



Poverty in Westbury

Until recent times the cloth industry has been the mainstay of life in and around Westbury – employing many people. Others would have been self-employed – coopers, masons, thatchers, shopkeepers etc. and many would have worked on the land and in service.

The town's prosperity in the 15th century is reflected in the extensive rebuilding of the church – only a town with considerable financial backing could have afforded to do that. By 1460 there were three annual fairs and three weekly markets and in 1515 three more fairs were added. This splendid state of affairs, however, did not last and by the early 17th century a depression had occurred. In 1606, the destruction of the cloth workers was so acute that the Law of Wilts was passed, stating a minimum price for piecework, not that this made anyone well-off!! In 1605, 38 Wiltshire clothiers were fined for under-paying their workers.

The depression was made worse by the plague in 1603/4, in which many of the victims were weavers and fullers. A special entry in the Burial register at the church lists 32 victims. At a sitting of the quarter sessions it was stated that the inhabitants of Westbury were seriously impoverished owing to isolation (to prevent the spread of disease). Arrangements were made whereby supplies of corn at market prices should be delivered in or near the markets of Warminster and Market Lavington, to be collected by appointed persons from Westbury, in addition 40 shillings a week would be given for the relief of the poor. The town in 1609 was described as being impoverished and seven years later an extensive fire caused over £1000 worth of damage, a bitter blow to an already suffering people.

At about this time it was said that the town was noted for its 'rough and turbulent people'. Two hundred and fifty people petitioned for relief because of the lack of work and the price of food – claiming they were depending entirely on the cloth trade, 'which was become as nothing'.

Widespread famine followed by a cattle plague and by the end of the century the market was in decline and finally petered out in 1876. The Victoria History of Wiltshire states that in 1819 the unemployed were set to digging, but digging what? – new roads, drainage ditches? Also a person was employed to teach children to knit stockings.

In 1826, Mr Cobbett, visiting Westbury described it as '*a nasty, odious, rotten borough, a really rotten place. Its cloth mills seemed ready to tumble down, as well as many of the houses.*'

In the same year in the Evening Mail on 22 September there appears an article referring to Westbury. It states that the principal trade is weaving but whereas the usual practice was for employees to work at home, here they worked in mills. Some of the workers were paid by the barter system: i.e. in cloth or goods, rather than money.

The article goes on to say that some 250 families were out of employment and dependant on the parish for support, and many others were only partially employed. The poor were much distressed. The cottages for the poor were inferior in appearance to those in Trowbridge, but one bright note was that the road to Trowbridge itself was 'one of the finest in the county and presents the surest signs of improvements with well built, neat and roomy cottages for the poor, generally surrounded by extensive gardens.' To alleviate some of the worst effects of poverty, soup was given out to the poor, and coal and barley were sold very cheaply.