

## *The Woollen Industry in Bradford*



In 1725 Daniel Defoe described Bradford and Trowbridge as the two most eminent towns in that part of the Vale for the making of fine Spanish cloths of the nicest mixtures. At one time Bradford was the central town in the West of England for the manufacture of superfine broadcloth.

The wool manufacturing business is known to have been carried on in Bradford to some extent in the time of Edward I. In 1331 Edward III took advantage of discontent among the merchants of Flanders to invite them to settle in his dominions and they brought with them some manufacturers of cloth, which up to that time had been unknown in England. Some of these manufacturers settled in Bradford and by the late fifteenth century clothmaking was an important occupation among the inhabitants. In the late 15th and early 16th century the leading clothier was Thomas Horton (d 1530) who built the Church House and was the founder of Horton's Charity. A younger Thomas Horton died in 1549 leaving his fulling mill in Bradford to his son Edward. One Mary Horton, a great niece of Thomas, married Thomas Yerbury (d 1549) of Trowbridge. Their son John Yerbury (died 1614) and grandson Thomas Yerbury were leading Bradford clothiers. Other Bradford clothiers in the late 16th and early 17th Centuries were Richard Steer, Richard Horne (d 1577), John Parker, John Yew, John Browne, Howard Tally and William Horne.

Following a slump during the reign of James I the Wiltshire woollen industry was revived after the Restoration by switching production from broadcloth to medley cloth and reaching a newer and wider market. A leading Wiltshire clothier called Paul Methuen (d 1667) in 1659 obtained some "spinners" from Flanders for the purpose of obtaining the secrets of manufacturing the finer kinds of cloth (up until then the cloth manufactured was a relatively coarse type of druggett). The Parochial Officers required Paul Methuen to enter into a bond of indemnity in the sum of £100 in case the foreigners or their children should become chargeable to the Parish. The name of the place where they lived is still called Dutch Barton. Around the same time Paul Methuen also signed his name to deeds guaranteeing to pay at any time for the removal of one Anne Lowden to Bulkington and similarly in relation to one John Emling of Standerwick in the County of Somerset – described as a "wool breaker" Mr Standerwick was said to be desirous of settling in Bradford because "worke is more plenty there". Mr Paul Methwin of Bradford was said to be "the greatest cloathier of his time".

By the beginning of the eighteenth century Bradford had considerably increased in population and importance. In 1723 there were no fewer than twenty five clothiers in the area, most of whom lived in the town itself. The second son of Paul Methuen, Anthony Methuen(1650-1717) succeeded his father as a clothier followed by Anthony's son Thomas Methuen (d 1737). In 1721 a resolution was passed in Vestry to purchase from Anthony Methuen a portion of Dutch Barton for the erection of the Parish Workhouse. Another Bradford family prominent in the industry was that of Houlton who reached their point of greatest prosperity in the mid 17th Century, the two leading members being Robert Houlton and his son Joseph. Other Bradford clothiers of this period were Richard Halliday, John Curl (d 1703), Michael Tidcombe, Robert Rawlins and Ebenezer Lydyard. Anthony Druce and his brother William, both clothiers, were members of the Society of Quakers, after whom Druce's Hill in Bradford was named. Other Quaker clothiers during this period were Israel Noyes, Charles Tyler and George Grant.

The cloth trade continued to flourish at Bradford during the second half of the 18th Century. Among leading clothiers were Francis Yerbury (1707-78) and his son John, descendants of the John Yerbury mentioned above. Francis Yerbury was the inventor of a new method of making a superfine cloth, for which he took out a patent in 1765. Other clothiers of this time were Zachariah Shrapnel (d 1775) John Rennison (1745-1816) and Francis Hill (d 1828). By the last quarter of the eighteenth century men and women from other parts of the country were flocking into Bradford to obtain employment there. The leading clothiers of the town had to give guarantees to the parishioners to prevent the possibility of their being put to any expense in relation to the newcomers. At the end of the eighteenth century Bradford was one of the largest towns in Wiltshire, after Salisbury, Marlborough, Corsley and possibly Devizes. However, at the same time came the introduction of machinery with a long term impact on the industry. Weavers and others employed in the manufacture of cloth started to be employed in factories, rather than working in their own homes, as previously. On 14 May 1791 a tumultuous mob of nearly 500 persons assembled before the residence of a clothier, Mr Phelps, who had been seeking to introduce a new type of machinery. Eventually he was compelled to surrender up the machine, but not before a number of persons had been seriously injured or killed, and his home had been extensively damaged.

From the early 19th Century the cloth making trade declined. There were 17 clothiers listed in a local directory in 1822-3; only 6 in 1830. The decline of the cloth industry caused much hardship as it had been the town's only industry for three centuries. The distressed weavers were thrown on the parish poor rates. In 1822 the magistrates applied for troops to be stationed at Trowbridge to protect the area against rioters following a riotous assembly near Bradford earlier that year. The Bradford weavers were said to be starving and four suicides occurred in one day in 1821. In 1841 a local bank failed and put several manufacturers out of business. Hundreds were thrown out of work and no less than 400 persons were forced to seek residence in the Workhouse which was unable to accommodate such a number of people. An emigration fund was set up which enabled many weavers and their families to seek employment in foreign lands; others were helped to travel to Wales and the North of England. In ten years the population of Bradford decreased by a quarter.

A directory in 1855 gives only four cloth manufacturers – Edmonds & Co of Church Street, John King and also H Applegate both of St Margaret Street and J W Applegate at Greenland Mills. The reason for the depression was competition from the Yorkshire woollen industry (ironically Bradford in Yorkshire was said to have been founded by natives of the Wiltshire town) – and Bradford fared worse than Trowbridge. The failure of most Bradford manufacturers was probably due to out of date methods. However, the cloth making industry in Bradford did not entirely die out until 1905.

The last cloth manufacturer to close was the firm called Applegate Brothers. This was on the site of Greenland Upper Mill, initially part of the Duke of Kingston's estate in the eighteenth century which in 1718 was let to Thomas Methuen. By 1804 it had been bought by John Hinton and a factory was built on the site which was occupied by the firm Thomas Tugwell and Co between 1810 and 1825; in 1816 seventy seven hands were employed there. In 1844 the Executors of John Hinton offered the factory with a fulling mill and extensive workshops for sale – having initially been purchased by Edmonds and Co the factory was eventually bought by a small Trowbridge firm J. W Applegate and Co in 1851 and, as stated above, survived until 1905. Although the firm of Edmonds and Co survived the great depression of the 1840s in the town it was apparently bankrupt by the early 1860s.