

# The Wool Trade in Steeple Ashton

The church of St. Mary the Virgin was built in 1480 at the cost and charge of Robert Long and Walter Lucas. They were clothiers who had evidently prospered greatly due to the wool trade.

In 'Steeple Ashton', A History of the County of Wiltshire: Volume 8: Warminster, Westbury and Whorwellsdown Hundreds (1965), pp. 198-218.

It states "When Leland visited Steeple Ashton c. 1540 he remarked that 'it standithe muche by clothiers' and named two, Robert Long and Walter Lucas, who had assisted in the building of the parish church.

Although there is no evidence of any cloth industry at Steeple Ashton prior to 1500 by this date the wool trade was flourishing as it was in many other parts of the country. However despite the impact of the clothiers in Steeple Ashton their era was relatively brief and lasted less than 100 years.

By 1600 no clothiers remained in the village although spinning and weaving would have continued in the thatched cottages probably for the Trowbridge and Westbury clothiers until the introduction of power machinery put an end to that.

Besides Walter Lucas and Robert Long, (his two sons Walter and Thomas Long moved to Trowbridge to set up business).

There are records of other clothiers of the early and mid-16th century;

William Alcombe was an associate of James Terumber, who was a rich Trowbridge clothier.

There was also John Reynold who held land in Steeple Ashton in 1540.

In 1545 Robert White who was less prosperous than other local clothiers paid more tax than anyone else in the tithing.

In 1561 Robert, George and William White disgraced themselves by selling defective white cloths and were fined.

By 1576, George White, who had apparently bought land in the village and William White were the only two clothiers still paying tax in Steeple Ashton.

It is believed there were two main factors which caused the demise of the wool trade in Steeple Ashton.

Firstly there was the lack of water power essential for the continual development of the production of wool cloth.

Secondly there was a fire which spread quickly and destroyed many of the houses in the village possibly including the some of the clothiers residences. The fire may have also been responsible for the decline in the weekly market which had been so important for the prosperity of the whole village.

(It should be noted that many houses were rebuilt and date from this period. As one walks through the village there is such a wonderful sense of living history).

Interesting Fact; In 1666 due to concern regarding the decline in the demand for wool the Burial in Wool Act was passed.

It was decreed that:

"No corps should be buried in anything other than what is made of sheep's wool only; or put into any coffin lined or faced with any material but sheep's wool, on pain of forfeiture of £5."

In addition, an affidavit to that effect was required not later than 8 days after the burial. These affidavits sometimes appear in parish registers.