

The variety and quality of English woollen cloth exported in the Late Middle Ages

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The remarkable success of English exports between 1350 and 1500, and especially from 1470 to 1550, can be better understood with an appreciation of the range, price and quality of the English cloths that entered international trade. An examination of all the available customs information, and merchants' inventories and accounts, clearly shows that until the mid-fifteenth century English merchants sold primarily low-quality broadcloth and narrow straits or kerseys, but once the European economy revived later in the fifteenth century the range of exported English cloths had widened, and the price and quality of most cloths dramatically rose. Merchants began to export significant quantities of more luxurious long cloths for the first time. A wide range of kerseys were sold, now comparable in price to broadcloth, and its share of English exports steadily increased. There were also considerable exports of inexpensive cottons and frieze whose price remained largely unchanged, as well as other cheap narrow cloths and broad dozens.

This paper looks at the customs accounts, surviving merchant accounts and inventories to examine the variety of exported woollens and their quality in order to better understand the reasons for the great success of England's merchants and clothiers, as England came to dominate the continental woollens' trade in the early sixteenth century. It shows that, until the mid-fifteenth century, England was primarily a source for low-quality cloth, but that, from then on, the average quality of exported broadcloth and kersey rose significantly, while the sale of large quantities of inexpensive, narrow cloths still continued. The standard short English broadcloth was one and three quarters wide and around 24-26 yards in length when finished.¹ Other

¹ For a summary of all the changes in the cloth assize, see A.R. Bridbury, *Medieval English Clothmaking*, (London 1982), pp. 106-11.

cloths were recorded as a percentage of broadcloth by customs officials. Straits, usually a foot wide and twelve yards in length, were customed as a quarter broadcloth, and kerseys, one yard in breadth and, after 1464, standardized at eighteen yards in length, were considered to be equivalent to a third of a broadcloth.² Kerseys and straits were only included in the petty customs figures in 1388.

Unfortunately we know so much more about the quantities than the qualities of English cloth exported in the late medieval period.³ The remarkable surviving series of wool and cloth customs accounts, tabulated by port in 1964 by Eleanora Carus-Wilson and Olive Coleman, and recently edited by Stuart Jenks, document the upward trajectory of English cloth exports from around 4,000 cloths at the time of the Black Death to their peak of 150,563 in 1553-54.⁴ These petty customs accounts do not discriminate between the types of cloth, except in one respect. The very expensive broadcloths, dyed wholly or partly in grain, were subject to higher rates of tax, and therefore separately recorded. However the quantity exported was very small.⁵ Petty custom taxed the number, not the value of cloths. It is impossible to determine from the enrolled customs accounts what percentage of the cloth was exported as broadcloth, narrow straits, or kerseys, or the relative quality of these cloths. Further, the custom accounts understate the number of cloths exported because they exclude other inexpensive cloths,

² W.M. Ormrod, 'Finance and Trade under Richard II' in A. Goodman and J. Gillespie (eds), *Richard II: The Art of Kingship*, (Oxford 1999), p. 171.

³ This export growth is charted in C. Barron, *London in the Later Middle Ages: Government and People 1200-1500*, (Oxford 2004), p. 96, and in E.M. Carus-Wilson, *Medieval Merchant Venturers*. (London 1954), pp. xviii, 262-64.

⁴ E.M. Carus-Wilson and O. Coleman, *England's Export Trade 1275-1547*, (Oxford 1963); S. Jenks (ed.), *The Enrolled Customs Accounts (PRO, E356, E372, E364) 1279/80-1508-09 (1523/24) Parts 1-12*, (List & Index Society, 2004-10, and in press); J.D. Gould, *The Great Debasement: Currency and the Economy in mid-Tudor England*, (Oxford 1970), p. 136.

⁵ Grain and half-grain cloths have been tabulated for 1350 to 1377, although the figures are given as dyed and half-dyed cloth, in A. Beardwood, *Alien Merchants in England 1350 to 1377*, (Cambridge, Mass. 1931), pp. 163-75. They have also been printed for Henry VIII's reign by G. Schanz, *Englische Handelspolitik gegen Ende des Mittelalters*, (Leipzig 1881), pp. 86-105, when they accounted for less than 0.1% of exports.

such as frieze and Welsh cottons, that were subject only to the poundage subsidy. A variety of worsteds were included in the customs accounts and given values equivalent to broadcloth. They are not dealt with here as volume was small, and the quantity declined from the mid-fourteenth century.⁶

Price is used as a proxy for quality as cloth dimensions, for the most part, remained standard throughout the period. In the fourteenth century the length of cloth was very carefully measured by customs officials. By the sixteenth century cloth prices had become more standardized, and customs were often not converting longer lengths of cloth to assize lengths.⁷ The result was that broadcloths were frequently far longer than lengths outlined in the statute, so sometimes prices per yard rather than the price of the full cloth is a better indication of quality.

Three main pricing sources are used; poundage particulars, merchant inventories, and merchant accounts. Poundage was an *ad valorem* tax that was only granted intermittently before 1415. Both aliens and denizens paid poundage in 1383-84 and 1393 for example, but for the most part denizen and Hanseatic merchants avoided poundage after 1422.⁸ In the sixteenth century denizen and Hanseatic merchants were again paying poundage on frieze and cottons.⁹ In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries poundage particulars are therefore very useful to determine the quality and types of cloth exported by Italian and Spanish merchants, but tell us nothing about English and Hanseatic

⁶Carus-Wilson and Coleman, *Export Trade*, Appendix 5. For the changing quality and exports of worsteds in the fifteenth century, see J. Oldland, 'Fync worsted which is almost like silke': Norwich's double worsted', *Textile History*, 42 (2011) (forthcoming).

⁷ Carus-Wilson and Coleman, *Export Trade*, p. 14; P. Ramsey 'Overseas trade in the reign of Henry VII: the evidence of customs accounts', *Economic History Review* (*EcHR*), 2nd ser., 6 (1953-54), p. 178.

⁸ N.S.B. Gras, *The Early English Customs System*, (Cambridge, Mass. 1918), pp. 82-3; Ommrod, 'Finance and Trade', p. 175; Jenks, *Enrolled Customs Accounts*, Part 6, pp. iv-v.

⁹ Denizens were paying poundage on Welsh cloths and straits in 1503-04, see S. Flavin and E.T. Jones (eds), *Bristol's Trade with Ireland and the Continent 1503-1601*. Bristol Record Society, vol. 61, (2009), pp. 1-102.

pricing. The only alien merchant inventories are those of the 'View of Hosts' accounts for London and Southampton in which foreign merchants revealed their business transactions to their English hosts from 1439 to 1444, Hanseatic and Genoese merchants excluded.¹⁰ The only details on cloth prices from surviving merchant accounts prior to the sixteenth century are for the London grocer, Gilbert Maghfield in the 1390s, and from the Borromei ledgers for 1438. In the sixteenth century we have the luxury of a number of accounts. The Worcester merchant, William Mucklowe, was trading at Antwerp in 1511; the draper Thomas Howell purchased cloth from Suffolk and Essex for the Spanish market in 1527; the mercer Thomas Kytson bought a wide range of cloths for sale at Antwerp between 1513 and 1539, and the mercer Thomas Gresham acquired kerseys and Worcesters for shipment to Antwerp in 1548.¹¹ In addition there is information on cloths sold at Antwerp from 1536 to 1546.¹²

1. Broadcloth

1.1. Fourteenth century. In the late fourteenth century much exported broadcloth was not of assize length, but the half-cloth, *duodenum* or dozen, as the particulars for the subsidy on the production of cloth, known as the *alnage*, clearly indicate.¹³ In Somerset for example, which produced more cloths than any other county, 19,411 half-cloths and

¹⁰ The Public Record Office at The National Archives (TNA), E 101/128/30, 31, 34.

¹¹ Birmingham Reference Library, Zachary Lloyd Collection, 5/11, ff. 1.3; Drapers' Hall, London, Thomas Howell Ledger, ff. 53v-64v; C. Brett 'Thomas Kytson and the Somerset clothmen, 1529-1539', *Somerset Archaeology and Natural History*, 143 (1999), pp. 29-50; C. Brett, 'Thomas Kytson and the Wiltshire Clothmen, 1529-1539', *Wiltshire Archaeology and Natural History Magazine*, 97 (2004), pp. 35-62; Mercers' Hall, London, Thomas Gresham Day Book.

¹² O. de Smedt, *De engelse natie te Antwerpen in de 16e eeuw* (Antwerp, 1950), vol. I, pp. 341-51, 415, 427-35.

¹³ In 1388 the assize cloth was ruled to be only six quarters and ray cloths to be 5 quarters, but from 1393-94 to 1405-06 it was free trade. The *alnager* measured the cloths but no law could be broken on account of size, see Bridbury, *Clothmaking*, pp. 108-09.

4,461 narrow short cloths, straits, were alnaged from December 1396 to October 1397, but no full broadcloths.¹⁴ These half-cloths would have been exported from Bristol, Southampton and London. In Kent from July 1394 to November 1395, the dozens alnaged were equivalent to 1385.5 assize cloths, far more than the 456 full-size broadcloths.¹⁵ In Warwickshire, in 1397-98, broadcloths were almost exclusively dozens, with a few straits.¹⁶ It seems that production of full-length cloths was concentrated in a few towns - London, York, Salisbury and Bristol - that were organized to make the finer cloths. For York we have the Day Book for 1394-95 which recorded the amounts of cloth taken by clothmakers each day to the alnager. While there were many small and narrow lengths of cloth alnaged, the large producers were presenting whole cloths.¹⁷ Of the larger cloth towns only Coventry made mainly half-cloths. By the sixteenth century most broadcloth was exported as full-length cloths.

Cloths exported in the fourteenth century were mostly dyed and finished.¹⁸ Almost all the cloth alnaged at York in 1394-95 was coloured, and much of this must have been exported. English broadcloths sold in Poland around 1400 were coloured.¹⁹ A detailed examination of English cloths sold in the Iberian peninsula at this period indicate that the cloth was dyed and finished, as was much of the cloth destined for the Mediterranean basin.²⁰ In the 1392-93 Lynn poundage account, white cloths were a separate category representing less than seven percent of the cloths exported.²¹ The emergence of Antwerp as the

¹⁴ TNA, E 358/8, rot. 4

¹⁵ TNA, E 358/8, rot.2.

¹⁶ TNA, E 101/344/25.

¹⁷ J. Lister (ed), *The Early Yorkshire Woollen Trade. Extracts from the Hull Customs' rolls, and complete transcripts of the alnagers' rolls*, Yorkshire Archaeological Society, vol. 44 (1924), pp. 35-107.

¹⁸ TNA, E 122/185/3, 185/19.

¹⁹ J.H. Munro, 'Medieval woollens: the western European woollen industries and their struggles for international markets, c.1000-1500', in D. Jenkins (ed), *The Cambridge History of Western Textiles*, vol. 1, (Cambridge 2003), p. 324.

²⁰ W.R. Childs, *Anglo-Castilian Trade in the Later Middle Ages*, (Manchester 1978), pp.79-83.

²¹ Gras, *Early Customs System*, pp. 526-53.

principal northern European port for English cloth by the mid-fifteenth century, and its development as a finishing centre for much of that cloth, meant that an increasing percentage of English cloth was sent to Antwerp to be dyed and finished. Of the over 500 English cloths sold to Frans de Pape at Antwerp from 1538 to 1545 most were white, and the few that were not white or grey were red or blue, the latter frequently re-dyed to produce stronger, darker colours.²² Yet a significant proportion of Antwerp broadcloths were dyed and finished. Thirty-four percent of the long and short broadcloths exported by Hanseatic merchants between July 1560 and February 1561 were coloured and finished.²³ In the 1532 inventory of the London mercer, John Broke, there remained at Antwerp marble and new colour Kentish cloths for sale.²⁴ Broadcloths destined for the Iberian peninsula were usually coloured. Almost all of Thomas Howell's cloth purchases in 1526-27 were coloured, and those white cloths that were purchased in East Anglia were usually finished and dyed in London.²⁵

Broadcloths dominated cloth exports, in numbers and even more in value. At the export peak in the mid-sixteenth century Merchant Adventurers sold at Antwerp from May 1549 to April 1550, 49,667 short cloths, 8,787 long cloths, 49,337 kerseys, 4,246 cottons, 2,577 dozens, 95 Stockbridges, 2,282 straits, and 2,046 friezes for a total of 119,759 cloths.²⁶ Broadcloths accounted for 70% of the total value of cloth, but were less than half of the cloths exported. Broadcloths were even more dominant in the fourteenth century, when kerseys and cottons were less important. The value of broadcloth shipped from London from March to November 1390 was 84% of the total.²⁷

²² De Smedt, *De Engelse*, vol. 1, pp. 341-46.

²³ *Calendar of the Manuscripts of the Most Hon. The Marquis of Salisbury*, Part 13 (Addenda), (London 1915), p. 57.

²⁴ Devon Record Office, 312M, FY/64.

²⁵ Thomas Howell Ledger, ff. 43v-64v; J. Oldland, 'London Clothmaking, c.1270-c.1550' (unpublished PhD thesis, University of London, 2003), pp. 116-19.

²⁶ Smedt, *De Engelse*, vol. 1, pp. 433-34. Stockbridges were inexpensive narrow dozens made in Stockbridge.

²⁷ TNA, E 122/71/13.

The most expensive exported broadcloths were scarlets. They were exported in very small quantities and often priced by the yard. For example, a Genoese carrack sailing from Southampton in November 1405 carried just over eighty-seven cloths in grain worth between 220-240 shillings each and seven cloths of half-grain worth 160 shillings.²⁸ The kermes dye accounted from 36% to 40% of total production costs compared with 4% to 22% in both material and labour costs for other colours, resulting in a price for scarlets that averaged 56% more than the next most expensive cloth at Bruges.²⁹ When poundage cloth prices became standardized in the late fifteenth century, scarlets were priced 240 shillings for a thirty yard cloth, whereas half-grain cloths, those dyed both with grain and other dyes, were priced at 160 shillings.³⁰ This seems to have been close to the market price as, for instance, the Mercers' Company paid twelve shillings a yard for scarlet and violet in grain cloth in 1449-50 and 1458-59, and nine shillings a yard for murrey in grain in 1461-62.³¹ The finest scarlets purchased by the Great Wardrobe could be considerably more expensive, as much as 500 shillings for one scarlet.³² A scarlet therefore was four times the price of standard broadcloth and twice as expensive as the finest coloured long cloths.

The average quality of exported broadcloth was higher around 1380 than it was to be until later in the fifteenth century. Trade was mainly from Bristol and London to Gascony, Iberia and Ireland, rather than to northern Europe.³³ English cloth was excluded from Flanders, and therefore cut off from the mercantile networks centred in Bruges.

²⁸ TNA, E 122/139/4-8.

²⁹ J. Munro 'The Medieval Scarlet and the Economics of Sartorial Splendour', in N.B. Harte and K.G. Ponting (eds), *Cloth and Clothing in Medieval Europe: Essays in Memory of Professor F.M. Carus-Wilson*, (London 1983), p. 39.

³⁰ TNA, E 122/142/2.

³¹ L. Jefferson (ed), *The Medieval Account Books of the Mercers of London, Volume 2*, (Farnham 2009), pp. 671, 849, 939.

³² Munro, 'Scarlet', p. 62.

³³ E. Quinton and J. Oldland 'London Merchants' Cloth Exports, 1350-1500', in R. Netherton and G. Owen-Crocker (eds), *Medieval Textiles and Clothing, Vol. 7* (Woodbridge 2011), pp. 120-21 .

Two poundage accounts from the 1370-80s, from Bristol and London, provide the earliest indication of the price range for exported cloths (*Table 1*).³⁴ The average broadcloth price appears to have been around 46-47 shillings. At Bristol all the cloths were standard broadcloths (with the exception of a few Irish and Welsh cloths) worth, on average, 47s 10d, and ranging between 40 shillings and 66 shillings. The variety of cloths was far broader from London, where broadcloths were worth, on average, 46s 6d (20d a yard), but the cloths ranged from twenty to one hundred shillings each.

Exported cloths around 1380 were, on average, in the same price range as regular coloured broadcloth purchased by the Great Wardrobe, and good quality cloth bought by Oxford, Cambridge and Winchester colleges towards the end of the century.³⁵ In the 1390s the Great Wardrobe purchased woollens from 18d to 144d a yard (*Table 2*). The fine cloths dyed in grain were priced around 144d a yard, and half-grain cloths around 106d a yard. Fine, ultra-luxury broadcloths using regular dyes were 64d a yard, and the regular, assize-length coloured broadcloths were worth just 26d a yard or 52s a cloth. In 1395 the London draper, Thomas Hende, who was the primary cloth supplier to the Great Wardrobe, sold cloths for a determination feast at Merton College Oxford in 1395. The coloured cloth ranged from 20-25d a yard, prices just below the short broadcloths sold to the king. Ray cloth, woven with dyed wool to produce a striped effect, was priced lower, at 12-20d per yard.³⁶

There were two qualities of broadcloth sold to Oxford, Cambridge and Winchester Colleges, the superior cloth reserved for the fellows

³⁴ E.M. Carus-Wilson (ed), *The Overseas Trade of Bristol in the Later Middle Ages*, Bristol Record Society, (1937), pp. 180-89; TNA, E 122/71/8.

³⁵ TNA, E 101/402/13; Gras, *Early Customs System*, p. 122; E. Thorold Rogers, *A History of Agriculture and Prices in England from the Year of the Oxford Parliament (1259) to the Commencement of the Continental War (1793)*, (Oxford 1866), vol. 1, pp. 569-92; vol. 2, pp. 643-44; vol.3, pp. 494-507; vol. 4, pp. 565-87; W. Beveridge, *Prices and Wages in England from the Twelfth to the Nineteenth Century*, (London 1939), vol. 1, pp. 45-51, 85-87.

³⁶ Thorold Rogers, *History of Agriculture*, vol. 2, pp. 643-44.

and stewards, the lesser cloths given to scholars and servants (*Table 3*). First-quality clothing was superior in quality to the short broadcloths sold to the Great Wardrobe for the use of retainers and servants. Unsurprisingly, university clothing was superior to that at Winchester College. As a broad generalization, luxury broadcloth was priced at sixty shillings or above for short broadcloth, good quality at between forty and sixty shillings, and average to low quality below forty shillings. Presumably some alien merchants were able to buy cloth at a lower price than the Great Wardrobe and Oxbridge colleges, but it is difficult to generalize what that difference might have been. Most of the cloth would have been bought from English cloth merchants or from London's Blackwell Hall, and Oxbridge colleges may have bought from the same suppliers or directly from clothiers.

Exports surged from the mid-1380s to the late 1390s, with most of the increase coming from trade between London and northern Europe as trade disruptions with Flanders induced Italians and Hansards to purchase more cloth in England.³⁷ Much of this growth was in lower quality broadcloths, and even cheaper, narrow straits and kerseys, illustrated in the London poundage account from March to November, 1390 (*Table 4*).³⁸ Only 4% of cloths were worth more than three pounds, 48% between 35s and 45s, and 33% were valued at less than thirty-five shillings. Many of these cloths must have come from Somerset and Wiltshire since production figures revealed by the alnage from these counties vastly exceeded the broadcloths exported from Bristol and Southampton. In addition, and excluded from the table, were Coventry, Kentish, Guilford, Welsh and Irish cloths that were recorded separately, and mostly valued at less than twenty-five shillings. London cloths were priced higher than for other east coast ports. The Essex dozens purchased by Gilbert Maghfield from John Kempson of Hadleigh, Suffolk for export to Spain in 1391-92 were of relatively high quality, 20s a dozen, equivalent to 40s for standard broadcloth.³⁹ Richard Britnell

³⁷ Munro, 'Struggles for international markets', p. 300.

³⁸ TNA, E 122/71/13.

³⁹ TNA, E 101/509/19.

has concluded that the success of the Colchester industry at this time, selling grey russet dozens for 20-24 shillings to Gascony and the Baltic, owed as much to the efficiency of Colchester production and marketing as it did to the price and quality of the wools.⁴⁰ Guilford cloths, the name given to Surrey and Sussex cloths, were also inexpensive, priced at only three quarters the price of cloths from Essex and the western counties, according to the Southampton poundage account for 1405.⁴¹

Florentines imported only the cheaper varieties of English cloth, as their primary interest was to purchase the finest English wools for their own draperies. The Datini company of Prato, just outside Florence, purchased Guilford cloth for only 7¼d a yard, as well as Essex narrow dozens for twelve shillings a cloth (12d a yard).⁴² Italians were exporting higher-quality cloths through Southampton than they were from London, but there was still considerable volume of lower-priced cloths. For example, there were 450 cloths without grain shipped in the Genoese carrack in 1405 at an average value of 45s 10d, plus 1,761 Essex cloths at 36s 2d, 51 Cotswolds cloth at 35s 7d, and 842 Guilford cloths at 27s a cloth.⁴³

Pricing information from continental markets confirms that English broadcloths were among the cheapest sold by the northern draperies. English cloths rarely competed with the best cloths produced by the traditional urban draperies such as Ghent, Bruges, Brussels and Mechelen, or those of Florence, all using the finest English wools. These draperies had been restructured in the early fourteenth century to focus on luxury broadcloths that could absorb higher transaction costs involved in international trade, and rising English wool duties in the 1340s. English cloths competed with the rural Flemish *nouvelles draperies*, cloths

⁴⁰ R.H. Britnell, *Growth and Decline in Colchester 1300-1525*, (Cambridge 1986), pp. 59-63.

⁴¹ TNA, E 122/139/4, 7, 8.

⁴² H. Bradley 'The Datini Factors in London, 1380-1410', in D.J. Clayton, R.G. Davies, and P. McNiven (eds), *Devotion and Governance: Papers in Later Medieval History*, (Stroud 1994), p. 61.

⁴³ TNA, E 122/149/4-8.

woven from lower-quality wools using lower labour costs, but still luxury woollens made to exacting standards.⁴⁴ They used primarily English wools but blended them with Scottish, Irish and local wools.⁴⁵ Early in the fifteenth century the *nouvelles draperies* started to use Spanish wools.⁴⁶ For the most part, broadcloths from the *nouvelles draperies* were priced above the average English broadcloth. John Munro's comparison of *nouvelles draperies'* prices with those of dyed short-cloths purchased by the Great Wardrobe in the 1440s indicated that those from Wervik, Courtrai and Menen were considerably more expensive while those of the small Flemish draperies were of similar price to English broadcloths.⁴⁷ At Pisa in the 1360s, *nouvelles draperies'* broadcloths were priced at 81s 5d sterling and English broadcloths at under 40s.⁴⁸ In the Levant markets c.1390-1410, Wervik cloths were priced from 52s 5d compared with 44s-105s for English Cotswolds cloths. English cloth took over the Levant market in the second quarter of the fifteenth century, as it underpriced other cloths as economic conditions in the area worsened.⁴⁹ In Poland c. 1400 Kortrijk and Dendermonde cloths were priced at 48s 5d and 60s 5d respectively, while cloths from London were 48s 5d and 96s 7d.⁵⁰ In Navarre at this period English cloths were generally priced below those of the *nouvelles draperies*.⁵¹ At Toulouse in 1430-31 English cloths of 'good medium quality, sold to middle-class customers, were priced between 45s and 56s 3d per 'canne' compared with the Flemish *nouvelles draperies*

⁴⁴ Munro, 'Struggles for international markets', pp. 249-62.

⁴⁵ E. Coornaert, 'Draperies rurales, draperies urbaines. L'évolution de l'industrie flamande au moyen âge et au XVI^e siècle', *Revue Belge de Philologie et d'Histoire*, 28 (1950), p. 64.

⁴⁶ J. Munro, 'Spanish merino wools and the *nouvelles draperies*: an industrial transformation in the late medieval Low Countries', *ECHR*, 58 (2005), pp. 456-66.

⁴⁷ J. Munro, 'Industrial Protectionism in Medieval Flanders: Urban or National?' in H. Miskimin, D. Herlihy and A.L. Udovich (eds), *The Medieval City*, (New Haven and London 1977), pp. 257, 263.

⁴⁸ Munro, 'Struggles for international markets', p. 260.

⁴⁹ E. Ashtor, *Levant Trade in the Later Middle Ages*, (Princeton 1983), p. 327.

⁵⁰ Munro, 'Struggles for international markets', pp. 324.

⁵¹ Childs, *Anglo-Castilian Trade*, pp. 81-2.

around 53s.⁵² For the most part merchants from the Low Countries and Florence looked to England as a supplier of the finest wools, but of some of the lowest quality cloth in international trade.

There were several reasons why English merchants enjoyed most of their initial success as suppliers of inexpensive cloths. This was the fastest growing part of the market as standards of living for the lower ranks of the society improved while aristocratic fashion in dress moved from woollens to silk. Flemish drapers were able to hold on to the declining quality end of the market because of their trading networks at Bruges, and the superior quality and reputation that resulted from comprehensive civic quality regulation that did not exist in England until the late fifteenth century. Venetians were looking for low-priced cloth to sell to the Levant that was in recession in the early fifteenth century, and Florence bought only cheap cloths so as not to compete with their own high-quality cloth industry. The relative value of English cloth increased as wool prices fell, because cloth was mechanically fulled in England but more expensively foot-fulled on the continent, and as rising labour costs were, to some extent, offset by the transition to rural production and the more efficient organisation by rural clothiers, who were not subject to cumbersome urban regulation.

1.2. Fifteenth century. England's price advantage and competitive position improved dramatically in the fifteenth century. Wool prices had fallen over 40% between the first to the fifth decades (*Table 5*). As a result export duties as a percentage of the price of better-quality wools rose from 54% at the turn of the century to over 100% by mid-century.⁵³ Then prices for the best wools rose with demand as the European economy revived. The price of the best Shropshire wools doubled from 1454 to 1499, while the price of lower-quality wools remained stable as the increase in pasture and sheep flocks kept pace with rising

⁵² P. Wolff, 'English cloth in Toulouse (1380-1450)', *EcHR*, 2nd ser., 1-2 (1948-50), pp. 292, 294.

⁵³ Munro, 'Struggles for international markets', pp. 300-01

demand.⁵⁴ Prices for the highest quality cloths rose far faster at the end of the century than lower quality cloths. For the continental draperies that exclusively used English wools, prices soared as is illustrated by the prices for the ultra-luxury Ghent dickedinnen cloth prices that more than doubled over the century. One of the *nouvelles draperies*, Wervik, through the substitution of Spanish merino and other wools for English wools, was able to keep prices relatively constant, as were cloth prices at Winchester College and second-quality cloth at Oxford and Cambridge colleges. John Munro has developed a cloth price series based on London and Southampton poundage accounts, which shows that non-Hanseatic alien cloth prices, paid by primarily Italian merchants, rose 50% over the century, matching the price increase of the best cloths sold to Oxford and Cambridge colleges.

Unfortunately fifteenth-century cloth export prices are only available for non-Hanseatic aliens because, after 1422, both denizen and Hansard merchants were generally excluded from paying poundage, and surviving particulars for the major ports come after that date. Consequently we cannot analyse the characteristics of the growing native and Hansard trade, a growing percentage of which was unfinished and undyed broadcloth sold at Antwerp.⁵⁵ Non-Hanseatic trade represented 30.5% of exports in the first half of the century, but fell to 21.4% in the second half.⁵⁶ Most of this non-Hanseatic alien cloth was dyed and finished. Non-Hansatics paid higher petty customs duties than either denizen or Hansards: on the standard broadcloth, 2s 9d compared with 1s 2d for denizens and 1s for Hansards. Petty custom equated to about 2% of market value for denizens and 6% for Italians and Spanish merchants, placing non-Hanseatic merchants at a competitive disadvantage, particularly with more price-sensitive cloths.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ J. Munro, 'Wool-price Schedules and the Qualities of English Wools in the Later Middle Ages c.1270-1499', *Textile History*, 9 (1978), pp. 140, 147-8.

⁵⁵ Kerseys had become an important part of the trade by the end of the century, but they were mostly dyed and finished.

⁵⁶ J. Munro, 'Struggles for international markets', pp. 306-7.

⁵⁷ Ramsey, 'Overseas trade', p. 176.

As long as Italians dominated the sea routes to the Iberian peninsula and the Mediterranean, and as long as these sea routes remained profitable, they seemed to have been able to absorb these high taxes. But the growth of Antwerp as an emporium for English cloth meant that non-Hanseatic aliens could frequently buy their cloth more cheaply in Antwerp, and when the Italians, towards the end of the century, abandoned the sea routes and shipped their cloth overland to the Mediterranean, it made sense to buy some English cloth in Antwerp. London drapers were among the principal beneficiaries of this transition as they were the primary suppliers of finished cloth to the Italians. We can see from the customs particulars that they were increasingly operating through Antwerp from the 1450s onwards, and by the end of the century had become the second most important London merchant company trading at Antwerp, after the mercers.⁵⁸

The most detailed picture of the range of cloths exported from London and Southampton in the first half of the fifteenth century is provided by the 'View of Hosts' inventories of alien merchants, mostly Venetians, between 1439 and 1444 (*Table 6*).⁵⁹ During this short period the local host responsible for aliens made an inventory of all alien purchases. Cloths inventoried for both towns were very similar, suggesting that Venetians and other aliens were buying cloths in London, and then shipping them from either London or Southampton.⁶⁰ Cheaper West Country Westerns and Bastards dominate, with as yet

⁵⁸ Quinton and Oldland, 'London merchants', pp. 132-34.

⁵⁹ TNA, E 122/128/30, 31; M. Guiseppi 'Alien Merchants in England in the Fifteenth Century', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, new ser., 9 (1895), pp. 85-91; A. Ruddock, 'Alien hosting in Southampton in the fifteenth century', *EcHR*, 16 (1946), pp. 30-7; E. Fryde, 'The English cloth industry and the trade with the Mediterranean c.1370-c.1480' in N. Spallanzani (ed), *Produzione, commercio e consumo dei panni di lana*, vol. 2, (Florence 1976), pp. 349, 363-66; P.C. Clarke 'The commercial activities of Giovanni Marcanova di Giacomo', in E. Barile, P.C. Clarke and G. Nordio (eds), *Cittadini veneziani del Quattrocento: I due Giovanni Marcanova, il mercante e l'umanista*, (Venice 2006), pp. 302-6. Fryde determined that Venetians accounted for 88% of inventories.

⁶⁰ A.A. Ruddock, *Italian Merchants and Shipping in Southampton 1270-1600*, (Southampton 1951), p. 55.

few broadcloth purchases from Suffolk and Essex draperies, which, thirty years later, were to become an alternative source of quality broadcloths. Venetians were buying cheaper cloths, inexpensive Westerns at between 23-26s a cloth, and Bastards priced at around 38s.⁶¹ Small quantities of higher-quality cloth were purchased from Northampton and Ludlow. Musterdevillers, high quality blues and greys, were the other important luxury cloth.⁶² Northampton and Ludlows were probably long cloths, as were those dyed with grain.

The Southampton poundage account from 1441-42, that coincides with the period of the View of Hosts inventories, shows that the Genoese must have been buying far higher-quality cloth than the Venetians, who were re-exporting much of the cloth to the Levant, and than the Florentines. The average price of broadcloth and equivalent cloths was 52s 9d, whereas the bastards' inventories by mostly Venetians were priced at 38s 2d (*Table 7*).⁶³ Yet Italians in general were buying far more expensive cloths in the 1440s than those bought for export in London fifty years before. 24% of broadcloth was worth forty shillings or less (65.5% at London in 1390), 61% from forty to sixty shillings (30.6% in 1390), and 15% above sixty shillings (3.9% in 1390).⁶⁴ Gray estimated that the average price of all cloths between 1446 and 1482 by non-Hanseatic aliens in the poundage accounts was 35s 2d, those from London less than at Southampton, because the capital exported cheaper cloths.⁶⁵ He concluded that while many English, and especially Italians, shipped many cloths worth more than forty shillings, most

⁶¹ It has been suggested that the name bastards came from the fact that the weft and warp yarns were quite different, see G. de Poerck, *La Draperie Médiévale en Flandre et en Artois. Technique et Terminologie, 2 vols.* (Bruges 1951), i, 16, n. 70. They may have been white cloths, see E. Carus-Wilson 'The woollen industry before 1550', in E. Crittal and R.D. Pugh (eds), *Victoria County History. Wiltshire*, vol. 4, (London 1959), p. 139. Fryde estimates that the average price paid for broadcloths by the Genoese was £2 10s compared with £2 for the Florentines on four galley fleets between 1439 and 1448, see Fryde, 'English cloth industry', p. 354.

⁶² These were presumably copied from cloths made in Montevilliers, Normandy.

⁶³ TNA, E 122/141/25.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ H. Gray 'English foreign trade from 1446 to 1482', in E. Power and M. Postan (eds), *Studies in the History of English Trade in the Fifteenth Century*, (New York 1966), p. 7.

cloths, especially those by Hansards and denizens, were worth less than forty shillings.⁶⁶

Poundage particulars suggest that the quality of broadcloth exported by other aliens rose steadily in the second half of the century (*Tables 7 and 8*). This was to be expected as the discriminatory tax rate would induce many of them to buy only better cloths. But the transformation of the East Anglian industry from straits to quality broadcloths would also suggest that English and Hansard merchants were buying finer cloths. By 1466 Lavenham and Long Melford in Suffolk were producing exclusively full-length broadcloth, as was most of Hadleigh's cloth.⁶⁷ In 1464 Edward IV personally shipped, through an Italian factor, 3,000 cloths worth £2 4s a cloth, very close to the average price of cloth shipped from London by non-Hanseatic aliens in 1466-67.⁶⁸ As the accounts became standardized in the later fifteenth century, as at London in 1488-9, coloured broadcloth was priced at 60s and white at 40s, higher than prices in the 'Views of Hosts'. At that time Italians and Spanish merchants were shipping mostly higher-quality, coloured broadcloth. There remained a diminished market for cheaper cloths; westerns, bastards, broad lists, Florence and coarse whites. Inexpensive Guilfords and Essex cloths, purchased by the Italians earlier in the century, had disappeared from the accounts. In many years at the end of the fifteenth century, 70% of the cloth trade was passing through either London, or Southampton, whose trade was controlled by Londoners.⁶⁹ The overall price of English cloth had considerably increased since the fourteenth century; the standard broadcloth price was 60s by the end of the fifteenth century.⁷⁰ This was partly a result of rising wool prices, but it also reflected a real improvement in the quality of exported cloth.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁶⁷ R.H. Britnell 'The Woollen Textile Industry of Suffolk in the Late Middle Ages', *Ricardian*, 13 (2003), p. 98.

⁶⁸ C. Ross, *Edward IV*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles 1974), p. 351.

⁶⁹ H.S. Cobb 'Cloth Exports from London and Southampton in the Later Fifteenth and Early Sixteenth Centuries: A Revision', *EcHR*, 2nd ser., 31 (1978), p. 665

⁷⁰ Ramsey, 'Overseas trade', p. 179.

1.3. Sixteenth century. Exports grew 82% from 1500 to 1553. English cloth exports received a shot in the arm from the depreciation in the English currency from 1526, and especially in the 1540s, as cloth exports rose by 30,000 cloths in that decade alone. The boom came to an end in 1550 as the Antwerp market became over-saturated, and the currency was re-valued in 1551.⁷¹ Wool prices, which had remained low through most of the fifteenth century, rose significantly from the 1510s onwards. Using the second half of the fifteenth century as a base, wool prices had risen 53% by the mid-sixteenth century, and the price of sheep doubled.⁷² Rising wool prices were reflected in a series of cloth-finishing acts that set a level above which cloths had to be finished prior to export. This had been set at 40s in 1486. It was raised to 53s 4d in 1511, 66s 8d in 1513, and to 80s in 1535, a doubling in fifty years.⁷³

Average cloth prices also rose because English clothiers were now exporting some of the finest cloths made anywhere. These were fine long white Worcesters and Kentish cloths, usually coloured. William Mucklowe, the Worcester merchant, sold two fine long Worcesters at Antwerp's Sinksen mart of 1511, for 138 shillings a cloth.⁷⁴ Assuming a 25% gross margin, the English purchase price would have been around 103 shillings.⁷⁵ The price of short Worcesters, a lower-quality cloth whose statute length was 20% shorter, was 63 shillings. Fine long Worcesters were the most expensive English broadcloth purchased by Frans de Pape in Antwerp from 1538 to 1546, from 160s-335s.⁷⁶ In

⁷¹ Gould, *Great Debasement*, pp. 118-40.

⁷² P. Bowden 'Agricultural Prices, Farm Profits, and Rents', in J. Thirsk (ed), *The Agrarian History of England and Wales, Vol. 4, 1500-1640*, (Cambridge 1967), pp. 858, 861.

⁷³ D. Pickering (ed), *Statutes at Large, from Magna Charta to the End of the Last Parliament, 1761*, (Cambridge 1762) (*Statutes at Large*). vol. 4, 3 Henry VII, c. 11; 3 Henry VIII, c.7; 5 Henry VIII, c.3; 27 Henry VIII, c. 13.

⁷⁴ Birmingham Reference Library, Zachary Lloyd Collection, 51/1, f.3.

⁷⁵ Based on an estimate of Thomas Kytson's gross margin trading with Antwerp in the 1520s and 1530s, see P.H. Ramsey 'Two early Tudor cloth merchants – Sir Thomas Kytson and Sir Thomas Gresham', in Spallanzani, *Produzione commercio*, p. 388. In some years he was able to make a gross margin above 30%, see Brett 'Somerset clothmen', pp. 46-7; Brett 'Wiltshire Clothmen', p. 54.

⁷⁶ De Smedt, *De Engelse*, vol. 1, pp. 341-49.

April-May 1548 Thomas Gresham was buying long Worcesters for the mart at Barrow (Bergen-op-Zoom), paying an average of 166 shillings for fifty-one long Worcesters.⁷⁷ The price gap between the long and short Worcesters had widened probably because the price of the finest wools were rising faster than lesser quality wools.⁷⁸ The other highly regarded cloths were Castlecombes from Wiltshire, and Coggeshalls from Essex. Thomas Howell paid 3s 4d a yard for a fine white Coggeshall forty yards long, worth 133s.⁷⁹ Thomas Gresham bought Castlecombes in 1548 for 100s.

At mid-century fine Kentish, Sussex and Reading cloths were the heaviest in the country, ninety pounds compared with eighty-four pounds for long Worcesters.⁸⁰ Thomas Howell was buying fine long Kentish cloths, mostly russets in 1526 and 1527 to send to Spain, paying 100-140s a cloth, compared with the short Suffolk and Essex coloured broadcloths that cost him between 55 and 75 shillings.⁸¹ Thomas Kytson paid as much as 140s for a Kentish russet in 1531 and 146s 8d in 1536, and the Cranbrook clothier Stephen Draner, on his death in 1540, had two brown-blue cloths worth 200s, and two fine blues, each worth 300s, in his stockroom.⁸²

Unfinished broadcloth from the western counties, Somerset, western Wiltshire, Gloucestershire and western Oxfordshire was the staple cloth sold at the Antwerp and Barrow cloth marts. The London poundage accounts for 1508-09 had the average broadcloth, mostly coloured, priced at almost 68s.⁸³ Thomas Kytson was probably the

⁷⁷ London, Mercers' Hall, Thomas Gresham Day Book.

⁷⁸ P. Bowden, 'Movement in wool prices, 1490-1610', *Yorkshire Bulletin of Economic and Social Research*, 4 (1952), pp. 110-11.

⁷⁹ Thomas Howell Ledger, f. 50v.

⁸⁰ *Statutes at Large*, vol. 5, 5&6 Edward VI, c. 6. Four years later the weight for Kentish cloths was reduced to 86 pounds, and 75 pounds for long Worcesters, see *Statutes at Large*, Vol. 6, 4&5 Philip & Mary, c. 5.

⁸¹ Thomas Howell Ledger, ff. 43-64.

⁸² TNA, PCC, Prob 2/525; Cambridge University Library, Hengrave Deposit, ms. 78.2; M. Zell *Industry in the Countryside: Wealden Society in the Sixteenth Century*, (Cambridge 1995), p. 161. Kytson's fine Kentish broadcloths weighed 100lb, and were therefore longer than the 28-30 yards specified in the 1552 statute, that weighed only 90lb.

⁸³ TNA, E 122/81/1, 2.

largest purchaser of western whites in the 1530s; he paid from 55s to 59s on average in 1530 for his Wiltshire cloths, but this had risen to 63s to 64s by the late 1530s (26-28 yards long).⁸⁴ Thomas Howell's coloured broadcloths in the 1520s from Hadleigh and Stoke by Nayland in Suffolk mostly ranged from 55-63s, while those from Colchester were slightly more expensive, 62-86s (23-25 yards long). In 1549-50, by which time wages and, more importantly, wool prices had risen significantly, Thomas Gresham was buying white short Worcesters from between 65 and 69 shillings (23-25 yards long). This pricing suggests a highly competitive market with most short broadcloths selling within a relatively narrow price range.

There was also growth and proliferation of cheaper broadcloths. In the north there were kendals from Cumbria; northern dozens and penistone dozens from the West Riding; in Suffolk vesses or setcloth; in the Western counties, westerns and bastards; in Devon, Bridgewater, Totnes dozens, Tavistocks, Moultons.⁸⁵ Vesses were of reasonable quality. Those under 40s for a full cloth were exempted in 1522-23 from the regulations concerning re-stretching of cloth. Thomas Howell was buying vesses that were 52-65s, not much less than the Suffolk broadcloths in which he mostly dealt. Thomas Kytson bought Cheshire penistone dozens for around 15s in 1529.⁸⁶

2. Kerseys and straits

Narrow cloths, a yard in width, woven on a one-person narrow loom in mainly rural areas, continued to find an export market

⁸⁴ Brett, 'Wiltshire clothmen', p. 42.

⁸⁵ TNA, SP8/ 113, ff. 129-40; *Statutes at Large*, vol. 4, 14&15 Henry VIII, c.11; H. Heaton, *The Yorkshire Woollen and Worsted Industries*, (Oxford, 2nd ed. 1965), pp. 79-80; J. Geraint Jenkins, *The Welsh Woollen Industry*, (Cardiff 1969), pp. 104,109-10; N. Lowe, 'The Lancashire Textile Industry in the Sixteenth Century', Chetham Society, 3rd ser., 20 (1972), pp. 2-5; J. Kermode 'The trade of late medieval Chester, 1500-1550', in R. Britnell and J. Hatcher (eds), *Progress and Problems in Medieval England*, (Cambridge 1996), pp. 286-307.

⁸⁶ Cambridge University Library, Hengrave, ms. 78.2.

throughout the period. In the fourteenth century the words straits and kerseys were often used interchangeably, as both cloths appear to have been mostly 12-13 yards long. Kersey had twice as many weft as warp threads, and was woven with a very pronounced twill that gave it elasticity. Initially, they were inexpensive cloths, but by the sixteenth century some kerseys were as valuable, by cloth area, as quality broadcloths. Straits, usually twelve to thirteen yards in length, were the dominant cloth produced in Devon, and in parts of Suffolk and Essex, in the late fourteenth century.⁸⁷ In Suffolk straits accounted for three-quarters of the cloth alnaged.⁸⁸ In Devon outside Exeter in 1397-98, 7,319 straits were the only cloths alnaged, and at Exeter there were 1,070 straits alnaged, equivalent to 266.5 broadcloths, as well as a further 269 broadcloths.⁸⁹ Kerseys were also produced in Berkshire and Hampshire, particularly in the Isle of Wight.⁹⁰ Straits were the principal cloth exported from Exeter, Dartmouth and Bridgewater.⁹¹ One thousand and seventy-nine Devon straits were exported from Bristol between March 1404 and May 1405.⁹² Devon straits were inexpensive cloths priced at only 4d a yard or 4s a cloth, far cheaper by area than broadcloth.⁹³ Hansards were the principal exporters of straits or kerseys from London. These narrow cloths were already an important London export by the late 1380s when kerseys were specifically broken out in the customs accounts: 10,665.5 kerseys were shipped from September 1388 to May 1389, 6,022 from May 1389 to February 1390, and 8,466 from September 1390 to September 1391, averaging around 10,000 kerseys and straits a year, accounting for 12-15% of exports, with a

⁸⁷ Britnell, *Colchester*, p. 60.

⁸⁸ H.L. Gray 'The Production and Exportation of English Woollens in the Fourteenth Century', *English Historical Review*, 34 (1924), p. 28.

⁸⁹ TNA, E 358/8, rots. 6,7.

⁹⁰ TNA, E 358/8, rot. 2; L.F. Salzman, *English Industries of the Middle Ages*, (London 1964), p. 241.

⁹¹ For example at Exeter, 1,048 straits and 83 broadcloths were exported from March to December 1404, see Jenks, *Enrolled Customs Accounts, Part 5*, p. 1,379.

⁹² Jenks, *Enrolled Customs Accounts, Part 5*, p. 1,361.

⁹³ M. Kowaleski, *Local Markets and Regional Trade in Medieval Exeter*, (Cambridge 1995), p. 20.

kersey equal to a third of a broadcloth.⁹⁴ In the March to November 1390 London poundage accounts 13,923 kerseys were exported compared with 6,306 broadcloths.⁹⁵ These cloths had benefited from lower rates of taxation prior to 1388, as they were only subject to poundage. However, in retaliation for the discriminatory treatment of English merchants in many Hanse towns, and seeing a perceived opportunity to increase customs duties, temporarily from 1388 and permanently from 1390, these cloths were made subject to petty custom.⁹⁶ These kerseys, mostly probably from Suffolk and Essex, were 12-13 yards in length and only valued at 4s 2d a cloth, yet they were taxed on the basis of three to an assize broadcloth, not four as might have been expected.⁹⁷ They were therefore subject to taxation out of all proportion to their value, as much as 10% for denizens, and a punitive 23% for non-Hanseatic aliens.⁹⁸ Unsurprisingly, Hansards soon reduced their purchases of kerseys or straits. The cheap kerseys of the 1390s must have been of much lower quality and shorter in length than the kersey that had evolved by 1464, when the assize determined that kersey was to be one yard in width and eighteen yards in length.⁹⁹ It is probable that kerseys evolved in quality and size to be able to bear the high tax rate that had been placed upon them.

During the fifteenth century the importance of straits declined, and kerseys rose. Essex and Suffolk straits rose in value, while Hampshire

⁹⁴ Jenks, *Enrolled Customs Accounts, Part 5*, pp. 1,216-17; Ormrod, 'Finance and Trade', p. 171. Hanse merchants claimed in 1390 that they were exporting 10,000 straits and kerseys a year, see T.H. Lloyd, *England and the German Hanse, 1157-1611*, (Cambridge 1991), 70.

⁹⁵ TNA, E 12271/13.

⁹⁶ Lloyd, *Hanse*, pp. 68-71, 77-79.

⁹⁷ There were no straits recorded in the 1390 London poundage accounts. In the alnage particulars, the only kerseys mentioned are from Berkshire and the Isle of Wight, but it must have been that the Hansards were buying Suffolk and Essex straits because of the quantities involved, and the rapid development of the Suffolk industry at this time. Isle of Wight kerseys were deemed to be equivalent to half a broadcloth, but in 1390 there were only 6½ cloths recorded in the poundage accounts, worth sixteen shillings each, a far more valuable cloth than Suffolk straits.

⁹⁸ Ormrod, 'Finance and trade', p. 171.

⁹⁹ *Statutes at Large*, vol. 3, 4 Edward IV, c. 1.

and many Devon straits remained at their fourteenth-century price levels. The 1438 London Borromei Ledger records Essex straits selling between 10s 4d to 13s 9d a cloth, and in the Views of Hosts' accounts they were priced at 10s 7d.¹⁰⁰ Given that a strait was little more than a quarter the size of standard short broadcloth, these more expensive straits were comparable in price by area to western broadcloths. Straits accounted for 28% of assize cloths exported by other aliens from Southampton in 1443-4 and 21% in 1461-62.¹⁰¹ In the 1461-62 Southampton poundage account, Suffolk straits and Bridgewater narrows were priced far higher than Hampshire narrows, as low as 5s, and straits still accounted for 42% of the cloths paying poundage on an equivalent basis, 1,853 equivalent cloths compared with 2,526 broadcloths.¹⁰² London particulars for 1448-49 show that non-Hanseatic aliens were shipping few straits, only 87 cloths on an equivalent basis compared with 3,417 broadcloths. In 1488-89, however, they still accounted for 9.7% of equivalent cloths. At Exeter, white straits, priced at 5s a strait, remained the principal exported cloth even in the early sixteenth century.¹⁰³ Many clothiers chose to move to produce more profitable cloths by the end of the century: in Suffolk and Essex to quality broadcloths, in Hampshire and Devon to kerseys. The result was that the market for higher-priced straits dried up.

In the sixteenth century, now that the price of broadcloth and kerseys had risen, cheap straits had become overvalued by customs relative to broadcloth. In 1536 there were minor revisions in the customs regulations, on the one hand to stimulate the sales of inexpensive, narrow cloths by lowering their value, and on the other hand to ensure that they were subject to petty custom as many cloths, particularly in Devon, were being called Cornish cloths which, until

¹⁰⁰ The Borromei Bank Research Project, www.queenmaryhistoricalresearch.org, London account, 1436, ff.156.1, 182.7, 197.5, 337.2. Colchester straits were priced around 10s during the 1393-1413 period, see Britnell, *Colchester*, pp. 59-60

¹⁰¹ TNA, E 122/ 141/25, 142/2, 78/7. These figures exclude narrow Welsh cottons and frieze that were not customed.

¹⁰² TNA, E 122/142/2.

¹⁰³ TNA, E 122/41/6, 42/2.

then, had avoided custom altogether.¹⁰⁴ Coloured straits were now valued at five to a broadcloth, white straits six, Totnes narrows seven, Tavistock narrows eight. At Exeter exports increased significantly.¹⁰⁵

Kerseys were of rising importance, at least to Spanish and Italian merchants. The small London poundage accounts from October 1465 to April 1466, in which the Spanish feature as the principal exporters, show as many kerseys as broadcloths exported, on an equivalent basis.¹⁰⁶ They were worth, on average, 17s 4d, as much by surface area as a broadcloth. In the larger volume London accounts for 1488-89, kerseys were only 12.5% of broadcloth sales on an equivalent basis, the white kerseys valued at 10s and the coloured at 13s 4d. Non-Hanseatic merchants shipped 7,656 kerseys and only 813 broadcloths from London from April to June 1509.¹⁰⁷ Twenty percent of the English cloths registered at the Brabant fairs in 1495-98 were kerseys.¹⁰⁸ On the other hand very few kerseys were shipped from Bristol in 1503-4.¹⁰⁹ The early sixteenth-century kersey was, on average, a far higher-quality product than it had been in the fourteenth.

In the sixteenth century, the growth and development of kerseys was truly remarkable, both in terms of volume shipped overseas and the range of quality offered. The average price of three kerseys was raised from forty to sixty shillings in 1505, in line with the standard price for broadcloth.¹¹⁰ Kerseymaking now stretched across southern England from the Weald in Kent to eastern Devon, and was important in Yorkshire's West Riding and Lancashire. Kerseys became the primary cloth export for non-Hanseatic aliens. In 1553-54, non-Hanseatic aliens shipped 8,321 kerseys and only 1,955 broadcloths, on an equivalent

¹⁰⁴ TNA, SP 1/113, ff. 129-40.

¹⁰⁵ Carus-Wilson and Coleman, *Export Trade*, p. 118.

¹⁰⁶ TNA, E 122/194/17, 18.

¹⁰⁷ TNA, E 122/81/1, 2.

¹⁰⁸ J.H. Munro, 'Industrial transformations in the north-west European textile trades, c. 1290-c.1340: economic progress or economic crisis?' in B.M.S. Campbell (ed), *Before the Black Death. Studies in the "Crisis" of the Early Fourteenth Century*. (Manchester 1991), p. 134, n. 87.

¹⁰⁹ Flavin and Jones, *Bristol's Trade*, pp.1-102.

¹¹⁰ Ramsey, 'Overseas trade', p. 179.

basis.¹¹¹ Merchant Adventurers shipped 16,268 kerseys to Antwerp in April-May 1535 compared with 13,340 short broadcloths and 347 long broadcloths.¹¹²

Kerseys were mostly coloured. Only 20% of kerseys shipped by non-Hanseatic aliens from London in 1553-54 were white.¹¹³ However, it is likely that many coloured cloths were blue, to be re-dyed on the continent to make blacks and purples. Thomas Kytson sent to Antwerp's Sinksen and Barrow marts in 1529, 110 plunkets, 21 reds, 18 light greens, 14 sad greens, 7 whites, 6 watchets and 3 yellows (Plunket was a light blue. Blue, in descending order of darkness, was sad blue, blue, azure, watchet, plunket and huling).¹¹⁴ As with broadcloth the finest kerseys were also longer. In Eastern Europe, Yorkshire kersies were 17-18 yards long, ordinary Hampshire kerseys were 24 yards and the better sorting kerseys were 28 yards.¹¹⁵ The average price of kersey in Antwerp in 1551 was 33 shillings and 3 groats Flemish compared with 100 shillings for the average short broadcloth.¹¹⁶ Since the statute dimensions of kersey was 37% of a western white broadcloth, then the quality of a coloured kersey must have been comparable to a short broadcloth. The very successful Gresham dynasty of London mercers specialized in kerseys. Richard Gresham shipped 2,880, John Gresham 2521, and William Gresham 1,140 kerseys to the Sinksen mart in 1535, 40% of the kerseys shipped. As with broadcloths there were clear price points for various quality levels. From 1538 to 1544 the Antwerp commission agents, van der Molen, paid 38-48s for Winchcombe kerseys from around Newbury, 36-48s for second-grade kerseys, and 6-8s less for northern kerseys.¹¹⁷ Thomas Gresham in 1548 bought cheap northern kersies for 24-34s, most western kerseys for 34-36s, and Winchcombe kerseys for 40s.

¹¹¹ TNA, E 122835, 862.

¹¹² Smedt, *De Engelse*, vol. 1, p. 430.

¹¹³ TNA, E 122862.

¹¹⁴ Cambridge University Library, Hengrave Hall, ms. 78/1.

¹¹⁵ W. Endrei, 'English Kersey in Eastern Europe: with special reference to Hungary', *Textile History*, 5 (1974), p. 90.

¹¹⁶ Smedt, *De engelse*, vol. 1, 434.

¹¹⁷ P. Edler, 'Winchcombe kerseys in Antwerp (1538-44)', *EcHR*, 7 (1936), p. 58.

3. Cottons, frieze and other narrow cloths

Cottons and frieze were inexpensive, heavy woollens that had a raised nap, often produced by rubbing with an iron card, and were then shorn.¹¹⁸ Frieze was used primarily for outerwear; cottons for packing cloths and as lining material. In the fourteenth century they were widely made, in Coventry and London for example, but most came from Wales, and were finished in Welsh border towns like Shrewsbury.¹¹⁹ In the sixteenth century Cheshire and Manchester cottons were widely exported. Cottons and frieze were narrower than straits or kerseys. In 1552 the dimensions of Welsh frieze were 36 yards long and three quarters of a yard wide, and Welsh cottons 32 goads (a goad is thought to have been 1½ yards) and three quarters of a yard wide. Manchester cottons were smaller, 22 goads long by three quarters of a yard wide. In the poundage accounts Welsh cottons were priced at 6d a goad and a roll of frieze at 13s 4d, valuations that had remained relatively constant from the early fifteenth to the mid-sixteenth century.¹²⁰

These cheap cottons and frieze were not included in the petty customs accounts but were subject to the poundage subsidy. In the fourteenth century the quantities of Welsh straits, later known as cottons, were relatively small, for example 1,159 goads from Southampton from October 1405 to March 1406.¹²¹ The cloth seems to have been in use primarily as wrappers for more expensive cloth and other merchandise, and was occasionally called 'wrappers'.¹²²

¹¹⁸ E. Kerridge, *Textile Manufacturers in Early Modern England*, (Manchester, 1985), p. 19.

¹¹⁹ TNA, E 101/341/10, 341/15; *Statutes at Large*, vol. 6, 8 Elizabeth, c.7; T.C. Mendenhall, *The Shrewsbury Drapers and the Welsh Wool Trade in the XVI and XVII Centuries*, (Oxford, 1953), p. 8; E. Carus-Wilson 'The oversea trade of late medieval Coventry', in E. Perry (ed), *Economies et Sociétés au Moyen Age: Mélanges Offerits à Edouard Perroy*, (Paris, 1973), pp. 373-74.

¹²⁰ In 1529 Thomas Kytson was paying 7¼d per goad for Manchester cottons, so the 6d price in the poundage accounts no longer reflected the market price, see Cambridge University Library, Hengrave, ms. 78.2. In 1558 the Book of Rates valued a goad of cottons at 8d and a roll of frieze at 20s, see T.S. Willan, *A Tudor Book of Rates*, (Manchester, 1962), pp. 66-7.

¹²¹ TNA, E 122/139, 4-8.

¹²² TNA, E 122/185/3, 71/13.

In the fifteenth century Italians increased their purchases of Welsh cottons and frieze. In the small London poundage account for October 1465 to April 1466, other aliens shipped 160 broadcloths, 165 kerseys, 50 dozens, but 17,167 goads of Welsh russet cottons, 512 rolls of frieze and 61 linings.¹²³ These cloths subject to poundage were 60% higher in value than the customed cloths. This was unusual. In the much larger London account for 1488-89 when 71,618 goads of Welsh cottons and 279 rolls of cotton were shipped as well as 549 rolls of frieze, their value was only 8% of all cloths. Petty custom accounts, which excluded cottons and frieze, therefore significantly understate the volume of the Italian cloth trade in the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Cottons and frieze were only a small part of the Antwerp trade, accounting for only 3.5% of the value (13% of the number of cloths) in 1551, with frieze exports worth almost double the value of cottons.¹²⁴ But they were a far more important part of non-Hanseatic trade from London; around 5.2 % of the value of cloths during April-June 1509, 14.9% in 1520-21, and rising to 20% in 1553-54.¹²⁵ At Bristol, cottons (or Welsh straits as they were called) accounted for less than 2% of the value of cloths shipped in 1503-04, although Welsh cloth, worth twenty shillings and subject to poundage, was worth another 6.6%.¹²⁶ At Bristol in 1545-46 cottons and frieze accounted for 12% of the value of cloth shipped. Non-Hanseatic aliens exported 643.5 and denizens 2,013 Manchester and northern cottons, valued at 10s each.¹²⁷ Aliens exported 89 $\frac{1}{3}$, and denizens 12 $\frac{2}{3}$ cloths of Bristol frieze worth 13s 4d a roll. At London, in 1547-48, denizens exported more frieze (751.7 rolls) and cottons (58,651 goads) than aliens (33 $\frac{1}{4}$ roll of frieze and 21,484 goads). Hanseatic merchants exported small quantities of cottons as wrappers, 20 to 100 goads per shipment, on which they

¹²³ TNA, E 122/194/17.

¹²⁴ Smedt, *De Engelse*, vol. 1, p. 434.

¹²⁵ TNA, E 122/81/1, 2, 83/5, 86/ 2.

¹²⁶ Flavin and Jones, *Bristol's Trade*, pp. 1-102.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 457-545. The relative value of cottons to other cloths assumes that broadcloth was worth, on average, 70s.

seem to have paid poundage. In 1534-35 the valuation placed on cottons owned by Hanseatic merchants was 8d a goad, presumably close to the market price, compared with 6d a goad for non-Hanseatic merchants.¹²⁸

4. Conclusions

Before 1450 England was primarily a supplier of cheap broad and narrow cloths, with some exceptions, to both northern and southern European markets. During the fifteenth century, as wool prices fell dramatically for all but the finest wools, as wool duties increased as a percentage of wool prices, as production costs also declined because clothiers managed cloth manufacture more efficiently, and as the Low Countries' draperies were weakened by the credit restrictions of the Calais staple bullion ordinances, English clothiers found that they were able to sell more higher-quality cloths. After 1470 the European economy revived. The range of English cloths became more diversified, as many Flemish and Brabant draperies had declined, and English cloths enjoyed improved access to continental markets. Most cloths showed remarkable growth; not just standard broadcloths, but cheap cottons and frieze, cheap and high-priced kerseys, and expensive long broadcloths. Leading cloth merchants and clothiers were able to dramatically increase both quality and output of broadcloth and kerseys at the same time in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. The success of this strategy was to be reflected in the great wealth of London's merchants in the early sixteenth century, and of leading clothiers such as the Springs of Lavenham, Winchcombes of Newbury and William Stumpe of Malmesbury.¹²⁹

¹²⁸ TNA, E 122/82/8; Lloyd, *Hanse*, p. 386.

¹²⁹ J. Oldland 'The Wealth of the Trades in Early Tudor London', *London Journal*, 31 (2006), pp.127-56.

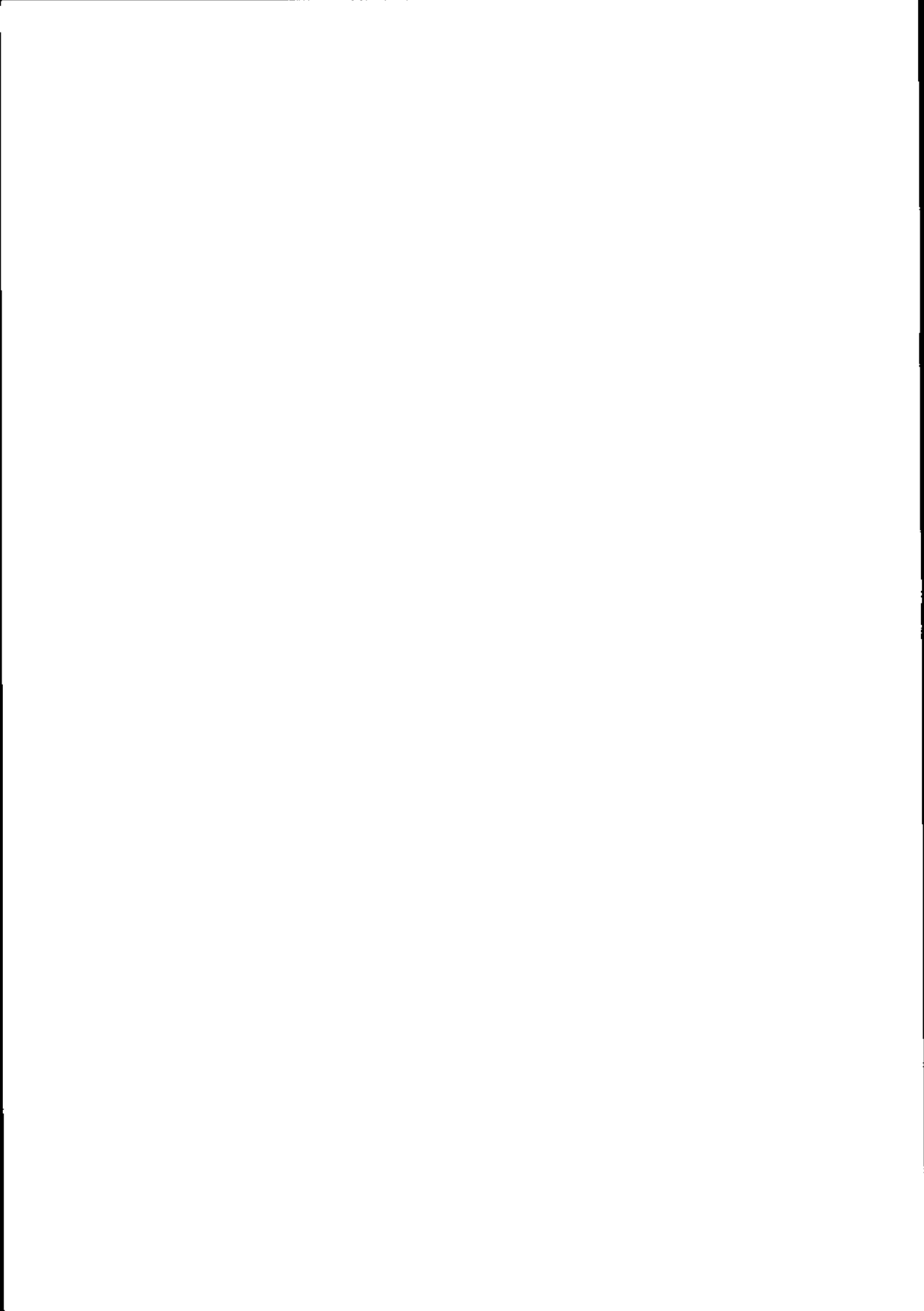
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Appendix

The variety and quality of English woollen cloth
exported in the Late Middle Ages

TABLE 1. Average Prices for Cloths Paying Poundage, 1378-1405, in Shillings and Pence

Cloth types	Bristol, 1378-78	London, 1384-85	Boston, 1390	Hull, 1391-92	Lynn, 1391-92	Exeter, 1398-99	Hull, 1398-99	London, 1390	Bristol, Southampton, 1403-04	1405 ¹
Broadcloths	47s 10d	46s 7d	37s 9d	29s 5d	34s 7d	30s 5d	27s ²	38s 7d	28s 2d	45s 10d
Straits		8s	5s 2d	4s 2d	7s 5d	4s 3d	4s 1d ³			
Kerseys		6s 7d			4s 2d			4s 3d		5s
Guilford broadcloth		31s						23s 5d		27s
Essex broadcloth										36s 2d
Cotswolds broadcloth										35s 7d
Welsh broad dozens								15s 4d	9s 4d	
Welsh straits (narrow cottons)								6d a goad		
Frieze									18s 10d	

¹ These prices have been taken from the large shipments for the last day in November, 1405, when all cloths were specifically priced.

² In 1430-1 the average broadcloth price was about the same, 26s. 8d. see J.N. Bartlett, 'Some aspects of the economy of York in the later Middle Ages, 1300-1500', (Unpublished PhD. Thesis, University of London, 1958), p. 79.

³ Most straits were recorded in ells. This estimate is based on an analysis of shipments of 24 May.

TABLE 2. Great Wardrobe Drapery Account, 1392-95

Cloths	Price range per yard in pence	Median price per yard in pence	Standard cloth length ¹	Median price per cloth in shillings and pence	Percent of expenditure
Scarlet	144-160	144	28	280s	9.9
Half-grain	104-108	106	28	247s 4d	2.8
Long coloured	38-96	64	28	149s 4d	38.0
Long russet	48-66	60	28	140s	1.1
Long blanket	48-80	62	28	144s 8d	.9
Short coloured	16-54	26	24	52s	36.6
Short russet	40-56	47	24	94s	.3
Short blanket	16-48	28	24	54s	3.2
Ray	16-25	18	24	36s	6.6
Russet ray strait	16-36	17	12	17s	.4
Straits	8-10	10	12	10s	.2

¹ Thorold Rogers, *History of Agriculture*, vol. 1, p. 575; Beveridge, *Prices and Wages*, vol. 1, p. 47; Bridbury, *Clothmaking*, p. 109; TNA, E 101/387/13. The assize at this time called for the standard broadcloth to be 28 yards in length and 6 quarters in width, yet both Thorold Rogers and Beveridge found that the standard finished cloth was 24 yards in length. Long cloths were usually 28 yards in length after finishing

Source: TNA, E 101/402/13.

TABLE 3. Prices for Woollen Cloth at Oxford, Cambridge and Winchester Colleges in the 1390s, in Shillings and Pence

	First quality	Second quality	First quality	Second quality
Oxford and Cambridge, 1390-99	77s 10d	40s	39d	20d
Winchester, 1393-99	40s 10d	34s 10d	20d	17d

Source: E. Thorold Rogers, *A History of Agriculture and Prices in England from the Year of the Oxford Parliament (1259) to the Commencement of the Continental War (1793)*, Vol. 1, (Oxford, 1866), p. 592; W. Beveridge, *Prices and Wages in England from the Twelfth to the Nineteenth Century*: Vol. 1, (London, 1939), p. 85.

TABLE 4. Quantities of Standard Broadcloth Exported at Various Prices from London between March and November 1390

Price per assize broadcloth in shillings	Broadcloths shipped	% of cloths
Less than 25s	313	5.6
From 25-30s	674	11.9
From 30s to 35s	890	15.7
From 35s to 40s	1,633	28.8
From 40s to 45s	1,083	19.1
From 45s to 50s	447	7.9
From 50s to 60s	394	6.9
From 60s to 80s	205	3.6
From 80s to 100s	18	.3
From 100s to 120s	7	.1
120s and above	4	
Half grain	1	
Scarlet	6	.1
Totals	5,675	100.0

Source: TNA:PRO, E 122/71/13.

TABLE 5. Fifteenth-Century Price indices for Wheat, Wool and Cloth (1401-10 as 100)

Index	1411-20	1421-30	1431-40	1441-50	1451-60	1461-70	1471-80	1481-90	1491-1500
Wheat prices	92	84	109	75	83	83	87	101	88
All wools ¹	90	85	86	78	57	79	63	82	62
Oxford & Cambridge first-quality cloths	99	110	108	114	122	145	112	147	164
Oxford & Cambridge third-quality cloths	87	93	82	93	92	79	80	114	120
Winchester first-quality cloths	102	95	96	102	103	106	111	114	116
Winchester second-quality cloth prices	98	92	96	99	95	98	101	104	104
Non-Hanseatic cloth export prices	82	123	133	134	113	113	129	142	154
Ghent dickedinnen first-quality	101	102	120	133	124	137	150	236	246
Wervik first-quality (new drapery)	91	96	116	107	98	107 (1461-65)	na	na	na

¹ Prices for the second half of the century are less reliable and understated because the index is composed of fewer manors, and they are skewed to those producing lower-priced wools

Source: T.H. Lloyd, *The Movement in Wool Prices in Medieval England* (Cambridge, 1973), pp. 43-5; J.E. Thorold Rogers, *A History of Agriculture and Prices in England from the Year of the Oxford Parliament (1259) to the Commencement of the Continental War (1793)*, (Oxford, 1866), vol. 4, p. 589; W. Beveridge, *Prices and Wages in England from the Twelfth to the Nineteenth Century*, vol. I (London, 1939), pp. 85-6; J.H. Munro 'Three Centuries of Luxury Textile Consumption in the Low Countries and England, 1350-1570: Trends and Comparisons of Real Values of Woollen Broadcloths (Then and Now)', K. Vestergård and M.L. Nosch (eds), *The Medieval Broadcloth: Changing Trends in Fashions, Manufacturing and Consumption* (Oxford and Oakville, 2009), pp. 38-44.

TABLE 6. Cloth Inventory for the Principal Cloths in the 'View of Hosts' for London and Southampton from 1439 to 1444

Cloth	London		Southampton	
	Number of cloths	Average cost in shillings and pence	Number of cloths	Average cost in shillings and pence
<i>Cloths in grain</i>				
Grain			.3	243s
Murrey in grain	1.67	215s 7d	1.33	270s 7d
Half-grain	5	100s	5	100s
<i>Broadcloths</i>				
Musterdevillers	32	145s 7d	51	127s 7d
Northamptons	40	124s 5d	54	135s 4d
Ludlowes	8	102s 6d	250	80s
Coloured			40	97s
Colchesters	28	86s 8d	17	(unpriced)
Bristols	100	80s		
Blanket	27	40s 5d	27	40s 5d
Bastards	2,468	37s 7d	3,576	38s 2d
Guilfords	122	28s 2d	123	28s
Westerns	4,095	23s 10d	7,087	26s
Western dozens	80	12s	180	13s 10d
<i>Narrow Cloths</i>				
Kerseys	532	19s 2d	781	19s
Suffolk straits	140	12s	716	12s 2d
Straits	2,132	10s 7d	2,446	10s 5d
Southampton dozens	414	7s 2d	413	7s 9d
Source: TNA, E 101/128/ 30, 31, 34.				

TABLE 7. Average Prices for Cloths Paying Poundage at London, Sandwich, Southampton, Bristol and Exeter, 1443-1515, in Shillings and pence

Cloth types	London, 1448-49	London, 1462-63	London, 1466-67	London, 1488-89	Sandwich ¹ , 1465-66	Southampton, 1443-44	Southampton, 1461-62 ²	Bristol, 1465-66	Bristol, 1483	Exeter, 1515
Scarlet					6s 8d per yard		240s			
Half-grain					5s per yard ³		160s			
Northampton					66s 8d					
Coggeshalls					53s 4d					
Broadcloth	30s	35s	43s 2d		40s ⁴	52s 9d	50s 7d	50s 7d	60s	
Broadcloth, coloured					60s 40-53s 4d					
Broadcloth- white					40s					
Westerns-coloured					40s					
Westerns-white					30s					
Worcester whites					20s					
Bastards					26s 8d					
Bastard dozens					10s					
Coarse whites					20s					20s
Bridgewater dozens					10s			8s 2d		
Northern dozens					10s					
Hampshire straits					5s			5s		
Suffolk straits					5s					
Essex straits					6s					
Coloured straits					6s 8d					

continue

The variety and quality of English woollen cloth exported in the Late Middle Ages

continued **TABLE 7. Average Prices for Cloths Paying Poundage at London, Sandwich, Southampton, Bristol and Exeter, 1443-1515, in Shillings and pence**

Cloth types	London, 1448-49	London, 1462-63	London, 1466-67	London, 1488-89	Sandwich ¹ , 1465-66	Southampton, 1443-44	Southampton, 1461-62 ²	Bristol, 1465-66	Bristol, 1483	Exeter, 1515
Straits	6s 8d						10s			5s
Welsh straits								4s 7d		
Kerseys	15s		17s 4d		13s 4d	14s	13s 4d			10s ³
Kerseys-coloured					13s 4d					
Kerseys-white					10s					
Frieze	15s		14s 7d	13s 4d						10s

¹ These prices are those from a note attached to a Sandwich customs account, TNA, E 122/128/8.

² Prices in the account were given in equivalent cloths. Prices have been adjusted for kerseys at three to a broadcloth and for straits, four to a broadcloth.

³ These half-grain cloths were violets.

⁴ In this category, cloths of Winchester, Colchester are mentioned. Colchester cloths were of two qualities, 40s and 53s 4d.

⁵ Devonshire kerseys were 12-13 yards in length, see E. Kerridge, *Textile Manufactures in Early Modern England*, (Manchester, 1985), p. 27.

Source: TNA, E 122/73/23, 194/14, 194/17, 78/7, 141/25, 142/2, 19/4, 20/1, 42/2; D. Burwash, *English Merchant Shipping 1460-1540*, (Toronto, 1947), p. 203.

TABLE 8. Broadcloths Paying Poundage at London in 1488-9

Cloth	Standardized price	Volume in equivalent cloths	Percent of broadcloth
Coloured broadcloth	60s	2,967	56.6
White broadcloth	40s	234	4.5
Coloured westerns	40s	358	6.8
White westerns	30s	186	3.5
Bastards	26s 8d	492	9.4
Broad lists	26s 8d	759	14.5
Florences	26s 8d	175	3.3
Coarse whites	20s	71	1.4
Total		5,242	100.0

Source: T NA, E 122/78/7.

