

Mortlake Tapestries

Tapestry weaving in Mortlake began in 1619 under the patronage of James I. The Mortlake works produced scores of tapestries which became renowned for their fine detail, rich borders, striking colours and the excellence of their yarns – silk, wool and gold thread. The enterprise was run by Sir Francis Crane, who had also provided the buildings. The first commission in 1620 was for a set of nine tapestries for the Prince of Wales depicting the Amours of Vulcan and Venus.

Mortlake was chosen as the location for the tapestry works for a number of reasons. It was well located for the easy transportation by water of raw materials and finished goods. The works also needed to be near to the river for the humidity and dampness of the air. In addition, Mortlake was a well-known place – the Archbishops of Canterbury had been Lords of the Manor at Mortlake for centuries with their manor house by the river. Several monarchs visited the manor house, Thomas Cromwell, as Lord of the Manor, lived there; Queen Elizabeth I visited John Dee in Mortlake; and there was easy access to all the royal palaces along the Thames – Mortlake was important and well-known.

The main part of the tapestry works was a substantial building on three floors; on the second floor were two large rooms containing 12 looms. Cartoons, or tapestry designs, by Raphael, Rubens and Van Dyck were used by the weavers to produce tapestries which usually told a story in several panels. Multiple sets of the same story were created as the cartoons could be used several times.

In 1636 the Flemish workforce numbered 140. Many workers specialised in particular aspects of weaving such as faces, bodies or flowers. They lived in Mortlake with their families, and the Archbishop of Canterbury authorised Flemish clerics to administer the sacrament and to conduct services for them in the parish church.

Charles I visited the works in 1629. By the end of the 17th century most of the workers had moved to Soho and the works closed in 1703. Suthrey House, 119 Mortlake High Street, built in the early 17th century, is the only surviving building of the tapestry works.

