COURTAULDS IN ESSEX

Courtaulds was a United Kingdom-based manufacturer of fabric, clothing, artificial fibres, and chemicals. It was established in 1794 and became the world's leading man-made fibre production company before being broken up in 1990 into Courtaulds plc and Courtaulds Textiles Ltd.

The company was founded by George Courtauld and his cousin Peter Taylor (1790–1850) in 1794 as a silk, crape, and textile business at Pebmarsh in north Essex trading as George Courtauld & Co. Courtaulds Road in Basildon was named after him as the founder of the Silk Industry in Essex in the 18th Century. In 1810, his American-born son Samuel Courtauld was managing his own silk mill in Braintree, Essex.

On display in the museum are items including crape mourning outfits and items associated with the production of crape, the material that made the company famous. Other highlights of the gallery include a Courtauld Taylor and Courtauld loom and personal items of the family.

George Courtauld, (1761-1823) a gifted engineer, established in 1799, a silk throwing business in a waterpowered mill at Pebmarsh. Samuel Courtauld III, George's eldest son, took it upon himself to transform the family silk business into one of the greatest industrial stories of the 19th century.





In 1798 Pebmarsh mills which consisted of a water powered corn mill and a windmill was put up for sale [County Chronicle, London). The mill was acquired by a London silk firm, Witts & Co. The conversion to a water powered silk throwing mill was carried out by George Courtauld who also built a dwelling house into which he moved his family in 1801. By 1838 in addition to the water wheel a 5-horsepower steam engine was being used [Parliamentary returns]. The silk mill continued in use until 1883.

Courtauld's engagement with Witt's did

not stipulate any term of years and as he was unable to secure a more definite arrangement he was attracted by other offers. In 1806 Courtauld meet with Joseph Wilson who had a business as a silk manufacturer [ERO D/F 3/2/94]. In 1809 Wilson purchased Braintree water corn mill [Ipswich Journal]. George Courtauld demolished the old mill and erected a larger building together with a mill house, the river was deepened and a larger water wheel, of 10 hp, installed.

Silk throwing started in 1810 and weaving shortly after. The partnership between Wilson and George

Courtauld ended in 1818 and Courtauld left Braintree [Courtaulds an economic and social history, D. C. Coleman, 1969]. In 1816 George Courtauld's son Samuel, who had worked at the Braintree works, set up as a silk thrower on his own account with a horse mill in Panfield Lane,

Bocking. In 1836 the silk mill was working solely by waterpower employing 106 people, seventyseven of whom were under 18 [Parliamentary returns].



Bocking Windmill has been in Bocking Church street since 1721. It was moved two hundred yards up the hill to its present site in 1829 by John Tabor. The mill was worked until 1929 but after this it fell into disrepair until it was restored in 1962. The windmill is a listed monument consisting of five floors and is open to the public for visits.

In the summer of 1817 Samuel persuaded his cousin Peter Alfred Taylor to join him in the silk business. After an unsuccessful search for a suitable water mill, they purchased a piece of land in Braintree on which to build a horse powered mill. The search for waterpower was kept up and they were able to secure a lease on a fulling mill in Church Street, Bocking, with an option to purchase from Joseph Savill [ERO D/DQc 1]. This was converted to silk throwing. Around 1825 a small steam engine was installed in the Bocking mill, the need for this had been brought about by a hard winter of 1822-3 when ice and frost was followed by severe floods.

In 1825 Stephen Beuzeville, a Spitalfields silk manufacturer, purchased Town Mill, Halstead.



The Townford Mill and the Old Lodge (Courtauld Silk Mill) in Halstead, Essex

Samuel Courtauld was to convert the corn mill to silk throwing and take a share of the profits. Beuzeville went bankrupt two years later and Courtauld was able to buy him out. By 1826 softsilk winding machinery had been installed. As at Bocking Courtauld installed a larger water wheel, this however brought litigation from the owners of Box mill which lay upstream [ERO D/F 3/2/97].

The owners of Box mill had long complained that the owners of Town mill by raising the water level.

backwatered their water wheel. Courtauld's by raising their banks by eighteen inches for the new

wheel made matters worse. After a lengthy hearing at the Essex Assizes, in 1827, a jury found the

owners of Town mill had no right to pen up more than eight inches on the apron at Box mill.

As a result, Courtauld was forced to install steam engine, in 1828, to supplement the power from the

waterwheel. Although Samuel Courtauld founded his business on waterpower it was the introduction of steam power which allowed him to expand it. At Bocking, the 8 hp of water and 4 hp of steam used in 1826 had become some 40 hp of steam by 1850. At Halstead there was 8 hp of water and 6 hp of steam in 1828, and by 1850 45 hp of steam was driving the power-loom factory. Braintree mills however remained water powered during this period [ERO D/F 3/2/30; 43-90: D/F 3/1/88-89].

In 1814 George Courtauld was granted a patent for an improved spindle for the manufacture of silk. When John Hall came to Coggeshall to set up a branch of his ribbon-making business he went to Samuel Courtauld to get ideas for the interior design of Abbey mill, on which he had acquired a twenty-year lease [ERO D/DBw T19].

Abbey mill was converted to silk throwing in 1820, and in 1838 was working with an 8 hp water wheel and a 10 hp steam engine [Parliamentary Returns]. In 1838 Hall, built a new steam powered silk manufactory in West St, Coggeshall, the lease on Abbey Mill was not renewed. During the following year it was converted to a flour mill.



Abbey Mill Coggeshall. While the first mill on the site was built for the Cistercian Abbey in the 12th century, the building is the latest to have been built there and was designed as a factory for the woollen-cloth industry in about 1760. From 1840, however, it has operated as a corn mill.

Hatfield Peverel mill was briefly used for silk Throwing. A five storied building three floors of which were set up for the throwing of organzine (a silk thread made of strands twisted together in the contrary direction to that of each individual strand) and tram (Tram silk is reeled, not spun, and has very little twist, so it is the most lustrous silk you can get and is wonderful as weft). sometime after 1815 by South Morse [Chelmsford Chronicle, 1815]. The venture was a failure and the mill put up for sale in 1828, by 1832 it had been converted back to a corn mill [The Times, 1828; Chelmsford Chronicle, 1832].



Morse like all the other Essex silk throwers relied on the cheap services of children and young girls. The sale particulars of 1828, for Hatfield Mill, state that the lodging house contained six bedrooms with accommodation for 40 – 50 children.

In 1825 fifty girls absconded form Morse's mill. When brought before the magistrates one girl explained that she worked six days a week, 6 am to 7 pm for which she received 3/6d in the first year and 4/- in the second, paying 1/- for lodging and 2/6d for food and had little to eat but bread. The magistrates however showed little sympathy or compassion and sentenced her to seven days' hard labour. John Hall, when setting up in Coggeshall, found local families unwilling to supply him with labour and had to import thirty-five girls, aged from 11 to 16 to work as winders. The girls were lodged in a hostel under the supervision of a domestic superintendent. Courtaulds in the nineteenth century became the largest industrial employer in Essex, employing, in the early years, women and children who in the early 1830's worked double shifts of 12 hours by day 101w by night [ERO D/F 3: Parliamentary Papers].

In 1825 Courtauld installed a steam engine at the Bocking mill, and then installed power looms at Halstead. His mills, however, remained heavily dependent on young female workers – in 1838, over 92% of his workforce was female.

It was in 1825 when Samuel's brothers George and John Minton joined the firm that the family decided to start making crape (crimped silk gauze), the textile which would make the company famous. As the fashion for mourning spread throughout the growing middle-classes, encouraged by Queen Victoria after the death of Albert, this resulted in the enormous success of the firm that became known by the mid-19th century as Samuel Courtauld & Co. In the early 20th-century, the company pioneered the production of artificial silk, later to be known as rayon, which revolutionised fashion and 'wash day' in the homes of millions.

By 1850, Courtauld employed over 2,000 people in his three silk mills, and he had recruited partners including (in 1828) his brother, George Courtauld II (1802–1861) and (in 1849) fellow Unitarian social reformer Peter Alfred Taylor (1819-1891 – son of Peter Taylor who died the following year). By this time, Courtauld was a wealthy man but was also deaf. He had planned to spend more time on his country estate Gosfield Hall near Halstead, but continued to play an active role in the company until just before he died in March 1881.

Textiles.

The wool trade flourished in Essex and Suffolk for several centuries, but gradually declined during the eighteenth and into the early nineteenth centuries. As it disappeared the silk industry expanded and replaced it.

Textile mills existed at Pebmarsh, Halstead, Bocking, Earls Colne, Coggeshall, Glemsford, Sudbury and Castle Hedingham. The principal manufacturer was Courtaulds whose main product during the second half of the nineteenth century was mourning crepe, ("Crape was a matte silk gauze that had been crimped with heated rollers; dyed black; and stiffened with gum, starch, or glue,") which was followed by diversifying into artificial fibres. Their first mill at Pebmarsh operated from 1799 to 1809 and was later occupied by E.L. & H. Roddick, silk throwsters until 1883. The mill was demolished in 1893 although the adjacent Mill House is still occupied. The Townford Mill at Halstead was built in 1788 for grinding corn. In 1825 it was converted by Courtaulds for silk production. They constructed several more buildings in the vicinity and eventually employed about 1400 in Halstead alone. The factory closed in 1983 following which some buildings were demolished but the original mill survives and is now an antiques centre. Apart from Courtaulds there were other silk manufacturers in Halstead during the early nineteenth century namely John Davies in the High Street and Jones and Foyster in Parsonage Street.

At Earls Colne, Courtaulds constructed a purpose-built mill in 1884 for mourning crepe, which they later used for weaving artificial silk, until closure in 1925. It was later used by R. Hunt & Co. Limited for a store and remains in light industrial use and is in a Conservation Area. In Coggeshall, John Hall & Son were silk throwsters at West Street, Abbey Mill and Gravel Mill. Lace-making was also carried on at Coggeshall and in the nearby villages of Chappel, Marks Tey and Great Tey.

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries there were silk throwsters in Sudbury and Glemsford employing many people. In 1840 there were no less than four silk weaving factories in Sudbury employing about five hundred people, which increased to over 850 by 1851. During

the latter half of the nineteenth and into the twentieth centuries, new businesses continued to be attracted to Sudbury. The Gainsborough Silk Weaving Co. Limited was established in 1903 and in 1925 opened a newly built factory in Chilton. During the 1920s, Anderson & Robertson Limited were silk throwsters in Glemsford. Other well-known silk manufacturers were Daniel Walters & Sons in North Street (also at Braintree), Stephen Walters & Sons in Acton Square and Vanners at Glemsford. In 1971 Richard Humphries re-assembled some old hand looms in Sudbury and in 1975 moved them to a former school at Castle Hedingham. The Humphries Weaving Company operated the De Vere Mill for some years and was one of the last handloom silk weavers in the country. He also operated in the Courtauld's Mill at the Causeway, Halstead 1961 27 Halstead Cottage Hospital built by George Courtauld in 1884 Homes of Rest at Earls Colne built by Reuben Hunt Bocking Village Hall, built by Samuel Augustine Courtauld restored Warner Mills in Braintree before returning to Sudbury Silk Mills in 2004 where production continues.

His great-nephew Samuel Courtauld (1876–1947) became chairman of the Courtauld company in 1921 but is chiefly remembered today as the founder of the Courtauld Institute of Art in London. William Julien Courtauld was also a benefactor of the arts: he gave artworks to the Essex County Council chamber at Chelmsford and the town hall at Braintree in the 1930s.

Industrial Housing

Some of the industrialists referred to in this and the two previous articles, built houses for their employees. The most outstanding architecturally were built by Samuel Courtauld & Co., and by various members of the Courtauld family at Halstead, Gosfield, Bocking, Braintree, Blackmore End, High Garrett, Penny Pot, Colne Engaine, Wakes Colne and one farmhouse at Sible Hedingham. These were built in several styles from the 1850s to the 1950s. Some of the earliest cottages were built by Samuel Courtauld in Gosfield and High Garrett. He also built Gosfield Primary School in 1858 and the Reading Room. The five pairs of cottages in Church Street, Bocking and the sixteen three-storey dwellings in Factory Terrace, Halstead were designed by John Birch, an architect, who specialised in country cottages and built in 1872. They were followed in 1883 by a row of twelve two storey houses in the Causeway, Halstead designed in Queen Anne style by George Sherrin.

He was also the architect for the Workmen's Hall in Bocking and Halstead Cottage Hospital built by George Courtauld in 1884. During the 1920s and 1930s over fifty houses were built by Samuel Augustine Courtauld in Halstead, with more in Blackmore End. They were designed in the Arts and Crafts style by Coldwell, Coldwell and Courtauld, architects, who also prepared plans for houses built by other members of the family. Alms-houses for retired employees such as twenty Courtauld Homes of Rest, Hedingham Road, Halstead, were built by Samuel Augustine Courtauld in 1923. He also built the Village Halls at Bocking and Blackmore End and Katherine Mina Courtauld built the Village Hall at Colne Engaine.



In Earls Colne, Reuben Hunt of R. Hunt & Co., agricultural engineers built a considerable number of houses for employees between 1872 and 1911, including alms houses for retired workers. These are found in Halstead Road, Hayhouse Road, Foundry Lane, Burrows Road, and York Road. He also built houses in Brook Road and other locations in Great Tey from 1895 to 1910. The Hunt family, like the Courtauld family, also erected several community buildings.

At Marks Tey, W. H. Collier Limited, brick-makers, built four houses and a bungalow in Church Lane for employees. Similarly, in Sible Hedingham, Mark Gentry, another brickmaker, built twelve houses in Wethersfield Road for his employees during 1886 and 1887. In 1890 he built four houses in Nunnery Street, Castle Hedingham. All these houses contain some fine ornamental brickwork.

During the inter-war period, Rippers Limited, joinery manufacturers built fourteen wooden bungalows in 1920-21, which were demolished in the 1970s, followed by ninety-four semidetached houses between 1924 and 1928, located in Swan Street, Brook Terrace, Crosspath, Station Road and Yeldham Road. Examples of dwellings associated with public utilities are a house in Colneford Hill, White Colne built in 1864 for the manager of the former Earls Colne Gas Light and Coke Company and two pairs of houses by the former Halstead Rural District Council at the Drawwell, Great Yeldham for employees of the water pumping station.

The silk industry brought enormous wealth to the Courtauld family, and they used this to endow buildings, schools, parks and gardens throughout Braintree and the Essex district during the 19th – 20th century. This included Manor Street School, in which the museum is housed, William Julien Courtauld Hospital and Braintree Town Hall. The crape trade was crucial to Braintree's development and prosperity in the 19th century.

Expansion

Wishing to reduce their dependence on natural silk, in 1904 Courtaulds acquired the Cross and Bevan's patents to the viscose process for manufacturing artificial silk or rayon from dissolving pulp. They set up the first factory to produce it in Coventry UK in 1905. The early yarns were first woven into fabrics at the Halstead Mill in Essex in March 1906, but the process remained troublesome until further inventions improved yarn strength.

However, in a few years the process became highly successful and was responsible for transforming the silk weaver into the world's leading man-made fibre production company. In the inter-war era, Courtaulds, along with its domestic rival, British Celanese, both benefitted from tariff protection extended to the rayon industry by the Finance Act of 1925.

Courtaulds also entered the market of cellulosics (viscose and acetate) in North America with the setting up of the American Viscose Corporation (AVC) in 1909. The investment in the US was successful, but its sale at a knock-down price was enforced in 1941 as part of the negotiations which preceded Lend-Lease. Courtaulds was Canada's only rayon manufacturer in the 1980s, and was criticized for polluting Cornwall, Ontario. By 1989 the company was dumping "an average of 12 million litres of water a day, loaded with acids, zinc, murky solid materials and other contaminants.... Tests in 1986 showed the company's waste killed healthy trout within five minutes."

In 1927–28 Courtaulds and Vereinigte Glanzstoff-Fabriken (VGF) gained control of the Italian rayon manufacturer SNIA Viscosa from Riccardo Gualino. A German director of VGF, Karl Scherer, replaced Gualino as head of the firm and cut output drastically. The foreign intervention was seen as humiliating by the fascists. In Europe Courtaulds expanded its cellulosics business both directly and in joint ventures, including British Cellophane.

During the second World War the Courtaulds factory in Braintree made Parachutes for the Armed Forces but perhaps where it started was with Everard Richard Calthrop (1857-1927) who took an interest in developing and patenting in 1913 some early designs. He lived in Loughton.

In 1945 Courtaulds remained one of the four groups which dominated the man-made fibre industry in Europe (counting the German VGF and the Dutch AKU as one group and including the CTA—later merged into Rhone Poulenc in France, and Snia Viscose in Italy). Courtaulds' activities in continental Europe consisted in a wholly owned, one-factory viscose fibre business employing some 3,000 people in France, a 50% share in a similar business in Germany (of

which the other 50% was owned by VGF, the major competitor), and a minority shareholding which controlled 20% of the voting capital in the Italian firm Snia Viscosa, also primarily a viscose fibre producer. This activity expanded until the 1960s, when these products were replaced by newer developments.

Post World War II.

Courtaulds was one of the earliest companies in the UK to establish an economics department. In the three decades following World War II that department made notable contributions to the understanding of investment appraisal and the formulation of British, and later European, trade policy. The function also played a significant role in the development of Courtaulds from a sedate, man-made fibres producer to the world's largest textile manufacturer, a position the company attained in the mid-1970s. The economics department then influenced the initial stages of the subsequent extensive restructuring of the company, a process that culminated in the demerging of its textile activities as a separately quoted company in March 1990.

Break-up

By the late 1980s, the manufacture of clothing was quickly moving to Southeast Asia and China. Courtaulds had closed many of its UK factories and moved production to new Asian sites. Further, its main profit was coming from its fibre and chemicals businesses, which were being held back by the textiles business.

In 1990, Courtaulds plc demerged itself into two parts:

Courtaulds plc – The fibre manufacture and chemicals businesses.

Courtaulds Textiles Ltd – The yarn and fabric manufacture and clothing businesses.

Courtaulds plc

In 1990, the company began pilot production of Tencel, a brand of lyocell rayon. The production of lyocell does not use carbon disulfide but is more expensive than viscose rayon.

In January In 1991, the company closed a viscose plant in Calais, France, allowing its other plants to boost output to 93% capacity, compared with an industry average of 75%. The share price doubled in the first three years following the demerger. CEO Sipko Huismans had focused the company on rationalisation and cost cutting, saying "We have to cut costs. We can't count on sales growth to pay us more or to allow us to buy more of our favorite things."

In 1993 the company employed 23,000 and had £2 billion in annual revenue, with 30% of revenue from the United States, 40% from Europe and 15% from Asia-Pacific.

Seeking to expand its business, specifically in Asia-Pacific, Courtaulds plc delivered part of its development in joint ventures, particularly with Akzo Nobel. It sought to merge with Akzo-Nobel, which the EU approved subject to the sale of Courtauld's aerospace business. In 1998 it merged with competitor Akzo Nobel. The name "Courtaulds" disappeared.

Courtaulds Aerospace

In October 2000, PPG Industries announced it had agreed to buy Courtaulds Aerospace for \$US512.5 million. Based in Glendale, California, US the aerospace business has annual sales of approximately \$US240 million, employs 1,200 people. In the US it manufactures sealants in Glendale, California, US and Shildon, England; coatings and sealants in Mojave, California, US; glazing sealants at Gloucester City, New Jersey, US; and coatings at Gonfreville, France. The business also operates fourteen application-support centres in North America, Europe, Africa, Asia, and Australia.

In the early 2000s, many jobs and factories were eliminated, especially in the UK, where manufacturing costs were higher. Marks and Spencer were squeezing its suppliers for lower costs. In 2007, 40% of Courtauld's turnover was from sales to Marks & Spencer (though sales had declined rapidly, as of 2006).

In 2007, Courtaulds Textiles employed around 20,000 people across sixteen countries in Europe, North America, and Asia. It had moved most of its manufacturing jobs offshore, most of which was divested in joint ventures for flexibility. One of these joint ventures was Slimline (Pvt) Ltd, Sri Lanka's largest apparel manufacturer, employing 1450 people and with a turnover of twenty-five million British pounds, and Courtaulds Clothing Lanka, which employed seven hundred people to make men's underwear. The whole company had an annual turnover exceeding £1billion.

Compiled by Norman Bambridge Basildon Borough Heritage Society July 2024.