

Surprisingly perhaps, East Anglia, now the most sparsely populated region of England, was once the most densely populated, the country's industrial heart, the engine of foreign trade.



For a few hundred years from the Norman invasion of 1066, it was rich enough periodically to bequeath an architectural legacy which still shows how good things probably were. Small villages have grand churches; small towns are dotted with fine buildings - Tudor, Jacobean and Georgian - some largely in original condition because in many cases, after the money departed, stagnation averted change.

The commercial peak was the medieval period and one product threads its way through the success: wool.

The story of wool and the more important cloth industry which followed is a tale of commerce, greed, protectionism, racism, corruption, good management, bad management and ultimately terminal Luddism.

It begins with the Danes who established towns which survive today but the Normans brought a wider perspective and by the 12th century, East Anglia was trading extensively with the two great commercial areas of the time: northern Europe and the Mediterranean.

Both wanted English wool and East Anglia could deliver. In a country where no roads were built between the 5th and 17th centuries, the region had surviving Roman roads, easy terrain and, most importantly, navigable rivers. Textile manufacturing, led by Flemish craftsmen, was growing rapidly on the Continent in the 11th and 12th centuries but the Flemings' own land, prone to flooding, was unsuitable for sheep and so the market looked to England. Wool became the most important English commodity, dominating the economy and even specified exclusively by Italy's Florentine Wool Guild, producers of Europe's finest cloth at the time.



And yet at that early stage, East Anglia was still making its money from wider trade because its wool, though plentiful and accessible, was short and curly and relatively unsuitable for the best cloths. In the 13th century, Herefordshire and Shropshire wool was worth 14 marks for a 364lb sack compared to just four marks for Anglian.

There were other problems for the region. Royal hands, wanting a slice of the action, created the Wool Staple under which wool could only be handled by the Staple Ports to make wool tax collection easier. East Anglia had just four such ports and they operated barely for ten years because politicking by Henry II made Calais, then part of the kingdom, the main Staple.

But by the 14th century, English wool exports were in decline because English clothmaking was growing and absorbing supply. And it was the cloth industry which became East Anglia's big earner.

Again, it was a question of geography. Flemish wool craftsmen, finally giving up on floods and war in their homeland, crossed the North Sea, encouraged by Edward III who was married to a Flemish princess. They went to Colchester, Ipswich and Norwich, spreading out to Hadleigh, Sudbury and Lavenham in Suffolk, and Coggeshall, Braintree, Dedham and Halstead in Essex. In Norfolk they went to Worstead, said by some to have given its name (with a spelling variation) to the cloth.



Until then, worsted had been East Anglia's main finished product. Unlike woollen cloth, it did not need to be 'fulled', a shrinking and compacting process requiring plenty of clear running water. Norfolk rivers were muddy and sluggish and so that county stuck with worsteds but Suffolk and Essex had clearer streams and the immigrants there brought a massive rise in woollens production.

And yet despite its success, this new industry still had problems. It was controlled, particularly in the towns, by the cloth guilds who dictated who worked where and for how much. Many craftsmen moved to the countryside for more freedom and, initially, they flourished. But they were then scattered and vulnerable to the control of the clothiers, particularly those in London, who by pegging prices gradually reduced them to the status of wage-earners. In the 15th century, first the semi-skilled sorters, carders and spinners comprising many of the rural poor were brought under the thumb; they were too humble to object. The skilled weavers and dyers resisted but they had to battle with wheezes like payment in food or wool and arguments about whether the cloth received by the clothiers weighed as much as the yarn they had supplied.



By the 16th century, the clothiers controlled the country industry and the position of cottage craftsmen only worsened with inflation brought by New World gold and silver.

Competition was also growing from the then resurgent Netherlands where another generation of craftsmen had freed themselves from their own guilds and also gone country, only for more wars and religious persecution in the 1660s to drive a new wave of them to East Anglia. There, resented by the locals, they settled in closed communities but brought energy to the towns they chose while those which rejected them went into decline. As times got harder, resentment increased. And there was still a marketing problem.

London, the best market, was controlled by powerful Livery Companies who

became the key to foreign trade and most of East Anglia became dependent upon them.

Only Norwich was wealthy enough to stand alone, mainly because in the late 15th century, it had amalgamated its English and Flemish clothworkers into a guild that largely eradicated racial jealousy and went on to gain almost complete control of worsted manufacturing in East Anglia.



Subsequently, in the early 17th century, other towns under London's cosh formed similar companies, but internal disagreement was rife and most didn't last, allowing the London cloth merchants to consolidate their oppression.

Then continental and colonial conflict began to damage trade while the Civil War of the 1640s disrupted manufacturing, particularly in Suffolk and Essex.

In Suffolk, by the third quarter of the 17th century, clothmaking was confined to a few towns with the rest reduced to supplying them with yarn. And by then, crucially, the north of England was beginning to compete with better wool and softer water.

But it was some East Anglian own goals that really finished the story.



The latest Flemings had brought the 'new draperies', much lighter cloths than those previously produced. But East Anglia resisted them contemptuously for a long time, even refusing to believe that woollens and heavy worsteds would not sell in the hot climate colonies which were the new market frontier.

Then there was mechanisation which had begun in the north with the harnessing of Pennine streams. By that time, only Norfolk worsted had much life left and yet when James Hargreaves invented the Spinning Jenny in the 1760s, East Anglia ignored it.

Later, more crucially, when the North adopted steam, East Anglia which could have followed with cheap coal from Newcastle was sniffy at management level and violently hostile on the cottage floor.

By the time they saw their error, it was too late. Suddenly, unemployment was rife, exacerbated by the Enclosures which were wreaking havoc among land workers. Many people moved north in search of work and the East Anglian textile sector was dead.

All that remains now is a string of villages and small towns with clusters of fine buildings. But touring around them - ideally with a copy of *Wool: East Anglia's*

Golden Fleece by Nigel Heard (Terence Dalton, Lavenham, 1970) if one can be found - is instructive.

In Norfolk, Worstead is now a pretty village with a small square dominated by a massive wool-funded church, one of many ecclesiastical monuments to cloth baron largesse across the region. Aylsham to the south-west was making cloth in the 12th century though it gradually merged into the Norfolk worsted industry, while in Norwich, still the hub of Norfolk, urban renewal has swept away most medieval streetscapes but Elm Hill where worsted was woven remains.

Essex has a string of remnants in places like Boxted and Bergholt and, up the Colne, Halstead and Hedingham. But Suffolk has more. In Hadleigh, old timber frames lean out between newer buildings and, despite parked cars, make it easy to imagine earlier times. The Guildhall, built in 1430, is substantially unchanged because the town never recovered from the suffocation of 15th century London control.

Kersey, a village of timber frames and steep streets, was once known for its cheaper 'kerseymere' woollen cloth though after the 16th century it was reduced to spinning yarn.



North up the B1115, Bildeston still looks the part with its timber framed houses though it too was down to spinning by the 16th Century, as was Monks Eleigh to the south-west.

Nearby Sudbury remains busy and so again ancient relics have succumbed to redevelopment although Friar Street's mixture of 16th and 17th century English and Dutch houses with Georgian facades gives a flavour.

The real museum piece, of course, is Lavenham, now a big village but one that 500 years on retains one of the finest collections of late medieval architecture in the country.

But the bigger picture that emerges is a time warp, villages and towns which grew up on this single industry and now remain largely as they were because nothing so vital ever followed to bring redevelopment before they came to be cherished for what they are. These days they are the small windows though which we can still see how good things once were. And for a while, they were very good indeed.

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