

Textiles Industry Part One – Early wealth and migrant workers

The textile industries are of particular importance to the social, political and financial history of the country and via our Landmarks it is possible to trace this history and tell the story of both the trades and crafts associated with it. Part one of this series of podcasts considers the early English cloth trade through the prism of Peake's House in Colchester, silk weaving at Princelet Street, Spitalfields, as well as stocking making at St Mary's Lane Tewkesbury.

Peakes House

Peakes House in Colchester sits quietly down a side street in an area of Colchester known as The Dutch Quarter. It has been a Landmark since 1995.

The Dutch Quarter of Colchester was named in reference to the Flemings who, in the 14th century, began arriving in Colchester in large numbers encouraged by Edward III to help with the expanding cloth industry.

Around the same time, Peakes house was built as a traditional medieval hall, but by 1550 it was divided in to two separate dwellings, number 31 and 32. Although we cannot definitively connect Peake's House itself with the cloth trade with any surety, its situation in the Dutch Quarter is wrapped up with that business, its occupants would have been part of the rhythm of industry there, and its long mullion windows are an indication of a domestic textile or weaving workshop.

Colchester was making cloth long before the arrival of the Flemings. In the mid decades of the 13th century the town had a reputation for grey or brown *russets*, which were taken to other parts of the country and made into outer garments. They were not fine cloth, but they were made to a recognised standard, and found a reliable market amongst the religious houses. The standard measure was the *decana*, which means a length of ten *ells*, equalling 121 yards. It came in two widths: broad or large cloths (approximately 2 yards), and narrow or strait cloths.

In the process of cloth making, the raw materials and woven fabrics passed through many hands and many places and it was the clothiers – the overseers and controllers of the whole process - who amassed large amounts of money. Raw wool was bought in the town's Moot Hall cellar. It was washed, broken up and parted, combed or carded before being dyed and

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spun with spinning wheels. It was woven on looms either owned by the weavers or hired independently from an employer. Completed cloths were first washed then fullled, or cleansed, by mills; and the riverbank could always be seen covered with cloths laid out to dry.

Richard Watts, in his *Concise Poem on Shepton Mallet* from *The Young Man's Looking Glass* of 1641, gives us a charming glance at the different processes involved in the cloth industry:

First the Parter that doth neatly cull
The Finer from the courser sort of wool.
The Dyer then in order next doth stand
With sweating brow and a laborious hand.
With oil they then asperge, which being done,
The careful hand of Mixers round it run.
The Stockcarder his arms doth hard employ
(Remembering Friday is our Market day)
The knee-carder doth (without controule)
Quickly convert it to a lesser roul.
Which done, the Spinster doth in hand it take
And of two hundred roules one threed doth make.
The Weaver next doth warp and weave the chain,
Whilst Puss his cat stands mewing for a skaine;
But he laborious with his hands and helles,
Forgets his Cat and cries, Come boy with queles.
Being fill'd, the Brayer doth it mundifie
From oyle and dirt that in the same doth lie,
The Burler then (yea, thousands in this place)
The thick-set weed with nimble hand doth chase,
The Fuller then close by his stock doth stand,
And will not once shake Morpheus by the hand.

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The Rower next his armes lifts up on high,
And near him sings the Shearman merrily.
The Drawer last, that many fault doth hide
(Whom merchant nor the weaver can abide)
Yet is he one in most clothes stops more holes
Than there be stairs to the top of Paul's.

Where did the completed cloth end up? Some passed through Bruges on its way elsewhere but more often it went further afield away from local competition and to places where diplomatic relations were friendlier than those between England and Flanders. At the time Peake's House was being built, Gascony in southwest France was the chief destination. It depended heavily on England for its supply of cloth, and ships that took cloth out to Gascony came back loaded with French wine in return.

The Baltic export business, established by the early 1360s, was more varied. Colchester Cloth was traded for fish and wheat, wax, bitumen and timber from the East Baltic, salt and iron from Scandinavia, and line, cloth, thread and beer from Northern Germany. The Mediterranean enterprise was established twenty years later. They called Colchester decane *Essex cloth* and sold it on to Eastern Spain and Northern Italy. By 1416 Essex Cloths had been exported as far as Damascus in modern day Syria.

After 1413 the decana measure disappears from records and a new standard in Colchester appears: the *whole cloth* measuring 24 x 2 yards. Colchester traded with Danzig in today's Poland and its cloth became a regular component of the Baltic trade with Russia controlled by the Hanseatic League of German merchants. In the 1440's, cloth output reached its medieval peak, but after 1450 exports decreased and the population and prosperity of Colchester fell. The problem was that the Essex cloths were made of the coarse, long staple wool of English sheep, whereas fashions were changing to shorter staple fleeces that

created a finer weave. Essex cloths became a mere commodity, with the dyers and finishers of the export markets reaping the main profits.

In Elizabeth I's reign therefore, the possibility of another wave of hard-working Protestant Flemings, who might give the town's cloth trade a boost, was a particularly welcome one. This second influx of refugees or strangers landed in Sandwich on the Kent coast and from there were given permission to settle across the East of England. They were escaping religious persecution at home. In August 1570, the Colchester town authorities wrote to the Privy Council

the dispersed flock, of late driven out of Flanders, for that their consciences were offended with the Masse; and for fear of tyranny of the Duke of Alva, to save their lives, and keep their consciences, they came into this realm for protection and said they came from Sandwich ... we cannot but greatly commend the same strangers unto you, for sithence their first coming hither, we finde them to be very honest, godly, civill and well ordered people, not given to any outrage or excess.

The new *strangers* as they were known brought with them the most valuable trade of fashionable baize and serge making, as well as other trades described in the town records such as hop-planters, needle makers, pot makers, fullers, tailors, physicians and parchment makers.

By 1584 there were 1,148 Dutch in Colchester, in a town with an entire population of 4,000.

During the Civil War, many of the *strangers* went back home or to America, disliking the uncertainty of the times. Charles II continued the protection of the Flemings and their trade by statute in 1660 but five years later, Colchester was devastated by the plague when 5,259 persons perished. By around 1700 a terminal decline in the cloth trade had set in, and in 1728 the Dutch Congregation was disbanded. Today, only their houses in the Dutch Quarter bear witness to this once booming manufacture in Colchester.

Now let's turn to the weaving tradition of a more luxurious fabric, woven by the Huguenot silk weavers of Spitalfields, from their homes like Landmark's house at No 13 Princelet Street.

Princelet Street

Number 13 Princelet is today part of a vibrant multicultural area in the eastern part of the City of London.

But when it was built, in the 18th century, 13 Princelet St was typical of the speculative housing that sprang up in Spitalfields, just outside of the ancient city walls by Bishops Gate. At the time, the city was coping with a population increase, and was in the throes of a massive reconstruction campaign following the Great Fire of London in 1666. Spitalfields, named after a 12th-century hospital, had from the Middle Ages attracted enterprising outsiders, whose birth or origin barred them from trading or living in the City itself.

Rights of work and residency in the City of London were tightly controlled by the livery companies and trade guilds right through until the eighteenth century. Bishop's Gate was maintained from the 13th to 16th centuries by the privileged merchants of the Hanseatic League, who used it as the entry point for their goods brought from north and eastern Europe. The foreigners who lived just outside the walls also catered for the needs of the merchants and started small industries of their own.

After the St Bartholomew Day massacre of French Protestants in Paris in 1572, Spitalfields became well-known as an enclave of French refugees fleeing from religious persecution. They were known as Huguenots and were welcomed by Elizabeth I's Protestant regime. Many of these French Protestants had fled from southern France, especially the areas around Tours and Lyons, which were centres of excellence for silk weaving. Their skills were highly mobile and much sought after.

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By 1629, the silk industry had already become so established in Spitalfields that an incorporation (or guild) of silk workers was formed there. A further influx of Huguenonts in 1685 strengthened the area's reputation for weaving. By 1687, it has been estimated that as many as 100,000 immigrants had arrived in England, many destitute, landing from open boats along the south coast. Many were skilled in a wide range of industries – silversmiths, jewellers, clockmakers – but the greatest number were the silk weavers. They naturally sound out their own countrymen already in England, and with so much speculative building taking place in Spitalfields, they were accommodated with ease.

Within a very short space of time, a network of streets and alleys sprang up across the open ground just outside the city wall at Bishopsgate, houses built specially to meet the living and working requirements of the weavers, embroiderers, dyers, throwsters and other craftsmen. The street names still bear witness to their skills and French origins – Fleur de Lys Street, Rose Street, Blossom Street, Petticoat Lane, Fashion Street, Fournier Street. By the late 18th century, when the silk industry was at the height of its prosperity, up to 15,000 looms were in use in Spitalfields, the industry supporting perhaps 40,000 workers. These looms were often grouped together in the ownership of a master weaver, although most were still operated in attic rooms with distinctive long windows in the homes of individual craftsmen.

The weavers were generally thrifty and hard working. The breeding and training of singing birds was one of the weavers' hobbies and their singing was the noise that struck Englishmen most when they wandered into the quarter. People also remarked that however poor and hard-worked these strangers might be, they arranged and decorated their homes with a refinement of taste seldom seen in the homes of English craftsmen.



For most of the 18th century, the setting for this craft remained semi-rural. The weavers' houses spread into the countryside around, as yet little touched by the smoke and grime of industry. Their designs were influenced by the natural world that surrounded them. The image of silk designers wandering the gardens of then semi-rural Spitalfields in search of plants and insects to inspire their designs is, like the caged singing birds, part of the folk memory of the area, but it is based on firm evidence.

'Spitalfields silks' were famous in their day, the best of them the equivalent of the most sought after and expensive high fashion label today. The weavers would have been in direct touch with private patrons as well as mercers, and purchasers of every kind would have come into the area, the sedan chair frequently transporting a lady of quality to order her dress-length of brocade or figured silk direct from her favourite weaver.

Silk weaving was as much an English as a French occupation, with many English designers and weavers also working in the area. . Nearly all London silks were for clothing rather than furnishings and this affected the designs. English silk designs reflect the wider transition in aesthetics from Baroque to Rococo in the period and were distinctive in their preference for real rather than abstract patterns, for colouring very close to nature and above all for botanical naturalism whenever current tastes permitted. An article in *The Gentleman's Magazine* in June 1749 compared the 'glare of colours' in French silks and their 'tawdry tinsel appearances' with English silks which were 'pictures of great delicacy and ornament', finding a contrast between 'good sense and affectation.' The role of the best silk designers, like Anna Maria Garthwaite who lived on Princelet Street just opposite No 13, was important. It was their patterns rather than the cut of the costume that chiefly determined fashion.

Despite periods of hardship, the silk industry generally prospered in Spitalfields for the first half of the 18th century, helped by protection, a growing exporting trade to America and the proximity of the main domestic market in the capital. However, this prosperity was not to last. For a variety of reasons such as cheaper imports, mechanisation and changing fashions, the silk industry, and therefore Spitalfields as an area, was in decline by the end of the century.

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The weavers' home life was dominated by their work and in most cases their houses should be understood not simply as domestic architecture but also as industrial buildings.

As none of the very earliest 16th- and 17th- century weavers' houses survive, Folgate Street and Princelet Street hold some of the oldest surviving weavers' houses, some with double entrances allowing journeymen direct access to the weaving rooms on the attic floor – probably open to the rafters to accommodate the bulky looms. This separation of working and living spaces is also an indication of the affluence of the master weavers.

The average working day was 12-14 hours for a weaver and many suffered from chest complaints that they attributed to spending so much time leaning against the bars of the loom. The workrooms were seldom aired in order to keep humidity levels high. Humidity not only prevented the fine silk threads from snapping but, perhaps equally important, made the cloth, which was sold by weight, appear heavier.

The economic history of Spitalfields can still be read in its buildings today, of which some 35% are listed. In few other London districts was the provision of new housing so clearly and directly associated with the needs of a single industry. Many of the old houses were destroyed during the Blitz and many more in more modern redevelopments. Today's more developed awareness of the importance of conservation, should ensure that no more are lost.

St Mary's Lane, Tewkesbury

In the 16th century the town of Tewkesbury was famous for making woollen cloth and mustard. As English cloth making declined through the 17th and 18th centuries, Tewkesbury instead became one of the leading centres for framework-knitted stockings, at first made of wool and later of cotton. By the late 18th and early 19th century as much as a quarter of the town's population was engaged in knitting.

The stocking-frame was invented during the reign of Elizabeth I, by the Rev. William Lee, in Calverton, Nottinghamshire. The legend is that Lee was irritated by the sight of the woman

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he loved laboriously knitting stockings on needles, and invented the frame in order to secure more of her attention for himself.

His attempts to develop the industry were discouraged in England under Elizabeth and James I, on the grounds that it would put the hand-knitters out of work, and he went to France, where Henry IV protected him, and the manufacture was carried on at Rouen. He died in 1610 in Paris, without having made his fortune out of his ingenuity.

The row of framework knitters' cottages built in the 18th century in St Mary's Lane is a relic of an industry which once provided the chief employment for the people of Tewkesbury. Its former inhabitants would have spent their days by the long windows, knitting stockings flat on a frame. By 1830, there were as many as 1500 looms in the town, which was heavily dependent on the industry.

The three cottages down St Mary's Lane, all of which Landmark has restored were known locally as the Silk Mill or Stocking Factory. They were in fact, built for "home industry" in the mid 18th century before workshops or factories were established, which makes the row particularly interesting architecturally.

Their construction was simple and typical of their period; local brick and tile, elm timbers in roofs and floors, oak framed windows with sub-frames of iron. The original cottages comprised three floors of one room each linked by a narrow winding spiral staircase of elm boards, and an attic. Large windows in the front wall lighting the first floor rooms clearly indicate that here were the work was done, where the looms were kept.

As we shall hear in part two of this podcast, Richard Arkwright's success in larger scale factory cotton spinning in the late 18th century and inevitable mechanisation then started to impact the cottage industry in Tewkesbury. Richard Arkwright's workers living in similar purpose built cottages in North Street, Cromford, where there is another Landmark let, would have knitted their stockings in direct competition with their rivals in Tewkesbury and



beyond. In Tewkesbury, factories with new machinery were built into the late 19th century, but eventually recession and competition from the East Midlands killed its knitting industry completely by 1914.

However, the resourceful inhabitants continued their focus on feet, and the town became known instead for shoe and boot manufacture.