

# Well hung is half the work done

TEXT: TINA IGNELL

PHOTO: BENGT ARNE IGNELL

**SOME 40 PEOPLE** were gathered in Ann-Sofie Reuter's living room in Komstad outside Simrishamn. Reuter is responsible for the Bolstervaren weaving business and was part of an initiative for the recently formed mangle association, 'Glättstenarna' (Smoothing Stones). That day was the launch and Barbro Nyberg, formerly County Handcraft Consultant for Kristianstad, had been invited to talk about mangling linen.

There were various implements on the table: a smoothing stone, a mangling board and an ordinary tray.

First of all, it is important to distinguish between different groups of textiles: ecclesiastical textiles, textiles in museums, textile collections in rural heritage centres and our own functional textiles. The talk that day was more to do with the latter group. It is important to dare to use our woven linen, wash and make it smooth again.

From left, Barbro Nyberg mangling with a rolling pin and mangling board. Embroidered tablecloths are laid out damp on a tray and smoothed. Trying out the box mangle at Bolstervaren.



Before moving onto the washing of linen, she made a point about spot removal. A tablecloth is not dirty just because a bit of something got spilt on it. Soap and warm water can remove most spots.

A freshly woven linen tablecloth responds well to first being immersed in and absorbing lukewarm water before its first wash. This prevents creasing which is then largely impossible to remove. After this, the tablecloth should be washed at 60° using a washing agent which does not contain bleach and optical brighteners.

Nyberg had brought along two tablecloths that showed clearly what happens if the wrong washing agent is used. The incorrectly washed cloth was bluey-white and lacklustre. The other tablecloth had lustre and a lovely, slightly golden tone.

– A white linen tablecloth should look like thick cream, she said simply.

When the linen is hung out to dry you make things a lot easier by smoothing it out and straightening the edges.

– Well hung is half the work done, is a motto worth remembering.

Nyberg prefers to let the linen dry completely before damping it for mangling, allowing the natural size to stiffen and bind the fibres.

The tablecloths are then dampened thoroughly and kept folded overnight, best in a big plastic bag. When the tablecloth is taken out it should be moist right through.

She began by demonstrating how to use a mangling board and rolling pin. The tablecloth is folded in three and wound tightly round the rolling pin.

– This is a simple, quite quick method which neither demands much equipment nor electricity, she said, applying her whole weight to the mangling board and pressing diagonally against the roll.

– Having the right gut instinct is what counts.

**ANOTHER METHOD** suitable for smaller tablecloths, napkins and small embroideries is to make use of a smooth surface.

There was an embroidery laid, right side up, out on a tray. Nyberg took it up and showed how effective just wetting, smoothing and air drying can be.

A linen napkin was given the same treatment (with the right side down). It was laid dripping wet out on a tray and smoothed out. Later it just had to be folded ready for the table setting.

A black smoothing stone lay on the table. In the past it was primarily for smoothing the visible parts of the linen garment part of the local costume. The aim was to make it look like silk.

After demonstrating how to use these hand tools for mangling, we went over to the mangling room and to the box mangle which had been transported over from an apartment block in Simrishamn. Each member of the mangling association may use the box mangle as needed. There are clear instructions up on the wall. Nyberg started with a white tablecloth.

There are several ways to fold a tablecloth before mangling. But the important thing is not to fold the cloth exactly the same way each time. The lever comes down and the several hundred kilos of stone roll over the linen tablecloth. The same principle applies as with the mangling board and rolling pin Nyberg demonstrated earlier, but the pressure from the box is considerably greater and, after a few minutes, out rolls a smooth glossy tablecloth.

Mangling and taking care of your linen is, according to the speaker of the day, a way of respecting a handwork tradition. The tablecloths woven today will be tomorrow's cultural heritage.

– People who feel it takes up too much time might like to compare it with the time put into washing and cleaning cars, which end up anyway on the scrap heap ■





# The linen mangle in Brynge

TEXT: TINA IGNELL PHOTO: BENGT ARNE IGNELL

*This old horse and water powered linen mangle in Brynge, Ångermanland, was in operation from the mid 18th up to the start of the 20th century. Now it simply stands witness to a time when 100 ells of the finest quality linen could be transformed into lustrous cloth. The newly refurbished flax shed, a little way off, houses a little magnificent hand operated mangle.*

UP ON ONE OF THE BUILDINGS is the sign for Café Linlyckan. Thommy Uhlin, chairman of the Brynge Cultural Association, met us there. For many years he and his wife Barbro ran the café, now under new management. Though they are still active in Brynge cultural life as part of the whole enterprise, which boasts one of Sweden's first water driven sawmills and a real linen mangle dating from the mid-18th century. The mangle was initially run on horsepower. In the mid 19th century it was linked up with the Nätra river currents. Once the dam was built in 1924, water was no longer available, putting both the sawmill and the mangle out of action.

For decades both buildings remained untouched. As luck would have it, the power station company made a significant investment by redoing the roof shingle on both buildings so they would not perish. When in the mid 1950s the County Council woke up to these unique buildings, they were able to ascertain they were in very good condition. Today Örnsköldsvik Commune owns the buildings, the power company owns the land.

Brynge Cultural Association was established in 2001 as a partner organization to the Commune. An annual grant and many hours of not-for-profit work mean they can now open the buildings and offer a host of activities. This year's summer programme includes flax processing, spinning, ropemaking, plant dyeing, cheese making, basketry and lots more.

What had brought us there that day though was the singular linen mangle.

It stands majestic and intact in one of the buildings, as if it had only just finished its work. The box with 10 tons of heavy stones sits on its rollers, the light filters through the cracks in the walls and we were told the history of the mangle and Ångermanland flax.

IN THE 18TH CENTURY FLAX was one of Ångermanland's most important commodities. The fine fibred tow produced by the short growing season with many hours of daily sun made for linen thread of the very best quality. The Crown rewarded dexterous spinners and weavers. Records show that a length of 100 ells, ca 56 metres, would be mangled as one piece. ▶



Lisbeth Vestin,  
Thommy Uhlin and  
Lilly Wahlström.



**The wooden mangle calls for good teamwork and physical work. When it was moved from the attic of a house in a neighbouring parish, it was dismantled. The hardest part was then to get the stones balanced right in the box when it was reassembled.**

Lisbeth Vestin and Lilly Wahlström are both involved in the Cultural Association and the Ångermanland Flax Association. They said that the linen cloths brought for mangling were very likely mostly of plain weave, many in fine qualities. One woman in Nätra village, for example, wove a linen with 44 ends to a centimetre.

– And she also spun the warp herself, even more incredible, said Vestin.

Linen buyers would come to the linen mangle and then sell the linen on. Some of them were called ‘southriders’, peasants who would travel south in the winter, mainly to Stockholm, to sell the goods.

At the close of the 19th century the mangle was run by two unmarried women. It was full time work and the accounts show they mangled 18 pieces of linen in a day at 14 öre a piece.

– Bearing in mind that an artisan’s wage at that time was around 250, it wasn’t that bad, said Uhlin.

And they were business minded.

– They took payment per woven piece. If somebody stitched weaves together to make it a bit cheaper, they would cut open the seams.

**THOMMY UHLIN PRESENTED A POSSIBLE PICTURE** as to how the mangling may have been carried out in the old linen mangle. First, the linen would be laid out on the long bench by the mangle. It would be dampened and rolled up on strong wooden rollers. The chains connected to the water power were activated as the box moved to the side, falling open. A new cloth roll could then be laid in.

When water power ceased in 1924, there was an attempt to replace it with electricity, with no success. The reason for this, according to Uhlin, was that the technology did not work and also that in the mid 1920s mangling was no longer required as before.

There is nobody around today who can describe what the mangle was like when in operation. The only story we have, from a man alive today, dates to 1923 when he left a weave there as instructed by a widow.

– But he was only a boy then so he wasn’t that interested in how the mangle worked, said Uhlin. But it was certainly mighty, with the surging rapids, the chains getting the box to move and slowly mangling the fine linen cloth.

**A COUPLE OF YEARS AGO** Vestin and Wahlström began to set up a beautiful flax shed where amongst other things they show what a square metre of cultivated flax can provide.

Here too there is a very interesting mangle. It came from one of the farms in a parish nearby and is of an ingenious construction. It was probably made in the later half of the 19th century for domestic usage.

**WE ROLLED UP THE LINEN DRÄLL** tablecloth (see the centre spread) following the general rules. First, the weave just off the loom was wetted out, then given a gentle machine wash with no spin, using the appropriate washing agent (no optical brighteners or bleaching agents). The evening before the mangling, the totally dry tablecloth was sprinkled with water and stored in plastic.

Wahlström rolled it up on a mangle roller, protecting it with a mangle cloth. The stone box with its 2-300 kg of stones was rolled/moved by hand and the roll placed under. The stone box was then pushed back and forth several times. The roll was removed, the weave then rolled up from the other direction and mangled again. For the best results it should also be mangled a third time when quite dry.

We took the tablecloth out into the sunlight and found the smaller box mangle had produced a lovely result.

Though one can only guess what might have happened had it been mangled in the old linen mangle with its box holding 10-12 tons of rock.



**More info:**  
[www.brynge.nu](http://www.brynge.nu)  
**Weaving directions for the dräll tablecloth and napkins on page 36.**

## SMOOTHING – A LOOK BACK IN TIME

Text: Monnica Söderberg

Photo: Bengt Arne Ignell

*How did people in the past get their textiles and garments nice and smooth?*

*The question could well arise, standing at the ironing board and steam pressing a pile of laundry, or using an electric mangle to do cold mangling.*



Slickstone and smoothing board made from a whale shoulder blade, found in a woman's grave in Birka near Stockholm, dating back over a thousand years.

ARCHAEOLOGISTS WORKING ON VIKING GRAVES in the Nordic region, including in Birka, Sweden's oldest town (from the end of the 8th century up till ca 970), have found several glass smoothers, but only a few smoothing boards. The finds date from the end of the 9th century. The smoothing board, illustrated top left, was made from the shoulder blade of a whale, ornately carved at the top with two dogs' heads, measuring 35.5 cm in length, 24.6 cm across and 1.8-2.3 cm deep. This and a green glass stone shaped like a half pear, lay in a Birka woman's grave. The stone was found in a wooden case and the board lay in one of the corners of the burial chamber. They can be seen at the Vikings exhibition at the Museum of National Antiquities (SHM) in Stockholm.

When smoothing, the textile was first spread out on the board and coated with a pale wax before being rubbed back and forth with a certain amount of pressure with the stone. Old records mention that at the start of the Christian era in the Nordic regions, waxed sheeting was used for shrouds.

I asked archaeologist Eva B Andersson about smoothing equipment.

– As regards smoothing stones, mostly ones made of glass (slickstones) have been documented during excavations. As far as I can tell these are from the Viking period on.

– I have worked on the Viking trading centres of Birka and Hedeby and other settlements in Skåne and Mälardalen. Slickstones appear in the Viking era mainly in places where there was specialized handwork, said Andersson. (She has a PhD in archaeology from Lund University on pre-historic textile tools, and is the author of the book, *Tools for Textile Production from Birka and Hedeby*. She now works in Copenhagen, Denmark at the Essential Research Foundation for textile research.)

Smoothing stones were probably also used for setting linen fabric in pleats. The sides of the concave lower part of the stone were good for pleating.

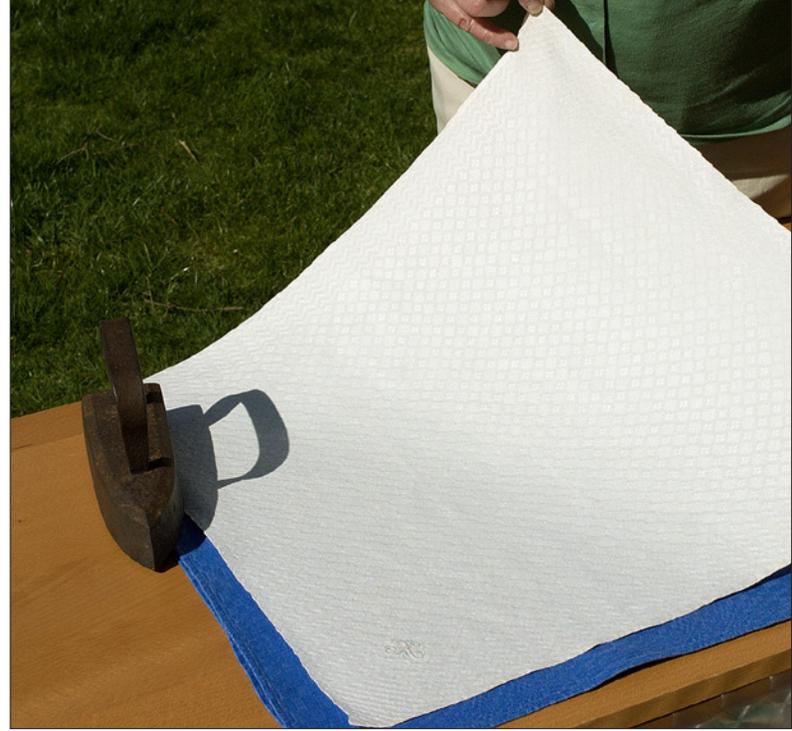
According to Andersson, it is hard to say exactly what its uses were. One view is that at least certain linen fabrics were set in pleats. These cloths were the subject of Inga Hägg's dissertation written in 1974 on women's costume in Birka.

Rubbing stones stayed the course of time in the care of linen.

Lars Nylander, curator at Hälsingland Museum, stated that the museum owns a number of aprons in black 'rask' (a waxed and smoothed linen) dating from the 19th century. Rask appears to have been in use in Hälsingland back in the 17th century, according to ecclesiastical inventories.

Ingrid Roos, curator at the Museum of Nordic History, lent me some source material on rubbing stones in the museum collections and on the history of laundrywork. Per Gustaf Vistrand noted: "In Skåne, where the folk costume, especially for women, in many local areas is distinguished by several very traditional elements, women would right into the 19th century, as they said, rub their clothes. The equipment available for carrying out this work was in general as basic and simple as was the intrinsic working method. There was a 'ryllefjäl', also known as a 'gniefjäl', and a rolling or rubbing stone. The 'gniefjäl' was generally a wooden board specially carved for the purpose usually from oak or beech, as a long narrow planed smooth rectangle, rounded off at one end in an arc and adorned with some shaping of the edge as well as simple and at times openwork carving. There seems to be general agreement that this would be included in the betrothal gifts and for this reason was reckoned as one of the finer small items pertaining to a well furnished residence..." The rubbing stone was in most cases made of glass, with a rounded circumference and diameter shifting from between 6.7 to 10.7 cm. The smoothing process involved using these two tools. The garment to be smoothed was spread out and stretched over the 'fjäl', sometimes with a calfskin underlay, and lightly coated with a pale wax. It was then worked energetically for a good while with the stone so that once the process was complete, the surface had an almost enamel like sheen in exceptionally lovely colouring. "The glossing practised today can scarcely achieve a lovelier effect" continued Vistrand in *News from the Museum of Nordic History, 1899-1900*, here in modern Swedish!

The museum's collections include a good 200 smoothing or rubbing stones, not all of which are dated. They have been collected in Sweden from the time of the Museum's founding in 1873 to the latter part of the 20th century. They are made of stone, glass, slate, wood, flint and bone.



Smoothing,  
not mangling



TEXT: MONNICA SÖDERBERG PHOTO: BENGT ARNE IGNELL

*Ingegärd Oskarsson makes use of a soapstone and a flat iron to bring out the beauty in her linen textiles.*

In the early 1990s Oskarsson heard Marie Louise Wulfcrona, textile conservator at the Museum of Nordic History, speak about smoothing at Grimslövs Folk High School. Oskarsson was very interested in how to look after her linen tablecloths without the aid of a mangle, so she went home and tested the method. It was extremely satisfactory. Since then, smoothing has held sway in her 'mangle shed'!

In Ingegärd and Per Gunnar Oskarsson's Grimslöv garden, washing hangs out to dry weather permitting. Otherwise it is hung in a cellar room.

Right now, in the summer, big tablecloths are flapping in the breeze and handtowels and napkins have been laid out wet and spread flat on a plastic topped table in the garden.

The linen textiles have to be dried to a 'mangle-ready' state before they are given their smoothing treatment. Another garden table (plastic with a separate wooden board) serves as the 'mangle'. During the cold part of the year the freezer top down in the cellar serves the same purpose.

A linen tablecloth, already half dry, is folded in three, rolled up and put in a plastic bag to await smoothing.

– The moisture spreads evenly through the tablecloth in the plastic bag, Oskarsson explained while at work.

**SHE WEAVES** and is on the committee for the Swedish Loom Museum, was formerly a board member of the Swedish Weave Council and the Hemslöjden in Kronobergs County. She was chair of the SHR, so textiles play a big part in her active life, even when she was a member of parliament for the Centre Party.

– When people complain they can't use big linen tablecloths because they don't have a mangle, I tell them I do smoothing. It is so simple.

– I began smoothing with a soapstone ice-bucket I bought in Värmland. It

is heavy and easy to grip and makes the linen gorgeously glossy.

– Now I also use a flat iron I bought at an antique dealers. It works really well and one just has to check it isn't rusty or the footplate damaged. The handle is great to hold, said Oskarsson while we looked at her two iron finds, which at one time would be heated up to press flat, but in their current usage could be called smoothing stones.

– It is great to be able to use an old artefact in a new way, she feels.

Oskarsson demonstrated how to smooth a 'mangle-ready' 100% linen napkin from Sätergläntan. The pattern is Lead Window, a 16-shaft dräll.

First she places a wooden board on a spare plastic table surface, dries it off and spreads the napkin out. She strokes the soapstone away from herself over the napkin with one hand and holds it down with the other. Small sections are smoothed at a time until the whole napkin is flat. The iron is used to get into the corners and smooth them.

It is striking how the sheen is enhanced and how well the pattern comes out when Oskarsson does her smoothing. The same procedure is applied to the reverse. Altogether, it took just a few minutes.

The napkin, now stiff and smooth, is folded and laid out to dry.

Time to set to work on the linen handtowels, which were also lying out flat on a table. These are folded in three and pulled quickly over the edge of the table using both hands. Right, there they are 'mangled'. In the winter she uses the freezer for this.

If the handtowels are going to be extra specially nice, she uses the smoothing process as for the napkin. Then the towels are folded in three, smoothed by hand and laid out to dry.

**NOW FOR THE LINEN TABLECLOTHS**, the ones waiting folded and rolled up in their plas-



tic bags, ready for smoothing. We went down to the 'mangling shed' in her cellar, that is to the freezer.

Ingegärd Oskarsson took the beautiful 100% linen Måsen Klässbol tablecloth out of its plastic bag. She positioned herself against a narrow side of the freezer box and rolled out a piece of the tablecloth on the freezer top. The rest of the roll was held with her knee against the box. Bit by bit the tablecloth gradually got smoothed. Pressing with light movements, the soapstone was passed forwards over the cloth. Once that side was done, the tablecloth was rolled up again. The other side was then smoothed the same way as the first.

The tablecloth is hung out to dry folded on the line, inside or out, or placed over a bed in the guestroom. When dry, it is rolled up again.

It just took a bit of time to smooth the linen textiles. They were lying folded and rolled out in the sunshine. We noticed how the patterning stood out along with the sheen.

The job was done, an old method serving well today.

– The advantages of 'my' method are that you acquire a special feel for the linen. The tablecloths are nice and straight and don't wear out in the mangle. And you don't get a load of tablecloths piling up, because you deal with them as and when, said Ingegärd Oskarsson. ■