

THAT DRESS!



Once upon a time, just a little while ago, there was a beautiful princess with her handsome prince and the promise of a fairy tale wedding. On April 29, 2011 Miss Catherine Middleton married Prince William Arthur Philip Louis of Wales and her gown was almost anticipated as the event.

It was stunning – and drew on the best of British in design, fabric and craftsmanship –English lace and French Chantilly lace was used throughout the bodice and skirt, and was used for the underskirt trim.

The bodice of this gown was obviously lace – but the underskirts were a wispy dream so subtle that few photographs do them justice.

The lace appliqué for the bodice and skirt was sewn by hand embroiderers from the Royal School of Needlework, based at

Hampton Court Palace. A technique known as Carrickmacrosse was used to applique individual flowers to create a unique design, which incorporates the rose, thistle, daffodil and shamrock.

The underskirt is made of silk tulle trimmed with Cluny lace and all the lace trims on the gorgeous little girls' frocks were Cluny. And where did this come from? From the Cluny Lace Company Ltd at Ilkeston in Derbyshire – manufacturers of traditional Leavers laces since 1845! And is this important?

Yes it is! The Mason family who own the Cluny Lace Company have made some really brave decisions.



Sheila and John Mason of the Cluny Lace Company at the opening of Cite de la Dentelle in Calais 2009. Photograph G Kelly

Lifeonline, a multimedia initiative about the impacts of globalisation, tells the story:

Once the Lace Market of Nottingham pounded to the Heavy Metal beat of its handmade lace-making machines... but no more. The Cluny Lace Company is the last of its kind, still making world beautiful lace with its old jacquard machines. Charles Mason is the last of the lace makers. He has inherited a family business that's had to confront technological change, globalization and the credit crunch recession.

"We've been making lace for up to 9 generations. We can trace our roots back to the stocking frame manufacturing days. We're the last ones left in the UK. We've been the last ones left for maybe 15 years."

Cluny are taking a huge gamble based on the higher quality of their lace. The "Leavers" machines that they use have their origins in the 19th century and can produce lace of such intricacy that it still cannot be copied by modern machinery. 99% of the world's lace is now produced on high speed "Raschel" machines. So can a potential 1% market share ever be enough to sustain a business? For many years Cluny tried to answer this question by making lace on both types of machinery.

Says Sheila Mason: "We actually kept parallel to the Leavers machines our Raschel machines, we had a large modern Raschel machinery, absolutely fantastic for high speed production but we couldn't compete on price. We certainly couldn't compete on wages from the low-cost countries where the World Bank was proposing to set up this machinery. I mean Mr Blair for example just decided that

textiles was a low tech industry which could go abroad. I mean the whole of that trade was taken over by the Far East."

With no government subsidy, Cluny were eventually priced out by foreign competitors. Cluny defied conventional wisdom and sold off their modern equipment. It was an incredible gamble.

"Yes it was a risk, a very great risk," says Sheila, "but we had no option. If we had kept that Raschel plant I don't think the Leavers would have been here today."

Cluny lace looked to the past to secure their future; to establish a unique position in the market place. A niche brand in a globalized world. Using antique machinery and a highly specialised workforce, they rely on processes over 100 years old.

So the use of Cluny lace in THAT gown is very important!

Gillian Kelly

