

Rayoneer Magazine Supplement, 1948

Claire Willetts, Collections and Exhibitions Curator at Braintree Museum

This Rayoneer magazine is part of our collection at Braintree Museum in North Essex. The map on the front cover shows the location of the Courtaulds textile mills across the country in 1948. It is an important part of our collection at Braintree Museum as it illustrates how the Courtaulds company expanded beyond its origins and home in Braintree District. Samuel Courtauld III opened his first mill in nearby Bocking in 1816 and established one of the most successful crape manufacturing companies in Victorian Britain. The company flourished with his brother's innovative and compact power loom and a unique technique of applying engraved designs onto black crape. Samuel Courtauld and Co became renowned for its expertise and designs in producing mourning crape, with the fashions in Victorian Britain creating a high demand for their fabric. New factories opened in Braintree and Halstead employing many local people, many of whom were women.

In the 1890s the demand for silk crape had begun to wane and the company began experimenting with creating new fabrics. They purchased the British rights to the viscose process of making artificial silk in 1904. In the Braintree mill workers wound and processed the new yarn and the company's first piece of artificial silk was successfully woven at Halstead Mill in March 1906. The creation of a commercial artificial fabric saw Courtaulds expand far beyond the success of the 1800s, Rayon would soon be worn by every man, woman and child in the modern world.

The 1920s were a time of great expansion and prosperity for the Courtaulds, Samuel Courtauld IV became chairman of Courtaulds Ltd and a prolific collector of Impressionist and Post-impressionist art. After the Second World War, Courtaulds group in partnership with Imperial Chemical Industries created a company called British Nylon Spinners. In 1948, the date of this Rayoneer Magazine, British Nylon Spinners successfully spun the first Nylon yarn in the UK.

The Courtauld National Partners project has enabled us to work with volunteers and our local communities to tell the next part of the company's story, collecting memories from those who worked at Courtaulds. From experiences of working in the mills on the first day, to the noise and smell of the mill floor. Social clubs and funny anecdotes has added a richness to our museum's collection. It gave us the opportunity to work with new volunteers, gain new skills and make connections with people who worked for the company. Memories that may otherwise have been lost have become part of our story, illustrating the significant impact the Courtauld company had on our district.