

Weaving History and Tradition with the Whitchurch Silk Mill

Emily: Hello and welcome to this week's episode of Hampshire HistBites. Today, we are speaking with Shannon Bye and Zoë Umpleby all about Whitchurch Silk Mill and its weaving heritage from its foundation all the way up to present day.

Would you mind telling us a little bit about yourselves and your roles at Whitchurch Silk Mill?

Zoe: My name's Zoë, I'm the Visitor Experience Coordinator here at Whitchurch Silk Mill. So that basically means I look after or help support with the exhibition and events programme, anything to do with schools and kids, education, that kind of thing, looking after all the digital media and engagement videos that we produce on our social media pages.

Shannon: I'm Shannon, I'm the Weaver/Tackler. So my job here is to keep the weaving skill alive, I'm taking all my knowledge from the senior Weaver. So it's just learning all of the different bits and machinery and a bit of everything, help Zoe out sometimes with some social media, but mostly the weaving.

Emily: How did you both get started at Whitchurch?

Zoe: So I'm a museum professional by nature. I did history undergraduate degree and then a master's degree in heritage management. I've worked for different museums in the past. And then I came here to this lovely museum. I think I've been here about three and a half years now. I'm not a weaver, unfortunately. So it's been a massive learning curve for me.

Shannon: I've been here just over a year now. I was part of the Lottery Heritage Funds Trainee Programmes. And my first year I was a trainee which I came from Norwich Uni of the Arts where I did a textile degree specializing in weaving, which is quite different to what we do here, actually, it's hand weaving. So I know how to do structures and what does this, how that works with weaving, but here it was like starting again. You know, learning how all the whole machinery, all the old skills, how it used to be done instead of how we do it now. I came up this way with my husband for his work and it was kind of a bit like, oh no, I'm never going to get a job in textiles, you have to move to where it is. And then, I've always had a passion for history for weaving and suddenly this cropped up and I thought, oh my goodness, I can't believe this. So I applied for it. And luckily, I was a good fit. That's how I ended up here working with Mairi. Wonderful, she knows absolutely everything. She'll tell me she's still learning, but yeah. So it's just been kind of starting again really.

The Lottery Heritage Funds did the refurb on the Mill to make it more accessible and flows better and it looks really great. Each year there'll be trainee Weaver for three years. The idea, I suppose, for the lottery was they're putting the money into the Mill to make it this amazing place that people can keep it, but to make it sustainable, you need the weavers to keep it going. So part of it was making sure that the skills are getting passed on, so it keeps going. And that was, I suppose, part of the Heritage Funding was making sure that didn't get lost after spending the money on making it beautiful museum.

Emily: So both preservation of the building and everything inside, but also preservation of all the traditional skills as well. Is there anything that you particularly enjoy about working at the Mill? Is there anything that kind of just makes you tick?

Shannon: So for me it's, I mean, obviously I've had a passion for weaving, and I love it and I love its history 'cause it's rich with it. Just think how long weaving's been going on for. I mean, they call it the original technology. So I've always loved that aspect. So then coming here and being a part of keeping tradition alive, I feel like I'm a part of that history because everything Mairi teaches me, I can teach somebody else and then they'll teach somebody else. And I know that I've helped keep that alive and keep that going. Rather than us reading something about how people used to hang twist warps¹ together and it used to pull through, and these looms used to work like this. People can see it and it's still working and it's still going. And I think that for me, that's what I really love about it. And that's what makes me really passionate at work is the idea that I'm helping keep this skill, this tradition alive.

Zoe: I think from a museum point of view you know, everywhere you work is different, every where's unique, but this really is unique and as Shannon said, you're a part of that. Every person that works here has played a small part on keeping it all going really and keeping the heritage alive. If it wasn't for this place, it would all disappear really. I think that's coming to work every day, knowing that you're keeping it going a little bit is, is really lovely.

Emily: It's kind of that combination of like, you're making a unique contribution, but also, it's like a constant learning curve for you as well.

Zoe: What's really lovely as well, is that here and from my point of view, I'm not sure that many museums can do this, but there's an industrial business side to it, which is what you are producing the silk and selling the silk.

Emily: Can you tell us a little bit about the history of the Mill?

Zoe: We unfortunately don't have a lot of records because a lot of them were destroyed in a fire. So we have to do a bit of a guessing game, but we think around 1813 to 1815, it started off as an iron foundry and it went through a series of different owners, but one of the key people we talk about is William Maddick. He was a silk merchant from Spitalfields. And he came down here and bought the building and revolutionized it a little bit.

Shannon: He literally made another floor, and had a whole channel put across the front of the Mill to push more water to the wheel to be more productive. And then from there, he brought obviously silk merchants, so he started throwing silk. For a while it was silk throwing. It was only really what was it? An iron foundry for about two years.

Zoe: But the main character, I suppose we talked quite a lot about is James Hide. He was a local family to Whitchurch and took over the Mill. He introduced power looms, so, electric looms, which is what Shannon uses today. So, a lot of these looms, your looms that you use are sort of over 200 years old.

¹ A **Warp** (in weaving) are the threads on a loom over and under which other threads (the weft) are passed to make cloth.

Shannon: For a short period, from it being an iron foundry to machine looms, they had big wooden frame looms that would have been on the middle floor and bottom floor. And then obviously, when James Hide came along, that then became, okay, how can we be more productive? And having machine looms and they had the power for it because they had the water wheel, it became more productive. They could make more; they could be quicker. It revolutionised the Mill by having these machine looms that are still sat behind us now.

Emily: Do you have any favourite stories from the history or maybe any sort of strange questions that you get asked by visitors?

Zoe: My favourite one is the one with the shuttle in the loom. I think it was, fifties, perhaps sixties and we just were here, using the looms, like normal, everyday busy, busy, busy, and one of the shuttles flew out of the loom, which happens quite a lot.

Shannon: It's quite common. Nowadays, we have guards at the end of the looms. I mean I had one just do it the other day. If the timings on the looms - 'cause obviously it's all relying on timings, the shuttle's² flinging back and forth - that really comes forward too soon, it flings them out. A lot of the time they'll hit the wall, we've got all dents all along the side of the walls, that show how the shuttles used to fling out and the shuttles come to a point with a hard bit of metal at the end.

Zoe: This particular time, it flew off the loom, through the window into the river. So that's one of my favourites cause that's quite a funny little story. And the other one was we used to weave quite a lot of sort of famous clients as well, but one of them, which was not sure if they knew at the time yet where this piece of silk was going, and it was believed to have been ordered by one of the Cray twins, who I think was in prison at the time, and one of his minions from his gang came around to collect this item that they'd ordered. It is a bit shrouded in mystery. No one's really quite sure of the precise details, but it is rumoured to have happened. And one of the ladies that used to work here has researched it thoroughly and she thinks it definitely happened.

Shannon: When the buildings was bought by the silk merchant who made it into a silk throw they obviously added the extra flooring, but obviously glass was expensive, wasn't it? So rather than buy all new glass for the extra floor, they took it from panels all from each floor window, they took a strip, and you can see where on some of them, two planks have been fused together, where a piece has come out they've taken it from each of those, and they've used them on the top windows. I don't know why, just I love that story about how they've been cleverly taken pieces and put back together again, to be reused instead of forking out for a load of new windows. And I love seeing people's faces 'cause then they're trying to spot all the clues on the windows and how they've been done. There's loads of clues all over the Mill that you can spot on how it's changed through the years.

Emily: I guess it means that you're always having to change your guidebook. Could you perhaps tell us a little bit more about the people who would have worked at the Mill - how it sort of fits into their local story?

² A **Shuttle** is a tool designed to neatly and compactly store a holder that carries the thread of the weft yarn while weaving with a loom.

Shannon: Obviously, amazing great big mill opened, which obviously would have supplied a lot of work to people in the area. I mean, even now we've got Mairi, she learned how to weave here, and she was here when it was still a functioning factory, like it's functioning now, but like when it was more reliant on the weaving. She worked here when she was younger, and she's been on and off working here even 'til now. so she learned everything she knew from here. My training has been different 'cause there's less of us, so we're more multilingual now. We would have had weavers which were women and then tacklers that were men. So weavers, they're the ones operating the looms and then tacklers are the ones that would fix the looms, keep them running, oil them, change any information to change the patterning. And now weaver/tackler, so obviously we're trying to push those together and make it more multilingual. And it's interesting seeing how Mairi went from, she said she used to just be on the pirn³, on a winding pirn, which is the weft⁴ that goes across the loom in the shuttles to then winding onto bobbins⁵, to making warps, then to weaving, threading up and - watching how she's gone through that and through the years, she's noticed how more and more people - rather than before you either were a Warper or you were a Weaver - she says now obviously she warps and weaves.

Zoe: We've got some quite nice stories, haven't we? Of some people that were here. That, one of the famous ones is – we call her Marvelous Marge - she was the longest serving Weaver here. She was here from pretty young, in her teenage years, up until it went into her 60's. She's quoted as saying how she's kind of survived, if you like, being Weaver for so long, is that having a glass of Brandy every night. And then her daughter was here, then she got married. But there was always like a big family thing, lots of local families have been here. And it's actually really nice because, we kind of, without being sort of too arrogant, I suppose, but we are kind of the hub of the community in some ways. I think when you live somewhere, that's got this mill that still has people - that pull people to the town, that people still want to know about it, and it's had this long history. I think it's something that you are proud of. I think when you live in, if you've got nothing physically do with it, you know, that that's part of your history that you're living in.

Emily: It seems that it's kind of a, quite a community focal point, but also ties into the national story as well. But how does Whitchurch Silk Mill compare to other silk mills in the country?

Shannon: I'd say the closest one, in how we weave is probably Gainsborough, which is in Suffolk. They have older machinery; all the techniques are older as well. And I think you can look round Gainsborough as well, but it's a slightly different vibe. I think our approach is because we're still in our original building. I mean, they've got beautiful stuff and all those

³ A **Pirn** is a rod onto which weft thread is wound for use in weaving. Pirns are wound from the base forward in order to ensure snag-free delivery of the thread, unlike bobbins, which are wound evenly from end to end.

⁴ A **Weft** is the crosswise threads on a loom that are passed over and under the warp threads to make cloth.

⁵ A **Bobbin** is a spindle or cylinder, with or without flanges, on which wire, yarn, thread or film is wound.

mills there, they have what are called Jacquard⁶ looms which function, so, each thread is kind of on its own individual little shaft⁷, so, you can make really complicated patterns and things like that. And theirs is good, Gainsborough is keeping a lot of their traditional patterns and they have all these beautiful records. Whereas ours is going back more traditional, we've got what called Dobby⁸ and Tappet⁹ looms. They work differently. You've got to be more conscious of how the patterning's threaded to how it affects the woven work. Like our ribbons. Nowhere else makes ribbons like we do because these machines are just, that's what they would have woven. And then Stephen Walters is another big one as well, that work very similar. We get a lot of yarn from them and at one point they used to own the Mill, so at one point we were actually connected to them greatly because they owned this Mill, as well as their one in Suffolk. There are mills still like us moving, going on. And then you've got Vanna's in there as well. Bit more modern than we are though.

Zoe: I think you hit the nail on the head. I think with that being in the original building is – our little plug line is we are the oldest silk mill still in our original buildings. So I think there are others that are perhaps older, but we are still here, so.

Shannon: And I think, how we function, it's keeping the history - Gainsborough - going but we function different. So you get different things out of seeing each one and I think, that just kinda makes each one unique.

Emily: You've got your own sort of little points of pride. You can actually go in and see it in its original building, which is, it's really special. Can you tell us a little bit about the process of how it was done back then, and then how you use that today?

Shannon: How people go around the Mill kind of guide you around the process. So you come in, you see the water wheel going. You kind of get a brief glimpse of the weaving shed and then as you go up to the top, you come up to that bit and there's all the bobbins. At that point we kind of get in 'once upon a time they would have dyed silk here, but now we don't really have the facilities for that'. We buy in our stock from another mill in the country that gets their silk, undyed, from China. Eventually it goes down the line and comes to us on cones and obviously they didn't used to come in cones. So we've adapted slightly with pegs and sometimes we'd get them in on skeins¹⁰, which are these big loops of silk. Now modern mills, they just put the cones on these great big spiky things. It all comes off the cone straight onto a

⁶ The **Jacquard** machine is a device fitted to a loom that simplifies the process of manufacturing textiles with such complex patterns as brocade, damask and matelassé.

⁷ The **Shaft** or harness is the frame of the loom that holds the warp threads. These shafts can be moved up or down by "treadles" to allow the weft to cross through and create the desired pattern.

⁸ A **Dobby** loom, or dobbie loom, is a type of floor loom that controls all the warp threads using a device called a dobbie.

⁹ A **Tappet** is a shedding tool placed on the peak of a loom in order to produce a pattern by using a limited number of healds.

¹⁰ A **Skein** is a length of thread or yarn, loosely coiled and knotted.

warp, but obviously we're keeping to our traditional methods. So everything gets wound onto bobbins. And from bobbins that goes on this thing, that's called a quill¹¹, which is a weird kind of frame thing, if you ever looked at our Instagram, you'd probably see it on there somewhere, and your bobbins go on there and then they go through this reed¹², which divides all the yarns and keeps them straight. And then through another one and onto this great big sideways drum. A bit like if you took the drum out of your washing machine and turn it sideways and wrap something around, it's a bit like that. That then moves round and round and pulls all the yarn from the quill off the bobbins and warps it round onto this great big thing, but then goes the other way and then walks back onto a beam. There you're ready. So that's your warp. Once upon a time, it would have been taken down on a crank. It's got like this big thing that comes through the floor that lowers it down. Obviously now we can't use it health and safety reasons. We carry it down, which means we can't maybe put on as much of a warp as we would have done. We tend to stick to about 240 yards because that's about a healthy weight to be able to carry down the stairs which is a bit of a nerve-wracking process. And as you get it down here, it goes into the back of the loom, then it gets threaded up in whatever particular - you've got all these little eyes hanging on these great big shafts, and that all gets threaded through there in a particular order, that's going to reflect whatever it is you're weaving or whatever cloth you want to come out.

The other thing was hand twisting. If you've already got a warp fitted and say, you went, oh, I want to make exactly the same thing again. And you've just made the exact same warp, 'cause that one's about to run out, you take two ends, one from one end, one from the other, and then kind of, they do this weird twist thing, and it holds them together. So you can just pull it through instead of having to thread it all up again, because you know that that's been threaded up right and it's been working right. And once that all gets pulled through you can do a little bit of a test. You put your weft through, cause obviously your warps going the long way and then the weft goes across. Go 'weft to right' that's how I always remember it. And obviously then that beats through, and then when you're weaving, you're off and the cloth slowly goes from being the unwoven thing on the beam at the back round to the woven cloth that we know that goes round the front. Then from there we take off, inspect the cloth, and wrap it onto a piece of cardboard, measure it, if there's any little bits that have flipped up, if there's a knot that's come through, we pincer that off and make it as flawless as we possibly can. Then that goes off to either an external client that has ordered something, or if the shop's going to make something from the weaving shed, they come and purchase whatever it is they want, the shop department then goes and makes up into something. The weaving department, we literally just weave it into cloth, inspect it, and then it goes off to wherever it's going to be made into what.

Everyone's always like, oh my God, it sounds so complicated, but I always think of it's a bit like driving, really. You think someone tells you how to do all these things with gears, and then you've got to remember indication at different points and lots of like looking in the mirrors and it sounds really complicated, but I bet now if you're a driver and you've been

¹¹ A **Quill** is a paper or cardboard tube on which weft threads are wound for use in a boat shuttle.

¹² A **Reed** is a comb-like implement (originally made from reed or cane) used by a weaver to separate the threads of the warp and correctly position the weft.

driving for a few years, you don't even think about it. It's instinctive. And it's a bit like that. Obviously, you're always learning, there's always something that can go wrong, but you know that process back to front. You know it's not going to the bobbin; you know it's got to go on the warping wheel, you know how you know how the warping wheel works, you know that's got to come down here and you know how it gets threaded.

So it sounds really complicated, but once you've been doing it, you kind of slowly get into this bit where you just realize that you're not even thinking about it anymore. You're just doing it.

Emily: I'm guessing you feel sort of like that you're quite used to it now. How was it getting to know and learn the skills and using machinery?

Shannon: Nerve racking is definitely the word and overwhelming. When I came from uni, it was textile design, so you could do all sorts of things and I specialized in weaving. From the moment I touched woven cloth and it was all set up for me. I was in there all the time out now, cause my uni used to be open until nine o'clock, so I'd be in there trying all different ones out there, doing lots of different patterns. When I got here, the first thing I was put on Mairi was like, Oh, okay, Shannon, we're going to stick you on loom number one, I love it, it's a great loom, but it is raw silk and it's about 900 ends. You've got all these fears of, oh my God, I really hope that I'm okay with working with silk. This is nerve wracking. I hope I don't thread it up wrong because you know, uni, you get bits wrong and I was like, oh my goodness, I don't want to get it wrong though. Mairi was fantastic. She said, look, this is your warp to learn on, so we're not expecting it to be flawless. Don't panic. You know, it can be re threaded. Just take your time practice through it. It was to get a sense and it was the finest silk. So it was the deep end, but she was right to do that because after I'd done that, I felt more confident because it was nowhere near as bad as I thought it would be. I mean, 900 ends is still a lot, but now having done 8,000 ends plus, threading things, it seems like a doddle.

And then turning the loom on for the first time. Of course, you've got the support of your fellow Weaver who's standing there, watching you, you know she's got that experience so she knows what's coming, but it's old machines and it's like, Oh, anything could go wrong. You feel like don't want to muck it up. I don't want to break something. I mean, you do learn very quickly that these machines are pretty robust. I mean, think how long they've survived. You kind of go through all these weird emotions, but after you've done it and you've woven that cloth and it comes off and you've inspected it and you did that, you feel this immense sense of pride that you're like, I wove this, I've made this cloth! I think every time you take something new on it is like that and especially with our ribbons, that end up in all sorts of different things. Literally watching something and think, Hey, I wove that ribbon? And it's on telly! And I can't wait for that cause Mairi's had that experience and I've taken with weeding knees.

So yeah, I'd say excitement, nerve racking at first and then, you kind of become comfortable with it. My granny actually, when she was a teen, she lived up North and she worked in a cotton mill with machines. Very similar, if not the same as these. And I was like, Oh my goodness! Then having ended here and I did show her the Mill, she can't come up this way. So I Face Timed her and showed her. She was like, they all worked on those. And it's like, crazy to think that it's gone from, you know, my granny doing it. I never knew she did it until I started weaving and she went, oh I used to weave.

Emily: It's got to be a level of like solidarity amongst weavers, of kind of the understanding, Oh, we get it. We've experienced that. And if it's really loud and things.

Zoe: Now obviously we think about all these things and there's all sorts of regulations and rules but at the time, its time was money and that was it, you know? And there was always someone else who could replace you.

Shannon: I mean, that's the other thing Mairi was saying to me the other day was the weavers, they were kind of paid on the basis of how much they wove. She said that, if something went wrong with your loom and a tackler went past, it was kind of a battle for who the tackler would go and sort out first, because if you were out of action, because your loom weren't working, and you're waiting for a tackler, you aren't earning money. It was kind of like me next, me next, me next which I suppose is another bonus for me being a weaver tackler is you then, like Mairi says, you learn your loom. So you being tuned into that is really important, not just for time, but for the value. If you lose them ends, then you're using more silk to fix it or you've had to replace an entire reed, which isn't cheap, and then you have to thread it all up again I think knowing how your loom ticks is another really important aspect, and you get your favourites. Like Mairi's favourite is number one, I've not woven on enough different ones yet to choose, but I know I'm very sentimental about the ribbons.

Emily: Do you enjoy making ribbons then?

Shannon: Yes. Yeah. I mean, it's getting to the point now where we had a massive order for it and it's a big old warp and there are times where you get frustrated, because certain things keep happening and you're like, why is this not working? Why is it doing that? You get times where you're like, Oh, I just want to move on to something else. But then you persevere and, when it works, you get that sense of pride that its working and you know that you've got that to work, but one of urm - Mike, he comes in and does the, he used to be a tackler here, so he knows the machines inside and out. And he said to me one time, it's like either 90% frustration, something isn't working, you have to have for fixing it or 90% boredom because your loom's just consistently running. And the idea knowing that this can go off and 'cause it's going to a costumier, so then they buy it, and it all goes to lots of different, lovely places. I mean, it's relatively complicated because we, weave 14 of them all in a row, that means that each time there's a break in between the ribbon, there's gotta be a way to hold that end. So when you cut them, they don't just fray and break apart. We have these clever little things called Lenos¹³, which are weird little eyes, that twist things around the edge to make many selvages. It's fiddly process and a complicated one. It's not a simple, you've got about three warps on the back, one great big one and then you've got satins that make these beautiful stripes. So they sit risen on the main ribbon, woven ribbon, they kind of sit - ribbon is shiny beautiful. And that's something that's really distinctive about them. You can see the quality in them as well because these looms were about when ribbons were the height of fashion, you had them all round your bonnet, and they were woven like that. It's authentic and I think that's why I like working with them because you've got the authenticity and all of these looms, like we call them loom quirks, they've got these little quirks, they do little things that cause what most places would call faults, but actually where the costumier that buys this, they love those

¹³ **Leno** weave (also called gauze weave or cross weave) is a weave in which two warp yarns are twisted around the weft yarns to provide a strong yet sheer fabric.

little bits because the people who buy them off them, they also love those little bits because they make them more authentic. Nowadays you've got end breaks, the loom shuts off, it knows that an end is broken. Whereas these can't do that. When an end breaks and it kind of catches some others, the weft kind of floats over the top and it makes a little mark and I think that would have been like, there's no avoiding that and that would have worked like that and that I think is what makes them feel a bit more authentic and they work better in the way that they crunch, because they've got certain weight to them means that when you're working with them to make the hats, they sit how they should do and how they would have done when those hats were originally being made. So I think they're easier to work with as well.

Emily: What about sort of another clientele? Who else has seen your silk and where else has it gone?

Zoe: The most famous one is we had a small part to play in Princess Diana's wedding dress. We didn't weave the dress, but we prepared the silk, so we stretched all the bobbins.

Shannon: Loads of mills around the country had a part in it. It wasn't just one. So her dress came from all different places in Britain that got the silk together to be made for the lace.

Zoe: So all different parts of the process to weave was made in different areas. And somewhere in our archive, we do have a little snippet of her dress. So that was really special to have a little, small part to play in that. And obviously knowing who she became and who she was, it was fantastic.

Shannon: There's Burberry as well. Obviously back when Burberry wasn't as big as now, Trench coats used to, obviously Burberry made the coat and the outside and stuff. And then the silk lining was made here. And we've got a big swatch book of all these different silks that went into Burberrys and they would select which one they want for certain lines. And then we'd weave up the silk and that would go to Burberry and they'd make their trench coats.

Zoe: Yeah, that's really cool actually about working here is that all these big names, like Burberry, Princess Diana The tiny town that no one's really ever heard of - and it's a very tiny and if you call it a village everyone gets really offended because it's not a village - one of the smallest towns in Britain, but you know, the fact that it's so small, but it has these connections.

Emily: In previous episodes, we've been talking to John Pilkington, who was talking about his journey along the Silk Road, how it started at Whitchurch and actually how, that the silk that you use actually comes all the way from China. The fact that you can have these connections from the other side of the world, as well as nationally. I guess the visitors who come buy any of your shops products as well, it has a story itself before it's even got into the visitors' hands.

Zoe: I think that's what's so lovely about industrial heritage as well, isn't it? Is that that is a huge part of it. Things come in, things get made, things get created. It has a story. It's got a personality almost.

Shannon: I think from a visitor point of view, you walk through the shop to start with, and you see all this woven stuff and, you know, silk isn't cheap, and people know that, but they don't particularly know why. You get to see that, and then go through and see how long it

takes and the process and then I've spoken to visitors and by the end of it, they come back to the other end, they're like, wow, I really understand it now because it is a long process. And it's a process that people cherish when they're making it, you know that they've taken the time to do that. Then if you buy something at the other end, you've kind of taken a bit of that history, but you've also watched it in a way being made. I think it's a unique perspective to take away when you've gone. I think you have a wider understanding of textiles.

Zoe: That's what we're trying to do, isn't it? You're trying to get people to understand and appreciate it more so that they love it more.

Emily: I think that's a really lovely point. It's kind of part heritage part actually looking forward into the future as well. It's kind of combining those different things.

Shannon: Why can't the past be a part of the future? How we used to do things, be used now, if that is better for what we need now. I think if you care where something comes from, that's when you like history.

Emily: In that case, how do you, or how would you like to see the future of the Mill?

Zoe: I think it's just being relevant, you know, like a lot of people, you go to places and they think, oh yeah, that's the past or that happened ages ago, but actually it's being and maintaining our relevance as well, but it's also getting younger people to appreciate it a little bit more, enjoy it and kind of understand that this is part our heritage, part of our history and I think to raise awareness of what we do, I know that we are part of the future. We're doing that a lot with our digital media currently; we're trying to open up more areas of the Mill so people can access it a bit more through videos.

Shannon: It might not necessarily say that all of those people that we've gained during the pandemic using more social media will necessarily get up and come and visit the Mill as soon as they open. But the fact that the support is still there, it's not just, you know, coming round, they might donate here and there or buy something from the shop or when we've had auctions, they've been there, or even if they're just there watching, it's nice to know that we've got more supporters and people are more aware of us.

Zoe: I think as well, exactly that people to feel a part of it. It's not something that they can't touch. It is being accessible, isn't it? Anybody can come here, and anybody can have a go.

Shannon: Try little hand looms. It's very difficult to explain weaving, I think unless you can physically see, I think it clicks once you see it working and your hands are doing it. So it's really nice to have hand looms available for people to have a go, you might inspire the next generation of weavers because they've come round and seen it.

Zoe: You don't know who you're influencing or who you are affecting and that's quite nice because you do your thing and then somebody takes something out of it. And I think that's actually really special.

Emily: That's really lovely, because it could just be anyone, it could be a weaver, it could be another historian, it could just be someone who absolutely loves the architecture or the machine, or it could just be anyone walking through the door and just discover their passion.

Zoe: Yeah, absolutely. We're quite fortunate here in that we can sort of tap into loads of different subjects. So we've got, obviously the weaving, textiles, but there's history, there's science technology, there's engineering, there's all the STEM, the STEAM now as well. There's so much stuff anybody is welcome here because there's something for everybody.

Shannon: I think from a point of view for me to become a Weaver, my spark was literally just down to where I went to uni. If I had gone somewhere else, I don't know, maybe I'd been a printer or maybe I'd just thrown in the towel, maybe I necessarily wouldn't have been doing this particular role in weaving because there's obviously different ways you can go, but because Norwich was a textiles capital at one point, and it's got such a rich history of weaving, seeing all those museums - going in the Bridewell Museum seeing the looms and that kind of sparked it for me for the historical part of weaving. I just feel like fates brought me here, cause I just happened to move half an hour away when I used to live in Norfolk, it's just like four hours away. And then suddenly I'm here and I'm half an hour away from what is essentially my perfect job, weaving and doing it within history. I like to think we are that for somebody as well, I think that's what we want going forwards is to not just give a great experience, but maybe spark other people into their passion, into their dreams.

Emily: Well, I guess to conclude, are there any sorts of lasting messages you would like to leave our listeners with?

Zoe: I think we have an aim or a vision here and it's to be a thriving, living museum, which weaves silk and delights all who visit. I suppose that's it's just to say that we're here, you know, we're doing all this stuff, we're creating these beautiful things, we're inspiring, like Shannon here, the next generation she's taking it on.

Shannon: Sharing your passion with somebody else, who's also interested. Seeing visitors go around and someone in awe of what you're doing, it's really great to see. I love it when people are round and having a good look.

Zoe: And we can't wait to have everyone back. We'll be here waiting for you when you come back.

Emily: Thank you for listening to today's episode. If you're interested in finding out more about Whitchurch Silk Mill, be sure to check out their website, or if it's more your style, take a look at their active Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram pages, or YouTube channel. If you fancy it, why not even take a visit, and get immersed in the heritage for yourself?

You can find more details in the show notes on the Hampshire HistBites website.