

Whilton Local History Society

“CHUCK AWAY THE CHINTZ”

About 20 members met on Friday 15th April, when Wendy Raybould from West Haddon introduced us to the Northamptonshire textile industry in the 1700s. Brightly coloured patterned chintz had been very fashionable, but this import was undermining our own textile makers, who were often the very poor. In an attempt to provide continued work for them, and to save rises in the poor rates, chintz was banned from being imported, or even worn. As a result of this and the arrival of experienced refugee wool combers and weavers from Europe, our skill base improved and the production of a variety of woollen materials blossomed.

Kettering was a very important centre for weaving, but Long Buckby was one of the centres for wool combing needed for the production of worsteds. We heard details of some who worked in local villages, including West Haddon, Crick, Dodford and Whilton. We saw illustrations of spinsters, weavers and combers and some of the variety of textiles they produced, from tammies and shalloon to moreen. Locally made moreen bed hangings can still be seen at Canons Ashby.

By the end of the century, however, cotton imports were allowed again and with the beginnings of steam and water-powered machinery the old cottage industries died very quickly, bringing abject poverty to those who had been part of this local activity. Among these was Richard Constable, a wool comber of Whilton, whose business collapsed and who died after working by the canal near Northampton in the bitter winter of 1813 -1814.