English ⓘ

Welcome

We hope that you will enjoy your visit to the Irish Linen Centre and Lisburn Museum. The exhibition in the Irish Linen Centre, 'Flax to Fabric', tells the story of Ireland's linen heritage and also displays objects of interest and value from the Museum's collections. This short introduction will help you to understand our written texts and appreciate both the visual images and also the staff who demonstrate some of the manufacturing processes.

You should allow at least one hour for your visit so that you can see the whole story. Afterwards you may wish to visit the Museum shop which stocks books, postcards, linens and other high quality craft goods.

We do not permit photography as a general rule. However, if you have a special request for photography, please speak to one of our gallery assistants. We provide wheelchair access to all areas of the building.

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Lisburn Market House

This building is the original 17th-century Market House of the town of Lisburn. There has been a weekly market held in the town since 1627. The market took place under the arches of the Market House and spilled out into the open air. Everything was on sale from locally produced butter, vegetables, and oatmeal to baskets, buckets, and candles. By the early 18th century, Lisburn was known as a town where dealers specialised in buying linen cloth and spun yarn. The recreated market scene shows a typical transaction between hand-loom weavers who are trying to sell their linen cloth to a merchant for a good price. A woman has brought her homespun linen yarn to sell to a weaver.

Linen Beginnings

Linen is one of the oldest textiles in the world. Linen cloth is woven from flax, an annual plant with a pale blue flower often described as 'the wee blue blossom.' The earliest documented use of linen is in Egyptian times when high-quality fine linen cloth was used in the bandages of Egyptian mummies. A piece of linen from the tomb of Tutankhamun, dating from 1500 BC, is on display in the exhibition.

High status is also associated in the Bible with the wearing of fine linen garments. The ceremonial uses of linen expanded with the spread of Christianity throughout Europe. The depictions of the saints in the Irish annals of the Early Christian period are represented in the exhibition in the portrait of Saint John from the Stowe Missal. Such portraits show us that the Irish people of that time also associated linen with high status.

From at least the twelfth century, flax was grown in Ireland for home-produced cloth. This was dyed using natural plant material. Yellows and browns were common colours worn by Irish noblemen. Until the 17th century, the Irish exported linen yarn rather than cloth, chiefly to the ports of Chester and Bristol in England where it was sold to English weavers.

17th-Century Expansion

A number of influences led to the expansion of the industry in 17th-century Ireland. In the first half of the century, statesmen such as the Earl of Strafford and the Duke of Ormonde attempted to encourage the spread of the industry. They had diplomatic connections with the Low Countries (Netherlands) which were recognised then as the most important European region of high-quality linen production. Both statesmen used their influence to bring spinning wheels, looms, and skilled weavers to Ireland.

New settlers who may already have been weavers came from Britain. Some of the Ulster landlords, especially Lord Conway and Arthur Brownlow, who owned estates in this area, encouraged their new farm tenants to take up flax cultivation and linen manufacture. The religious group, the Society of Friends, also known as Quakers, brought their enterprise and capital into the linen industry.

Shops

During the 18th century, demand for Irish linen grew markedly in England. Drapery and haberdashery shops catered for the rising middle classes who followed London and Paris fashions. Shops vied with each other to provide a profusion of fabrics and accessories for their customers to have made up into the latest styles.

Louis Crommelin

The most important individual in this period of expansion of the industry was Louis Crommelin, whose portrait hangs in the exhibition. He was a French Huguenot refugee, with experience in the linen industry, who was invited by William III to develop the industry in Ireland. He settled in Lisburn with a colony of Huguenot weavers in 1698. Following his success, in 1711 the government set up the Irish Linen Board to promote and regulate the industry.

Linen Market Halls

Under the old market system, the merchants who bought the weavers' cloth were responsible for bleaching it white to make it ready for sale. By the end of the 18th century, many of the bleachers, and also master weavers who employed other workmen, stamped their finished bales of linen cloth with seal marks to indicate their origin and quality. You can see original seals and practise stamping the marks with their replicas! White Linen Halls were set up during the 18th century where merchants and bleachers could sell their stamped linen cloth to foreign buyers.

19th-Century Production

During the 19th century, the system of marketing linens changed to more modern methods. The weavers no longer took their cloth to market and the White Linen Halls fell out of use. Merchants employed the weavers directly and provided them with yarn. They sold their weavers' cloth to bleachers. Bleaching required capital because of its high level of technical and chemical investment and so bleaching firms became very large. Many of the bleaching firms expanded into the weaving and spinning sides of production. By the end of the 19th century, most of the biggest linen firms in the north of Ireland had their business headquarters in Belfast.

Sewing Skills

Even after industrialisation the linen industry gave work to many beyond the factory gate. Shirts and handkerchiefs are two examples of goods which came to be considered specialist products of the Irish linen industry. Many women and girls also worked at home on embroidery of white linen household textiles and clothing. Local shopkeepers acted as agents for the Belfast linen warehouses. The whitework was destined for the large department stores of London, Paris, and New York where it was prized by those who valued the delicacy of hand embroidery patterns. These sewing skills are carried on by today's craftswomen, though not on a commercial scale. Examples of some of the best modern work can be seen on display.

Flax Into Yarn

The flax crop was grown by many small farmers in Ireland. It was planted in spring and was ready for harvesting by summer. The entire stems were pulled out of the ground and steeped in a pond of still water known as a flax dam or 'lint hole'. (LINT) This steeping process was known as retting (RETTING) and softened the stems. After about ten days of retting the stems were spread out in fields to dry and then the flax was ready for scutching. (SCUTCHING) This involved beating the stems to break off the woody parts known as shous. (SHOUS) Next the tangled mass of fibres was hackled or combed by a hackler (HACKLER) who used a range of combs of differently spaced teeth or pins. The last combing left the flax bundle soft and dense, ready for spinning. In the exhibition, a video presentation of archive film and photographs shows these processes being carried out. You can see the demonstrations by the gallery assistants of the processes of hand spinning, scutching, and hackling.

The Spinner's Cottage

During the 18th and early 19th centuries, flax was grown, harvested, spun, and woven on the farm as a domestic industry. All the family helped in linen production. This is depicted in the recreated scene in the Spinner's Cottage. Spinning was women's work, hence the origin of the term 'spinster'. Young children wound the hanks of spun yarn onto pirns (PIRNS) or bobbins (BOBBINS) for the weaver's shuttle. The father or adult sons wove the cloth on the loom and then took it to market to sell.

Activities Gallery

In this gallery you can see the ways in which the Industrial Revolution of the 18th and 19th centuries changed the Irish linen industry. You can also try some of the activities in the story for yourself and thus appreciate the skills of the past. Video screens show you the contemporary processes.

Linen Thread

One of Lisburn's early specialities was in linen thread production. This can be seen in the displays of advertisements and products given by the firm of Barbour Campbell Threads Ltd., which was established by John Barbour in 1784. Thread production involved twisting two or more strands of spun yarn together. By the end of the 19th century, Barbour's was an international company and its premises at Hilden, near Lisburn, were the largest thread works in the world.

Invention of Machine Spinning

In the early 19th century, linen thread and linen yarn production were revolutionised by the invention of machines which could spin coarse linen yarn. This machinery used water and steam power. In the 1820s, a technique of wet spinning by machine was invented which passed the flax fibres through troughs of warm water. This meant that the yarn did not break and that fine-quality linen yarn could be produced. Hand spinning ended and the domestic system of linen production on the farm began to disappear.

Hand-Loom Weaving

It was not so easy to devise power-driven machinery to weave linen cloth and many hand-loom weavers continued to work at home. They used the same type of plain hand looms as their ancestors had done, though they now had the ‘flying shuttle’ (FLYING SHUTTLE) which meant they could work faster. You can practise the techniques of weaving which require co-ordinated movement of feet and hands.

Linen Collection

This room is dark and cool because the items on display require controlled exposure to light and temperature.

These are some examples from our collections of costume and household linens from the 19th and 20th centuries. Linen was associated with infants' garments such as christening robes and with fashionable attire and accessories for ladies and gentlemen. Mail order retailing in the late 19th-century department stores specialised in selling Irish lace handkerchiefs and lavishly embroidered linen handkerchiefs.

Royalty and heads of state commissioned damask table linens which were woven on hand looms using the Jacquard mechanism. Intricate patterns depicted the family crests or commemorated victories in battle.

The Hand-Loom Weaving Workshop

Stepping into this workshop enables you to understand and appreciate the skills which are required to produce hand-woven linen cloth. All the machinery is authentic. The Jacquard damask loom and the cambric loom are well over 100 years old.

Card Cutting

First you meet our card cutter who works on the Jacquard card-cutting machine to transfer a pattern from paper onto punched cards. Each card represents the pattern of a line of weft.

Jacquard Hand-Loom Weaving

Our master weaver mounts the cards onto a machine on top of the loom. The machine is connected to the warp threads. They weave the damask patterns by co-ordinating the treadle action of their feet to raise and lower the warp threads according to the pattern of each card. They throw the shuttle of weft yarn across the warp to weave the pattern, line by line.

Types of Looms

A Jacquard hand loom is used to weave figured patterns such as floral designs or family crests. On this loom the weaver produces damask table napkins. The plain loom next to it is set up to produce fine linen of a weight suitable for cambric handkerchiefs.

Long before invention of the Jacquard machine in 1801 it was possible to weave damask linen. Weavers worked on draw looms and employed young people as assistants. The weavers called out instructions to the assistants to raise and lower the warp threads by pulleys. Very elaborately patterned cloths were produced by the most skilled workers. Only a few Irish examples are known to exist today.

Factories

Work in the late Victorian mills and factories was very different to work in the domestic linen industry at home. The hours were fixed, 6am – 6pm, and the atmosphere of heat, dampness and smell was very distinctive. Workers often lived within the shadow of the mill chimney in houses which were owned by the company and therefore if they lost their job the family lost its home. Children could start full-time work at 13 years of age in the period just before the First World War. Half timers, who spent half the day at work and the other half at school, started work a year or two younger. Many got their first job by being 'spoken for' by a relative or friend already employed in the mill.

Though the number of people who work in today's linen industry is much smaller than it was one hundred years ago, the high degree of technical investment has ensured that Irish linen once again has a quality profile. Fashion images of linen clothing for men and women and the traditional elegance of fine table linens provide a reminder of Irish linen's noble origins and continuing international prestige.