

Domestic System



In the 18th Century the production of textiles was the most important industry in Britain. Most of the work was carried out in the home and was often combined with farming. There were three main stages to making cloth: carding, spinning and weaving. Most cloth was made from either wool or cotton, but other materials such as silk and flax were also used.

The woven cloth was sold to merchants called clothiers who visited the village with their trains of pack-horses. Some of the cloth was made into clothes for people living in this country. However, a large amount of cloth was exported.

(1) Daniel Defoe, A Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain (1724)

The nearer we came to Halifax, we found the houses thicker, and the villages greater. The sides of hills, which were very steep, were spread with houses; for the land being divided into small enclosures, that is to say, from two acres to six or seven acres each, seldom more; every three or four pieces of land had a house belonging to it.

Their business is the clothing trade. Each clothier must keep a horse, perhaps two, to fetch and carry for the use of his manufacture, to fetch home his wool and his provisions from the market, to carry his yarn to the spinners, his manufacture to the fulling mill, and, when finished, to the market to be sold.

Among the manufacturers' houses are likewise scattered an infinite number of cottages or small dwellings, in which dwell the workmen which are employed, the women and children of whom, are always busy carding, spinning, etc. so that no hands being unemployed all can gain their bread, even from the youngest to the ancient; anyone above four years old works.

(2) Samuel Bamford, Early Days (1849)

The farming was generally done by the husband and other males of the family, whilst the wife and daughters attended the churning, cheese-making, and household work; and when that was finished, they busied themselves with carding and spinning wool or cotton, as well as forming it into warps for the looms. The husbands and sons would next, at times when farm labor did not call them, size the warp, dry it, and beam it in the loom. A farmer would generally have three or four looms in the house, and then - what with the farming, the housework, the carding, spinning and weaving - there was ample employment for the family.

(3) George Walker, The Costume of Yorkshire (1814)

The manufacture of cloth affords employment to the major part of the lower class of people in the north-west districts of the West Riding of Yorkshire. These cloth-makers reside almost entirely in the villages, and bring their cloth on market-days for sale in the great halls erected for that purpose at Leeds and Huddersfield.