



THE TEASELS OF SOMERSET

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IN late summer, Somerset is the scene of one of Britain's rarer harvests – that of the teasel crop. It was the availability of teasels and of fuller's earth (the export of which was banned), together with proximity to the port of Bristol, which contributed largely to the West Country's early fame for woollens. John Billingsley, writer of a classic treatise on the agriculture of Somerset, remarked in 1795 that "teasels are much cultivated", the heads being "used in dressing of cloth". To-day this cultivation is confined entirely to the pleasant fertile countryside in the neighbourhood of Taunton, though it was formerly carried on also in the Mendip country round Blagdon.

Above
Crop of teasels at Fivehead, near Taunton.

Left
Harvesting teasels.



The wild teasel, a kind of scabious, with its prickly head and pairs of leaves opposed to form water container insect-traps (the water being regarded by gypsies as a tonic), is a fairly common wayside plant. The cultivated variety, known as the "fuller's teasel", is not unlike it, except that the head or "burr" has much stronger spines, with hooked points.

This natural comb has long been used for raising a nap on woollens (the word "teaseler" can be traced back to 1607) and it still remains, even in this age of mechanical invention, without effective rival for the purpose. Wire substitutes have been tried, but they lack the essential properties of elasticity and of gradual wear in use, which prevent damage to the cloth.

It is for this reason that the woollen mills of Great Britain still demand the burrs from Somerset, in addition to a considerable number which are imported from the Continent. A single mill may require as many as 600,000 in one year.

The seed (which, incidentally, may be used for feeding canaries) is saved from the better heads, and is sown in April. The young plants have roots resembling parsnips, so that they are difficult to remove for transplanting. The upper portion or "knot" is therefore cut off with a short chisel-like tool known as a "teasel-

spitter". The prepared plants are set out in October with a short planting-stick or "dibber" – about 14,000 to the acre – and by the following spring they will have become established.

The heads break into pale blue flower in July, and harvesting commences when the burrs are sufficiently mature. They are cut with a short, curved knife, which is looped for convenience to the cutter's wrist. An average crop of 200,000 burrs to the acre will occupy a cutter for ten days. The spiny nature of the stems necessitates the wearing of protective gloves. The heads are bound in "handfuls" of fifty and attached to long poles, which are then stacked in the open to facilitate drying-off. They are ultimately despatched in packs of 20,000 to the mills.

The burrs are prepared for use by cutting off the calyx with scissors. Afterwards they are fitted into long, narrow frames, known as "rods", which are clamped into the cylindrical drums of the "gig-mills" assembled in the raising-room. The rolls of cloth are then unwound and brought into gentle contact with the drums, which revolve at 120 r.p.m., thus enabling the teasels to raise a nap or pile on the surface. New heads are inserted piecemeal, to obviate too violent a change in intensity of the pulling action.

Teasels are used to brush up the surface and to give a fluffy finish to woollen cloths such as blankets and overcoatings. The surface of the cloth passes in one direction over the drum and is brought into contact with the teasels which are revolving in the opposite direction at a greater speed.

