

## The Plush Industry of Oxfordshire

By R. P. BECKINSALE

THE physical conditions of Oxfordshire were unfavourable to the early development of a large-scale manufacture of textiles except in the north and west where deeply-dissected limestone hills provided sites suitable for water-wheels and supported a local supply of wool. Even here, however, the water was relatively hard and the fleeces coarse. Yet in spite of a lack of strong natural stimuli the county eventually acquired an international reputation for several fabrics and notably for blanket-cloth and plush. In the following account the plush-industry will be described, together with the general background of textile development out of which it grew.

### OXFORDSHIRE TEXTILES PRIOR TO 1650

The main early centres for textile manufacturing in Oxfordshire were at Oxford, Witney and Banbury. At Oxford a weavers' gild was recorded in 1130 and during the next hundred years the town, with the aid of its fulling mills, became one of the leading cloth-making centres of England.<sup>1</sup> The cloth, however, was coarse and cheap and the output rapidly declined, partly no doubt for that reason. The industry revived strongly in the late fourteenth century, but in 1546, presumably because of gild interference and of civic industrial apathy in general, it missed a remarkable opportunity of large-scale revival when William Stumpe, a wealthy clothier of Malmesbury, failed in an attempt to turn Oseney Abbey into a great cloth-factory.<sup>2</sup> By 1600 the gild-controlled textile trade at Oxford had again slipped into insignificance.<sup>3</sup>

This decline at Oxford was contemporaneous with a marked growth of textile manufacturing at Witney and Banbury. Witney lies on the river Windrush eleven miles west of Oxford in a locality where the supply of water-power was exceptionally reliable on Oxfordshire standards. Here in the

<sup>1</sup> *V. C. H. Oxon.*, II. 242-3; *Pipe R.* 1130 (H.M.S.O. Fac.), 2. The fulling mills included that at Sandford: *Sandford Cart.* ed. A. M. Leys, I (O.R.S. XIX), p. 15.

<sup>2</sup> Bodl. MS. Top. Oxon., c. 22, ff. 42-43, 69-72. Stumpe over-optimistically contracted with the Borough Council to find work for 2,000 persons from time to time: *V. C. H. Oxon.*, II. 244.

<sup>3</sup> Oxford had 14 woollen-cloth manufacturers as late as 1841, and 12 in 1851: *Census, 1841, Occupations*, H. C. [587], p. 146-7 (1844), xxvii; *Census, 1851, Occupations*, H. C. [1691-1], p. 230 (1852-3), LXXXVIII (1).

thirteenth century an unfettered cloth-industry made notable progress due partly to the encouragement of the Bishop of Winchester and of royal visitors to his palace in the town, and partly to the erection of at least three fulling-mills.<sup>4</sup> The subsequent history of the blanket trade hardly concerns our present topic. Suffice it to say that for various reasons the Witney people retained the manufacture of the traditional rough blanket-cloth when most manufacturers elsewhere went over to the finer broadcloths and worsteds. The retention proved extraordinarily fortunate. Blanket-cloth lost favour for general clothing purposes but became the prime night-time covering. Consequently, the Witney blanket trade found an expanding market and, under unselfish leadership and close personal connexions with London merchants, grew steadily. Today it produces over one-fifth of the British output of blankets.<sup>5</sup>

At Banbury the rise of textiles was slower and less specialized than at Witney. The town lies 23 miles north of Oxford near the river Cherwell which was most uncertain as a source of power. Yet Banbury early had the advantage of being a notable wool market. Sheep-keeping had increased on the North Oxfordshire hills under the efforts of monastic landlords and later of the gentry who bought up cheaply the estates of the dissolved monasteries.<sup>6</sup> About the mid-sixteenth century the citizens of Banbury included William Calcot, merchant of the Staple, and the borough records mention a 'wole-house', a fuller and an ulnager.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless the cloth industry must have been small or non-taxable as of the eleven Oxfordshire clothiers fined for selling defective cloth in 1561-62 ten lived in the Witney district and only one, William Shugborowe, at Banbury.<sup>8</sup>

Both cloth and wool sales had expanded considerably by 1608 when the borough was granted a weekly wool market and the freemen were given the right to buy and sell 'wools, threads, woollen and linen' in Banbury or any other place in England with the proviso that each freeman's external sales of 'wools, threads, linens and yarns' were not to exceed 2,000 tods in any one year. The profits of the wool market, which after 1610 was held in a newly-erected official Wool-House, were to be devoted for the use and public good of

<sup>4</sup> A. Plummer, *The Witney Blanket Industry* (1934), 3; *Rot. Litt. Claus. (Rec. Com.)*, i. 452b, 454. For a fulling mill at Minster Lovell see R. Lennard, 'Early English Fulling Mills,' *Econ. Hist. Rev.* (1951), 342.

<sup>5</sup> Personal inf.; R. P. Beckinsale, 'Factors in the Development of the Cotswold Woollen Industry,' *Geog. Jnl.* (1937), 359-61. For the Witney guild (fl. 1711-1847) see Plummer, *Witney Blanket Industry*.

<sup>6</sup> 'The Decaye of England by the Great Multitude of Shepe' (anon. c. 1550) refers mainly to Oxon., Bucks., and Northants., but underestimates the acreage put down to grass by over one-half: *Four Supplications* (Early Engl. Text Soc. Extra ser. xiii, 1871), pp. 95-102; *V. C. H. Oxon.*, II. 190-1.

<sup>7</sup> A. Beesley, *History of Banbury* (1841), 212-13, 224, 257. A 'farm of the Drapery' presumably refers to an ulnager: *ibid.*, 218. For William Calcot of Williamscoth, merchant of the Staple, *d.* 1592, see P. C. C. Blunt 28.

<sup>8</sup> G. D. Ramsay, 'The Distribution of the Cloth Industry in 1561-62', *E. H. R.* 1942, pp. 361-9.

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the borough and especially for the sustenance of its poor and infirm.<sup>9</sup> At this time the textile industry employed clothiers, dyers, fullers and weavers in Banbury and in several of the nearby villages, and the fabrics produced included woollen cloth, worsted, garter and linen. The frequent mention of dyers is not surprising as the dyeing of fabrics in North Oxfordshire can be traced back at least to about 1450 when John Bandye of Great Tew, clothier, sold blue cloth worth £7 15s. 2d. to Bicester Priory.<sup>10</sup>

More surprising is the fact that, although the Banbury textile industry often involved complete finishing, none of its participants seems to have built up a large business nor to have acquired great wealth. Most of the leading textile operatives also managed a small estate or else a smallholding with shares in the common fields. Nicholas Hampden of Banbury, clothier (d. 1635), had in his shop one press, three pairs of 'fulling shears', two frames and various other equipment, worth in all £9 12s. 8d. The vats and implements of a local dyer were worth 15s. out of a total inventory of only £5 19s. There were few signs of vertical integration in the textile businesses of the neighbourhood.<sup>11</sup>

### OXFORDSHIRE TEXTILES, 1650-1750

About the mid-seventeenth century the growth of road transport greatly affected all the chief Oxfordshire textile centres. The county's strategic position athwart the main east-west routes from London to Gloucester and Worcester and main north-south routes from Southampton to Coventry, Birmingham and Northampton now proved a direct stimulus to textiles. Banbury and several other local towns soon became the foci of a considerable horse-drawn traffic which created a large demand for webs, girths, horse-cloths, wednal for lining horse-collars and tilt cloths or awnings for carts and waggons. This trade was taken up with some regard to the fabrics already made in the various weaving towns. At and near Witney the manufacturers made blankets, duffels and bearskins of the better parts of the fleeces and kept the worst tail-wool for wednal, bale-wrappers and tilt-cloths.<sup>12</sup> Here the sale of waggon-tilts persisted into Victorian times and horse-cloths are still made. A few miles to the north at Chipping Norton a small manufactory situated close to the London-Worcester turnpike made tilts, horse-cloths and linsey-woolseys, and was the origin of the existing cloth factory.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Beesley, *Banbury*, 257. One tod equals 28 lb.

<sup>10</sup> N. J. Hone, *The Manor and Manorial Records* (1906), 215.

<sup>11</sup> Details are taken from the Banbury wills, 1542-1858: Bodl. MS. Wills Peculiar, 32-60; *Index to Banbury Wills*, ed. J. S. W. Gibson (O. R. S. XL).

<sup>12</sup> R. Plot, *Natural History of Oxfordshire* (1677), 278-9.

<sup>13</sup> *Geog. Jnl.*, xc (1937), 358-9; *Oxford Times*, 22 July 1955.

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It was at Banbury that the horse-furniture industry found its greatest market. The borough was situated about 72 miles from London and Bristol and became the chief focus of roads leading northward to the central Midlands.<sup>14</sup> This convenient position gave rise to an exceptional production of horse-furnishings. The first important step was the founding by Messrs. Cobb of a girth, web and horse-cloth manufactory in 1701. The manufacture suited well a trade already involved in narrow and broad weaving and in woollens, worsteds and linen. The factory was on a distinctly larger scale than most of the textile concerns in the district although it was small by West Country standards.<sup>15</sup> The typical textile business near Banbury still remained allied to farming. Most of the participants were yeomen who, with the help of a sizeable family, managed a small estate as well as a fulling-mill or a few dye vats or a shop with two to four looms. When John Apburroughe, a worsted weaver, died in 1664, he left in his shop four looms and their implements, valued with some wool at £3 6s. 8d.; and in his loft a worsted mill worth £2 10s. and one piece of stuff and some yarn together worth £3. Nearly a century later the inventories of textile workers were still on this scale. Yet, whereas businesses did not seem to grow appreciably, there were frequent changes in the kind of fabric they made. It seems almost as if the demands and security of a small estate discouraged large-scale capitalism but permitted changes from one fabric to another. Thus William Watts of Cropredy near Banbury (*d.* 1615) did mainly garter weaving; his descendant John (*d.* 1701) had gone over to wider cloths and left in his shop four looms, worth with the materials belonging to them £20; his son Thomas (*d.* 1742), who inherited two of the above looms and half the tools, left 'linen, woven and yarn, £5' and 'implements of the weaving trade, £4'.<sup>16</sup>

Changes such as these had now ensured that the Banbury district produced a wide variety of fabrics. Irrespective of the making of slays, looms and bobbins, the textile occupations included lace-working, hemp-dressing and the weaving of girths, webs, horse-cloths, jersey, garter, broadcloth, worsted, silk and linen. Dyeing remained important and the dyers included members of the Franklin family, ancestors of Benjamin Franklin, whose uncle and father lived here for some years and whose grandfather is buried in the parish graveyard.

Such a variety of products was perhaps to be expected in an old cloth-making district that impinged on the progressive cloth, silk, linen, lace and hosiery trades of the Midlands proper. The new coach and cart traffic virtually

<sup>14</sup> W. Potts, *Banbury in the Coaching Days* (1929). For turnpike acts, trade lists and directories see E. H. Cordeaux and D. H. Merry, *Bibliography of Printed Works relating to Oxfordshire* (O.H.S. N.S. XI).

<sup>15</sup> It probably never exceeded fifty workers. In 1838 it employed forty persons on the premises on girth, web and horse cloths.

<sup>16</sup> Banbury Wills, 1542-1858.

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ensured that the Banbury people looked mainly northward, and especially to Coventry, for their industrial inspiration and personal contacts. When the textile workers of North Oxfordshire eventually decided to specialize it was perhaps not surprising that they chose a narrow fabric similar in structure to a silk velvet but composed mainly of wool or worsted.

### THE BANBURY PLUSH INDUSTRY, 1750-1948

**THE EARLY DEVELOPMENT.** The manufacture of shag or plush spread rapidly through the Banbury district after 1750. In England the word, shag, was applied from about 1592 onwards to various fabrics with a long nap; its synonym, plush, derived about 1594 from the French *peluche*, a hairy fabric, was rarely or never used by the Banbury manufacturers until Victorian times. The term in and after the eighteenth century denoted a shaggy stuff with a velvet nap on one side and composed regularly of a weft of a single thread and a double warp of two threads twisted. Although sometimes called Utrecht velvet, it differed from velvet in having a longer and less dense nap. The speciality of the North Oxfordshire weavers was fine plush made of either an intermixture of worsted warp and silk or hair weft or purely of one of the three fibres. Cotton was used in cheaper varieties.

The earliest account of the trade occurs in a letter of 8 December 1787 sent by Joseph Clark of Banbury to his brother, the Rev. John Clark of Trowbridge, who was a noted maker of superfine cloths. He congratulates John on the birth of another son and proceeds: 'Observe what you say respecting a Dyer, . . . but at present have no occasion for one, the Drunken fellow you saw when at Banbury I turn'd away the week after you left us. & have had the whole management of the Vatts & everything else eversince, there is a great alteration in the Trade, Orders are very plentiful & we cant get goods round fast enough to supply them indeed Banbury is not the place for a manufactory the Masters being so much under the control of the workmen, wish I could meet with a Situation in your part of the Country near some river where there was a Dyehouse, or any Building that might be coverted (*sic*) into one & sufficient room to carry on the Shag manufactory I could with pleasure embrace it, as I am certain beside the Dying Business I could make Shags full 20 P cent cheaper there than at Banbury . . . if you should hear of a Situation that you think would suit wish you would inform me, I had some thought of coming to Trowbridge this Xmas time . . . but we have so many Orders to Compleat. & not a Person but myself can undertake the Dying or matching any one Colour that am obliged to postpone it . . .' Joseph concludes by sending his love to Br. Jester Sheppard and others and adds as a postscript, 'Mr. Barker who bought some

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cassimere of you has purchased the House I live in . . . Mr. Snow has built a Warehouse in his Garden adjoining his house.<sup>17</sup>

This letter, besides demonstrating the close personal contacts between wealthy clothiers such as the Clarks and Sheppards and the willingness of skilled artisans to seek favourable factory-sites anywhere, leaves no doubt of the prosperity of the Banbury shag industry.

**THE HEYDAY OF PLUSH.** Before 1800 the making of worsted shags had surpassed that of webs and horse-cloths and dominated the economy of the whole of the Banbury district. The industry had spread throughout North Oxfordshire as well as into the parts of Northamptonshire, Warwickshire and Worcestershire nearest to Banbury. The fabric suited the district well. The purchase of worsted, silk and cotton was facilitated by good road and canal communications with Coventry and the North ; shags were neither scoured nor fulled and needed the minimum of water requirements, an ideal condition for a region with hard water and small streams.

The main distributing and marketing centre was Banbury from which yarn was sent out to weavers within a radius of ten to twelve miles and occasionally even more. The 1831 census return for Oxfordshire, the first to mention plush, gives a vague idea of this distribution : ' In the town of Banbury, and its adjacent hamlet Neithrop, 125 men are employed in plush and girth-making, 40 at West Shefford, Bourton and Wardington ; and weavers (many of whom seem to be employed in this species of manufacture) are noticed at Bloxham, Adderbury and elsewhere.' The same census asserts that in Northamptonshire : ' at Kettering about 200 men are employed in making shoes and weaving silk-shag, and about 60 weave plush at Rothwell, Chalcombe and Eydon.'<sup>18</sup> The last two villages are in the Banbury neighbourhood.

The census undoubtedly underestimates the employment afforded by plush and a reliable contemporary observer reckoned that ' the Banbury masters then really employed about 550 men in the town and adjacent villages, besides numerous women and children, who were engaged in some parts of the manufacture '. Talk of a decline about this time seems erroneous as, although many women spinsters became redundant when machine-made yarn began to be bought in quantities from the North and Midlands, shag sales remained good and ' as many weavers are now employed in Banbury as ever were . . . Probably it is the rapid increase of manufactures in other places, and not any actual increase of them in Banbury, that has given origin to the belief of their decline.'<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> The letter is printed by kind permission of Miss Truda Clark. For the remarkable success of this firm and of the family of Joseph Clark see *The Trowbridge Woollen Industry*, ed. R. P. Beckinsale (Wilts. Arch. Nat. Hist. Soc. Records, vi).

<sup>18</sup> H. C. 149, pp. 506-7, 446-7 (1833), xxxvi.

<sup>19</sup> Beesley, *Banbury*, 566.



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*The Report of the Assistant Commissioner on Hand-Loom Weavers* gives a vivid picture of the industry late in 1838.<sup>20</sup> The considerable trade in plushes and other very heavy fabrics of worsted and cotton variously intermingled, chiefly for export, was in the hands of three main firms: Gillett, Lees & Gillett (about 150 looms), R. & T. Baughan (120 looms) and Harris (160 looms).<sup>21</sup> These were reputed to be the only plush manufacturers in England making rough articles for clothing, except one house making a few sealotts for waistcoats and caps at Manchester and establishments producing silk plush for hats at Coventry and Kettering. All the Banbury stuffs were in the style of velvets and were woven on hand-loom 'of the oldest construction'. Coarse flat brass wires with a groove at their top were inserted between the warp threads during weaving and the threads across the wires were then cut by a knife (*truvat*) to form the pile, but in some varieties a curly surface was obtained by withdrawing the wires and leaving the weft loops uncut. Dyeing was usually done in the piece but plush for waistcoats was also printed and sealotts, if woven in checked patterns for waistcoats and caps, were dyed in the yarn. Tapestry was woven in pieces of 24 yards whereas most hairs and plushes were warped for 42 to 44 yards. The common widths varied from 18 up to 29 inches.

About 60 men were employed on livery plush and each could weave a piece of 44 yards in a month for which he received about £3. The average production, however, was about 10 pieces per weaver annually.<sup>22</sup> Most of the weavers lived in the villages around Banbury whereas the dyeing seems to have been concentrated in or near the borough. The only factory actually mentioned in the report is that of Baughan with about 30 hands. Many of the fabrics went through retail merchants to Portugal, Spain, Italy and other parts of southern Europe. Trade was 'constant but limited'; at the moment it flourished and it was 'scarcely possible to get the work that is wanted done'.

On the social side the report states that the 'relations between the employer and the employed appear to be of the most primitive and satisfactory nature . . . The very isolation of this little manufacturing community establishes between the master and the men relations which do not subsist . . . in large manufacturing

<sup>20</sup> H. C. [217], pp. 333-6 (1840), xxiv.

<sup>21</sup> The borough directories show that in 1832 there were five shag-manufacturing firms in Banbury: John Baughan & Sons; Bury & Lees; William Essex Crosby; Jos. Ashby and William Gillet; and Harris & Harris. William Crosby's widow closed their business in about 1838. The habit of forming business partnerships or amalgamations indicated in the *Hand-Loom Weavers Report* seems to have become prevalent several decades earlier. Few families retained individual textile businesses in Banbury for more than a few decades during the nineteenth century.

<sup>22</sup> In 1838 the workers in Messrs. Cobb's girth-, web-, and horse-cloth factory earned on an average the following wages: boy winders about 1s. 0½d., weavers on piece rates about 11s. 0½d., working 9½ hours daily for a six-day week. The plush-weaver must have averaged about 12s. a week for the year.

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populations'. However, the industry was still affected by the regulations of 'a diminished trade-club' which prohibited women from working and enforced a seven-year apprenticeship for boys, each man being allowed one apprentice only. This prohibition on women workers probably explains why Gilletts employed 20 girls at Brailes, 11 miles away in Warwickshire, on warping and winding. It may also help to explain the eventual survival of plush-making at Shutford just over five miles from Banbury.

Further details of the local textile industry are contained in the reminiscences of George Herbert (1814-1902), whose father Thomas was an outstanding weaver and whose maternal ancestors were weavers in Leeds.<sup>23</sup> Thomas was usually given preferential treatment. When on webs and girths he wove the wide belly bands; when on plush his wife was allowed to make the worsted harnesses for the weavers. He made a pattern for a brush-cloth that became quite popular and was 'so strong that a yard of it would stand upright without any support'. He could manage a linen-loom at sight; had two silk-looms in his workshop where he covered the hats he made himself; and could successfully copy any model from memory, even a jacquard loom which he saw working when visiting relations who were silk-warpers at Coventry. George Herbert mentions that Lees, who joined with Gillett in 1836, had an office in London where he sold and obtained patterns from France, Manchester and elsewhere. Among their products were multi-coloured tablecloths printed by a French firm and embossed fabrics some of which were supplied later as furnishings to the House of Lords. The embossing rolls were said to have been bought from Bessemer. There is no need to doubt the old man's recollections as the original estimate sent to Gillett, Lees & Company, with the postscript that Bessemer added in his lovely handwriting, survives:

Estimate of an embossing machine the same size as Mr. Caccia's—except in width which will be four inches more, in order to give a more equal pressure at the edges of the material, or to admit a wider piece without difficulty—a Substantial Castiron frame bolted together with wrought Iron Stays, the tops of the frame to unscrew, so as to admit with facility the removal of the engraved roller, without taking the Machine to pieces. At one end of the machine will be fitted a metal screen to prevent the ashes falling on the goods when the heaters are changed also a double set of heaters of half the usual length, in consequence of the difficulty of heating a piece of iron (30 inches long) to the same temperature at both ends a sound Paper roller, running on Gun-metal bearings with lifting screws under them to adjust it to any required height, a larger tooth wheel than

<sup>23</sup> G. Herbert, *Shoemaker's Window, Recollections of a Midland Town*, ed. C. S. Cheney (Oxford 1948).



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the one now employed so as to enable the Machine to be worked by one man, by a separate shaft for fly-wheel and Pinion, Mahogany stretchers &c.

	£	s	d
to be delivered in six weeks fit for use, for the sum of	58	10	0
a roller cast annealed and turned for large Pattern	9	10	0
Engraving do including design	15	0	0
a size Smaller roller for light pattern	8	10	0
Engraving do including design	14	0	0
PS.—will also undertake to Emboss Plush with this machine either in large or small quantities at 1½ <i>d.</i> per yard, . . . . .			
as the whole of the wood Models are ready to send to the Iron founder's there will be no difficulty in completing the Machinery in one month from this date should it be required,			

Signed

Henry Bessemer

this Ninth day of November 1837.<sup>24</sup>

The extraordinary skill of Bessemer in casting fusible alloys and his great artistic ability were given full play in the construction of the machinery and the engraving of the embossing rolls. Although the machine was not patented, Bessemer developed his ideas on figuring and ornamenting surfaces to apply to leather, books and any woven fabrics.<sup>25</sup> He always remembered the welcome success of his early invention and on 31 March 1897, when 85 years old, wrote to his niece and mentioned the events of sixty years earlier :

'The simple fact is that wool . . . partakes of the property of horn, and is fusible by heat, but there were many details to work out, and when that was done I constructed the necessary machinery at my own cost and managed to get six shillings a yard for all the velvet I passed through the machine. The first work done by the machine was for the finishing of a suite of rooms in Windsor Castle. With this good introduction the material became popular and fashionable, and, I may add, profitable. I increased the demand by lowering the price, and when it got down to one shilling per yard [for embossing] I sold the machinery to a manufacturer of Utrecht velvet at Banbury ; the price [for embossing] eventually came down to twopence per yard, and then omnibuses and cabs were lined with it. My great difficulty was, that I could find no one capable of preparing the rolls, and had, as a last resource, to do it myself.'<sup>26</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Copied in 1936 from the Wrench MSS. at Shutford.

<sup>25</sup> Pat. Off. 1850, no. 13183 ; 1851, no. 13819.

<sup>26</sup> For full text see E. F. Lang, 'Bessemer, Göransson and Mushet', *Manchester Memoirs*, LVII, no. 17 (1913), 37-38.

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The purchase of the embossing machine may well have helped to postpone the decline of the plush trade at Banbury. It seems, however, that there had already been a noticeable decrease in employment by the time of the 1841 census which was the last of its kind to distinguish the occupation of plush manufacturing. This census records in Scotland 6 plush-weavers and in England 260 plush or shag makers, three of whom were women. The leading English counties were Oxford (116 males : 45 per cent national total) ; Warwick (70 males and 2 females : 28 per cent national total) ; and Northants (42 males : 16 per cent national total). In Oxfordshire all the plush-weavers lived near Banbury. In Warwickshire 45 men and 2 women were engaged full-time on plush in the borough of Coventry but it is probable that most of the other plush-weavers in the county lived near Banbury.<sup>27</sup> In Northamptonshire silk-weaving had been introduced from Coventry in the early nineteenth century and had expanded especially at Kettering and Rothwell where the products included coloured silk plush and black plush for silk hats.<sup>28</sup> However, even in this county a considerable number of plush-weavers lived in villages close to Banbury. A conservative estimate would be that just over 170 plush-manufacturers or two-thirds of the national total worked in the Banbury district. Apart from Coventry and to a lesser extent Kettering, Banbury had no notable rivals. The only other boroughs with a plush industry were Darlington-on-Tees (six workers), Halifax (three workers), and Stockton-on-Tees, Newcastle-on-Tyne, Ashton and Manchester with one weaver each. There were a few rural plush-weavers in Lancashire, Devon, the North Riding and in Worcestershire nearest to Banbury. In Hampshire the craft was upheld by a solitary woman. The predominance of the Banbury district may be gauged from the fact that several of its villages had a plush output greater than that of the whole of the North of England.

A discrepancy connected with the above census returns has yet to be mentioned. It concerns the great difference between the number of plush-weavers (about 175) living near Banbury in 1841 and the number of hand-loom (about 430) reckoned to exist there in 1838. The difference arose partly from the part-time nature of some of the weaving, which caused some workers to be grouped in non-textile occupations ; partly no doubt from a small decline ; and partly from the fact that some Banbury firms commonly employed a few weavers in Coventry. But the main explanation lies in the common habit of one family keeping two narrow looms, a habit encouraged by the numerous

<sup>27</sup> *Census, 1841, Occupations*, H. C. [587], *passim* (1844), xxvii.

<sup>28</sup> *V. C. H. Northants*, II. 334 ; III. 219. At Kettering there was 'a good woollen manufacture of serges, shalloons and tammies' in the eighteenth century : B. Martin, *The Natural History of England*. Here plush was a minor fabric in a silk-, plush-, ribbon-, linen-, and lace-making economy in the first half of the nineteenth century.

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different varieties of plush and by the long and tedious operation of 'tying in' which was especially time-taking in plush-manufacture.

THE DECLINE OF PLUSH HAND-LOOM WEAVING. The early Victorian age witnessed a national decline in the numbers engaged in plush-making and, in the Banbury area at least, a drop in output. The great rival to Banbury was Coventry which now had the advantage of being near to coal supplies for motive power as well as for use in dyeing processes. The Warwickshire city introduced steam-driven looms in 1831 and by 1838 had 53 in use.<sup>29</sup> The installation of power looms proceeded slowly in the 1840's, when 2,719 weavers lived in the borough, and rapidly in the 1850's, when the numbers engaged on silk and ribbons rose to over 10,600.<sup>30</sup> Such a phenomenal expansion, particularly in power-production and in a rival fabric soon affected adversely the prosperity of the Banbury plush-makers. It is not known when plush was first produced on power-looms but at Coventry it was almost certainly being power-produced in the 1850's. It happened that power-weaving affected more seriously the hand-weaving of plush than that of any other fabric. The power-loom wove simultaneously two pieces of plush face to face, the pieces being cut apart as the weaving progressed leaving the nap upstanding on the inner faces. The hand-loom weaver's output remained at about one piece per month whereas the power-loom was soon capable of producing two pieces in about a week. Thus the early decline of the Banbury plush industry can be attributed to growing competition from Coventry power-loom weaving and to a general decrease in the national sales of plush. The declining prosperity is noticed in the census of 1851 which ascribes the dwindling population of Adderbury parish partly 'to the removal of several plush weavers with their families to Coventry'.<sup>31</sup>

The next few decades saw many economic reactions to the worsening conditions. Notable among these reactions were the rapid changes in the ownership of the plush-making concerns and a few remarkable attempts either to obtain cheaper raw materials or to develop new textile lines. The firm of Gillett dropped out in 1850 in order to specialize in banking and finance, in which it already had strong interests and in which it still prospers. About the same time Thomas Baughan, obviously attempting to cut the cost of fine yarns hitherto bought mainly from the North, built a factory for worsted and mohair spinning. The anticipated local market may be judged from the considerable

<sup>29</sup> J. Prest, *The Industrial Revolution in Coventry* (O.U.P. 1960). I am indebted to Dr. Prest for information on power looms.

<sup>30</sup> *Census, 1841, Occupations*, H. C. [587], p. 199 (1844), xxvii; *Census, 1851, Occupations*, H. C. [1691-1], p. 509 (1852-3), lxxxviii.

<sup>31</sup> *Census, 1851*, H. C. [1631], Div. III, p. 37 (1852-3), lxxxv.

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size and equipment of the factory : 12 h.p. steam-engine ; 1,056 spindles and 50 workers.<sup>32</sup> However, in 1859 the venture failed for lack of capital and calamity fell on the mill. The attendant let out the fire of the boiler of its hot-water heating-system and the pipes froze during a sudden cold spell ; when he re-lit the fire, a 'blow-up' smashed all the windows, did much other damage and caused the bankruptcy of both Thomas and Richard Baughan although the latter was only a partner for plush manufacturing. The plush side of this business was then bought by John Hill who kept it alive for another forty years. In 1861 Hill, and Robert Lees & Co., were the chief plush-making firms in the borough but in the following year the old firm of Lees was taken over by Cubitt, Wilson & Randall. The plush industry was then said to support 120 families in the district which seems more than probable as the new firm employed 17 men and 7 women in its worsted-plush finishing factory alone.<sup>33</sup>

The attempts of the Banbury industrialists to introduce new fabrics grew bolder as plush markets declined, particularly as the sales of webs and girths were also decreasing. The census of 1861 recorded in the borough 11 wool-staplers, 5 clothiers, 22 stuff makers, 14 worsted-makers, 8 unspecified weavers and 67 woollen cloth-makers. In brief, out of the 129 full-time textile workers enumerated in the borough over one-half had now taken up woollens.<sup>34</sup> But the real revival of woollen cloth-manufacture at Banbury did not come until 1870 when T. R. Cobb sold his web-girth mill near the canal in Factory Street to a tweed-making concern, which later became the Banbury Tweed Company. The result by 1883 was that 200 textile workers found full-time employment in the borough. By 1894 only just over half that number were employed, partly because of the introduction locally of plush power-looms and partly of the decrease in the sales of tweed. Whereas tweeds had proved, and still prove, a highly successful introduction at Chipping Norton, at Banbury they failed to outlast the plush trade. There were at this time in the borough two plush firms : John Hill, who ceased plush-manufacture in 1900, and Cubitt, Son & Co. who produced all kinds of pluses for curtains, upholstery and liveries for servants and carried on a considerable export trade to 'all parts of Europe, Australia, America and elsewhere'.<sup>35</sup> Cubitt's managed to outlive the Banbury tweed manufactory, which ceased in 1902, but failed to outlive the web-girth industry which as a shop hand-craft lingered on until 1932.<sup>36</sup> However, when the firm closed in 1909 its goodwill and machinery, including Bessemer's

<sup>32</sup> *Return of Factories*, H. C. 7, p. 8 (1857), xiv.

<sup>33</sup> W. P. Jackson, *Hist. Banbury* (c. 1865), 256 ; *Return of Factories*, H. C. 440, pp. 2-5 (1871), LXII.

<sup>34</sup> *Census, 1861, Occupations*, H. C. [3221], p. 401 (1863), LIII (1).

<sup>35</sup> *British Industries Business Review : Industries of Oxfordshire . . .*, 1895, 24.

<sup>36</sup> K. S. Woods, *The Rural Industries around Oxford* (Oxford 1921), 174 ; W. Potts, *Banbury through a hundred years* (Banbury 1942).

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embosser, were bought by Messrs. Wrench of Shutford who prolonged the life of the Oxfordshire plush industry for another forty years.

THE TWENTIETH CENTURY SURVIVAL.<sup>37</sup> The village of Shutford, which lies over five miles from Banbury and so presumably always outside trade-club pressure, is perched on the steep upper flanks of a watershed at some distance from the nearest stream. Here plush-weaving was active in 1747 and by the early nineteenth century a finishing shop had been set up by Robert Lees. The Wrench family took over the business about 1815 when Lees moved into Banbury. The Shutford trade became mainly concerned with fine plush for liveries, upholstery and furnishings, types of fabrics which, especially if including silk, gave considerable employment to women and needed skilful shaving by hand. Much of the dyeing was done by an old-established firm at the upper fulling mill at Broughton, two miles away. Fine plush in gorgeous colours was supplied through retail houses to almost every court in Europe, particularly for the adornment of household troops and retainers. During this century as the number of monarchies and of noble establishments declined the decrease in regal and ducal sales of fine, hand-woven plush was compensated by the growing demand for power-woven, hand-finished plush for industrial purposes. Wrench's introduced power looms in 1885 at a time when they owned nearly forty hand-loom and employed men at Brailes, Coventry and elsewhere. After 1905 the power-loom and finishing machines were driven by a Tangye 20 h.p. suction engine which produced from one ton of coal enough gas to drive the machinery for nearly three weeks whereas the old steam engine had devoured three tons of coal weekly.

In 1910 the firm with the aid of Bessemer's rolls won two gold and a silver medal at the Brussels exhibition. They then claimed to be the largest firm of livery plush makers in the world and the only firm making hand-loom plush. Among their distinguished customers were Edward VII, the Lord Mayor, the Carlton Club, the Russian and Danish courts and the embassies in Japan, Turkey, China, Persia and the United States. At the coronation of Czar Nicholas some scarlet plush came from Shutford. Unfortunately these successes were followed by disaster; in 1913 the factory was gutted by fire. The order books, apart from one current ledger, the stock, including a large consignment of livery plush for Turkey, and the machinery, except a few hand-loom and the embossing machine in a separate building, were destroyed. The surviving order book contained a request from a tailor 'By Appointment' at St. Petersburg for '1 piece black plush, our usual quality' for His Majesty

<sup>37</sup> Based on the Wrench MSS., including business records and numerous cuttings from trade journals and newspapers. For the full inspection of these and for many visits to the factory I am much indebted to the late Mr. H. E. Wrench, Mrs. E. Wrench and to Miss D. Sharratt, secretary of the firm for its last twenty-five years.

the Emperor. However, most customers were industrialists in the North and West, there being scarcely an important textile centre in England and Ireland which did not send here for plush- or finishing-cloths. In addition certain qualities of power-woven plush were sold for use in printing machines and for photographic and other industrial purposes. The fabric too had created its own market judging from the many small orders from dealers in antique furniture.<sup>38</sup>

The patterns showed that the varieties of plush produced were as numerous as ever. The hand-woven plush for liveries was made in 24-25 inch and 28-29 inch widths and in 35 to about 40 yard lengths, whereas mohair for commercial purposes was generally 20-21 inches and occasionally down to 18 inches in width. Special hand-woven plush for the linen mills of northern Ireland was warped in lengths of 60 to 70 yards and had guiding lines in the warp for cutting into separate narrow longitudinal strips; each of these special fabrics took several months to weave. The power-woven plush was equally varied in sizes. Most silk plushes, irrespective of quality, were 24 inches wide and about 30 yards long while fine silk plushes for the Near and Far East, including Manila, were only 16 to 17 inches wide and were woven double that width with a selvedge down the middle as well as at the sides so that a power-loom produced four pieces simultaneously. Power-woven worsted plush was made to widths of 24 inches and 36 inches and warped for 50 to 60 yards. For polishing and finishing fabrics in the printing trade special short lengths, down to 12 yards, were woven to a 24 inch width. In some of these pieces the pile was very low and in others very high, in imitation of rabbit fur; the warp was of cotton and the weaving was arranged so as to form narrow longitudinal bands of thick weft pile which could be cut into separate strips by the customer.

The First World War seriously injured the sales of plush although fashions had been changing adversely and the use of livery decreasing since mid-Victorian times. After 1918 it proved impossible to restore the export trade with some countries, particularly Turkey and Roumania; in England liveries and furnishing-plush, such as were formerly supplied to the Houses of Parliament, soon became things of the past. In 1937, however, fine plush was still being sent direct from Shutford to many parts of the world including the United States and most South American republics, especially Argentina. In Europe, the Netherlands and the Scandinavian countries remained regular customers but by far the bulk of the output went to the textile firms of the West Riding, Lancashire and Ulster. The factory then contained six power-looms, still driven by the Tangye gas engine, while in the upper storey of a separate shop were five traditional hand-looms worked by elderly weavers.

<sup>38</sup> Wrench MSS.



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During the Second World War the few young weavers were conscripted and the five surviving handloom weavers, three of whom had been over fifty years at the craft, were forced into retirement by the scarcity of special yarns. The management and a small staff struggled on and in September 1947 had waiting for completion orders for machine-made plush from Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Uruguay, the United States, Egypt, India, Norway, Sweden and several other European countries. The problem at Shutford was to find craftsmen and apprentices who would live in a rural village and resist the lure of large engineering concerns at Banbury. Mr. H. E. Wrench, the fourth generation to own the factory, tried in vain to increase his staff but, having found only one apprentice, decided to sell the business. Things might have been otherwise had he been younger—he was 67—or had there been a son or any youthful member of his family keenly interested in textiles. The end came in 1948. The goodwill and power-machinery were sold to J. H. Walker & Sons of Dewsbury, makers, among other fabrics, of bearskins, sealskins, mantle cloths, velvets and moquettes. The hand-looms were dispersed to various museums and so after a life-span of almost exactly two centuries the plush industry finally left north Oxfordshire.