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Everyday Fashion in Early-Modern Europe: Transformations in Textiles, 1500-1750

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Introduction.

An older generation of economic historians assumed that, before the Industrial Revolution, the families of labourers, husbandmen and craftspeople across Europe were clothed in a narrow range of coarse textiles, often homespun and largely unchanging. It is a view that has increasingly been challenged by their successors, or, at least, heavily qualified.

Nevertheless, its legacy lives on in the popular imagination. Yet between the fifteenth and the eighteenth centuries, western Europe witnessed a tide of novelty in textiles. A wave of innovation, embracing both fabrics and techniques, swept the continent. It is this wave of innovation that is the subject of my lecture today. The lecture falls into three parts. First, I shall examine the innovations, with a particular focus on how they extended to non-elite consumers. Second, I shall assess the principal explanations recently offered by economic historians for these changes in the production and consumption of textiles, suggesting they fail adequately to integrate changes in production with changes in consumption. Third and finally, I shall ask how the changes impacted auto-consumption of textiles. In other words, I shall explore their relationship to what an older historical literature termed 'homespun', the textiles produced by the members of a household for the household's own use.

The scope of the phenomena I shall discuss extended across western Europe, something I shall endeavour to acknowledge in outlining broad trends. However, as someone who works principally on early modern England, my detailed analysis will inevitably focus on the English experience, not least because the birth of the classic Industrial Revolution in England has generated a density of historical research that is hard to match elsewhere.

Innovation.

Early modern textile innovation in western Europe was framed by two linked developments during the later Middle Ages. The first is the shift from a two-fibre textile culture, with production and consumption monopolised by wool and flax, to a four-fibre textile culture, with woollens and linens supplemented by fabrics made from silk and from cotton.

Introduced initially from the eastern Mediterranean, silks and cottons were becoming thoroughly domesticated in parts of western Europe by the end of the Middle Ages. During the next three centuries, their manufacture and consumption underwent massive expansion, both geographically and socially. It drove a change in élite taste in fifteenth and sixteenth century Europe, what Patrick Chorley described as a Europe-wide 'shift away from woolen broad cloth to silk that characterized this whole period up to the seventeenth century'.¹

Demand contracted for the heavily napped woollen broadcloths and the silk velvets that had dominated the high-prestige textile market since the arrival of the horizontal loom from

¹ P. Chorley, 'The "Draperies légères" of Lille, Arras, Tournai, Valenciennes: New Materials for New Markets?', in M. Boone and W. Prevenier (eds), *La Draperie Ancienne des Pays-Bas: débouchés et stratégies de survie (14e-16e siècles)* (Leuven, 1993), 163.

Asia in the twelfth century. They were challenged by lighter, smoother, colour-patterned fabrics, often with a distinct sheen. Silks led the trend and were to dominate European fashion for the next two centuries, but they were quickly followed by textiles made to mimic patterned silks in wool, in mixed materials, and eventually in cotton and linen. Interaction between the fibres stimulated dramatic expansion in the range of textiles available to consumers, with substitutions of one fibre for another, technology transfers between fibres, and a proliferation of new, mixed-fibre fabrics. The cheapness of these lighter fabrics, including new lighter silks, as well as their fashionability, secured them far wider markets than their heavy medieval predecessors, extending deep into the middle and eventually lower ranks of western European society.

The second framing development is the re-invigoration of European trade at the end of the Middle Ages. As the late John Munro argued, the changing pattern of trade in Europe saw the re-emergence of trans-European trade in medium and low quality textiles, which had been eclipsed during the contraction of European trade in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, as well as a reinvigorated trade in textile raw materials.² Munro, when discussing the fourteenth century contraction of trade in cheaper says and other semi-worsted, suggests they went on being made, but for household use or for purely local consumption. He says little more about them. The implication is that there was a later medieval falling back on to reliance on local textile resources, with a corresponding contraction in the diversity of textiles in everyday use. Christopher Wickham has recently argued that, even at its zenith, around 1300, long-distance trade in woollen textiles from the urban cloth making centres of Italy and Flanders served predominantly 'lords and their entourages'. Peasants in the surrounding areas could always 'make most of their necessary goods themselves'.³

With the expansion of European trade in light-weight, cheaper textiles later in the fifteenth century, a relatively small number of major manufacturing centres emerged, which were to dominate their production for national and international markets during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These centres were located in western Europe's most economically advanced regions, initially, in the sixteenth century, in Flanders, Italy and Picardy, and subsequently in Holland, England and other parts of France. They supplied markets across Europe, drawing on what Stuart Jenks has identified as a distribution revolution of the fifteenth century, and beyond Europe with the opening of intercontinental maritime trade in the sixteenth century.⁴ For textiles, the consequences of European maritime expansion

² J. Munro, 'Medieval Woollens: Textiles, Textile Technology and Industrial Organisation, c.800-1500' in D. Jenkins (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Western Textiles* (Cambridge, 2003), vol. 1, 181-227 and *ibid*, 'Medieval Woollens: the Western European Woollen Industries and their Struggles for International Markets, c.1000-1500', in *ibid*, 228-324.

³ C. Wickham, 'How did the feudal economy work? The economic logic of medieval societies,' *Past and Present*, 251 (2021), 30.

⁴ S. Jenks, 'The Missing Link: The Distribution Revolution of the 15th Century,' in C. Jahnke and A. Huang (eds), *Textiles and the Medieval Economy: Production, Trade and Consumption of Textiles, 8th to 16th Centuries* (Oxford, 2015), ch. 15.

were to be profound, including new or previously unfamiliar dyestuffs (indigo, cochineal, logwood), new techniques, especially for decorating fabric with colour (colour-fast painting and printing), new sources of textile raw materials (American long-staple varieties of cotton, Chinese and Indian raw silks), and new markets in West Africa and Asia with distinctive tastes and unfamiliar competitors.

Textile innovation in Europe between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries was characterised by two principal trends. First, the shift I have already identified towards lighter, more colourful and more highly patterned fabrics, used both for clothing and for furnishings. Second, the dissemination of textiles employing new or unfamiliar techniques, such as knitting, lacemaking, printing and the use of New World dyestuffs. The impact of these innovations can be observed across the whole range of textile fibres, including wool, linen, silk and cotton. Their effects were felt at every level of the market, from the finest patterned silks worn by monarchs and their courtiers, to the cheap ribbons worn by housemaids in their caps. These forms of product innovation were intimately linked to innovation in technology, fashion and marketing. They were associated with the invention, dissemination and refinement of new machines. They went hand-in-hand with an intensification and systematization of fashion, culminating in the emergence of an annual fashion cycle for silks, at least, during the later 17th century.⁵

Pre-existing types of woven fabrics tended to become lighter. Loom-patterned silks, produced principally in Italy, but widely exported, were the most costly and high-status textiles in 16th-century Europe. Between the mid-fifteenth century and the early 17th century, their weave density fell by a third, reflecting a shift to lighter, thinner cloths.⁶ An equivalent change can be observed in fine woollen broadcloths, which could be almost as expensive as silks. Between the 1630s and the 1680s, the weight of a typical coloured broadcloth made in Wiltshire, in the west of England, fell by a third.⁷

The reduction in the weight of established fabrics was accompanied by the dramatic success of a variety of light woven fabrics. Most prominent were those made from combed, long-staple wool. They succeeded at the expense of heavier and less attractive competitors. As I have already pointed out, light fabrics, such as says and serges, made either entirely from combed, long-staple wool or mixed with short, carded wools, had long been produced in Europe. Nevertheless, the expansion of European commerce during the late 15th and 16th centuries saw huge increases in their production in key centres, initially in Flanders, but extending in the course of the next two centuries to Holland, England, France, Italy and

⁵ J. Styles, 'Fashion and Innovation in Early-Modern Europe', in Evelyn Welch (ed.), *Fashioning the Early Modern: Dress, Textiles, and Innovation in Europe, 1500-1800* (Oxford, 2016), 33-55.

⁶ L. Mola, *The Silk Industry of Renaissance Venice* (Baltimore, 2003), 88, 146-52.

⁷ J. de L. Mann, *The Cloth Industry in the West of England from 1640 to 1880* (Oxford, 1971), 14, 312-5.

beyond.⁸ This growth was accompanied by a proliferation of new light fabrics, often manufactured in the same localities. Some were made entirely from combed, long-staple wool. Others combined combed, long-staple wool with silk or other fibres. Those mixed with silk copied a wide range of costly silk piece goods – satins, damasks, velvets and taffetas – but at a much lower price.⁹ Collectively they were known in English as worsted stuffs.¹⁰ By the later 17th century they too were facing competition in key markets from another type of light-weight woven textile that was new to Europe – all-cotton fabrics such as calico, imported from India, initially by the Portuguese in the 16th century and, after 1600, on an ever larger scale by the English and Dutch East India companies.

The shift to lighter weight fabrics for outer garments was accompanied, from the 15th century onwards, by a mass diffusion of linen underwear. It was associated with a major expansion in the production of coarse linen and hemp fabrics in the late Medieval countryside, both for local consumption and for international trade.¹¹ The proliferation of linen underwear reflected the spread of new conceptions of cleanliness.¹² At the same time, it contributed to the multi-layering of dress associated with wearing outer garments that were thinner and lighter, providing reduced thermal insulation.

Textiles were not just becoming lighter in weight. The new fabrics were cheaper. The new, light silks – grosgrains, sarcenets, satins and damasks – cost only half to three-quarters of the price of the traditional heavy brocaded velvets they superseded.¹³ But these new fabrics were also less durable. The Venetian ambassador to the French court complained in 1546 that the satins and damasks made by the Tuscans and the Genoese were ‘cloths that cost little and last even less’.¹⁴ In 1606 it was claimed, perhaps with some exaggeration, that the old Norwich worsteds of the mid-16th century would have lasted six times longer than the new Norwich stuffs.¹⁵ A century later, the English author Daniel Defoe famously dismissed Indian calico as ‘ordinary, mean, low-priz’d, and soon in rags’.¹⁶ Cheaper, less durable fabrics

⁸ H. Van der Wee, ‘The Western European Woollen Industries, 1500-1750,’ in Jenkins, *Western Textiles*, vol. 1, 397-472 and N. Harte (ed.), *The New Draperies in the Low Countries and England, 1300-1800* (Oxford, 1997).

⁹ Chorley, “‘Draperies légères’”, 151-166.

¹⁰ For the displacement of heavier, traditional worsted fabrics in Norwich, the principal production centre of the new light worsted stuffs, see L.N.D. Martin, ‘Textile manufactures in Norwich and Norfolk, 1550-1622’, (PhD dissertation, University of Cambridge, 1991), 7, 60.

¹¹ S.R. Epstein, ‘The late medieval crisis as an “integration crisis”’, in M. Praak (ed.), *Early Modern Capitalism: Economic and Social Change in Europe 1400-1800* (London, 2001), 41; A.L. Huang, ‘Hanseatic Textile Production in 15th Century Long Distance Trade’, in A.L. Huang and C. Jahnke (eds), *Textiles and the Medieval Economy: Production, Trade and Consumption of Textiles, 8th-16th Centuries* (Oxford, 2015), 204-215.

¹² G. Vigarello, *Concepts of Cleanliness: Changing Attitudes in France since the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 1988), ch. 4.

¹³ E. Currie, ‘Diversity and design in the Florentine tailoring trade, 1560-1620’, in M. O’Malley and E. Welch (eds), *The Material Renaissance* (Manchester, 2008), 160.

¹⁴ Quoted in Mola, *Silk Industry*, 96.

¹⁵ Martin, ‘Textile manufactures in Norwich’, 7.

¹⁶ D. Defoe, *A Brief Deduction of the Original, Progress, and Immense Greatness of the British Woollen Manufacture* (London 1727), 50.

facilitated more frequent purchases of a wider array of items, aligned with a heightened sensitivity among consumers to novelty and variety. The Tuscan and Genoese silks criticized as cheap and flimsy by the Venetian ambassador in 1546 were made to 'suit the desires and tastes of the French'. They were 'exactly what that nation wants, because it would get bored if a garment lasted too long'.¹⁷

An emphasis on design innovation was a corollary of the acceleration in turnover. Almost all the new fabrics were distinguished by the speed with which their patterns and colours were changed.¹⁸ Norwich was one of the main English centres for the new, light fabrics made from combed wool, known there as stuffs. Unlike woollen fabrics made all or part from carded, short-staple wool, stuffs were not fulled and napped. Consequently, their yarns were visible, facilitating a huge array of woven patterns. In 1611, Norwich stuffs were already being described as being 'of infinite variety of sorts, figures, colours and prices.' The need for new patterns was constantly stressed. 'Our trade is most benefitted by our new inventions and the varying of our stuffes which is contynually profitable.'¹⁹

The shift to lighter weight fabrics was associated with a proliferation of new textiles made from mixed materials. They included union fabrics, in which the fibre of the warp yarn differed from the fibre of the weft yarn, as well as blended or union yarns, in which the yarns themselves combined different fibres. Mixed-fibre fabrics were not, of course, new. Yet despite Medieval precursors, the proliferation of new kinds of mixed fibre textiles that accompanied the European shift to lighter textiles from the 16th century onwards was unparalleled. Like Medieval half-silks, the new mixed fabrics often mimicked more expensive textiles made from a single type of fibre, but at a lower price.

So as the new, cheaper, light-weight Italian silks swept western Europe in the later 16th century, their patterning, colours and sheen were evoked for less affluent consumers by cheaper textiles combining expensive silk yarns with cheaper yarns made from combed wool, mohair, cotton, or linen. By the early 18th century, merchants in British America were importing camblets and poplins combining silk warps with worsted wefts, and crapes and camblets with warps composed of silk and worsted yarns twisted together.²⁰ Equally, the expensive new lighter broadcloths made with Spanish wool were imitated in fabrics like serge and baize, which combined warp yarns made from combed wool with weft yarns made from carded wool, as well as in heavily napped fustians.

In the major textile centres of western Europe, this diversification of materials was linked to a process of ever more precise sorting and differentiation of traded textile fibres. Silk, wool,

¹⁷ Quoted in Mola, *Silk Industry*, 96.

¹⁸ Innovation in colour was, of course, encouraged by the availability of new dyestuffs from the Americas.

¹⁹ Quoted in U. Priestley, 'Norwich Stuffs, 1600-1700', in Harte, *New Draperies*, 278.

²⁰ New York Historical Society, Alexander Papers, 10.5: Mary Alexander, Fabric Samples, 1730.

flax and cotton were all subject to increasingly careful grading by quality and price, sometimes according to specific attributes of the fibre, sometimes according to its place of origin. Each grade of fibre had a different use and commanded a different price. Precise grading of materials facilitated an expansion of product ranges, each range differentiated by quality, and each quality targeted at different price points in different markets.

Grading extended to the waste products generated as materials were processed. The differentiation between legitimate materials and waste was especially stark for silk, the most expensive textile raw material. Most silk yarn was not spun. Yarn was made by winding the silk fibre off the cocoon and then twisting strands into various grades of thread. However, at each stage in the process, short-fibre silk waste was created which could be transformed into inferior quality yarn only by spinning it. In mid-16th century Venice, it was estimated that about a quarter of the material derived from silk cocoons ended up as waste silk that could only be spun.²¹ Spun silk were used as weft in cheaper silk fabrics, or in mixed fabrics like the *burates* made at Nimes in France in the 18th century, using spun silk warps and woollen wefts.²² Different grades of spun silk were also employed extensively in haberdashery and trimmings

Indeed, although I have focused so far on early modern innovations in textile piece goods, it is important to stress that they were accompanied by an equivalent transformation in the range and volume of textile trimmings and clothing accessories. Ribbons and tapes have ancient origins, knitted goods were familiar in medieval Europe, and needle and bobbin lace had medieval precursors. Nevertheless, all three saw a remarkable elaboration and proliferation after 1500. Ribbons, often, made from inferior or even waste silks, became key decorative elements in European dress, even among the poor. They were followed by decorative neckerchiefs worn by both men and women, the most prized made from relatively expensive silk, lawn, or muslin, but small enough in size to command a wide market. The same was true of lace trimmings, especially those made from the cheaper bobbin lace. Stockings, knitted in silk or woollen yarn, and subsequently also linen and cotton, almost entirely replaced medieval hose made from woven woollen cloth.²³

Explanations.

The way economic historians have tried to understand these developments in the manufacture of textiles between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries has tended to

²¹ Mola, *Silk Industry*, 234.

²² L. Teisseyre-Sallmann, *L'industrie de la soie en Bas-Languedoc: XVIIe-XVIIIe siècles* (Paris, 1995), 90-1, 245.

²³ A. Caracausi, 'Textiles Manufacturing, Product Innovations and Transfers of Technology in Padua and Venice between the Sixteenth and Eighteenth Centuries', in K. Davids and B. de Munck, eds, *Innovation and Creativity in Late Medieval and Early Modern European Cities* (Abingdon, 2014), 131-160; S.M. Levey, 'Lace in the Early Modern Period, c.1500-1780', in Jenkins, *Western Textiles*, vol. 1, 585-596; C.M. Belfanti, 'Fashion and Innovation: The Origins of the Italian Hosiery Industry in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries', *Textile History*, 27 (1996), 132-147.

be teleological, shaped by what followed during the Industrial Revolution. Two recent approaches stand out for their historiographical influence and conceptual coherence, though neither is restricted to textiles.

The first is proto-industrialisation, a term coined by the late Franklin Mendels in a famous article in 1972: 'Proto-industrialization: The First Phase of the Industrialization Process'.²⁴ The focus of Mendel's article is early modern linen production in Flanders and it aims to explain the rise of commercial industrial production in the countryside between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries. Essentially, proto-industrialisation is a refinement of an older stages theory of European industrial development, first formalised by German historians in the later nineteenth century. Mendels aim was to provide a new explanation of the dynamics of what scholars had previously termed the domestic system, in other words the stage in the development of industry between the urban guild system of medieval Europe and the urban factory system of the nineteenth century.

His explanation was predicated on two linked developments in the economies of western Europe. First, the growth of regional divisions of labour between commercial manufacturing, commercial agriculture, and towns. Second, the growing availability of distant markets for commercial handicraft production. Some regions which previously combined agricultural production with part-time industry, now gave up their industries and began to purchase industrial products from other regions. At the same time, other regions began to specialise in rural handicrafts to supply not simply local markets, but for 'regional, national, or international trade.'²⁵ Building on this model of Smithian regional specialisation, Mendels offered an explanation of, first, why rural farmers and labourers were drawn into industrial production, couched essentially in terms of pressure of population on resources, and, second, how that development led to factory industrialisation, via, in particular, further demographic expansion and capital accumulation. Significantly, Mendels denied the significance of early modern technical innovation, ignored product innovation, and offered no account of the shape of demand for proto-industrial goods beyond general references to local, regional, national and international markets.

Unfortunately, as Donald Coleman famously pointed out, more often than not, proto-industries failed to fulfil their theoretically predicted destiny of transmuting into mechanised industries.²⁶ Proto-industrialisation was not, for most, the first phase of the industrialisation process. On the contrary, destiny for the majority was attenuation and disappearance, in other words, de-proto-industrialisation. Thus, over the last twenty years or so, the theory has fallen out of favour, although the linkages it highlighted between

²⁴ Franklin Mendels, 'Proto-industrialization: The First Phase of the Industrialization Process,' *Journal of Economic History*, 32 (1972), 241-61.

²⁵ Mendels, 'Proto-industrialization,' 248.

²⁶ D.C. Coleman, 'Proto-industrialization: a concept too many,' *Economic History Review*, 36 (1983), 435-448.

manufacturing, markets, regional specialisation and especially demographic change remain key issues.

The second approach that stands out for its historiographical influence and conceptual coherence is Jan de Vries's notion of an 'industrious revolution' that preceded the industrial revolution.²⁷ De Vries asked how evidence for real wage stagnation in north-west Europe between the sixteenth and the eighteenth centuries could be reconciled with the equally compelling evidence for ownership of growing numbers of material things, including, prominently, textiles and clothing.

He resolved this paradox in two ways. First, drawing on studies of the English industrial revolution, he pointed out that if macroeconomic growth before 1830 was slower than previously believed, then 'it leaves "pre-industrial" England as a rather richer economy than had earlier been assumed, for the simple reason that less growth in the 1760-1830 period means the pre-1760 economy must have possessed a per capita income closer to that found in the post-1830 period', challenging the old belief that the European economy of the period from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries was pre-modern and therefore growthless and poor. He insisted that consumer demand was transformed in north-west Europe between 1650 and 1800. New kinds of commodities emerged, with the capacity to entice ordinary people out of self-sufficiency into working harder and buying more. They included new manufactured goods that were cheaper, less durable, and more fashion sensitive, such as clothing fabrics in lightweight, printed cottons and containers for food and drink in decorated earthenwares. They also included new kinds of stimulants, both exotic (like tea, tobacco and sugar) and domestic (like gin and brandy).

Second, de Vries argued that the key dynamic in this period of pre-industrial economic expansion was the behaviour of the household as an economic unit, in particular the way time was allocated to different activities by members of the household. In order to buy more, ordinary households devoted increasing time and effort to paid work, especially the wives and daughters of those households. Wage rates may have stagnated, or even fallen, but (1) more household members participated in paid work, and (2) they worked for more hours and more days. Consumption was key. People were drawn into paid work by the lure of new commodities that were superior to those they could produce for themselves. Like Mendels, he assumes the paid work available would vary according to regional patterns of comparative advantage.

De Vries's industrious revolution thesis has been enormously influential. Yet it is chronologically timid. De Vries traces the starting date of his industrious revolution back

²⁷ J. de Vries, 'The Industrial Revolution and the Industrious Revolution', *Journal of Economic History*, 54 (1994), 249-70; J. de Vries, *The Industrious Revolution: Consumer Behaviour and the Household Economy, 1650 to the Present* (Cambridge, 2008).

only as far as the mid-seventeenth century, when the new commodities he identifies as the spur goading women and children into paid work first became available. His list of key new commodities is dominated by the exotic groceries, Asian-influenced ceramics and Indian cotton textiles that are all too familiar from the eighteenth-century consumer revolution literature. That is a problem. Tobacco apart, none of them achieved anything approaching the market penetration among working people that could realistically have encouraged greater industry before the mid-eighteenth century. De Vries's focus on these exotics diverts attention from material, technological and commercial changes in access to consumer goods, especially textiles, that were happening earlier.

As far as textiles are concerned, De Vries's industrious revolution would be more chronologically coherent if he placed less emphasis on late-seventeenth and eighteenth-century imports of exotic Indian calicoes, and more on the earlier shift to lighter, brighter, cheaper, fashion sensitive, and less durable textiles which were equally alluring to humble consumers – (1) the worsted and semi-worsted textiles already beginning to be produced in the Low Countries from the end of the fifteenth century, and, alongside them, (2) the new, fashionable clothing accessories, previously highlighted by Joan Thirsk, which quickly captured equally wide markets during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, particularly ribbons, knitted hosiery, and bone lace.²⁸ All these textiles had the attractive characteristics de Vries sees as characteristic of his new consumer goods. They also provided novel opportunities for the kind of women's and children's work he discusses, because they needed more frequent replacement and, in the case of worsteds, required a higher ratio of female spinners to male weavers than the older, heavier woollen fabrics.

By way of illustration, I shall briefly examine two relevant clothing items – petticoats and ribbons.

De Vries identifies Indian printed and painted calicoes and the European-made cotton textiles that copied them as the most important textiles driving his new industriousness.²⁹ He suggests they held a particular fashionable appeal for women, whose increased participation in commercial manufacturing is crucial to the industriousness thesis. Here he draws on the literature on the so-called 'calico craze', the surge in demand for Indian cotton textiles that took place in late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth century western Europe. Yet in England before 1700 Indian cotton textiles were not extensively worn as women's main garments – as gowns or as petticoats. Indeed, gowns and petticoats made from cotton, whether of Indian or British manufacture, did not become common until the middle decades of the eighteenth century.³⁰ Nevertheless, the textiles used for women's main

²⁸ J. Thirsk, *Economic Policy and Projects; The Development of a Consumer Society in Early Modern England* (Oxford, 1978).

²⁹ De Vries, *Industrious Revolution*, 133-43, 154. He notes a prior expansion in the consumption of linen fabrics.

³⁰ J. Styles, *The Dress of the People: Everyday Fashion in Eighteenth-Century England* (London, 2007), ch. 7.

garments did change radically during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In the case of petticoats, the evidence from criminal trials in south-east England, mainly for theft, indicates a dramatic shift away from heavy, short-staple woollen cloth to silks and especially to worsteds – stuffs, serges, tammies, mohair (Table 1).³¹ Calicoes are nowhere to be seen.

Table 1. Textiles for petticoats in indictments at Kent Assizes and City of London Sessions, 1559-1688.³²

| Textile | Kent Assizes 1559-1603 | Kent Assizes 1660-1688 | City of London Sessions 1675 |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|---|
| Silks | 0 | 16 | 21 |
| <u>Woollens</u> | 14 | 14 | 3 |
| Worsteds / linsey | 0 | 24 | 22 |
| Linens | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| Calico | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| TOTAL | 14 | 55 | 47 |

Petticoats and gowns both employed significant lengths of fabric. In the first half of the eighteenth century, an English working woman's gown required about 7 yards of fabric, a petticoat about 4 yards. In the 1740s, a yard of very narrow worsted tammy bought by a plebeian family cost 13.5d., a yard of wider wool-worsted serge 14d. In other words, during the first half of the eighteenth century a petticoat worn by a working woman cost at least 50d. for the fabric alone. By contrast, a yard of narrow, colourful silk ribbon could be bought for 3d. or 4d. At this cost, a length of ribbon to decorate a hat or a cap fell into a similar price range to working people's purchases of the extra-European groceries that figure so prominently in Jan de Vries's industriousness thesis, as we can observe in the purchases made during the course of the year 1759 of ribbons, sugar, tea and tobacco recorded in the account book kept by a shopkeeper at Fewston, high in the Yorkshire Pennines between Skipton and Knaresborough (Table 2).³³ The shop served a clientele consisting overwhelmingly of poor farmers and tradespeople. The median length of ribbon purchased was 1 yard.

³¹ The definition and form of petticoats changed appreciably in the course of the early modern period, but from the mid-sixteenth century to the later eighteenth century the word petticoat generally was used to describe a woman's skirt, worn from the waist down, sometimes with, and sometimes without a gown over it.

³² J. Cockburn (ed.), *Calendar of Assize Records: Kent Indictments, Elizabeth I* (London, 1979); J. Cockburn (ed.), *Calendar of Assize Records: Kent Indictments, Charles II, 1660-75* (London, 1995); J. Cockburn (ed.), *Calendar of Assize Records: Kent Indictments, Charles II, 1676-88* (London, 1997); London Metropolitan Archives, CLA/047/LJ/01/0239-0246: City of London Sessions, 1675.

³³ West Yorkshire Archive Service Bradford, 33D80/6/7: Shop book of Stephen Hudson of Fewston parish, Yorkshire, 1751-9.

Table 2. Purchases of ribbons, sugar, tea and tobacco at Stephen Hudson's shop, Fewston, Yorkshire, 1759.

| Item | Number of purchases | Average spend per purchase (d.) |
|---------|---------------------|---------------------------------|
| Ribbon | 38 | 6.5 |
| Sugar | 105 | 9.5 |
| Tea | 16 | 14.0 |
| Tobacco | 47 | 2.5 |

Silk ribbons already appear in the probate inventories of English provincial shopkeepers in the sixteenth century, but not in large numbers. In the course of the seventeenth century, however, their numbers and variety increased markedly. Their manufacture in England grew and spread from London to the provinces, especially to the area around Coventry. Polly Hamilton notes in her extensive survey of haberdashery in retailers' probate inventories: 'the quantities of ribbons ... took an upturn in the 1670s, rising from roughly fourteen varieties noted per decade to thirty-two varieties per decade around the turn of the century.'³⁴ In elite dress, the fashionability of ribbons waxed and waned across the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Nevertheless, they and other inexpensive clothing accessories, such as knitted stockings and bone lace, became and remained essential components of everyday fashion. Indeed, they became fixtures in the stock of small shopkeepers who served plebeian customers well before most of the extra-European groceries. In terms of their pricing and their desirability, they were just as potent as incentives to industriousness.

Auto-consumption: the fate of homespun.

Jan de Vries's 'industrious revolution' saw rural women and children drawn into various forms of home-based, income-generating manufacturing, especially spinning, by the lure of attractive new consumer goods, from textiles to tea. This move into market-orientated work was unprecedented, 'making effective use of labour [previously] trapped in idleness and underemployment by the seasonal constraints of agriculture'.³⁵ Yet de Vries never analyses this assumed world of female rural idleness and underemployment. It exists merely as a counterpoint to a subsequent surge of industriousness.

So what were early-modern women and children doing with their time before income-generating work in commercial manufacturing became available? English commentators at the end of the eighteenth century were almost unanimous in insisting that what they had

³⁴ P. Hamilton, 'Haberdashery for use in Dress, 1550-1800' (PhD thesis, University of Wolverhampton, 2007), 273.

³⁵ De Vries, *Industrious Revolution*, 97.

been doing was domestic self-provisioning with textiles, and they repeatedly bemoaned its decline. In Staffordshire, for instance, it was reported in 1794 that 'there is no considerable public manufacture of linen, but a good deal of hurden, hempen, and flaxen cloth, got up in private families,' while 'a good deal of woollen cloth is got up in the country by private families, though in less quantity than formerly.'³⁶ Similarly, in the East Riding of Yorkshire 'the domestic manufacture of coarse grey woollen cloths, from a mixture of black and white wool, for the clothing of the farmer and his family, which was formerly not unusual, has now long ceased; but the careful housewife still spins and knits the stockings for her family of black or mixed wool, (most farmers keeping one or two black sheep for the purpose,) and likewise during winter spins flax for a web of linen for sheets or shirts.'³⁷

Of course, household self-sufficiency in textiles could never have been complete in any era, because the different stages of production involved radically different time commitments. A single weaver working full-time required the output of several spinners, their precise number depending on the fibre, the preparatory processes, the fineness (or count) to which the yarn was being spun, and the intensity at which they worked. So when we talk about household self-provisioning in textiles, we are talking principally about spinning by the women of the household. Weaving the yarn they spun into cloth for their own use was generally undertaken by skilled specialists – men who identified themselves occupationally as weavers and owned looms and an appropriate range of loom gear. Such weavers worked on a jobbing basis for local customers, weaving up the yarn spun by local women into cloth for a fee.

We have information about the proportion of weavers in the population from the lists of men balloted for the militia in three English counties between 1759 and 1777: Hertfordshire, Northumberland and Northamptonshire (Table 3). These militia lists provide a fairly comprehensive census of adult male occupations for these counties. Northamptonshire was a county with a significant, but declining worsted industry producing for distant markets. Hence it is not surprising that 13% of the men balloted were textile workers, more than three-quarters of whom were weavers.³⁸ By contrast, neither Hertfordshire nor Northumberland were noted for large-scale textile production. Nevertheless, the militia lists reveal the presence of textile workers in those counties. In Hertfordshire, they accounted for only 1% of men listed for the militia ballot.³⁹ In Northumberland the proportion of male textile workers was higher – 5% – but still well

³⁶ W. Pitt, *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Stafford* (London, 1794), 162-3.

³⁷ H. E. Strickland, *A General View of the Agriculture of the East Riding of Yorkshire* (York, 1812), 283-84

³⁸ W. Raybould, 'Open for business: textile manufacture in Northamptonshire, c.1685-1800' (PhD dissertation, University of Leicester, 2005), 94-5.

³⁹ Paul Glennie, *'Distinguishing men's trades': occupational sources and debates for pre-Census England* (Bristol, 1990), 69, 93.

below the proportion in semi-industrial Northamptonshire.⁴⁰ Though these percentages appear small, spread across their counties they were large enough to mean there was a jobbing weaver in most townships or parishes.

Table 3. Textile occupations in militia ballot lists for Hertfordshire, Northumberland and Northamptonshire, 1759-77.

| | All | Textile | % textile |
|-----------------------|--------|---------|-----------|
| Hertfordshire 1759 | 12,360 | 114 | 1% |
| Northumberland 1762 | 13,707 | 672 | 5% |
| Northamptonshire 1777 | 11,206 | 1,446 | 13% |

In the case of Northumberland, we know what a number of these weavers were doing. In 1792 jobbing weavers around the town of Hexham circulated handbills listing the charges for their services weaving household-spun linen yarn of various finenesses for ‘housewives’. The fabrics they wove were yard-broad plain linen cloth, sheeting, ticking and huckaback.⁴¹

The pattern book of Thomas Jackson, a jobbing weaver in the vicinity of Kirkleatham in the North Riding of Yorkshire, records how one of these weavers wove the same patterns for different customers.⁴² Alongside a draft for a simple linen damask diaper, Jackson notes that it was woven for a customer in 1756 with a yarn of a linen count of slightly higher than 3 hanks per pound (NeL 3), again in 1761 with a yarn of little higher than 2 hanks per pound (NeL 2), and again in 1769 with a yarn of just over 3 hanks per pound (NeL 3). Jackson evidently adjusted to accommodate the fineness of yarn supplied by his customers, and yarns could vary considerably in fineness between different spinners. Nevertheless, these were all very coarse yarns. In the internationally competitive Irish linen industry, 2 hank yarn was not even exported, but used for local consumption, while 3 hank yarn was deemed just about adequate for linen for labourers’ shirts. It is notable that the 1792 Hexham weavers’ price list included yarns even coarser than these, which in Ireland were used for sacking or coarse sheeting for the poor.⁴³

We can observe this kind of auto-consumption from the household’s perspective in the accounts kept by the Latham family between 1724 and 1767. The Lathams farmed a small

⁴⁰ P. Kitson, ‘The male occupational structure of Northumberland, 1762– 1871: A preliminary report’, (Cambridge, 2005), 18. Also see J.H. Clapham, *An Economic History of Modern Britain. The Early Railway Age, 1820-1850* (Cambridge, 1930), 161.

⁴¹ *At a meeting of the master weavers, living in Hexham, and parts adjacent, it was unanimously agreed, that the prices for weaving of plain cloth, sheeting, ticking, huckaback, etc. be as follows’* (Hexham, 1792). Also see Castle Museum, York: hand bill for Nicholas Forster, weaver, Alnwick, Northumberland, 1800.

⁴² Cooper Hewitt, National Design Museum, New York, 1958-30-1: Weaver’s thesis book, England, 17th-18th century.

⁴³ A. Young, *A Tour in Ireland: With General Observations on the State of that Kingdom*, vol. 1 (London, 1780), 174, 184, 277-8.

holding of approximately 19 statute acres in the rural township of Scarisbrick in west Lancashire.⁴⁴ They are the most humble eighteenth-century English family for whom a long run of household accounts survives. During the early years of married life, between 1726 and 1741, Richard and Ann (Nany) Latham produced eight children, seven of whom lived to adulthood. Six of their surviving children were daughters.

Four key points emerge from the Latham evidence:-

1. Fabrics made from yarn spun within the household made a major contribution to the Latham family's textile consumption, although there is no sense in which the family was self-sufficient in textiles. In other words, self-provisioning was important, but not paramount.
2. The boundary between self-provisioning and market supply, between goods made or processed within the household for use by its members and goods sourced from outside the household, was drawn in terms of quality. The textiles the Lathams had made from their homespun yarn were mainly coarse linens. As the family's income rose in the 1740s when the daughters started to undertake paid work, homespun coarse linens continued to be used, but the quantity of shop-bought, higher quality fabrics increased, used especially for the kinds of adult outer garments worn in public – ie. what we might term the de Vries effect. In other words, fabric quality and fashion were critical issues for textile consumption.
3. Spinning for a wage and spinning for household use were not mutually exclusive within a family, although whether individual women of the Latham family specialised in one type of spinning or the other is not clear. Differences between fibres in spinning technique may have been crucial here. In other words, we cannot assume self-provisioning with textiles necessarily declined because waged spinning increased.
- 4.. Spinning yarn for household use did not depend on access to land to grow flax or raise sheep. The Lathams bought most of their flax and hemp, drawing on international supply chains that extended into the Baltic. They grew flax on their small farm only briefly at a time when flax prices were rising, and did not repeat the experiment on any scale. In other words, we cannot assume landless labouring families were excluded from spinning for household use simply because they did not have land to grow the raw material.

⁴⁴ Lancashire Archives, DP 385: Account book of Richard Latham of Scarisbrick, 1723-1767. Also see L. Weatherill, *The Account Book of Richard Latham, 1724-1767* (London, 1990); C.F. Foster, *Seven Households: Life in Cheshire and Lancashire, 1582-1774* (Northwich, 2002); Styles, *Dress of the People*, ch. 14; A. Dolan, 'The Fabric of Life: Time and Textiles in an Eighteenth-Century Plebeian Home,' *Home Cultures*, 11 (2014), 353-74.

Conclusion.

It is all too easy for those of us who study the early modern period in England to assume that somewhere in the dim and distant medieval past, sturdy peasants made almost everything for themselves, including, indeed perhaps especially, textiles. We assume that, after the Middle Ages, the story is one of constantly diminishing self-sufficiency and constantly burgeoning market provision. Medieval economic historians present a different story. In later medieval Suffolk, for instance, cheap local manufactures produced by the village tailor, tanner or weaver were already being supplemented by better-quality goods manufactured by artisans living some distance away. These new manufactures were fed through wide mercantile networks rather than peddled in rural weekly markets.⁴⁵ So already, in the 14th and 15th centuries, we observe a mixture of textiles, some that were vernacular and literally homespun, and others acquired through retailers from suppliers at a distance. By the 18th century, systems of household textile provisioning that combined self-provisioning with market supply were longstanding. That does not mean they were unchanging.

Indeed, we might hypothesise that, in some senses at least, the 16th and 17th centuries witnessed a flowering of household self-provisioning with textiles, at the same time as it witnessed an expansion and diversification of market consumption, and that it is this flowering that is registered in the attention devoted to household textile production in many domestic and farming how-to books, such as Thomas Tusser's *Five Hundred Pointes of Good Husbdrie* of 1573, or Gervase Markham's much-plagiarised *English Hus-wife* of 1615.

As we have seen, the period saw an enormous diversification in the range of commercial textiles available to modest consumers at cheaper prices. This diversification extended to the range of varieties available *within* broad categories of fabric, including linens. Coarse linens did not disappear simply because finer varieties of linen became more widely available. Diversification of fabrics was associated with a broad trend towards finer yarns for higher quality fabrics. The quality range of available yarns expanded. Because yarn fineness was the chief quality criterion, the quality range of fabrics expanded in parallel. Spinning the finer yarns took considerably longer than spinning the coarser yarns. A 6 hank linen yarn (NeL 6) took approximately twice as long, and more skill, to spin than a 3 hank linen yarn (NeL 3), so as long as the demand for coarse fabrics continued, or increased, there was an incentive to continue producing the less demanding coarse yarn quickly and cheaply at home, while purchasing in the marketplace finer fabrics made with slow-to-spin yarns.

Any such development was assisted by technological innovation. It is easy to forget that it was only in the course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that spinning wheels largely replaced hand spindles in England, speeding up production of yarn two or

⁴⁵ Bailey, *Medieval Suffolk: An Economic and Social History, 1200-1500* (Woodbridge, 2007), 264.

threefold.⁴⁶ Wheels were more expensive than hand spindles, but not prohibitively so. Spinning wheels themselves became increasingly specialised, with different wheels for flax, wool, and cotton, optimising productivity in each fibre.

At the same time, an increasing emphasis on cleanliness was associated with more frequent changes and hence greater numbers of linen undergarments and linen bedding. Inventory studies suggest ownership of linen sheets underwent a long-term increase in several parts of England from the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries.⁴⁷ This went hand-in-hand with a semiotics of cleanliness that privileged linen bleached white over unbleached brown linen.

It is possible, therefore, that between the 16th and the 18th centuries, greater availability and use of a widening range of different types and qualities of textiles and fibres, combined with the wider availability of spinning wheels, simultaneously encouraged BOTH the consumption of higher-quality commercial varieties AND the flourishing of household spinning of coarser varieties. In a household economy anything like that of the Lathams, the relationship between commercially sourced textiles and domestically sourced textiles was more complementary than competitive, although there was always the potential for substitutions as family incomes and textile prices changed. Thus in the Latham household in the mid-18th century, a combination of price and quality issues had already largely undermined household self-provisioning with woollen textiles for outer garments.

Similar issues apply when we consider the final eclipse of household self-provisioning of woven textiles in the course of the early 19th century. The driving force here was not simply the cheapness of the new factory yarns spun by machine (although by the late 1820s, factory-spun cotton yarn had become devastatingly cheap).⁴⁸ There were also issues of raw material availability and yarn quality. By the later 18th century, as we have seen, household self-provisioning of textiles involved mainly coarse linens. From the 1790s onwards flax and hemp prices rocketed as a result of European warfare, and remained high after peace arrived in 1815, undermining any cost advantage enjoyed by homespun linen yarn. At the same time, the cotton industry was radically reformulating the quality of cheap, everyday shirting and sheeting. The average count (ie. fineness) of cotton yarns doubled in the 60 years from the 1760s to the 1830s, from an average of less than cotton count 20 (Ne 20) on the eve of the spinning inventions, to about cotton count 40 (Ne 40) by the 1830s.⁴⁹ A cheap, bleached-white, 40 count Lancashire calico sheet for a mid-19th century labouring

⁴⁶ S. Moorhouse and J. Hurst, 'An imported stoneware spindlewhorl, with some preliminary comments on stoneware spindlewhorls in England, their dating and origin,' *Transactions of the London and Middlesex Archaeological Society*, 32 (1981), 124-8.

⁴⁷ M. Overton *et al*, *Production and Consumption in English Households, 1600-1750* (London, 2004), 108-11; C. Husband, 'Standards of living in north Warwickshire in the seventeenth century,' *Warwickshire History*, 4, 6 (1980-1), 203-215.

⁴⁸ *Reports from the Assistant Hand-Loom Weavers Commissioners*, Part 2 (London, 1840), 352.

⁴⁹ C. Knick Harley, 'Cotton textile prices and the industrial revolution', *Economic History Review*, 51 (1998), 49-83.

family's bed was a very different thing materially from the coarse, homespun, brown linen sheeting in which 18th century working people slept.

Even the most adept domestic spinner of coarse linen sheeting found it hard to match the products of Lancashire's spinning machines for fineness, let alone price. Cotton sheeting was much less durable than linen, but once the price of cotton sheets fell low enough to accommodate the necessary replacement rate, linen was eclipsed.⁵⁰ It took the Arts and Crafts movement of the 20th century to reframe hand-spun yarns, with all their variation and irregularity of texture, as aesthetically attractive, morally virtuous, and (of course) worth a hefty premium price.

⁵⁰ Styles, *Dress of the People*, ch. 7.