

Fabrics, haberdasheries and spices: Shopping internationally in 17th-century Lutterworth

Introduction

Lutterworth is a small market town in south-west Leicestershire, approximately 110 miles north of London. The diocesan population returns of 1563 recorded 106 households in the town, increasing to 225 houses in the 1670 Hearth Tax.¹ Lutterworth is adjacent to Watling Street, which allowed ready access to the wide variety of imported goods coming into London's ports as well as knowledge of London fashions.

Three probate inventories spanning the 17th century survive for large shops in the town, selling a wide range of cloth, haberdashery and groceries, taken on the deaths of Francis Pope (1626),² John Almey (1666),³ and Daniel Ogden (1695).⁴ Probate inventories were made upon people's death and recorded all that the deceased owned, not just the contents of their shops. However they do not record wealth, as debts owed are not included, and these may have been substantial. Three inventories is a very small number, but these shops stand out from other probate inventories from the town by their size, value, and the range of goods they stocked. Although Lutterworth was growing, it seems unlikely that more than one shop such as these would have been present at any one time.

These inventories reveal a developing range of goods available for sale, enabling us to identify which products became popular, and more widespread, as they were introduced into England. There will many reasons why shop contents changed over time, but this essay will focus on the impact of foreign trade and international relations on the three types of goods: cloth, haberdashery and groceries.

¹ J. Goodacre, *The Transformation of a Peasant Economy: Townspeople and Villagers in the Lutterworth area 1500-1700* (Aldershot, 1994), pp. 60-1.

² The Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland (hereafter ROLLR), PR/I/32A/121.

³ ROLLR, PR/I/65/14.

⁴ ROLLR, PR/I/100/97.

Francis Pope, 1626.

Pope's inventory describes him as a mercer, which a 17th-century dictionary defines (in the context of country towns) as a person who sold 'all sorts of Linen, Woollen, Silk, and Grocery Wares'.⁵ He was also a substantial farmer. His livestock, including 260 sheep and 25 cattle, were valued at £181 5s. 8d., whereas the value of his shop goods was lower, at £110 15s. 10d. This suggests it was difficult to earn a living purely from shop keeping, confirming Berger's assertion that there was a growing trend during this period to 'engage in retailing part-time in addition to one's primary occupation'.⁶

In the 1620s, English international trade was closely linked to the relationship between the English, the Dutch and the Spanish. Initially the Dutch were the dominant Western European traders in Northern Europe as well as in the East Indies, Russia and Guinea. This was accompanied by continuous tensions between the Dutch and the English over East Indies trade, the Spitsbergen whale fishery and the 'dyeing and finishing of England's cloth exports'.⁷ Tensions eased from 1621 on the resumption of Dutch-Spanish conflict over control of the Netherlands. The Treaty of London (1604) had established peace between England and Spain, which lasted until 1625, so English traders could enter Spanish ports without persecution, and England's neutrality during the early stages of the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) also aided its growth as a trading and naval nation.⁸

Pope had 12 different lines of cloth, including imported cloths such as 'holland', 'Normandy', cambric (from Cambray, in Flanders) and 'ozenbrig', from Osnabrück. There are also a few English cloths, such as linen, which appear prominently but there is little from outside Western Europe. Silk is listed in his inventory, but as it is included within 'haberdash wares and silke wares', it is not clear whether it is cloth or not. Some choice of colours was available, including 'Blew linen', 'browne ozenbrigeat' and 'greene say'. In contrast to the detailed lists of cloth, his haberdashery stock is mostly grouped with other items. The total value of 'haberdasher wares and silk wares', 'haberdasher wares and small grocery' and 'thrid [thread] and grocery' was £21 1s. 0d., equating to one-sixth of the total value of his

⁵ E. Phillips, *New World of Words* (1696), quoted in *Oxford English Dictionary online*.

⁶ R. M. Berger, 'The Development of Retail Trade in Provincial England, ca. 1550-1700, *The Journal of Economic History*, vol. 40, no.1 (March 1980), p. 125.

⁷ J. Israel, *Competing Cousins: Anglo-Dutch Trade Rivalry*, *'History Today'*, 38, no.7 (1988), pp. 17-22.

⁸ *Ibid.* pp. 18-19.

shop goods, but it is impossible to know how much of this was haberdashery, or what items he stocked.

Just four grocery items are separately listed: hops, oil, nearly 6 cwt of currants and ‘peper & other spices & other things’. Although the latter, valued at £5, is indicative of trade beyond Europe, the brief description suggests there were few different spices, or that only tiny quantities of some spices were held. He had no sugar, but the currants would have added sweetness to dishes.

The creation of the English East India Company in 1601 introduced an increasing array of spices to England, but the company was still in its infancy when Francis Pope died in 1626. Twelve fleets had sailed to the East Indies between 1616 and 1626,⁹ but the company had no ‘fortified trading post’ in this period, and ‘no permanent capital fund until 1657’. Only with the establishment of a headquarters in Bombay (Mumbai) in 1669 did the East India Company have a physical footing in Asia.¹⁰

John Almey, 1666

John Almey was a mercer and a chandler. Chandlers made and sold candles: he had 8 dozen candles in the shop valued at £1 12s. 0d. and a ‘tallow shop’ [workshop] with ‘4 hundred wait of tallow’ and equipment, valued at £8 10s. 0d. This implies that by the 1660s, some mercers had developed another skill which they could use to stock their shops, unlike Pope who essentially had to work in two completely different environments. As a result, Almey did not have to rely on farming to supplement his income, and had just ‘20 sheepe and foure beasse’ [cattle]. This implies a growth in the retail trade, as traders and retailers could now support themselves without relying on farming. In a study of Lutterworth and the surrounding villages, Goodacre argues that the seventeenth century saw a decline in the relative importance of agriculture and the growing importance of traders. Several Lutterworth traders and innkeepers are known to have issued trade tokens in this period, when low denomination coins were in short supply.¹¹

⁹ I. Burnet, *East Indies* (Rosenberg, 2013), p. 96.

¹⁰ P. D. Curtin, *Cross-Cultural Trade in World History* (Cambridge, 1984), 155.

¹¹ J. Goodacre, *The Transformation of a Peasant Economy: Townspeople and villagers in the Lutterworth area, 1500-1700* (Aldershot, 1994), pp. 18-19, 212.

The range of different types of cloth offered by Almey is far greater, with 19 lines of cloth. The difference does not sound that large, but in 1666 there are more types of each fabric on offer, for example Pope only has 'greene say' whereas Almey has 6 individual items for 'seay'. As well as the domestic and European cloths sold by Pope, by 1666 silks, calico and lace were also on sale. Relative quantities had also changed. Pope stocked 287 ells of 'hollond' (equal to 358.75 yards) but Almey had only 42.25 yards of the same material. Single-dyed fabrics were also available, for example he stocked '19 yards of blew linon'.

Between 1626 and 1666 the English were able to establish themselves more strongly as a trading nation at the expense of the Dutch partly through the 1651 and 1660 Navigation Acts, as only English ships, or the trading nation's ships were allowed to import or export to 'any lands, islands, plantations, or territories to his Majesty belonging or in his possession'.¹² Partly as a result, Anglo-Dutch relations deteriorated, and when Almey died in 1666, the Second Anglo-Dutch War (1665-67) was being fought. This may largely explain the decline in the amount of 'Holland' stocked and its relative importance for English clothing in this period.

Almey may also have supplied more things needed in haberdashery to make and trim garments. Buttons, thread and ribbons are individually with 'thred' buttons, 'Collher' buttons and coat buttons, black and brown thread, as well as 'cotton ribbins' and 'taffity Ribin'. By 1666, 27% of Almey's shop value is made up of haberdashery and lace. A shift of fashions, or an expanding whale fishery industry, was also noticeable in the emergence of whalebone in Almey's inventory. He stocked 8lb of whalebone, worth 18 shillings, suggesting this had become a common material for making corsets and for other products.

The groceries available by 1666 also reflect a changing international dynamic. Sugar became available in Lutterworth and Almey stocked 3lb. of white sugar, 4lb. of loaf sugar and 29lb. of brown sugar with a total value of 19s. 0d. Increasing trade with South East Asia is evident in the arrival of ginger and liquorice. The quantities and the way in which spices are referred to in this inventory also display how common spices were, with each spice listed individually, for example, he had 13lb of ginger valued at 7s. 10d. Tobacco was becoming popular. Pope had no tobacco, but Almey had 49 lb, valued at £3 6s. 0d. (1d. per ounce). During the 17th century the price of tobacco rose and fell quite dramatically. The mass

¹² The Navigation Act, 1660 in J. Thirsk (ed.) *Seventeenth Century Economic Documents* (Oxford, 1972), pp. 520-4.

importation of tobacco began with the colonization of Virginia (1607), and 58,000 lb. of tobacco had been imported by 1615. At the same time, tobacco was being grown domestically, predominantly in Gloucestershire, and Holderness argues that this caused a collapse in prices. In the early 1630s tobacco was being sold at 1d.-2d. per lb. The cost of tobacco didn't stabilise until 1652 when the domestic production of tobacco was banned to aid London and Bristol merchants.¹³

Whilst there are other factors, including the acquisition of Jamaica in 1655, which would have helped to increase the availability and affordability of spices and sugar, the direct trade enforced by the Navigation Acts helped strengthen English trade and widen the products for sale in towns such as Lutterworth.

Daniel Ogden, 1695

Unlike Pope and Almey, Ogden is given the status of 'Mr', rather than an occupational description. He has been able to achieve this 'gentlemanly' status purely through retailing, and has no dependence on a farm. His inventory is much more substantial than Pope's, and even Almey's. Again basic cloths are stocked but by 1695 there were a wider range of fabrics, and more coloured materials, including 'cullord', 'black glaised linon' and 'stript' [striped] linen, the latter indicating that he had fabrics made with dyed yarn, rather than just those dyed in the piece. Other cloths are also available in multiple colours with calico coming as 'printed', 'oring' (orange), black and white. Tabby (silk), taffeta and flannel cloths are all available for the first time in Lutterworth and in a range of qualities. These cloths appear to have replaced previous staples, such as Holland, with Ogden only stocking 1 yard of Holland. This shows a shift in fashions, encouraged by an increase in trading outside Europe. Trade in India, as well as in Asia generally, was well established by 1695 with the East India Company allowing for a larger quantity of products to make their way into the English market.

This change is also reflected in the foodstuffs available. In addition to the spices stocked by Pope and Almay, by 1695 Ogden has fennil seeds, cinnamon, mace, turmeric and cloves. Two types of tobacco are also available for the first time: smoking tobacco and 'tobacco dust for snuft'. Another new product at the time of Ogden's death was rice, showing that European trade in South-East Asia had diversified beyond spices and now included other

¹³ B. A. Holderness, *Pre-Industrial England: Economy and Society from 1500 to 1750* (London, 1976), p. 125.

dry goods. The introduction of rice into the Lutterworth diet also helps to create a sense of the emerging 'middle class' in England who could afford to indulge in new luxuries, which rice would have been as 14lb was worth 5 shillings. This also shows that goods brought over from different parts of the world were not simply for the rich and city dwellers but permeated through to all layers of society and parts of the country.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the range of goods available to Lutterworth people significantly broadened over the 17th century, with the introduction of new and exotic products due to the extending English trade and political network. By 1695, fabrics available included calico and silk, and there was a vast array of foodstuffs, including 'sweet fennil seeds', currants and rice. These changes reflect the growing strength and importance of the English East India Company bringing goods in from Asia, and the importance of the American colonies, with increasing amounts of sugar and tobacco being sold.

Unfortunately, probate inventories can only inform us about the non-perishable goods in the shops, and give a small window into the vast range of products available in Lutterworth during this period. Not all of the inventories are as detailed as others, and other crucial pieces of information which would help paint a more detailed picture are missing. Additionally, the larger range of goods in Odgen's shop may partly reflect a growing population, or an increase in levels of wealth. Yet although other information which would help paint a more detailed picture may be missing, the inventories tell us about the needs and wants of Lutterworth's shoppers. By 1695, the desire for luxury, foreign goods in Lutterworth had been realised and shopkeepers, due to the changes in international politics, were able to widen their stock and establish new markets.

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