

THE OTHER GEORGIAN SPITALFIELDS

Historian Peter Guillery reveals a lesser-known part of Huguenot and Spitalfields heritage (introduced by Charlie de Wet and transcribed from the text of a lecture)

Elegant houses on Fournier, Wilkes and Princelet Streets are well known as the homes of Huguenot and other master silk weavers and merchants in Spitalfields. Less familiar are the homes of the hard-working journeymen weavers, who toiled from morning to night, six days a week, often for low pay, in north Spitalfields and Bethnal Green. The journeymen's tenement houses were built for people whose lives were dominated by work; they were perhaps the first houses where design was directly associated with the needs of a single industry. There are very few remaining – many are derelict and severely dilapidated – and there is nothing else like them in London. These houses are a crucial part of the history of the East End and its role as an important manufacturing and creative hub.

A number of the journeymen weavers were Huguenots – French Protestants – many emigrating from France to escape religious persecution after the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685. Around 50,000 Huguenots came to England with many settling in London: in Soho, the City, Clerkenwell, Greenwich, Spitalfields and Wandsworth. Others went further afield, to Canterbury, Colchester, Faversham, Norwich



and Sudbury. In England, they practised their faith in peace and used their talents to provide for themselves. One area in which the Huguenots were particularly skilled and industrious was silk weaving.

In the late seventeenth century, Huguenot immigration was an important factor in Bethnal Green's growth and demography. About 15–20% of the names in the land-tax assessments for the streets, appear to be of French origin – 9 of 42 names on Sclater Street in 1728, figures that are consistent with other estimates for Spitalfields more generally. Overwhelmingly dependent on silk, Huguenots appear to have mixed with the English, their addresses perhaps determined principally by wealth or by trade speciality rather than by ethnicity.

Journeyman weavers earned up to 15 shillings a week in the 1760s, but there were often long periods of unemployment, therefore this is not translatable as an income of £39 a year. Incomes of £20 a year and less were widespread. Calculating what an economic historian of eighteenth-century London has deemed an average expenditure of about an eighth of income on rent, a room in a Sclater Street house would have been affordable with an income of £20 a year and thus within reach of typical journeymen weavers.

Throughout the eighteenth century, silk was one of London's largest industries. It dominated Spitalfields, and with it Bethnal Green. Imported raw silk was thrown then dyed, bought by a master weaver and 'put out' to journeymen for weaving. The weaving was carried out in houses in areas that were first developed in association with the growth of the industry, largely for occupation by weavers whose home lives were dominated by work. In London's more central areas many poor people were accommodated in old buildings, but that was not a possibility at the edge where there was a need for housing purpose-built for the working, that is weaving, poor. These houses were not simply domestic architecture, but equally industrial buildings.

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, there was generally a family in every room. Daniel Lysons reported in 1795 that, 'The town part of this parish is extremely populous; being inhabited principally by journeymen weavers, who live three or four families in a house'. During the early nineteenth century, the number of people per house declined, and living standards perhaps improved somewhat with numerous new streets of cottages for single-family occupation.

In so far as there are accepted images of weavers' housing in Spitalfields and Bethnal Green they tend to have their roots in two places: the converted attics of early eighteenth-century merchants' houses in Spitalfields proper, as on Fournier Street, or the no-longer extant rows of two-storey early nineteenth-century cottages, as where the Boundary Street Estate followed. An entire class of eighteenth-century weavers' tenement houses, now scarcely surviving, has been forgotten.

It is hard to know what the eighteenth-century weavers' tenements were like as homes. The rhetoric of squalor from that time needs to be offset against the fact that cleanliness would have been paramount in the production of fine silks. Poor though they were, weavers could not have lived in filth.

The eighteenth-century streets of Bethnal Green's weaving district bore little resemblance to anything with which readers may be familiar. The disregard for elevational symmetry that is such an arresting quality of the journeymen weavers' housing needs to be understood in functional terms, both in relation to multiple occupation by journeymen, and in terms of workshop use. Fenestration patterns are key, most obviously through the wide so-called 'weavers' windows'. The maximizing of light in rooms used for intricate weaving was a priority. Broad windows in the main body of the house, as opposed to in attics, are clear indicators that the houses were designed for, rather than altered to, workshop use. Brick front walls tended to make segmentally-arched heads to wide windows a structural necessity. Flat-arched heads to such openings would have been technically difficult. Even so, full-width windows were more readily achieved just below the eaves, sometimes also in timber back walls.

The big 'weavers' window' is only part of the peculiar fenestration. The other part is the small staircase



Far left: 125 Brick Lane, a shop and workshop tenement probably built in 1778 for Daniel Dellacort, a distiller

Left: 70–74 Schlater Street. No 70 was refronted in 1777 (Photos by The Gentle Author)

window, once especially prominent on Sclater Street. These invariably occur in entrance bays, lighting winder staircases that rose in the front corners of one-room-plan houses. The surviving houses at 70–74 Sclater Street, again of around 1720, largely but conservatively rebuilt, also show this.

The placing of the staircase just inside the front door is unusual in urban houses of any period. It is inconvenient in a multi-storey home where the mediation of private circulation between storeys is generally desirable. However, it is appropriate to multiple occupation, as it allows upper-storey tenants to come and go without intruding into the ground-floor tenant's space. The front-staircase layout is also efficient in relation to the comings and goings of industrial use; eighteenth-century warehouses frequently had front staircases lit by small windows. In the weavers' houses, front staircases were also advantageous in terms of lighting. Most of them were brick fronted, in conformity with the London Building Acts, but many originally had timber back walls, so there could be full-width lighting to the rear, a possibility that would have been lost if the staircases were placed there. Thus, the front-staircase layout was probably favoured for a range of functional reasons.

The one-room plan was all but universal in eighteenth-century Bethnal Green. This is explicable in relation to multiple occupation and one-room tenancies, but it is probably above all a function of the need for good light in the room interiors, deriving from the silk industry and workshop use of most of the rooms. Any front-back two-room layout in a narrow-fronted urban house leaves the inner parts of the rooms without good natural light. The size of looms must have dictated the minimum dimensions for the rooms. Fronts of about 14ft (4m) were usual in the late seventeenth century, in houses that may have been built for single-family occupation, as on Castle Street. These rooms would have accommodated looms, but probably left little space for circulation. The early eighteenth-century houses tend to have 17ft (5m) fronts, which, in the event of multiple occupation and use of a single room as a family home, would have allowed for looms and a small amount of living space.

Probate inventories give us a more personal and less statistical picture. Susannah Lermigne was a silk windstress and widow who lived simply in two rooms, the contents of which were valued at only £1 16s 8d when she died in 1740. Both rooms contained

Far right: 190 and 192 Brick Lane, built 1778–9 by James Laverdure (Photo by The Gentle Author)

‘engines’ (or looms) as well as beds, one room also serving for cooking, with kettles, pans and bottles stowed away in a closet. Tenancy of a single room did not necessarily mean poverty, as is shown in the inventory of a room occupied by Anne Minier, another Bethnal Green widow, who died in 1752. She was not evidently a weaver, and the inventory gives no obvious indication of trade. Her room had two windows, two beds, a looking glass, an easy chair and a tea table. Her cooking equipment included a tea kettle and a coffee pot. Her goods were worth £18 2s 9d.

From the 1770s onwards weavers’ houses began to be given more regular elevations in both new houses and refrontings, sometimes without ‘weavers’ windows,’ but more usually retaining them, vertically aligned in single bays under parapets. In these new houses the small staircase windows were generally absent and frontages were sometimes back down to about 15ft. These houses seem no longer to have risen above three storeys, though the main blocks were still always one room deep.

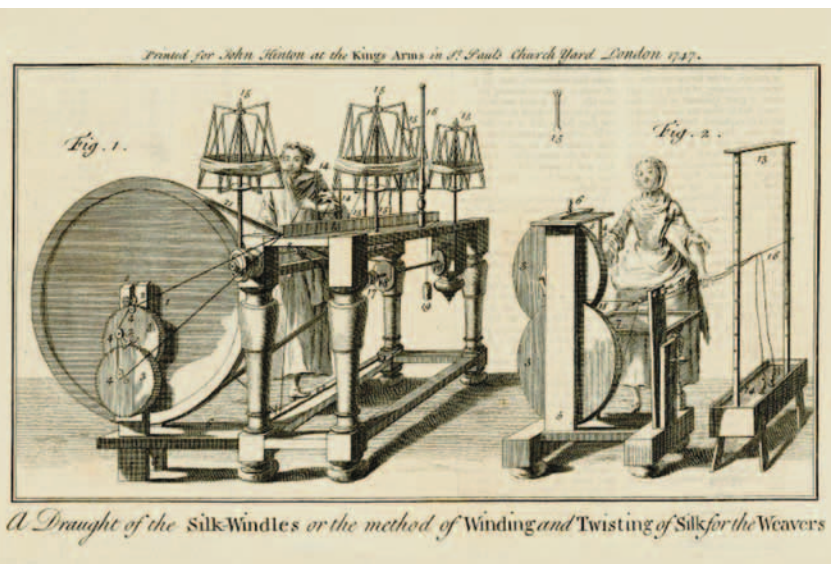
The Spitalfields silk industry’s last flourish in the



early nineteenth century was associated with a distinct, almost as if codified, change in housing form – the weaver’s cottage. Along numerous new streets houses like this and smaller were laid out, in long uniform rows, entirely brick and rising only two storeys. Better examples had two rooms on the ground floor in narrow fronts, with single-storey service ‘Ls’ to the rear and amply fenestrated first-floor workshops. These were clearly intended to be single-family houses, not tenements. The rationale for the front staircase and verticality were no longer operative.

For decades, Dan Cruickshank and The Spitalfields Trust have been relentless in their commitment to save Georgian architecture in Spitalfields. As a result, there have been some outstanding successes but the demands of developers mean that there have been some disappointments; the failure to conserve Norton Folgate is a great shame, and the compromised designs that will go ahead will in no way respect what little is left to protect.

A few years ago, the East End Preservation Society was formed by Will Palin and its enthusiastic and dedicated supporters are actively signing petitions and writing letters of objection to preserve the rich architectural fabric of the East End.



Above: *A Draught of the Silk Windles, or the Method of Winding and Twisting Silk for the Weavers*. An illustration from the *Universal Magazine*, dated 1747, showing two large apparatuses for making silk yarn



A design in pencil, pen and ink and watercolour on laid paper, dated 1707–8, from an album of designs by Spitalfields weaver James Leman (1688–1745). Leman was born into a weaving family of Huguenot descent and was apprenticed in 1702 to his father, Peter. He lived with his family in Stewart Street, Spitalfields (© Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Ref E.1861:36-1991)

Huguenots of Spitalfields, formed only five years ago, has done much to raise awareness of the extraordinary contribution that the Huguenots made in Spitalfields, holding walks, talks and events taking place in and around the Listed Georgian houses in Wilkes Street, Princelet Street and Fournier Street; in Hanbury Hall, once La Patente, a French Huguenot chapel, granted by James II; and in Christ Church, Hawksmoor's baroque masterpiece, considered by Professor Kerry Downs to be the finest baroque church in England.

Huguenots of Spitalfields launched a series of Journeymen Weavers' Houses walks to highlight

the plight of the now derelict buildings, and the stories behind the people who once lived there. In addition, Huguenots of Spitalfields applied to Tower Hamlets Council to have the journeymen weavers' houses Locally Listed, a campaign that is on-going. The organisation also coordinated two talks by Peter Guillery at the Guildhall Library and at the German Lutheran Church in the East End (hosted by SPAB) again to raise awareness of the campaign to save the houses of the journeymen weavers. The preservation of the houses features in the charity's HLF funded primary school programme to ensure that the younger generations are aware of the Huguenot legacy in Spitalfields.

All three organisations are committed to saving the journeymen weavers' houses. Although they do not have the funds or remit to purchase these historic buildings, they work tirelessly to draw attention to these very special houses that have a special place in British architectural history.

Dan Cruickshank shares his views on the importance of the journeyman weaver houses and why they should be saved

The silk industry that thrived in Spitalfields from the late seventeenth century to the 1760s and then, in fits and starts, continued into the mid nineteenth century, is rightly famous. The Huguenots, who started the industry, created a most valuable trade that not only produced an often stunningly beautiful fabric but which also generated the wealth that fuelled much of the growth of Spitalfields as one of London's most important merchant and manufacturing quarters.

The traces left by the silk industry are sadly few and those that do survive – if viewed superficially – tend to create a false impression about how the industry functioned. What survives in Spitalfields are the middling houses of early eighteenth-century date – mostly in Elder, Fournier, Wilkes and Princelet streets – that were originally homes to merchants, and generally not in mixed or shared use nor used primarily as workshops or counting houses. Some of these houses are large and most impressive – the biggest are mostly in

Fournier Street – but these do not compare in their grandeur with the great – and now long lost – merchant palaces of Spital Square. Created in the early 1730s for master weavers and entrepreneurs when the industry was booming, the best contained bold Baroque plasterwork, panelling and staircases of the finest quality, and possessed a generous sense of space. The sole surviving Spital Square house, number 37, dates from the 1740s and, although a fine building, does but hint at the ambition expressed by the lost palaces on the east side of the square.

Also lost – and arguably the most tragic loss when it comes to understanding the Spitalfields silk industry – are the humble buildings, of specialized design, in which journeymen weavers and their families lived and in which most of the silk was woven. These houses – with wide windows in the back and front elevations of their upper storeys, residential lower storeys and perhaps shops on the ground floors – and typically with small windows lighting very utilitarian newel staircases – once existed in their thousands. They could be found in courts and small streets within the heart of Spitalfields, but mostly on the periphery of the area, and in Bethnal Green and Shoreditch. Their lack of architectural display, the often rudimentary nature of their construction and sometimes years of poor maintenance or slum-use means that only a couple of dozen or so of these journeyman houses now survive. You can glimpse these survivors in Sclater Street (the best derelict for decades and cocooned in scaffolding), in Brick Lane, in Bethnal Green Road, in Redchurch Street (no. 113 which dates from 1735, is listed but continues to languish as it awaits repair and conversion into shops and offices), and in Club Row where a splendid pair, each with two storeys of wide windows, dates from 1764.

These fragmentary remains represent an immensely important building type, hovering on the cusp between traditional cottage industry and factory architecture. But – despite their rarity and architectural and historic importance – many of the survivors are now derelict, poorly maintained and appear generally unappreciated, with only a couple protected by listing. Fifteen years ago, Peter Guillery documented these buildings in his epic and seminal book *The Small House in Eighteenth Century London*. Their story has been told. Now is the time to take action to save what remains.

Details from Samuel Wilson's pattern book of Spitalfields silk. Photo courtesy of Kate Wigley at the School of Textiles

