

The Medieval Clothier: Making and Marketing Cloth in the Middle Ages in Yorkshire

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Wednesday 9th July 2025

On Wednesday 9th July at our well-attended monthly talk, Professor Lee gave an extremely interesting and well-presented lecture on the medieval clothier, leading us through the several various processes involved in making and marketing cloth.

Some people had their own sheep in their fields but otherwise, middlemen and local markets and fairs were sources of obtaining wool. In addition, the monasteries in the Middle Ages possessed large flocks as did noblemen & local large landowners. The quality of the wool varied enormously, the finest wool was generally perceived to be from the Welsh Marches, local wools in Yorkshire seen as of medium grade. The two largest areas for wool producing were south Suffolk & north Essex and the Cotswold counties. Once obtained, the wool had to be carefully prepared by sorting, the impurities removed, and all knots taken out. This was a process known as combing and carding, to make the wool ready for spinning.

Spinning was commonly carried out by women in the home, using a distaff and spindle. Women undertook these tasks while also looking after their children and livestock, often as a way of supplementing the family income. Spinning was a time-consuming activity, and the appearance of the hand operated spinning wheel in the early 13th century tripled productivity. Likewise, the invention and introduction of the horizontal loom had a significant impact on weaving – previously a spinner could process 1lb of yarn per day, so it would take a weaver and his assistant nearly two weeks to produce a typical broadcloth. This equipment was now becoming so valuable that it was being left in wills to ensure the continuation of the family's livelihoods. Clothiers then collected their cloths from the weavers and took them to fullers to cleanse and thicken the fabrics before the final dyeing and finishing of the cloth, where it was carefully pressed and packaged up for sale. Dyestuffs, often imported from abroad, could add between 25 and 150% to the value of the wool. Gradually over time, the process became increasingly mechanised throughout the Middle Ages, and the impact of the water wheel in particular led to big investments in mills, especially by the monasteries and noblemen.

Marketing: The clothier was very much the co-ordinator, with people being paid piece-rates at each stage of the process. This led to more centralised production in what can be viewed as early factories, the premises being owned by the clothiers. Clothiers had several outlets for their products, including buyers from the provinces, London or overseas, as English cloth was very marketable across Europe. The formation of the Hanseatic League enabled the penetration of English cloth into Germany and central Europe. At home, most towns and cities held formal weekly markets alongside the more informal trading sites and the travelling Fairs. Here in Yorkshire, Wakefield was one of the market towns that was competing with York in the 14th Century – the ulnage accounts of the next century show that Wakefield along with other West Riding towns had expanded at the expense of more established centres such as York and Ripon. Professor Lee drew three main conclusions: weaving and spinning were significant factors in the way of life in the Middle Ages, 15% of the adult workforce being employed in weaving in 1540 and 1 in 4 households were involved in spinning. Secondly the clothier's managerial and entrepreneurial role could be seen as a form of capitalism and thirdly, the financial success of making and marketing the wool transformed the landscape of medieval England.

Stephen Hargrave July 2025