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Chapter 10

Elizabethan entrepreneurs: three clothiers of the Frome Valley, 1550–1600

John Gaisford

At the accession of Elizabeth I in 1558, Wiltshire was one of England's most important manufacturing regions. Its main product was white woollen broadcloth, a durable, heavy-duty cloth used for coats and cloaks, which was made by village weavers, then 'fulled' at water mills to thicken the cloth and make it almost waterproof. Broadcloth production was regulated by statute: each Wiltshire cloth was required to be 'in length being thorough wet betwixt 26 and 28 yards and shall be seven quarters of the yard in breadth ... and being well scoured thicked milled and fully dried shall weigh every piece 64 pounds'.¹ Metal seals were attached at the fulling mill to show that the cloths had been measured, weighed and checked for defects and that the aulnage (inspection) fee and Crown subsidy had both been paid.² The cloths were 'raw' or unfinished when they left Wiltshire. The majority were sold to London merchants, who shipped them to the Low Countries or Germany, where the cloths were dyed, shorn and pressed before being distributed throughout northern and central Europe. Others were finished in London and sold by domestic retailers, or exported to the Baltic or the Mediterranean.³

According to George Ramsay, the mid-twentieth-century historian of this trade, Wiltshire provided almost a quarter of all London's 'raw' cloth exports in the 1540s and had doubled its market share by 1606.⁴ This was a business of national significance, which fuelled the import trade of London's merchants. 'Throughout the sixteenth century,' wrote Fisher, '[woollen] cloth was by far the most important commodity exported and by far the greater proportion of cloth went out through London'.⁵ In the

1 5 & 6 Edward VI, c. 6 (1552).

2 The aulnage fee was ½d, the subsidy 4d per cloth, both payable to the county aulnager.

3 C.G.A. Clay, *Economic expansion and social change, England 1500–1700* (Cambridge, 1984), vol. 2, pp. 108–9. The finishing process involved raising the nap of the cloth with teasels and trimming it with shears to achieve a smooth surface, ready for folding and pressing.

4 G.D. Ramsay, *The Wiltshire woollen industry in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries* (Oxford, 1943; rev. edn. 1965), pp. 65, 71.

5 F.J. Fisher, 'Commercial trends and policy in sixteenth century England', *Economic History Review*, 10 (1940), p. 96.

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exchequer year 1559/60, London merchants paid nearly 93 per cent of the customs payable on cloth exports.⁶ In 1564/5, when exports boomed following a year-long closure of the Antwerp market, cloth accounted for 78 per cent by value of all exports from London – £851,417 4s 6d out of a total £1,087, 866 15s 8d – and by the end of the reign cloth accounted for ‘well over four-fifths of English exports’.⁷ If Ramsay was correct, and Wiltshire by 1600 was supplying half of London’s output, its products were generating nearly 40 per cent of England’s export revenues.

The cloth was produced near the rivers used for washing and rinsing the wool and cloth and for powering the fulling mills. The main centres were made clear in 1576 by *An Act for the Toleration of Certain Clothiers in the counties of Wilts, Somerset and Gloucester to inhabit out of Townes Corporate*. The act notes that the clothiers of these counties have: ‘at their great Costes and Charges planted themselves and their Dwelling Howses dispersedly throughowte the said Counties’, and the first locations named are ‘the Ryvers of Frome water, Kingswood water and the river Avon ... and the branches of the said waters [which are] verie good and apt for clothinge’. It refers to ‘the great number of Fulling Mylnes and other Workhouses thereunto adjoining’ and the ‘greate multitude of poore People as Weavers, Tuckers, Spinsters and such like [who] have of long tyme heretofore and at this present do inhabite and dwell nere unto the said Places and Waters, by means of the great Clothmakinge there’.⁸ The areas designated are in west Wiltshire and an adjacent strip of east Somerset, on both sides of the river Frome, which was often described as ‘in Wiltshire’ by Elizabethan exchequer officials; and at Kingswood, now in south Gloucestershire, but then a remote enclave of Wiltshire (Figure 10.1).⁹

With the growth of Wiltshire’s market share, the west Wiltshire manufactory had become of particular interest to local magnates, exchequer officials and members of the Privy Council. John Thynne of Longleat (1513?–80), who acquired monastic lands in west Wiltshire while serving as steward to Protector Somerset, was surveyor of the Crown’s Wiltshire properties (including Kingswood) during Elizabeth’s reign and steadily extended his estate in the Frome Valley.¹⁰ William Paulet, Lord Treasurer at Elizabeth’s accession, had already acquired the former priory of Edington, just a few miles west of Longleat.¹¹ In 1567 Walter Mildmay, Paulet’s *protegé* as Chancellor of

6 L. Stone, ‘Elizabethan overseas trade’, *Economic History Review*, 2 (1949), p. 39. The customs charge for exporting Wiltshire cloths was $1\frac{1}{2} \times 6s$ 8d, or 7s 11d per cloth: B.E. Supple, *Commercial crisis and change in England 1600–1642* (Cambridge, 1959), p. 275.

7 Stone, ‘Overseas trade’, pp. 37 and 45.

8 18 Elizabeth c. 16.

9 The National Archives (TNA), E159/361 Humphrey Yerbury of Beckington, John Whalley of Bath; TNA, E159/371 John Baylie of Beckington, Henry Davis (Davison?) of Norton St Philip, Gregory Style of Bath are all described as ‘in Wiltshire’. Numerous other examples could be cited.

10 M. Girouard, ‘Sir John Thynne (1512/3–80)’, *ODNB*. Thynne was closely involved with London’s overseas merchants: he married Thomas Gresham’s sister Christian and held the office of Packer of Strangers’ Goods.

11 R.B. Pugh et al. (ed.), *The Victoria History of the County of Wiltshire* (hereafter *VCH Wiltshire*), 18 vols (London, 1953–2014), vol. 8 ‘Edington: Manors’.

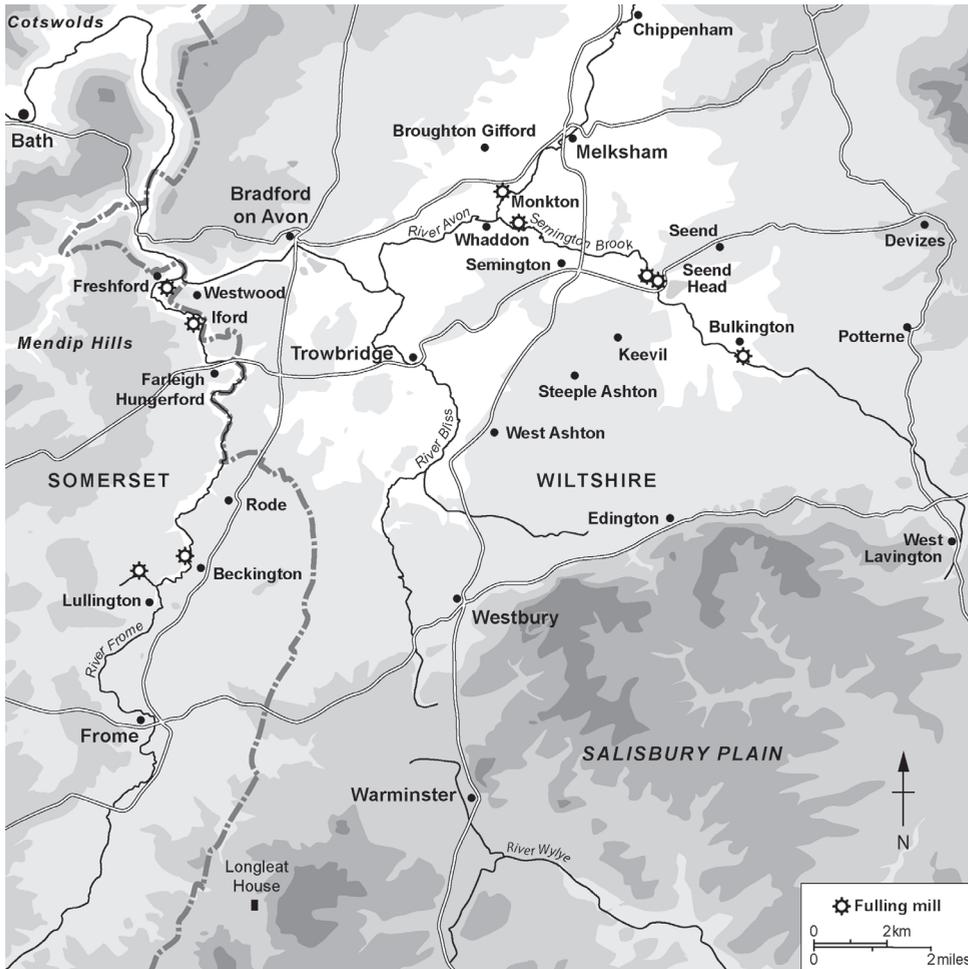


Figure 10.1 Map of the Frome Valley.

the Exchequer, encouraged his eldest son to marry a west Wiltshire heiress, Grace Sharington of Lacock.¹² In 1576 Mildmay's brother-in-law Francis Walsingham, Secretary of State and beneficiary of a valuable licence to export cloths free of customs duty, was granted the Hundred of Bradford and the reversion of the manor of Bradford-on-Avon, held meanwhile by the earl of Pembroke.¹³

The importance of west Wiltshire to the leading merchants of London can also be clearly demonstrated. John Stow recorded that:

The number of merchants in London in the beginning of Queen Elizabeth, viz. when Alderman Lodge was mayor (which was Anno 1561), were in all 327.

12 L.L. Ford, 'Sir Walter Mildmay (1520/1–89)', *ODNB*.

13 TNA, SP 46/16 ff. 223–4; *VCH Wiltshire*, vol. 7 'Bradford Hundred', 'Bradford-on-Avon: Manors'.

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Whereof the Company of Mercers afforded 99. And these were the names of the chief, Sir Thomas Leigh, Sir Thomas Gresham, Mr Alderman Martin, Mr Alderman Baskerfield, Sir Rowland Hill, Vincent Randal, Lionel Duckett. Of the Grocers were 57. Whereof the chief were Sir John Lyon, Mr Alderman White, Mr Alderman Lodge, Lord Mayor, Mr Edward Jackman, Alderman. Of the Drapers 29. Whereof the chief were Sir William Chester, Mr Alderman Champion.¹⁴

Of these 13 'chief' mercers, grocers and drapers, all but Lyon, Randal and Champion can be shown to have had direct links with west Wiltshire as purchasers of cloth, as landowners, by marriage or as beneficiaries, witnesses or overseers of clothier wills.¹⁵ During Elizabeth's reign such ties became ever more valuable because Crown policy favoured the wealthiest merchants. William Cecil thought it desirable for the export trade to pass into 'the hands of a fewer number of merchants, of those that be richer and that will deal and trade like merchants with their stocks and not with the exchange as all the young merchants do'.¹⁶ The wealthiest merchants had both the motive and the means to cultivate long-term relationships with the leading clothiers in west Wiltshire, to secure their sources of supply and to shut out competition.

Yet, despite these indicators of a vibrant commerce, even the wealthiest Elizabethan clothiers of west Wiltshire and east Somerset have been almost invisible to economic historians. Tawney had no doubt that the cloth trade was the main driver of the sixteenth-century enclosure that absorbed him, but was far more interested in the effects than the causes and so took relatively little interest in the western counties, which he found 'relatively unaffected by the changes of our period'.¹⁷ Postan, in contrast, traced the fortunes of the cloth trade from early medieval times to the sixteenth century, but from this macro-economic perspective found the 'new draperies' of East Anglia more noteworthy than the traditional broadcloths of the west.¹⁸ Carus-Wilson's account of Wiltshire's medieval cloth economy did identify several wealthy clothiers, but ended at 1550. Mann's complementary study of the later period leaned heavily on Ramsay for its account

14 J. Stow, *A survey of the cities of London and Westminster*, ed. J. Strype (London, 1720), Book 5, p. 291.

15 Leigh as a 'very loving friend' of Robert Long, a west Wiltshire-born mercer: TNA, PROB 11/35/78; Gresham as a buyer of Wiltshire cloth: Mercer's Company *Thomas Gresham day book*; Martin, Baskerfield, Duckett and Jackman as brothers-in-law of Richard Lambert, a grocer with estates in Wiltshire and Gloucestershire: W.P.W. Phillimore (ed.), *Visitation of the county of Worcester made in the year 1569*, p. 102 and TNA, PROB 11/49/267; Hill as an overseer of Robert Long's will TNA, PROB 11/35/78; Lodge as a witness of Thomas Horton's will TNA, PROB 11/32/463; Chester as a beneficiary of Thomas Long, d.1562 TNA, PROB 11/46/130.

16 D.R. Bisson, *The merchant adventurers of England: the company and the Crown, 1474–1564* (London, 1993), p. 98.

17 R.H. Tawney, *The agrarian problem in the sixteenth century* (London, 1912), pp. 195, 262–3.

18 M.M. Postan, *The medieval economy and society: an economic history of Britain in the Middle Ages* (London, 1975), p. 220.

of the Elizabethan era and, in Ramsay's view, 'not one of the clothiers whose activities lay at the base of the Wiltshire woollen industry during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries could be considered worthy of mention in any text-book of English history during the period'.¹⁹

Ramsay's research was, however, hampered by the difficulty of accessing local archives.²⁰ There is no such problem today, but since the 1960s economic historians have moved on to other concerns and only local historians such as Ken Rogers and Colin Brett have continued the documentary research that enables individual clothiers to be linked to specific locations and activities in the Frome Valley.²¹ Their findings have raised many questions about the conventional account of the late Tudor broadcloth manufactory. This chapter, therefore, will build on their work to outline the activity of three Elizabethan clothiers – Thomas Webb of Beckington in Somerset, his son-in-law Robert Webb of Kingswood and Beckington, and Edward Horton of Bradford-on-Avon in Wiltshire. It will demonstrate that, contrary to the prevailing narrative, the leading clothiers of the Frome Valley achieved unprecedented wealth and influence during the Elizabethan era, and thus are as worthy of attention as their merchant customers, who have been much more fully studied.²² First, however, it will examine the historiographical context and the themes and debates which were generated in the 1960s by the successors of Tawney and Postan.

Entrepreneurs and 'industrialists'

Ramsay's monograph, published in 1943 and reissued with minimal revision in 1965, remains the standard source for the Tudor and early Stuart era.²³ But Ramsay viewed the first, not the second, half of the sixteenth century as the golden age for the Wiltshire cloth entrepreneurs.²⁴ In this he followed the seventeenth-century antiquarians Thomas Fuller (1608–61) and John Aubrey (1626–97). Fuller named among the Tudor 'worthies' of Wiltshire only the Henrician clothier William Stumpe of Malmesbury, who in the 1540s set up a large weaving workshop in disused buildings at Malmesbury Abbey and proposed (but never realised) an even more ambitious project to the corporation of Oxford, projected to employ as many as 2,000 cloth workers.²⁵ Aubrey

19 E. Carus-Wilson, 'The woollen industry before 1550' and J. de L. Mann, 'Textile industries since 1550', *VCH Wiltshire*, vol. 4, pp. 115–47, 148–82; Ramsay, *Wiltshire woollen industry*, p. 138.

20 *Ibid.*, pp. 145–6.

21 C.J. Brett, *The manors of Norton St Philip and Hinton Charterhouse, 1535–1691*, Somerset Record Society 97 (2004); K.H. Rogers, *Wiltshire and Somerset woollen mills* (Edington, 1976).

22 See, for example, R. Grassby, *Kinship and capitalism: marriage, family and business in the English-speaking world* (Cambridge, 2001).

23 For the subsequent period J.de L. Mann, *The cloth industry in the west of England from 1640–1880* (Oxford, 1971) is much more detailed.

24 Ramsay, *Wiltshire woollen industry*, p. 65.

25 T. Fuller, *The history of the worthies of England*, ed. P.A. Nuttall (London, 1840), vol. 3, pp. 337–8; T.F.T. Baker, 'William Stumpe (by 1498–1552)', in S.T. Bindoff (ed.), *The history of parliament: the House of Commons 1509–1558 (HoP)* (London, 1982).