THE WOOL TRADE

The Peters[8] cite, as an early reference to a fulling mill (used for fulling cloth, see below) in the Launceston area, an indenture dated 1400 between the mayor of Launceston and the Prior at Newport 'concerning divers Liberties and Franchises'. This seems to have been somewhere just to the east of St. Thomas church, not far from where the Pearse family later had their cloth making business. The production and export of wool and woollen cloth made a considerable contribution to the West-country economy for many hundreds of years. By the eighteenth century, a substantial export trade in West-country cloth had been built up, based on Exeter and Topsham. This probably peaked around the time of Queen Anne (1702 – 1714), declined somewhat later in the century but was still substantial in 1785 – 1790 when Pearse was writing his diaries[9]. Thereafter, there was a further decline in the West-country wool industry due to the increasing use of cotton for cloth manufacture and because it became unable to compete on price with the more highly mechanised mills in Yorkshire and elsewhere in the north of England. West-country clothiers were slower than their competitors further north in the adoption the use of machinery for wool processing and weaving. Some mechanisation was introduced, however, and Robbins (p. 320) records that a number of spinning jennies were in use in the Launceston/Newport early in the nineteenth century. This machine was originally invented for cotton spinning in the mid 1760s but was also used for spinning wool. Further industrialisation, however, meant more machinery, which needed more power to drive it. The old water mills of Devon and Cornwall probably had little extra capacity for this and the use of steam power needed supplies of coal. The north of England had the advantage of nearby coal mines and the investment in a system of canals further reduced transport costs. This put Launceston, which is as far from a port as one can get in Cornwall, at a disadvantage and this must also have been the case for many inland towns in Devon.

At the time Robert Pearse was writing his diaries in 1785 and 1790, however, the wool business was still profitable enough to enable him, along with several members of his family, to make a good living. One thing that is not at all clear from the diaries is the extent to which Robert Pearse Jr.'s business was integrated with that of his father, who was clearly still operating a substantial business with help of his other sons, particularly William. At the beginning of 1785, Robert Jr. was aged 28 and had been married four years, with two small sons, and he had evidently already built up a substantial business of his own. However, the diaries both have entries at the end of the year mentioning Pearse settling accounts with his father (aged 55 in 1785) so it is possible that they shared the buildings and other facilities used for sorting and washing wool. In their wills, which are held in the Cornwall Record Office[10], the Robert Pearses, senior and junior, both describe themselves as clothiers, which implies the manufacture of cloth, in this case serge, as widely produced throughout the West-country at that time. Clothiers were the entrepreneurs and capitalists at the top level of the industry who owned the mills and buildings used to house the processes needing more extensive accommodation and equipment, such as washing, drying, weaving and fulling. Here most of the manual work was done by employees with the appropriate skills but the clothiers might also be involved directly with some of the more critical tasks. They also provided working capital to buy wool from farmers and pay

[8] See footnote 4.

[9] See, for example, M. Havinden p. 338 in *Historical Atlas of Southwest England* ed. R. Kain and W. Ravenhill, 1999.
David Seward *The Wool Textile Industry 1750-1960,* in *The Wool Textile Industry in Great Britain* ed. Geraint Jenkins, 1972

[10] Cornwall Record Office AP/P/4036 and AP/P/4097

Northeast Cornwall from a Map by C. and J. Greenwood, 1827

the many outworkers in both towns and the villages around who were spinning the wool into yarn. Judging by the entries in the diaries, Robert Pearse junior's activities were at that time mainly those of a wool stapler and yarn jobber, involved only with the production of yarn.

The process of converting wool to cloth starts with the shearing of sheep which is usually done in late spring or early summer. The wool must then be stored as the later process steps need to be spread out over a longer period. The details of these varied somewhat from place to place but were probably broadly as follows:

Sorting
Washing and drying
Dressing
Carding or combing
Spinning
Weaving, followed by a further series of washing , dying and fulling processes.

The type of cloth manufactured in the area at that time was called serge. Weaving involves interlacing two threads (the warp and the weft) at right angles and, in the case of serge, these are different. The warp threads run up and down the cloth and are fixed to the bars of the loom. The continuous weft thread is woven across the warps passing alternately above and below them. The warp threads need to be stronger than the weft as they have to withstand the tension of being strung across the loom, so warp and weft were spun in different ways. In Cornwall and Devon the warp was known as 'chain' and making chain was a skilled task, using the longer fibres of wool. The shorter fibres were used for spinning the weft.

The starting point for Pearse's business was thus the collection of wool from farmers. He makes no mention of the type of sheep the wool came from, perhaps implying that all the sheep in his catchment area were much the same. During the eighteenth century considerable progress had been made in Britain with the selective breeding of sheep[11] which was directed at improving the quality and quantity of both the wool and the mutton produced. However, at the time of the diaries, it seems likely that these improvements were not well advanced in Cornwall and West Devon. In 1794, Robert Fraser[12] wrote reports on the state of agriculture in both Devon and Cornwall for consideration by the Board of Agriculture and Internal Improvement. He noted that "the common sheep in Cornwall are the same as the neat (i.e., unmixed) sheep of Devonshire. They have a small species of this kind of sheep in Gwithian, which have very small tails, and a very well formed animal, and small boned. The horned sheep are also to be found in some parts." He also recorded that several larger landowners had introduced other breeds, including a flock of Dorsets at Boconnoc, near Lostwithiel, and two flocks of Leicester sheep. A little later, Polwhele[13] writing in about 1803, pointed out that the ability of the sheep to thrive in the local environment was also important and different breeds were used in different parts of the country. Indeed, the early experiments in Cornwall with breeds from less damp climates were not successful as they were vulnerable to foot rot and it was some decades before cross breeding produced improved flocks. In Pearse's time, the sheep commonly found on farms in near Launceston, including neighbouring areas of Devon, would probably have been a horned variety[14] producing short or medium length wool.

[11] W. Youatt *Sheep,Their Breeds, Management and Diseases* 1837 and M.L. Ryder *The History of Sheep Breeds in Britain* Agricultural History Review Vol 12.1 p.1, 1964
[12] R. Fraser *General View of the County of Cornwall* 1794
[13] R. Polwhele *History of Cornwall* 1803-1808
[14] M.L. Ryder, see footnote 11above , p. 65

Part of a Map of Devonshire by J. Cary 1787

Pearse spent much of his time travelling to farms, negotiating a price for the wool, and packing it ready for transport back to Newport. Many of these farms were close to Launceston but he also had contacts with a number of farmers ('my agents in the North') near to Bideford and Torrington.

Once the wool Pearse had purchased had been delivered to Newport, it would next have been sorted and washed before being distributed/sold to spinners in outlying villages. Sorting wool is a skilled task and involves separating out the long, medium and short length fibres as well as taking account of the fibre diameter and cleanliness. As it is shorn from the sheep, fleece wool, also known as 'yokey' wool, is contaminated with grease, sweat, dung and general dirt. Although wool can be spun 'in the grease' (i.e., unwashed) and the cloth washed later, it was found that better control of the yarn spinning process can be achieved by washing the wool first, resulting in a better quality yarn.

Pearse mentions the 'wool washing place' and this activity was certainly important in his business. The traditional process used in Pearse's time involved washing the wool in a mixture of dung, urine and potash. The diaries mention the purchase of substantial quantities of dung and potash but not urine, so perhaps this ingredient was not included or not mentioned because it was not paid for. The resulting solution is alkaline and the potash forms a soap with the grease (lanolin) assisting with removal of other dirt. The wool must then be rinsed, (probably in a 'willy' – willow basket) requiring a plentiful supply of water; Pearse's washing facilities were located at Wooda, just to the west of Newport where a stream called Harper's Lake, which runs down from the St. Johns area of Launceston, joins the river Kensey – both were probably used to supply water. Once washed, the wool needed to be dried and this was done in wooden buildings, called lofts, which were fitted with many louvres in their walls to provide good ventilation. The next step was to 'dress' the wool by applying a small amount of grease in order to facilitate the spinning process. Pearse records (October 1785 etc.) buying barrels of 'greace' from a Mr. Whipple of Dock (Devonport) – this was probably goose grease, possibly imported from France or elsewhere in Europe.

As well as references in the diary pages relating to washing and sorting activities there are many entries recording regular visits made by Pearse and/or his employees to nearby villages, usually alternating between Beals Mill and Lezant (to the south of Launceston) one week and to Boyton and Tamerton (to the north) the next. Here the local women were provided with (or sold?) wool to spin, the finished yarn then being picked up later. This must have involved many small financial transactions which were presumably recorded in another account book as there are no relevant diary notes. In many parts of the country, the spinners were dependent on just one yarn jobber to supply the wool and had to rely on him to give a fair price for their work but Pearse sometimes refers (5 April 1785) to these village visits as 'markets' so he may have been in competition with other yarn jobbers. As well as providing wool, Pearse would probably also have provided the cards and combs needed to prepare the wool prior to spinning. Combing was used for the wool with longer fibres to be used for making chains, while carding was used for the weft yarn. Cards consist of arrays of wire pins mounted on a board or leather backing and there are several references to the purchases of these from local suppliers, e.g., (10th February 1790) 'recd. Two bundles of cards from Mr. Sargent, Liskeard'. In his 'History of Liskeard',[15] John Allen says that several of the principal tradesmen in Liskeard at that time were card makers who employed women at 6d or 8d per day and children at 3d per day.

[15] J. Allen *History of Liskeard* pub. J. Philp, Liskeard 1856

For selling the yarn, Pearse probably made use of the yarn market at Launceston held on Saturdays. Pearse's main customers in 1785 (apart from his father, possibly) were Mr. George Prideaux, Mr. George Durant and Day and Co., the latter two being based at North Tawton. By 1790, Prideaux and Day were no longer buying from Pearse but Mr. Durant was still a major customer and had been joined by a number of others who bought in smaller quantities.

When recording sales to his customers, Pearse mainly talks of packs of yarn, in three grades, best, 2nd and 3rd, but there are a few entries in 1790 where he mentions chains, including one (23 Jan 1790) which reads 'Sold Mr. Pening one pack of Yarn & one pack of Chains at 10/9 per Market Chain'. This seems to imply that by 'Yarn', Pearse means the thread used as the warp. I have not been able to find any reference to explain the difference between the different grades of yarn. A'pack' was a horse-load, defined as 240 lbs, while a 'draft' (usually spelt 'draught') was 61 lbs, or 'a quarter of a pack with 1 lb allowed for the turn of the scale'. According to some contemporary accounts (e.g. Defoe) pack horses were exclusively being used for transport in the area, there being too many hills to allow the use of wagons. However this is contradicted by the diary entry for 4th April 1785 which clearly refers to a problem with a delay in despatching a consignment of yarn because of 'no waggon here'. Pearse made use of the regular weekly carrier service to and from Exeter which was operated by Mr. Moffett, see the list of carriers operating from Exeter in the printed section of the 1785 diary.

As mentioned above, it is difficult to know how much the business of Robert Pearse Junior overlapped with that of his father. Pearse Junior used the accounts pages in the diaries to record sums of money paid to farmers when he collected their wool, payment received from his customers for finished yarn and some items of expenditure, e.g., for the purchase of dung, but there is no mention of wages paid to employees or payments to spinners for the finished yarn, which must have been recorded elsewhere The employees most often mentioned were apprentices, who would have received little or nothing by way of wages; Tom Hender often accompanied Pearse on his visits to the spinners in nearby villages and also to trips to buy wool from farmers. Tom was probably the son of William and Ann Hender, christened at St. Stephens on the 14th June 1772, so only 12 at the beginning of 1785 - he is first mentioned on 25th February. A second apprentice, John Bray, had been taken on by 1790 and an entry for 2nd June 1790 says 'of Wm. Bray being the remaining part of the Consideration Money for his son John, £10-10-0.' John was 16 in 1790.

Some idea of the size of the business can, however, be obtained by adding up Pearse's payments for wool and receipts for yarn. According to his diary records for 1785, he purchased about 19,000 lb of wool for roughly £460 and received about £1,050 from his sales of roughly 70 packs of yarn, i.e., 15400 lb - raw wool might yield only 80% of its original weight of usable wool after washing and sorting, so these are quite consistent figures. In 1790, his wool purchases totalled about 23,000 lb for £633 but sales or despatches of yarn were now only occasionally being noted. The recorded income from his customers amounted to about £975, which is less than might be expected to result from the larger amount of raw wool. The entry for 1st May 1790 includes the prices for the three grades: best, £22½ per pack, 2nd £19½ and 3rd £16; taking an average of £20, this means that the income of £975 would correspond to only about 49 packs, or 10780 lb. Whatever the reason for this discrepancy, the turnover of around £1,000 was a large sum of money at this time, when an agricultural labourer would have been earning about £16 in a year and a skilled tradesman perhaps about £32. The recorded figures are not sufficiently detailed to work out how much profit Pearse was making from his main business of selling yarn but this was not his only source of income. There is mention of setting up racks in 'my shop' and one note, inside the front cover of the 1785 diary, talks of the sale (on credit) of a 'surtout' coat (a type of overcoat) to a Mrs. Sheeres, so Pearse (or perhaps his wife) also seems to have been involved in selling finished garments. This is further supported by occasional mentions of purchases of

blanketing and cloth, including one from a supplier as far as away as Chard. Altogether, Robert Pearse Jr. was clearly earning enough to enjoy a comfortable lifestyle.

ROBERT PEARSE THE INDEPENDENT CHURCHMAN

Pearse's parents, Robert senior and Grace, came from Hatherleigh, where they were married in 1751. Both had probably been brought up by non-conformist parents, and attended the Independent meeting house in Hatherleigh, which is where all their children were christened even though most, if not all, of them had been born in Newport (see below). It is clear from his diary entries that Robert junior followed his parents' example and was a devout Christian and strong supporter of the Independent chapel in Newport. In 1785 he attended three or more church meetings each week, and although this had reduced somewhat by 1790, he was still playing a very active role in the local congregation.

The history of the non-conformist churches in Launceston (and Newport) has been described by several authors – the Peters (p.330), Robbins[16], and, most comprehensively for the United Reformed Church, by K.E.Hyde[17]. It is clear that by Pearse's time, there had been some sort of Presbyterian presence in Launceston for over a century but the first definite reference (Robbins, ref. above p.241) to a meeting house was when Edward Bennett, of Hexworthy, conveyed a piece of land an £120 to 'found a Presbyterian Meeting House in or near Launceston' in 1707 (CRO document X 750/4/1,2) . This was duly built in 1712 on a site in Castle Street. The first minister was the Rev. Michael Martin, who died in 1745, leaving £50 to his own meeting house and £10 to that at Hatherleigh. (This apparent connection between the congregations at Launceston and Hatherleigh may well have been a factor in Robert Pearse senior's decision to move to Newport around 1752.)

According to Robbins (p. 271), the death of Rev. Martin was followed by a decline in the Presbyterian movement in the town. The Rev. Mr. Castle from Hatherleigh preached there occasionally for a few years but the meeting house was eventually closed. It then came about that the future of the non-conformist movement in Launceston and Newport was to be much influenced by the remarkable religious conversion of three teenagers living in Tavistock. These were John Eyre, who was born and educated in Bodmin, and the twin brothers John and William Saltren who were the sons of Thomas Saltren of St. Stephens (Launceston) and the grandsons of John Saltren of Treludick in the parish of Egloskerry, just a few miles northwest of Launceston. All three were later ordained and their story is told in a biography of William Saltren published in the Evangelical Magazine in February 1796, which is anonymous but almost certainly written by John Eyre, who was the magazine's editor, and also in a biography of John Eyre by G. Collison published in the same magazine in 1803. John Eyre was born in January 1754 and the Saltrens in January 1755; all three remained at school until they were fifteen, Eyre in Bodmin and the Saltrens almost certainly in Launceston. Robert Pearse was clearly well educated and about a year younger than the Saltrens, so it is likely that he was attending the local grammar

[16] See footnotes 4 and 7 above
[17] K.E.Hyde *The Union Church at Launceston* Baptist Quarterly vol. 14.3 p. 117 and vol. 14.4 p. 153