

Inspiring our *futures*

Tracy Spiers examines the Cotswold art and wool legacy

Decades ago an abundance of red scarlet cloth was spread out to dry on racks in the green fields of Stroud. There's a wonderful historic painting in the town's Museum in the Park illustrating this amazing sight. Hundreds of mills dominated the skylines – not just in Stroud, but throughout the Cotswolds – and were brimming with life, roaring with sounds of water wheels and heavy looms turning many of our Cotswold towns and villages into wonderful centres for the woollen industry. They may be quieter these days and some are sadly redundant, but many mills have been given fresh leases of life, new creative industries have evolved and buildings have now been restored to their former glory. As for the wool which all started with the Cotswold Lion – the native sheep famous throughout Europe during the 13-15th centuries for their heavy fleeces and high quality of wool – it lives on through the plethora of textile artists who work tirelessly in studios tucked away in old redundant mills, attics, garden studios and contemporary spaces. If you want to see some of them then Select 2013 organised by Stroud International Textiles (April 27–May 26) is hosting a Select Trail of crafts and applied arts on May 11, 12, 18 and 19 as part of their Spring Select 2013 programme. (www.sitselect.org)

This is an exciting and innovative programme of textiles and makers work in exhibitions and events in Gloucestershire. Among the 40 participating artists will be Polly Lyster who instead of red scarlet, hand-dyes indigo fabric; Cleo Mussi mosaics exhibiting with Annie Hewett (ceramics), Fionna Hesketh (enamel jewellery), Susan Early (traditional & contemporary willow), Red Heart designer knitwear, Liz Lippiatt (screen printing & costume design) and award-winning Nick Ozanne (hand weaver).

Artistic prowess and creative talent are ingrained in the Cotswolds DNA. It is an area famous for its arts, crafts and antiques. Influential figures such as William Morris and the Arts and Crafts Movement left an indelible mark on the world of art and design in the UK. Leading



Illustration by Tracy Spiers

practitioners left London to move here. Morris spent summers at Kelmescott Manor near Lechlade; architect designers Ernest Gimson and brothers Ernest and Sidney Barnsley, settled near Cirencester and CR Ashbee and some 100 followers settled in Chipping Campden, bringing with them the ethos of the Guild of Handicraft which had worldwide influence. In Broadway another craftsman, Gordon Russell, established a workshop and showrooms. It goes on and decades later artists continue to leave their inspired marks. I encourage you to take time to visit a gallery, workshop, studios or embrace one of the many arts festivals and see those influences for yourself.

We owe a lot to our creative past thanks to some very key people. The following have left their trace behind because they were inspired by the very surroundings we enjoy. Many Cotswold towns and villages remain unspoilt and thus look as they did when these men and women visited and lived here:

- **William Shakespeare** (1564–1616) - most famous of all playwrights and poets, born and brought up in Stratford-upon-Avon.
- **William Henry Fox Talbot** (1800-1877) – discovered developing, fixing, and printing process that underpinned most photography for the last 160 years. Lived

at Lacock Abbey, Wiltshire.

- **John Singer Sargent** (1856–1925) - leading American portrait painter in Edwardian period. Stayed in Broadway and painted Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose, his most famous painting there.

- **Beatrix Potter** (1866–1943), author of Peter Rabbit and other stories. Her third book *The Tailor of Gloucester* is set in the city of Gloucester inspired by visits when staying with a cousin at Harescombe Grange, between Gloucester and Stroud.

- **Gustav Holst** (1874-1934), British composer born in Cheltenham, best known for his orchestral suite *The Planets*.

- **Edward Elgar** (1857-1934), friend of Holst, born in Lower Broadheath, near Worcester, composed many patriotic works in support of war effort including *Pomp and Circumstance March No 1*.

- **John Betjeman** (1906-1984), popular British poet of his age; received countless awards; stayed at Sezincote House in Bourton-on-the-Hill in the 1920s while studying at Oxford University Magdalen College and lived in Wantage, Oxfordshire for many years.

- **Jane Austen** (1775-1817), English novelist of romantic fiction, one of Bath's most loved famous residents and visitors. *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* are largely set in Bath.

- **Laurie Lee** (1914–1997), poet and author from Slad, near Stroud. *Cider with Rosie* is still one of the UK's most popular books and is studied by young literary students all over the world.

- **TS Eliot** (1888 to 1965), publisher, playwright, literary, social critic and most important 20th century English-language poet. Nobel Prize winner, Eliot wrote *The Country Walk*, a poem highlighting his fear of cows whilst on a Cotswold ramble.

Creative people today ensure the traces of their ancestors continue. Building on past inspiration, they continue to leave their legacy including well-known names such as Damien Hirst, Jilly Cooper, JK Rowling, PJ Crook, Joanna Trollope, Katie Fforde and Kate Winslet, who all live in the Cotswolds. But I also want to pay tribute to the not-so-well-known who beaver away at their chosen discipline and will leave their own important marks to enthuse future generations. ■