

## A.Sindall: Textile trimming manufacturer, Dalston an interview with Mr. Cecil Sindall

Recorded and transcribed by Dr Denis Smith

*The family firm of Albert A Sindall, textile trimming manufacturer, was founded in 1864 by Mr Cecil Sindall's grandfather in Bethnal Green, moving to Dalston 10 years later. The area was well known until the 1970s for furniture and soft furnishings, with many firms providing a major source of employment. From small beginnings the firm grew to a peak of over 100 staff before 1939; after 1945, with increased mechanisation, about half that number were required. Sindall's materials were used on state occasions, and for uniforms in war and peace. Mr Sindall (Plate 1), who lives in Dalston close to the firm's former premises, started work in 1915 and retired in 1981, aged 81! when production moved to Derby. Mr. Sindall was recorded at his home Clifton House, 17 Malvern Road, Hackney, London E8 3LP Friday 15th March 1985.*

"Mr. Sindall's grandfather, George Bernard Thomas Sindall, started the firm, Albert A. Sindall in 1864, he was in his early youth at the time, he was working for Faudel Phillips in Newgate Street, City, and the buyer there wanted some tassels. So he said he thought his sisters could make those, and he bought his silks from Pearsalls in Little Britain, as they were then, and apparently made a success of the job with the tassels and was able to get started himself in business, gradually. He made a spinning walk down his garden at his home at 12 Peters Street in Bethnal Green - its not there anymore, its been built on. He gradually employed people, handloom weavers (Plate 2), and one thing and another, and built up until he wanted to enlarge and he went to Lansdowne Road, in 1874, where the church is built now, on the site there. He bought three houses - he occupied a large double-fronted house, number 102, Adelaide Lodge, with his family, numbers 100 and 98 were converted and a factory, plus the gardens - the gardens were built on, and my mother and father Albert Alexander Sindall, were married and lived in the upper part of number 98, where we were born, in February 1900, my twin brother, Redvers George, and myself. We had no light downstairs - when we were in the kitchen, if we wanted to look out of the window, we opened the window and watched the spinners walking up and down. When we were about five, my brother was ill and I was

allowed to go in the street with a little railway engine and run up and down on the pavement. I wasn't out there ten minutes before the old lady in the house next door came out - or sent her companion out to complain to my father about the noise I was making and we were not allowed to play in the street anymore - its a bit of a contrast with what you get today.

In 1906 we moved to the new factory, a 2-floor building approximately 130ft x 23ft, in Middleton Road, on the site of the stables attached to number 36, Albert Road, I should say - it didn't become Middleton Road until 1933, I think it was (Plate 3). We had to go to school, but we spent all our spare time playing in the factory, or trying to help somebody around the factory. In 1909-10 and 1911, additions were made to the factory by building on the garden of number 38 Albert Road. As we grew up we couldn't leave school fast enough, we didn't want to go anywhere else and when war broke out in 1914 my father decided to try and capture some of the German trade and he put all the power looms in. The floor was lowered by 6ft - which meant removing many tons of soil - to accommodate 10 new Jacquard looms which were built in Coventry by Thomas Chaplin & Co. The 400 needle double lift Jacquards, with 800 hooks and springs controlling 2,400 ends of harness each with a maileye and lingoe weight were built by William Devage & Co. Ltd., Manchester. The first loom arrived in 1915 and the remainder arrived at intervals throughout the war (Plate 4).

My brother Redvers and I were anxious to work in the factory and left school in 1915, in time to help to build them, working mainly in the new department, assisting in the erection of the 14 foot high looms, and it was a good job we did, really, because the manager that was engaged to do the job, he got his calling up papers, and he didn't want to go in the army, so he went to Manchester and he picked up a chap there in a pub who was quite prepared to join the army in his name, as he was a corporal, and would get the extra money and our man skidaddled to Canada in 1916 and stayed there until the war was over. So we were left on our own and what we had learnt in erecting the first two or three looms carried



Plate 1. Mr Cecil Sindall demonstrating how sergeants' sashes were woven (Photo RJM Carr 1981)

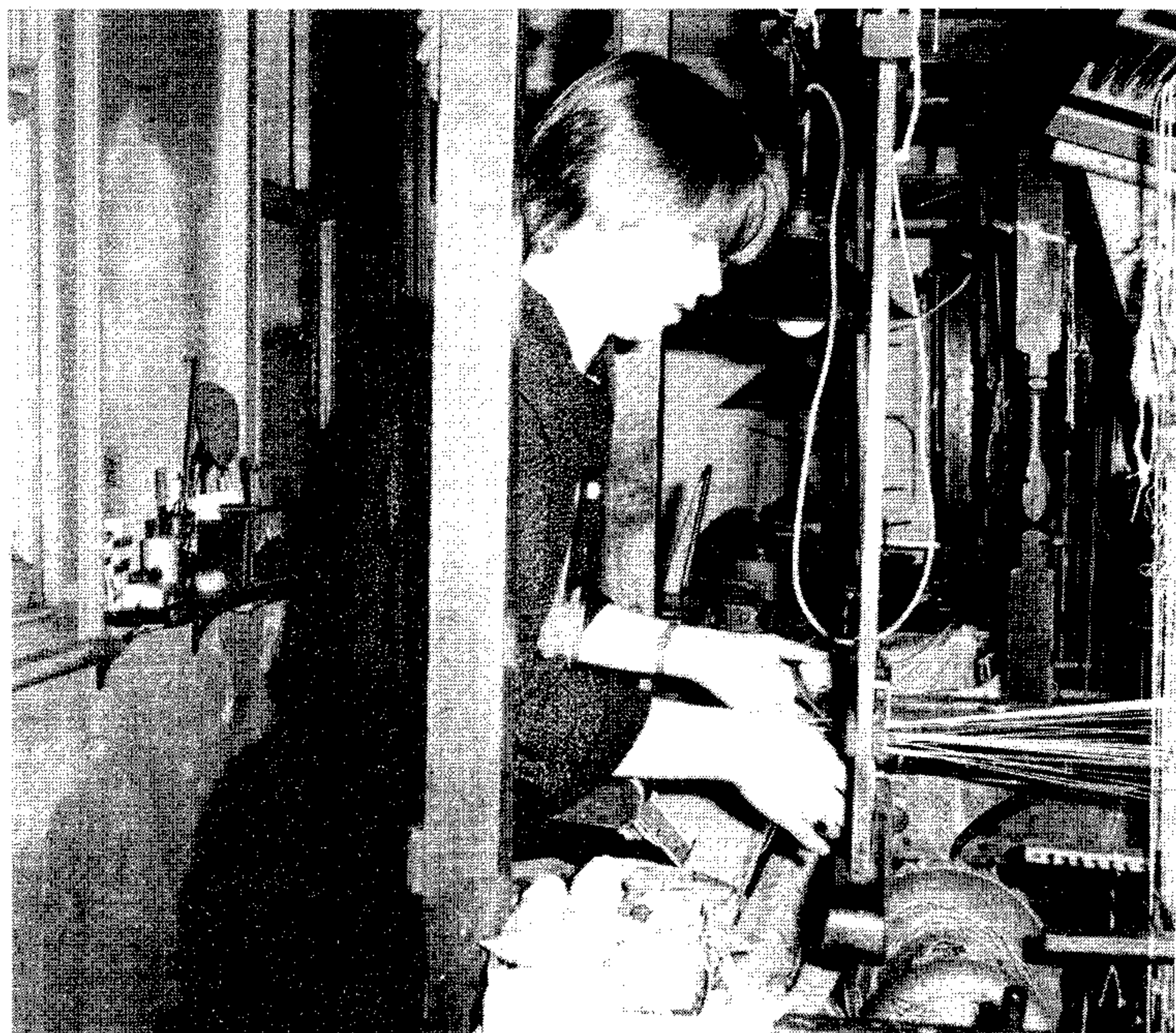


Plate 2. Wendy Cushing working at a traditional narrow fabric hand-loom (Photo RJM Carr 1981)



Plate 3. Exterior of Sindall's works, 116 Middleton Road E8 (Photo RJM Carr 1981)

us off in good stead. We erected the first of them with the help of the spinners and people in the factory.

In 1918 we had our calling up papers - my brother was unfit, he suffered from bronchitis and asthma, and I was unfit because I was getting over rheumatic fever, I've got a weak heart, so we were very lucky really - we probably wouldn't be alive today. This chap, Mathias Reish, came along in 1918 from one of our friends in the trade, he wasn't satisfied where he was, and my father engaged him. He'd had his training in France and he was running the factory for J.R. Foster, Foley St, in the West End and he stayed with us for over twenty years - he knew everything. He taught us how to do the designing, draughting, and everything, that was my job. We had a very happy time with him. We carried on from there and before my father died in 1929, he put a new floor on the front part of the building in 1925 by raising the slate roof on jacks - 22ft x 30ft and weighing approximately 50 tons and that was the last of the extensions until we were able to extend again after the second world war. Redvers managed the office and dealt with colour matching and purchasing of supplies and I attended to the plant and the visiting of customers. Mr. Mathias Reish in the Weaving Department and Mr. Joseph

Woods in the Spinning Department were very good friends and in spite of the slump, in the 1930's, we managed to hold our own whilst quite a number of manufacturers went into liquidation. We purchased a number of second-hand machines and converted them for our own purpose and bought some new machines. In 1936 we ordered 6 new machines from Germany for spinning, braiding and fringe weaving and were very fortunate to get delivery just as war was declared in 1939. As the machines came into operation we gradually stopped all hand spinning on the ground floor.

At Lansdowne Road they had a small gas engine with tube ignition for driving new machinery for winding silk, cotton and wool, together with additional spinning and twisting wheels from Messrs J. Walker, Derby, and when they came to Albert Road in 1906 they had a larger one to run a little bit more winding machinery but the spinning and twisting wheels continued to be turned by men and boys until about 1916 (Plate 5). In 1914 when the looms were installed we had a 14 horse-power National Gas Engine which became my responsibility for a number of years and that eventually drove the whole factory until the middle '50s as we converted machines to power. It was only because of the disruption of the gas mains that we eventually

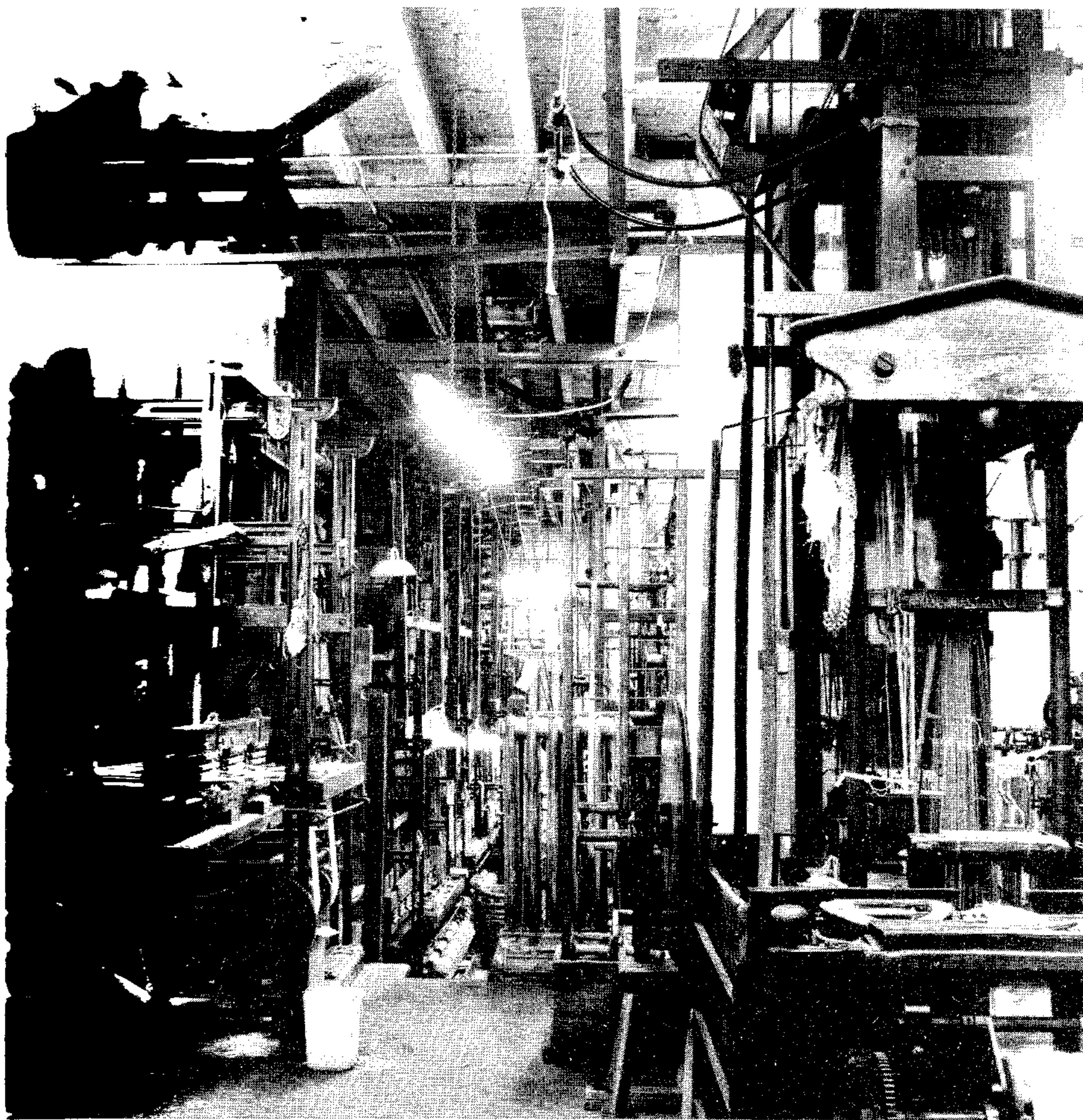


FIG 4 Narrow fabric Jacquard looms tightly packed on the ground floor of No116 (Photo RJM Carr 1981)

...to put electric motors in to drive the looms and leave the gas engine until the gas supply became more regular - that was during the second world war. During that time we were on almost total war work but we were asked to make dressing-gown cords and tapes and send them to Australia and New Zealand because the ships were going back empty after bringing in munitions and food supplies. During the war we made nearly two million yards of braid for the services, stockings and one thing and another, and nearly a million and a half lanyards of all types, also elasticated nets for map reading tables in tanks, and red wool pom-poms for the Royal Dutch Navy and Free French Navy.

We had a job when the war was over to get supplies of yarn because it was rationed very tightly, but we eventually got round that and we were lucky because we had quite a good staff. In 1946 our cousin, Basil Hibbard, was demobilised and he joined the firm, taking over the major share of the office control from Redvers. Very soon after the war the men began to come back, the girls were getting married and they were all leaving us again. But we were able to get young people from school, which is far better than getting youngsters when they are grown up, they don't settle down to work really, not that type of work - it's a bit tedious at the beginning. We held a good staff and until the war we had just

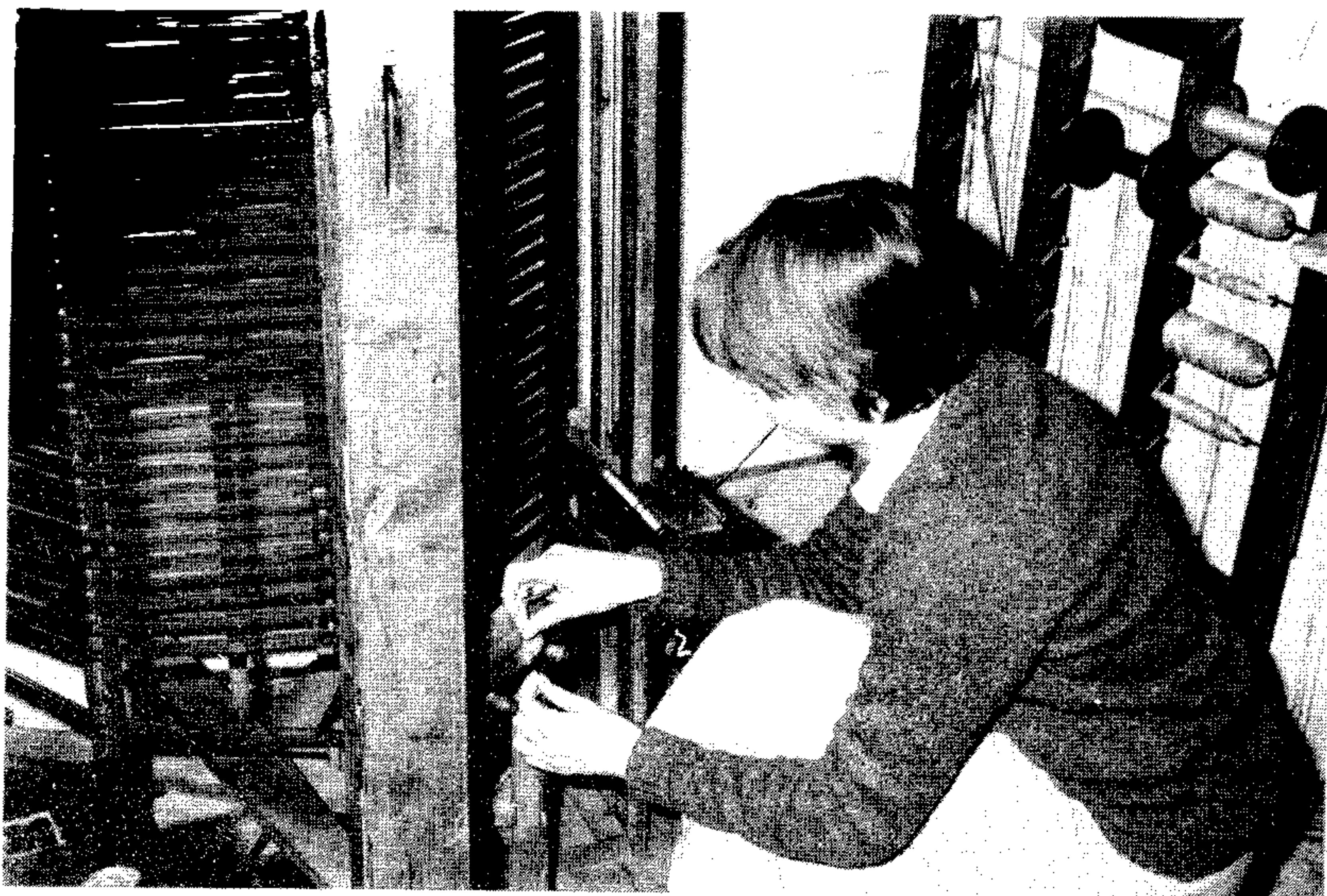


Plate 5. Winding the warp for the hand loom (Photo RJM Carr 1981)

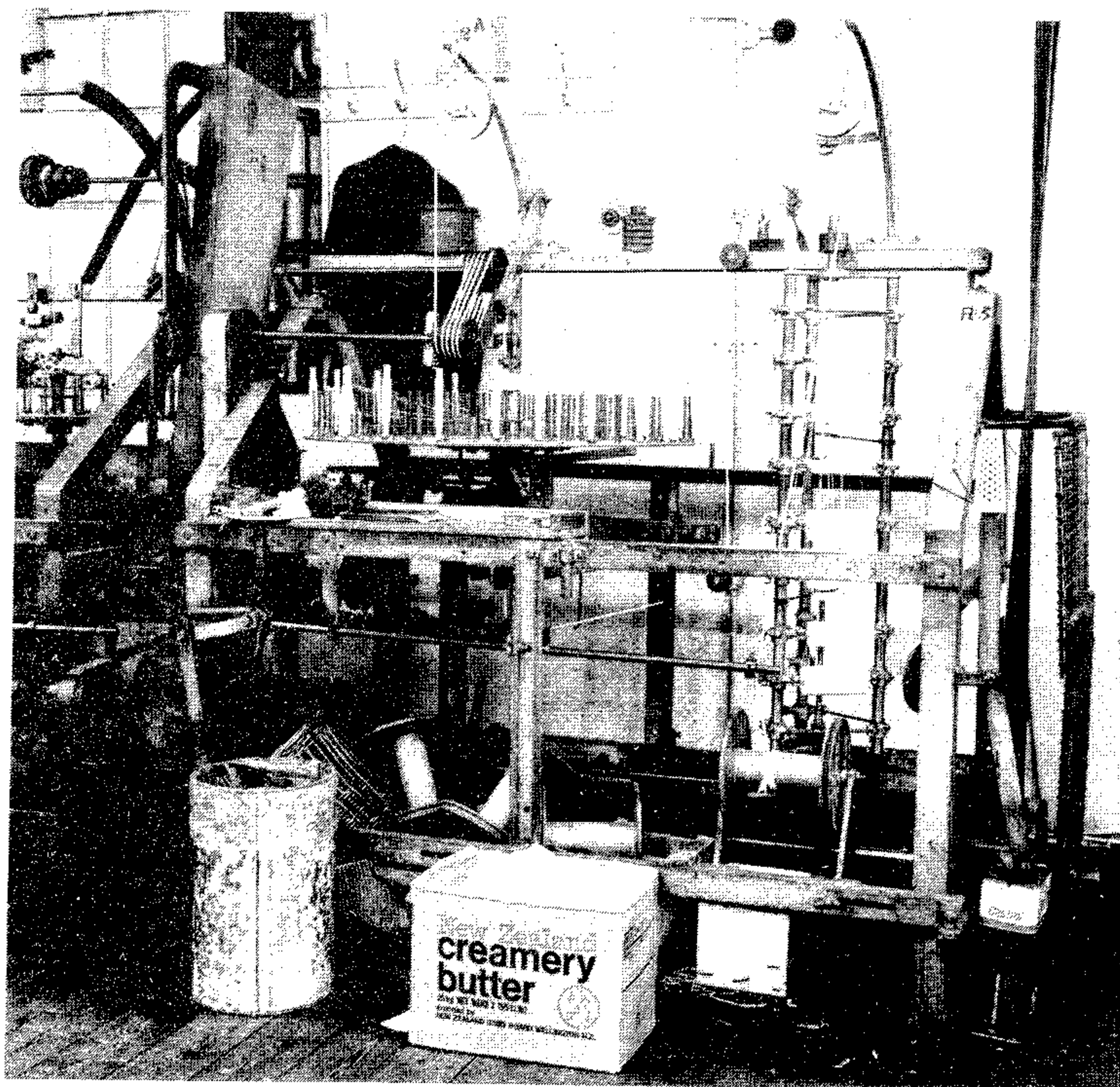


Plate 6. Braiding machine for weaving monks' girdles (Photo RJM Carr 1981)

over a hundred staff, but by the time we'd mechanised when the war was over we were able to do with about fifty or sixty, and made quite a lot difference really - production went up, labour went down, which is what's happening now.

We made so many trimmings like fringes, at one time we used to make the ball and fan edging to go round the mantle borders, that went on for quite a number of years and we made quite a lot of trimmings for the P & O liners and other vessels - that gradually disappeared and we went on to soft furnishings and curtain trimmings generally, and furniture cord, curtain tie-backs, chandelier rods - suspension rods. On the corded side, it was dressing-gown cords, also bugle cords, bagpipe cords and girdles, a very big thing for us at one time (Plate 6). We did a maximum in one year, in the peak period, 22,000 dozen, and there's a dozen and a half of girdles to a gross of cord - I won't start to work that one out! But that was a heck of a lot of cord apart from all the other material we were making. We were doing barrier ropes in quite large quantities for the warehouse friends in particular, and staircase ropes, and we still do (Plate 7). And lanyards, we had the braiding machines working all the time making lanyard cords, (and) we did quite a lot for the Ministry of Defence and the Crown Agents for the Colonies, only eventually we were supplying them direct to the various African States as they gained independence, and to South Africa - its surprising really where all the materials go.

We did all the trimmings for the interior of Westminster Abbey for the coronations of both King George VI and Queen Elizabeth II, and there's quite a lot involved there, and trimmings for the Mall and Trafalgar Square. The large ropes and tassels which were erected in the Mall when, say, the French President came over or anybody of similar status, there was the Union Jack and the national flag of the visitor with these large gold ropes and tassels on each flag staff. We replaced them about four times over a large number of years and the last lot were estimated to last about seven years - they were never really scrapped, I think - if they were too bad to sell they had to be scrapped but I think the Americans bought quite a lot of this sort of thing. I'm not quite sure about Princess Margaret's wedding, I believe we did a lot of trimmings for that and the Queen's Silver Jubilee and many other special occasions including the investiture of the Prince of Wales at Caernarvon Castle. We did quite a lot for the royal palaces, Buckingham Palace, Palace of Holyrood House, St. James's Palace, Windsor Castle, and Kensington Palace, also many great houses and museums and most of the British Embassies including Paris, Warsaw, Tokyo, Oslo and Moscow. We didn't apply for the Coat of

Arms or anything like that, because we were supplying most of these things through our customers, and you can't supply your customers and your customers' customers, not very well. Latterly, we were doing trimmings which went to Saudi Arabia, to the various palaces which were being built - I'm sure the oil done us a lot of good indirectly. My brother Redvers died suddenly in 1975 and I eventually took Basil Hibbard into partnership.

Jacquard looms use an endless belt of cards, punched with holes arranged to form the required pattern. Sindall's made their own punched cards as new patterns were needed. After the old French chappie died, you could never do anything at the factory, there were too many interruptions, always somebody wanting to know something and I used to bring the stuff home to do it. After we had our evening meal, I used to just get down with a paintbrush and point paper and gradually work the things out.

The largest draft I did was 320 cards, with nearly 400 ends involved, that means the 400 ends in width and 320 cards that way. That meant cutting 320 cards when that was finished - I didn't of necessity have to cut those, somebody else could do them (Plate 8). But if somebody was doing them during the day time, if it was an urgent job, I would be doing them in the evenings. Then they had to be all laced up, we had a big lacing-board, took 36 cards at a time, we made our own lacing cord, and we laced them up with a needle, in and out all the way down and them come back and put the other cord through. If there were more than 36 you joined all the thirty-sixes together to make a big circle - so like a piano-player. Then they were put on the Jacquard and as the cylinder slid in and out it turned over and you get a fresh card pressing on each time. There were 400 needles and 800 hooks in each Jacquard, and it was alright while none of them got bent, but if you get any bent hooks it was not very funny 'cause you've got to take a row out in the middle, and you've got 400 of them, you've got 8 in a row, and 40 odd rows, and its very difficult to withdraw the needles, eight, one above the other, all got little stops on them, to get at the hooks which were bent or buckled - it wasn't very often that I could find anybody that had got the patience to do it really. And, apart from that, there were 400 brass springs in a box at the back. I only remember them being upset once, that wasn't very funny, if you drop them down they get all mixed up with the harness and one thing and another.

We used to start, when we were kids, at 9 o'clock in the morning, an hour for dinner, that was 12 or 12.30, then we carried on and had half an hour for tea, half past four to five, and we all worked till seven o'clock. There was some overtime done even in those days.



Plate 7. The rope walk (Photo RJM Carr 1981)

The hours gradually reduced until we got down to a 40 hour week. The majority liked to do overtime, the men in particular, and I remember in 1911, before I was in the business, we worked a night shift and the long spinning walk was only lit by fan-tail gas burners. There were four walks and these lamps were spaced down the two middle ones, every ten feet down the walk, and that was the only lighting there was. We had two chaps working from 7 o'clock in the evening until the next morning making black cord for an export order - now that's black cotton, and black real silk, we didn't have artificial silk then - artificial silk didn't come in until about 1914 and then everybody cursed it because it was so tender.

From the fan-tail burner we went on to vertical mantles, then we went on to inverted mantles, and then we went on to lamps with three mantles - it still wasn't enough. Finally, we went over to electric light bulbs which were pretty hopeless, in any case, it was a very poor light when they first came out. Then we went on to fluorescent lights, and even to the end there was always somebody said there wasn't enough light just here. When you think about the other chappies working night shift and no

complaints, it was extraordinary really. We started with inverted gas burners with one mantle on each lamp with a spring burner which flicked backwards and forwards, if anybody knocked it, obviously the mantle fell off. They got their air vents - the gas used to shoot down between the spring to the mantle. But, unfortunately, the girls used to bob up and light, or singe their hair. I don't think they put electric light in until about 1922 - there wasn't any in the road. My grandfather wanted electric light when he built the factory, but the electricity people in those days were very independent and couldn't see much future in laying cables down the road, and they said that if he would pay for the cables they would put it on - well, he said he would stay with gas, which was a good thing because the gas lights heated the factory. We had no central heating, and in 1914 when they had lowered the floor for the looms department, they put gas radiators all the way round - it was supposed to be marvellous. Well, we hadn't been working down there very long before all the girls were conking out because the fumes from the gas weren't rising because it was so damp in the concrete, and it was all settling down and we had to put hot water pipes. We had a coke fire down there and that cleared it,

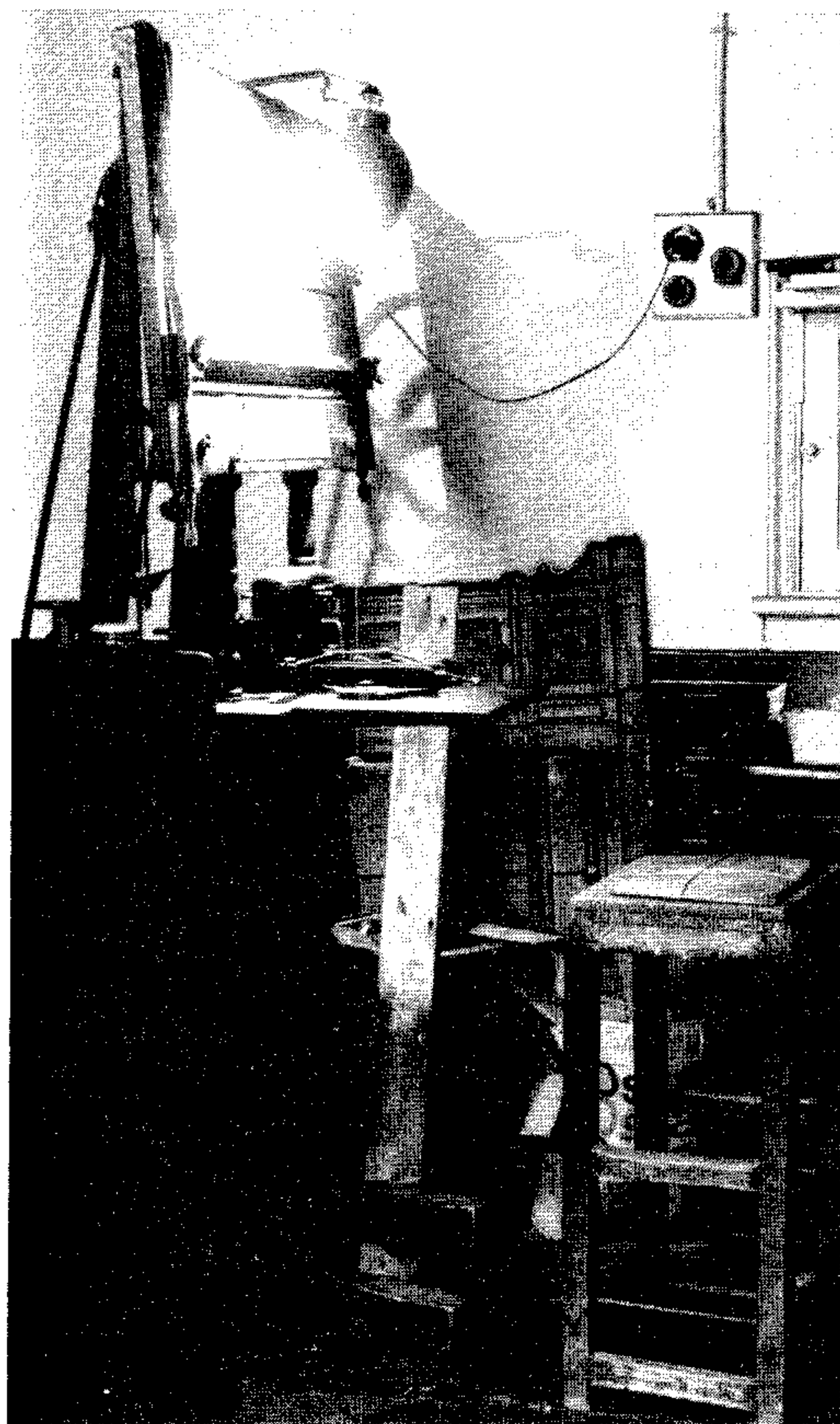


Plate 8. Desk at which cards for Jacquard looms were punched (Photo RJM Carr 1981)

but it was a bit of a problem at the time.

We used to recruit labour from the schools - we sent a note round to St. Paul's school: 'Dear Mrs. Pardoe, we have a vacancy for six girls in the weaving department. If you have any girls interested, we shall be pleased to find them employment.' And this is how we started,

nearly everybody started from school. We got boys in much the same way. Most of those people stayed, the girls married, when their children were off their hands lots of them came back. The men just carried on, as they grew up they took over from the older men - they were with us for 51 years. One reason they were staying for the odd year was because they started work at 14 and they didn't qualify for a pension until they were 65 so they had to do 51 years service, but in any case they wouldn't have stayed if they didn't want to. I can't remember the total number that stayed with us for 50 years, but there were quite a lot - we could go up to 20, I would think, which is quite a big percentage. Some of the old men, I don't know how long they were with us - some of them were there before I was born - most of them worked until they died. But it was always a very interesting, satisfying, job whatever department it was in. If the colours didn't change, the job changed very frequently, in the weaving department we changed the patterns in the looms every week, or if we didn't change the patterns we changed the colours, so nobody was really bothered about the monotony of the job, it wasn't monotonous and they were kept busy all the time putting in the quills and the shuttles and one thing and another, so they were quite active, it wasn't boring at all.

The same really applies to the spinning, the hand spinning as well as working on the machines. Because there was always an end running out of cotton or silk - so I'm sure everybody enjoyed the job. I know that as far as I'm concerned, I started in 1915 and I finished in 1981 and I enjoyed every minute of it from the word go. I got a lot of help, of course, my brother and I worked very closely together and we got a lot of help from our cousin who joined us after the last war, and he stayed with us until we closed down. He didn't retire at the time, he retired about two years later when the factory moved, he went with it. When, in 1976, we were approached by our old friends at the Nottingham Braid Co. of Derby, we decided to sell the business. Five years later, it was decided to transfer all our looms and most of our other plant to the works in Derby where it is still trading as A. Sindall under the control of the parent Company. Mr. Tubbs and his sons are running, and Mr. Allen controlling the factory and they're really very busy; getting on very nicely thank you."