**Sudbury Silk Stories Interviews**

Andrew Phillips - Lord Philips of Sudbury

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FULL TRANSCRIPT (with timecode)

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The background is a thousand years of history. This is the oldest continuous weaving town in the United Kingdom and the weaving business started before Edward the third encouraged over the Flemings who were more advanced in their techniques I understand than the locals there was weaving going on here then and it is an extraordinary fact that it's never stopped because when it afflicted the decline in wool weaving here

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ruled out weaving in most other of the local communities.

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We survived because we attracted the Spittlefield's Silk weavers, a lot of them Huguenots. So we have a remarkable history

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Huguenots came from France

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mainly around the city of Lyon. And they were French Protestants effectively. And

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they were persecuted increasingly. And

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they were, themselves, very early on, a Weaving centre

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And they threatened to leave, well they were leaving France in large numbers. Some of them went to Holland and the Flemish land. So the French gave them freedom of worship.

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But silly old Louis

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Revoked it because the the the freedom of worship was in an edict gaudy edict of not.

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But that was revoked in the 60s 90s by the French monarch which exposed them to instant persecution and prosecution

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And huge numbers of them fled France. And we were lucky enough to find that many of the Weavers came to London. A part of London, north east London. That was, I think pretty well vacant land then, now called Spitalfields. There they started the silk weaving industry

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and it all goes on from there. They eventually moved out this way not totally and exclusively but overwhelmingly the silk

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emigration from Spitalfields came in this direction because there were a huge number of wool weavers out of work because the wool weaving went north. As mechanisation came in. Mechanisation was aided and abetted by

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the coal industry and and so on which enabled the machines to be powered by Coal and water and so on here the weaving was done

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by foot power and, as such, it lost most of its wool weaving over a period of 40, 60 years in the mid 18th century leaving huge pools of unemployed skilled people. And that's why they had the good sense to come out this way to take advantage of that. The French Huguenots settled into Sudbury and neighbouring I mean Braintree and Bocking, Halstead.

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They they took it in quite large numbers.

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So it was

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also accelerated all of that by the fact that the Huguenot

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Merchants in Spitalfields were finding the wages they had to pay to their workers its in Spitalfields too high for them to compete in foreign exports. The cost of weavers out here was very much less. So there was a straight economic benefit as well as a skills benefit and much of our produce.

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In those eighteenth century days was exported and still is.

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I think certainly here. But I think in Spitalfields as well the people who did the weaving, were self-employed but had individual contracts with the merchants to produce X yards of Y fabric

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and that was certainly the case here. So there was negotiation on how much

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The Weaver would ask and how much the merchant would pay. And that persisted until actually the weaving went from individual houses into factories purpose built factories and that didn't happen until the mid 19th century in Sudbury

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And We still have uniquely rows of terraced houses. Which are three story, ground floor living space, top floor

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bedding, middle floor working space. They wanted good light. So they put their looms on the middle floor. And then they let off the individual houses to individual craftsmen and they would carry on in the old fashion knows how moms called jobbing

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Jobbing weavers. They had various names and

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the

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Journeyman they were called. So it was an extraordinary fact that not until as I say the mid 19th century did most of these weavers start to be

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Truly employed. And of course that

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Independent arrangement was a signal factor in the extraordinary history of this town which is little appreciated because we here in Sudbury and the weaving communities all around places like Bildeston and Gelmsford and Lavenham and Clare and so on. Hadleigh.

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This was the heartland of independence of thought and action in both politics and religion. This was the heartland of the Protestant growth the heartland of the lowland movement the heartland of parliamentary power in the Civil War the heartland of the emigration to the United States and in effect the creation of the United States.

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So all I think related to the independent culture bred by the weaving industry and its inherent independence.

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If you were self-employed you were at the mercy of your merchants or merchants who normally dealt with.

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And if they decided to get tough you could find yourself with no work to do. Having to look for other merchants with whom to work because they tended to have a relationship with a particular merchant it's tended to be mutual loyalties and the effectiveness of it. They knew each other. They knew how to deal with each other so it was a very you know the whole system.

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But there were abuses. Yes. I think in the height of the nineteenth century there were six separate firms

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Making silk

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Five or six and. Of course. A huge number of. Independent weavers

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Don't forget right until well after the war

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There weren't just the three firms we have today.

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There were other firms I mean there was it. They weren't silk.

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They were weaving What was it called Cornard Knitting owned by Mr. Heyman employed two or three hundred people. That was not natural wool or silk it was manmade fibres. And that was going full tilt until twenty years ago. I think there were a few other firms like that.

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I think the

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the role of weaving in the town

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has given it

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a certain outward lookingness as well as that independence of thought and belief. If you were exporting a huge chunk of what you make overseas. Then you know. You're bound to have a bit of interest in what's going on over there and suddenly the owners. And the merchants they did a lot of travelling to their overseas main customers their main customers were merchants in foreign countries

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Who bought from them. They wanted to keep abreast of developments in design and fashion and we were good at that. I mean right back until I love the idea. That in the 13th century we were absolutely at the cutting edge of the then very colorful fabrics. Wool. But colourful bright designs that were then fashionable and dear ol' Sudbury we were right there right with it and we still are.

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It's still a town of independent thinking and that's partly why I love it. You know people are gonna be pushed around. They think for themselves. And it's it's not just money either. The considerations which lead to Local people making decisions about whatever.

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It's sophisticated.

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Populace. I would say. And it's imbued still imbued and you can't measure it or

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Precisely describe it but there is a profound culture of independent thought and action. I'm not gonna be pushed around. OK. You've told me what you think but I'm sorry I don't agree. And I'm going to do this or that I'm going to vote for this or that. I'm not going to vote at all because you're all a load of whatnots and so on and it's still. It's still here.

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Hard to say. I mean I tend to exaggerate the virtues that it's brought us. But I'm convinced that they're very real. And one of the things that is little understood is the profoundest possible influence of this culture that I've been trying to discard scribe on the creation of the United States because the emigration that really did

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found America pilgrim fathers you know they've fizzled out

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Winthrop, his emigration of 16 thirty, what is eleven ships, was followed over the next 12 years until the Civil War started here in Sixteen forty two. There was a constant emigration from this country they reckoned about thirty thousand people. And a huge amount of work done on this, the reckoning is 25 to 30 percent of those thirty thousand odd people came from within 15 miles of this town

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and I think if you look at the way America develops the values that were fed into a Declaration of Independence they are palpably akin to those which ruled the roost here

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Both in the days of emigration and afterwards. And it's a lovely thought.

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And indeed in 60 42 there was a big emigration is almost stopped because the people who are going to the Massachusetts they were the same people who were totally opposed to what Charles the Second did economically and religiously. And once that led to a rebuttal by the Civil War. A lot of them came back to support the parliamentary cause and stayed.

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But the Values they'd implanted remained rooted and are still there.

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well I was lucky enough to

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get to know Peter Walters very well and I got to know Gordon Kipling

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quite well I did some work for him in the 60s

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and two remarkable men and I think the silk industry was had an unusual proportion of

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Unusual and unusually talented people.

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Gordon Kipling was quite controversial he was could be very rough tough fella but he was brilliant in his way and led Vanners to great distinction and you know a lot of the people who work for him you know they realised that he could be a difficult boss but he was also a very able one and he did try and look after their interests and certainly all of that is true of Peter Walters so he didn't have the sort of

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Sharp temperament of

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The other fella.

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but no I know the more recent

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Walters generations and I know our new arrival who I think you've spoken to

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And you know it breeds an interesting sort of person and the people who work for these firms

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Running a loom requires huge skill and intelligence. People underestimate how much intelligence needs to be deployed when you're

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Doing a complicated job with a complicated pattern and all sorts of changes in fibres and so on.

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So it's innate that it encourages individualism and collectivism because you can't have an effective place of silk manufacture without

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a total collaboration between all involved and you've got the different processes.

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There are half a dozen processes in producing a silk fabric so you know it requires both qualities collectivism and individualism and it is just lovely because they stick around. I mean very few people who work in the silk business in this town leave it the characteristics that I've touched upon have all benefited the town in another way a general way in that

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The people who've been in and are in this remarkable industry in Sudbury carry their talents and attitudes into their life outside the firms

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So into the incredible number of organisations and clubs and societies in the town into civic life. And so there's a mutuality here that is of benefit to everybody and that's why we are so lucky in why we are such a very particular and I think Happy Town.