

Rebecca Ough-Transcription

Audio Quality: Good, very clear. Some background noise from 13.28 to end.

0:00:00

LMI: Hi, I'm here with Rebecca Ough. And Rebecca, would you like to introduce yourself and tell us who you are and what you do?

RO: I'm Rebecca, I run Salt Weave Studio, just based down in Shipley, which is a woven design studio where I design fabrics on my hand loom and then I work with mills in the area to produce fabric on a larger scale.

LMI: Where are the mills in the area?

RO: I work with a few different ones, so, a couple over in Lancashire, a couple in Yorkshire.

LMI: And how did you get into doing this?

RO: I studied at Bradford College to do an art foundation course, which was where I first saw a hand loom. I didn't actually use them at Bradford College but, um yeah, that's where my interest was peaked. And then I went on to study textiles at Manchester School of Art, where I specialized in woven design.

LMI: And was that a very a three-year course?

RO: Yeah so, yeah yeah, it was a three-year course, where you started off just - the first year was like exploring all of the different textile options, and then second and third year I specialized in woven textiles.

LMI: So, the other day I interviewed someone who is, was, a textile designer, but way back in the 80s, before computers. So do you use a computer to do your design?

RO: Yes, so, my loom is semi computerized, so I do a lot of my design work on a computer, but a lot of the time actually it starts off with squared paper and I'm drawing out patterns before inputting it onto my computer, but um, yeah.

0:01:51

LMI: She talked about projecting the squared pattern onto a wall so you could see the individual picks and mark them all off.

RO: Oh mapping it out.

LMI: Yes and you presumably you have to do all of that.

RO: Yeah well, it's still - I guess it's like the same process on a computer like I've got a grid which I'm drawing squares on so it's still the same process, not much has changed in terms of that.

LMI: And what kind of fabrics?

RO: So, I do quite a wide range, and I've got my own range of blankets that I do.

LMI: I think I've got one just here actually, I'm looking at. It's very lovely, very soft.

RO: Yeah, I make blankets and scarves. So, I've hand wove all the samples to test out different designs and colours before working with the mill to develop it on a larger scale.

0:02:48

RO: So that's one side, but then the other side is I work with a few different companies designing fabrics for them. So I offer them like a design service, which I hand-weave initially, and I come up with the technical information to be able to weave it.

LMI: Is it this kind of thicker textile that you design, this um, blankets and thicker fabrics?

RO: It's a lot of upholstery fabric I do as well, and tweed, and sort of fashion apparel fabrics I do as well. Sort of like industrial fabrics, which is a tricky one to pin down.

LMI: I immediately think of seat coverings for buses and things like that.

RO: Yeah, I haven't actually done that. That's a, yeah, like a maquette fabric, that's called. A different type of weaving is that, but, yeah, I guess industrial uses.

0:03:37

RO: I can't really.

LMI: Is it...? Do they tend to be bespoke designs?

RO: Yeah, yeah, they're all bespoke designs for the individual companies. And I help them with the supply chain, so sourcing yarns, materials...

LMI: So you specify all of that?

RO: Yeah, so I do all the... like fibre sourcing for them and... yeah, develop the right quality fabric they're looking for; so the right weight, the right handle, but also bearing in mind sort of the technical specifications of the fabrics as well, so, like how hard wearing it is, how strong it is. So, I keep that all in mind whilst I'm designing as well.

LMI: So, up the road is Salts Mill, and that employed something like, I don't know, 2,000 people or something, in its hey-day

0:04:41

LMI: And it sounds like you're doing everything that those 2,000 people had, to do.

RO: Well, on a very small scale. So I'm really focusing on the design side, so the very much like the beginning side, and the sourcing. So I work with lots of different companies, sourcing yarns, and then the manufacturing. So I don't do the manufacturing myself, whereas at Salts Mill they would have done the manufacturing.

LMI: So do you feel very much like you're part of a history, a story of textiles in Bradford?

RO: Yeah, I think, I guess so in a way. It's something I've not really thought about like that, but I've worked at a few different mills in Yorkshire, so I guess I have been part of like the textile landscape, I guess you could call it. Because it's not... there's still, there is still some some really high quality mills operating around here.

0:05:39

RO: And it's a really... I think maybe people assume that it's in the past and it's not really happening anymore. But you still have these really top quality, like world renowned mills.

LMI: Can you name any of them?

RO: Yeah, so, A.W. Hainsworth is a really good example. They weave all the Royal Guard fabric for the guards in London, transport fabrics for aeroplanes, protective fabrics for the fire brigade.

0:06:12

RO: So yes, some really like prestigious...

LMI: Any others? Any others?

RO: Abraham Moon is another good example. They're based in Guiseley.

LMI: Oh, I've bought one of their blankets.

RO: Yeah, really nice designs.

LMI: And do you design for those two companies?

RO: No, I don't. They've got their own in-house design teams. I used to work at A.W. Hainsworth.

LMI: So how long have you been doing this? You left college...

0:06:45

RO: I graduated in 2015 from Manchester School of Arts. I've been working in the industry and then for myself since then. So yeah, about eight years, is that? I think.

LMI: And do you think people are interested in the sort of, the world of textiles in Bradford and the work you do? I mean, do you get a lot of interest?

RO: Yeah, I think I've been quite lucky. I've worked with some really good companies that are really interested in what I can offer. I think the fact that I'm able to offer a small scale design service is quite appealing. It makes it quite flexible. They're not tied into sort of huge design costs if they go straight to a mill direct.

LMI: So if I came along now and said "I'm running a big mill down the road and I want you to come and work for me." Would you think about it? Or do you like being a small business?

0:07:43

RO: I do like being a small business. It means I'm able to work on lots of different types of projects. It keeps it really interesting.

LMI: And you do your own projects as well, don't you?

RO: Yeah, so I've got my own designs that I'm always developing in the background as well.

LMI: And you told me when we met the other day, you're getting a new loom or something.

RO: Yes, I've been really lucky and my friend David's passed me his old loom which is a Hattersley loom which was designed and manufactured in Keighley. So, really like local textile heritage. And I think it, I think it's from like 19... I want to say 1940s but I need to find out the exact date...

LMI: It's going back a bit.

RO: But it's a really old piece of equipment.

LMI: Completely mechanical?

0:08:29

RO: Yeah, completely mechanical. It's pedal operated, so you basically cycle it like a bike.

LMI: That will keep you fit.

RO: Yeah. So that will be, yeah, I'm really excited to sort of expand into the micro manufacturing side of things. So it will allow me to design fabrics in-house and manufacture

on a smaller scale, but then also work with larger mills for larger quantities as well. So it's quite a flexible operation.

LMI: Can you see yourself growing your business? If you had the chance to do that, would you want to do that?

0:09:06

RO: Yeah, that's the plan. Yeah, I hope to move into manufacturing as well as design. So that will expand what I'm able to offer people, and maybe even in the future have someone work with me.

LMI: So, to give the listeners a bit of a sense of where we are, we're in a purpose-built studio inside Wharf Street Mills, is that what it's called?

RO: Wharf Street Studios.

LMI: Wharf Street Studios. And it's not a huge space, but it's got a lot of things in it, including this... Is this a cutting table, this thing?

0:09:40

RO: Yes, I unpack all my rolls of fabric in here and inspect them all, cut them up.

LMI: So when you get a blanket like this, do you have to actually make the blankets from the material that you've designed that's been woven by someone else?

RO: Yes, so the fabric that's been woven at the mill comes back to me on big rolls, and I unroll it all, cut them to the right size, and sew all the edges and finish them in my studio here.

LMI: And over in one corner is some shelving with lots and lots of bobbins of various sizes with lots of different kinds of fabric on them. Do you want to talk about what that is, lots of yarns on, would you like to tell me what they are?

RO: Yes, so I've got quite a big variety of yarns in my studio so I... When I work with different companies they require different types of fibres, different thicknesses of yarns, different... yeah, just different qualities of yarn. So I've built up quite a nice stash over the few years. So I've got a range from Merino Lamb's wool, Shetland wool - I have quite a bit of Shetland wool, cotton, linens.

0:10:57

LMI: Do you use artificial fibres at all?

RO: I try to focus my business mainly on natural fibres, so I use wool wherever I can. Some cases it does need to have some man-made fibres in it, such as nylon for strength purposes and abrasion purposes. Like if the fabric needs to be quite hard wearing. But yeah, I try to use high quality wool.

LMI: So you must have got, you've got, you have to think about colour and then shape and pattern design, strength, some durability, all those things when you're putting a design together?

RO: Yes, so there's a lot that goes into it really. I guess you have to start with the fibre itself.

LMI: Do you have a favourite colour palette?

RO: I guess I'd always go to undyed natural colours.

0:11:51

LMI: Ah, right.

RO: Yeah, that is my favourite.

LMI: So, do you know about dyeing as well?

RO: Yeah, so I often work with dyers if a customer wants certain shades for their particular project. I work with local dyers who dye.

LMI: So where are the local dyers?

RO: There's one in Keighley that I work with, a little bit, and then there are others in Scotland that I work with as well.

LMI: And again, I presume some of those use more natural dyes than other people?

RO: Yeah, well it's a big talking point at the moment, is natural dyes. It's not quite at the stage yet where you could use them commercially, natural dyes. So a lot of the time it is chemical based. But hopefully that will change in the future as more research comes out.

0:12:48

LMI: And are there other people like you around in Bradford?

RO: Yeah, there's definitely a community of hand weavers. I guess there's quite a lot of hobbyist hand weavers.

LMI: Have a loom at home?

RO: Yeah, I think weaving has become more popular... as sort of like a therapeutic craft.

LMI: Like pottery or?

RO: Yeah, I don't think there's many small businesses doing what I'm doing in this area. There is a few around the country. But yeah, it's a very friendly community of weavers.

LMI: It is really interesting.

0:13:32

LMI: So, the fact that manufacturers, I presume some of them are quite big manufacturers, will come to you, rather than to some design house somewhere, or have a load of in-house designers?

RO: Yeah, I guess... So I tend to work with commission weavers, so I would be approaching the weavers to say, "Oh could you weave this for me?" Which then will be passed on to my customer. But my customers themselves... I guess the small to medium sized businesses that I work with, I guess because I'm able to offer quite a flexible service and tailor it to what they need.

LMI: It's quite a nice thought isn't it, having the things you make in homes all over the country. And presumably all over the world? I mean, do you get customers from far away?

RO: Yeah, well, I'm still building that up. My own products tend to be just in the UK. I think the 'Made in Yorkshire' tag line really attracts local people. But yeah, maybe one day.

LMI: Well, we'll stop there unless you've got anything else you want to say about the work you do if you think I've missed out anything really important.

0:14:51

RO: Maybe just that I say that I think it's a really good career path is textiles and I do think that sometimes it's overlooked in this area, but it's a really growing industry.

LMI: That's interesting isn't it, because it's... I think sometimes... and some of the stories we've got already from people who've worked in mills in the 60s and 70s, it's seen as a sort of a bit of a sweatshop, hard work, you know... Whereas obviously, you're doing something quite different in that respect.

RO: Yeah, I guess it probably does have that sort of, yeah, appearance from the outside. but a lot of the really good textile companies in the area tend to be family run. Have a really good sort of community.

LMI: Community is really something that's come across quite strongly as well. People who've worked in mills and found it quite hard work, still talk about the community and the people who worked in them and pride as well for what they did.

RO: Yeah, definitely. I think everyone I've worked with in textiles is really sort of interested and engaged in what they're doing and do have a feeling of, yeah, pride about what they're making because it's, I think it's... it is such a craft and a skill.

0:16:14

RO: And I think there's so many different career options within textiles, like engineering, like mechanical engineering is a really big thing in textiles. So it's not just the design side, it's like, there's a whole spectrum of different jobs in textiles.

LMI: It is, and I've been amazed by how many different jobs I've come across. I interviewed a woman the other day who was... she stopped working in the mill about 30 years ago, and she could still remember all... she was a spinner, so she spans from... and she knew every movement of the spinning machine she had to go through, to get it, because the lines, they break, and the cones have to be replaced, all that kind of stuff. Doffers, you have to be a doffer. And so, and she obviously lived it, and I said, "If I put you in front of a spinning loom tomorrow, mill tomorrow, would you be able to do it?" She said "Oh yeah absolutely, absolutely." And it was all still there in like a muscle memory.

RO: Yeah, definitely, yeah, and it's such a skill as well, that sort of thing. Yeah, I'm always amazed by like the menders in the textile department who can mend like any hole in a fabric. It's really impressive to watch.

LMI: Well, that's great.

0:17:31

LMI: Thanks very much, Rebecca. I really appreciate it. It's great, great to talk to you, and it's great to know that you're part of a continuing story of Bradford's textile industry because it's something that people think has gone away and it hasn't at all.

RO: Yeah, thank you for involving me.