

Kersey and other Cloths Woven in Sutton Coldfield

By A. F. Fentiman

Introduction

In 1528 Bishop Vesey, then Bishop of Exeter, persuaded his master King Henry VIII to transfer control of the Manor of Sutton Coldfield to the inhabitants of the manor itself. Its affairs under a Charter¹ were to be regulated by a council of twenty-five respectable citizens, who were expected after the first year to elect annually a leader called the Warden, the first warden, William Gibbons, having been appointed by the King's Council.

In return for the privilege of self-government the King required a Fee Farm Rent of £58 per annum to replace the revenues lost when patents granted to court notables were allowed to die out.

Bishop Vesey then expended a considerable amount of thought and indeed money in improving the fortunes of what must have been his run-down birthplace. He for instance paved the streets, built a Moot Hall (a sort of Town Hall), improved the Parish Church, started a Grammar School, built, so it is said, 51 stone houses, fenced the woods in the park so that the inhabitants could pasture their cattle therein and introduced stud horses. Further he tried, though in this he seems to have been less successful, to introduce the manufacture of 'Kersey'² cloth to Sutton with which he was familiar from his Devonshire diocese.

Though the term 'kersey' crops up in the literature from time to time no effort is made to explain what it actually is. These short notes are probably sufficient to give an understanding of the term and some idea of cloth manufacture in the town up to say the Inclosures of 1824 to 1851. The whole process is quite complicated with many intermediate steps, so only those stages which it can be inferred from the literature were carried out in Sutton are discussed herein.

Kersey Cloth

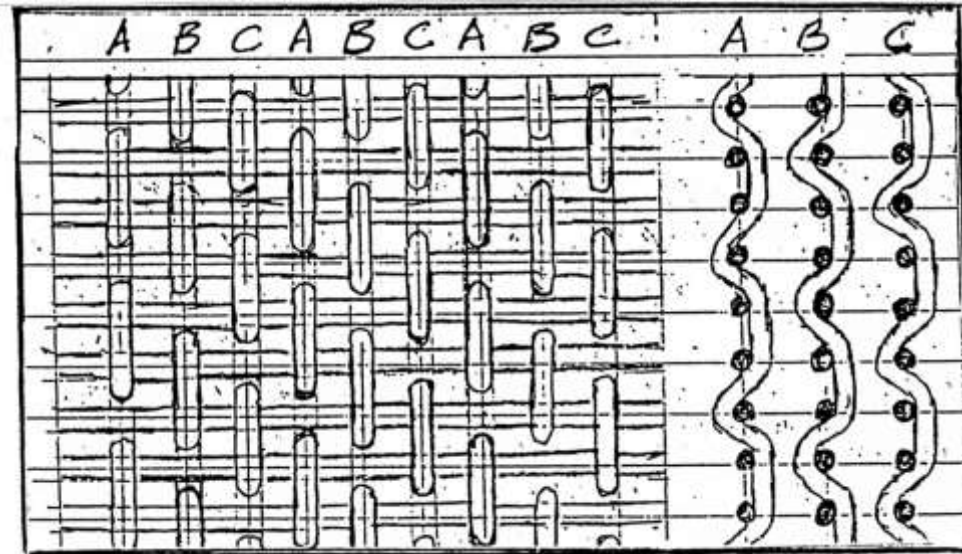
The cloth

Kersey, a special sort of cloth fabric originated, so it is said, in the village of that name in Suffolk in the fourteenth century or earlier. As there is a Priory in or near the town it might be that it is a cloth of continental origin.

Kersey takes the form of a heavy twill milled to disguise its basic construction and give a short lustrous nap³. Though there are variations in both weight and materials usually it is a woollen cloth similar to, but heavier than melton cloth used in the tailoring of high-class overcoats and military wear.

Twill

Twill is made by running the weft (lengthwise) threads under one and then over two warp (crosswise) threads and so on. Adjacent threads step down one warp thread and repeat, the pattern thus giving a ribbed effect which is then hidden by milling.



Twill weave (much exaggerated)

Milling or fulling

The woven cloth is then beaten under water to increase its density and hide the basic weave. This has the effect of felting and shrinking the cloth. Cleansing agents are added to remove dirt and grease to prepare the cloth for dyeing. The residual processes are common to other cloths and described hereafter.

Cloth-Making in Sutton

Introduction

Although Bishop Vesey seems to have made a considerable effort to encourage weaving, it failed to flourish and the literature on the subject is quite sparse. There is enough to conclude that the main stages in manufacture from the raw material through spinning, weaving, milling, dyeing and the eventual disposal were all taking place, and these are dealt with in that order.

The raw material

This was predominately wool, although there are inventory references to hemp and flax. At one time there must have been wool in abundance for William Pitt (1796)⁴ states that there were about 11,000 sheep on the Coldfield, which then crossed the border towards Barr and encompassed about 6,500 acres⁵. These sheep were a homeless grey-faced breed developed from Southdown stock, good to eat as long as fattened on better land, which with well-chosen rams did not degenerate the clothing wool.

These flocks were most probably run on a commercial basis, for a noted master, Richard Fowler of Erdington used, according to Pitt, to run several flocks of hundreds of sheep indiscriminately both sides of the county line [the Coldfield also extended into Erdington; grazing on the Sutton Commons was strictly regulated]. Flock numbers would have been were it not for the proliferation of rabbits on some 1,500 acres competing for the same food source as the sheep. Townspeople were more constrained, for by ordinance of the Court Leet of 1763[and in the sixteenth century courts] each freeholder was allowed to pasture fifteen sheep on the commons and their servants but six⁶.

The eventual enclosing of the open land by various Acts from 1800 onwards (1824 in Sutton) and consequent fencing of free range led to the disappearance of these flocks. Sheep were forbidden on the enclosed lands for seven years unless additional fencing was provided to stop them destroying the diminutive hawthorns, which would eventually comprise the bulk of the hedges round the newly allotted fields.

Hemp seems to have been cultivated on a small scale, there being occasional references in old deeds to hemp plecks⁸ and to hemp dressers, the men who separated the woody fibres to form yarns suitable for spinning. The scale of flax cultivation is even more uncertain though there is mention of a flax comber in one deed and the yarn is mentioned in a number of seventeenth century probate inventories as material to be spun.

Spinning

After preliminary carding of the random sheared wool fibres which persuaded them to lie in one direction, they were twisted to form a yarn and wound onto bobbins for presentation to the loom. These processes were carried out simultaneously using a spinning wheel, which in earlier times must have been a common piece of household equipment.

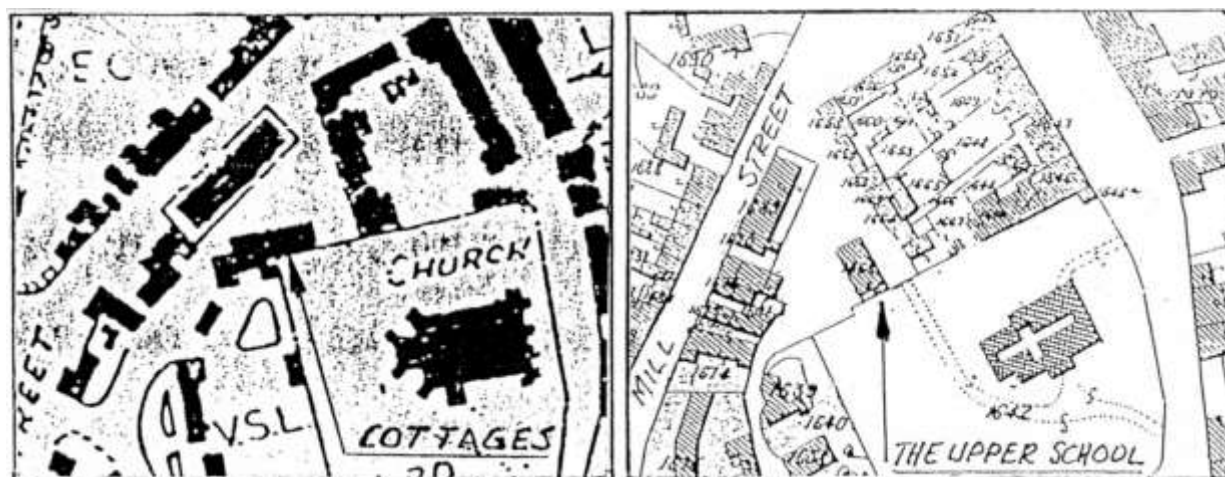
However, in the third bedroom of Thomas Clifton (of whom more anon) there were stocks of linen and wool yam and raw wool and three wheels (assumed to be spinning wheels)⁹. If this is the case it implies rather a more than domestic usage, bordering on a small manufactory. This could well be so, for Clifton had other interests in the cloth trade besides owning a flock of thirty sheep.

Another known possessor of a spinning wheel was Anne Sacheverell of Sutton Coldfield, possibly living at Culls House, No. 36 High Street, in the 1660s, widow of Valence who previously lived at New Hall. Her 1665 inventory lists considerable stocks of hempen yarn, used to make a coarse cloth like sackcloth) and of flaxen yarn, but no wool¹⁰. She did however have linen of all sorts to the value of £25 (say £500 today) [over £4,000 using another conversion table], so possibly there were linen weaving facilities in the area.

Weaving

Though one views with a certain amount of scepticism the claim that Vesey stone houses were used for weaving there were certainly a number of buildings in the area specially adapted to the purpose. Some of these can be identified, and a few still exist but not in their original form.

A weaving shed, certainly not now standing, occupied the site where the Sons of Rest now stands. A corporation committee, discussing the erection of a new Upper or Secondary School in the 1830s concluded that two timber-framed cottages on the north wall of the churchyard (one of which had been a weaving shed) occupied the best possible site¹¹. These were demolished and the school built in their stead, to be replaced in its turn by the Charles Avery memorial building.



The Cottages Destroyed

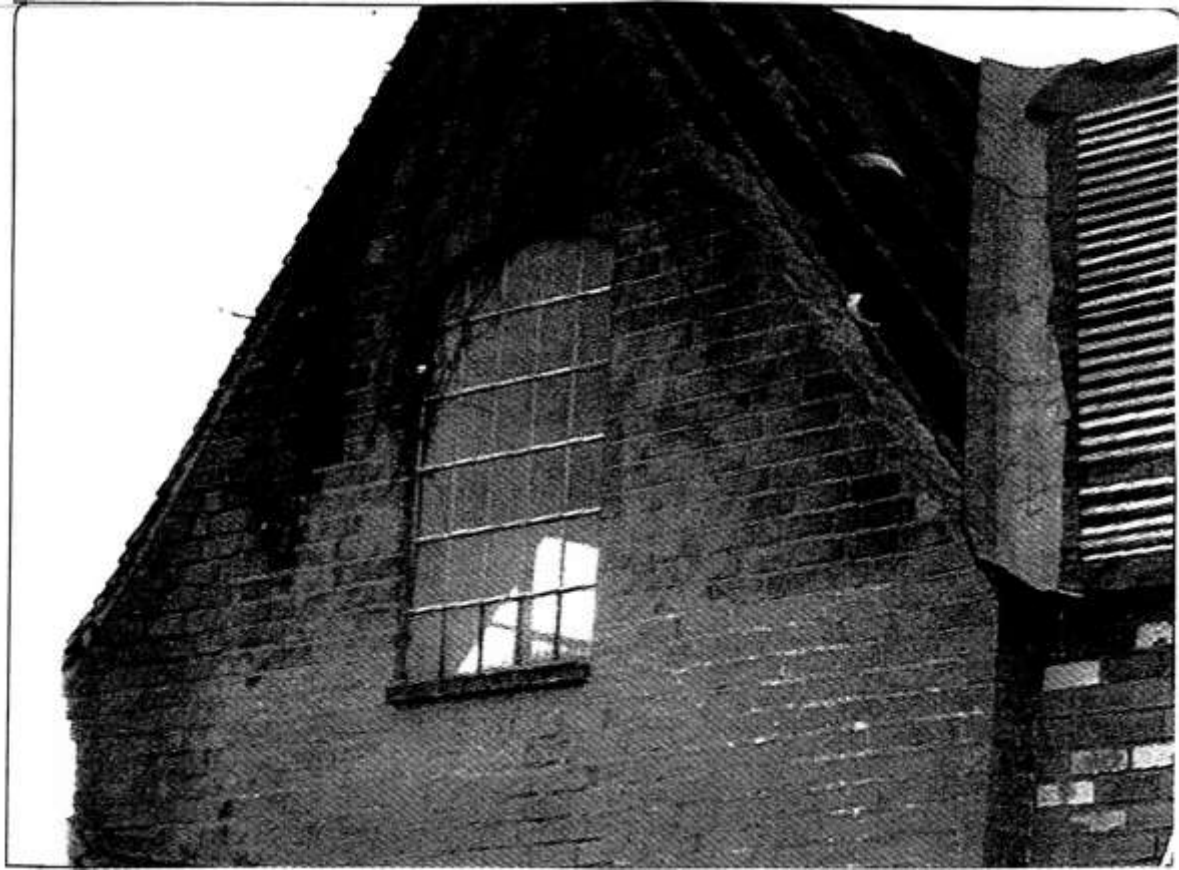
The Upper School Site

Riland Bedford mentions a cottage on the opposite side of the road to the 1701 Rectory (i.e. Rectory Road) which had weavers' windows¹². These inordinately wide windows were a feature of weavers' cottages and this leads to the suspicion that 3 Coleshill Street was a weaver's house. Here the window opening to the left of the entrance was originally seven feet wide now infilled to accommodate a sash half that width). Some¹³ of the houses in Coleshill Street were reputedly built by Vesey as weavers' cottages and this could well be one — nos. 1 and 3 are stone houses faced with brick.

One other known example lies on the eastern border of Sutton beyond High Heath. Here, one of a pair of houses included a 'weaving shop'¹⁴, but this is not apparent in the single and very much rebuilt house now standing on the same ground.

Occasionally the trade of weaver occurs in old property deeds. Thomas Rastley of Arley, Warwickshire, weaver, leased land at New Hall from Valence Sacheverell in 1826, and William Richards of Walmley and Robert Cox of Minworth, both weavers, were engaged in a mutual deal in 1654, and there are other examples¹⁵

Disappointingly, however, no remains of the actual looms have been found, and many of the 'looms' in probate inventories for Sutton were used in cheese making rather than weaving.



Weaver's Window at High Heath Farm Cottage



1906 photo of Church Hill, showing an inserted weaver's window

Milling

The process known more generally in this area as 'fulling' was originally based on the use of long troughs, probably lead-lined, in which the cloth, woven in a strip about a yard wide, was laid under water. It was then trodden underfoot by men wearing lead-soled boots thus spreading the fibre and giving the cloth a dense structure. A natural cleansing agent, Fullers Earth, was used to remove the residual greases and clean the cloth ready for dyeing¹⁶.

Quite early on the fulling process was mechanised by use of water power. A fulling mill in Erdington was reported to have fallen out of use in 1470¹⁷, and documents refer to Penns Mill as comprising 'corn mills, blade mills and a fulling mill' in 1617, and a corn mill and two fulling mills in 1694¹⁸. The process is based on the use of heavy wooden hammers raised by the turning shaft of the water wheel and allowed to drop onto the wet cloth, quicker and more effective than the walking method.

Dyeing

Information on the finishing processes can be derived from the inventory of the aforementioned Thomas Clifton who lived in Sutton High Street and died in 1684. He was a 'diar and sharman' by trade, that is a dyer and shearmen¹⁹. He had both a workhouse and a shop, the former containing two large vats in which the cloth was boiled in a vegetable solution to effect the colour change. Typical dyeing agents were woad (later indigo) for blue, madder for red, logwood for black, and for the best and densest cloth, cochineal, from a cactus-feeding insect. This produced the handsome brilliant red called hunting pink. Subsequently the cloth was air dried whilst stretched between tenting hooks on frames at the rear of the premises.

There were probably others in the same line of business in the district for there is mention of a small field called Tenters Croft. This is in the executors' sale of the lands of Samuel Stevenson, a wealthy resident of Sutton Coldfield who died in 1707 owning land in Maney and elsewhere²⁰.

Shearing

The dyeing process no doubt raised the nap of the cloth so roughening it. To restore the smooth surface the shearmen went over it cutting off upstanding threads. Thomas Clifton had four pairs of shears and some had handles. No use is indicated for the latter, but they must have been standard equipment, for a franchise by the City of Oxford of about 1572, which gave a fuller permission to work within five miles of the city was conditional upon his having 'eleven pairs of handles and at least two pairs of shears'²¹. No mention is made in Clifton's inventory of teasels, but it is suspected that the handles were made to hold the prickly flower heads of that plant, used to control the nap while shearing.

Later, of course teasels were, apart from exceptional circumstances, replaced by wire brushes, and shears by rotary cutting machines, precursors of today's cylindrical lawn mowers.

The ultimate disposal

There are no clues in Clifton's inventory as to the actual disposal, whether the cloth was sold as a length or by the piece, but the presence of a shear board in his shop hints at sale by the piece.

For export, cloth was sold in standard lengths of eighteen yards long by just over a yard wide [a 'kersey' was this size], initially to adjacent European countries. By the middle of Queen Elizabeth's reign these markets were becoming saturated and she used her best endeavours to find fresh outlets. Especially after the defeat of the Armada she sent ambassadors and envoys world wide and encouraged the formation of companies of merchant adventurers such as the East India Company. The ships' logs and accounts of the returned voyagers make interesting reading in the twenty-volume *Purchas his Pilgrims*²².

Woollen cloth remained for a long time England's chief export. Whether Thomas Clifton's products formed part of the outgoing cargoes is, like so many other things of the period, not known.

References

¹ *The Charters of Sutton Coldfield*

² *Oxford English Dictionary*

³ M. Hardingham. *Illustrated Dictionary of Fabrics*, 1978.

⁴ Pitt, William. *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Stafford*, 1796. Pitt says the Coldfield was 'sparsely covered by mostly heath with grass in small proportions'.

⁵ Yates' *Map of the County of Stafford*, 1775. (Reproduced by Staffordshire Record Society 4th Series Vol. 12, 1984). It shows the Staffordshire part of the Coldfield extending from Sutton Park to Barr Beacon.

⁶ Sutton Borough Records- *Court Leet Register 1763-1796*. BRL, copy in Sutton Reference Library

⁷ *Acting for Inclosing Lands in Sutton Coldfield*, 1824

⁸ For example, land of the Rev. Duncombe Perkins in the *Corn Rent Schedule*, 1824

⁹ *Inventory of the Estate of Thomas Clifton*, 1684. Lichfield. Copy in Sutton Reference Library, see also *Thomas Clifton of Sutton Coldfield, died 1684* by Jim May in *Scenes from Sutton 's Past* edited by R.M. Lea, 1989

¹⁰ *Inventory of the Estate of Anne Sacheverell*

¹¹ *Minutes of the Warden and Society of Sutton Coldfield*, 1834. See also Bracken, A. A. *The Forest and Chase of Sutton Coldfield*, 1860. p.63

¹² Riland Bedford W K. *The Real Vesey*, 1904

¹³ 1,3 and 5 Coleshill comprised the old rectory, superseded by the one in Rectory Park, but the author disputed this and here advances his own theory

¹⁴ *Survey of Charity lands*, c. 1811

¹⁵ William Salt Library deed 50/B16/56 and BRL deed 328970

¹⁶ A good deal of information on this trade, guilds, etc., in Coventry C.1550 can be found in Vol. VI of the Victoria History of the County of Stafford

¹⁷ Hilton, R. H *Ministers' Accounts of the Warwickshire Estates of the Duke of Clarence, 1479—80*, Dugdale Society Vol. xxi, 1952

¹⁸ Lease — filling mills, etc., at Penns, BRL deed 330725

¹⁹ *Inventory of Thomas Clifton*

²⁰ BRL deed 443147

²¹ Foreman, Wilfrid. *Oxfordshire Mills*, 1983

²² Purchas, Samuel, ed. *Hakhzytus Posthumus or Purchas his Pilgrims*. 4 Vols. 1625 (Hakluyt Soc.20 Vols1905-7

