

Bed, Bath, and Beyond: The Linen Trade and Tudor England  
by Denise Jenkins

A sea of blue flowers mirroring the sky, rolling with the wind; this was what a Tudor flax farmer would have seen. This simple plant, once processed, produced a soft absorbent cloth known as linen. Linen fabric had been used for millennia before the Tudor era. The ancient Egyptians used linen for their clothing, the Greeks and Romans also had linen garments, and linen moved with the Romans into the territories that they conquered. The cultivation of flax, that blue flowering plant from which linen was made, was suited to the British Isles because of the wet and mild climate that they had.<sup>1</sup> Something as simple as linen was able to influence Tudor policies, both domestic and abroad. Why was linen important to Tudor England though? Linen was important to Tudor England because it protected clothing from the body, provided a way to control the English subjects, influenced trade with surrounding countries, and was used as paper for important documents; linen was used from birth until death.

The processes needed to make linen cloth began with the flax plant. Each step of the linen making process provided employment to the common people of England and the other countries where linen was made. Farmers would include flax as a cash crop, and they would process it. Spinning allowed for women to contribute to the family income by selling their product.<sup>2</sup> Weaving was handled by trained craftsmen of a guild, dyeing relied on trade experience and bleaching was aided by the farmers. The product would then be ready to be sold by a merchant to consumers.

Simply put linen cloth was made from the flax plant.<sup>3</sup> Flax was sown in finely plowed soil in the springtime, and was harvested in late summer.<sup>4</sup> The flax plant had to be harvested

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<sup>1</sup> Kathleen Curtis Wilson, *Irish People, Irish Linen* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2011), 21.

<sup>2</sup> Constance H. Berman, "Women's Work in Family, Village, and Town after 1000 CE: Contributions to Economic Growth?" *Journal of Women's History* 19, no. 3 (2007): 14.

<sup>3</sup> *Oxford Dictionaries*, s.v. "linen."

<sup>4</sup> Wilson, *Irish People*, 21.

gently, by hand, so that the fiber within the stalk would be as long as possible and to prevent damage.<sup>5</sup> This was usually done by men, who would pull a group of plants and tie them together to dry upright.<sup>6</sup> Flax was grown in England during the Tudor era. According to Maria Hayward in *Rich Apparel*, during the reign of Henry VIII, “for every 60 acres fit for ploughing, one rood was to be sown with flax or hemp.”<sup>7</sup> However, the freshly harvested flax was not quite ready to become cloth.

Before the flax could become linen, there were processes needed to prepare the fibers inside the stalk. A rippling comb was used to remove the seeds from dry bunches, and the stalks were put in water to rot, also known as retting.<sup>8</sup> This process involved moisture being used to decompose the fibers within the stalk to allow for them to be separated and spun into thread.<sup>9</sup> Once retting was complete, there was a second drying process and then the flax was beaten in a manner that preserved the fibers inside.<sup>10</sup> Scutching was the next step, and it involved further removal of the exterior of the plant with a wooden wedge, leaving only the fibers.<sup>11</sup> After scutching came hackling, which involved untangling the freshly cleaned flax fibers by pulling them through a large comb.<sup>12</sup> The longer the fiber, the better the linen that could be spun from it, because the longer fiber made a smoother yarn.<sup>13</sup> After the long process of preparing the flax, the fiber was ready to be made into something useful.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Maria Hayward, *Rich Apparel: Clothing and the Law in Henry VIII's England* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2009), 69.

One rood was equal to one fourth of an acre of land.

<sup>8</sup> Wilson, *Irish People*, 22.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 22-23.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

Processing flax fibers into linen fabric started with spinning the fiber into yarn. Spinning was done in the home, by the females of the household as it was considered women's work.<sup>14</sup> Unmarried women were the primary spinners because they did not have to run the household.<sup>15</sup> This is where the term spinster came from. Spinning in the Tudor era was performed using either a drop spindle or a spinning wheel, depending upon availability. The spinning wheel was preferable because it could make more yarn in less time, and it became popular after its European introduction in the fourteenth century.<sup>16</sup> The spinner also had a distaff to hold the fibers while she worked, and would use the spindle or spinning wheel to twist the fibers into a thread or yarn, depending on the thickness desired. Thread was useful for sewing, but weaving required greater tension which yarn was more suited for.

After spinning, the linen yarn would be woven into linen cloth. In the Tudor era, even though images show women weavers, weaving cloth was primarily a man's duty and women rarely took on the role.<sup>17</sup> According to estimates from the article "Housewives and Servants in Rural England, 1440-1650: Evidence of Women's Work from Probate Documents," it took roughly six spinners to supply a single weaver with enough yarn to weave, so long as the

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<sup>14</sup> Jane Whittle, "Housewives and Servants in Rural England, 1440-1650: Evidence of Women's Work from Probate Documents," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 15 (2005): 52.

<sup>15</sup> Berman, "Women's Work," 10.

<sup>16</sup> Hayward, *Rich Apparel*, 66.

<sup>17</sup> Berman, "Women's Work," 15-16.

spinning was a full time occupation.<sup>18</sup> Weaving in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was done using various looms with the type of loom used depending on the weaver's taste and the type of



cloth being produced. The two main classifications of looms available during the Tudor era were horizontal looms and vertical looms. The vertical loom was an old method of weaving. The work by Hans Leu the Younger, *The Virgin at the loom ministered to by angels*, showed how the weaver would have a frame upon which the yarn was attached lengthwise, or warped.<sup>19</sup> Warp yarns

1. *The Virgin at the loom ministered to by angels*. Hans Leu the younger. Drawing. Pen and black ink on paper. 279 X 197 mm. 1510. British Museum

were those yarns being held taut by the loom, and they were also the ones to be manipulated to produce the fabric.

This method was used for specialty cloths such as tapestries or

bands, as seen in the drawing.<sup>20</sup> As seen in the fresco by Pintoricchio, *Penelope with the Suitors*,

a basic horizontal loom allowed for the weaver to stay in a seated position while making long

<sup>18</sup> Whittle, "Housewives," 72.

<sup>19</sup> Hans Leu the younger, *The Virgin at the Loom Ministered to by Angels*, 1510, Drawing, London: British Museum.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

pieces of fabric.<sup>21</sup> Foot pedals were connected to a bar holding string or wire heddles so that by depressing a pedal, the shed would change.<sup>22</sup>

Essentially, when the weaver pressed a peddle, the yarns that were on the top of the weaving would switch to the bottom, and the shuttle holding another length of yarn, known as the weft yarn, would be passed between them. This way the weft yarn would hold the warp yarns on the alternating sides of the fabric. There would also be a slotted piece of wood, called a reed, which would be used to beat the weft into place.<sup>23</sup> Horizontal looms made

weaving much faster and easier, so they were used for making the longer and wider cloth used for garment production.<sup>24</sup> Regardless of the loom type used to make the fabric, the quality was determined by the weaver and his skill.



2. *Penelope with the Suitors*. Pintoricchio. Freco, detached and mounted on canvas. 125.5 X 152 cm. about 1509. The National Gallery, London

<sup>21</sup> Pintoricchio, *Penelope with the Suitors*, 1509, Fresco, detached and mounted on canvas, London: The National Gallery.

<sup>22</sup> Heddles are devises with an eye in the center through which a single strand of yarn is strung. This allows the individual yarns to be moved to create a pattern determined by which heddle bar they are on. The shed is the space between the working yarns as they are pulled by the heddles. This is where the yarn known as the weft yarn goes through to create the fabric.

<sup>23</sup> Pintoricchio, *Penelope with the Suitors*.

<sup>24</sup> This is a common practice that is in use to this day.

Cloth could either be woven from yarn that was dyed beforehand or could be sent to the dyer or bleacher after weaving, if the raw color of the linen was not desired. In the Tudor era, dyes came from natural sources. Blue was made from woad, red from kermes, madder, and cochineal, purple was made from muricidae mollusks, orchil, or blends of woad and red dyestuff, and black was made through the expensive and time consuming task of dyeing the fabric several times, each time changing the color.<sup>25</sup> The dyeing process required soaking the fabric or yarn in a brew of the dye matter and water. In order to set the dye so that the color would not run from the cloth, a setting agent was needed. In the Tudor era this was potash, alum, verdigris, copperas, or argol.<sup>26</sup> Once a length of cloth was dyed, if dyeing was desired, it would be dried and ready for use in whatever way the consumer desired. Bleaching, on the other hand, was at this point in time done most cheaply by using potash. The first step to making the substance involved farmers, including those who grew flax, burning the weeds that were pulled from their plots.<sup>27</sup> Potash was made by boiling the ashes of this plant material, separating the water from the waste at the bottom, allowing the water to evaporate, and exposing the material left to heat and air.<sup>28</sup> The potash was then mixed with slaked lime which would combine with the undesired minerals left in the substance, and when water was added, the undesired mixture would not dissolve but the rest of the liquid was perfect for bleaching linen.<sup>29</sup> The linen would have to be boiled in the liquid multiple times and left to dry to achieve the desired whiteness.<sup>30</sup> This processed linen was then ready for market.

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<sup>25</sup> Hayward, *Rich Apparel*, 96-98.

<sup>26</sup> E. M. Carus-Wilson, "The English Cloth Industry in the Late Twelfth and Early Thirteenth Centuries," *The Economic History Review* 14, no. 1 (1944): 39.

<sup>27</sup> John Horner, *The Linen Trade of Europe During the Spinning-Wheel Period*, (Belfast: M'Caw, Stevenson & Orr, 1920), 66.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* 66.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

Linen was used throughout Tudor England. There were some differences in how it was used. These differences originated in the standards of the social classes of the people who used the cloth. However, linen was a cross-class fabric, used by everyone; hindered only by their ability to buy the cloth.

Linen price was determinant upon cloth quality. This provided that the rich used the best quality of linen while the poor were left with rougher or even mixed fabric. The highest quality of linen came from Flanders, also known as the Low Countries, or the countries along the English Channel between present day France and Germany.<sup>31</sup> This was where the best flax was grown, and the most skilled linen-workers plied their trade.<sup>32</sup> However, most linen used by the English, especially in the case of the lower classes, was a product of the British Isles.<sup>33</sup> To get the mixed attributes of linen and wool, and to reduce costs, weavers would make a coarse cloth from linen and wool yarns woven together, and they called it linsey-woolsey or sometimes linen union cloth.<sup>34</sup> The British were able to grow the amount of flax needed to produce enough linen for the basic needs of the people, but the people wanted more than the basics.

Tudor England used linen because of the softness, versatility, and weight of the fabric. Native wool was heavy, scratchy, warm, and difficult to wash properly. Silks were expensive and delicate, and so they were highly prized. Linen was absorbent and handled washing well, so it was frequently used for undergarments and clothing pieces that were expected to be soiled.<sup>35</sup> Linen garments provided a buffer between the oils of the body and the outer clothing, allowing for the outer clothing to be laundered less often. Smocks, as the undergarments were known,

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<sup>31</sup> Horner, *The Linen Trade*, 344

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>34</sup> Hayward, *Rich Apparel*, 66.

<sup>35</sup> Hayward, *Rich Apparel*, 92.

were made based on the simple T-tunic shape that pervaded European dress for millennia.<sup>36</sup> A T-tunic was a garment that when laid out looked like the letter T. There were different styles of smock depending on the gender of the wearer and the style of over dress that the wearer would have on. Garments with a lower cut neckline would require a lower cut smock, unless they wanted to be more modest and wear a smock with a collar. High-necked garments would have used a high-necked smock underneath. Linen was also used for sheets, towels, collars, ruffs, veils, and linings depending on the weight of the fabric.<sup>37</sup> Fashionable table linens were made of simple, light, yet elegantly textured linen cloth of either diaper or damask.<sup>38</sup> Diaper referred to the diamond or other repeating shape in the weave that was on it, and damask was in reference to the reversible pattern in the fabric.<sup>39</sup> Some mattresses would have been made from and covered with linen cloth.<sup>40</sup> The use of the term linen for bed clothes, and other household fabrics that were expected to be washed regularly, regardless of the material that they were made from, was passed down even to the current day.

Newborns in Tudor England were swaddled very shortly after birth. The swaddling bands used by common people would have been made of linen.<sup>41</sup> Swaddling bands were lengths of fabric tapered at one end. They wrapped snugly around the baby, and could be tied or tucked in to prevent unraveling. They were meant to make the baby feel warm, secure, and possibly

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<sup>36</sup> This style is evident in images from Ancient Rome to the Tudor era.

<sup>37</sup> Hayward, *Rich Apparel*, 92-93.

<sup>38</sup> D. M. Mitchell, "'By Your Leave my Masters': British Taste in Table Linen in the Fifteenth and Sixteenth Centuries," *Textile History* 20, no. 1 (1989): 49.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> Horner, *The Linen Trade*, 59.

<sup>41</sup> David Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life-Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 89.



help straighten them out.<sup>42</sup> The bands would be removed to clean the infant and would then be replaced.

Linen was also used in headwear worn under a hat, or as the hat. A linen under-hat, or coif, was worn to protect the more

expensive headwear from the oils of

the head, or to protect the hair from the

headwear. A coif

went around the

head from the

forehead to the nape

of the neck, and it

covered the hair and

ears of the wearer.

Fig. 3 Coif. Silk and metal-wrapped silk thread embroidery, linen foundation. Late 16th–early 17th century. Cooper Hewitt, National Design Museum, Smithsonian Institution Textiles Department.



Some would also include a string to tie

under the chin. As seen in figure three, the coifs were sometimes embroidered for decoration.<sup>43</sup>

Lawyers were invested into an order of the coif and were given white linen coifs when they

joined.<sup>44</sup> A coif was thus a symbol of position and power, even though it was a common linen

cap.

<sup>42</sup> Stephen Wilson, "The Myth of Motherhood a Myth: The Historical View of European Child-Rearing," *Social History* 9, no. 2 (1984): 194-195.

<sup>43</sup> Coif, Silk and metal-wrapped silk thread embroidery, linen foundation, Late 16th–early 17th century, Cooper Hewitt, National Design Museum, Smithsonian Institution, Textiles Department.

<sup>44</sup> Hayward, *Rich Apparel*, 310.

Another use for linen was in making paper. The Tudor era fell within the time period in which paper was made from rags, particularly linen rags. The rags would be sorted by trained women into groupings based on quality and color.<sup>45</sup> Old well-worn rags were desired because they became pulp faster and with less effort than new fabric remnants, and thus would save money for the company.<sup>46</sup> After the sorting, men would take over the process. The rags would then be fermented to make the fiber better for stamping, or becoming pulp.<sup>47</sup> The next step was to scoop up some diluted pulp onto a mold, made so water could drain off of the fibers through a mesh screen, held by a wooden frame called a deckle, and shake the mold to cover and intertwine the fibers.<sup>48</sup> The mold was then taken from the deckle, turned upside down on a piece of felt, and the sheet of paper that came off was covered with another piece of felt until there was a stack.<sup>49</sup> This stack was pressed to make the water leave the paper the sheets were then taken off of the felt, put into stacks, pressed again to further dry and smooth the paper, and hung to dry.<sup>50</sup> The last step was called sizing, which involved the coating of the leaves of paper with liquid gelatin, pressing, and drying.<sup>51</sup> Sometimes the paper would be finished with a smooth stone, but this was not always the case.<sup>52</sup> Papermaking was a profession that called on both men and women in order to function.

While the process of making linen paper was complicated, it provided a cheaper material than parchment for writing. Parchment was a material made from stretched and cured animal

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<sup>45</sup> Tim Barrett, et al., "European Papermaking Techniques 1300-1800," *Paper through Time: Nondestructive Analysis of 14<sup>th</sup>- through 19<sup>th</sup>- Century Papers*, The University of Iowa, Last modified July 14, 2014, <http://paper.lib.uiowa.edu/european.php>.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

hides, thus it was not the most renewable nor cheapest resource. Combined with the printing press, linen paper permitted larger distribution of reading material, allowing for increased literacy and cheaper education.<sup>53</sup> One of the first and most popular books printed was the bible, and the bibles printed by Johannes Gutenberg himself were printed on linen paper.<sup>54</sup> When lay people were able to get their hands on personal bibles, there was a desire to translate the book into secular languages so that the people could read it. Once people were able to read and study the bible for themselves, they formed opinions and this became a major aspect of the Reformations.<sup>55</sup> When England turned away from the Roman Catholic Church, the leaders of the new Anglican church would have made use of linen paper and the printing press to distribute propaganda and protestant bibles to the people. Thus, someone's old shirt or other pieces of linen could have been used as an intellectual weapon in one of the most decisive moments in Tudor England. Old pieces of linen cloth helped to fuel a major aspect of Tudor foreign relations.

Linen was used in the church as well. Although higher level clergy members could afford silks and other valuable fabrics, they still had a need for linen, but they would have fine imported linen, an example being Cardinal Woolsey, the catholic advisor and chaplain to Henry VIII before Anne Boleyn and the break from the Church of Rome.<sup>56</sup> As with secular people, the clergy would have had undergarments made of linen or even, as found in some higher level ecclesiastical inventories, linsey-woolsey.<sup>57</sup> Nuns would have acquired veils and wimples, often

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<sup>53</sup> British Library, "Gutenberg's texts," accessed April 8, 2016, <http://www.bl.uk/treasures/gutenberg/gutenbergstexts.html>.

<sup>54</sup> British Library, "The Paper," accessed April 8, 2016, <http://www.bl.uk/treasures/gutenberg/paper.html>.

<sup>55</sup> Richard A. Crofts, "Printing, Reform, and the Catholic Reformation in Germany (1521-1545)," *The Sixteenth Century Journal* 16, no. 3 (1985): 374-75.

<sup>56</sup> Horner, *The Linen Trade*, 344.

<sup>57</sup> Hayward, *Rich Apparel*, 258.

made of linen either from their families or from donations.<sup>58</sup> Religious status symbols such as a mitre, the triangle-like headdress worn by those of bishop rank or above, were sometimes made of linen.<sup>59</sup> White linen was important to the church because it was a sign of respectability and being sinless.<sup>60</sup> Linen cloth was as basic a need for people of the cloth as it was for those outside the folds of the church.

With the Reformation came a change in clergy fabric use for clothing but not for church furnishings, because the new churches based much of their style on the Roman Catholic church. While they still had special clothing to distinguish themselves during services and special events, clothing in general became more secular within the Anglican church, and according to Maria Hayward, this was because marriage was allowed and the Anglican leaders cared less about what fabrics were worn by churchmen.<sup>61</sup> The reason marriage was a factor in the clergy being able to wear secular dress was because through marriage they were more connected to worldly life. During the chaos that surrounded the creation of the Anglican church under Henry VIII, textiles were looted from the old Catholic buildings for their value, but since the new Anglican church made use of textiles much the same as had been used by the Roman Catholic church, they had to furnish new cloths.<sup>62</sup> While the use of cloth changed in regards to clerical clothing, the majesty that properly worked cloth gave to churches was retained.

Linen was used in other areas of life as well, specifically with regards to funerals. In *The Encyclopedia of Tudor England*, by John Wagner and Susan Schmid, the section on death stated

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 276.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 263.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 270.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 259.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 263.

that the body would be washed and then covered in cloth.<sup>63</sup> In the book *Birth, Marriage, and Death: Ritual, Religion, and the Life-Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* by David Cressy, an instance was mentioned in which Henry Barrow, an Elizabethan separatist stated that corpses were wearing linen crosses.<sup>64</sup> Shortly after the Tudor Era, linen was no longer allowed to be buried with an individual, and wool was to be the funeral cloth of choice.<sup>65</sup> Nobility and other high ranking and wealthy people would have been able to afford to use more expensive fabrics to furnish their funeral and tombs, but they still would have had on a smock in the very least.<sup>66</sup> This last use of linen in a person's life would have completed the idea that a person was touched by linen from their birth to their death.

The trade in linen was heavy in northern Europe where the major production centers were located, but it spanned all of the continent. The English would make and use their own linen, but they still had to participate in the trade. They would trade within their country with Ireland, but they would also look outside the Kingdom for supplementary linen goods. This trade had an effect on the use and policies that were related to linen.

Although the English were producing their own linen from their own flax plants, they were not able to meet the demand on their own. English linen included home grown and home processed yarn, as well as Irish and Flemish linen, which was imported to meet the linen cloth and thread demand.<sup>67</sup> The book *The Linen Trade of Europe during the Spinning Wheel Period* said that the Irish exported large amounts of linen, mostly as spun yarn, and the English would

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<sup>63</sup> John A. Wagner and Susan Walters Schmid, ed., "Death," *The Encyclopedia of Tudor England*, vol. 1, A-D (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2012), 337.

<sup>64</sup> Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death*, 403-404.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 431.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> Hayward, *Rich Apparel*, 69.

do the weaving of the yarn into cloth for further use.<sup>68</sup> Linen for royal clothing was imported from Flanders because of the superior quality.<sup>69</sup> The linen trade between England and their neighbors was of great importance, and it helped to propel the future of England.

Occasionally the English would put regulations on imports in order to help the country's economy, or they would repeal previous trade laws that harmed their native craftsmen. In 1536, Henry VIII repealed an order that stated that:

no person or persons English nor stranger, denizen or alien... should bring or convey, or cause to be conveyed or brought, by any manner of means, into this realm of England, any linen cloth called doulas or lockerams, unless every whole piece of doulas contained in length five score ells of assize, ... and in breadth one yard of assize; ... and all the whole piece and half piece of one goodness in making. And also ... every whole piece of lockerams should be of like length as the whole piece of doulas.<sup>70</sup>

This meant that nobody was allowed to bring less than the equivalent of 375 feet in length of linen doulas or lockeram into England. This was repealed and replaced with a statement saying that the length and width of the fabric had to be clearly marked.<sup>71</sup> This was specifically done to protect the cloth-workers of England who the King believed were becoming impoverished because they could not fully comply with the length and/or width required by the law.<sup>72</sup>

Merchants in Tudor England traded cloth in Flanders, Antwerp, northern Germany, and the Netherlands. Through Antwerp, they traded with further foreign merchants.<sup>73</sup> Turkey became a place that welcomed the English cloth trade, primarily woolen cloth known as

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<sup>68</sup> Horner, *The Linen Trade of Europe*, 16.

<sup>69</sup> Hayward, *Rich Apparel*, 162.

<sup>70</sup> Danby Pickering, comp., *The Statutes at Large: From the Magna Charta to the End of the Eleventh Parliament of Great Britain, Anno 1761 [continued to 1806]*, vol. 4, *From the First Year of King Richard III, to the Thirty-first Year of King Henry VIII*, inclusive (London: Cambridge University, 1763), 413.

Copied using the modern equivalents of the letters. An ell of assize is an ell according to the standard measurement set by the monarch.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>73</sup> Hayward, *Rich Apparel*, 71-72.

kersey.<sup>74</sup> During times of peace between the countries, England and France had markets for the other's goods. Glen Richardson, in the article "England and France in the Sixteenth Century," stated that the English would trade their cloth and tin for French wine.<sup>75</sup> During the eras of hostility, merchants required protection and they would hire fleets to protect their trade ships.<sup>76</sup> Tudor England would not let the mood between their country and another dampen their trade if they could help it.

Occasionally in the history of the Tudors, the linen trade with other nations was put at risk or denied. After the Reformation of the English Church under Henry VIII, trade became more delicate. One instance from 1540, as stated in *Rich Apparel*, involved trade with areas of what are now Belgium, Holland, and Denmark, "The proud and ingrate merchants of Antwerp with the Hollanders and Zealanders will petition the Emperor that neither madder, ode [woad], iron nor linen cloth shall pass into England."<sup>77</sup> These countries were under the influence of Emperor Charles V of Spain and the Holy Roman Empire, a catholic. Their plea to the Emperor fell shortly after the English break with Rome and the annulment of the marriage between Anne of Cleves and Henry VIII. The attempt to withhold linen could thus be seen as either a religious matter or a political one. This matter was eventually settled because, as seen in Maria Hayward's analysis of cloth used for the royal wardrobe, Henry VIII continued to use the high quality linen from these areas to make his clothing, and the rich followed.<sup>78</sup>

England, Spain, and France had a tense relationship that would fluctuate between cordial and hostile. Tudor monarchs, as stated in "England and France in the Sixteenth Century," would

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 77.

<sup>75</sup> Glenn John Richardson, "England and France in the Sixteenth Century," *History Compass* 6, no. 2 (2008): 513.

<sup>76</sup> Hayward, *Rich Apparel*, 77.

<sup>77</sup> Hayward, *Rich Apparel*, 97.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 161-162.

use their claim to the French throne, and threats of invasion to extort money from the Kings of France, even though neither the French nor the English wished to fight.<sup>79</sup> England and Spain would also have tense relations under Henry VIII and Elizabeth I. These periods of strife would help to strengthen the Kingdom of England. Seeing as how they were an island nation, the Tudors began to change their foreign policy and make it rely more heavily upon naval power, so they built more ships.<sup>80</sup> These ships had to be outfitted with sails and roping, which were made of linen and hemp, respectively.<sup>81</sup> Some of the linen sailcloth needed to be purchased outside of the country. In these instances, England would look to Brittany, Laval, and Amiens for good quality sailcloth.<sup>82</sup> Thus linen factored into the Tudor ability to trade with other nations, as well as their gradual dominance of the sea.

The policies regarding cloth and clothing in Tudor England were numerous. There were sumptuary laws, guild regulations, and measurement standards that affected or were related to linen. These policies had effects on the people of England and the trade that England engaged in. These policies tied into the economic system of the time, mercantilism.

In Tudor England, the monarch created laws governing what people could wear. These laws, called sumptuary laws, were meant to separate the social classes. Sumptuary laws were divided by the royal family, dukes, earls, barons, lords or Knights of the Garter, those with special positions or land with an annual value above 100 pounds, gentlemen and sons of lords worth 100 pounds a year or less, knights, serving men under the degree of knight, husbandman, and there were exceptions to almost every rule.<sup>83</sup> At each level of the sumptuary laws, further

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<sup>79</sup> Richardson, "England and France, 513.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 511.

<sup>81</sup> Y. Eyup Ozveren, "Shipbuilding, 1590-1790," *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 23, no. 1 (2000): 68.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

<sup>83</sup> Hayward, *Rich Apparel*, 29-39.



fabrics were denied to people who were of a lower class than the stated class. Not only was the fabric type regulated by social class, but the amount used, place of origin, and cost of material was also limited by class.<sup>84</sup> Certain colors were not allowed to be worn by certain classes in Tudor England. Expensive purple fabrics tended to be reserved for royalty, but violet was allowed for others.<sup>85</sup> Linen was one of the few fabrics that was not as strictly regulated by sumptuary laws within England proper, with the exception that it was regulated in Ireland. Linen was a fabric that transcended social class, and was available to those who could afford it.

Sumptuary laws were a way to keep the social order by regulating what people could wear, and thus what they looked like.

Though the Normans had conquered and brought it into the kingdom of England, the Tudors did not have full control over Ireland.<sup>86</sup> In order to try to reestablish English sovereignty over Ireland, the Tudor monarchs enacted laws and regulations that cut at Irish nationalism through their clothing and trade. The laws in Ireland under Henry VIII made the traditional clothing illegal.

3. Irish as they stand accoutered being at the service of the late King Henry. Lucas d'Heere. Dutch Watercolor. 16<sup>th</sup> century. Universiteits Bibliotheek Gent.



<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 341.

<sup>86</sup> Samantha Watson, "Ennobling Reform in Tudor Ireland," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 43, no. 1 (2015): 83.

As seen in the watercolor “Irish as they stand accoutred being at the service of the late King Henry,” by Lucas d’Heere, traditional Irish dress was based around a garment called a leine.<sup>87</sup> The leine was a long billowing tunic, usually dyed yellow with saffron. The sleeves of the leine would reach the knees of the wearer and the shirt would be belted at the waist to then be drawn up so that the hem was at the knees, with the excess hanging over the belt. After the laws of Henry VIII, Irishmen’s leines, as stated in an edict from May 1539, had to use less than “seven yards of cloth, to be measured according to the Kinges Standard.”<sup>88</sup> Saffron, which was used by the Irish to make a yellow dye, was banned from use in their clothing.<sup>89</sup> The purpose behind the clothing regulations was to dominate the Irish people. Through taking away the Irish national dress, the English were stripping away at Irish nationalism. In the article, “Ennobling Reform in Tudor Ireland,” Samantha Watson stated that the reformers of Ireland under the Tudors sought to use the cultivation of plants as one way to make money from Ireland, and thus bring them to heel.<sup>90</sup> This idea, along with the fact that the area of Ireland that was most under Tudor rule happened to be the area best suited for linen production, suggests that flax was one of the proposed plants for sowing. Essentially, the Tudors began to take away what it meant to be Irish by forbidding the Irish to look like they were Irish.

Sumptuary laws were hard to enforce and not everyone complied with them. The article, “The inordinate excess in apparel’: Sumptuary Legislation in Tudor England,” by Leah Kirtio said that the local government was in charge of enforcing sumptuary laws, and they had special

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<sup>87</sup> Lucas d’Heere, *Théâtre de tous les peuples et nations de la terre avec leurs habits et ornemens divers, tant anciens que modernes, diligemment depeints au naturel par Luc Dheere peintre et sculpteur Gantois* (Gent, Universiteits Bibliotheek Gent, MS BHSL.HS.2466, fol. 81.

<sup>88</sup> Hayward, *Rich Apparel*, 28.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> Watson, “Ennobling Reform,” 95.

sumptuary officers to look out for transgressions.<sup>91</sup> In 1533, a statute, as quoted in Leah Kirtio's article, proclaimed that anyone who was found to be wearing an article of clothing above their station would be forced to give the clothing up and pay a fine for every day that they had worn the clothing, thus breaking the law.<sup>92</sup> The piece of clothing would also be auctioned in court, to be bought by someone who was allowed to wear the article, and the money from the fine would be split between the King and the receiver of the garment.<sup>93</sup> This method was supposed to serve as a detriment against those who would attempt to impersonate someone of a higher rank in order to rise above their station through clothing. It also rewarded people for turning in someone who was wearing something not suited to their station, because if they could claim the garment they had a chance to get twice the reward; the article and half of the fine.

Guilds were in charge of the production of goods in England, and linen was no exception. The cloth-workers were in control of enforcing regulations concerning all types of cloth, especially in regards to the length and width measurements of the cloth.<sup>94</sup> The guilds were comprised of men employed in most of the stages of cloth production; as expected there were weavers, but there were also dyers and fullers. They were in charge of maintaining fairly equal lengths and widths, as well as cloth quality.<sup>95</sup> These men would have been in charge of maintaining the reputation of the guild by making sure guild members were not cheating their customers. They would have provided that linen was of a specific quality so that it could be sold

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<sup>91</sup> Leah Kirtio, "The inordinate excess in apparel': Sumptuary Legislation in Tudor England," *Constellations* 3, no. 1 (2011): 20.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Horner, *The Linen Trade*, 75.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

in accordance with that quality. Guilds made sure that the honor of the guild and the laws regarding fabrics were being upheld.

Some common measurements mentioned in Tudor documents on fabric include ells, yards, and inches. Tudor inches and yards were similar to modern ones, but an ell was about forty-five inches.<sup>96</sup> These measurements fluctuated and depended on the state ordinances of each ruler, if they so chose to change them. Henry VII sought to have a standard of measurement throughout England, and he sent standard weights and measuring rods made of brass to each of his members of parliament.<sup>97</sup> Within the same statute from 1494, it was stated that the reason behind this was to protect the King's subjects from being swindled.<sup>98</sup> These measurements came into contention in the middle of the Tudor era.

According to the book *The Proclamations of the Tudor Kings*, steps had to be taken in the middle of the 1530s to try to enforce a standard for cloth measurements in trade, especially if they were to be sold to foreign markets. The British merchants believed that there were rumors, in the mainland countries, of English cloth not being of true measure and good quality.<sup>99</sup> Thus the cloth-workers had to accommodate the change in fabric widths, and have new looms and other accoutrements made to the proper size.<sup>100</sup> Woolen broadcloths were required to be “seven quarters in breadth instead of the previously acceptable width of two yards, while kerseys were to be one yard in breadth.”<sup>101</sup> While the requirements mentioned within the book referred to

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<sup>96</sup> *Oxford Dictionaries*, s.v. “ell.”

<sup>97</sup> Pickering, *The Statutes*, 56.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>99</sup> Rudolph W. Heinze, *The Proclamations of the Tudor Kings*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 123.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

woolen cloth, the looms that were required to change could have also made linen to that standard measure.

Mercantilism was the economic policy in England in the Tudor Era, and for about two hundred years after.<sup>102</sup> Mercantilism was an economic system based around increasing the amount of gold, silver, or other precious metal of worth within a country by preventing the loss of capital through buying goods from another country and increasing the amount of exports sold to other countries.<sup>103</sup> England's goal, along with every other mercantilist state, was to get as much wealth in the country and keep it there, while spending as little as possible outside of the country. This could be seen in the manufacture and trade of linen and linen products. The linen that was used for most of the country's needs was grown in England and England's supplicant, Ireland. This kept the cost of importing linen limited to the fine linens used for the rich and the monarchs and the sailcloth that England would get from Brittany, Amiens, and Laval. England had enough linen to support most of their own needs but they did not have enough to export. However, they did have a rich trade in wool. English wool would be sent to Flanders and Calais for trade and in return, the English would get foreign goods.<sup>104</sup> Some of these goods would have been linen, and some of that linen would have been used to either clothe the rich or as sails for the good of the Kingdom.

It has been shown that linen influenced almost every aspect of daily life. Linen in Tudor England was influential on the policies that the monarchs and parliament made. It was used as a method to try to control the Irish, and it was a major crop that the Irish grew for the English to

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<sup>102</sup> William D. Grampp, "The Liberal Elements in English Mercantilism," *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 66, no. 4 (1952): 465.

<sup>103</sup> *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. "mercantilism."

<sup>104</sup> Hayward, *Rich Apparel*, 72.

manufacture. From the time before flax was made into linen to after the linen became rags and was sold to the paper mill, linen provided a livelihood for the subjects of the Tudor Kings and Queens who sought to utilize it. It was used among the people on a daily basis, in their homes, on their bodies and their children's bodies, in their places of worship, and it was with them for their final rest. It was imported for various uses from the Low Countries, areas of modern day France, and in an unprocessed form, from Ireland. Linen was used by all strata of social class, and was one way to link the rich and the poor. The term linen became ubiquitous with the items in a household that were closest to a person, that enveloped them. The word linen came to be linked to the smell of laundry, or the feel of fresh sheets upon the bed. The importance of linen was passed down in language, policy, industry, and life.

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