

A “woolly history” of Nidderdale AONB

E Moss



Fountains Abbey.

One of the most magnificent features of the AONB is Fountains Abbey. The home of Cistercian monks and was the centre of Nidderdale AONB's wool and textile trade in the Middle Ages.

The monks of the Abbey controlled a huge area of land. They built Granges from which their Lay Brothers would have worked the land. Some of the Granges still exist today (or archaeological evidence of the buildings can be found). One of the main roles of many Granges was to manage sheep flocks. The wool trade was very big business and the Abbey became very wealthy from it.

The sheep flocks were ultimately managed by the “Bercarius” (master of the sheep). He was responsible for making sure everything was done to high standards and would pay the shearers and the wool processors. He managed the buildings and ensured that winter-feed was gathered.

The sheepcotes (sheep houses) were surrounded by hedges or, higher up the valleys, by drystone walls and had roofs made of ferns. Several shepherds would be assigned to each Sheep cote to manage the flock. Here the sheep were sheared before being driven up drovers' tracks back to the fields and moors. Evidence of these tracks can still be seen on modern maps.



A drovers' route in Dallowgill.

Once the wool was gathered it was washed and graded before being bundled and transported by packhorses and ponies to the Abbey where it was stored. There is a preserved example of a packhorse bridge at Dacre. As the industry developed



Dacre Packhorse bridge

the monks built dye vats at the Abbey and, in the 14th century, a hot water supply was added. The Abbey traded the wool and textiles at York and further afield. They even had their own ship licensed to carry wool and traded in Italy and Flanders! The monasteries of the middle ages had the monopoly over the wool trade and it gave them much wealth and, consequently, power.

Eventually the dissolution of the monasteries by Henry VIII put an end to this, but the wool trade continued to be good business. English nobles made fortunes turning peasants off their land to create sheep pastures and so the textile industry of Nidderdale became strong. Cottage-weaving industries developed in the area now known as Nidderdale AONB. 14th century records tell of cottage weavers in the parish of Kirkby Malzeard.

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AONB

Nearby, powered fulling mills revolutionised the process, which had previously been done by foot power. There is a record in 1284 of a fulling mill on the banks of the river Nidd near Knaresborough. Ripon, slightly to the east of the AONB, was one of the main centres for the cloth trade in 14th and 15th century Yorkshire. Some of the weavers and dyers in the City may have settled there from Flanders.

By the late 16th century much of the woollen weaving industry in Nidderdale was of the cottage type. This was usually farmers weaving woollen products using looms in their homes. Some of the cloth was sold in Leeds and York, the nearest marketing centres, and some was exported from ports like Hull.

In the late 16th century the growth in the population meant a demand for more and more woven products. In the AONB the population increase also created a need for ways to make a living other than from farming. Between them, family groups would manufacture fabrics with fathers weaving and wives and children spinning and carding wool.

The 17th century depression and civil war resulted in a lull in the woollen trade at the same time as the desire for quality fabrics increased. The cottage weavers found it hard to obtain a high standard of wool to supply this demand. So, in the early 18th century, the weavers turned their hand to other yarns. Flax and hemp became more available and the market in linens was growing. This new textile industry grew quickly. Wool was still important but not the only yarn to be spun and woven. Inevitably the hand spinning process was the bottleneck and the revolution of water-powered spinning machine changed the textile industry in the Nidderdale AONB.

Water mills grinding corn were already in use on the watercourses, but this new use for waterpower saw an increase in the number of mills and even some being changed from corn to cotton. There were mills at Birstwith, West End, Dacre Banks and Pateley Bridge to name a few.

The children worked alongside the adults in these spinning mills. Their days were very long and the work hard. In 1833 the Factory Act was passed to protect children workers. It stated that children under nine years must not be employed in the textile industry and children from nine to twelve years must work for no more than nine hours a day and forty-eight hours a week! If you were between twelve and seventeen you could expect to work for twelve hours a day! Children under thirteen also had to attend school for two hours a day. In 1844 an Act was passed to limit children under thirteen to working six and a half hours a day and they must attend school for fifteen hours a week. By this time the weaving looms were also powered by water rather than by hand.

The emergence of the water-powered mills had a significant effect on the landscape through the damming of river tributaries and creation of millponds. Many of these features can still be seen in the area even if the mill buildings have gone. In some cases the mills remain but have been converted for other purposes in modern day life, such as sawmills or housing. If you follow the course of the River Nidd on the Ordnance Survey map you can see where the mills were. Clues include weirs and areas where the river is diverted to create pools etc. One mill you will not be able to find evidence of is West End Low Mill as, along with the rest of West End village, it is now submerged in Thruscross reservoir!



Down at the sheep wash at the end of the 19th century.