

Shoddy and Mungo - Recycling wool over two hundred years ago

During July, a student I mentored some years ago, YooA, asked me, along with the local MP, to open an outdoor exhibition of functional Textile Art in Heckmondwike, in West Yorkshire.

The MP was Tracy Brabin, who took over the seat after the murder of Jo Cox. Many people will remember Tracy as an actress in Coronation Street, plus other television dramas. Tracy was brought up in the area and attended the local grammar school, just up the road from the exhibition. She went on to study drama at Loughborough University and also gained a Master's Degree in Screenwriting. She gave a very passionate speech about how we must fight to preserve the teaching of 'Arts' subjects in schools and colleges and was also very complimentary about the way YooA has developed her businesses in the small town.

YooA Kang

I have known YooA since she was a mature student at the University of Huddersfield. From my own experience, there are advantages and disadvantages being a mature student; very often it is not easy. I realised at our first meeting, that, she was hungry to learn. She had a different focus towards her work, than younger students, as I had.

My wife and I soon got to know her, and I suppose we started helping and mentoring her. She borrowed a loom and some equipment from me; whether that was a good idea or not, I am not sure, as she would sit on her garage floor, weaving into the early hours of the morning, in the middle of winter. She was certainly dedicated, tenacious and ambitious to do well.

For her Final Degree show, she concentrated on promoting and using British Wool. She was passionate about this product, when life could possibly have been easier, without this focus on using a home product. After all, British Wool Headquarters are based in Bradford just down the road. She has, since leaving university, kept up this passion.

YooA is a very special lady, opening Studio YooA and Cafe Han; she is providing a service, experience of her talents and of a different culture. She was born and brought

up in South Korea and moved to Britain with her husband, speaking very little English. She is a visual artist, designer of fashion and textiles, writer and poet, business person, mother and a British Citizen. If anyone has ever looked at the British Citizenship test you will realise how tough it is. How many of you know what the last battle was between Britain and France?

My wife and I are very pleased to know YooA, but, most of all I was very honoured and privileged to be asked to say a few words regarding her work which was on display in the small park in the centre of Heckmondwike.

Shoddy and Mungo

Many of the older generation, especially local to this part of West Yorkshire, will be familiar with these terms and products.

However, shoddy is very widely known in the English language, as a term for poor quality, goods and services. More unusual, is the term Mungo. However, going back 40 odd years, it was the name of a rock/pop recording group called Mungo Jerry. One of their best known records was, "In the Summertime", very appropriate for the opening of the exhibition. You can see it on YouTube. Today, however, we are talking about Mungo as a textile. The word Mungo is said to have originated from the Yorkshire saying 'Munt go'. Must go. Even today in this area of Yorkshire, must is pronounced munt.

We talk very much today about recycling, conservation, the circular economy, sustainability and regeneration; that was the idea of Shoddy and Mungo just over two hundred years ago.

It is believed that

By Bill Skidmore

As my old boss used to say, 'There is nothing new, Mister'. What goes around comes around.

YooA and Tracy Brabin, MP with Bill



the process of taking old used woollen rags and off cuts from tailors and grinding them up into fibre was developed by Benjamin Law around 1813. The main areas were Dewsbury, Batley, Morley and Ossett.

It started with the 'rag man', later to be known as rag and bone man, going up and down the streets of terraced houses, with his horse and cart, shouting to let residents know of his presence and asking them to bring out any old clothes, blankets etc. for which they would get a few pence. You may have heard of the old music hall song, "Any Old Iron," another shout of their presence.

The rag man would take his rags to the rag yard. Skilled women would then sort the rags according to how dirty these were, how heavy the material was, if it was new tailors off-cuts/trimmings or into colour batches. They worked over a grid, so loose fibres, dirt and dust fell through the grid but this was not wasted, it was collected. Like many industries, it had severe health repercussions, not only handling soiled cloth, but even worse were the fibres and dust on the lungs; this was called "Shoddy Fever"

After sorting, the rags were ground down in a machine called a "picker," coarser fibres were spun into yarn for Shoddy, finer fibres were made into Mungo. The recycled fibres were re-spun with a little new wool and used for blankets and Army uniforms.

The older generation may remember the Army and Navy stores, very popular in most UK towns. After WWII and well into the 60s and 70's you could buy army surplus stock. These ranged from officers' evening shirts to sleeping bags, tents to boots and rug sacks, billy-cans to army blankets. The grey blankets were very popular for use as bedding, but, also for making dressing gowns. Family recycling was and had to be a normal way of life, hence 'waste not want not'.

By 1855, 35 million lbs /16 million kilos of rags were being made into Shoddy and Mungo. In 1860 Batley alone produced 7,000 tons of Shoddy. There were 80 firms involved in this particular industry. If you go through Dewsbury, you cannot miss Machell Brothers, now no longer a mill but converted into flats but on the building it states Shoddy and Mungo, built 1856 and this is proudly repainted each year.

As stated previously, we hear today the buzz words about recycling and sustainability but this was happening in this area 200 years ago.



*YooA's Pieces
decorating the park*

People around West Yorkshire must have heard of the Wakefield Rhubarb Triangle; today they use wool fleece on the soil as a fertilizer, because it is hygroscopic....holds moisture, and contains nitrogen, which is good for the soil. 200 years ago, the fine dust and short fibres, too short to spin into yarn, were shipped to Kent to fertilize the Hop fields.

So how does this relate to YooA's exhibition of artefacts and products? They are made by crocheting and knitting textile waste. During certain weaving procedures the raw selvedge is cut off the loom. What would normally be discarded, YooA is putting to a functional and aesthetic use. Not strictly 'Shoddy', but certainly in the same spirit. As my old boss used to say, "There is nothing new, Mister". What goes around comes around. ■



*A Peaceful
Interlude*