

A STITCH IN TIME: Cloth in the Archives

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Birmingham is not a place you particularly associate with cloth. Early maps of the Digbeth and Hurst Street areas certainly show dyeing works, thread mills and the like, but these may have been part of the leather industry's activities.¹ Nonetheless, propriety and the English climate meant that materials would be purchased and clothes fashioned, decorated, cleaned and even buried locally. The occupations index to title deeds in the City Archives lists no fewer than 226 tailors between the years of 1310 and 1892, and 182 weavers between 1294 and 1852. The latter includes fourteen different varieties, from ribbon to rope and from hair sieve to silk.

What tends to survive in the Archives are accounts and descriptions of the more common sorts of cloth, the calicoes and fustians used by the workhouse and charities; but silks and furs also appear, and this account will gather together a few of the threads in the Archives.

Funeral clothing has been mentioned in a previous article², but the use of woollen cloth increased as a result of the Burial in Woollen Acts of 1666 and 1678. Sometimes special burial registers were started or forms printed for making the affidavit that the corpse had been wrapped only in wool. Birmingham parishes do not seem to have made a particular effort at recording these. An exception is St Giles, Sheldon, where, in the list of 'Burialles in Sheldon Anno Domini 1678', is written:

"The Act of Parliament for buryng in woollen taketh date the first of August Anno Domini 1678"

What is left of the page in the register of St Peter and Paul, Aston, for that date records:

'Thomas Hancox of deretend was buried in woollen and Affidavit made according to the act'.⁴

Inevitably, perhaps, poverty and charity hold prominent places in the record of clothing, with the need to account for monies spent. In the minutes of the Blue Coat Charity School in 1723 we find the following:

'At a Solemn Meeting of the Subscribers It was then agreed and Order'd That Mr. Blackham ye present Treasurer shall pay John Millington for the Making of three & thirty pair of Leather Breeches after ye Rate of eight per pair and a Shilling over for the whole. It was also agreed and Order'd that the treasurer shall pay Joseph Osbourn John Anchors Thomas Allsop & Thomas Sympson for the Making of Six and Thirty Coats and Waiscoats for the Boys, and fourteen Gowns & Pettycoats for the Girls. Twenty pence for the Boys Coats and waiscoats & Twelvpence for the Girles Gowns and Pettycoats...'

The "Orders" of the school state that the girls should be taught 'to knitt Sew and mend their Cloaths to spin'. The boys, of course, were to be taught arithmetic and writing!

The Tailor's accounts for the school show the amounts required for clothing the children:

'2½ Yards for Coat & wt. coat.	Blue Cloth
1½ Do. for Smallclothes	Cord[uro]y
1¼ Do. of Calico for lin[in]g Smallclothes	
1½ Yds. of Do. for lin[in]g Coat & wt. coat	
3¼ Yds. of Blue Cloth for going out Coat & wt. coat.'	

In 1849, the Ladies' Committee of the Protestant Dissenting Charity School discussed the matter of dress material. Dresses made of Orleans cloth had been found to wear badly and Mrs Eyre Lee offered to procure durable, woollen cloth samples from Scotland. At the next meeting she produced several examples of 'Scotch plaid' from Edinburgh.

'...choice having been made of a small green & black check, Mrs Lee was commissioned to order a quantity not exceeding 250 yds to make the next set of new dresses for the children.'

At the next meeting, the Committee permitted the assistance of a 'work-woman' for cutting out and making the new frocks⁶

The Dorcasian Society of Cherry Street Methodist Church was started in 1818. Two of its Rules read thus:

1. That the society shall consist of Ladies, whose object shall be to obtain cast off wearing apparel & bedding & to purchase & make up new, for the relief of distressed persons...
5. That the Committee and other Ladies of the Society meet once a fortnight from three in the afternoon till half past six in the evening to make up the articles which may be wanted... One of the Ladies shall read some appropriate book while the others are engaged at work...'

The books were mainly religious; there is little mention of the clothing made, though occasional gifts of baby linen and bonnets are recorded.⁷

Yardley Workhouse's Book of Clothing (1812-1815) lists a much greater variety of materials given out week by week: calico, cotton, corduroy, flannel (three yards for a shroud in December 1813) grey cloth, gingham, hurden (eight yards for bed-tick for the Bushell family in 1813), lincey, linen, blue linen, brown linen. The beds were obviously refurbished in spring 1813:

'17 April 1813 For Beds in the House 30 yards of Hurden

1 May 1813 For sheets in the house 30 yards
of Hurden⁸

The Sub-Committee of Marston Green Homes Management Committee decided in 1880 that a seamstress should be appointed, who, with the assistance of the 'extra mother' would do all the cutting out and stitching of all clothes required at the homes. They stressed that all repairs should be done at the homes, and the girls should be taught to sew to help out. Items made included stockings, aprons, frocks, shirts, pinafores, and collars. The boys' jackets; which were to be of tweed, were made in the tailor's shop, as were their trousers (to be made of corduroy), vests and suits. Another resolution of the sub-committee in 1880 was:

'That after the present winter two night shirts should be supplied for each child, your Sub-Committee being of opinion that the present habit of sleeping in day clothes, which are thus kept on the body for 168 consecutive hours, is not conducive to health or good habits.'⁹

One other charity which has left records of the distribution of clothing, is seen in the list of doles given out from St Giles, Sheldon. In 1911, blankets, sheets, shawls, dresses, quilts, calico and flannel were dispensed to needy people, and there are accounts with various suppliers in Birmingham and Wales, such as Tulletts, the Small Heath Drapery Warehouse, Coventry Road, and Pryce Jones of Newtown in Wales.¹⁰

During the First World War, St Mary's, Moseley, organised an auxiliary branch of Birmingham Citizens' Committee to collect food and clothing for the Belgian refugees in Birmingham and for serving soldiers. The Sewing Committee, of 21 members, reported in 1914, that 2,011 garments had been sent in to them and had been forwarded to the Lady Mayoress' Depot.

'In addition many requisitions have been sent to them from different Regiments for khaki shirts, socks, helmets and warm clothing, giving in some instances the shortest notice, all of which have received prompt attention.'

The women on the committee were on duty each day at Sorrento to receive finished garments, and on Mondays and Thursdays to give out garments and wool to be made up. By January 1917, the Needlework Committee had sent out 11,214 garments.¹¹

During the First World War soldiers were issued with a booklet of useful information such as how to clean a gun, how to conduct themselves and how to do the washing. Instructions were divided into care of scarlet, blue, moleskin, or flannel, woollen or worsted clothing.

'Stains from Perspiration or Dirt: (a) Kersey and cloth frocks and tunics: A solution of salts of sorrel (¼ oz. to pint boiling water) should be applied all over the garment with a clean hard brush. Finish off by sponging well with cold water. (b) Scarlet serge frocks may be washed in lukewarm water, in which some good yellow soap and a little oxalic acid (¼ oz. per gallon)

have been dissolved. Rinse off well in cold water'.¹²

Joseph Harris & Sons, dry cleaners and dyers, could probably have helped the soldiers out. This firm started in 1780, with a dyeing business in Flaxhouse Close. Joseph Harris (b.1831) bought in to the firm in 1850. The records are quite substantial and make fascinating reading. They illustrate a very different attitude to clothes and furnishings: the need to preserve, re-make, repair or to dye something to pretend it was new. In the 1920s Harris' catalogue claims to be able to clean everything from Persian carpets and Swiss embroidered lace curtains to Ostrich feather fans, altar cloths to pram covers, Rampoor Chuddah shawls to feather beds. The dressmaking department could repair ladders in silk stockings or add hems of georgette or lace to convert short frocks to 'today's ankle length fashion' (1930). A book of dye recipes and preparations for silk from 1830 shows what a difficult business it was:

'To revive or cleanse 8 pieces India [silk] Bandannas... after printing In a Tub of 36 Gall or 38 Gall of cold water throw ½ bucket of Cow dung [yes I] & half or ⅔ a bucket of Bran, the latter having been first soaked about 5 minutes in 2 Gall of Boiling water. Enter 4 prs., 2 over the winch, turn quickly 15 or 20 minutes. Winch to dry up on the lines...'

and repeat!

There are likewise directions for silk printing and mention of chemicals of all sorts for dyeing cotton and silk crimson, scarlet and puce.¹³

John Southam Evans was a silk ribbon manufacturer in Coventry in the 1830s. There survives a fascinating lease of buildings and machinery for the purpose of silk manufacture in Saltisford, the parish of St Mary, Warwick, of 1830, which includes an inventory of the premises. These included a steam engine, an engine room, a throwing mill room, a spinning mill room, a counting house, a reel room and a staff room (with a silk press). A full list of the spindles, reels, wheels, line shafts, silk bins, weighing scales, and the rest, along with the 'one small fire grate', is given.¹⁴

Silk ribbon weaving was, of course, a major occupation in Coventry. In 1861 the trade was obviously in trouble: there is a printed notice in a collection of miscellaneous items relating to Sutton Coldfield, which announces:

'In order to assist the Distressed Ribbon Weavers of Coventry it is proposed that, at the forthcoming Ball to be held in the Town Hall, Sutton Coldfield, on the 14th instant, in aid of the Funds of the Reading Room, the Coventry Ribbons be worn as generally as possible. The Young Ladies to wear white, pink or cerise colours. The Chaperonnes, crimson or magenta colours. The stewards, rosettes of white ribbon; other gentlemen, bows of bright blue. A supply of Ribbons will be procured from Coventry and may be had from Miss Steele Perkins, Mrs Sadler, or Miss Pimm and Mr M W Wilson, Sutton Coldfield. January 7th, 1861'¹⁵

Feature Articles

The Z. Lloyd papers have a considerable amount of information about cloth and clothing, as befits a family of wealthy merchants, who dealt in silk and furs, among other goods. A piece of paper dated 1589 has 'a notte of the money disburse for my app[ar]ell'. This includes five yards of 'washroller fustian' to make a doublet and pair of hose, white fustian for lining, buttons, lace, cloth for a cloak, stockings, 'fallynge bands', a yard of lawn, more lace and buttons, two ells of sarsnitt, two oz. black lace for his cloak and velvet for the cape.

From a century later comes a list of house furnishings 'Sent to london by John Davis to son Zacharyes for Selby Mucklow' in 1698. This includes fine damask napkins and tablecloths, fine holland sheets, 'four Carnation flowred Satyn curtains lined with Crimson sarsnett', a matching satin couch, satin chairs and stools lined with painted calico and '1 large green mohaire chair cover[e]d with green bayes for betty'.

An account from 1729 gives a list of animal furs and skins (in store ?) which includes beaver pelts, beaver wool, hares, and brown and white wombs (the belly piece of a skin) in very large quantities.¹⁶

The last example of fabrics in the Archives comes from a 'Special Notice to Pawnbrokers' from the Detective Office, Aston, in February 1902. It lists items stolen, with a request to pawnbrokers to make a special search for them. I doubt if the owners wanted their underwear to be advertised in this manner!

'Stolen on the 5th Inst. from Clothes lines in this district

1 New long roller towel. White twill material.

1 Gents striped woollen shirt, lengthened at tail about 9 inches with different material.

1 Sheet, grey twill, full size.

1 Pair lady's bloomers, brown calico.

1 Man's yellow striped shirt.

3 Pairs of Childrens flannelette nickers to fit children from 4 to 7 years. Pink with blue & scarlet stripe.

1 Baby's pink flannelette shirt same material.

2 white Petticoats, hand stitched. One has tuck with featherstitching thereon.¹⁷

- 7 MC 21/37
- 8 279933 Yardley Workhouse Book of Clothing, 1812-15
- 9 Birmingham Union. Marston Green Homes Management Committee, Minutes 1880-1881. Report of the Sub-Committee as to the supplying of clothing at Marston Green Homes
- 10 DRO 42 Miscellaneous volumes. List of people to whom blankets etc. were distributed, 1899-1927
- 11 DRO 77/16/2/1
- 12 MS 2054/2/1
- 13 MS 494//53/75/78
- 14 MS 1688/1
- 15 424509 [IIR 80] Miscellaneous items relating to Sutton Coldfield, c.1784-1885, collected by George Sidwell
- 16 Z.Lloyd 57/7, 53/16, 51/6
- 17 MS 1167/3

Time to tie off the threads of this survey of cloth as it appears in the records of the City Archives!

REFERENCES

- 1 MS 919 (Hurst Street); MS 1895 (Digbeth)
- 2 'Death in the archives', *Birmingham Historian*, 10 (1994)
- 3 DRO 42 General volume 1
- 4 DRO 41 General volume 3
- 5 MS 1622 Minutes Vol 1, 1722-46; Tailor's Accounts
- 6 471926 [ZZ 70B] Protestant Dissenting Charity School. Minutes of the Ladies Committee 1845-70