



CASH'S

THE LAST WOVEN LABEL MANUFACTURER IN AUSTRALIA

STORY AND
PHOTOS BY
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There's a sign above the punch clock at Cash's woven label factory: *Pride of Workmanship. Do It Once. Do It Well. Build a Better Australia.* Alongside the electronic clock, the slotted metal rack holding employees' time cards is mostly empty. Fifteen years ago, before the lifting of textile tariffs saturated the Australian market with cheaper imports, this factory operated 24 hours a day over three shifts and employed 100 people. The present-day company has diversified into printed paper labels and metalwork, but weaving remains the heart of the business. Today, 24 people work single-shift days, producing woven labels, badges and ribbons that would not be unfamiliar to the workers who laboured at Cash's original manufacturing plant when it opened in inner Melbourne in 1913, or even to John and Joseph Cash, silk ribbon merchants who founded the parent company in Coventry, England, in 1846.

Cash's are probably best known for their woven nametapes: the cloth labels parents have sewn into kids' school clothes for decades in the hope that garments will be returned when they are inevitably misplaced. Mine was a centimetre-wide ribbon with my name woven in red block letters. When I meet Managing Director Scott Buckland and General Manager Peter Mulder at Cash's

head office in Melbourne, I show them the Cash's nametapes my mother saved from my schooldays in the 1970s and 80s. In a pre-WWII sample book, I'm surprised to see my nametape—the same red block letters reminiscent of Copperplate or Bank Gothic on a creamy white background. My sister Alison's nametape is woven in a cursive script, exactly the same as that used in the sample book for a nametape for silent movie star Mary Pickford. Both of these styles are still available, but possibly not for long. After concentrating on the commercial apparel market for the past decade, Cash's plan to update their consumer products with new typeface styles. I protest gently, but am told that there's no relevance for the old styles for anyone under 50 (even though I'm 40): they look old. Which is, of course, what makes them so appealing.

The Cash brothers were Quakers and exemplified the progressive, humanist possibilities some saw in the Industrial Revolution. Rather than a wholesale migration from home-based piecework to the misery of the Victorian factory floor, these two men brought their enlightened philosophy to bear on the physical conditions of silk weavers' lives. They became famous for their cottage factories, known as topshops: three storey terrace row houses comprised of workers' dwellings on the lower two floors and a large, light-filled room on the third floor that housed a Jacquard loom. These looms were powered by a single driveshaft linking the power looms in the individual weaving lofts to a common steam engine at one end of the terrace, enabling increased productivity in a home setting.

The Jacquard loom transformed mechanical weaving by allowing complex patterning and colour work, which came to both reflect and inspire the fashions of the Victorian era, which included elaborate lettering, scrollwork and fanciful design. It continues to be used today. At Cash's factory, a Jacquard loom is laced with a warp of 6,000 longitudinal threads, which are intersected by

the transverse threads, known as the weft. The warp allows 162 stitches per inch; the weft, 72 stitches per inch. A design is created by deciding at every one of these points along the warp whether the weft thread travels above the warp thread or below, allowing the weft thread to be visible or not. This is controlled by the Jacquard, which directs the tiny hooks connected to every warp thread to rise up to allow the weft thread under or remain still, forcing the weft thread over.

In the 19th century, the Jacquard was a series of strung-together punch cards. Each punch card controlled a single pass of the weft through the warp. Spring-loaded pins read the punch card; if the pin passed through a hole, the attached wire lifted the warp thread. No hole, the thread remained stationary. The punch card technology introduced by Joseph Marie Jacquard in 1801 was the direct precursor to modern computing technologies, which, when first invented, read programs encoded on punch cards. Jacquard looms today are run by software, which electronically directs electromagnetic valves to lift the warp thread or not. The problem facing Cash's today is not with the older looms, but with the ageing computers required to run outdated software. The marriage of mechanical and electronic technologies is one of incompatible cycles of obsolescence: a perfectly good loom is easily rendered useless without the software required to operate the Jacquard.

Production Manager Graeme Stanley has worked at Cash's factory for 30 years. He hands me earplugs before we enter the production floor. Thirteen broadlooms and 11 needle looms are in operation, making woven nametapes, Scout badges and boot loops for iconic Australian bootmakers Blundstone and R.M. Williams. The sound is a deafening, anxious hum. The sight is of an almost invisible cobweb of thread suspended mid-air, waiting to form a 400-kilo warp that will crush the winding machine if

left overnight; the shimmering fluorescent nylon cords of the harnesses that control the lifting and lowering of the warp threads; the spool trees of texturized nylon constantly feeding the machines; needles and rapiers flying back-and-forth, carrying thread through the spaces created in the warps. Modern looms make approximately 2000 weft insertions a minute; it's almost too fast to see. In contrast to the ferocious speed of the thread moving across the warp, the labels appear quite slowly, growing one fine thread at a time. It almost looks as if they're made out of air.

I ask Graeme if his kids' clothes have nametapes sewn in. He laughs guiltily and admits that he sent his son off to school this year in a new, unlabelled jumper because he hadn't got around to it yet. The company is constantly researching new adhesive technologies to improve their iron-on labels, but even their premium-grade iron-ons don't stand up too long in commercial laundries. Nursing homes and boarding schools insist labels be sewn in. The fact that fewer and fewer people sew or have time to do so drives Cash's research into alternatives. However, as yet, there's nothing that does the job as well as sewn-in labels. For now, the nametape in a kid's jumper or the boot loops on a pair of Blundstones are the last remaining link between the 19th century Coventry silk weaver and the 21st century computer programmer. Along the way, however, some of the art has been lost. The pre-WWII silk labels in Cash's archives are full-colour beauties, made to identify and brand garments that were worn, washed, mended, loved and re-made. The nametape my mother saved from one of my school uniforms, unpicking each small stitch by hand, outlasted its garment by 20 years. Cash's nametapes are a product of a time when losing something was an actual loss, not just the premature disappearance of something that was never meant to last. **1**