

# N E E D L E P R I N T M O R E B E A U T I F U L B O O K S

## SPOTLIGHT ON MUSEUMS

### THE BANKFIELD MUSEUM, HALIFAX, WEST YORKSHIRE

‘From Hell and Hull and Halifax, dear Lord deliver us’ is how the old folk song goes. But Halifax, once an important centre of England’s textile trade, is heaven to the lover of textile history and needlework in particular.

At the moment, I am lodging in what was once the largest manufactory of woolen carpets in the WORLD. Dean Clough Mills in Halifax was, and is still, one of the most impressive architectural heritage centres in the world. The mills here, constructed in 1867 along Renaissance Italian palazzo design, constitute an awe-inspiring testimony to the wealth produced by wool, water and graft of human hands. These mills owned by the Crossley dynasty were built to last until Kingdom Come. Famous for woolen carpets, they also produced the renowned Crossly mosaics – textile pictures drawn out of wool strands like Blackpool rock, the ends butted onto gummed card and sliced to produce velvet-like pictures which are now much sought-after.

Like all powerful dynasties, the Crossleys intermarried with other powerful textile families, including the Salts of Saltaire, whose founder Sir Titus Salt, made his fortune upon the ability to spin abandoned waste into the most craved-after commodity of the Victorian and Edwardian ages – Alpaca. A simple sampler stitched by a Crossley daughter survives in Salts museum to this day.

The Bankfield Museum in Halifax was once home to Edward Akroyd (1837-1886) a local mill owner, who like many of his northern peers built a mansion in the Tuscan style. Around his home he built the model village of Akroydon for his textile workers, which included sanitary housing, church, school and park. The entrance hall to the Bankfield Museum with its Italian Renaissance painted walls is reminiscent of the Villa Ephrussi Rothschild on Cap Ferrat in the South of France. Climb the stairs and you will find one of the best museums in England dedicated to textiles, needlework and the preservation of needlework skills outside of London.

There always seems to be a textile workshop in progress and the permanent exhibitions are textile led. In the panel room are samples of textiles of all ages from all parts of the world – from Coptic tapestries, Peruvian weaving to 17th century English raised work and 1950’s smocking. Upstairs in the costume gallery you can see early textiles, costumes and shoes from all continents of the world alongside Victorian clothes in period home settings.

Fabulous too, is the Edith Durham collection of costumes and textiles from the Balkans. Edith, born in 1863 spent her life until the age of 37 at home caring for an invalid mother. In 1900 exhausted, she sought help from her doctor who told her to ‘get right away no matter where so long as the change is complete.’ Edith obeyed and departed with a friend for Montenegro. She was to spend the next 14 years, until the outbreak of the First World War, in Albania, Bosnia, Herzegovina, Dalmatia and Montenegro, observing people and collecting their embroidered costumes with which she fell in love.

Along the museum walls are ten 19th century wool samplers. One by Rose Ann Akroyd worked when she was 6 in 1842. Her peers also worked mourning samplers and a Solomon’s Temple sampler. There are more samplers in the store, but you will need to make an appointment to see them.

While you are in Halifax do not forget to visit the unique Piece Hall built in 1779 (the same year that Ackworth School opened for teaching Quaker scholars.) Here weavers brought their pieces of woven cloth – the width of their loom and about 30 yards long and offered them for sale. There are three stories of shops built around a vast central cobbled square courtyard which today house a museum, small handicraft studios and tea shops. Look inside the Town Hall, built with textile wealth to a design by Charles Barry, architect of the Houses of Parliament and father of James Barry, the author of Peter Pan.