

# THE EARLY HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE WOOLLEN INDUSTRY IN WALES

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To trace the history of the woollen industry in Wales is a most fascinating study, covering as it does a period of many centuries. Indeed, this industry was well established in Wales long before the days of Hywel Dda and Giraldus Cambrenis, and the historian, economist and antiquarian all find something of value in the search for, and examination of, records which throw light upon the activities of the cottage weaver and the small woollen factories of Wales. Though to-day the industry



PLATE 1 The Esgair Woollen Mill, built in 1760, re-erected in the grounds of The Welsh Folk Museum, St Fagans, South Wales

is of slight importance compared with those of coal, iron and steel, yet in past centuries wool was, next to cattle, the characteristic export of Wales and it played a considerable part in the economic development of a poor and backward country.

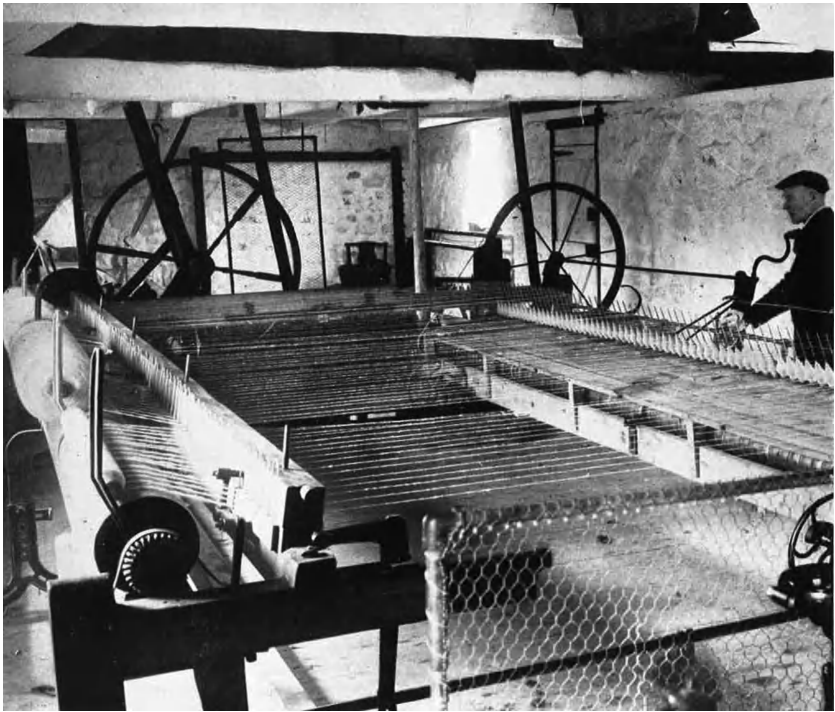


PLATE 2 Mule spinning at the eighteenth century mill at St Fagans

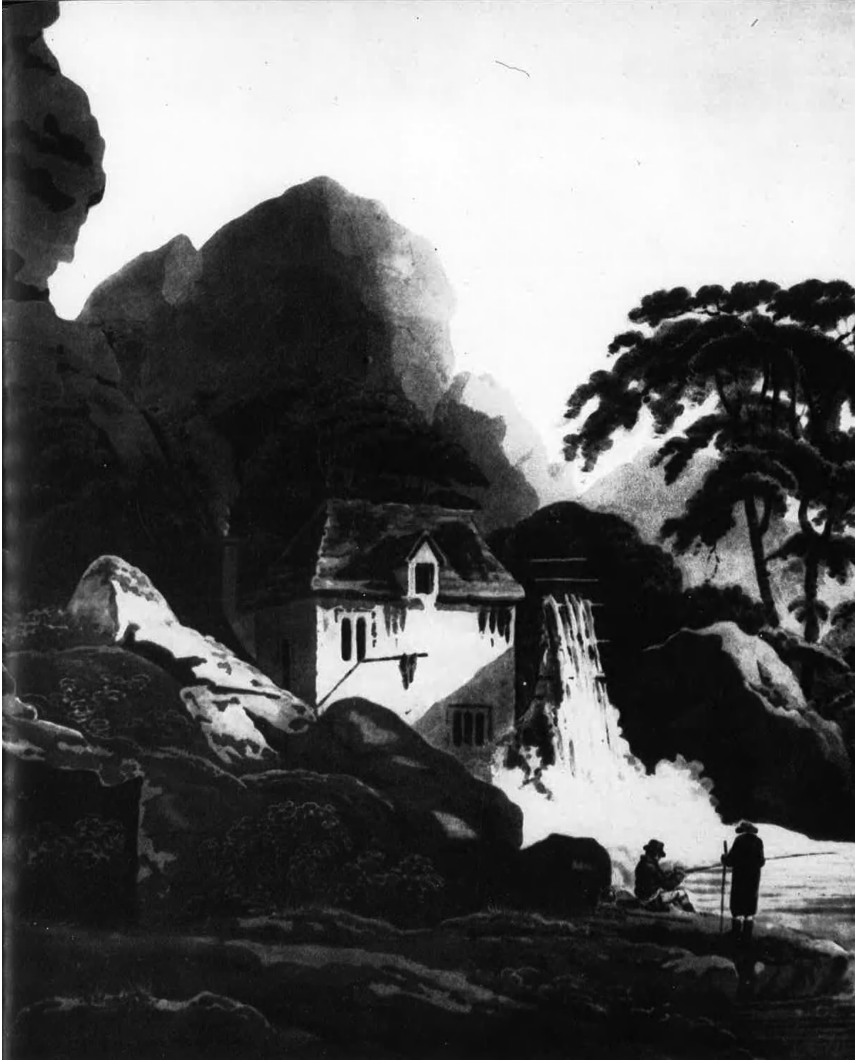


PLATE 3 Watermill near Dolgellau, from an aquatint by F J Sargent  
1811

The industry extended over a wide area. From the sixteenth century onwards the term “Welsh cloth” or “pannus Wallie” was commonly used, and one frequently meets with the terms “Welsh frieze” and “Welsh plains” which are descriptive of the type of cloth that was peculiar to Wales, that is, cloth simply woven without any after-dressing. This Welsh cloth was of rough material, suitable for hard wear rather than for show.

### **DOMESTIC WEAVING**

Originally cloth weaving was a domestic art and was one of the many activities of the homestead. Many of these weavers were small farmers as well, and right down to the beginning of the nineteenth century they were content to work in the traditional fashion, being hardly affected by the improvements introduced into the English cloth industry. Spinning and weaving were carried on at most of the farms which were large enough to be able to afford spinning wheels and one or two looms.



PLATE 4 Warping in the old woollen mill

Farmers hired servants, not only for their skill in the fields, but also for their skill as spinners and weavers. In many parts of Wales, as the art of spinning was easily acquired, women and children were hired by the day for this work. In the counties of Merioneth and Montgomery particularly, most households had a spinning wheel or a pair of hand cards. But whereas a spinning wheel could be bought for 1/6 to 2/-, a weaving loom was a much more costly item, its price ranging from £1.10.0 to £2.0.0, and this could be afforded only by someone in a more prosperous position. By the middle of the eighteenth century, many weavers had come to depend upon the profits of their loom for their livelihood and to them the cottagers took their yarn to be woven into cloth. Thus the Welsh clothier, unlike his West of England contemporary, would be wool-buyer, weaver and cloth-seller, and probably a farmer as well.



PLATE 5 Welsh costumes on market day. Lithograph published by H Humphries, Caernarvon

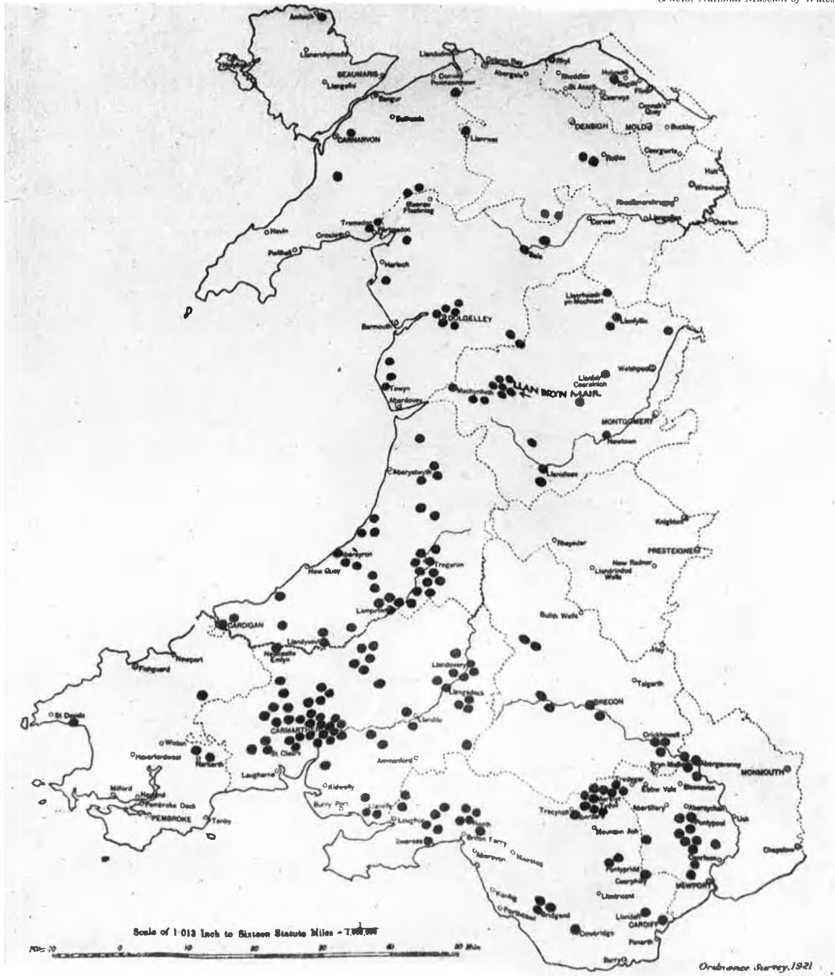


Figure 1 Map showing the distribution of the customers of a Welsh manufacturer of mill machinery in the nineteenth century. From *Y Cymmrodor*, Vo I. XXXIX, London, published by the Honourable Society of Cymmrodoriou 1928

## **CLOTH FAIRS**

As early as the fourteenth century, the product of Welsh looms found its way across England to Lynn, in Norfolk. Wales had long been well provided with fairs, the number of which as early as 1601 was 233 a year. By the end of the fifteenth century the Welsh friezemen or clothiers were to be met, not only in the markets and fairs of Wales, but in the towns of the Border and occasionally at the great Cloth Fair of St. Bartholomew in London.

Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Welsh cloth was sold in large quantities in the home fairs and markets direct to consumers or travelling merchants. Still larger quantities found their way outside the country to the great cloth market at Oswestry whither the Shrewsbury drapers repaired week by week, until, after a long struggle, they succeeded in transferring the market to their own town. Much of the cloth bought at Oswestry was brought by pack-horse to London and sold at Blackwell Hall for export. Many of the travellers who came to Wales in large numbers during the eighteenth century, in recording their impressions of the country, could not fail to note the part played in its economy by the woollen industry. Thus, Daniel Defoe, who passed through Wrexham in 1778, observes that here “is a great market for coarse linens and for flannel which the factors buy up of the poor Welsh people who manufacture it, and thence it is sent to London; and it is a considerable manufacture throughout all this part of the country by which the poor are profitably employed”. Another traveller notes the active sale of Welsh woollens at the market in Carmarthen and at Welshpool. Thomas Pennant writes that in Shrewsbury “about

700,000 yards of Welsh webbs, a coarse kind of woollen cloth, are brought here annually to the Thursday market; and brought up and dressed, that is, the wool is raised up on one side by a set of people called Shearmen ... in the time of Queen Elizabeth the trade was so great that no fewer than 600 maintained themselves by this occupation”.

It was towards the end of the eighteenth century that the industry reached its most prosperous period. Thus in South Merioneth in 1796, the total annual value of the web manufacture was estimated at close on £100,000. Here the industry was almost entirely dependent upon the export market for its sales. The wars and colonial acquisitions of the eighteenth century had brought web cloth into popularity as a material for soldiers’ uniforms, and the webs found their way to the American continent, where they were used to make cheap suits for African and West Indian slaves.



PLATE 6 An early nineteenth century drawing of the Aberystwyth Fair

## **KNITTING INDUSTRY**

No account of woollen manufacture at this period would be complete without reference to the knitting industry which was carried on extensively in many parts of Wales. It was a particularly flourishing occupation in the highlands between the upper reaches of the Dee and the Conway, especially in Merioneth, where some women, having learned to knit “as soon as they could talk” (as Thomas Pennant informs us) were able to finish a whole stocking in a day. The weekly sales of these goods in Bala market had risen, before the end of the eighteenth century, from £200 to £350, while the annual sales were reckoned at nearly 200,000 pairs, yielding a clear profit of about £13,000. There were contemporary critics who said that the wool was spun too fine, and that Shetland stockings, although cheaper, were better. Yet valetudinarians were known to pay as much as half-a-guinea for a pair of hose made of the soft, warm wool of Merioneth, and eight shillings was quite a common price.

The coming of the stage-coach had created a market for yet another knitted article. This was the Welsh wig — a sort of woollen cap, greatly favoured (with the falling out of fashion of the peruke) by bald-headed old gentlemen like Dickens’ Mr. Fezziwig, especially if they happened to be travelling by coach. It cost only a couple of shillings or so, and a tourist of the time informs us that the knitters used to congregate at strategic points on the Holyhead coach route to besiege passengers with cries of “D’you want a Welsh wig? — d’you want a wool stockings? — d’you want a wool gloves?” No doubt the “Welsh wig” of Solomon Gill in *Dombey and Son* was of Bala

origin. Merchants from Shrewsbury and elsewhere employed agents to buy Welsh stockings for re-sale in London and other English towns, and “Welsh hosiers” travelled through the adjoining English counties to supply shops and warehouses.



PLATE 7 View of Nant Mill from an aquatint by F Jukes after J la Port (1799)

In the nineteenth century the question at issue for the Welsh woollen industry was, could it adapt itself to the changing conditions? In some areas, in the early years of the century, small factories were established where machinery for carding and spinning was set up. In only a very few places was any machinery for weaving introduced. Mules were brought into use at one or two factories in Montgomeryshire about the year

1835, and power looms two or three years later. The delay in taking advantage of mechanical inventions led to the gradual decline in the prosperity of woollen cloth manufacture, and when the industry in England, especially in Yorkshire, was revolutionised by the use of steam-power, which made large scale production possible, the Welsh hand-loom weaver was outstripped.

It is unlikely that the Welsh woollen industry will ever again achieve the importance it possessed in earlier centuries, but it has left a deep mark on Wales in various ways, and reminders of it remain in numerous place-names and in proverbs. Many of the old spinning and weaving appliances have found their way into museums, but too often they have been destroyed as useless encumbrances. The old fulling-mills are often recalled by the place-name *pandy*, as, for example, *Pandy Tudur*, near *Llanrwst*, and *Ton-y-pandy* in the *Rhondda* valley. There is a “Tenter” field in the parish of *Gresford*, and in *Carmarthenshire* there is a place called *Cwm Twccwr* (the *Tucker’s Combe*). “*Gwneud melin a phandy*” (to make a mill and a fullery) is said of a person who talks of the great things he is going to do, but which are not likely to be accomplished. In the letters of the famous Welsh poet, *Goronwy Owen*, is the sentence: “In the year 1745 I was ordained a Deacon, what our people call a half-fulled priest.”

For other survivals of the woollen industry in Wales we must look to the *Welsh Folk Museum* at *St. Fagans* where, through the untiring efforts of the Curator, *Dr. Iorwerth C. Peate*, some objects of the greatest interest to students of economic history have been collected and preserved. The fabric of the old *Esgair*

Moel Woollen Factory, near Llanwrtyd in Breckonshire, built about 1760, has been transferred in its entirety and re-erected in the Folk Museum grounds, and the main features of the original setting of this very typical factory with its unique spinning machine and condenser carder, have been reproduced.