



## THE MAKERS

Suffolk-based master weaver Gainsborough uses traditional skills and tools to produce some of the finest silks in the land. **Kate Salter** reports

At a workshop in Sudbury, Suffolk, there's an archive of thousands of swatches of exquisite fabric. Every silk, linen, damask and brocatelle ever woven by the Gainsborough Silk Weaving Company has been kept for posterity, including commissions for early clients such as Ford motorcars, Liberty and William Morris & Co.

Today, Gainsborough's silks can be found in grand palaces, smart hotels, embassies and private yachts around the world. The National Trust and English Heritage often call on the firm to recreate antique fabrics during restorations. The company was even able to accommodate a curator who specified "Bic biro pen lid blue" for a damask at Audley End House.

Despite the high-calibre commissions coming thick and fast, Gainsborough has only around 20 employees. Its fabrics have been produced on the same site

since 1924 and its most expensive silks are made on hand looms that are 100 years old. In a world where goods are produced faster and cheaper than ever before, it is something of an anomaly in the textile industry.

"I think we realised some time ago that we were never going to compete price-wise with imported fabrics, so it had to be all about quality," says Gainsborough's technical director Neil Thomas, who has worked at the company for 30 years. "The only way we can ensure the very finest quality is to do everything ourselves."

The company is unusual in that every step of the process, from dyeing the raw silk to weaving, is done in house. "There aren't many of us doing it in the world," Thomas says. "It's very much easier to buy in yarn that's already dyed and most fabric houses don't actually weave any longer, but our clients really appreciate the artisanship and the craft involved." →

ILLUSTRATION BY JESSICA KENDREW





Silk production, or sericulture, goes back thousands of years. Ninety per cent of the world's silk is still produced in China, where farmers and small land owners supplement their income by cultivating silk worms, the silk moth caterpillars that build cocoons on mulberry trees.

"The individual threads are drawn off the cocoons," Thomas explains. "A single thread is so long it could go around a football pitch three times." The threads are twisted into yarn, or 'thrown', in Como, northern Italy, then sent to Gainsborough. Turning the silk into the finished product requires the expertise of dyers, bobbin winders, warpers (who prepare the correct length of thread ready for weaving) and weavers.

Many of the staff are long serving, including Sue Thompson, who insisted on becoming a weaver when she joined in the early 1970s, despite the fact that the task was usually performed by men. "Our female weavers are more conscientious than some guys," laughs Thomas. "Guys are all about banging out fabric as quickly as possible."

The intricate work requires a weaver to sit for "two hours of concentrating without a single thread breaking," says Thomas. Even the weather can thwart their efforts. If it's too dry, the threads become brittle (this



was once rectified by throwing wet rags on the floor, but the firm now has humidifiers).

Most of Gainsborough's work is bespoke commissions, much of it from interior designers whose clients demand the world's finest silk. Holders of a Royal Warrant, Gainsborough's handiwork has also been seen inside the carriages at royal weddings, from Prince Charles and Diana, Princess of Wales, to the Duke and Duchess of Sussex. This silk is always woven on the oldest looms, which are gentle enough to cope with very fine threads, but also slower. "Buckingham Palace recently commissioned 250 metres for its East Gallery sofas, which means a month of weaving," Thomas says.

But it's not all traditional: Clients have also included fashion houses Christopher Kane, Giles Deacon and YSL. Gainsborough's designers, who use a thoroughly 21st-century CAD design programme, often come from Central Saint Martins, where Thomas mentors students.

It's encouraging that new generation of fashion students wants to work for a firm that once produced silk for the Titanic. But don't expect an edgy Gainsborough fashion collection just yet. As Thomas says, "There's no point changing something if it isn't going to improve what you're already doing." ■



From top: bobbins of thread in every colour under the sun, including "Bic biro pen lid blue"; a rich damask fabric is woven on a loom; Neil Thomas examines archive swatches

More information: [gainsborough.co.uk](http://gainsborough.co.uk)