

PENSFORD AND THE GROWTH OF THE CLOTH INDUSTRY IN LATE MEDIEVAL SOMERSET

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I

Pensford is not among the best known villages of Somerset, but its origins and development lay at the heart of the one of the great economic transformations in its history, when, for a brief period, Somerset became a major industrial county. This article both seeks to examine developments in Pensford and to place them in the wider context of the development of the cloth industry in late medieval Somerset.

In the later 14th century, England had emerged as a mass exporter of manufactured cloth, and the trend had continued with short-term interruptions during the 15th century. Somerset was one of the key areas in this process. National exports of cloth rose from an average of 6,413 cloths in the 1350s, to 40,291 in the 1390s, a sixth-fold rise, and continued to increase (Bridbury 1982, 116; Carus-Wilson and Coleman 1963). Cloth now replaced wool as the country's main export. The growth of the textile industry showed itself in the increase in cloth exports, for which figures can be calculated from the customs records, and in the aulnage accounts, which recorded the proceeds of a tax on the marketing of cloth. Like any medieval taxation records, the latter need to be used with caution, and they do not enable us to see the amount of tax evasion. By 1470, the aulnage accounts had become stereotyped and some were fraudulent (Carus-Wilson 1954, 279–91) although they may still provide a sense of how the production of the industry had once been distributed.

Somerset was part of a broader West Country industry that ran from Devon to Gloucestershire, and from Somerset to Hampshire, and which lay at the heart of this industrial growth. The area had already achieved a dominant position by the 1350s, and this had subsequently been reinforced. In 1356–8, the five counties from Hampshire to Somerset produced nearly 56% of the cloth produced for sale (Gray 1924, 21–2). The area's rapid growth is also indicated by the export figures. In 1355–60 Bristol exported 30% of the national total of cloths, and in 1365–70 this rose to 40% (Sherborne 1965, 10). By the 1390s, Somerset with over 12,000 cloths had become by far and away the most important cloth-manufacturing county in England. Its rivals (Wiltshire with over 7,000 in second place and Bristol, York city and Warwickshire) were far behind. Somerset, together with Wiltshire, Dorset, Hampshire and Bristol, produced 54% of England's cloth in 1394–8 (calculated from Gray 1924, app.ii; Hare 2001, 108–9). In 1470, Somerset was still the second largest producer, although now overtaken by Suffolk. (Heaton 1920, 85). By the late 15th century, the West Country was responsible for what Carus-Wilson described as 'possibly half the whole cloth production of the country, and for almost all the broadcloths' (1987, 679).

Cloth production for more than local demand had existed in the 13th century, as at Taunton and in the Mendips (Hunt 1956–7, 89–105; Shaw 1993, 76). In the 14th century, the industry

had initially been heavily concentrated in towns. In the 1350s, it was focused on Bristol, Bath and Wells. In the 1390s, four of the five largest centres were still the old towns of Bath, Wells, Frome and Taunton, and together they produced almost half of the county's production. Wells has been described as 'first and foremost an industrial city' (Shaw 1993, 66). At Bath the poll tax returns of 1379 survive, but do not give a clear idea of the occupational structure of the town. Too many people are given such vague terms as labourers, although it is perhaps significant that the three weavers are amongst the most highly taxed members of the town (Green 1889, 300-9; see now Fenwick 2001). When a former customs official wished to choose a name to associate with an industry in which national pride was firmly involved, as it challenged the dominance of the Flemish industry of Ypres and Ghent, it was perhaps not surprising that Chaucer should choose Bath. 'Of clooth-making she hadde swich an haunt, she passed hem of Ypres and of Gaunt'. But the industry was increasingly breaking beyond the towns and even the wife of Bath came from 'byside Bathe' (Chaucer, *The Prologue*, 424). Increasingly the industry was to be based in the countryside and the small towns, although there has been debate on the scale of continued urban activity (Carus-Wilson 1987, 672-86; Bridbury 1982, 62-83). But this shift to the countryside occurred earlier and more extensively in Somerset than in neighbouring counties, where such towns as Salisbury, Sherborne and Winchester still dominated production of their counties even more than did the towns of Somerset (Hare 1999, 5; Hare 2001, 109). Pensford was to play a crucial role in this great transformation.

II

Nowadays, Pensford's appearance is dominated by the great viaduct of the disused Great Western (North Somerset) railway, while its miners' welfare institute reminds us of a later industrial phase on the Somerset coalfield. But in the later 14th century it lay at the heart of these changes whereby Somerset became the most important textile-producing area of the country. Pensford was a very different type of place from the traditional urban centres of the county, but its outstanding importance was clear. In 1395/6, it was the largest cloth market in the county, registering a fifth of the county's cloth. Pensford's 61 names were responsible for over 5,000 dozens (a smaller cloth regarded as equivalent to half a broadcloth). Its merchants included Thomas Prysshton and John Prysshton the two largest dealers in the county, with 795 and 570 dozens respectively. Its marketing was on a large scale with its clothiers being responsible for an average of 83 dozens, a figure surpassed only by that of Frome (117 dozens), and in sharp contrast to the much smaller average urban production of Wells (22 dozens) (PRO/E101/343/28). A few years later, in an account for the hundred of Keynsham, John Prysshton was still marketing on a large scale, and was the largest producer. The account was then the responsibility of John Martyn of Pensford and his brother Richard. A Richard Martyn, John Martyn sen., and John Martyn jun. all traded in cloth but none was among the greatest of the cloth traders of the hundred (PRO/E101/344/2).

The industry remained important throughout the 15th century, although it may have declined from its former pre-eminence. It had important trading links with the great city of Salisbury (Bridbury 1982, 71). Leland writing in 1542 described it as 'a pleasant little cloth-making town, with a market and a stream which flows down to it and drives several fulling mills' (Leland 1983, 429).

Pensford was an entirely new centre and community. It was not even a unit of taxation in 1327 or 1334, or a parish (Dickinson 1889; Glasscock 1975, 270). It seems to have had two chapels: one on either side of the river Chew and with each dependent on a different mother church (Publow and Stanton Drew) (Collinson 1741, 428-9; Leech 1975, 45-9). Here, a new settlement had grown up on the fringe of two neighbouring parishes and manors. Its focus was the ford

where the road to Bristol crossed the river or stream. But the settlement had little physical relationship to the legal and ecclesiastical units from which it had emerged. There may have been an earlier small satellite settlement at the ford but it was the cloth industry that generated a substantial village or township. The stream itself provided water for powering the fulling mills, as emphasised by Leland, while the ford provided a natural route centre. Looking at the village today, it still possesses two distinct elements on either side of the stream. The 19th-century tithe map of Publow of 1839 (SRO 329/1), shows more clearly than the present landscape, the long and distinctive plots of a planned settlement, although these have now been partially destroyed by the bypass and the school. Of its chapels, one has gone and one has been in decay, but the latter still reveals a fine later 14th-century tower. Here was an even more spectacular example of the emergence of a new clothing settlement than at the more famous Stroudwater (Gloucestershire) (Carus-Wilson 1962, 152–8).

It is unlikely that the cloth was produced on such a large scale in Pensford itself. More likely was a situation akin to that of the rural and domestic cloth production of the West Riding of Yorkshire in the 18th century, revealed in the diary of Cornelius Ashworth (Atkinson 1979, 27–32). He worked his own agricultural holding and produced cloth. When he had finished a cloth, he took it and sold it in Halifax. Just as the packhorse tracks converged on Halifax, so here they would have centred on Pensford. The farmer-cloth makers could bring the finished product to Pensford, where they knew that men such as the Prysshtons would buy their product. They in turn could purchase the goods that they needed. It may not have been a formal market, but its impact would have been much the same: part of the varied forms of informal marketing that existed in the later Middle Ages (Dyer 1994, 292–303).

III

The emergence of Pensford, however, needs to be seen in the context of the growth of the cloth industry elsewhere in the county. It was certainly not an isolated exception. The aulnage account for 1395–6 shows other evidence of rural growth: thus the village of Croscombe accounted for nearly 10% of the county's cloth, and towns like Bath and Frome would have drawn upon the production of a rural hinterland, as with the fictional wife of Bath. Bristol itself had its own urban industry as well as the rural industries of Somerset and Gloucester. Although we cannot locate the precise source of the cloth that was aulnaged in Bristol, it is likely to have included much from Somerset. A century later, the day books of the aulnager allow us to trace the date when the cloth was stamped. They show considerable variations in marketing throughout the year but also clear seasonal parallels between the two years 1466–7 and 1484–5. They are the seasonal patterns of a predominantly rural rather than an urban workforce, with the February high sales and the July low (PRO E101 33/ 11 and 12; Bridbury 1982, 104). The poll tax evidence both in its scanty survival and in its lack of detail is much less of a useful source than in neighbouring Wiltshire (Fenwick 2001, 418–54).

The geographical pattern of production was not a static one, and the aulnage accounts provide two snapshots of this process, in 1395–6 and 1470, or in the case of the latter, of fossilised figures of earlier relative regional importance. The two accounts may be tabulated, and the comparison of the two accounts can be illuminating. The material has been tabulated as a percentage of the county's production, so that it can be used to ascertain broad trends in the relative distribution of cloth production rather than as an indication of any absolute production figures. Unfortunately the two sets of aulnagers did not use the same units. The 14th-century account lists centres with production as small as two cloths, suggesting that it provides a comprehensive survey of marketing patterns. Production then seems to have been dominated by the urban centres of Bath, Wells, Taunton and Frome, although it had expanded enormously

in the countryside in the east of the county and in the Mendips. It is noticeable that the Mendips were the second highest taxed area in 1525 (although not all of this would have resulted from cloth production) (Sheail 1998, 151). Comparison of the two accounts suggests a picture of both continuity and change, with much continuity, particularly in the old urban centres.

In the east of the county the industry continued, and was increasingly part of a large-scale broad cloth industry that crossed the border into the expanding industrial area of west Wiltshire. The Horton family who became well known clothiers in Bradford and Trowbridge had come from Lullington in Somerset (Kite 1902, 164; PRO Prob 11 11/17). When in the reign of Henry VIII, the prominent London merchant Thomas Kitson recorded his cloth purchases for 1529–40, they show him concentrating on the purchase of white broad cloth which he bought from west Wiltshire, east Somerset and Gloucestershire. Over half the suppliers who can be located came from west Wiltshire, but most of the others came from Bath and the Frome valley, from the places that had been active in 1395–6: from Frome, Beckington, Rode, Norton St Philip, Hinton Charterhouse, Bath, Keynsham and Bristol (Carus-Wilson 1959b, 139). Of the Somerset centres, Bath with its 17 sellers showed by far and away the broadest base for cloth sales, most other centres produced only a few named figures. Over half his purchases came from Somerset (Brett 1999, 32, 31), although this may have been over-weighted by the enormous purchases from John Clevelod of Beckington. Between 1528/9 and 1537/8, over half of Kitson's Somerset purchases came from Clevelod (and in the last year from the latter's daughter Mary) (calculated from Brett 1999, 32).

Table 1 Aulnage accounts and the distribution of cloth production (expressed as a percentage of the total for the county); source: PRO/E101/343/28; E101/344/7

	1395–6	1470
Wells	9.8	8.4
Shepton Mallet (Shipton)	3.0 + 9.2	Croscombe (Corscombe) 8.0
Pensford	20.3	18.9 (P. and Harptree)
Bath	8.4	8.4
Ford		4.0
Frome	18.3 + 8.3 (Beckington, Rode & Mells)	26.1 (F. and Compton)
Bruton	4.5	2.0
Axbridge	0.2	6.0
Bridgwater	0.6	6.0
Langport (Lamport)	1.7	4.4 (L. and Yeovil)
Taunton	9.0	7.6

Ford and Compton raise issues of location. Ford occurs between Bath and Frome in the account, and I have taken this to be the Ford near Bath, now Bathford. Compton is linked with Frome in the aulnage account, and seems unlikely to be one of the surviving villages that bear the name. The nearest (West and East Compton in Whitson hundred), seems too close to another specified centre, Shepton Mallet.

But there were also changes in distribution by 1470, as some areas declined or rose in relative terms. Pensford seems to have fallen marginally, but probably not very significantly. A new centre had emerged at Ford, near the famous cloth-producing centre of Castle Combe in Wiltshire. There seems to have also been an expansion of production in the west (in the Axbridge and Bridgwater areas), and in the south (at Langport and Yeovil), where they were probably producing kerseys, the lighter and dyed cloth. This industrial growth was also seen in the expansion of cloth exports through Bridgwater, which would have catered for a restricted but active area. At Taunton, production remained on a similar scale in 1470, but grew

considerably at the end of the 15th century as part of an industry that increasingly looked towards Exeter (Carus-Wilson and Coleman 1963; Carus-Wilson 1963, 19–22)

Production in east Somerset was dominated by that of undyed broadcloth, but in the rest of the county, the industry concentrated on lighter and dyed cloths, kersies and dozens. In the 1440s, Frome had been one of the most important destinations for woad from Southampton, although this may have been as a marketing centre for other places beyond. But in the 1460s other Somerset centres became more important, such as Langport, Shepton Mallet, Leigh on Mendip and Wells (Coleman 1960–1, 322–4). Other woad came through Bridgwater and Bristol. From 1470, an increasing number of wills show gifts in kind that reflect the prevalence and importance of both cloth production and dyeing; with bequests given in woad, a key dyestuff, or in cloths themselves. The vast majority of these cases lay in the Mendips and to the north, in villages like Leigh on Mendip, Yatton, Chew, North Pederton, Banwell and Croscombe, together with towns like Glastonbury, Bridgwater and above all at Taunton, that lay beyond (Weaver 1901). The contrast between the areas of lightly fulled and dyed cloth and east Somerset with its emphasis on heavily fulled and undyed cloth is also reflected in the London merchant Thomas Kitson's sales in the 1530s. He sold little woad to the clothiers of East Somerset but much more to two men of Stoke St Michael (or Stoke Lane) further west (Brett 1999, 37,40).

IV

But why had the industry developed so dramatically in Somerset? Explanations in terms of raw materials are not enough. Wool was produced on the Mendips, and evidently on a large scale, as in 1341. But the flocks were by no means so great as in neighbouring Wiltshire (Miller 1991, 292–3; Dunning 1978, 16; Hare 1994, 160–1). The development of heavy water-powered fulling was not a prerequisite of cloth production as the continued success of manual urban fulling makes clear, but for certain cloths, such as the heavily fulled broad cloth, water power was essential for producing the required finish (Hall and Russell 1981, 115–16). East Somerset and West Wiltshire also had a ready supply of fuller's earth. Thirsk has argued that an explanation should be found in the tradition of family farming that established itself in the pastoral parts of west Wiltshire. But Wiltshire suggests the initial importance of cloth production was as much in the chalklands, despite its very different economy of large-scale farming. Perhaps we seek for too mechanistic an explanation, and the element of chance and initiative must be firmly taken into account (Bridbury 1982, 104). It may be that the heart of the industry lay in Bristol and then spread to existing urban industries in Bath and Wells, and to the countryside that lay around. It should be emphasised that, as with the rise of west Somerset and west Wiltshire in the 15th century, the industry did not just expand and then stagnate: it both declined in some areas and expanded into others (Hare 1999, 10–12; Hare 2001, 114–15). In addition there were chronological variations, periods of growth but also of decline, as with the mid century recession. It would be wrong to see this as a period of unending growth (Hatcher 1996, 237–72; Hare 1999, 18–22).

What effect did such industrial growth have on the rural settlement of these areas? Certainly, the industry helped generate a prosperity that was reflected in the lord's income, as in the classic example of Castle Combe, or elsewhere in Wiltshire (Carus-Wilson 1959a; Hare 1999, 1–26). New jobs generated new wealth and with it the opportunities for consumer spending, not to forget the basic needs of sustenance required by a growing population: of wheat for bread, barley for ale, and of meat. By the early 16th century Somerset was one of the richest counties in England, ranking second in a survey of lay and clerical wealth in 1514 (Schofield 1965, 504). The cloth industry would have played a considerable importance in this growing wealth. In the 1390s, Somerset produced 25% of the country's cloth. But a few years before in

1377, it possessed only about 4% of the country's population (see poll tax figures, excluding Cheshire and Durham for which there are none, Dobson 1970, 54–7). Even allowing for a degree of internal migration, the textile industry provided a source of employment that allowed the creation of an exceptional concentration of new wealth. This would have affected most of the county's society, whether in generating jobs, consumer goods or food and other agricultural products.

One obvious sign of this new wealth was the church building that was to leave such an indelible mark on the landscape of the county. It seems difficult to make sense of this outpouring of investment without reference to the prosperity generated in industry and agriculture by cloth production. The church of Huish Episcopi provides a fitting and spectacular example of such wider building activities. Yet it lay in an area of the county where a settlement survey suggests that the evidence of wealth is apparent in the obvious church building activity of the later Middle Ages, the evidence of late medieval settlement change is difficult to disentangle, and the cloth industry easily neglected (Ellison 1983). Yet Huish and other neighbouring villages with their fine churches, were already in an important area of 15th-century cloth production, and such industry would have also generated agricultural prosperity beyond. The aulnage accounts show that there was a small but noticeable industry at neighbouring Langport in the 1390s, but the importance of the Yeovil-Langport area grew in the early 15th century, and by 1467–70, it accounted for a twentieth of the county's production. In the 1460s, Langport itself was one of the major centres where woad was sent from Southampton (Coleman 1960–1, 323). The parish of Huish also included an urban element of Southwick, a suburb to Langport, even if it later failed.

Industrial expansion would also have generated the demand for more housing. Occasionally the presence of real estate developments by the lord may still be seen, as at Mells. This was already an important centre in the later 14th century. According to Leland, this 'used to be an attractive little clothmaking place' where Abbot Selwood of Glastonbury, had observed the wealth of the inhabitants of Mells 'and decided to rebuild it with modest houses of stone blocks'. Much of one street still survives. (Williams *et al.* 1987a; Leland 1983, 430). The George Inn at Norton St. Philip provides another survivor of this expanding industry. Built in the 14th century and enlarged in the 15th and 16th centuries, it served both as an inn and, at least from the 17th century as the headquarters of the annual fairs there (Williams *et al.* 1987b; Betty 1986, 150).

We know little about the organisation of the industry, although occasionally wills hint at possible complexity. Thomas Chauncellor, citizen of Bath, drew up his will in 1496. His interests, as suggested by bequests to churches, lay within the city and in the villages around. He possessed two looms given to the fraternity of St Katherine, although his brother in law was allowed to use one for his life. He possessed a shop that was kept by Isabell. He employed weavers and fullers within the city, each of whom was to receive a bequest of 1s. He produced cloth directly in his own buildings, employed others to weave and full, and traded (Weaver 1901, 341–4). Men like the Prysshtons of Pensford were clearly large-scale traders rather than producers of cloth. Over a century later in the 1530s, the purchases of Thomas Kitson produced examples of similar large-scale traders. Within a decade he had bought over 500 cloths each from John Kent of Bath, from Roger Blackdon followed by Maurice Llewellyn from Farleigh Hungerford, and above all from John Cleveland of Beckington from whom he bought 3,340 cloths (Brett 1999, 32).

In most cases it is difficult for us to understand fully the scale and impact of this lost industry. We recognise the wealth that must have been spent on church rebuilding. We see evidence of new settlements, housing or expansion on the edge of a settlement, and suggest that they might belong to this period. We know enough to appreciate the need for much more research into Somerset's rural economy. Pensford may lack the tourist appeal of Castle Combe, or the latter's

superb documentation, but it was once the more important of the two as a textile-producing centre. Pensford provides us still with a reminder of a period when Somerset lay at the heart of a dramatically changing national economy.

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Abbreviations

PRO Public Record Office
SRO Somerset Record Office

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