

The Wiltshire Wool Industry

The history of a local industry, its growth and decline

B ACAS conducted excursions to Devizes and Trowbridge in 2010 which highlighted the importance of the wool industry in these towns. The townhouses of the clothiers and their factories still dominate the area and this article explores the history of wool manufacturing in Wiltshire.

Tim Lunt Although there is evidence of weaving from Saxon times, the woollen cloth industry developed from around 1300 and spread across both Wiltshire and Somerset. It was a cottage industry and a division of labour existed in the four main stages in production: preparation, spinning (to yarn), weaving, and lastly fulling, or finishing, the cloth. No mechanisation existed at this time except for some water-powered fulling mills.

“Clothmen” were wealthy in Medieval times, identified by their property and donations to the church, but there were considerable differences of scale between those who employed others and the independents. By the 16th Century the woollen industry was the major industry in Wiltshire and brought considerable prosperity. Different areas specialised in different types of cloth, for example Salisbury concentrated on “kerseys”, a lightweight coloured cloth while further west Trowbridge was making heavier white “broadcloths”. By this time the importance of the wool industry for employment and trade began to be recognised by government who sought by various acts to regulate the quality of the product and the monopolies of the larger clothiers. Guilds also formed to protect the rights of weavers and maintain standards of workmanship.

Trade in the early 17th Century relied heavily on exports to Europe but after 1615 increasing import duties levied by France and Holland together with the onset of the Thirty Years War brought stagnation and unemployment to the industry. The English Civil War compounded these difficulties in the 1640s. Some clothiers failed and many workers were in danger of starvation. However there is evidence that high prices, poor quality and increasing foreign competition also played a part. At this time the development of the “medley” or Spanish cloth, a finer dyed lightweight which used imported wool, began to grow in importance and rapidly became a major export item replacing to some extent the losses in ‘white’ cloth exports. This move to finer cloth also marked the arrival of Dutch workers who began to make a significant contribution to improvements in spinning and finishing. Prosperity returned by the 1670s as the home market grew rapidly for fine cloths with Trowbridge being a major manufacturer of the Spanish medley. However other specialised products developed elsewhere, with Devizes becoming notable for production of worsted serge and ‘drugget’ material in addition to white cloth.



The 18th Century marked the start of the woollen industry moving from its cottage origins (see Figure 1) to the factory. Machinery began to be used increasingly in production and improved sales and marketing methods expanded the markets. Competition from abroad still continued and increasingly areas like Yorkshire began to make inroads to Wiltshire’s traditional expertise. The result was a series of booms and busts throughout the century often leading to wage riots as weavers accused their clothier employers of various types of exploitation. Trowbridge saw many incidents of this type with ringleaders sometimes hanged when property was destroyed.

Figure 1
Hand spinning at home. (Image reproduced with the kind permission of Trowbridge Museum)

It was the latter part of the century when the industrial revolution took off in the wool industry. The spinning jenny and carding machines started to appear from the 1770s and it is from this time that Wiltshire began to gain its luddite reputation. On many occasions mobs gathered to destroy machinery as they saw it directly affecting their livelihoods, yet the new technology continued to arrive. By 1795 John Anstie owned a factory on New Park Street, Devizes that contained 22 jennies while John Cook of Trowbridge had 30 jennies with up to 80 spindles each and four 'slubbing billies' used for yarn production.

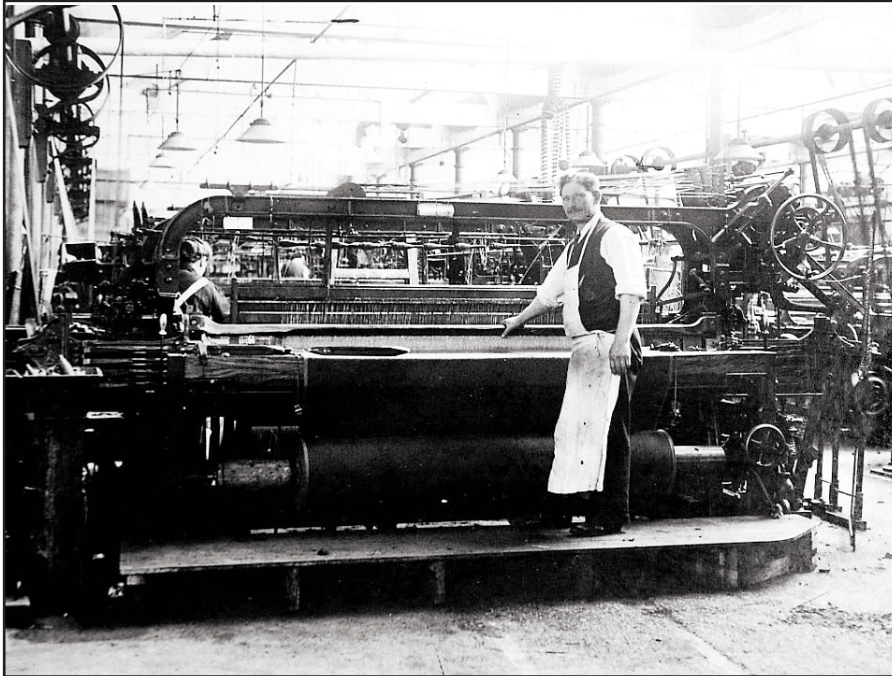


Figure 2
The Foreman of the Weaving Shed standing in front of an electrically-powered loom in Samuel Salter & Co. Ltd., Home Mills, Trowbridge, Wiltshire in 1913. (Image reproduced with the kind permission of Trowbridge Museum)

The spring, or fly-shuttle loom and the shearing frame for finishing fine cloth arrived in the 1790s. As these replaced the most skilled workers they were certain to meet resistance but better market conditions resulting from the chaos of the French Revolution meant less problematic than could be expected. In many cases Wiltshire was slower to introduce this new machinery and sought to avoid conflict from the workforce by sending

goods to be finished in Gloucestershire where the machinery was established but Trowbridge did suffer arson and riots from the well-organised shearmens union at this time.

Major investment in buildings and machinery now became a necessity for any clothier to succeed from 1800 onwards. To drive the various new pieces of equipment used for wool manufacture, water power quickly surpassed horse power. Corn and fulling mills with existing water rights were converted for use but new water-powered sites were difficult to establish. Steam power was an obvious solution but coal was expensive and in this regard Wiltshire was at a disadvantage to Yorkshire. The completion of the Somersetshire Coal Canal in 1805 changed this cost differential and the first steam engine was fitted in Trowbridge in that year. Many water-powered factories also added steam capability to support periods of water shortage or flood. The final step was the construction of factories solely driven by steam and in Trowbridge one of the first was the Bridge Mill built in 1808. Boulton and Watt was the principal steam engine manufacturer of this era and lists 27 engines erected in the area between 1805 and 1828.

The move to steam powered factories which brought all parts of the production process under one roof marked the beginning of end of the independent local weavers. The factories ran for up to 12 hours per day with up to 100 looms. Trowbridge had 14 large steam powered factories by 1820 and many smaller ones including specialist workshops for fulling and dyeing. The population of the town increased rapidly to support this growth. A significant part of the labour force was children but this fell sharply after the introduction of the Factory Act in 1833.

The cycle of periodic depressions in the wool industry continued through the first half of the 19th Century and led to numerous riots and strikes as unemployment took hold. Many clothiers who had overreached their limits went bankrupt and the remaining factories were under-utilised. This

period marked the end of significant wool manufacturing activity in Devizes but Trowbridge survived better than most. Clarks showed a profit in nearly every year and expanded their Duke Street, Trowbridge site three times. Trowbridge also started to take the lead on equipment development with patents granted for improved gig, rotary shearing and other finishing machines to Hadens and John Dyer.

Trade prospered again from around 1850 in a period known as the Indian summer for the industry and Trowbridge continued as the dominant wool town of the region. It also increasingly became a centre for cloth sales with established local wool merchants and was known as the "Manchester of the West". One writer described the Trowbridge of 1850 as "the richest town for its size from the Tweed to the Tone". Further investments in new factories and machinery continued (see Figure 2). Clarks of Trowbridge established Studley Mill and Brown & Palmer built Ashton Mill. These new structures were wide floored, multi-level buildings to accommodate vast spinning mule, carding and loom capacity. The new machinery also allowed diversification into new types of cloth with striped and tweed 'fancy goods' being made.

This era generated great wealth for some clothiers and their stately Georgian homes can be seen in Trowbridge in Fore Street and the Parade (see Figure 3). Pevsner defines these as "finer than any in Bristol" and "a stretch of palaces". It was not to last. Increasing competition from Scotland and Yorkshire, together with over-supply from the faster, more efficient machinery meant that after 1880 some large firms went out of business, notably Haywards, Adye and Gabriel in Trowbridge. Increasing competition and declining business prospects continued until the Second World War, a time which marked the end of the wool industry in Wiltshire.



**Figure 3 above
Parade House, Trowbridge**



**Figure 4 right
Salter's Mill, Trowbridge**

As seen on the excursions in Devizes and Trowbridge, many of the clothiers factories and mansions and the more humble dwellings of the workforce still stand in these towns and have been converted for other uses. Salter's Mill, the last operating factory in Trowbridge that closed in 1982, is a fine example to be found in the midst of the Shires shopping centre and now accommodates the local museum and a cafe (see Figure 4). These buildings define the history of over 500 years of industrial activity which gave Wiltshire great prosperity.