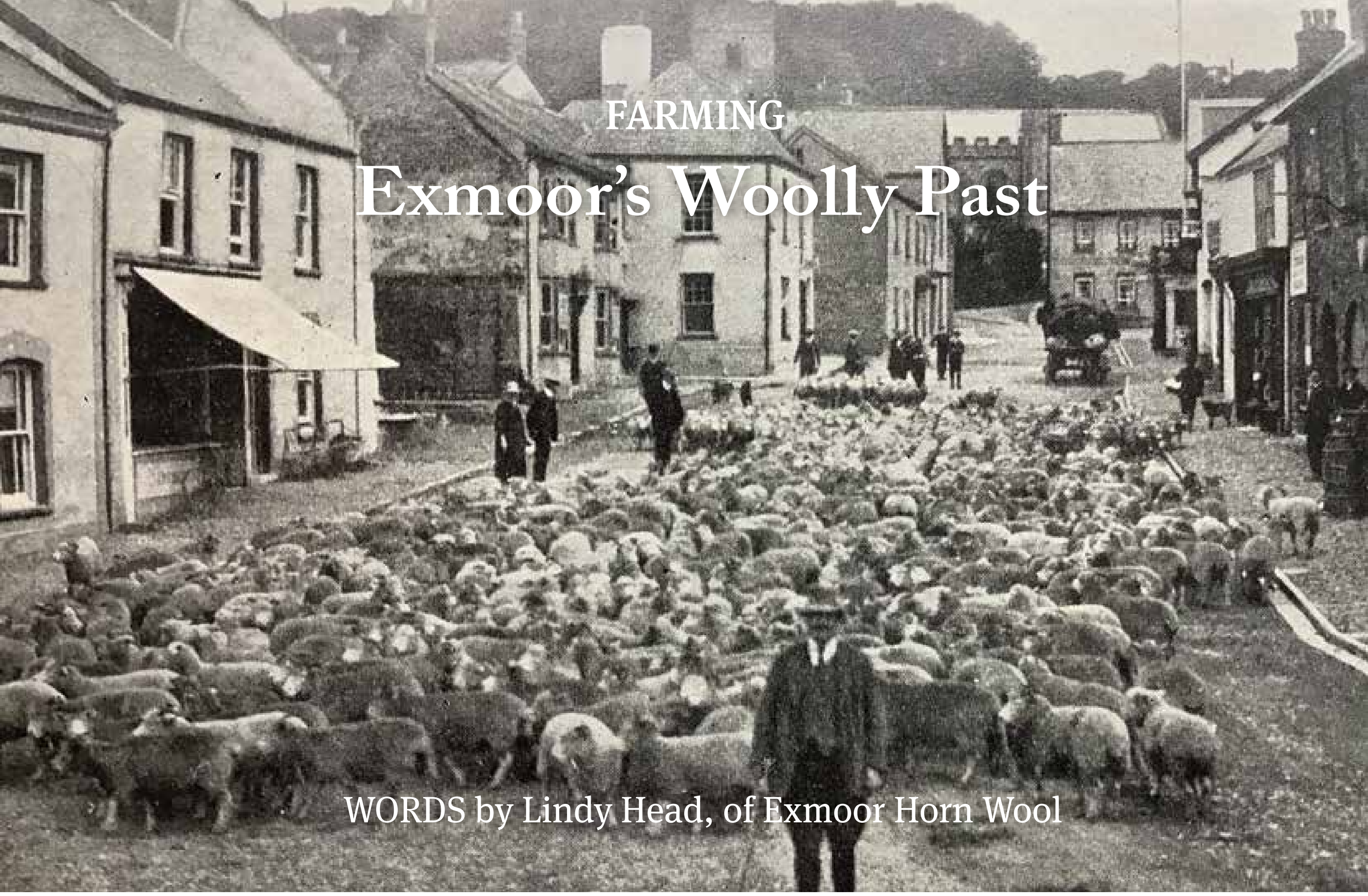


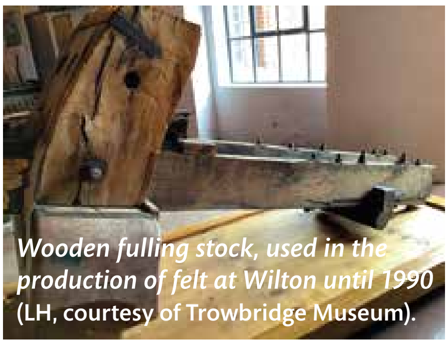
FARMING

Exmoor's Woolly Past

WORDS by Lindy Head, of Exmoor Horn Wool

The history of wool on Exmoor is inextricably tied to water. The Domesday Book of 1086 records around 50 mills in the West Somerset area. Fulling (woollen) mills, as opposed to grist mills or tanneries, became the mainstay of the local economy following the development of water-powered fulling stocks in 1185, and remained so until their gradual decline in the early-eighteenth century.

Fulling mills are recorded in South Molton in the twelfth century; also three in Dulverton between 1638 and 1654; four in Dunster between 1279 and the fifteenth century; two in Luccombe in 1559 and later; two in Porlock, late Tudor and in 1604; one in Exton in 1676; one in Kilve in 1666; one in Nether / Over Stowey in 1456 and so on.



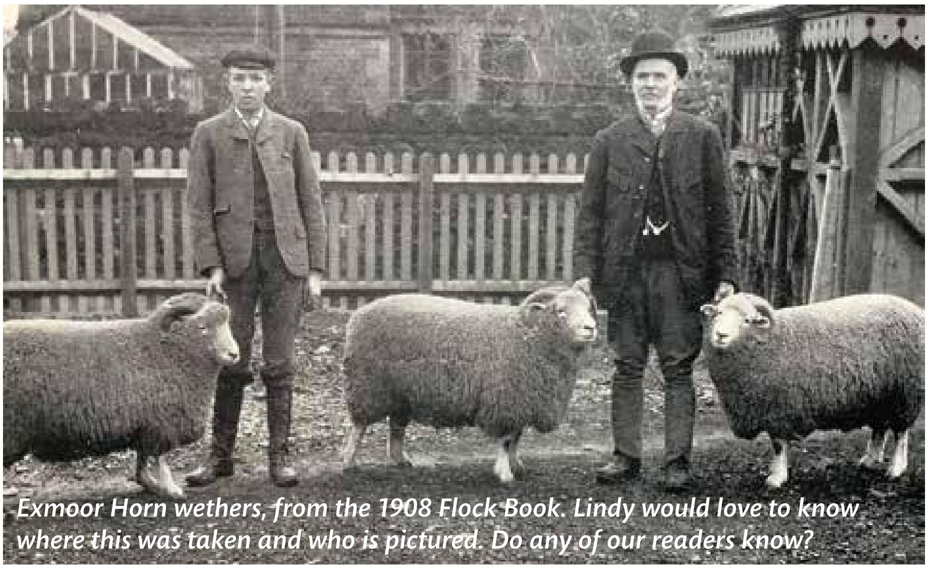
Wooden fulling stock, used in the production of felt at Wilton until 1990 **(LH, courtesy of Trowbridge Museum).**

But before fulling came spinning and weaving, which, for many commoners, cottagers or farmers, provided important sources of income. Woolmen or staplers travelled across Exmoor, bringing sorted fleece prepared for spinning, and collected the yarn when the job was done.

In the twelfth century, the invention of the Great Wheel as a spinning machine (at which the spinner stood) increased productivity, improving still further around 1555 with the introduction of the Saxony wheel where a treadle with flyers and bobbins enabled the spinster to sit. Gone were the days of distaff and spindle. Because of the price differential between washed and unwashed fleece, many farmers undertook the annual laborious task of washing the sheep, a practice which did not totally die out until the mid-twentieth century. (Just think of the number of farm or field place names on Exmoor with 'Sheepwash' in them.) Many mills had washing facilities consisting of wooden bridges extending out into the river or a leat that enabled the unwashed fleece in baskets or perforated metal containers to undergo preliminary cleansing before proceeding on to a drying house.

A replica great wheel at Dunster Yarn Market, built by Trevor Miles, his wife Tracy is doing the spinning (LH).

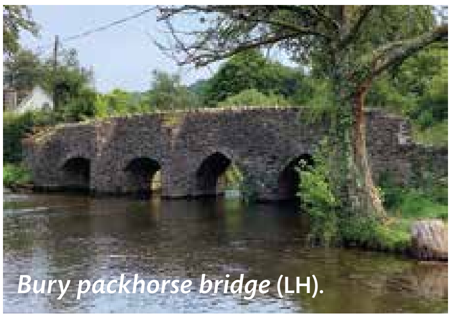
To produce an even yarn the spinner needed to card the raw fleece, that is, to disentangle it and make a continuous sliver. Originally teasels (the ones with the straight spines, not the ones with hooked spines used for raising the nap of cloth) were used for this, but later 'hands' – fine wires set in a leather or wooden backing – became more commonplace. Even as late as 1705, spinning work was provided for the poor in South Molton.



Exmoor Horn wethers, from the 1908 Flock Book. Lindy would love to know where this was taken and who is pictured. Do any of our readers know?

Dyeing either took place at an early stage, (hence the expression 'dyed in the wool'), or after spinning in a hank or skein if weaving was to be of a medley, or when the cloth had been finished. Although woad *(Isatis tinctoria)*, a very widely used dye plant giving blue, was cultivated in Somerset (where half an acre is recorded as being grown in Selworthy by William Westcott), there was not nearly enough of it to meet demand, so imports came from Bordeaux, Bayonne and Portugal, via Minehead and Bridgwater, to dyers in Taunton. Woad, in conjunction with other plants such as weld *(Reseda luteola)*, which gives a yellow, produced a range of colours including several greens. Madder *(Rubia tinctorum)* roots, which gave a red dye, were also imported via Bridgwater.

The only remaining vestige of historical dyeing on Exmoor is at Dyehouse Cottage in Bury, c.1755. An Ordnance Survey map of 1904 shows a leat there which would have made it a more controllable water source for washing and rinsing than the River Haddeo whence it came.



Bury packhorse bridge **(LH).**

In general it took several spinners to supply one weaver. Weaving took place at homes in the villages such as Brushford (where in 1621 a man's will showed that he owned a loom and in 1626 another owned two looms), and Exebridge (where there was a weaver's shop), as well as in larger towns. This system of spinners and weavers as outworkers persisted from late-medieval times until its decline in the early-eighteenth century and then its disappearance at the beginning of the nineteenth under the increased pressure of mechanisation as part of the Industrial Revolution. Surprisingly, the 1921 census shows that, for women, the fourth most common occupation was still weaving.

In passing we must recognise the historic importance of wethers (castrated male sheep) in wool production. They were kept out on the moor, gathered annually for shearing, and eventually sent for fattening on low ground. According to Charles Vancouver in 1808, they would yield "delicious mutton and 4 to 5½ lbs of wool at shearing valued at 9d/lb unwashed or 13d/lb washed."

Wethers continued to have a strong place in Exmoor's ovine economy until meat-eating habits changed; the last large flock of them was sold in the 1970s.

Having spun the yarn and woven the cloth, the purpose of fulling is to soften and thicken the fibres of the cloth so that they mesh together to form a denser, stronger, smoother fabric than the original open weave. Fulling stocks, usually in pairs, were effectively large wooden mallets held within a wooden frame driven by water-powered gearing, and were used to beat the moving cloth.

The first stage in the fulling process was to scour (cleanse) the cloth to remove dirt, grease and lanolin in the wool if it had not already been washed. If the yarn used in the weaving was coloured, the scouring phase would have already been done since dye cannot adhere properly in the presence of grease. The use of fermented human urine in the fulling process persisted for centuries, and is the origin of the rather derogatory epithet 'piss poor'. It was collected in carts from public houses and private dwellings.

After fulling, the cloth would have shrunk considerably, so it was stretched and dried on a tentering frame to ensure that the cloth was evenly tensioned to given dimensions. In Dunster, there were tenter frames on Grabbist Hill and on the side of the castle tor, and in Dulverton tenterhooks may still occasionally be found on the ground at Weir Cleeve atop the hill facing west.

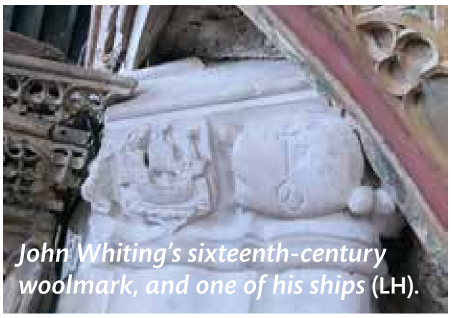
Following drying, the cloth had its nap raised using an array of teasel heads and then shorn off, to give a fine, smooth surface. Teasels are tall herbaceous biennials which have stiff-headed spiny flowers with tiny hooks at the end of each bristle, which, when dried, raise the nap without tearing the fabric as metal would do. In the seventeeth century teasels were grown in the area between Taunton and Langport [regular readers may like to refer back to Rosemary FitzGerald's article about teasels in Issue 77, Winter 2016].

It was then the expert job of the shearman to trim the nap to make a smooth cloth using very sharp shears, which could weigh up to 31 pounds. Shearmen were the aristocrats of wool workers and were generally self-employed. Handshears had almost disappeared by 1830.

Cloth shears **(LH, courtesy of Trowbridge Museum).**

To give some context to the significance of wool in the English economy, broadcloth exports, for which the South West was particularly well known, increased from 15 to 40 thousand cloths between 1350 and 1400. These were usually white and undyed for finishing by Flemish merchants via the port of Antwerp. Being a plain weave, but heavily fulled, broadcloth's great virtue – especially when used for coats and cloaks – was that it could be cut and used without the need for hemming. John Greenway from Tiverton (1460–1529) made his fortune from kersey, a 2/2 twill, narrower, lighter fabric than broadcloth, brushed on one surface for skin contact.

Exeter Canal, the oldest surviving UK ship canal, enabled woollen goods to be loaded in the city instead of Topsham. Tiverton and Cullompton both used this export route for their cloth trades. Bridgwater, Minehead and Watchet sent kerseys to Ireland in 1540 and broadcloth to Spain, their trade expanding to the New World in the seventeenth century. St Peter's Church in Tiverton records the achievements of John Greenway through carvings in the Greenway Chapel and church porch. These depict several vessels, similar to those at St Andrew's Church in Cullompton in an early-fifteenth-century chapel funded by John Lane, cloth merchant, and at St Mary's Kentisbeare in the chapel funded by John Whiting *(below)*.



John Whiting's sixteenth-century woolmark, and one of his ships (LH).

Tiverton Museum has a wonderful collection of lead seals embossed with the merchant's name and symbol, which were applied to certify bolts of cloth. During unloading, the lead seals were discarded. The earliest seal found on the Algarve coast in Portugal belonged to John Greenway, who also exported to France, Holland and Spain. Eighteenth-century seals from Samuel Burridge of Tiverton have been found on the island of Schermer, in Holland.

From 1688 to 1715 serge manufacturing on the Devon/Somerset border was the most important section of British textiles, worth £850,000 out of £3 million UK exports. West Somerset had 40% of the county's wool industry and was home to 45% of the county's wool workforce, thus making Taunton the county's most prosperous town.

Martin Dunsford's *History of Tiverton* stated that in 1720 there were about 1,500 looms in daily use, with 700 woolcombers constantly employed, serving 56 fulling stocks.

The migration of manufacturing to Yorkshire in the late-eighteenth century did not, however, result in the wholesale removal of wool processing from Exmoor, but rather a patchy decline in which Exmoor fared somewhat better than some areas simply because new inventions such as the flying shuttle for weaving, invented by John Kay in 1733, and James Hargreaves' spinning jenny, invented in 1764, were late to arrive here. 'Manufactories' were set up at Dulverton and Heasley Mill. Dulverton produced serge and coarse woollen blankets at the Tangier Mill, which had a breastshot 10hp waterwheel before it became what we now know as the (former) laundry in 1903 [see pp.29-33].

Heasley Mill was a four-storey factory with two overshot waterwheels. It produced a type of serge solely for the East India Company which used this cloth as exchange in its monopoly trade with China. As a consequence, when this monopoly trade was broken by an Act of Parliament in 1834, Heasley Mill lost its only customer and it declined rapidly.

The partnership of Bawden, Cresswell and Bawden opened the first mechanised factory in South Molton in 1800, producing serges for export. Bawden is still a familiar Exmoor name. Although in 1844 there were three woollen manufacturers in the town, by 1851 this had reduced to two. Without the coal supply that was necessary for steam production, the South West, with its water-driven machinery, found it difficult to compete against the North of England. This hastened the decline in South Molton, and in 1866, the Higher and Lower Mole Mills were sold and many jobs were lost before final closure in 1886.

Dunster declined for a different reason. George Luttrell, who owned Dunster Castle and became the MP for Minehead,

The EHSBS Secretary, Mr D.J. Tapp (standing) *with his joining and retiring assistants, W.E. Yendell* (left) *and W. Dicker* (right), *from the 1938 Flock Book.*

in 1584 paid for improvements to Minehead Harbour to facilitate the import of fleece from Ireland. In 1609 he commissioned the building of Dunster Yarn Market. However, Tudor and Stuart prosperity could not last without taking advantage of the changes in wool industry technology, which Dunster's clothiers did not, thus losing market share. In comparison, the mills of the nearby Fox family at Wellington embraced new water-powered machinery. For example, Thomas Fox bought land and water rights in 1797 to establish Coldharbour Mill at Uffculme as a spinning mill. During the First World War, Fox Bros produced 8,000 miles of khaki cloth for uniforms, and 70,000 pairs of puttees a week.

Despite the majority of the woollen processing industry having deserted Exmoor by the start of the twentieth century, amongst farmers a passion for fleece quality remained steadfast.

When the Exmoor Horn Sheep Breeders' Society met formally for the first time on 28 July 1906 at the Carnarvon Arms Hotel, Dulverton, the average breeding ewe flock size was 68, so it was a tremendous achievement on the part of the secretary, Mr D.J. Tapp of Higher Combe, his assistant Mr Dicker, and the four teams of branders, to brand 25,000 sheep in the first two years of the society's existence.

Through the lens of the Exmoor Horn Sheep Breeders' Society's (EHSBS) annual Flock Books, records show that members put considerable effort into promoting the breed nationally and internationally for both wool and meat.

Exmoor Horns were exported worldwide. In 1906 shearlings had been sent to South Africa for crossing with Merino ewes; four ewes and a ram went to Argentina in 1910; and the 1935 Flock Book has a picture of Exmoor Horn ewes in Belgium.

In 1911, 140 ewes, belonging to Alan Young of Watergate, Bulford, were bought by F.S. Peabody, of Hinsdale, near Chicago, who founded the Exmoor Association of America amidst a great press fanfare. Soon after, A.C. Young represented the breed at the International Exhibition in Chicago in November 1913, where he won the cup shown *(below, centre)*. Photos courtesy the Peabody

Mayslake Estate *(including the one above)* show some fine specimens with lambs at foot. Although another 140 sheep were purchased in July 1914 for export to America, the outbreak of the First World War leaves uncertainty as to whether they actually arrived. The Association eventually disappeared.

After the war, in 1919, the generosity of all members enabled 50 ewes and a shearling ram to be sent to Serbia, whose civilian population had suffered dreadfully as a collective punishment for the assassination of the Archduke Franz Ferdinand.

Professor Barker of Leeds University researched the properties of 27 wools from British pedigree sheep in 1923. He commented that Exmoor was the strongest of all the pedigree wools and concluded that it was one of the best, most promising wools for which he predicted a good demand.

During the 1920s the railway system made it possible for large numbers of stock for breeding or fattening to be transported from Exmoor to the Wiltshire Downs *(see the photo on page 35)*. Sheep were herded along droving routes to stations with lairage facilities such as Bampton, Dulverton, East Anstey, Molland and South Molton on the Taunton (Norton Fitzwarren) to Barnstaple line.

Co-operation with the Devon Closewool Society (founded in 1924) resulted in the creation in 1934 of Devon and Somerset Woolgrowers Ltd. Wool was to be paid for according to grading, with members receiving part payment on delivery and the balance on completion of sale, with a share in the profits at year end. The outline of this system stayed the same until disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Wool had a landmark year in 1950 when Clement Attlee's Labour Government set up the British Wool Marketing Board. By statute it was duty bound to accept all wool offered, irrespective of breed, whatever the quantity or quality, and that obligation still exists today. Grading of wool had hitherto been done on farm by a merchant but would now take place at the grading depot. Wool continued to have a base price (effectively a subsidy), in order to stabilise the market, until the base price was abolished by Labour in 1992. The first depot in the area was at Wheddon Cross, but due to access problems, and as a consequence of larger and heavier lorries, in 1973 the depot moved to its current site at South Molton [see Issue 84, Autumn 2018, 'Woolly Yarns' by Michelle Werrett, pp.19-22].

Tom Rook, from the 1989 Flock Book.

Thanks to the efforts of auctioneer Tom Rook, who was secretary to the Society from 1959 until 1990, Dartmoor membership of the Society peaked at 30 in the 1960s. The total flock size of Exmoor Horn breeding ewes had its zenith of 27,000 in 1981 (of which 8.7% were on Dartmoor) and an average flock size around 250. Since then the total flock size has decreased gradually to around 10,000 and the average number per member has dropped to below 100.

Wool continues to have a place on Exmoor, due to the presence of John Arbon's worsted spinning mill in South Molton. And Exmoor Horn Wool is proud to promote the continued use of wool as a renewable natural fibre in the fight against pollution caused by synthetic microfibres.

The image on page 35 shows Exmoor Horn sheep passing through Dulverton on their way to Salisbury Plain, from the 1925 Flock Book.

Prize-winning shearling ewes, Bath & West Show, property of O.T. and A.F. Robins, Lydcott, from the 1927 Flock Book.