

Newton St Cyres History Group



concentrated in the areas around Crediton, Tiverton and Cullumpton. Fulling is done in mills where water powers hammers which beat the wet cloth to felt and matt it.

Most of the serge was then shipped from Topsham and details of the cargoes, their suppliers and destinations are still available for the mid 18th century. Some went to other ports in England, most though was exported, particularly to Holland, but throughout Europe, including Germany, the Baltic countries, Russia, Spain and Italy.

For our first meeting of the New Year we were pleased to welcome Mike Patrick (a former resident now living in Topsham) to speak to us about the wool trade through Topsham.

Mike concentrated on the serge trade during the 18th century and was able to illustrate this through a parallel description of the rise of a family of merchants to eventually become peers around 150 years later.

Wool processing was recorded in Tiverton as early as 1353 and by the end of the 17th century serge manufacture was beginning to take over from kersey and soon became the predominant product. It was a stronger more waterproof cloth. Mike said that Tiverton was the Manchester of the era. By 1730 there were 56 fulling mills in Tiverton (Hoskins) as well as numerous dye works.

The initial spinning and weaving was a cottage industry with weaving being

Demand for the cloth outstripped the supply of local wool. Serge requires wool of both short and long fibre and considerable quantities of long-fibre wool were imported from Ireland through Minehead and the ports of the north coast. Pack horse trains of wool were a common site in Devon.

Finished material was transported to Topsham by horse and cart and Mike was able to show us the record in the bale book of 1759 of merchant Oliver Peard's wool being transported by Widow Enchmarch from Tiverton. There was no road along the Exe valley then and a much hillier route via Butterleigh and Silverton was taken. The widow was licensed to use a wagon pulled by five horses. The use of six would have incurred much higher tolls.

Wars in the late 18th century and early 19th century, produced major problems for this trade, cutting off markets in Europe and making sea transport hazardous.

Production declined and there were many destitute weavers. Somewhat later the Industrial Revolution transformed the textile industry, with most of it moving north. However, Heathcote's Mill, moved from the Midlands to Tiverton and through concentrating on lace thrived and provided considerable local employment. Other industries developed in Tiverton and Topsham became a centre for shipbuilding, sail making and ancillary activities.

Mike traced the history of a prominent Tiverton merchant family. Tiverton received a charter and became a parliamentary borough in 1615. He described it as 'the rottenest of rotten boroughs'. There were two MPs, with the first being a member of the most prominent family in the town and the second was appointed by the political manager or 'fixer' of the corporation. He was also Receiver General of Land Tax which was commonly used to further private business interests. It was highly corrupt, but very lucrative for some.

The Peard family entered the wool trade in the 17th century and became Mayors and 'fixers' in the early 18th Century. Oliver Peard controlled Tiverton in this capacity for a generation, but in 1764 he died, by blowing his head off, shortly after he had torn up his will. The reasons for this trauma are not known, but his fortune of £150,000 (equivalent to £12m now) was inherited by his sister, Mary. The business interests were then developed by a cousin – another Oliver Peard – and by James Dickinson, a cousin of the Peards. One Dickinson, through patronage, became the excise man for Topsham and bought

property on the Strand in Topsham. Two of his sons were sent to Holland to extend commercial links in the wool trade. Interestingly, the prominent merchants did not own the Dutch-style houses on the Strand, but had properties that were less pretentious and were probably used as business premises. The family were strong non-conformists and had close links with John Wesley.

A nephew Benjamin Dickinson took control and with Mary bought estates to endow St George's Chapel and a charity school that had both been set up previously by the family. He established Tiverton's first bank in 1787. A subsequent Benjamin Dickinson in 1845 married Frances Walrond, heiress to the substantial Bradfield Estate, Uffculme. He changed his name by Royal Licence to Walrond (part of the marriage deal?) and moved to Bradfield selling the Knightshayes Estate to the Heathcotes. The Heathcotes demolished the existing mansion at Knightshayes and built the present house. The Walrond family thrived, with four of their descendents becoming MP for Tiverton and were eventually elevated to the title of Baron Waleran.

This family story illustrates a common pattern. Families that had been successful in the wool trade would become politically active. Their business interests would diversify to include banking and insurance and successful marriages might lead to landed estates. Quite often families would have houses and businesses in both Tiverton and Topsham – towns linked from the early days of the wool trade.