

## THE DEMISE OF THE KENT BROADCLOTH INDUSTRY IN THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY: ENGLAND'S FIRST DE-INDUSTRIALISATION

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In December 1677 the 'case of the poor' of the parish of Cranbrook was presented by the minister, Charles Buck, churchwardens Stephen Osborne and Theophilus Fowle and twenty-four of the leading inhabitants to the Dean and Chapter of Christ Church, Canterbury. The townsmen claim in their petition that Cranbrook had 'been a great clothing town' but that 'by reason of the great decay of the said clothing trade' and that 'being very populous it is become exceeding poor'.<sup>1</sup> Of course, this plea may have been influenced by the desire of stallholders to negotiate reduced market rents with the Dean and Chapter. But it is also true that by the late seventeenth century Cranbrook's textile industry had declined and the cost of poor relief in the town had become a heavy burden. For sixteen years it had amounted to £450 and upwards a year.<sup>2</sup> The problem of economic decline was echoed in the protests of neighbouring parishioners: a 1673 petition from Benenden complained of the 'great and general poverty in respect of the trade of clothmaking within the said parish'; and the vicar of Biddenden in 1683 reported that the parish 'was not so populous now as formerly when the clothing trade there flourished'.<sup>3</sup> This paper concentrates on the trajectory of manufacturing decline in Cranbrook and its neighbourhood area. It also examines the evidence for economic dislocation and cyclical trends in the wider Wealden textile industry. What was the nature and chronology of the decline, and was there still significant clothmaking in the period after the Civil War?

Before proceeding to a detailed discussion of the demise of the Kent Weald broadcloth industry, a few words about 'proto-industrialization' – and about 'de-industrialization' – are necessary to provide a wider context within which to understand developments in Kent. 'Proto-industrialization' is one of those grand theories – conceived in the 1970s and 1980s – which aims to explain the economic evolution of Western societies from their pre-industrial past to the traditional 'Industrial

Revolution' in the early nineteenth century. As outlined by one of the theory's inventors, Franklin Mendels, the Industrial Revolution was anything but a sudden and revolutionary leap from agricultural to industrial society. Rather it was the second of a two-stage process through which most Western societies passed between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries. The first stage he labelled the stage of 'proto-industry', and asserted that the second stage, the one traditionally labelled the Industrial Revolution, could not have happened without the earlier 'proto-industrial' development. Mendels' first stage, 'proto-industry', equates roughly with Marx's 'age of manufacture' and with what earlier historians had dubbed 'cottage industry'. But Mendels was much more specific about what the era of 'proto-industry' entailed. In particular, proto-industry involved manufacturing – often in a rural setting – for national and international markets. The 'proto-industrial' family, in the model, was usually involved in farming, but did not occupy enough land to be self-sufficient; they needed other work to supplement their income. Usually a capitalist entrepreneur – such as the clothiers described in this paper – was involved; he usually both financed and organised production – which generally took place in the cottages of his workforce, and it was he who sold the manufactured articles – be they textiles or metalwares – to wholesalers and export merchants. This was a level of manufacturing well beyond Marx's stage of basic handicraft production; it was capitalist manufacturing similar in many ways to the industrial production of the early nineteenth century – but without the factory. Mendels and other proponents of 'proto-industrialization' argue that most of the prerequisites for the nineteenth-century industrial revolution were assembled during the era of proto-industry: the growth of a wage-earning workforce, trained in skills necessary for manufacturing rather than farming; the separation of an increasing share of the labour force from the land; the evolution of a class of independent manufacturers who could deploy sufficient capital to finance their own production, and who in a later generation would be the earliest entrepreneurs of the Industrial Revolution.<sup>4</sup>

Mendels also noted that most of the regions which participated in the Industrial Revolution had earlier been centres of manufacturing; hence Mendels' conclusion: 'proto-industrial' regions evolve into 'industrial' regions; the existence of 'proto-industry' seems to have been a required condition for progress into modern industry. Proto-industrial districts were widespread across Western Europe. In England alone one could point to more than a dozen regions of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century manufacturing – including those which subsequently became early centres of the new Industrial Revolution: Yorkshire, South Lancashire and the West Midlands. However, it had to be admitted that there were very many areas of 'proto-industry' which did not proceed irresistibly into factory industry in the nineteenth century: in England these

included some of the most important textile districts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: the Norwich area, the Colne Valley in Suffolk and Essex and, most important, the West Country clothing region of Wiltshire and east Somerset. And, of course, there was the Weald of Kent, the site of a flourishing, proto-industrial broadcloth industry in the sixteenth century! Here were regions with successful proto-industry that not only failed to industrialize; they de-industrialized in the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries. The inventors of ‘proto-industrialization’ did not spend much time examining this underside of their model. But it’s high time that historians examine these failures to industrialize; why did so many sites of proto-industrialization fail to become centres of modern industry? Mendels’ very general suggestion to explain the many de-industrialisations had to do with the comparative advantages between manufacturing and agriculture that different regions enjoyed. We will return to this point at the end.

The Kent Weald was one of the earliest centres of ‘proto-industry’ in England. From at least the early fifteenth century, local manufacturers organised the production of what was known nationally – and in the Low Countries – as ‘Kent broadcloth’. It was coloured, heavy woollen cloth that was ‘dyed in the wool’ – that is *before* and not *after* weaving. Kent broadcloths were about a metre in width, and by statute each cloth had to weigh at least eighty-six pounds, and be at least twenty-eight yards long.<sup>5</sup> The authors of this paper have studied the operation of the Wealden broadcloth industry in the sixteenth century, and charted its decline over the course of the seventeenth. Here was England first ‘de-industrialization’, in terms of the proto-industrialization model; it should be a good case study of a process which has been sadly overlooked. The central Weald – with Cranbrook at its core – is an example of an early proto-industrialized region of the sort described by Mendels (whose own examples were drawn from the eighteenth century). Cranbrook and its neighbourhood had several of the geographical, historical and cultural prerequisites that were crucial for the establishment of a proto-industrial cloth industry. It was located in a wood-pasture farming region, where small farms proliferated, where there was an active land market, and where there were large numbers of small farmers engaged predominantly in pastoral farming. This was typical of other cloth manufacturing areas such as east Somerset, Wiltshire and the important clothing area of the Colne Valley in Essex and Suffolk, where wood-pasture agrarian regimes supported large under-employed populations in ‘open parishes’.<sup>6</sup> The Kentish custom of gavelkind – which specified partible inheritance – favoured the growth of cottage industries because it led to the proliferation of smallholders, who needed to supplement their income from farming through by-employments in industry. Gavelkind custom also encouraged

local population growth, which meant there was a growing pool of labour for clothmaking entrepreneurs to employ – on a putting-out basis, and for piece rate wages. They were the sixteenth century's ideal 'flexible workforce'! Large-scale capitalist clothiers prospered and adapted well to changes in the market demand for textiles in the sixteenth century. In part the clothier élite was successful because they invested part of their capital in farming and in purchasing land which could be profitably rented out: such income streams supplemented their income from cloth production and increased their liquidity.<sup>7</sup> It has always been assumed, however, that by the mid-seventeenth century these Wealden clothiers were under pressure from changes in the market, and that their failure to adapt and supply the growing market for lighter, less expensive cloths led to the collapse of the broadcloth industry in Kent. A number of different explanations have been suggested to explain the collapse of the Kent broadcloth industry. Many years ago Coleman thought that the industry declined because wages in Kent were higher than wages paid to clothworkers in other rural areas, which made the Kent cloth too expensive for its customers in Europe; and that the Kent industry also suffered from the emigration of many of its skilled workers to Germany in the seventeenth century. But the comparatively high wages paid in the Kent countryside did not cause the collapse of clothmaking in the sixteenth or very early seventeenth century, so why should they be the cause of industrial decline in the mid-seventeenth century?

In 1989, Brian Short argued that the decline of the Kent broadcloth industry was part of a wider collapse of manufacturing in the Weald that happened because London capitalists withdrew their investments in the region, which, he claimed, suffered at the same time from a backward and under-capitalized agriculture.<sup>8</sup> This explanation sees the Weald as a backward region, exploited by and dependent upon the whims of metropolitan capital. Not all historians, however, would agree with this portrait of the Kent Weald in the early seventeenth century. And, just a year later in a textbook by Short and Brandon, they ascribe the decline of the Wealden cloth industry to a bag of external causes, without even mentioning London capital:

Inter-regional competition from centres specializing in the New Draperies as well as from clothiers at Sandwich, Canterbury and Maidstone, together with disputes over timber supplies, export restrictions and poor communications, all hastened the decline.<sup>9</sup>

But the expansion of New Drapery output in Sandwich and Canterbury occurred before the collapse of the Wealden broadcloth industry, and their products were aimed at different markets than the traditional consumers of the Weald's fine broadcloths. The two clothing regions in Kent were not in direct competition. Timber supply, again, is not a convincing explanation

of the broadcloth industry's decline. There had been competition over timber supplies ever since the first iron furnaces appeared in the central Weald in the mid-sixteenth century; this did not change in the seventeenth century. The 'export restrictions' that Brandon and Short refer to occurred in the early seventeenth century, and were caused by the so-called Cockayne Project – which resulted in the disruption of cloth exports to the Netherlands market in 1614. This trade crisis certainly was a blow to what was still a successful export trade in woollens, but it also doesn't explain the decline of the Wealden broadcloth industry in the second half of the seventeenth century. Finally, there is 'poor communications'. Slow transport links with London were certainly a problem the Wealden industry had to face, but communications were no worse in 1650 than they had been in 1550 or 1600 – when the industry was flourishing. In the end, we think that the explanation for the decline of the Kent broadcloth industry is to be found in the Weald itself and not in London. By the 1670s there was clearly a problem.

The central Weald flourished as a proto-industrialized region from the early sixteenth century, but was unable to sustain that expansion in the next century. Among the problems facing the Wealden cloth industry was the growing competition for raw materials, especially wood, from the local iron industry. There were repeated complaints to Parliament from the 1570s about the ironmasters' insatiable demand for wood and the dangerous threat this posed to the cloth industry.<sup>10</sup> Acts were passed in 1581 and 1585 for the preservation of timber in the Weald.<sup>11</sup> Access to wood was also an issue in a 1594/95 conspiracy to attack the iron works of John Baker, Esq. One contemporary thought that grievances among the poorer sort 'do grow for want of corn, small wages and scarcity of wood'. Popular discontent was allegedly 'increased by the rich fellowship of the clothiers in these quarters that repine much at Mr Baker's lettings of his iron works'.<sup>12</sup> Discontent arose out of rival interests of the 'richer sorts' to secure adequate supplies of wood at reasonable prices, tensions that informed local attitudes to the control of woodland into the next century. A 1637 petition to the Privy Council against John Brown's proposed iron furnace in Cranbrook argued that 'the town and other parishes adjoining have for many years subsisted by the trade of clothing', but that due to the increased use of wood for making brass and ordnance 'no furnace should be erected within the parish'. Brown replied that 'the number of poor and the assesses for them in Cranbrook and its neighbourhood is much increased', and that wages paid by clothiers to textile workers were so low that 'the poor employed by them cannot live upon the wages'.<sup>13</sup>

The Kent broadcloth industry was subject to recurring periods of economic dislocation throughout the seventeenth century. In the early seventeenth century English exports of undressed cloths fell from 76,123

in 1606 to 71,539 in 1614, a seven per cent decline. Exports of dyed and dressed cloths fell from 10,574 (Kent supplied 3,945) in 1606 to 6,469 (Kent supplied 2,068) in 1614; Kent's share fell from 37 to 30 per cent.<sup>14</sup> Cyclical crises and changes in demand for English woollens were associated with the Cockayne project of 1614-16, the collapse of European markets in 1621-22 and another export crisis in 1630-31. Zell has argued that after 'each successive crisis recovery was at a lower level of production and sales than the previous one'.<sup>15</sup> In the Civil War era the decay of Cranbrook's manufacturing base continued. A 1659 petition from Kent and some other counties complained of the declining state of the once-flourishing broadcloth industry.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, woollen manufacture survived in the Weald until late in the century, and some wealthy clothiers continued to produce broadcloth, although their numbers were small in comparison with the numerous successful clothiers of the late Elizabethan and Jacobean period. Flisher has shown that dynastic clothing families, by virtue of the wealth acquired through inter-marriage and economic success, were able to achieve economies of scale, which lesser clothiers could not match. Many of the families that achieved great prosperity in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, consolidated their wealth in the period up to the Restoration through successful investments in farming, and through the rents taken on the lands they leased out to others.<sup>17</sup>

The considerable debate among historians over this first 'de-industrialization' suggests that the reasons for the Wealden cloth industry's decline are complex. Wealden clothiers had the 'reputation of making strong, durable broadcloths of good mixtures and colours', which were noted for their high quality and high price.<sup>18</sup> Coleman argued that increased competition from Continental clothmakers, European wars and political dislocation during the Civil War in England, allied to emigration of skilled workers and high costs of labour, combined to make Kentish broadcloth uncompetitive.<sup>19</sup> Chalklin thought that the high cost of labour in Kent was the most significant factor in making the product too expensive to sell.<sup>20</sup> Short's argument that Wealden clothiers were 'a clique' whose businesses were 'externally controlled and increasingly dependent on national, metropolitan and international forces' has been questioned by Zell, who has shown that rural clothmaking was 'financed by the manufacturers themselves, from family and from other local sources of capital'.<sup>21</sup> Short's thesis is mistaken because it assumes that Wealden cloth manufacture was heavily dependent upon metropolitan investment; the evidence, as will be shown, does not support this argument.<sup>22</sup> Zell has argued that 'the capitalist clothmakers of the Kent Weald failed because they failed as entrepreneurs'.<sup>23</sup>

Assessing the state of the Cranbrook cloth industry in the seventeenth century is not straightforward and, in order to examine both the timing

and the reasons for its decline, we need to look at a number of factors. There was no simple, across the board decline in the early seventeenth century. For a long time the wealthiest and most able clothiers did not fail as entrepreneurs, because they consolidated their business enterprises, diversified their assets and either bought out lesser clothiers or drove them to the wall through their greater market power. If we compare evidence for Wealden cloth production in the 1630s with evidence for the period 1640-49 and 1660-69, some interesting findings emerge. The average inventoried wealth of clothiers in Cranbrook in the 1630s was £511. In the neighbourhood parishes clothiers' mean inventoried wealth was £198 (**Table 1**).

TABLE 1. CLOTHIERS' MEAN INVENTORIED WEALTH 1630-1669 (£)

PARISH	1630-39 (46 inventories)	1640-49 (20 inventories)	1660-69 (29 inventories)
Cranbrook	511	155	196
Benenden	88	96	238
Biddenden	244	347	717*
Goudhurst	200	286	116
Hawkhurst	260	173	226
Staplehurst	140	118	435*

*Source:* CKS PRC10/1-72, PRC11/1-30, PRC27/1-21, PRC28/4-20; \* on Biddenden, Staplehurst.<sup>24</sup>

The majority of 'clothiers' in this period were active cloth makers, with cloths in production at the weavers' and finished cloths in stock or with London dealers.<sup>25</sup>

Table 1 shows the fortunes of textile manufacturers in the neighbourhood area. Of the 46 inventories sampled for 1630-39, 24 showed signs of active cloth production. At this time most clothiers were primarily engaged in manufacturing with farming investments forming only a small part of their chattels. However, in the 1630s a large number of wealthy clothiers died, including many from important clothier families in the rural parishes. Thereafter, these families fall out of the records.<sup>26</sup> This factor may have contributed to the dislocation of the industry and the loss of capital and expertise in clothmaking at a time when external economic and social problems associated with the Civil War period began to impact on the region. In Cranbrook even dynastic clothing families were affected by the loss of human resources in clothmaking in the 1630s. The Weller family experienced a succession of deaths beginning with Alexander

Weller in 1630, Stephen Weller in 1634, Joanne Weller (dyer) in 1637 and Alexander Weller, jun. in 1641.<sup>27</sup> The loss of so many clothiers would have also diminished opportunities for weavers who had less work put out to them by local clothiers.

However, Table 1 also shows quite clearly that the decline of textile manufacture in the area was a very slow death. The period 1640-49 was probably less productive due to the dislocation of the Civil War. Clothiers in Cranbrook in particular, as well as in Benenden and Hawkhurst seem to have suffered in this period. Nevertheless, some clothiers' prosperity rallied somewhat in the period 1660-1669, although as we shall see, this was not necessarily due to the production of broadcloth.

The period 1640 to 1670 has long been associated with the decline in broadcloth manufacture in the Weald. However, investment was not being withdrawn wholesale from the industry. Where individual entrepreneurs could achieve greater productivity and returns, they continued to invest in textile production. What is different from the previous period is the lower levels of clothier wealth recorded in Cranbrook during this time. The average inventoried wealth of a sample of 21 Cranbrook clothiers in the period 1640-1669 was approximately £172, a considerable decline from the sample of the 1630s, when the average was £511. On the other hand, the mean inventory value of a sample of 28 clothiers from the neighbouring parishes had increased considerably to £379, compared with an average of £198 in the 1630s.

In order to evaluate long-term trends in textile manufacture, the period 1640-1670 was divided into two decades, 1640-1649 and 1660-1669. **Table 2** shows the mean value of clothiers' inventories compared with other occupational groups in Cranbrook and its neighbourhood between 1640-1649. The average clothier's wealth in Cranbrook in this period was £155 and in the neighbouring parishes £228. Clothiers in the rural parishes of Biddenden, Goudhurst and Hawkhurst, were seemingly wealthier than those in Benenden, Cranbrook and Staplehurst.

TABLE 2. CLOTHIERS' MEAN INVENTORIED WEALTH 1640-1649 (£)

PARISH	Clothiers (20 inventories)	Farmers (59 inventories)	Weavers (16 inventories)
Cranbrook	155	153	67
Benenden	96	127	44
Biddenden	347	127	165
Goudhurst	286	201	31
Hawkhurst	173	99	573
Staplehurst	118	169	113

Source: see Table 1.

**Table 3** shows that individuals styling themselves ‘clothier’ were still resident in these parishes after the Restoration. It also shows that they remained wealthy individuals. In the period 1660-1669 the average clothier’s wealth in Cranbrook was £196, and in the neighbourhood as a whole the mean was £363. Nevertheless, these figures cannot be used to argue that clothiers were becoming wealthier, or that a boom in textile manufacture was occurring.

TABLE 3. CLOTHIERS’ MEAN INVENTORIED WEALTH 1660-1669 (£)

PARISH	Clothiers (29 inventories)	Farmers (57 inventories)	Weavers (10 inventories)
Cranbrook	196	273	81
Benenden	238	284	79
Biddenden	717	180	0
Goudhurst	116	179	173
Hawkhurst	226	350	67
Staplehurst	435	230	0

*Source:* see Table 1.

The high mean of £717 for Biddenden and £435 for Staplehurst can be accounted for by the death of several wealthy clothiers in the 1660s (Table 1). But, as John Ramsden’s inventory of £1,958 shows, his circulating capital was dependent on the recovery of £726 of good debts at the time of his death. He was also owed £347 in desperate debts deemed unrecoverable.<sup>28</sup> The rising mean of clothiers’ wealth in both Cranbrook and the neighbourhood parishes, in the later period, disguises a general contraction in the number of small-scale clothiers operating in the area. Small-scale clothiers, whose manufacturing enterprises were uneconomic, were likely to have gone out of business by this time.

The relatively small number of weavers is also telling, and suggests a contraction in production. The average weaver’s wealth in the neighbourhood declined from £165 in the decade 1640-49 to £61 in the period 1660-1669. The number of weavers who left inventories in these parishes also declined from 25 in 1630-39 to only 10 in 1660-1669. It is likely that the success of some weavers in the rural parishes, whose mean inventoried wealth was £165 at this time, hides a much larger number of very poor weavers who had insufficient wealth to have their goods appraised. The ability of some weavers to diversify into rural by-employments (as many always had) provided an additional source of income when weaving skills became redundant, as clothiers cut back production in response to the downturn in demand. Weavers often grew crops on a small scale or kept a

few cows for milk and dairy produce for sale at local markets; inevitably, weavers living in the outlying rural parishes were better placed to pursue these dual occupations.<sup>29</sup>

The inventories show that the broadcloth industry in the Weald, whilst declining in importance as a major source of profits and employment, was still of some significance even at this late stage. Indeed, some inventories show signs of late seventeenth-century capital investment, evidence that some clothiers were still expanding their manufacturing. A few entrepreneurs were able to maintain a healthy place in the competitive market for textiles, in the face of the growing demand for lighter cloths at this time. However, it will be shown that some clothiers had diversified their investments into other businesses, whilst retaining the title of 'clothier'.

Some specialised Cranbrook clothmakers were still actively engaged in textile production in the 1660s. Valentine Browne (d.1665) was operating a successful clothmaking business. Browne had goods valued at £471, of which £396 (84 per cent) was invested in cloth production. At his death Browne had deposited '£200 on the consideration of a clothing house and the land belonging'.<sup>30</sup> Browne's assets were wholly engaged in cloth production, and there is no evidence of any effort to diversify his investments.

However, other clothiers from the 1640s onwards diversified their investments into a number of other businesses, while reducing their investment in textiles. Of the clothier inventories sampled from Cranbrook for the period 1640-1670, only 38 per cent show evidence of active cloth manufacture. Some clothiers were more active in farming at this time than cloth production, whilst others operated equally as farmers and clothmakers. Tables 2 and 3 showed that farming could be a lucrative business in Cranbrook and the rural parishes, which became more profitable between the 1640s and the 1660s. As entrepreneurs, clothiers identified the advantages to be gained from diversifying into farming: good investment opportunities and increasing profits to be made from the rising demand for agricultural produce.<sup>31</sup> Such farming investment is ignored by Short who identifies the Weald as a primitive, poor and uncommercial farming region.<sup>32</sup>

Evidence from the final 30 years of the Kent broadcloth industry provides some interesting findings on the timing and incidence of England's first de-industrialisation. It looks like industrial decline took place much later in the seventeenth century than has hitherto been believed. Wealden clothmaking certainly declined in the 1640s-50s but some clothiers continued to be active in the harsher economic climate of the 1670s and 1680s before the industry finally collapsed at the end of the century.

This revised account of the Wealden textile industry in the seventeenth century is based on a comparative analysis of clothiers' inventories from

the first thirty years of the century with those from the period 1670-1699 (Tables 4 and 5).

TABLE 4. CLOTHIERS' MEAN INVENTORIED WEALTH 1600-1629

Years	No. of Clothiers	Mean inventory wealth
1600-1609	6	£296
1610-1619	26	£350
1620-1629	23	£413
<i>1600-1629</i>	<i>55</i>	<i>£370</i>

*Source:* CKS PRC10/1-72, PRC11/1-30, PRC27/1-21, PRC28/4-20.

TABLE 5. CLOTHIERS' MEAN INVENTORIED WEALTH 1670-1699

Years	No. of Clothiers	Mean inventory wealth
1670-1679	28	£326
1680-1689	11	£130
1690-1699	11	£220
<i>1670-1699</i>	<i>50</i>	<i>£259</i>

*Source:* CKS PRC11/32-61, PRC27/22-34.

It seems that during the last decades of the century the status and title of clothier retained its local significance even while the industry itself declined in importance and the numbers engaged in clothmaking decreased. In most cases clothiers were retaining the title of 'clothier' even though their principal source of income was their farming business. Many more clothiers in Cranbrook were combining farming and clothmaking.<sup>33</sup>

However, some clothiers simply seem to have become inactive as producers, with little or no evidence of stock in trade or farming activity. Some of these 'clothiers' may have retired from business, happy to live off their investments and acquire the household comforts of a 'gentlemanly' lifestyle.<sup>34</sup> Others may have ceased production because of the contracting market demand for Kentish broadcloth. There is evidence that clothiers' stock was being left unsold at London warehouses, due to declining demand. If clothiers were sensitive to the market, they could have responded to a downturn in demand by laying off their weavers and spinners, who, unlike clothiers, did not have alternative landholding and farming investments to fall back on.

The significant contraction in the number of working weavers in the neighbourhood in the final decades of the century provides clear evidence

that clothmaking had declined in the Cranbrook region. In the period 1600-1629, 59 weavers left inventories with a mean value of £59. In the period 1670-1699 only nine weavers left inventories, with a mean value of £61, an indication of the general impoverishment of the period. In the decade 1690-99 only one weaver's inventory survives: that of John Row of Cranbrook, whose goods were appraised at £48. He had no weaving tools and no farming stock.<sup>35</sup>

Clothiers who were operating on the margins of profitability in these years would not have had the capital to sustain their clothmaking businesses if their product was lying unsold at the London dealers or if they were owed large sums by their creditors. Under these conditions it is hardly surprising that the number of active clothiers declined. And, although it is difficult to prove, it seems likely that lesser manufacturers may have sold out to wealthier clothiers, or moved out to the countryside where their costs of production were cheaper.

This decline in the market for Kent cloths can be traced from the mid-seventeenth century onwards; many clothiers had large sums of money owing to them in outstanding debts. Clothiers' probate accounts can provide us with a final glimpse of the testator's financial state after his debts and obligations had been paid; the net sum is a valuable guide to his liquid assets.<sup>36</sup> Unfortunately, clothiers' accounts provide rather contradictory evidence of the level and profitability of broadcloth production during this last stage of clothmaking in the Cranbrook neighbourhood.

Debts owing to the testator were of course a financial asset if the sums were recoverable, and it does not necessarily signify that a clothier was unable to recover the credit extended to others in the course of trading. It is likely that where no sign of production is evident, an individual's business activities had largely ceased. Alexander Osborne the elder, clothier (d.1678), had probably retired from business. His chattels were valued at £1,832, of which £273 was in ready money, silver and gold. He also had debts owing to him of £309, two debts due upon a mortgage of £950, £42 due for rent and £100 in desperate debts; in all £1,401 (76 per cent) of his goods were in debts due.<sup>37</sup>

Nevertheless, debts due could turn from being an asset into a liability if they were unrecoverable, as was the situation with William Parton, whose Cranbrook clothmaking business was still active in 1673. The administrator of Parton's estate had tried in vain to recover a debt due to him of £234 from the 'Londoners', but the most that could be 'collected' was £174. Nevertheless, after the sum total of all his charges and losses, Parton's estate was still worth £820.<sup>38</sup> However, some Cranbrook clothiers were operating at a loss by the late seventeenth century, and their accounts tell a story of wide ranging debts unpaid at their death, for which the administrator had insufficient funds.<sup>39</sup>

In addition, a considerable proportion of late clothiers' inventories show

that farming was equally if not more important than cloth production to their economic prosperity.

TABLE 6. CLOTHIERS: CHANGING PATTERNS OF ACTIVITIES 1670-1699

Years	Cloth Production		Farming		Cloth Production + Farming		Not Active	
1670-1679	4	29%	3	21%	3	21%	4	29%
1680-1689	4	27%	3	20%	3	20%	6	40%
1690-1699	11	30%	10	27%	9	24%	7	19%
1670-1699	19	29%	16	24%	15	23%	17	26%

Source: CKS PRC11/32-61, PRC27/22-34; TNA PROB4.

From a sample of 66 inventories we can see that by the period 1670-1699 a large number of clothiers (23 per cent) were active in farming as well as textile manufacture (see **Table 6**). In many cases clothiers' farming activity was their dominant economic activity even though some clothmaking is evident. Between the primarily farming-clothiers and those either retired or economically inactive, half of all 'clothiers' were not actually engaged in cloth production, although they continued to style themselves 'clothier'.

This trend away from cloth production is brought home in the will of 'Richard Beecham, styled as 'clothier' of the parish of Hawkhurst, 'yeoman' who died in 1669.<sup>40</sup> It is indicative of the growing importance of farming in the Cranbrook area that a 'clothier' wished to be identified with the yeomanry. As we can see from Table 6, some clothiers had by this time abandoned all pretext of cloth manufacture and had gone over to being full-time farmers.<sup>41</sup>

By the end of the seventeenth century many traditional clothier families were styling themselves as 'yeoman' and primarily engaged in farming. In Cranbrook, Robert Holden, Samuel Hovenden and Jonas Botting left substantial 'yeomen' estates at their death.<sup>42</sup> Similarly in the rural parishes, Stephen Sharpie, John Tate and William Chittenden ended a longstanding tradition of Wealden clothmaking in their families by turning to farming for their livelihood.<sup>43</sup> Indeed many 'clothiers' developed livestock rearing and invested in setting out hop gardens as part of their increased farming activity.<sup>44</sup>

But a considerable number of clothiers combined farming with cloth manufacture, as many clothiers had done in the previous century. At his death in 1668 Thomas Sceales, clothier of Biddenden, had a flourishing textile and farming business with chattels valued at £1,549. His account shows that he was still actively engaged in broadcloth production and had

developed kersey production in response to changes in the market. He also employed husbandmen to tend to his farming interests in the neighbourhood and in Sussex. After his debts and expenses were paid Sceales was still a very wealthy man, with a net estate of £1,032.<sup>45</sup> Sceales is typical of somewhat more wealthy clothiers in the neighbourhood at this time, whose businesses successfully combined farming with textile manufacture.<sup>46</sup> However, although some entrepreneurial clothiers diversified into kersey making alongside the traditional production of broadcloth in the 1670/80s, this never took off on a large scale in the Weald.<sup>47</sup>

A number of clothiers, through a combination of different economic activities, continued to be successful. For some this was achieved through astute investments in land. The wills of many longstanding clothier families bear witness to a lifetime of investment locally and beyond the neighbourhood in land and woodland, which could be farmed directly or leased out. Investments in land enabled some Cranbrook clothiers to continue their clothing business into the period of industrial decline. Many of the clothiers who fell by the wayside in the harsher economic climate of the late seventeenth century may simply have had less business acumen. But small-scale clothiers, operating on marginal profits, also lacked the disposable income to plough back into alternative investment opportunities.

Lands and tenements that could be leased out cushioned some clothiers from the collapse in the broadcloth market, when by the 1670s and 80s it is apparent that 'Kentish cloth was no longer being exported in any significant quantities'.<sup>48</sup> Instead, members of the clothier élite turned to farming and land acquisition as their main business.<sup>49</sup> Others were less successful.<sup>50</sup> Indeed by the end of the seventeenth century many styled as 'clothier', have goods of less than £100 with little or no evidence of cloth production.<sup>51</sup>

The evidence shows that by the end of the seventeenth century the broadcloth industry in the Weald of Kent had collapsed. Some individually wealthy clothiers, who were able to spread their risks through diversification into a number of business enterprises, held out during the last decades of the century. But the majority of clothiers faced with increasing costs, insufficient capital and a diminishing market for their product, ceased production. Wealden clothiers, for a number of reasons, failed to adapt to the changing market as the industry declined, and by the eighteenth century the region ceased to be defined by its industrial specialism.

As the Wealden cloth industry declined, the economic impact of increased unemployment and poverty was felt most acutely where the workforce was most dependent upon wages, and where opportunities to supplement household income through farming and farm labour were fewer. In Cranbrook and the rural parishes of Biddenden and Staple-

hurst, the demise of the cloth industry undoubtedly contributed to the impoverishment of many of the inhabitants. Cranbrook, as well as being the centre of Wealden textile manufacture, was also the market town for a large rural area, providing goods and services for its dependent villages.<sup>52</sup> But the declining purchasing power of the growing numbers of the 'poorer sort' undermined the viability of the town's service industries and contributed to the eventual decay of the market. Nevertheless, in spite of severe economic difficulties caused by the decline of the local cloth industry, Cranbrook survived as an important local market for goods and services right up to the end of the seventeenth century and beyond.

Finally, what are the implications of the decline of the Wealden cloth-making for the 'proto-industrialisation' model? First, there was no single reason for the downfall of the Kent broadcloth industry; instead a cocktail of factors lay behind England's first de-industrialisation. Perhaps most significant was the long, slow decline in European demand for the comparatively expensive Kent broadcloths. But equally important was the response of the region's textile entrepreneurs: rather than developing new products, they stuck to the traditional heavy, coloured broadcloths. In hindsight there was a disastrous failure of enterprise, a failure to innovate and respond to changes in market conditions. Rather than moving over to the lighter, cheaper 'new draperies', the leading Weald clothiers stuck rigidly to what they knew – and watched production plummet. A wealthy few continued to produce Kent broadcloth to the end, perhaps even subsidizing their cloth businesses from other income. Many others went out of clothmaking altogether. The consequences for the clothiers were less damaging than they were for their workforce. While clothiers could turn from manufacturing to commercial farming, most textile workers had no alternative employment. This is where Mendels' theory of comparative advantage helps us to understand the de-industrialisation of the Weald. Demand for the region's agricultural commodities – principally beef – grew over the seventeenth century, which meant that clothier families with some capital could reduce – or even end – their commitment to clothmaking with little economic pain. There was less incentive to innovate as clothiers when it was comparatively easy to transfer one's capital from manufacturing to farming. The region's ease of access to the expanding metropolitan food market made it comparatively advantageous to desert clothmaking for livestock rearing. This was not the case in many other English broadcloth districts: in the West Country many clothiers diversified their textile production – to meet changing overseas demand. They did not have the options that Wealden clothiers enjoyed in the seventeenth century. The Kent cloth industry disappeared without much fanfare; the victims of its demise were the spinners and weavers, whose voices were not likely to be heard in Restoration England.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Canterbury Cathedral Archives and Library, DCc/BB13/24.
- 2 *Ibid.*
- 3 C.W. Chalklin, *Seventeenth Century Kent* (1965), pp. 121-2.
- 4 F. Mendels, 'Proto-industrialization: the First Phase of the Industrialization Process', *Journal of Economic History*, 32 (1972), 241-262.
- 5 Dimension and weight drawn from statutes 5 and 6 Edward VI, c.6 and 4 and 5 Ph & M, c.5. Kent clothiers often produced 'long Kents' of 30 yards or more for the export market.
- 6 J. Thirsk, 'Industries in the Countryside', in F.J. Fisher (ed.), *Essays in the Economic and Social History of Tudor and Stuart England* (1961); K.G. Ponting, *The Woollen Industry of South-West England* (1971); G. Unwin, 'The History of the Cloth Industry in Suffolk', in *Studies in Economic History* (1920).
- 7 M. Zell, *Industry in the Countryside: Wealden Society in the Sixteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 226-227.
- 8 Brian Short, 'The de-industrialization process: a case study of the Weald', in Pat Hudson (ed.), *Regions and Industries: a perspective on the industrial revolution in Britain* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 156-74.
- 9 Brandon and Short, *The South East of England from AD 1000* (1990), p. 228.
- 10 In 1575 there was a complaint about the decay of the cloth trade in Kent: The National Archives [TNA] SP 12/106 no. 49.
- 11 *Calendar of State Papers Domestic [CSPD]*, Eliz. I, xcv, no. 61 (23 Eliz. c.5).
- 12 Staffordshire Record Office, D593/5/4/36/11.
- 13 *CSPD*, Charles I (1867), cccxlv, p. 290.
- 14 A. Friis, *Alderman Cockayne's Project and the Cloth Trade* (1927), pp. 129-130.
- 15 Zell, *Industry*, pp. 241-242.
- 16 *CSPD*, *Interregnum 1659-60*, p. 340.
- 17 L. Flisher, 'Cranbrook, Kent, and its Neighbourhood Area, c.1570-1670' (University of Greenwich PH.D, 2003), ch. 8.
- 18 Quoted in R. Furley, *A History of the Weald of Kent* (2 vols., 1871-4), ii, p. 481.
- 19 D.C. Coleman, 'The Economy of Kent Under the Later Stuarts' (London University PH.D thesis, 1951), 148-163.
- 20 Chalklin, *Seventeenth Century Kent*, pp. 115-23.
- 21 M. Zell, 'Credit in the pre-industrial English woollen industry', *Economic History Review*, 49 (1996), 667-691.
- 22 Short, 'The De-industrialization Process', pp. 162, 164.
- 23 Zell, *Industry*, p. 245.
- 24 The very high mean for Biddenden in the 1660s is due to the death of three very wealthy clothiers with above average inventoried wealth. Centre for Kentish Studies [CKS], PRC11/18/172, John Patterson 1661 £1,067; PRC27/20/72, Thomas Sceales 1668 £1,549; PRC27/20/72, John Ramsden 1669 £1,958 (Ramsden was owed an additional £347 in desperate debts); in Staplehurst John Buckland left £1,115 in 1664, which comprised a clothing business and extensive farming investments: PRC27/16/10.
- 25 CKS PRC28/17/464 John Codwell of Biddenden (d.1638) had cloth ready at London valued at £97, and cloth in manufacture worth about £60, in addition to wool and dyestuffs; his stock in trade came to 76 per cent of his total inventory of £412; PRC28/17/464, Smallhope Bigg (d.1638) left goods valued at £1,862. Biggs' inventory shows that he was a large-scale cloth producer: his stock of coloured cloths was appraised at £598 and he had '12 broadcloths in cloth and colour' worth a further £185; PRC28/17/464, Josias Colvill

## THE DEMISE OF THE KENT BROADCLOTH INDUSTRY IN THE 17TH CENTURY

(d.1631) £1,027 – Colvill had 23 completed broadcloths in London, valued at £350, 10 broadcloths at the weavers and spinners valued at £120 and £184 owing to him in good debts from London merchants.

<sup>26</sup> CKS PRC28/10/163, Nathaniel Chittenden 1623 £419; PRC28/18/303, William Chittenden, sen. 1632, £332; PRC28/18/305, William Chittenden, jun., 1632, £199; PRC28/19/708 John Chittenden 1633, £632.

<sup>27</sup> CKS PRC28/15/184, Alexander Weller 1630, £579; PRC28/18/212, Stephen Weller 1634, £560; PRC10/71/271, Joanne Weller, 1637 (dyer), £172; PRC20/9/452, Alexander Weller, jun. 1641, £572.

<sup>28</sup> CKS PRC27/21/87, John Ramsden Biddenden 1669, £2305 – his inventory shows evidence of his considerable clothmaking activity with £386 in ready-made cloth at Biddenden and in London and 4 liver colour cloths out and making ready for cloth £32. But he was owed £726 in good debts and £337 in desperate debts, which suggests that his business enterprise was vulnerable to fluctuations in the market demand for his cloth.

<sup>29</sup> CKS PRC11/22/90, 11/23/102, 11/23/132, 11/25/22, 11/28/85.

<sup>30</sup> CKS PRC27/17/31; TNA PROB4/15039, John Baseden (d.1662) also seems to have been operating a profitable textile business when he died in 1662, leaving goods valued at £469. Baseden had 'ten half cloths and four whole cloths at London £50, four broadcloths at the weavers £50, and one half cloth at Fowlers, a dealer in London', in addition to debts due of £100.

<sup>31</sup> CKS PRC27/8/7, Peter Courthop, 'clothier' of Cranbrook (d.1640), left no sign of textile manufacture in his inventory. His chattels were appraised at £172 and included farming goods worth £143 (83 per cent of his estate), including a hop garden; CKS PRC11/20/111, Robert Taylor, 'clothier' of Cranbrook (d.1662), left only evidence of agricultural investments in his inventory valued at £384. His mixed farming activities of livestock rearing, arable and hops were represented by chattels worth £247, 64 per cent of his goods; CKS PRC11/17/46, Samuel Hovenden had a clothier's workshop and a copper but had ceased cloth production by 1660. He had acquired many luxury household items and was styled a 'gentleman'. Perhaps with his eye on a better investment, he had redeployed his capital into livestock rearing and fattening on a large scale.

<sup>32</sup> Short, 'The De-Industrialisation Process', pp. 156, 159, 164.

<sup>33</sup> Some clothiers in Cranbrook had clearly scaled down their clothing activities in response to the downturn in demand for the quality broadcloth. Although not a phenomenon that was entirely new to the 1640-1670s the balance of farming to manufacturing was beginning to swing away from textile manufacture. Examples are John Taylor (1640), CKS PRC11/8/223; George Hanburie (1648), PRC 11/15/81; Stephen Weller (1659), PRC11/22/104; James Bridgeland (1667), PRC11/28/33.

<sup>34</sup> CKS PRC11/17/45, Robert Hovenden, clothier (d.1660) had a copper in the workhouse and 2 liver colour broadcloths valued at £38. But he had extensive household and furnishings valued at £122, 67 per cent of his total goods and chattels; PRC11/13/133, Thomas Colville, sen. (d.1646) had very extensive household and furnishings, while his workshop was inactive and he had no clothier's stock in trade. He had a modest farming interest and £50 owing to him in debts.

<sup>35</sup> CKS PRC11/57/108.

<sup>36</sup> M. Spufford, 'The Limitations of the Probate Inventory', in J. Chartres and D. Hey (eds), *English Rural Society 1500-1700* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 139-175.

<sup>37</sup> TNA PROB4/3481.

<sup>38</sup> CKS PRC20/12/77.

<sup>39</sup> CKS PRC1/8/103, Robert Hovenden (d.1660), was obligated to 'George Curtis of Tenterden for principal money and interest on a debt due upon a bond £120'. He also owed money to his fellow clothier, Robert Holden, upon a bond of £55'. Hovenden's accountant

paid out £187 which was 'more than the deceased had in funds', resulting in a £99 deficit; CKS PRC2/36/161, Samuel Bridgeland, clothier (d.1675), owed four separate sums in rent to landlords in Cranbrook, Biddenden and Aldwich, London, amounting to £85, in addition to seven debts due upon bonds totalling £101 to local creditors (some of whom can also be identified as Cranbrook clothiers). In all, his administrator paid out £195, which exceeded his goods valued at £180.

<sup>40</sup> CKS PRC11/31/31.

<sup>41</sup> Numerous examples of clothiers who were primarily farming at this time could be given. Typical are Richard Bathurst of Goudhurst (d.1664) £196, CKS PRC11/25/24; Peter Sharpe, sen. of Benenden (d.1669) £121, CKS PRC11/31/224; Jonah Fuller of Cranbrook (d.1693) £331, TNA PROB4/10113.

<sup>42</sup> CKS PRC27/19/46, Robert Holden of Cranbrook 1667 £794; PRC11/17/46, Samuel Hovenden of Cranbrook 1660 £342; PRC11/35/34 and PRC11/51/83, Jonas and Jeremy Botting 1673 and 1687.

<sup>43</sup> CKS PRC11/23/181, Stephen Sharpie of Benenden 1664 £221; TNA PROB4/6803, John Tate of Goudhurst £1566; PRC11/28/57, William Chittenden of Hawkhurst 1667 £211; TNA PROB4/12986, Robert Courthop, 'clothier' of Benenden (d.1681) was engaged in livestock fattening and had arable crops, but showed no sign of clothmaking; PROB4/10113, Jonah Fuller of Cranbrook, clothier (d.1693) left an estate wholly comprised of arable crops, cattle and an investment of £28 in a 'hop garden and hop poles'.

<sup>44</sup> CKS PRC11/35/211, Isaac Walter of Cranbrook 1672; PRC11/25/44, Christopher Catstreet of Staplehurst 1673; PRC11/36/36, Samuel Bredgeland of Cranbrook 1674; PRC11/54/30, Thomas Bayley of Goudhurst 1689; PRC11/47/7, Thomas Amery of Frittenden 1683; PRC11/31/225, Richard Sharpe of Benenden 1699, all show evidence of livestock rearing and investment in hop poles and gardens.

<sup>45</sup> CKS PRC19/4/59, PRC27/20/72.

<sup>46</sup> TNA PROB4/11992; CKS PRC27/23/83.

<sup>47</sup> CKS PRC11/39/139, John Morebred of Cranbrook 1679; PRC11/39/134, John Miller of Goudhurst 1677; PRC11/37/132, Mathew Hodge of Goudhurst 1675; PRC11/34/59, Samuel Crompton of Cranbrook 1678; PRC27/34/69, John Barrett of Biddenden 1696; PRC27/23/83, Vincent Quilter of Biddenden 1671.

<sup>48</sup> D.C. Coleman, 'The Economy of Kent Under the Later Stuarts', p. 162.

<sup>49</sup> TNA PROB11/387/46, PROB11/426/112, John Colvill, clothier (d.1691) held properties throughout the neighbourhood as well as in Headcorn, Bethersden and High Halden.

<sup>50</sup> CKS PRC32/53/408, John Buckland (d.1664) instructed his executors to sell off parcels of woodland acquired in his lifetime to pay off his many debts.

<sup>51</sup> CKS PRC11/60/248, PRC11/59/292, PRC11/58/160, PRC11/57/108, PRC11/54/30, PRC11/50/30, PRC11/49/179, PRC11/49/38.

<sup>52</sup> A. Dyer, 'Small market towns 1540-1700', in P. Clark (ed.), *Cambridge Urban History*, ii, p. 442.

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