



PAST TIMES

Cullompton & Culm Valley Cloth Trade

WORDS by Penny Bayer

For centuries the people of the Culm Valley have been producing cloth, clothing and leather which have been exported to top London markets and to Europe, India and China. From the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, Cullompton was an important Devon woollen town, alongside Tiverton, Crediton and Exeter. There were trade and familial links between producers, merchants and bankers in these towns. Being conveniently located near Wellington in Somerset and within easy reach of the Devon port of Topsham, one Cullompton-born sergemaker, Nehemiah Upcott (1710-1788), rose so high as to become Master of Tuckers Hall, the influential Guild of Weavers, Tuckers and Dyers in Exeter in the 1870s.

THE LANE AISLE AND THE MEDIEVAL CLOTH TRADE

By early Tudor times, 90 per cent of England's exports consisted of cloth. John Lane of Cullompton is one familiar name from this time; he was finishing cloth and trading it through the port of Exeter, exporting serge cloth and importing Breton linen. He funded the earliest, most beautiful and nationally significant architectural legacy of the cloth trade in the Culm Valley at St Andrew's Church, Cullompton, where rare cloth sculptural markings on the inside and outside of the medieval Lane's aisle were installed between 1526 and 1529, the year of John's death. Many of the corbels carry his merchant mark, which appears as the figure 4 with a cross on the end (*below, far right*), and which he would have used to distinguish his cloth bales when they were distributed and exported. Merchants' marks such as these are found in written records, on seals and on houses and churches funded by merchants. There are also images of the ships used to export the cloth (*below, third from left*), angels holding combing shears (*below, second from left*), used to crop the surface of woollen cloth to give it a smooth finish, and teasels for combing wool (*below, far left*). The aisle has fine fan tracery, whose intricacy and elegance is considered by some to equal that of Westminster Abbey. The fine detail is easily viewed on the new touchscreen in the Community Centre next door, which has a zoom facility. John Lane and his wife Thomasina are buried at the east end of the aisle and other cloth merchants, including William Upcott, are buried in and outside the aisle.

Lane's aisle is comparable to John Greenaway's chapel at St Peter's, Tiverton, from a similar period, and with sculptures of a variety of ships, anchors, fish, monograms and arms, both buildings indicate the great wealth that merchants could accrue from the cloth trade at that time.

Clothiers such as John Lane organised the production of cloth from small local workshops, probably supervising the finishing of the cloth himself. Two centuries later, in the 1730s, the cloth-making business still relied on numerous small concerns – some 40 small businesses in Cullompton were insured with the Sun Fire Insurance company to make serge cloth by handloom weaving. Many were also involved in other aspects of the process of cloth production – washing, carding, spinning, weaving and dyeing – which often took place in linneys attached to their homes.



THE UPCOTT AND FOX FAMILIES

The period following the Industrial Revolution saw a centralisation of ownership of the means of production, with two families dominating Culm Valley cloth production: the Upcotts and the Foxes.

The Shortlands estate at Cullompton had produced serge since the seventeenth century, but under the canny business leadership of William Upcott (1776-1851), the family business expanded and mechanised cloth production. During his lifetime William owned not only Shortlands, but also Bradford Mill, the workhouse building, and a number of Cullompton mills. In the early-nineteenth century he exported serge cloth to various European countries, including Portugal. A ledger and letter book, purchased in 2014 by public donation through the Cullompton Cloth Trade project and now in the Devon Heritage Centre, shows Upcott's complex dealings from 1802-1836 with Carlos Luis Ahrends, a Portuguese dealer whose trading contacts extended as far as Eastern Europe and South America.

William Upcott also exported through the East India Company in London, which traded serge for tea. When this system of barter came under threat, he campaigned with other manufacturers. He kept the business going through very difficult trading conditions, even finding a way to subsidise the business through Poor Law payments. Members of the Upcott family continued to trade in wool into the twentieth century.

The Fox Brothers cloth business was built on the initial success of the Were family of Wellington and Uffculme in serge production. Both families were Quaker and, in 1797, after they inter-married, Thomas Fox bought the land and water on which to establish Coldharbour Mill at Uffculme as a spinning factory. Fox Brothers eventually had factories and mills at Coldharbour, Wellington, Cullompton, Culmstock and Chipping Camden.

In 1901 the staff outing for the first four of these was attended by 2,000 people who could choose to visit Weston-super-Mare or Weymouth.



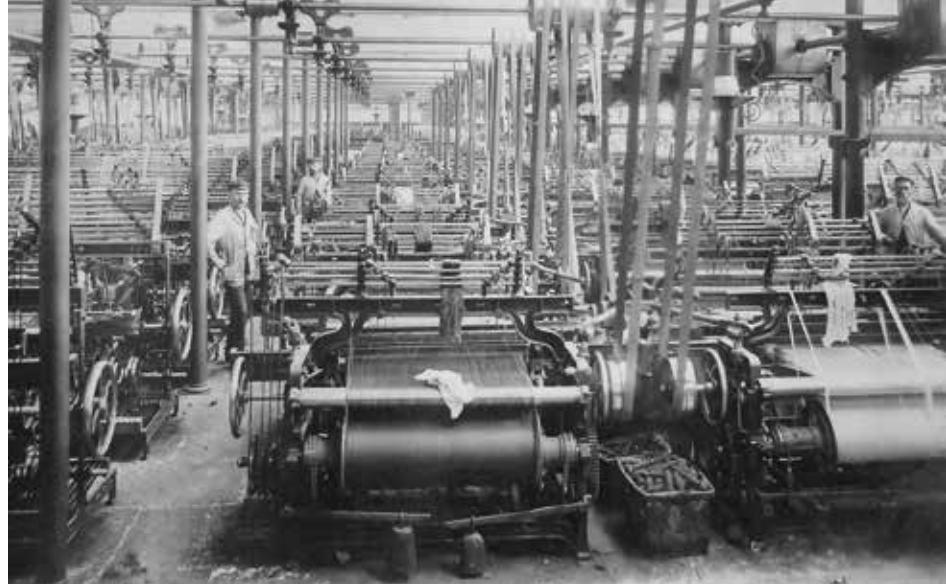
Above: This three-ton steam lorry (the first sold) was used to transport wool between Fox Brothers' factories, shown here in 1897.

Below: Fox Brothers millworker, probably at Wellington, early 1900s.

Facing page, top: An early image of workers at Tone Mills, Wellington; the conditions would have been very similar at Cullompton, early 1900s.

Bottom, left and right: The interior and exterior of Lane's aisle.

Facing page, bottom: Various carvings at St Andrew's Church, Cullompton, which illustrate the cloth trade (referenced in more detail within the text).





Above: *The White Room at the Cullompton Fox Brothers factory in Willand Road, early 1900s. Here white cloth was checked for flaws and mended. Good eyesight and lighting were needed – hence the windows above.*

Below: *Staff at The Weavers, Cullompton in 1914. This was a small workshop which made knitted goods. Sadly, some of the faces are missing.*

Below, right: *A worker on a machine at Wellington.*

At its peak Fox Brothers employed 5,000 people, producing cloth for quality male clothing, and selling to Savile Row and abroad.

Fox Brothers' factories were Quaker-run and had advanced social ethics for their time, including employee education for men, health insurance and pensions.

While Coldharbour Mill is well known, fewer people know that Fox Brothers had a weaving factory in Cullompton from 1890-1977. In 1893 it employed 30 people. The Cullompton factory was in Willand Road (where Twyford Engineering is today) and wove worsteds and woollen cloth. White cloth was produced for military and other uniforms in 'The White Room' (above) which had plenty of light; patterned cloth was made for gentlemen's suits.

The Cullompton factory is remembered by the weavers, overseers, menders and pickers who worked there. Joan Heard and Gladys Davis

worked at the factory as menders. Gladys remembers the "big long shed with a glass roof for plenty of light for invisible mending". She says, "It was lovely material – turquoise, grey and black for suiting." Marian Dummett, whose four sisters worked at the factory, recalls, "My sisters were skilled lip readers as the noise of the loom was so loud you couldn't hear anyone speak. There was a huge camaraderie among those girls at Fox's – the Milfords, Wrights and Rowlands. They were skilled cloth workers and fine women."

SMALL BUSINESSES

The 1841 census shows that there were many jobs associated with cloth and clothing in Cullompton town centre: as well as one merchant and four wool manufacturers, there were 177 weavers, 42 woolcombers, 27 spinners plus wool sorters, woolstaplers, warpers, feeders, winders, knitters, shoe makers and tanners.





Above: Staff at the Cullompton factory in Willand Road in 1951 with Bob Morgan, the factory manager, next to his wife Kath and members of the Wright, Rowland, Thomas and Milford families.

Many of these trades continued into the twentieth century. For example, The Weavers (see facing page, bottom) was set up in Cullompton town centre by Mrs Gidleigh, wife of the local doctor, in a stable behind Heyford House, to provide employment for women: the workshop produce knitted goods such as twin sets. Marian Dummett, former Mayor of Cullompton, remembered that its staff were said to consider themselves of a better class than the "rougher girls" at the Fox Brothers factory up the road! A First World War sales catalogue for The Weavers shows that at that time it employed ex-servicemen to produce silk-woven goods.

Cullompton's history of leather production is thought to date back just as far as the cloth and serge industry. In the twentieth century Sellwood's Tannery produced hides and the Culm leather factory (on what is now the Alexandria Industrial Estate) produced quality leather which was bought by companies in London for sheepskin coats and gloves,

and was also sold next door to the Drevon and Brown glove factory in Cullompton. Eric Dummet, who worked there, recalls, "It was filthy, stinking work. Skins were brought in from Devon, from the Middle East and South Africa." There was strong camaraderie among the workforce.

FIND OUT MORE

St Andrew's and Coldharbour Mill are excellent places to learn about the cloth trade. The Mill is a working textile museum and is the last eighteenth-century working woollen mill in the West Country. Touchscreens in Cullompton (at the Hayridge, the Walronds and the Community Centre) and at Coldharbour Mill tell the whole story, through films, maps, photos, oral histories and text. A tourist trail has two parts, taking in the wider area, and a detailed walk around Cullompton town centre, plus a children's quiz trail (see cullomptonclothtrade.wordpress.com). These resources have been created through a Heritage Lottery Fund grant.

CONTACTS:

THE HAYRIDGE:
E: thehayridge@devon.gov.uk
ST ANDREW'S CHURCH:
T: 01884 33249 (mornings)
COMMUNITY CENTRE:
T: 01884 33265
THE WALRONDS:
W: www.walronds.com
COLDHARBOUR MILL:
T: 01884 840960
www.coldharbourmill.org.uk

Do check before visiting St Andrew's as work is being carried out at the time of writing.



*This image: Culm Valley Works outing, 1949.
Left: The Bobbin Store, probably at Tone Mills. Wool was collected from here on bobbins and taken to factories such as Cullompton for weaving.*

