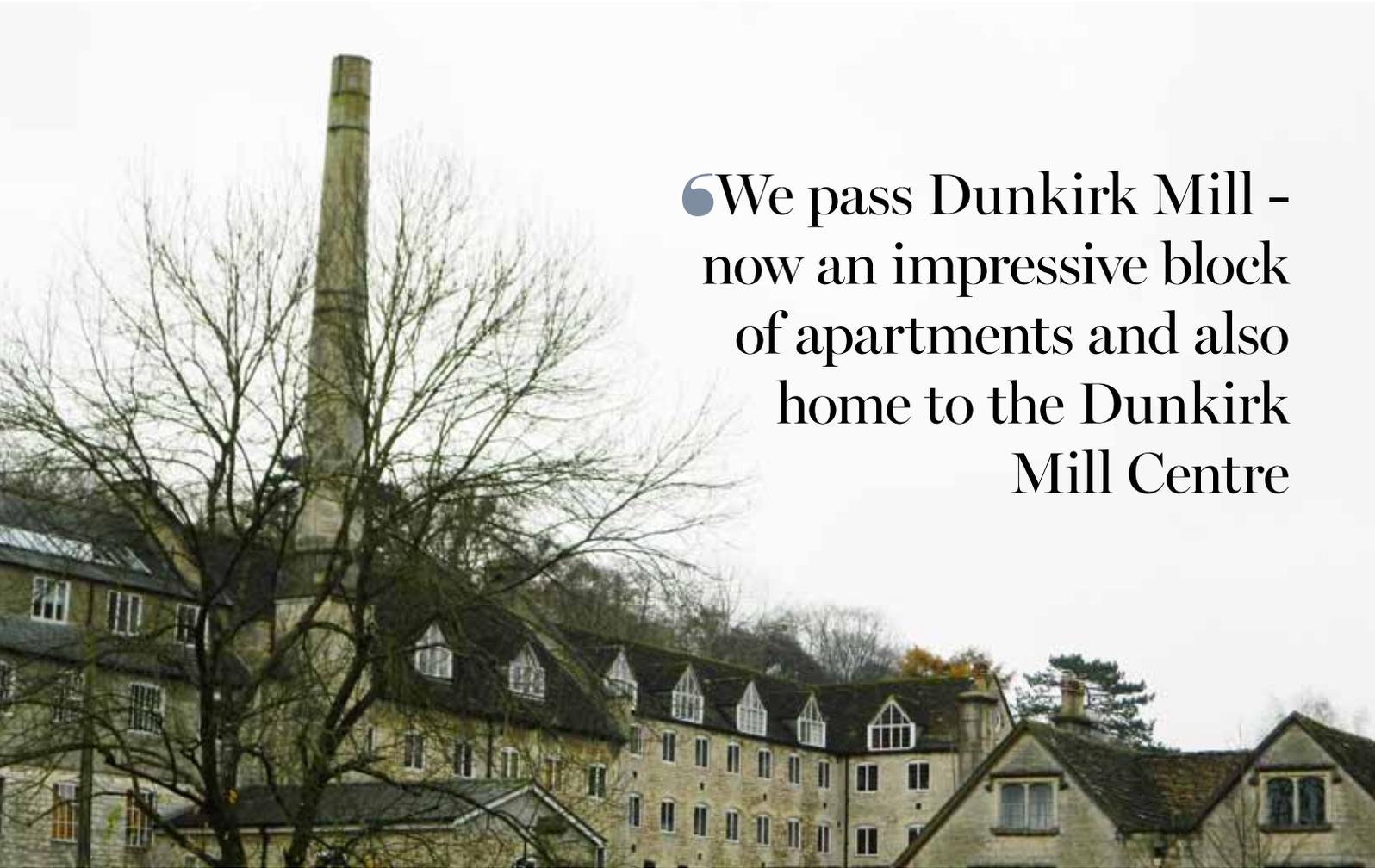
Screen Printing, a specialised print service that offers printing to a wide variety of businesses. Hayley shares the studio with husband Marcus Walters, a graphic designer and illustrator.

Today I find her in the studio teaching a one-day screen printing workshop whereby the public can print their own designs on to t-towels, t-shirts, bags or posters/art editions.

"We have been here about four years and we have been very impressed with the diversity of what is going on here. It is a lovely old building and so suitable for artists."

I too am impressed by the diversity. Within five hours I witness a whole host of industries operating in these former mill buildings.

The distinctive roundhouse at Frogmarsh is also a reminder of the past. Believed to have been used for storing



## “We pass Dunkirk Mill - now an impressive block of apartments and also home to the Dunkirk Mill Centre

### Dunkirk Mills

teasels, it was also used as a wool drying stove and is now a private dwelling.

Another mill, Merrett's Mill at Inchbrook continues to live on thanks to industrial diversification. Apparently eiderdowns were really stuffed with the down of eider duck chicks and the tower-like building was used to dry it and the recycled wool that was used to stuff mattresses.

The trading estate is an eclectic mix of small companies - many family-run. I meet Alex Clark, director of Maynard Engines Ltd who appreciates being part of a business community.

“It is like a micro-industry. We have everything here from sign makers, refrigeration companies, electricians, accountants and bread makers - really there is no need to go anywhere else. We get the waft of Halls Bakery coming over, especially when they are making sausage rolls,” admits Alex.

Talking food, I find Marc Birch, founder of Plenty pies, who has an amazing ability to design a pie in his head, make it and turn it into a winner. Recently his Breton chicken pie recipe beat more than 100 other chicken pies nationwide to scoop class champion prize at the prestigious British Pie Awards.

They are out-of-this-world pies and you won't find them in a supermarket - only in restaurants, garden centres and pubs who know when they have found something unique.



Jan and Tracy relaxing at Egypt Mill

“I have about 154 fillings in my head at one time and cook through a recipe in my mind and have an idea how it will taste,” explains Marc.

“We recently had to make 300 pies for Hatherley Manor Hotel. They wanted an old Gloucestershire filling known as a squab pie, so I researched and adapted a recipe of lamb, prunes and apple which was flavoured with spice and cinnamon. It was so successful that we are going to include it in our range,” he adds.

We unintentionally miss out Dyehouse Mill, now Renishaws - where the mill building survives and offices are built on the old millpond - but feeling hungry, we head for our last stop at Egypt Mill. We pass Dunkirk Mill - now an impressive block of apartments and also home to the Dunkirk Mill Centre, run by Stroudwater Textile Trust, which shows a massive working water wheel.

Nailsworth is apparently known as the waterwheel capital of the South West. There's a fine example of this at Egypt Mill, a popular hotel and restaurant - the perfect end to a thoroughly interesting journey. It may have only been three or four miles but it has been a trip back to the past whilst celebrating the entrepreneurial spirit of today. No longer do we hear the deafening sound of looms and shuttles, but a new and diverse sound. We may have lost so many of our fine mills, but the magnificent buildings we have preserved, have been given fresh life thanks to creative enterprise. ■

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