
HISTORY OF A COAT.—No. I.

THE very elevated rank which the manufacturing reputation of England maintains is likely to induce in us the flattering belief that Englishmen are really more clever than their neighbours; that the woollens and cottons, the porcelain and glass, the iron and the cutlery of England, owe their excellence to the superiority of our workmen over those of the Continent. But however just it may

be to attribute a portion of the excellence to this source, there are two other circumstances which should not be lost sight of, viz. the great richness of England in those mineral treasures, particularly coal and iron, which are indispensable to the construction of machinery; and the impetus which a demand is sure to give to inventive ingenuity, by which new processes, and shorter modes of conducting old ones, are devised. It is to all these circumstances combined that we are to attribute the possibility of performing a feat which perhaps no country but England could witness. It was stated a few years ago, that the late Sir John Throgmorton on one occasion sat down to dinner in a coat, the wool of which was on the backs of his own sheep that same morning. The animals had been washed and sheared; the wool washed, carded, spun, and woven; the cloth scoured, fulled, sheared, dyed, and dressed; and a coat made from it by a tailor, between sun-rise and the hour of seven in the evening. It scarcely need be said that all the preparations were made beforehand, and speedy modes of drying, &c. adopted: we may also presume that the cloth produced was not "extra-superfine Saxony;" but still, if the statement itself be correct, it is quite sufficient to excite our surprise and admiration. The processes here enumerated are very varied; and it may not be uninteresting to the reader to follow us in a brief description of the steps by which the coat of a sheep becomes transformed into the coat of a man; this description may be introduced by a notice of the *history* of the woollen manufacture.

The hair or wool which grows on the backs of animals has, from an early period, been one of the materials from which men have provided themselves with clothing: so far different ages agree; but the distinguishing feature between the early times and the present is the degree of preparation which the substance undergoes before it assumes the form of a garment. In a barbarous state of society, whether in past or present ages, the savage makes a garment of the skin of an animal, wearing the hairy or woolly side next the skin, for the sake of warmth. This custom was alluded to by Juvenal, who, in speaking of a miserly person, says:—"To guard himself against the cold, he does not wear the costly clothing of the luxurious Romans, but the skins of animals, and these even inverted, that is to say, with the hairy side turned inwards, without caring whether the appearance be agreeable or not." When the barbarian rose one grade in the scale of society, the unsightly appearance of the fleshy side of the skin prompted him to conceal it, and to wear the hairy side externally. But still such a garment must have had the disadvantage resulting from an animal substance being worn in an almost unprepared state near the skin; and if the skin to which the fur, hair, or wool was attached underwent any process analogous to that of tanning, the hairy surface would be likely to be injured thereby.

When the efficacy of hairy or woolly substances in furnishing warm garments for the human body was proved, men were naturally desirous to try whether these substances, removed from the skin or pelt on which they grew, might be combined into a woven or otherwise continuous material; and wherever or whenever this was first done, the woollen manufacture may be said to have commenced, for it owes its peculiarity, not to the weaving at the loom, but to the peculiar property of *felting* which is possessed by woolly substances, and which we shall hereafter explain. It must be borne in mind, however, that the fur of the wild animals usually captured by the hunters was not of such a nature as to bear weaving and felting; and that animals more or less resembling the *sheep* are those which, on account of their exterior coat being *woolly* rather than *hairy*, have always been sought after for this purpose: the history of the woollen manufacture depends, therefore, in some respects, on the history of the sheep.

The sheep is supposed to have first come from Africa,

but that so long as it was domiciled in that parching district the covering bore more resemblance to hair than to wool, and that it was not until that animal was introduced into the milder climates of Southern Europe that the covering obtained that quality which fits it for the felting process. It is supposed that the Egyptians, the Greeks, and the Romans were the first nations who became acquainted with the woollen manufacture, and that after the fall of Rome in the sixth century, the manufacture remained dormant for a considerable period. The revival of it took place in the Netherlands, and from thence spread gradually to other nations of Europe. Dr. Ure states:—"In the middle ages, Spain seems to have abounded in fine-wooled sheep, of the Tarentine breed, which it originally derived from its ancient Roman masters. So far back as 1243, the woollen cloth from Barcelona and Lerida is spoken of with admiration, and as being in high esteem at the gay court of Seville in the reign of Pedro the Cruel. Innumerable flocks existed in Spain in the time of Charles V., of which so many as 30,000 belonged to one shepherd, and served to supply foreign nations with the softest wool. The finest wools then went to the Italian states, to the amount of many thousand sacks annually, at from forty to fifty gold ducats each; that is, from 10*l.* to 12*l.* of our present money."* The French woollen manufacture appears to have first attained a degree of importance in the seventeenth century; but it soon arrived at a point of excellence unequalled in any other country at that period.

The woollen manufacture in England has been one of the staple sources of national wealth; indeed, before the extraordinary rise of the manufacture of cotton, that of wool was considered by many persons as the most important in the range of English industry, and one of the longest standing. It is probable that the Romans brought with them into England the art of fabricating garments from sheep's wool; and indeed they established at Winchester a manufactory of sufficient extent to supply the Roman soldiery with clothing. As long as the Romans remained in Britain, the manufacture appears to have flourished; but this, as well as many other advantages resulting from the residence of the Romans in this country, was lost during the subsequent turmoils between the Saxons and the Danes. It revived again, however, after the reign of Alfred, and in the tenth century it had so far risen in importance, that the fleece of a sheep was valued at two-fifths of the whole animal, a much larger proportion than that at present observed.

The wool employed down to about the middle of the thirteenth century was wholly English; but at that period the demand for fine cloths made from Spanish wool was so great among the higher classes, as to lead to the introduction of wool from that country. This was soon afterwards prohibited by law, on the plea that it would injure the English wool-growers; but laws of this kind are generally incapable of being maintained against public opinion, and we find that, from the year 1240 to 1330, most of the cloth worn by the gentry was made from Spanish wool; while the wool of England, being in some measure deprived of a home market, was sent to the Netherlands to be manufactured into inferior clothing. The English manufacturers had frequent opportunities during this period of observing the superior skill of the Flemish artizans in working up the wool into broad-cloth, and, by inviting some of them over to England, the home manufacture was so much increased, both in extent and in excellence, that the legislature thought the time was come for prohibiting the exportation of British wool, under the idea that British interests would be consulted by the manufacturers using no wool but British, and by the wool-growers supplying no manufacturers but those of England; thus excluding both import and export dealings with other countries. But this short-

* 'Philosophy of Manufactures,' p. 132.

signed policy was soon found to be based on a wrong system, for the wool-growers had a large stock gradually accumulating in their warehouses, arising from the supply being larger than the English manufacturers could consume.

By degrees, as the legislature adapted its measures to the exigencies of the trade, the woollen manufacture obtained a firm footing in England, and maintained an important position in the time of Edward III. The seat of the manufacture is supposed to have been principally in Yorkshire, but partly also in the west of England, and at Cranbrook in Kent, where the Flemings who were invited over by Edward III. settled.

For two centuries after this period the woollen manufacture appears to have been steadily increasing, and occasional mention is made of it by most of the chroniclers and annalists of that period. It is recorded that, in 1520, the three most famous clothiers or cloth manufacturers were Cuthbert of Kendal, Hodgskins of Halifax, and Martin Brian of Manchester, each of whom kept a great number of persons at work—spinners, carders, weavers, fullers, dyers, &c. Soon after this the manufacture was extended to five towns in Worcestershire, and the quantity produced being more than the home consumption required, there commenced an export trade of manufactured cloths: this was in the reign either of Edward VI. or of Queen Mary, and the amount of export soon increased to two hundred thousand pieces of cloth annually. In the beginning of the seventeenth century the manufacture was further extended by the introduction of what is called medley or mixed cloth, for the production of which the west of England has been ever since celebrated; and these and other circumstances proved so advantageous to the manufacture generally, that by the end of the same century the total annual produce of woollen goods amounted to the value of eight millions sterling, of which about five millions' worth was consumed at home and three millions' exported.

By about the year 1770 the exports had reached the value of four millions annually, comprising the various woollen fabrics of bays, cloths, flannels, serges, says, stuffs, carpets, and worsted stockings. About the same period the demand for cloths of a fine quality became so large as to require the annual importation of from three to four million pounds of Spanish wool. In the year 1800 there was a parliamentary inquiry into the state of the English woollen manufacture, and some of the evidence there given was such as to convey an idea almost startling of the extent to which it had reached. The number of packs of wool grown in England annually was estimated at six hundred thousand, which, at eleven pounds per pack, would amount to six million six hundred thousand pounds: it was assumed that the manufactured goods were, on an average, worth about three times as much as the raw wool, and consequently that the value of the manufactured goods amounted to nearly twenty millions annually. But the most extraordinary part of the evidence was that in which the total number of persons, men, women, boys, and girls, engaged in this manufacture in England and Wales, was stated at three millions! Mr. Stevenson, in an able article on the statistics of England, in the 'Edinburgh Cyclopædia,' has carefully analysed the whole of the evidence given before that Committee, and has shown that it must be greatly exaggerated in every part, particularly in that relating to the number of persons employed in the woollen manufacture in 1800: this number he estimates at rather more than half a million, instead of being, as was stated in the evidence, three millions. Since that time more attention has been paid to the collecting of facts in statistical inquiries, and we will here give Mr. McCulloch's estimate of the probable extent of the woollen manufacture in England in the year 1833:—Number of long-wooled sheep in England, four millions; number of short-wooled, fifteen

millions; five million pounds of English wool exported, thirty-eight million pounds of foreign wool imported; total value of woollen goods manufactured, twenty-one millions sterling, of which about six millions are exported: the number of persons employed, about three hundred and thirty thousand. It will be observed that this last estimate is even much within that of Mr. Stevenson for the year 1800; but we may remark that Mr. McCulloch is of opinion that Stevenson's estimate, small as it was in comparison with that given before the parliamentary Committee, is yet too large; and further, that the increased use of machinery has lessened the number of hands employed in some departments of the manufacture. As an instance of this we may state that, before the introduction of machinery in the processes preparatory to weaving, one thousand six hundred and thirty-four persons were employed to do that which could afterwards be done by thirty-five persons.

In this brief historical sketch we have treated of the woollen trade in its whole extent; but in the descriptive details which are to follow we shall confine ourselves to the production of short-wooled fabrics, such as broad-cloths.