

“From Sheep to Sugar”

*- the unexpected link between Welsh wool
and clothing enslaved Africans in the New World.*

Liz Millman #4281 and Caroline Sansome

We have decided to start this article with some questions:

Do you live in a ‘pandy’?
or a converted ‘factri’ ?

or do you live in a place called ‘Pandy’
or somewhere called ‘Felin’?

Have you checked out the meanings of local house names, street or field names and found references to a mill (felin), fulling mill (pandy) or tenterfields (Cae Dentir) ?

or have your family records included the occupations of farmer, weaver, spinner or fuller?

There is evidence all around us in the villages, towns and countryside of Mid and North Wales, of a massive but little remembered and little understood, industrial history of the woollen cottage industry. This shaped the lives of our ancestors and the people who lived in past centuries, living and working in the places where we live today.

We have recently set up a Lottery Funded project ‘From Sheep to Sugar / O Wlan i Siwgr’. The idea came from research by Prof Chris Evans from the University of South Wales in his book, ‘Slave Wales – The Welsh and Atlantic Slavery’, that some of the clothing for enslaved Africans in the New World was spun and woven by impoverished tenant hill farmers, their families and locally hired workers. The cloth was known by international merchants as ‘Welsh Plains’ which identified its source, but locally called various names including ‘webs’ and ‘flannels’.

The European Wars in the later 1700’s curtailed the opportunities for Grand Tours that led to more travellers visiting Wales. Their journals and paintings provide first hand reports of life in Wales and the prolific production of woollen cloth is remarked upon in some detail. Thomas Pennant in 1778 refers to the production “of a coarse cloth for the army, and for the covering the poor negroes in the West Indies” and Authur Aiken reports (1797) in his ‘Journal of a tour through North Wales’ that “the purposes to which the webs are applied abroad are various; the clothing of slaves in the West Indies and South America creates a large demand”.

Many of us therefore could have ancestors who were part of this highly skilled Welsh ‘cottage industry’ where households initially supplying local needs then developed dramatically to meet the demands generated by the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade by weaving woollen fabric for the “Plantation Trade”. The project aims to improve our understanding of this poorly understood history.

Eighteenth century Wales was notable for producing a coarse woollen fabric from which clothes for enslaved workers in the New World were fashioned. This was ‘Negro Cloth’, a drab material that is little remembered today. Yet it was important. ‘Who would believe’, asked one eighteenth-century commentator, ‘that woollens constitute an article of great consumption in the torrid zone? Such, however, is the fact. Of the coarser kinds especially, for the use of the ne-

groes, the export is prodigious.’

So it was. Weavers of Negro Cloth served a market that underwent an astonishing expansion across the eighteenth century. Between 1688 and 1812 the enslaved population of the British sugar islands underwent a more than eight-fold increase. Slave workers usually required a new set of clothes every autumn, it being taken for granted that a year’s labour would reduce the previous year’s ration to rags. Each year about 5 yards was allotted to every adult, juveniles were probably allotted something a little smaller. That suggests that 388,000 yards of woollen fabric were consumed by the enslaved circa 1690, vaulting to 7,736,000 yards in 1812

Welsh weavers did not have it all their own way in this burgeoning market. There were rival products. One of them, marketed as ‘Kendal Cotton’, was manufactured in Cumbria. Another type, known as ‘Penistone’ after the moorland parish of that name in the West Riding of Yorkshire, could also be found throughout the plantation world. The dominant variety of Negro Cloth, however, known as ‘Welsh plains’ or ‘Welsh cotton’, was produced in Montgomeryshire and Merionethshire. ‘Good Welch cotton seems upon the whole to answer best’, one slaveholder announced; its rivals were ‘light and insufficient’. The whole purpose of Welsh woollens, one observer went so far as to state in the 1770s, was ‘covering the poor Negroes in the West Indies’.

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries woollen manufacturing spread through upland pastoral districts where impoverished peasant households sought a way of boosting their incomes. The production of low-quality textiles was a way or doing so. The carding of wool and the spinning of yarn could be done in the slack periods that broke up the agricultural routine of the wet uplands. Weaving was performed on looms housed in lean-to additions to farmhouses and cottages. The proliferation of fulling mills along mountain streams in Montgomeryshire and Merionethshire in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is an index of the industry’s growth. It is one of the few indices available, for this widely dispersed domestic trade otherwise left few traces in the form of guilds or cloth halls.

Fulling was the only finishing operation carried out locally. High-value, high-skill processes such as shearing were carried out at Shrewsbury, over the border in England, where the formidable Drapers Company exerted a firm grip on the marketing of mid-Wales textiles. In the seventeenth century, Welsh cloth was sold in western Europe; in the eighteenth, however, it was sent to Atlantic markets.

When, in the 1780s, Elias Ball, a South Carolina planter, investigated the source of the Negro Cloth worn by his slaves, he discovered that ‘the great Markett for that article... is at Shroesberry [Shrewsbury] the Capital of Shropshire’, drawing on production zones to the west. Growing numbers of rural dwellers in Montgomeryshire and Merionethshire were harnessed to the Atlantic economy. The la-

houring poor resorted to industrial by-employments in response to mounting impoverishment. They were joined by small hill farmers who sought to cover rising rents, rates, and tithes by participating in woollen production.

This last April 2019 we prepared a large display to take to "Wonderwool" at the Royal Welsh Showground to promote "From Sheep to Sugar / O Wlan i Sigwr". We invited people who were interested to sign up as Community Research Volunteers to try out the online training materials and explore their local area or personal interest in the cottage industry. We were delighted to sign up several volunteers.

Then we contacted the Spinners, Weavers and Dyers Guilds, as the custodians of the craft, and got lots of help and explanations about the production processes of hand spun and hand-woven wool. Then as the team of Community Research Volunteers grew, we started researching and reading to find out more about how this massive cottage industry was organised. Very quickly others whose family research identified connections to the cottage industry came forward to share their stories and local historians also became interested to share their knowledge about the ruins of fulling mills and factories in their areas, as well as exploring pack horse trails and pack horse bridges.

We have found that woollen cloth of various weights and quality were produced for family use, to sell on local markets as well as for the export trade. Different areas had different specialisations, for example, knitting was a big industry in Bala, with socks and hats produced in large numbers. The Community Research Volunteers have been busy in a range of ways:

Pat has been researching the local history in her valley a few miles north of Barmouth as her family had uncovered the overgrown ruins of a fulling mill or 'pandy' on their land. This led to finding out about previous land ownership through tithe maps and local records, as well as identifying a pack horse track with stepping stones to cross the river

In Dolgellau, a small team came together after they recognised that the amazing range of old ruins of fulling mills and factories there were along the Arran Valley that were possibly under threat from local development. Retired Dolgellau archivist Merfyn Wynn Tomos spoke about the project at the Museum of Wales 'Lle Hanes' stand at the National Eisteddfod in Llanrwst this August.

The journey of the cloth after production involved Community Research Volunteers in Bristol and Shrewsbury. Gaynor and Sue have focussed the role of the Shrewsbury Drapers Company who held the monopoly of the trade in raw wool, then later with woven wool being purchased by the Drapers from the markets of Oswestry and Welshpool. Both Gaynor, who is a member of the Shrewsbury Drapers and has her own textile business, and Sue, who is a member of the local Spinners Weavers and Dyers Guild, are textile specialists and as weavers they have been exploring the issue of weaving, fulling and the managing the enormous lengths of cloth required for the export market.

Nigel Hinton is also one of the current Shrewsbury Drapers, and he supported the project launch, which was held at Draper's Hall in Shrewsbury, with an interesting after lunch town walk explaining about the history of the wool trade which he has researched and recently published to tell the story of the powerful and wealthy Drapers Guild.

University student, Jenny, was inspired by the theme of the project and recreated slave clothing for an exhibition in the National Trust Weir Garden in Hereford, created by a family that created its fortune from the sugar trade in Bristol. These poignant items were also featured in the From Sheep to Sugar project display at Prof Chris Evans 3 day conference on "Clothing the Enslaved in the Eighteenth Century Atlantic" held at the Museum of Wales in July, supported by the Pasold Trust.

John found that his family research showed generations of weavers listed in records living in Trefeglwys and contacted the project team to see if his family would have been producing Welsh Plains. This led to fascinating exploration around the community to find that weavers cottages were scattered on the hillsides, and linking this with findings from the CRV team in the Dysynni valley. Our Community Researchers have found references to 'factors' from Liverpool coming into the areas in Montgomeryshire and Merionethshire to increase cloth production. These 'factors' may well have been Welshmen who had been working in Liverpool building the docks and the fine structures to show off the wealth of the slave trading merchant adventurers.

The team at the Institute in Glynceriog are working on researching the history of the woollen trade in their valley, which increased dramatically later in the 1700's. They have even found the ruins of the place where urine was collected / delivered to supply the fulling mill with one of the essential requisites! As Liverpool quickly developed as the major European Slave Trade port, 'factors' were sent by merchants who required a wide range of goods to sell to the slave shop owners as supplies for the long sea voyages ahead, but also items to use for barter with the West Africa traders.

The flocks of Welsh Mountain sheep were tended by skilful shepherds who had a high standing in the community. In high summer, the sheep were shorn, and the fleeces sorted, as different sorts of cloth were produced. The poorer quality wool may have been used for the production of the weft for Welsh Plains, with the stronger thread for the warp threads. We have also found that raw wool was imported into Barmouth and may have been used for the weft of the Welsh Plains cloth.

We realised quite quickly that the project was only a starting point in exploring the processes of the cottage industry and currently we have got more questions than answers! The time taken to get into the research and the scale of the challenge we launched means that we have hardly started, so we intend the project to be open ended and we are considering ways to be able to support people to re-research the development and decline of the cottage industry in their own areas and collect the information found.

We really hope that many Gwynedd FHS members will be able to join us adding information gleaned from their own family history researches.

We are co-ordinators and directors of Learning Links International and have created two websites as part of this *Sheep to Sugar* project www.welshplains.cymru and a more recently www.spanglefish.com/welshplainsresearch in order to record findings - please note this is very much 'work in progress'!

We can also provide a list of books and papers which will help provide more background information. ■