

# **GLASGOW COLOUR STUDIES GROUP**

## **Notes following the Thirteenth Meeting, 9th February 2011**

The thirteenth meeting of the GCSG took place in Room 1, English Language, University of Glasgow. Thanks are due to David Simmons who acted as master of ceremonies, and to Christian Kay who organized the refreshments.

Our speaker was David Harvie, a writer on historical subjects, who has produced books on the conquest of scurvy, the production, use and abuse of Radium, and on Gustave Eiffel. He is also a local historian for Dumbarton and the Vale of Leven.

### **David Harvie spoke on ‘Textiles in the Vale of Leven, 1715-1960’**

“In a three-mile stretch of the River Leven, top quality mechanical engineers, chemists, designers, printers, wood-carvers and craftsmen of all descriptions worked shoulder-to-shoulder with poorly paid labourers and badly exploited women and children. In one year alone, 165 million yards of cloth and 20 million pounds of cotton yarn were produced. At a time when most of the people of Britain dressed in dark brown or black, spectacular colours and designs were produced, almost all for export to exotic destinations. In the peak year, 8-10,000 people were employed annually in this internationally important industry: today, scandalously, it is if they had never existed”.

David Harvie’s talk was important for reminding us (or informing us for the first time) of the huge textile industry of the Vale of Leven, the last vestiges of which were swept away well within living memory. American cotton, and later, west African cotton was spun at various places in the UK, and then sent to a string of printworks along the River Leven to be printed with astonishingly exotic designs and startling colours. David revealed some fascinating details, such as a mordant (which fixes the dye in the cloth) made from a mixture of bulls’ blood, rancid olive oil and sheep manure! He also spoke of the appalling dangers of the industry, and the deaths and injuries suffered by the workers, including children. Starting with engraved holly-wood blocks to print the fabric, by the late 18th century, the industry was using engraved copper cylinders. Dalmonach Works, for example, had 28 machines, each of which could print 16 colours more or less simultaneously. The industry suffered several blows in later years, such as the rise of the Indian textile industry (India had been a major importer of Leven textiles), the invention of synthetic dyes, and a series of strikes between 1911-1931. The factories at Cordale and Dalquhurn closed in 1942, and Alexandria closed in 1960. Last to disappear was the British Silk Dyers Ltd (at the present-day Loch Lomond Shores) which closed in 1980. None of these important industrial historical sites have been preserved.

### **News**

- The next meeting of the GCSG will take place on Wednesday, 23rd March 2011 when Dr Carole Biggam will speak on ‘The End of the World (Colour Survey)’.

- Please help everyone by announcing any colour-related conferences or publications that come to your attention, on our discussion list at [ColourStudies@jiscmail.ac.uk](mailto:ColourStudies@jiscmail.ac.uk) Please also raise there any of your colour queries or problems, as our multidisciplinary membership is very likely to be able to help.