

Linen Industry

(An extract from a chapter of the book "Great Ayton – A History of the Village by Dan O'Sullivan")

One very important industry during the 17th and 18th centuries was linen. There is an early reference to a fulling mill in the village in 1353, which may have been for scouring and beating the woven pieces of linen cloth, and if so this implies that there were already at this date a substantial number of local weavers to supply the cloth.

In the surviving fragmentary Ayton manorial court records of the mid-seventeenth century there is a definite reference to linen. A case was brought before the court by William Hewitson of Ayton, against Thomas Tweddell and Jane his wife in a plea of debt for 1/4d. *wherof is due for one Lynt (i.e. linen) wheel which the defendant Jane bought, the 24th of March, 1655.* However, the main evidence for the industry's importance in the village comes from the parish register, and from wills and Inventories such as that of Thomas Weatherill of Great Ayton who in 1713 had his *loome and gears* installed in a specialist workhouse.

Most of the flax for spinning came from abroad, especially from Holland and the Baltic; little was grown locally in spite of a flax-growing parliamentary bounty. The port books of Stockton and Whitby show a dramatic increase in flax imports in the later seventeenth century. Considerable amounts of yarn was also imported to be woven, and the finished linen cloth was exported from the same ports.

Flax-spinning and weaving were mainly cottage-based industries, and the cottagers involved would not have been particularly well-off, as is proved by some of their surviving inventories. It was an industry in which women and children played a large part, working at home while the men were out in the fields - similar to the way the woollen industry operated in other parts of England such as the West Riding. It has also been shown that the linen industry in the North Riding tended to flourish where the land was held in small parcels. This was true of Ayton as well as of, for instance, Guisborough, Stokesley or Thirsk. Land tax returns for the eighteenth century show a relatively large number of freeholders in these communities. Where, on the other hand, there were one or more great landowners, these tended to discourage the industry, because its seasonal fluctuations made for charges on the poor rates to which they might have to contribute. A comparison of Hearth tax records in 1674 with census records in 1801 shows that in the villages noted for linen manufacture the rate of growth of the number of houses was far greater than the average. At Great Ayton the increase was from 75 houses in 1674 to 205 in 1801 - a growth of well over 100 per cent.

It was only the finishing and bleaching of the cloth which was sometimes carried out in larger, factory-type units. The more typical pattern was for the manufacturer to distribute yarn to the weavers, who owned their own looms and worked in sheds known as *shops* in their back gardens. The poor rate assessments for Ayton in the 1820s show that weaving shops were structurally separate buildings. Few of these shops can have survived, but there is one still behind 5, Race Terrace. I have been told that the reason there is a brick cottage in the row of stone cottages making up Race Terrace is that formerly the gap in the terrace was left so that the weavers could carry yarn or finished cloth to and from their back gardens without going through their houses.

When the cloth was ready it was collected, finished and stored by the manufacturer until he had enough to dispatch to the port or to a local market. The nearest market to Ayton was at Stokesley where, no doubt, much local cloth and yarn was sold, and there are references in the Quarter Sessions records to attempts to organise the selling of linen at Stokesley and try to prevent unfair dealing. In 1726, for instance, the justices made the following order to the Stokesley constable:

Complaint having been made unto the Justices by the linen weavers of Stoxley and other adjacent places, that several evil practices have been used in Stoxley Market by people who expose for sale parcels of linen yarn not being in full tale of 6 score threads to the cut upon a reel which is half an ell long, and that several linen hecklers frequently buy up such yarns at their own prices and carry it to other parts, to the great prejudice of the common weavers of Stoxley, it is now ordered that the weavers of Stoxley do every year elect two Market Searchers to regulate and rectify such abuses as they may find.

Linen was still to be obtained at Stokesley at the end of the eighteenth century, as this extract from the diary of Ralph Jackson shows:

20th May, 1780. I walked to Stokesley (from Ayton,) and returned before dinner; a great annual Fair is held

here on this day for unbleached linen Webs, etc., being the Eve of Trinity Sunday, vulgarity called Trinity Saturday.

Ayton had three linen manufacturers in 1801: Philip Hesleton and Sons; Richard Lamb; and Thomas Nattriss. Hesleton's business seems to have been a large one, an exception to the usual arrangements in the industry, because he, we are told, *employed many weavers of linen, huckaback and sailcloth*. The Hesletons operated where Ayton School is now - in fact **it** was Philip Hesleton who sold the estate to the school in 1841. On the north side of Dykes Lane (i.e. Station Road), near the junction with Little Ayton Lane, the Hesletons bleached their yarn, and there was a stone building called the Boil House which survived until the end of the century. An important by-product from flax was linseed oil, and the building which is now the school art and craft block became Hesleton's oil mill, for extracting oil from linseed. One can still see the concrete channel — replacing the original stone - for the mill race, which supplied water-power for the mill wheel. The mill itself was very old, said to have been once a brewery and then a flax mill, before becoming an oil mill. The Jubilee *History of the Friends' School* explains how the seed-crushing process worked:

A piece of edged stone crushed the seed which was heated in small iron pans over a slow fire, and kept from burning by revolving knives in little tin pans; when hot it was put into hair bags and placed between wedges made of beechwood, the upper ones driven down by heavy stampers lifted by a revolving shaft, and then allowed to fall on the wedge. When this was driven home the bag was taken out and the crushed linseed was found pressed into a flat mess called oilcake, and sold to the farmers for feeding their cattle. The oil ran down into tanks below the wedge. In this state it was called raw linseed oil. This oil, when pumped in cauldrons and boiled with sulphuric acid, was called boiled linseed oil, and was in great demand for mixing with paint. The external appearance of the mill was rather unsightly, but the fall of the stampers produced a sound rather pleasant to the ear.

Shortly before the school was started the oil mill was leased to a Stockton firm who also rented Grange Mill, owned by John Richardson of Langbaurch, at the west end of the village. However, by the mid-century new techniques of extracting oil from linseed by hydraulic pressure had made both mills redundant.



The mill race entering Grange Mill at the west end of the village.

After the Napoleonic wars successive depressions badly affected the linen industry, as did competition from the cheaper cloth of Lancashire. In the Ayton Select Vestry minutes there are references to attempts by the Vestry to provide paupers with looms so that they could earn their own living. These, however, were not always successful. For instance, in February 1822: *Richard Lamb Jnr has had a loom bought for him for £2/10/0d. which he is to repay by instalments of 1/- a week until May Day and 2/- a week after that time until the whole is redeemed*. But in

December, 1824 there is another entry: *Overseers to demand payment for Richard Lamb's loom. If not paid to use legal means for recovery thereof*

By the mid-nineteenth century the linen industry had virtually disappeared from the village, and there were only seven weavers in the 1851 census. This decline affected the village's size, so that between 1831 and 1841 its population actually decreased — from 1,103 to 1,014. Many weavers no doubt left, some probably to the linen-making centres of Barnsley or Darhngton where the industry was more mechanised and hence more competitive. In 1830 the Vestry reported: *There being several weavers in the town out of work and it appearing that weaving may be had for them from a manufacturing concern in Darlington on condition that two looms can be employed to work webs 10 quarters wide, it is agreed that one loom be provided at the township's expense for that purpose in order that the others may get employ.*

From the late 1830s, of course, any surplus workforce in the area could also move to the expanding industrial centres of Thornaby and Middlesbrough. An interesting coincidence is that the last reference to a weaver in the Ayton parish register comes in 1856, the same year as the first reference to a miner (whether whinstone or ironstone is unspecified). In 1851 one little Ayton household symbolises the change-over; William Robson, aged 78, *pauper, ex-linen-weave*, was living with his son William, 44, *ex-linen-weaver, labourer in flint quarry*.