

Fruits of the loom

Tracy Spiers finds Stroud's creative heart and revisits her family's past at the historic Museum in the Park

THE toned-down sounds of turning water wheels and looms fill my ears. I am immediately transported back into the 18th century when my small home town of Stroud, hub of the cloth-producing valleys was a capital of the clothing villages for its high quality, richly dyed broadcloth. I say toned down, because in reality the noise would have been deafening, but nevertheless it highlights the rich textile heritage this Gloucestershire town had and still does thanks to the highly successful award-winning International Textile Festival, held each May.

So where am I you may ask? I'm in one of the upstairs rooms of the Museum in the Park, a Grade II 17th-century wool merchant's mansion, set in the 75-year-old beautiful grounds of Stratford Park. It may hold the keys to Stroud's story, but it also links me to my own personal heritage. This used to my grandparent's bedroom. My mother used to keep silk worms as pets on the window ledge next door. She grew up in this house as her dad was superintendent of the park grounds so to be able to come back at any time is precious. This month the museum celebrates its 10th anniversary with a prestigious international touring exhibition, Plain, Stripe, Check, which showcases contemporary hand-woven textiles by renowned weavers Tim Parry-Williams (UK) and Ikuko Ida (Japan). It also includes a rare chance to see some previously unseen Stroud cloth from the Museum's collections. It represents the results of historical research across both British and Japanese sources and emphasises the key character values of "timelessness, visual strength, understatement and simplicity." And may be these words apply to Stroud itself. There



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is an element of timelessness here. Although many of the original 150 mills are now sadly redundant from their former work, their wonderful silhouettes still dominate the skyline. Known collectively as the "string of pearls," these buildings of tremendous character and style, once famous for cloth of "beautifullest scarlet and other grand colours that are anywhere in England," now house other fascinating industries. Snow Business in the former Ebley Corn Mill is a multi-million pound industry making more than 160 types of artificial snowflakes for all major British and American blockbusters; Lodgemore Mill and its sister Cam Mill, near Dursley

produce Wimbledon's tennis ball coverings and snooker table cloth for international championships and one of Stroud's younger mills, 17th century Egypt Mill in Nailsworth, now a popular restaurant and hotel, was so named because its owner was such a hard taskmaster, his workers called him Pharaoh! The timelessness is also evident in the unspoilt countryside. One only needs to take a walk across one of the plethora of commons be it Rodborough, Minchinhampton, Selsley or Coaley Peak to get lost in panoramic views and stunning scenery. And another value mentioned in this month's exhibition – visual strength – is also significant. If there's one thing Stroud people are good at is campaigning if something is threatened. Community spirit is strong and they're not afraid to be different. The town, which has its very own currency, the Stroud Pound and boasts Fair Trade status, has in recent weeks been voted one of the three greatest towns in the UK and Ireland, alongside Hebden Bridge, Yorkshire and Westport, Ireland. The Academy of Urbanism nomination described Stroud as 'one of the more authentically gritty and industrial of the Cotswold towns'. ▶



The Shambles.



Stratford Park.



Town Mayor Andy Read says it's a fitting tribute.

"Whilst it's surrounded by some of England's most scenic countryside, people don't necessarily come to Stroud for chocolate box perfection. It's a Great Town because of the fantastic sense of community that pervades every corner. I don't think there's a better place in Britain to work, rest and play."

This month sees the opening of a new road bridge at Wallbridge as part of a multi-million pound construction project to re-open the Stroudwater Navigation and Thames & Severn Canals. The site was originally the location for Stroud Brewery and traffic crossed the canal over Wallbridge, which is still in place today. While life is being breathed back into the canal, in recent years the multi-award winning Farmer's Market in Cornhill has helped revived the town centre. Walk through the town on a Saturday morning and there's a tangible buzz as people come out in their droves to stock up on local herbs, spices, organic cheeses, honey, olives, fruit juices, fresh meats, breads and other delicious products.

But Stroud's unique quirkiness isn't confined to Saturdays. Three times every week local traders continue the town's 400-year market tradition under the gaze of the Old Town Hall which dates from the late 1500s. In the midst of The Shambles Market is a butcher's block on which John Wesley the founder of the Methodist Church preached on 26th June 1742. It is now one of the town's many listed buildings.

All year round Stroud has an infectious festival fever running through its veins. Four different events take place in September alone. Stroud's Fringe Festival delights both locals and visitors with events both indoors and out.

Dancing and music in the streets – everything from African drumming to flamenco dancers, clog dancers, Morris men and classical events. The town's Food and Drink Festival combines with Stroud Walking Festival for a two-week celebration showcasing local outstanding food and drink businesses and fantastic countryside.

It's a chance to celebrate the tremendous range of independent cafes, restaurants, markets, pubs, shops and local producers. But the Open Eco Homes Festival, an initiative by Transition Stroud, a network for local people and groups working on the transition to a locally based low carbon lifestyle. New for this coming summer is the first Edible Gardens Festival, which sounds intriguing. In recent years The Stroud Arts Festival, the first major event to put the town on the visitor map, still hosts a wide selection of cultural activities. In May the highly popular Stroud

International Textile Festival, awarded the prestigious Gold Award for Tourism in the Cotswolds for small events last year, attracts and profiles artists of international quality, while creating a platform for emerging new talent. And the annual Site Festival and Open Studios in June celebrates the diversity of the visual arts. It mirrors the Arts and Crafts tradition inherited from William Morris and his friends who spent a considerable time in Stroud.

This creativity lives on and the five valleys prove a real haven for sculptors, writers, painters, print-makers, masons, stained-glass ▶



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CHALFORD AND MORRIS

Four miles east of Stroud, the small village of Chalford built in terraces on the steep northern slope of the Frome Valley is sometimes referred to as the Alpine Village. Paths on the hillside were too narrow for more conventional forms of transport so donkeys were used to carry groceries a hundred years ago – a tradition which has been revived within the past two years. Chalford expanded rapidly with the construction of the Thames & Severn Canal in 1789 and the village became a centre for manufacturing broadcloth.

Its wealthy clothiers lived close to their mills and built many fine houses which survive to this day. In the late 19th century, the Arts and Crafts Movement, inspired by William Morris and John Ruskin, set out to restore functional honesty to the design of everyday household furniture and equipment. Chalford has long been a stronghold of the movement and is noted for two fine Arts and Crafts movement churches. Christ Church contains work by Norman Jewson, William Simmonds, Peter Waals, Edward Barnsley, Norman Bucknell and other notable artists and craftsmen working in the Cotswold tradition. The Church of Our Lady of the Angels in Brownhill boasts outstanding stained glass by Douglas Strachan. In 1919, Dutch craftsman Peter Waals, nicknamed "Duchy" by the locals, set up a workshop in Chalford which survived until 1937. Here he made simple yet beautiful furniture and fittings for numerous buildings including the newly restored Little Chapel in Rodborough.

An apprenticeship with Waals apparently lasted from five to six years and jobs included cutting inlaid strips of ebony and holly on a trestle saw and panel making.

The legacy left by the craftsmen of Morris' day remains today. Many artists and craftsmen continue to work with natural materials and use traditional skills. Chalford Place, dating back to the 14th-century and one of the earlier valley mill owner's houses, is now owned by artist Damien Hirst.



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artists and other craftspeople. Political poet and publisher, Michael Horowitz; the late Slad poet Laurie Lee; authors Jilly Cooper, Katie Fforde, Sue Limb and Jamila Gavin; artist Damien Hirst, creator of Minnie the Minx, Leo Baxendale; sculptor Lynn Chadwick and the late Rev. W. V Awdry, creator of Thomas the Tank Engine, are just a few of the wealth of artistic people who have connections with this area. Journalist and Guardian Food Editor Matthew Fort, who lives in Stroud, couldn't help commenting on the town's artistic prowess.

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For two thirds of its life, the five valleys of Stroud have buzzed with the sounds of industry. Inside the string of pearls, as well as weaving cloth, craftsmen and women have also been instrumental in producing walking sticks, buttons, pianos, motor cars, knitting needles, fountain pens, newspapers, ships and cabinets. Back in the upstairs room in the Museum in the Park, I'm surrounded by evidence of such productivity. Apparently the word Stroud

means “strutting.” In many ways the town has remained coy and shy of its achievements yet it has everything going for it. Creatively, artistically, environmentally and culturally advanced, this town needs to be proud of what it has and learn to unashamedly “strut its stuff.” ■

Stroud's Museum in the Park re-opens to the public on the January 1, and there is a New Year's Day walk in Stratford Park at 2pm that day. The museum will also be open on the Bank Holiday, January 3. Plain, Stripe, Check runs from January 8–February 20 (open Tuesday to Friday 10am–4pm; Saturday and Sunday 11am–4pm) Visit the museum's website to find out details of events connected to this prestigious exhibition: www.museuminthepark.org.uk

Other dates to note for 2011:

- Stroud festival fortnight will take place from September 2-18, www.stroudfestivalfortnight.com
- Stroud International Textile Festival will be April 30-May 21, www.stroudinternationaltextiles.org.uk
- The Edible Open Gardens Festival takes place on July 9-10.

Stroud Subscription Rooms.



All about Stroud...

Where is it? Below the western escarpment of the Cotswold Hills, at the meeting point of the Five Valleys.

Where can I park? There's a multi-storey car park at Merrywalks Shopping Station, a smaller car park at Rowcroft nearby, the train station has pay and display spaces, as do Cheapside, Church Street and Parliament Street.

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