

THE HISTORY OF WOOL IN TAVISTOCK

EARLY TIMES: SHEEP, MONKS AND ABBEYS



TAVISTOCK HERITAGE TRUST



Sheep first arrived in England in around **4,000 B.C.** when Neolithic settlers crossed the English Channel.

The **brown Soay breed** is usually given as an example of what Bronze Age sheep were like. The fleece has short, bristly fibres and is shed naturally each spring.

The Romans are thought to have introduced longwool breeds to Britain and they had a well-organised textile industry in Britain that produced wool “so fine it was comparable to a spider’s web”. English looms made materials to clothe the Roman legions fighting in colder latitudes, but the subsequent successive waves of Scandinavian invaders reduced the sheep to a subservient part of subsistence agriculture.

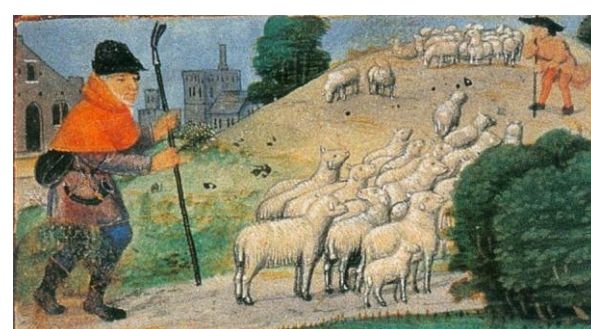


By the Saxon period, the ubiquity of sheep is clearly shown by the many Saxon place names – for example, **Shepley, Shepton Mallet, Shipley, and Skipton** - that embody a reference to sheep. However, parts of Southwest England and Wales actually had fewer sheep than the rest of England!



The Benedictine Abbey at Tavistock was founded in **974**. Tavistock became the largest and richest Abbey in the area. By **1086** the abbey held 768 sheep. **On average, the Abbey owned 1,000 sheep** of various breeds spread over several manors, including **Hurdwick, Ottery** (in Lamerton) and **Leigh** (in Milton Abbot). The accounts of the Abbey show that the early flocks were valued for **milk production** and making **cheese and butter**, rather than for wool sales. The large monastic estates played a major part in increasing wool production, although the monks did not get involved in the export or processing of the wool themselves.

By the middle of the 12th century, the Cistercian monks who took over Buckfast Abbey – to which Tavistock Abbey was closely linked – latched on to the profit to be made from the moorland, which formed a substantial part of their estate. In 1190, Buckfast Abbey received a charter from Richard I that gave them permission to **pasture their sheep and cattle on Dartmoor** throughout the year.



14th to 17th CENTURIES: FROM WOOL TO CLOTH



There is evidence that **Dartmoor was a significant wool-producing area by the late 13th century**, but wool from Tavistock Abbey does not appear to have been exported at this time. The yarns were spun from inferior carded wool from the native Exmoor and Dartmoor sheep then dyed using plants and roots. They were then woven into a thick, sturdy cloth – kersey or Devonshire Dozens – with a reputation for being hardwearing and waterproof. Each piece of cloth was one yard wide by 12 yards long (a ‘dozen’). Preparing the yarn provided work for the whole family and a weaver could make a piece on a loom at home in about a week. At Morwellham Quay a replica 14th century loom can be seen in working order.

By 1464, Tavistock had become well-known as a producer of wool: in the fifteenth century the Hurdwick flock alone produced an annual average of 280 fleeces. The expansion of sheep farming for wool led one commentator to observe that “*sheep have eaten up our meadows and our downs, our corn, our wood, whole villages and towns*”, although of course sheep also brought a new era of prosperity to the countryside.

The dissolution of the monasteries in the 1530s released vast new holdings of land, some of which was sold to local gentry and some became the country estates of wealthy London speculators and merchants. The **Russell family (promoted to Dukes of Bedford in 1694)** was gifted the Tavistock Abbey lands for services rendered to the king. In 1535 an Act was passed forbidding ownership of more than 2,500 sheep.



*“Devon has more sheep than almost any other county in England.” ... “There is no market nor village nor scares any privat mannes house where in theise clothes be not made, or that there is no spinning and cording for the same: ... wheresoever any man doth travel you shall fynde the at the hall dore ... **the wife their children and their servants at the turn spynninge or at their cardes carding.**”*



Gradually English sheep farming became concentrated into fewer and fewer hands, the home spinning and weaving that had been prevalent ceased, and the cloth trade became localised in a few areas, including Devon. Plain wool (not woven) collapsed as a market commodity by 1521. **Devon became known not for the wool itself, but for the cloth it produced.** What gave Devon the edge against competitors was its **established trade links** with continental Europe, access to a **plentiful supply of wool**, and **water power**.



The Exeter wool market sold over **£10,000 of yarn and wool in 1536** – a figure that had fallen to £5,000 by 1540; however, the weekly figure for wool cloth was rapidly increasing, with £100,000 worth of serge leaving Exeter Staple each week. The cloths were exported by the Devonshire merchants to Brittany and bartered for dowlas, lockeram and canvass. **Between 1688 and 1715** Devon exports were the most important sector of the English wool textile trade; **out of total exports of £3 million, it was worth £850,000 (about £171 million in today’s values!)**, with **Holland, Germany and Spain as its biggest customers**. The wool trade in **Devon even had its own currency**, trading tokens that were used locally, although these were later abolished by Charles II.

18th and 19th CENTURES: FROM PROSPERITY TO DECLINE

The Tavistock coat of arms was devised in 1682. The lion, fleur-de-lys and fleece banded refer to the town's loyalty to the Crown, to the Virgin who shared the Abbey dedication, and to the local woollen industry.



The buoyant trade for Devonshire cloths gave way to an **atmosphere of gloom** that pervaded the county in general and **Tavistock in particular by 1720**: long wars had dealt heavy blows to the industry; moreover the new Norwich 'stuffs' combining finer fabrics with cheaper prices, were making rapid inroads into the traditional serge market.

In 1720 the Vicar of Tavistock, Rev. Nathaniel Beard, tried to help one of his flock by despatching him to Exeter with the following letter to the Bishop:

"The bearer of this hath been for some years a laborious and reputable tradesman in our town in the woollen manufacture. 'Tis now for us, as in other places, trade is sunk, and a new method of living must be thought of."

In October 1759 Roger Lang, West Street clothier, was moved to write to the Duke of Bedford's agent:

"The times for several months past have been very dull. We have a great many goods on hand but are in hope it will not continue long, and are very unwilling to stop our weavers. In order to keep them employed, I desire the favour of your honour to intercede with his Grace to help us with some cash until such time as we can have some return."

This was a long-term depression that, from the late 18th century, reduced Tavistock's cloth industry to a permanently low level of activity. In 1768, 330,414 pieces of cloth were exported from Exeter (from which city the great bulk of woollen goods manufactured in Devon was sent); however, by 1820 the number was just 127,459.

Throughout the latter half of the 18th century the **East India Company was the main buyer of Devon cloth**, reportedly buying 2/3 of the county's output and using its monopoly position to sell the finished product; however, by 1813 the demand fell to around 150,000 pieces.

Although the 18th century saw the decline in Tavistock's cloth trade, it picked up again with the **mining boom of the late 18th and 19th centuries**. The fulling mills on the left bank of the Tavy were converted to manufacture serge in the 18th century and were still working until the 1840s. In 1838 there were still **3,000 looms in Devon weaving serges, of which around 100 were in Tavistock**.

Pigot's Commercial Directory (1830) offered the comment that:

"the chief manufactures of Tavistock are coarse woollens, which at one time was more extensive than at present."

However, in 1850:

"the manufacture of coarse woollens flourished here from an early period, but declined at the close of the last century, and is now nearly obsolete."

Aside from wars, the fundamental challenge to the industry in Devon came from the mechanised, factory-based production in the new **Yorkshire mill towns**.

The rate of decline can be clearly seen in the numbers of people employed in the industry within Tavistock: **in 1753 there was work for 175 parishioners; in 1841 there were 66; and in 1861 just 11**. As the 19th century went on the Devon woollen mills fell out one by one. In 1881 there were only about 1,200 people in the whole county of Devon employed in the woollen and worsted manufactures.

During the 19th century English **sheep went from being a source of wool to being essentially a meat animal**. In 1800, England imported about 5m lbs of wool, and in 1900 the figure was 400m lbs. England no longer needed English wool to feed its looms, but meat to feed its people.

20th CENTURY: WOOLCOMBING IN TAVISTOCK



In the 1890s the Hayle-based firm of **Hosken, Trevithick and Polkinhorn** (H.T.P.) leased the former Mount Iron Foundry building in Parkwood, owned by the Duke of Bedford, which had stood empty for six years.

The company set up a wool treatment business in Tavistock, which complemented the Cornish premises' focus on motor servicing and dealing. Tavistock had a number of advantages: it was placed between Devon and Cornwall and central to the wool producing area; a leat brought water from the River Tavy to power the mill; two railways (Great Western and London and South Western) served the town; and there was little competition for labour.

H.T.P. occupied the mill in 1897 and wool-processing equipment was installed the following year. Old cottages were demolished and extensions built to the mill. Building continued until 1905 and in 1916-18 the water wheel was replaced by a variety of power sources. The Tavistock mill operated as an H.T.P. subsidiary until the creation of **Devon Woolcombers Ltd** on 13th July 1926. The company **employed 40-60 people** at its height. **Sam Polkinhorn** ran the mill initially and built himself a distinctive red brick house that also served as the company's offices.



At one of Tavistock's railway stations, the sheets of wool were lifted out of the trucks onto the company's horse drawn wagons. Farmers also brought wool to the entrance that is now Heritage Park. Once the wool had been received, it was taken upstairs to a galvanised shed for preliminary sorting.



The wool was unrolled to release bits of straw, dirt and wool contaminated by tar used for branding. The fleeces were torn in two lengthwise before stripping off any coarse, shaggy tail wool; then the better wool was cut from the back and the various wools were sent to the production area in wire baskets. Long stapled wool went to a breaker machine that formed it into strips, which were washed again, balled and passed to a combing machine. Short stapled wool was carded after the initial wash and treated separately.

The work of the piece rate sorters was checked by a foreman (or overlooker) before it was dropped through to the floor below. The wool was then blended prior to being fed into a giant washing machine consisting of three rectangular wooden tanks. The wool was mechanically moved forward through a tank of hot water with soap and alkali. Then it was lifted and fed between rollers, capped with wool to prevent ironmould marks, into a second tank containing just hot soapy water. The wool was rinsed in a third tank and passed through a final set of rollers into the drying room where a large fan blew warm air over it as it lay on tables. A mechanical dryer was installed later.



The wool was prepared for combing by passing it through a series of machines known as 'preparing boxes'. They were equipped with steel combs that straightened out the fibres, finally winding and twisting the slivers into long rovings ready for feeding into the final combs, after which it was known as 'tops'. It then passed through more machines where it was wound into large balls and wrapped in paper to be baled ready for despatch to spinners. There was no spinning at Tavistock: from recollections of the employees, wool went to Buckfastleigh for blankets, and the coarser kind to Axminster for carpets.

On 27th February 1932, there was a major fire in a large shed adjoining the Tavistock mill. Employees threw water from the leat on flames that leapt 30 feet in the air. By the time the fire brigade arrived, only the bare walls were left standing. Production stopped during the repairs and about **half the staff of 30 went on strike**, refusing to accept a 10% pay cut.

The fortunes of Devon Woolcombers fluctuated over the years, but in the late 1930s **management was transferred from Sam Polkinhorn to Harry Bradley** – *"who achieved seemingly impossible profits that must have been welcomed by the directors in Truro"*.

By 1950, however, trade had so diminished that the **combing and carding machines were scrapped or sold**; sorting and washing continued for a time. **Final closure in 1965** was caused by the prohibition of any waste water being discharged into the River Tavy.

Tavistock Mill was a listed property and became **Edmund Kaminski's** builders' merchants and garden centre. In 2003 the mill was **converted into 9 dwellings**.

PRE-INDUSTRIAL WOOL TRADES

The **woolcomber** would receive fleeces from the wool-stapler, and his was the first process in the manufacture of flannel, serge and several other cloth types. He washed the wool and once dry he combed it with heated combs. Each woolcomber could supply about 10 spinners and 6 weavers.



The **spinner** - typically female - would take the fleece from the woolcomber and hold it in her hand, using the spinning wheel to draw it out to a finer thread, which was wound round a spindle. When the spindle was full the thread was transferred to a reel and taken off in skeins. These threads were then wound together (plied) before weaving.

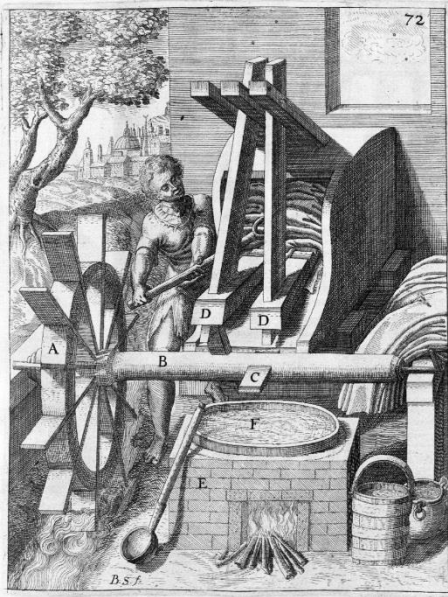
The pre-industrial cloth **weaver** used both his hands and his feet to control his loom. After mounting the warp (length-wise) he used a shuttle to pass the weft (transverse) thread from side to side. Different material such as flax or silk could be used for the warp and weft threads if required.



The **dyer** used mainly vegetable dyes to add colour to either wool or woven cloth. After the wool had been cleaned, the dye was applied by soaking the wool or cloth in a brass or copper cauldron.

MECHANISATION: FULLING, TUFTS AND TAVESTOCKS

The **fulling** process involved **scouring (cleansing)**, **beating** and **thickening** the cloth to enhance its feel and look. Prior to the 13th century, these processes were carried out manually by people known as ‘**fullers**’, ‘**tuckers**’ or ‘**walkers**’. After fulling, the cloth is spread onto ‘**tenterhooks**’ to dry.



A **water-powered fulling mill** was later invented, with one of the earliest fulling mills in Devon established at **Dunkeswell in 1238**. The mechanised fulling mill brought two main innovations: first, two wooden hammers replaced human feet; and second, the hammers were raised and dropped by water power. One man was needed to keep the cloth moving properly in the fulling trough, which would have been filled with water and fuller’s earth to scour the cloth and remove impurities.

The widespread **availability of rivers and streams throughout Devon** encouraged the adoption of mechanised fulling, which spread rapidly across the county. The **first fulling mill in Tavistock** was opened at **Parkwood**. In the 15th century several more fulling mills had been added on the Millbrook; **by 1500, 16 working fulling mills were located within 2 miles of Tavistock Abbey**.

Tavistock became well-known as a producer of wool, but because the wool was of a poorer quality than that found elsewhere in the country, **it was local practice to put ‘flocks’** or tufts into the cloth. An Act of Parliament in 1463 prohibited the use of ‘flocks’ in the making of woollen goods. However, the **Abbot of Tavistock** successfully petitioned parliament to be exempted from this act, stating that:

“they had been accustomed to use such mixtures from time immemorial, and that the cloth made by them could not be otherwise manufactured on account of the “stobernesse of the wool”, it being made solely of wool grown in these three hundreds” (Tavistock, Lifton and Roborough).

In a statute of **1511** these cloths are exempted by the name of **Tostocks**; in 1534 they are referred to as **Tavestocks** or ‘**western dozens**’. Tavestocks continued to be made as late as the reign of Edward VI (1537-1553).

TYPES OF SHEEP FOUND NEAR TAVISTOCK

By the 18th century the different sheep types had fleeces with distinct characteristics based on their varying proportions of fibre types (both hairs and different wool types). Whereas selective breeding and improved nutrition can affect the length of the wool, it cannot change a sheep that is characterised by a short-wool fleece into one that produces a long-wool type!

There were five distinct breeds found near Tavistock:



Devon long wool – polled (hornless) breed incorporating genetics from the Leicester as well as the Bampton to create one of the relatively few true long-wool English breeds, producing wool a bit coarser than the Lincoln breed. At the end of the 19th century the Devon long-wool had merged with the South Devon – similar to the Devon long-wool but with a finer fleece – into the Devon and Cornwall Long Wool.



Dartmoor – similar to the Devon long-wool and appreciably larger than the Exmoor. At the end of the 19th century the breed split into the **White-faced** and **Grey-faced Dartmoor**.



Devon close-wool: a white-faced, polled breed resulting from a cross between Exmoor Horns and Devon Long Wools. Producing relatively short, medium-quality wool. Primarily a grassland sheep, very hardy, having a docile temperament.



Exmoor horn: a white-faced horned breed producing similar wool to the Devon close-wool.

In the early 19th century the total stock was estimated at about 700,000, of which about 200,000 produced heavy fleeces of long wool. Before the 1939 war, **Devon was second only to Northumberland** among English counties in numbers of sheep.

FROM FLEECE TO CLOTH

The main processes involved in turning a sheep's fleece into a woven cloth are:

- **Shearing** or fellmongering – until 20th century this was carried out with hand shears
- **Grading** – the fleeces were sorted and graded according to quality, length and cleanliness of the wool fibres by a merchant known as the 'wool stapler', who then supplied the different grade wools to the weavers
- **Scouring** – replaced the 'tucking' or 'fulling' process – the process of removing grease, salts, dust, burrs and other foreign matter from the fleece. This is important, as poorly-scoured wool would not dye properly. The process involves scrubbing the fleeces with soda at varying temperatures in a sequence of tubs. The fleece is rinsed and dried in hot air and then either carded or combed, depending on the end use.
- **Carding** – process of mixing long and short staples and different coloured fibres to create an homogenous mixture that can then be spun and twisted into yarn. In pre-industrial times this was a manual process.
- **Combing** - used on fleeces with long and lustrous fibres. The objective is to get the fibres all aligned with each other.
- **Spinning**
- **Weaving**

TYPES OF CLOTH MADE IN TAVISTOCK AND DEVON

In **medieval times**, many woollen garments were made in their natural colours and were not dyed, hence the cream and brown habits worn by many of the monks that originated from Soay-type breeds. Most sheep now seen in England now produce white wool, but brown, grey and black wool is also seen.

The main types of cloth produced in Devon were:

- **Devonshire shalloons** – a loosely-woven worsted cloth, twilled on both sides
- **Druggets** – a coarse woollen fabric, felted or woven on either self-coloured or printed on one side
- **Kersey** – a coarse but lightweight cloth, made from using both long and short woollen fibres. Kersey gave way to serge in the 17th century
- **Long ells** – a fine white serge made in unusually long lengths. The warps and wefts used combed and carded wool respectively, and the resultant cloth was a twill weave. Mainly made for exports by the East India Company
- **Perpetuanas** – durable woollen fabrics with a twill weave
- **Serge** – a coarse but lightweight cloth, first made around 1615, but widely used by the 1680s, made using both long and short woollen fibres. The resultant cloth was a twill fabric, often used for military uniforms and similar.

The **decisive shift in Devon's fortunes** came in the late 15th century when the county's weavers switched from their more traditional cloth to the production of **kerseys**, which were popular in Southern Europe. The main spinning and weaving centres were towns such as Ashburton, Buckfast and South Molton, and much of the cloth was finished in and around Exeter. Each town was famous for its special type of cloth:

- **'Tostocks'** from **Tavistock** – Tavistock kept to the older and coarser cloths, but developed something of a serge manufacture by the 18th century
- **Kerseys** in **Crediton** – pre-eminent for fine spinning
- **Totnes** went on making "a sort of coarse cloth which they call **narrow-pin-whites**, not elsewhere made"
- **Honiton** became prosperous after pioneering the weaving of **serges**, which were also produced in Tiverton, Exeter, Tavistock and Totnes.

The Devonshire woollen industry, which had risen to greatness on the kersey trade during the 16th century, moved over to the serge trade in the 17th century. By 1698, one visitor to Exeter wrote:

"the whole town and surrounding countryside for at least 20 miles round is employed in spinning, weaving, dressing and scouring, fulling and drying of serges, it turns the most money in a weeke of anything in England".

PEOPLE OF WOOL CONNECTED WITH TAVISTOCK

Middlemen

In 1552 an Act of Parliament decreed that wool could not be bought unless it was for the buyer’s own use (and woven at home) or for export through the Staple (official wool markets). By the middle of the 16th century there were three classes of middlemen:

- The **Staple Merchants** – dealt with large quantities and the export market. Generally wealthy and owned a large country house in the area where the wool was produced as well as a town house where they conducted their business
- The **Merchant’s Middlemen** – travelled to collect fleeces, often buying at set times (August 24, November 1 and February 2)
- **Commodity Dealers** – bought sheepskins for their leather products, removed the fleece and sold the wool to dealers and other manufacturers.

Clothiers

Cottage industry **clothiers** controlled the supply of material to the workers. Clothiers were described as “*he who buys wool, pays for spinning/weaving/milling/dying/shearing/dressing etc – that is, he is master of the whole manufacture from first to last. This is the clothier, whom all the rest are to look upon as their paymaster.*” In 1753 it is thought there were 17 clothiers in Tavistock:

George Brown, his son Jonathan Brown

Peter Brownson, his son Richard Brownson

William Burdwood

George Calamy

John Condry

John Dodd

Roger Garland

Samuel Helefin

Roger Lang

Edward Paddon

John Payne

John Prideaux, his father Roger Prideaux

Thomas Roskilly

Robert Vigers

Upon these men rested the livelihoods of all the craftsmen in the industry who lived in the town, together with the scores of spinners in the scattered rural areas around the town, who worked in their own homes, and who were dependent on the clothiers supplying them with the raw wool on which they could work for piece-rate wages.

Do you know any of these names? Are they related to you? Please let us know!

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