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THE MEDIEVAL WOOL TRADE*

I am told that it is a commonplace of English history as taught at school that wool, in the shape of fibre, as sheep grow it, or made up into cloth, was one of the mainstays of England's greatness throughout the centuries that separated the first arrival of the Anglo-Saxons in this island and the beginning of the cotton industry.

We are also told, and we know it is true, that wool could be found behind almost every manifestation of English economic and commercial activity in the Middle Ages and in the sixteenth, seventeenth and perhaps the early eighteenth centuries. Yet I wonder how many of us realise how really important English wool was to England and to countries abroad throughout the Middle Ages. The barons of England, sitting in Parliament, asserted in 1297 that wool represented half of England's wealth or, as they put it, 'half the value of the whole land'. Other medieval Englishmen, of course, were much more vague in their appraisal of the importance of wool. The merchants of the Staple might refer to it – it was the common way of referring to wool – as 'the jewel of this realm'. That particular reference to the jewel of the realm dates from about the middle of the fourteenth century, but two centuries earlier the chronicler Henry of Huntingdon referred to wool as Britain's main national endowment. A rich fourteenth-century merchant in the Home Counties scratched on his windows for all visitors to his house to behold that 'sheep had paid for it all' – glass, mullioned windows, tapestries and everything else.

Wool also paid for many other things. When Richard I was captured abroad, his ransom, a vast one, was paid in fifty thousand sacks of wool. When Edward I engaged in dynastic and military adventures abroad in the thirteenth century, wool paid for that too. When Edward III opened that great Hundred Years War, which was to last in fact for one hundred and sixty years, the entire cost of the war throughout the early stages was borne by the taxes on wool and by loans on wool. Later still, a considerable portion of the finance which made Crécy and Agincourt possible was levied from wool growers and wool merchants, directly or indirectly. No wonder the Chancellor sat on the Woolsack. That is where the majesty of England's power resided.

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The importance of English wool to the continent or, to be more exact, to certain parts of the continent of Europe, was in its own way almost as great. People do not always realise how early in the history of Europe there appeared industrial societies, regions wholly or mainly industrialised with the populations dependent on industry for their livelihood. In the twelfth century one region thus industrialised was Flanders and the Netherlands, just across the narrow seas. Another almost equally important region, with industrialisation almost equally thorough, was Italy, and above all that part of Italy round Florence, which became a centre of quite a number of industries, but primarily of a cloth industry.

Generally speaking, when I refer to industrialisation I merely mean industrialisation in the sense that the Indians and the Chinese understood the word until a few years ago: textiles. The one industry which was capable of being developed continually on the basis of expanding supplies of raw material was the cloth industry, very largely because an expanding source of raw materials was provided by England. However, English wool was, to begin with, not the only wool on which these industrial communities were reared. The prevailing impression, probably the correct one, is that at first the weavers of the Netherlands got most, or at least a very large proportion, of their wool from Burgundy, a country quite near to the south-east of the Low Countries. Some wool also came from Spain.

At some time early in the Middle Ages, exactly when we do not know, but as far as we can gather some time in the twelfth century, fine curly-haired merino sheep were introduced to Castile from, probably, North Africa. From that time onwards, merino wools of African-Castilian origin were sent either to Florence or to the north, but mainly to Florence. There was also that very curious type of wool which is described in medieval sources as Garbo, which also came from Spain, probably from southern Spain, and thus indirectly from North Africa. So for the time being English wool was merely one of several contributions to European supplies of wool. French and East German, Rhine and English wool kept Flanders or Central Italy going in the same way as foreign raw materials and foodstuffs keep this country ticking over in our own day.

It was only in the course of the late twelfth and thirteenth centuries that English wool began to displace all other competitors in the world markets, until by the end of the thirteenth and the beginning of the fourteenth centuries one could say that without English wool the wool industries of the highly-industrialised communities could not have existed.

How important wool had become by then you will realise if I remind you of the way in which whole regions of Europe could be brought to the brink of starvation and their economic life reduced to complete inactivity by the cessation for a year or a season of imports of English wool. In

1336, at the beginning of the Hundred Years War, when for a while English wool was very short in Flanders, Flemish weavers roamed the country and the north of France, begging and singing for their bread, as, you will remember, the Welsh miners did in the streets of London in the years of the coal crises in the twenties. And when, in 1297, English wool exports were stopped by royal decree, the country, as the chronicler puts it, 'just emptied out, and people deserted the towns in which neither employment nor nourishment could be obtained'.

This particular position, in which wool was the foundation on which England's majesty, like the Chancellor's body, rested, and also the position in which England could give or deny a livelihood to great parts of the continent of Europe, was not, of course, arrived at at once. There was a gradual expansion, a growth, both in the production of English wool and in English commerce. How far back the process goes, we do not know. The archaeologists, on whom we depend for all our information about early peoples, do not tell us much about sheep or wool. But we know that there were large flocks in Anglo-Saxon times.

When the Emperor Charlemagne ruled a united Europe in the seventh and eighth centuries, England must have clothed his armies with uniforms. That is how some people interpret a certain letter from the Emperor Charlemagne to King Offa of the Anglo-Saxons, complaining of the deterioration of the woollen cloaks which England manufactured and exported to the Carolingian Empire. These must have been made from home-grown wool. At any rate, that is an obvious presumption to make.

By the time of the Norman Conquest and in the eleventh and the twelfth centuries, England was already covered by a multitude of sheep runs and sheep farms. Not all the compilers of the Domesday survey were equally interested in sheep; with the result that most of what we know about sheep at that time relates only to eight counties: Suffolk, Norfolk, Essex, Cambridgeshire, Cornwall, Devon, Somerset and Dorset and with the exception of these last two, Somerset and Dorset, these were not really sheep farming counties. Nature never meant them to be. Nevertheless Domesday enumerates in those eight counties something like a quarter of a million sheep. It is not beyond the bounds of possibility or probability that between three and four million sheep were then to be found in the country as a whole.

Little as we know about that early period, what we know is that from then onwards the production of wool expanded almost without interruption until some point in the middle of the fourteenth century. Those of you who know a little about English agriculture of that period and have heard the words 'manor' and 'demesne' know that there were large estates which contained within them large home farms, which we some-

times describe by their technical term, demesne; and you will probably recall that the thirteenth century was the heyday of demesne farming.

On quite a number of estates there were large home farms, which were producing for the market. By the middle of the thirteenth century, which was the peak point of demesne farming, it is not at all difficult to find estates with scores of thousands of sheep on them. The Bishop of Winchester, for instance, who had his estates mostly in the downlands of Hampshire and Wiltshire and partly also in Berkshire, had at one time very nearly thirty thousand sheep. In surviving references to exports of wool in that period, the total figure sometimes approaches fifty thousand sacks. This figure covers only the amount of wool exported and, of course, only the best quality wool was exported. If you remember that one sack represents the produce of 240 sheep, it is not an exaggeration to estimate that the total number of sheep in this country at that particular time was between fifteen and eighteen million. If you watch in the newspapers the painfully slow way in which scores of thousands are being added to the sheep flocks of this country at the present time, you will realise what a remarkable wealth fifteen to eighteen million sheep must have represented.

With this particular growth in the volume of wool production, went also a change – an improvement if you like which I prefer to call a change for reasons I shall make clear later – in its quality.

As, until recently, the bones of medieval sheep were not the stock-in-trade of archaeologists, we do not know enough to generalise about the breeds of medieval sheep. But partly from archaeology, partly from Dr Power's posthumous book, and from such stray corroborative evidence as we have, we can guess that originally there were, broadly speaking, two breeds of sheep in this country. There was the short-wool sheep, mostly found on the uplands of the Welsh and Scottish borders, the Kerry, Shropshire and Cheviot Hills, the Yorkshire Moors, and also on the Chalk Downs in the south. Theirs was the short, soft, curly wool, useful only for the making of the kind of matted soft fabric that we call woollen cloth. Secondly, there was the long-wool breed, producing the long staple which had to be combed, and which goes nowadays into the making of worsteds and was employed for similar purposes in the Middle Ages. This long-staple wool was grown by a very small number of highly valuable flocks in the country somewhere between the Severn and the southern marches of Wales. These were the Ryelands of South Shropshire and Herefordshire. The men in the Middle Ages knew this wool by much more picturesque names, such as 'Leominster Ore', the Golden Fleece of England, which applied to all the wool grown in and round (and round was a vague term, it might have been thirty, forty or fifty miles) the cathedral city of Leominster.

There was also the long-staple sheep of Lincolnshire, and later of the Cotswolds. In Lincolnshire itself were the equally valuable small herds of the Lindsey Marshes. But at that time the indifferent breeds and inferior growths of all the other English shires were being slowly improved by breeding and crossbreeding with rams drawn from these two major sources of high quality wool. Above all, the great upland plateau of the Cotswolds, which was an almost empty country in the early twelfth century, was converted into pastures for a breed of long-staple sheep which obviously must have been improved by continuous importation of Lindsey rams. In manorial documents there are to be found references to purchases of Lindsey rams in those areas for the special purpose of breeding.

By the middle of the thirteenth century, which we have agreed was the heyday of demesne farming, that high quality, crossbred wool – I am using crossbred not in the modern technical sense, but merely to describe the process of breeding and crossbreeding that was going on – became the principal type of wool to be exported. It is that type of wool which was grown in quite a number of Midland counties and even in the southern counties, that came to be known abroad by the generic name of Cotswold wool. 'Cotts' – as it was described briefly – supplied the bulk, probably more than half, of English exports of wool.

Even then values differed and varied immensely. Tables of qualities were published by the government periodically, and in the fixed prices given, which are useful to historians as indicating the relative rates of wool, were those of wools which at one time fetched £12 per sack and of wools which at the same time fetched as little as £3 10*s* or even £3 5*s*. In the thirteenth century a travelling Italian merchant, Pegolotti had one set of clients who managed to get as much as £15 per sack for their wool, whereas others in the same list of Pegolotti's could get little more than about £3 or £3 10*s*.

Yet although there were at that time these great variations, the fact remains that more than half, possibly more than two-thirds of the wool exported was of the quality which enabled Englishmen to claim that they were sending abroad the great and famous English Cotswold wool: Puich wool, as the Dutch described it, the wool of the texture of down. It was this characteristic that the best Cotswold wool was supposed to possess.

By the time the quantity had risen to its peak and the quality had improved, changes were beginning to take place in the marketing, in the purely commercial side of the English wool trade. You will recall that earlier I described this period, the thirteenth century, as the heyday of demesne farming, the time when most of the marketable agricultural produce, whether it was wheat, rye, cheese, bacon or wool, came from large estates run, one might almost say, on commercial lines. Some of these

estates were monastic. We know more about monastic estates, because the monasteries, being institutions, preserved their documents better. A large proportion came also from lay estates of various kinds. We can more or less assume that in that period the bulk of exportable wool came from large producers. Now as long as large producers supplied the bulk of the wool there was no necessity for developing the middleman function in the country. What happened was that the exporters, some of them Italian, some Flemish, and some English, got into direct contact with the big producers and obtained the wool on contract. The usual practice for an Italian was to have a contract for three, four, five, sometimes twelve years, with an important grower, and to get wool from that particular grower, year in, year out. Very often we find an Italian merchant, or a Flemish merchant, sometimes even an English exporter, advancing money to the grower, and so helping to finance investment in wool production.

You can consequently picture the entire wool trade as made up of large estates and their factors on the one hand, and the small but select group of high-class, wealthy, and if you want to use the term, capitalistic, wool exporters. Even then there were small quantities of wool grown here and there, but it is a curious thing to notice in documents that those small pockets of wool grown by smaller men, by substantial peasants or by smaller landowners, were usually collected by the great wool growers themselves. The contracts between exporters and the great nobles or monastic growers very often continued to make provision for what is known as the 'collecta'. In other words, the monastery, or the noble, or the Bishop of Winchester would undertake to collect wool in his area. In addition to, say, the sixty sacks of his own wool, he would supply five, ten or fifteen sacks of wool that he would gather from his tenants or from his neighbours.

This particular kind of organisation, with an international exporter dealing with a capitalist grower, could survive only as long as demesne farming flourished. It could not live a day longer after the demesne agriculture had broken up, and we know that in the late fourteenth and in the fifteenth century the whole structure and organisation of English agriculture changed. The large estate with the large home farm within it, run as a single commercial unit, was broken up into smaller tenancies. Of course I am generalising. At no time in English history did large estates, in that sense, disappear completely, but we can assume that by far the largest proportion of English agricultural production in the fifteenth century came not from large units, but from smaller ones, mostly from small holdings of twenty, thirty, forty or fifty acres, with a few head of sheep.

In order to get large quantities of wool it was now necessary to collect it all over the country, and there appear the men who were to become

familiar figures in the English countryside from the late fourteenth century to the eighteenth century, the builders of so many beautiful houses, the founders and embellishers of so many churches, i.e. the wool brokers, as they were called at that time, the wool merchants of the smaller country towns and the more substantial villages. These brokers travelled in the wool growing areas, in Yorkshire, in Northamptonshire, in parts of Wiltshire, in parts of Dorset, in the Cotswolds and in Gloucestershire. Marks left by the wool merchant are found in many small towns, in houses as in Chipping Campden, or in churches or brasses as in Northleach, or in innumerable tombstones in practically every sheep-farming area of this country. We know roughly how he lived and how he traded. Surviving British records fortunately contain accounts of two or three families engaged in the wool trade. The best known was the Cely family, wool exporters, merchants of London with a country place in Essex. They were not wool merchants in the strict sense of the term, but they were in constant trading relations with three or four merchant houses in the Cotswolds, and mostly with two families at Northleach, those of Midwinter and Busshes. We can follow the activities of the Midwinters and the Busshes in constant business relations with practically every small wool grower in the country, advancing money, collecting a couple of fleeces here, a couple of fleeces there, sending out travelling agents called chapmen, who sold trinkets and bought wool, sold salt and textiles and obtained again fleeces and lambs'-wool and all the other varieties of wool grown in the country. We also see the Busshes and the Midwinters collecting the wool, packing it, assembling it in samples, delivering it to the Celys under contract, sometimes participating in the profits. Very often they participated in many other not necessarily commercial interests, as when they married their daughters to their clients or placed their sons in their firms. In fact, they became an essential part of the business community of England.

This particular change in the marketing of wool within England was followed and to some extent accompanied by changes among the wool exporters.

When one thinks about the thirteenth century there is perhaps a tendency to idealise it, but it now begins to appear to us very much as does the Victorian era: a time about which we know very little that is precise, but about which we can say now that while it lasted things grew, and were, broadly speaking, free. It was a process of development which was unregulated and uncontrolled, and for that reason alone we know so little about it. When I was still a young man learning my history, some of the people who taught me used to say, 'Of course, there must have been very little trading in that particular period, as there are very few documents.' That is the kind of argument a historian ten centuries

or five centuries hence might produce about the Victorian Age. They might say, 'there was not really a Victorian Age; people had no bread at all, certainly no butter, because they had no coupons'.

The fact is that the earlier centuries bred no documents because governments, municipalities, or other authorities took little cognisance of trade, with the result that we have to guess much more than we know. Unfortunately we know very much more about some of the later centuries like the fifteenth, in which everything was regulated and controlled and one could not sell a pound of wool or lend a mark of silver, without leaving almost its worth in parchment as a record, a testimony to the transaction.

Consequently what we think about the thirteenth century may be to some extent unsubstantial owing to scarcity and paucity of documentation. But what we are inclined to think about it at present is that it was a period when trade was very largely unregulated, uncontrolled, and the export trade was free to all-comers, and the all-comers were foreign and English alike. There may have been as many foreigners as there were Englishmen among them. We know more about the foreigners than about the Englishmen, because they were the only merchants who had to get permission of entry and a licence to trade. But both Englishmen and foreigners were engaged in that particular branch of export trade.

This free and open structure of the export trade was gradually replaced by a monopoly which was on the one hand a national one, open only to native English merchants, and at the same time a monopoly which was restricted to a relatively small group of people. The growth of that monopoly is described in history as the rise of the Staple. The Company of the Staple was a regulated company which acquired exclusive rights of wool exports. Some historians, perhaps rightly, connect the growing power and the maturity of English commercial leadership in foreign markets with the appearance and development of this monopolist Company of the Staple.

I do not want to enter into a discussion as to how far that particular connection is justified. All I want to suggest is that at the end of the fourteenth and the beginning of the fifteenth centuries, when the Staple was finally established, the overwhelming bulk of the English wool trade was already in the hands of the English merchants, who as members of the company could trade in wool. In that particular period England's exports of wool no longer were at the high level of thirty or forty thousand sacks. The English wool exports had been declining slowly for some time before the machinery of the Staple came into existence, and went on declining for some time after the organisation had appeared.

Why it declined is, of course, a debatable question. If I were to try to answer it I should get myself, I am afraid, involved in all the controversies about the history of English society and agricultural economy

in the later Middle Ages. What I am going to tell you now is to a large extent a matter of surmise. I want to suggest two things. First there was a general decline in agricultural production. England was becoming a poorer and a smaller country in the later Middle Ages. It may have been due to the Hundred Years War. It may have been some of those mysterious hidden processes in population movement, the behaviour of people, their attitude to economic matters, or perhaps their attitude to marrying and setting up families. Perhaps all these things happened more or less together. But whatever the cause, there undoubtedly occurred in the late fourteenth and the fifteenth centuries, and continued until about the 60s or 70s of the fifteenth century, a general decline in agricultural production. Contrary to what you may have heard when you were at school, the decline in arable farming did not necessarily result in increased pasture. Pasture and arable as a rule declined together and there was a general decline in the production of wool. An American, Professor Gray, who tried to work these figures out, and two or three others, have concluded that between the middle of the thirteenth and the middle of the fifteenth centuries the total output of wool must have declined.

There is no doubt at all that exports declined very drastically. In the thirteenth and early fourteenth centuries as much as forty or forty-five thousand sacks could be exported in a single year, while the average exports in the middle of the fifteenth century were only from eight to twelve thousand sacks. The average export declined in the middle of the fifteenth century to roughly one quarter or one third of what it had been about two centuries earlier.

The decline in exports cannot be put down wholly to the economic condition of the country. We can find a very obvious and specific cause, royal taxation. I have already told you that wool paid for it all, and one of the ways in which wool could be made to pay for the war was by taxing it; and taxed it was. In various customs taxes and subsidies some exporters, especially foreigners, at times paid as much as £3 10*s* or £4 per sack of wool. For some qualities of wool it was a tax of very nearly eighty per cent. Even for the Cotswold wool, which by that time had dropped in price to somewhere about £8 a sack, there was a forty per cent export tax, and this tax made it impossible for cheap cloth to be made out of English wool either in Florence or in Flanders. Wool at that price, carrying a tax of that magnitude, could be worked up only in expensive luxury cloths. In general, those who study Florentine history admit that there was a general decline in the total volume of production, and that the Flemish and Florentine cloth makers were concentrating on the making of much smaller quantities of very much more expensive cloths. Cloth was ceasing to be the article of mass consumption and becoming a luxury textile.

Such a heavy tax must also have discouraged domestic producers and may have been responsible for some of the decline in English production which we have already mentioned. By the middle of the fifteenth century, perhaps even by the end of the fourteenth century, a situation had developed in which the foreigner could not buy all the wool he would have bought had it been cheaper, and the domestic producer was not growing all the wool he would have grown had he been able to sell it abroad at its full economic value.

In this picture of excessive taxation, monopoly and decline, decline both in England and abroad, there is perhaps one redeeming feature. The tax, £4, or £3, or £2 10*s*, per sack of wool, which inhibited exports, also favoured the use of wool at home. The domestic user of wool, the man who wanted to spin it into yarn in England and make it up into cloth in England, was now able to obtain this indispensable, invaluable, irreplaceable English Cotts fleece. He could obtain it for roughly thirty to fifty per cent below the price which the foreigner had to pay for it. It is very largely because of this unexpected, unpremeditated and unplanned competitive advantage which the English clothmaker obtained at the expense of the foreign clothmaker, under the protection of an unplanned tariff system, that the domestic manufacturer of cloth began to forge ahead. By the end of the fourteenth century and the early fifteenth century English cloth production had outstripped by a very wide margin the small quantities of cloth which England made in the earlier period.

In your text-books, and in my text-books when I was young, we read about the good King Edward III who woke up one morning with a very bright idea of inviting the Flemish weavers to this country. Why should they go on weaving cloth in Flanders if they could weave it here? He invited John Kempe, a Flemish weaver, who came with his wife and his children, his implements and his workers, and started English cloth production on the road on which it travelled from that time onwards until the revolution in the English industry in the eighteenth century. I do not know whether it was Edward III who invited Kempe. There is in fact a letter in the records admitting him and his family to England, as there are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of other letters admitting other Flemings to England before and after this period. I am quite prepared to believe that Edward III thought it was a good idea, but what the text-books do not tell us is why Kempe thought it a good idea to accept the invitation. Someone else might have and probably did invite Flemish weavers in an earlier century; but why did they not accept then but accept so readily now?

The crux of the matter is that England was now a desirable country to gate-crash into, not merely to come by invitation, because England was the country in which it was possible to get wool, and to get it cheaply.

This, of course, is not the entire story, for there were other advantages as well. England had developed some mechanical aids to the fulling of cloth. Owing to the strength of royal power and the weakness of town municipalities, it was possible to establish rural centres of industry where the making of cloth could develop without much interference from guilds, or urban authorities.

All this played its part, but what I really wanted to emphasise was that the particular story of decline which appears to be such a sad ending to the history of English commerce, did not pass unrelieved. The very same causes which had brought down the export of English wool and reduced the importance of England's trade in foreign industrial areas, enabled a very flourishing industry to be established in this country.