

Cloth is My Bread

by
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Chapter 7 Usury and the Church of England

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Chapter 7. Cloth is My Bread

Pannus Mihi Panis - Cloth is my Bread - is the motto of Kendal and it typifies the other tendency in England which indirectly contributed so much to the demand for the withdrawal of *Anti-Usury Legislation*.

It is necessary to realise why the *Chancellor* sits on a wool sack, and how it was that England changed from a self-supporting mainly agricultural country - such as Disraeli still favoured - to an industrial center looking abroad for food with its policies closely interwoven with - if not guided by - those of high finance.

There are other industries - notably the rural crafts intimately related with husbandry - but consideration of the *Wool Industry* will give enough insight into this chain of events.

The industrial and mercantile side of our country's life dates from the time of the seafaring *Norsemen* and the road-building *Romans*, while the link with the Netherlands is as early as the marriage of King Alfred's daughter to the Flemish Count.

Edgar fixed the price of *English Wool* carried to the *Continent*, and Edward the Confessor laid down regulations for the *Rouen Merchants* who had their own wharf in London. But in this and succeeding centuries there is the vast difference with later times, in that it was still a cardinal point of national policy for England to feed herself.

Manufacture and Export and the *Money Brokers* who are nowadays inseparable from these transactions were subordinate. The production of food, not of exports, was the country's first concern.

In the eleventh century, when the towns of Flanders and North Europe grew, wool producing Englishman turned attention to the manufacture of woollen goods at home.

“Under Edward I a basis of commercial law had been laid down, the beginning of a system of credit in business had been established.”¹

Edward, in fact, tried to negotiate with the wool merchants directly instead of through *Parliament*. Simon de Montfort advocated that England should learn manufacture from the *Flemish Refugees*. Edward III made an alliance with Flanders and, after *Cassel* in 1328 he welcomed them and they were taught English.

But these early kings narrowly guarded the rights of natives against the aliens, no less than the right use of money. Edward I had already done much in supervising the organization of trade - although *Local Guilds* had existed since the last quarter of the tenth century - and the *Statute of Westminster* fixed the custom on the export of a sack of wool as half a mark, and a mark on each last of hides (13/4d).

But Edward III tried to prevent mere trade going too far, and prohibited the export of wool, partly to encourage local industry and partly to ensure that his people were clothed.

The price of English wool increased in the wars from £2 to £8 a sack, and the power of the merchants was only checked by the *Statute of Staples* signed in 1353. Forty four different brands of wool were now produced, and the new *Mercantile Interest* flourished.

But the new class dealt in a *Commodity* not, like their successors, in money alone. It was said that:

“More wars were fought for cloves² than crowns.”

Standard wages and hours were enforced, and night work prohibited. When usury was accepted, conditions of work deteriorated sharply. The home manufacture of cloth was established, an excellent piece of statesmanship, and all to the good, so long as trade, manufacture and finance did not unbalance England's economy.

The word *economy* means *household management*, and the Edwards (I and III) were evidently anxious that their household should feed itself as a primary duty. The prosperity of the *Wool Trade* has built many magnificent churches particularly in East Anglia - and houses such as Paycock's - and in the fifteenth century the West Riding also benefited. There still remain public and private buildings of beauty as a legacy from the *Wool Makers*.

But at the same time, contact with the *Calvinism* of the Netherlands had a profound effect on the country's religion, especially in the point under investigation, for it was *Calvinism* that eventually accorded the *Usurer* respectability. It was in the manufacturing counties that *Protestantism* struck its strongest roots, while the agricultural districts clung to the old faith and ethic.

¹ According to Morris and Wood in *The Golden Fleece*.

² A clove is 7 lbs. of wool, and 52 cloves make a sack.

The *Cistercians* were great *Sheep Farmers* and good *Landlords*. Their wool paid a large part of Richard I's ransom. But the danger from excessive sheep farming was recognized at this early date (1195), as it was not later on, when the *Yeomen* were evicted. Sir Thomas More in his *Utopia* complained of the abbots whose sheep eat up the land that should have grown corn³.

The *Black Death* broke up the manorial system, which accepted payment in kind or labour, but which had given land and protection in return, and so had guaranteed a more real kind of freedom than that with money wage and mobile labour, which was to be the condition of the property-less proletariat.

But now in 1348 there were 200 men where there had been 300 before, and so sheep farming was the obvious remedy. The bad side of this was *Enclosures*, which came to take their place beside usury as the leading social evils of the country.

Both proceeded from the same spirit of *Greed* and *Monopoly*, and bore heavily on the *Yeoman*, who was the basis of the *Catholic Order*. Uncultivated arable land and the equivalent part of the *Commons* was first enclosed, but it went further and robbed the peasants, who should not by the custom of the manor have been expropriated.

The rebellions of Wat Tyler, John Ball⁴, John Wraw and Geoffrey Lister were the result.

In 1388 an act was passed forbidding children who had worked on the land up to the age of twelve to take up industry. This was to combat the agricultural depression which threatened. But the wool trade boomed. In the rest of England, the *Domestic System* began, whereby the *Clothier* handed out wool to the *Spinners*, *Carders* and *Weavers* to work up in their own homes. The system was praised by Cobbett and was infinitely preferable to the *Factory System*, although it gave the excuse for its worse excesses - such as child labour.

The export of fells made money, the carrying trade passed to England, the *Merchant Adventurers* came to the fore with the beginning of the fifteenth century. These aspects of a commercial civilization had the usual accompaniments of the increase in the use of money and of a *Pauper Class*.

John Wycliffe's⁵ significance of is as a manifestation of *Nationalism* as well as of religious revolt and the passing of the *Anti-Usury Laws* show that usury was more frequent.

The guilds had bound religion and industry together, as the *Mystery Plays* witness, and the *Council*, meeting in the *Guild Hall*, regulated the conditions of the trade.

Separate *Craft Guilds* arose late in the thirteenth century. The seven years apprenticeship guaranteed fair conditions and good work. After that, the *Aspirant* worked two years as a *Journeyman* and then submitted his *Masterpiece*. The *Wardens of the Guild* forbade night work, work on holy days (which were frequent).

The guilds fixed prices and wages, made inspections and cared for those who were ill. The first *Craft Guild* - that of the *Cloth Weavers* - arose in London about 1100.

Henry VIII, by his act of 1545, which confiscated the part of a guild's property which was devoted to religious purposes, was the death blow to the guild system. With them went the prohibition of *engrossing* and *regrating*, and the floodgates were open to commercial practices which are accepted today, while the rift between *Capital* and *Labour* was hopelessly widened. *Local Justice* was abandoned together with *Guild Halls*, the *Court of Pie Powder* and the *Law Merchant*. Local and religious bonds were being snapped and abuses had nothing to check them. But the old order left its mark for a couple of centuries.

The fall of Constantinople closed the overland trade routes with *The East* and the conquest of Egypt in 1517 removed the last means of bringing spices to make salt meat palatable. So Portugal sent ships round the Cape to the East Indies, and Spain turned to *The West*.⁶

There was an economic revolution in the sixteenth century only rivalled by the industrial revolution of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This bore hard on the old legislation and standards. The *New Capitalist*⁷ of the mobile *Profiteer* type arose, and American bullion found its way into their hands. The *Spanish Fury* of 1576 enabled London to replace Antwerp as the *Mart of Europe*. England added wool manufacture to wool growing, and more land was enclosed.

³ Mencius.

⁴ Ball and Wraw were priests.

⁵ John Wycliffe (1324-1384) was an *English Theologian* and early dissident in the *Roman Catholic Church* He founded the *Lollard Movement*, a precursor to the *Protestant Reformation*. He was one of the earliest antagonists of the papal encroachments on secular power. Wycliffe felt all Christians should have access to the Bible in the vernacular and is credited as the force behind the first complete translation of the Bible into English.

⁶ Cortez conquered Mexico in 1522, Magellan passed his straits in 1520, Pizzaro conquered Peru in 1532.

⁷ The notorious *Fuggers* were a fit example.

A typical complaint in the middle of the sixteenth century was that:

“Whereas forty men had their livings, now one man and his shepherd hath all.”

Sir Thomas More complained of:

“...the sheep that eat up and swallow down the very men themselves.”⁸

He applies much the same language to *enclosures* as that being applied to usury at the time. Bishop Latimer's sermon which describes his *Yeoman Father* is well known. He was a particular enemy of the *Usurer*. They were the twin social iniquities.

Absentee landlords multiplied, so that the personal bond was snapped and the importance of money increased. In the *Life of Golding* there is a note on a *Noble* exchanging his *tithes* for a fixed money payment. The influx of American silver brought a further rise in price. Abbots had enclosed, but only to a minute fraction of the extent practiced by the new rich who had obtained the abbey lands. The monasteries had little to be ashamed of in their administration of a fifth of England's land.

There was a shift in business. Coventry, for instance, decayed,

“Whereas in Edward IV's reign Coventry, along with Bristol, York and Norwich, was one of the four towns outside London which was considered important enough to mint his beautiful *Rose Nobles*.”

Somerset added to the distress by confiscating the funds of religious guilds. The growth of poverty is shown by the *Rebellion of Kett*, the *Pilgrimage of Grace*, and other marks of discontent. The alien workmen⁹ who increased woollen manufacture worked mainly apart from the guilds. The *Domestic System* was arising.

Under Henry VIII, *Spinners* and *Weavers* were gathered under one roof in a *Factory*. But “the feeling of the time was against the system”, and machinery was prohibited, with the objects of defending traditional skill and preventing unemployment.

In 1552 gig machines were prohibited, in 1589 stocking machines, in 1623 needle machines, while the *Weavers Act of 1555* forbade:

“Clothiers dwelling outside a corporate or market town to keep in their house more than one woollen loom at a time, or to profit by letting looms.”

Weavers were not allowed to keep more than two looms or to act as *Tuckers (Fullers)* or *Dyers*. *Tuckers* were forbidden to keep a loom. The current against monopoly was still strong, and it was:

“...the conscious policy to preserve existing social grades and to make each grade enduring.”

Francis Bacon commended Henry VII for maintaining farms with such a proportion of land as:

“...may breed a subject to live in convenient plenty and no servile condition; and to keep the plough in the hands of the owner and not mere hirelings.”

So the *Domestic System* was preserved and the Industrial Revolution delayed for 200 years. The carrying trade passed to England with the abolition of the *Hanse Charter* in 1598.¹⁰

The days of the *Merchant Adventurers* saw the rise of another kind of merchant - the *Usurers* who dealt on the *Exchanges*. The search and rivalry for markets was beginning, and with it the inversion of natural values. Each country desires now to export more than she imports to achieve a ‘favourable’ *Balance of Trade* in exchange for money or credit.

Broadly, Machiavelli's doctrine was accepted that the *Power of the Prince* - not the *Satisfaction of the People's Needs* - was the object of commercial activity. The state of nerves of the nation fortunately ensured that enough food was grown at home still to make the import of food unnecessary, and home manufacture was encouraged.

In fact, the *Government* was soon taking over the work that the *Guilds* had done so well. *Barter*, officially, was still the order of the day between countries, though Thomas Wilson¹¹ gives ample evidence of traders in money.

⁸ Mencius III. iii. ix – 9: “This is leading our beasts to devour men.”

⁹ *Huguenots* etc.

¹⁰ The *Steelyard* - the trading base of the *Hanseatic League* in London - was suppressed by Queen Elizabeth in 1598 and the privileges of the *Hanse Merchants* rescinded. Above is Hans Holbein's portrait of the German merchant Georg Gisze.

¹¹ Thomas Wilson in *Discourse on Usury* (1572).

Barter cuts out the *Usurer*. But trades that brought metal into the realm were ranked highest, and trade was ousting home production in importance. Wool was prominent, and the *Woollen Laws* that insisted on burial in wool were not repealed until 1874.

So the *Mercantile System* arose - also known as the *Favourable Balance of Trade* or the *Policy of Power* - which has left its scars on our thinking. Some of its notions were replaced under William Pitt, Adam Smith, the *Manchester School* and the *Free Traders*, but it was a big step in exalting *Money* to the detriment of *Real Goods* and of vitiating thought on money.

The *Tudors* realized that an industrial revolution just then would have increased poverty and other problems, so the restrictive laws were passed. The *Domestic System* was a half way house, and under it the craftsman lost much of his importance. But many families still owned land, and quality was still the aim.¹² Daniel Defoe, in his description of the land round Halifax, shows that the workers still had some land and independence.

But then the iniquitous *Truck System* arose, which meant payment in cheques which had to be spent at the employer's shop, where he usually overcharged. The miseries associated with the *Industrial Revolution* were already present in germ, with the type of employer as well as the *Master Usurers*.

But the work was still done at home and the family tie was not broken. *Fulling Mills*, indeed, had appeared in Bradford in 1311, but only gradually came into use. The woollen industry was widely distributed - particularly near the eolitic and chalky land which favours sheep. It was not understood that machines could shorten hours of employment.

But although industry was kept within bounds for some years, the increase in this kind of business inevitably brought heavy pressure against traditional standards. The huge halls built at the close of the sixteenth century are suggestive of monopoly.

Catholic morality on the subject of money was first broken down, as we shall see among the new and vigorous race of *Traders* and *Industrialists* - the *Puritan* type - and as far as our study of affairs in England is concerned, they are the advance guard of a new outlook which was eventually to relegate the laws prohibiting usury to the lumber of '*monkish superstition*'.

We have seen much of the medieval apparatus of society disposed of under Henry VIII - the local mints, the guilds, the monasteries, - and it remains to see how the laws and ethic about usury fared in his reign, and how the *Church of England*, another reformed new feature of the times, confronted the problem.

◀ Chapter 6

▶ Usury and the Church of England ◀

Chapter 8 ▶

¹² Tenter frames, which overstretched the cloth, were prohibited in 1597.