

WORN IN WHILTON

"WORN IN WHILTON" was the title of our meeting on 23rd March 2010, when we considered some aspects of clothing worn here over the centuries. Until the eighteenth century the main fabrics used were wool and linen, the wool being produced locally. The rector had a right to a tenth of the fleeces, and in 1631 two Whilton men, who had been involved in shearing at Brockhall, gave evidence about the collection of tithes there. After the farmer's sister had laid out the fleeces in tens, the Brockhall rector would send his factor to look over them. He would then choose one from each group as the rector's tithe. It is likely that a similar system operated in Whilton.

In this area the wool was mostly used to make worsted cloth, which was made of long-staple fibres which were combed to remove unwanted short fibres and make them lie parallel. In the spinning operation, which gives the necessary twist to hold the fibres together, worsted yarns are more tightly twisted than are the bulkier woollen yarns. The soft, heavy yarn is strong and durable and is often used for fine materials. There is a record of a Whilton farm being sold in 1437 for money and armour, which included a red worsted doublet, perhaps locally made.

Wool used for worsted cloth required more than carding, as the fibres to be laid parallel to each other and unwanted short staple wool had to be removed. This process was called woolcombing. It was an apprenticed trade, a seven year apprenticeship being the norm in the mid eighteenth century with apprenticeship starting at about the age of 12 or 13.

The comb, which was like a short handled rake, had several rows of long teeth, or broitches - originally made of wood, later of metal. The broitches were heated in a charcoal fuelled comb-pot, as heated combs softened the lanolin and the extra oil used which made the process easier. The woolcomber would take a tress of wool, sprinkle it with oil and massage this well into the wool. He then attached a heated comb to a post or wooden framework, threw the wool over the teeth and drew it through them repeatedly, leaving a few straight strands of wool upon the comb each time. When the comb had collected all the wool, the woolcomber would place it back into the comb-pot with the wool hanging down outside to keep warm. A second hank of wool was heated in the same way.

When both combs were full of the heated wool (about four ounces) the comber would sit on a low stool with a comb in each hand and comb one tress of wool into the other by inserting the teeth of one comb into the wool stuck in the other, repeating the process until the fibres were laid parallel. To complete the process the combed wool was formed into slivers, several slivers making a top, which weighed exactly a pound.

The cloth industry was relatively important in Whilton by the late eighteenth century. With a fast growing national population the production of clothing was essential. In 1781 there were three weavers and nine woolcombers in Whilton. Just as the numbers were reaching their peak, disaster struck, as new methods of making cloth were invented further north. As factories took over, there was no work left for Whilton woolcombers. We have the story of one of these men.

A WHILTON WOOLCOMBER

The records suggest that Richard Constable probably lived in Tudor House. He had a number of children baptized at St Andrew's and after his first wife died, he married Ann Townley of Whilton. Like other woolcombers he had various business interests. He had a shop in Whilton, but he was almost certainly part of the "harateen" or worsted industry for which Long Buckby was well known. He was probably more than an ordinary cottage woolcomber, being involved in collecting and delivering to other home workers in the area, and in this way may have had the opportunity to meet a variety of other people. This would have suited him because he was one of the earliest Methodists in this area.

Sometimes those he met were not trustworthy, as in 1796 when some of his jersey wool was stolen by a Dodford woman. "Jersey wool" was wool which had been combed but not yet spun. By the 1800s the home based woollen cloth industry was in serious decline in the face of industrialization. Richard was one of those left without work. He and his new wife had a baby daughter in 1811 and sometime after this he moved to Northampton in the search of employment. All the woollen industry had now moved further north and there was no congenial work available. Ann was pregnant again. With

another new baby to feed and no income, he took on work on a canal wharf in Northampton. The winter of 1813-14 was bitterly cold, and perhaps it was this freezing weather and snow, which must also have prevented canal trade, which led to his final illness and his return to Whilton. By February 1814 he had died and the fatherless new baby was christened here in the following May.

SOME CLOTHES WORN IN WHILTON

We heard about some of the clothes passed on through generations in the past, when hard wearing qualities were more important than the latest fashions. In 1601 Thomas Linnell inherited his father's russet coat and hose, and in 1641 William Reeve a Whilton husbandman left his wearing clothes of linen and woollen to his brother Richard. However, it was usually women who described their clothes in more detail, when leaving them in their wills.

We looked particularly at the clothes of the interestingly-named Philip Smith, a widow, who died in 1707. She was comfortably off and left a variety of money gifts to various relatives and friends. She had also given thought to all her dresses, and divided them up among several women, some of whom may have been her daughters. Elizabeth Langton received two "pettycoats and a sute of my best linen". Elizabeth Smith, the daughter of Widow Smith of Wootton near Northampton got a black gown and petticoat. Mary Russell, wife of Sam Russell of Long Buckby, inherited a sad coloured gown and petticoat. "Sad" in those days, as we would expect, meant dull. There was a mixed serge gown and petticoat for Alice, wife of John Smith of Stow, and Elizabeth Hedg of Daventry had a different sad coloured gown and a grey petticoat. But Elizabeth Green of East Haddon received a black tawny gown and petticoat with a silver lace. A petticoat at this period was an underskirt, sometimes decorated, and not a piece of underwear.