

THE WELSH WOOLLEN TEXTILE INDUSTRY



Cartheni, the traditional Welsh type of blanket.

Above
Detail of Cartheni.

(Photographs for this article by courtesy of the Rural Industries Bureau)

*O. W. LIPTON, B.Com., M.Inst.M.S.M.,
Economist and Senior Marketing Officer, Rural
Industries Bureau*

WHEN the location of the British wool textile industry is described as concentrated in Yorkshire, Scotland and the West of England, the section of it in the Welsh dales is usually omitted. Yet this small part of the industry might well claim a considerable reputation for the quality of its traditional products.

HISTORY AND TRADITION

The Welsh textile industry is as old as the other branches of the wool textile industry in Britain. When fulling became mechanised and power machinery developed, spinners and weavers went in search of water power to the streams of Yorkshire, Scotland, the West of England and in Wales largely to Cardigan, Carmarthen and Pembrokeshire. There are mills in other parts of Wales. Usually the buildings are old, blend well with the countryside and do not spoil the

landscape, as is often the case in other textile districts. The size of the mills ranges from the one-man firm to sizeable mills.

The industry has been shrinking over the last few decades from about 250 mills in 1900 to rather less than 30 as is shown on the accompanying map. Increasing competition and the slump of the interwar period are largely to blame for this shrinkage, as is the trend of depopulation in Wales. The picture is, however, not one of unremitting gloom. Some owners have modernised their buildings and equipment and in a few cases new ventures have been started. Management and ownership of Welsh mills are usually identical and the fight for survival is a very personal battle. There are many natural handicaps, such as remoteness from the big centres of population, not necessarily in miles, but in difficulties of transport and communications. There is no natural training centre and too few Welshmen train in other wool textile centres, though some have done so and returned to build up and extend their mills.

THE PRODUCTS

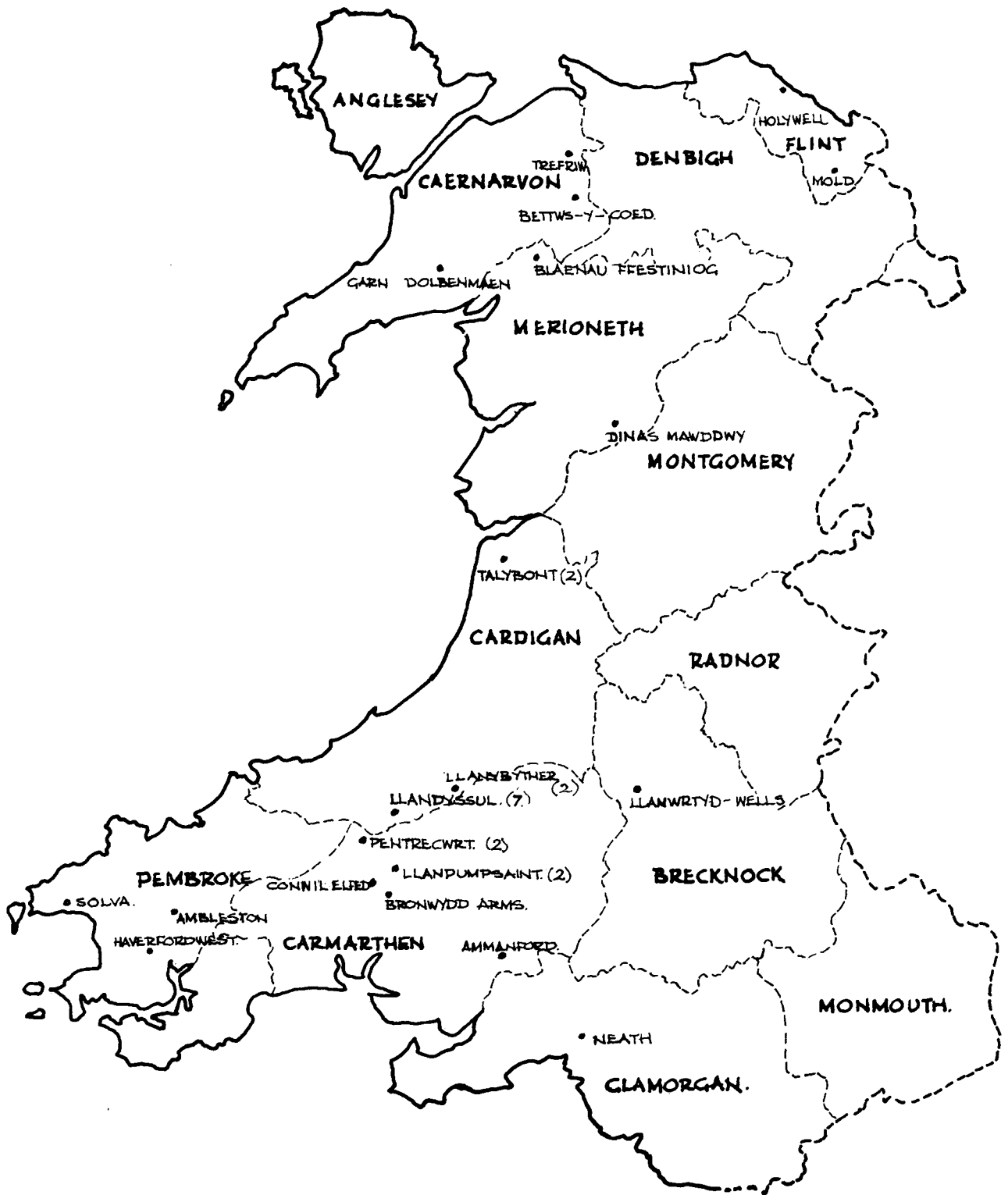
The Welsh textile industry is not backward and hidebound, but largely makes traditional products, such as flannel, quite often suitable for ladies' garments (few flannel shirts are worn by the miners now for the sweat absorbing qualities), and tweeds in all colours and weights of great durability (there are no better tweeds for stalking and fishing). Wales also produces lightweight tweeds without losing any of the excellent tweed qualities. In the next group of products which comprises blankets, there are plain blankets, check blankets in pastel shades, travelling rugs, and a bedspread-cum-blanket called cartheni. Carthenau (which is the plural will be gratefully remembered by many a traveller in Wales because they kept him warm and cosy during cold winter nights. The fringed cartheni is often a harmonious mixture of two or three bright colours and two or three pastel shades, and constitutes a very useful bedspread. An equally characteristic Welsh product is the honeycomb quilt, which can lend grace and attraction to a bedroom furnished in modern style. The double cloth (woven on two sides) that the Welsh mills produce can serve as wall hangings or floor coverings because of their almost indestructible character. Recently it has also been used for the making up of anoraks, après-ski clothing and similar garments. Wales also produces knitting yarns, though these are a challenge to the really skilled knitter, as fingering yarns from Wales do not necessarily comply with standard thicknesses. Furnishing fabrics have been increasingly made in recent years by the Welsh mills. All these products are pure woollens (practically no worsted yarns are used in Wales). The raw materials are a skilful blend of New Zealand and home produced wool.

OUTSIDE HELP

From this brief and incomplete recital of the products of the Welsh textile industry, it can be rightly deduced that there are possibilities of new developments hidden in the small mills in the Welsh dales. Though Llandyssul has, with some exaggeration, been called the Bradford of Wales, there is no natural centre of the Welsh textiles industry. The Rural Industries Bureau has taken on the role of stimulating and assisting the industry. At different times the Bureau has maintained a Technical Officer to advise the mills. Over the years there have been numerous designers and one is still in post; the Bureau has helped in the marketing field, including exhibitions abroad, and has given assistance in the formation of the Welsh Woollen Manufacturers' Association, which however did not last for more than a few years. Assistance is still available from the Bureau, including recent arrangements for training, the Rural Industries Loan Fund, the Rural Industries Organisers employed by the Rural Community Councils and last, but by no means least, the Mid Wales Development Association also stand ready to assist.

THE ECONOMIC PROBLEMS

It might well be asked why assistance should be given to the Welsh textile industry. Depopulation in the Welsh valleys is a serious problem and is surely one for the nation. If the Welsh mills can be assisted to maintain and expand output and employment, it would be a real contribution to solving the problems of Wales, quite apart from the considerations that the Welsh woollen products could and should be developed. At present the main outlets of the industry are in Wales and many mills own shops or have links with shops catering for the growing tourist traffic in Wales. There is a considerable challenge here.



MAP OF WALES SHOWING THE DISTRIBUTION OF THE WOOLLEN TEXTILE INDUSTRY.
FIGURES FOLLOWING PLACE NAMES INDICATE THE NUMBER OF MILLS IN THE AREA.