

2. The trade in teazles

Although the fullers' teazle is a native of the Mediterranean climatic zone it can be grown with more or less success in temperate latitudes. By the medieval period, therefore, teazle cultivation had already been introduced into various parts of northern Europe, including England, usually close to the places where there was a demand. On the neighbouring areas of the Continent, growing was carried out in the Low Countries, where there was an important urban woollen manufacture based largely on exports of wool from England, whilst the historic Normandy and Picardy teazle cultivations were probably also established by or in this period.

In England itself, by the thirteenth century, teazles were grown at various places across the south of the country where cloth was made and finished. These included London, where the teazles were grown in the Bishopsgate-Whitechapel district for the London clothworkers. Elsewhere, teazles would appear to have been grown near Taunton by 1218 or 1219 and around the same time at least at High Wycombe, whilst they were also grown at places such as Beaulieu Abbey, at Long Melford and Glemsford on the Norfolk-Suffolk border and at Easton, near Winchester. There is evidence too, in the late thirteenth century, from towns such as Nottingham, Stamford, Ipswich and Bristol, of the movement of teazles within the country.¹

By the early fourteenth century, however, despite the poorness of communications, and the fact that teazles were bulky and needed protection against bad handling and wetting, there was also a longer-distance, cross-channel trade in existence, as the available supplies were drawn to wherever the demand and prices were highest. This seems at first to have involved the exporting of English teazles, which were being bought up by Flemings and Brabanters for use in the woollen industry in the Low Countries. This, however, inevitably caused problems of shortages and high prices for the infant English cloth manufacture, particularly as the English climate is less well suited to successful teazle growing. As a result, in an early example of the official regulation that characterised this vital auxiliary trade down to the nineteenth century, in 1326, Edward II as part of the terms of the Ordinance of the Staple, banned the exporting of 'Tasles' and various other items of a similarly useful nature.² It was around this same time that as a consequence of the increasing demand for the teazle in the English cloth industry, this overseas trade began to turn into a regular import trade, one of the early consignments being 18,000 teazles landed in Exeter in 1331-32. By the end of the Middle Ages, what have been described as 'vast quantities' of teazles were being landed at ports all around the coast, chiefly from the Low Countries.³

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By the early eighteenth century, the supply trade serving the English woollen industry had developed into a new phase, with the country generally being self-sufficient in teazles. This would appear to have been the result of an import duty which remained in force down to the 1840s,⁴ and which was intended to ensure the vitally important supplies for the English woollen manufacturers by protecting the English growers against the competition from cheaper foreign teazles grown under more favourable climatic conditions on the neighbouring parts of the Continent. The leading counties of the growing trade were in the West of England, where the main woollen-manufacturing districts were located and where the making of fine cloth was carried out, particularly in Gloucestershire and the adjacent parts of Wiltshire and Somerset. The largest amounts of teazles were grown in Somerset, on the north side of the Mendip Hills, with Wrington being noted as an especially important growing parish.⁵ It is probable that growing was also then carried out in the south of the

county, in the Taunton area, where teazles had been used since at least the early thirteenth century. Northwards, growing was also undertaken in Gloucestershire, being noted for instance in 1667 at Frampton on Severn, and where there was at one time a considerable growing trade in the middle part of the Vale of Gloucester.⁶ The only other place in the country where teazles are known to have been grown in the period was Essex, where on the borders of Essex and Suffolk there was a woollen trade producing raised cloths such as broadcloth and baize. The teazles were grown around Coggeshall in a uniquely local way, as part of a triple crop, the other components of which were coriander and carraway.⁷ It is not impossible that outside these main growing areas, and away from the distribution routes from them, there were small localised pockets of growing, but the only known indication of this relates to places in Ireland. There according to an account at the end of the eighteenth century, some growing had previously taken place in Co. Wicklow for the use of the blanket weavers at Kilkenny in the interior of the south-east of Ireland, the teazles being transferred to Kilkenny by way of Dublin. However, as by 1800, this cultivation had been given up, seven or eight acres of teazles were then being grown at Kilkenny itself, each producing between 50,000 and 60,000 teazles. Imports of teazles into England, when they were required, probably came from the Low Countries, France, with its large production in Normandy in particular, having restrictions on the exporting of teazles in the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁸