

**THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST
TRANSCRIPT**

**EPISODE 110:
DYED IN THE WOOL**

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Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 110: Dyed in the Wool. In this episode, we’re going to look at an aspect of English society that was undergoing some major changes in the late 1200s, and that’s the wool and cloth industry. It may not seem like a sexy topic, but this was a period when Medieval fashions were changing. Clothing was becoming shorter and tighter and more closely tailored, and older articles of clothing were starting to be replaced by newer articles of clothing. In this episode, we’ll explore the important role of the English wool industry, and we’ll see how new innovations were changing both the production of cloth and the clothing that was made from that cloth. We’ll also examine how the Medieval wool and cloth industry shaped the English language.

But before we begin, let me remind you that the website for the podcast is historyofenglishpodcast.com. And you can sign up to support the podcast at Patreon.com/historyofenglish. And as always, you can reach me by email at kevin@historyofenglishpodcast.com,

Now let’s turn to this episode, and let’s begin by considering our modern words for basic articles of clothing. As we’ve seen before, many of our most basic words can be traced back to Old English. The first words that we learn as small children tend to be very old words – words that go back to the Anglo-Saxons. That’s the case with numbers, and family relations like *mother* and *father* and *brother* and *sister*. It’s true for basic parts of the body like *head*, *arm*, *foot*, *finger*, and so on. These words are part of our core vocabulary. We learn them very early on, and they tend to be very conservative – passing from one generation to the next over many centuries with very little change.

So based on that premise, you might think that most our words for basic clothing items also go back to Old English, but that isn’t really the case. Consider these simple words for the various items of clothing that we wear, starting with the feet and working our way up. We have *shoes*, *boots*, *socks*, *stockings*, *pants*, *jeans*, *trousers*, *shorts*, *skirt*, *belt*, *shirt*, *blouse*, *dress*, *gown*, *jacket*, *coat*, *sweater*, *cap* and *hat*. We can also add in undergarments like *underwear*, *panties* and *bra*. That’s twenty-two basic words for clothes that people wear today, but only four of those words are native words used by the Anglo-Saxons – *shirt*, *shoe*, *belt* and *hat*. All the others came from somewhere else or were created within the language at a later date.

Now we know from the earlier episodes about the Vikings that *shirt* and *skirt* originally referred to the same basic article of clothing. *Shirt* is the native English word, and *skirt* is the Norse version of the word used by the Vikings. The Norse word *skirt* was borrowed into English, and over time, the two words became distinct and came to refer to different articles of clothing. So *skirt* is a loanword. The Anglo-Saxons may have been familiar with the word, but it doesn’t appear in an English document until around the current point in our overall story – in the early 1300s.

Similarly, the words *sock* and *cap* are found in Old English documents, but that are actually early loanwords from Latin. So they are not native to English either.

Shorts, *sweater* and *slacks* and *stockings* are all based on Old English root words – *short*, *sweat*, *slack* and *stock*, respectively. But the word *stockings* wasn't coined until the late 1500s, and the three others didn't appear in English until the 1800s.

So if the words for basic items of clothing are part of our core vocabulary, why are so few of those words native to Old English? Well part of the answer is that clothing changes over time. And most of the articles of clothing I just mentioned didn't exist during the Anglo-Saxon period – at least not in the form that we recognize them today. So as fashions changed, words for old types of clothing tended to disappear from the language, and words for the new clothing items were either borrowed from elsewhere or were formed by coining brand new words from within the existing vocabulary.

If we think back to the clothing worn by the Greeks and the Romans, we tend to think of very loose-fitting clothing that was wrapped around the body – togas and loose-fitting gowns and tunics. These styles evolved in Europe during the early Middle Ages, but again, most clothing involved cloth that was draped over the body in a very relaxed and loose way. And part of the reason for that is because people didn't have a good and efficient way to secure the clothing to their bodies.

Take the tunic for example. It was probably the most basic article of clothing in Europe in the Middle Ages. It was essentially a large piece of cloth with a hole in the top for the head and secured around the waist with a belt. Both men and women wore tunics, and in fact there was relatively little difference between the clothing of men and women – especially basic clothing like this that was typically worn by peasants and workers. The legs were usually covered by some type of stocking – not pants as we know them today. A type of basic pants existed, but most people wore a leg wraps or stockings. And again, both men and women dressed in this manner. If it was cold, the person might wear a cloak or mantle on top of the other clothing. Again, this was usually just a large piece of cloth worn around the neck, and sometimes secured with a brooch. So people wore these large, loose-fitting clothes, and they didn't usually have access to any type of tailored clothing that fit the contours of the body.

But all of that started to change around the current point in our story from the mid-1200s into the early 1300s. One of the major reasons for that change was a brand new innovation – the button. Believe it or not, the simple button that we use all the time changed fashion in Medieval Europe. It made its first appearance in Western Europe in the mid-1200s. The innovation soon spread to England as well.

English-speakers borrowed the name of this new innovation from French, but the ultimate root word is Germanic. The word *button* is actually cognate with the native English word *beat*, as well as the Germanic word *butt* as in to 'butt heads.' The root word meant 'to thrust or strike or push violently,' and for this little clothing innovation, it referred to the fact that the button was pushed through a small opening to secure the clothing.

The word *button* was first recorded in an English document composed around the year 1320, so by that point, buttons had become so common that the word had entered the English language and was being used in English documents.

So you may be wondering why the button itself was such a big deal. Well, it fundamentally changed fashion in Europe. Up until this point, clothing tended to hang loosely from the shoulders, but now, clothes could be tailored and fitted. Cloth could be cut to fit the shape and contours of the human body, and it could be easily fastened and secured with a few buttons. That meant that clothing started to become tighter and more form fitting and more modern. Rather than large loose-fitting tunics that covered most or all of the body, the new clothing styles meant that people started to wear specific articles of clothing that were made for specific parts of the body. This fashion change allowed for the creation of shirts and pants and coats that were much more modern in appearance and style. The changes didn't occur overnight, but they were initiated with the arrival of the button.

As I said, buttons allowed clothing to become tighter and more snug, but it also made it easy for people to put on and take off those clothes with relative ease. So rather than clothing being wrapped around or draped over the body, people now started to speak of 'putting on' their clothes – referring to the process of placing several different clothing items on the body and fastening them one at a time. In fact, the phrase 'put on' in this sense of 'putting on clothes' first appeared in the 1300s.

Today we might also say that we are 'dressing' or 'getting dressed.' Well the word *dress* has an interesting history, and it's modern sense is directly related to this relatively new process of 'putting on' clothes one piece at a time. Like so many of the loanwords from this period, *dress* was borrowed from French and Latin, and it can be found in English for the first time in the early 1300s. But the original sense of the word didn't have anything to do with clothing. It meant 'to set something right or to put something in order or to prepare something.' We still have some of that original sense in the word *address*. When you 'address a problem,' your goal is to work through the problem and fix it. Well, by the 1400s, the word *dress* had evolved from a general sense of putting things in order to a more restricted sense of putting clothing in order. In other words, it came to mean the process of laying out specific articles of clothing and then putting them on one piece at a time. So that gave us the modern sense of 'getting dressed.' By the way, it wasn't until the 1600s that the word *dress* came to refer to an actual piece of clothing – a lady's gown or frock.

So buttons not only changed the nature of clothing, they also changed the process of getting dressed, and that gave us the modern sense of the verb '*to dress*.'

As clothes started to become more tailored to the contours of the human body, men's and women's fashions started to diverge. Rather than everyone wearing loose tunics, men and women started to wear much more distinct clothing. This may also help to explain how *shirt* and *skirt* became distinct. As we know, those are just the Old English and Old Norse versions of the same word. The words were coined at a time when both men and women wore loose fitting tunics that were very similar. But thanks to this new fashion, large flowing tunics started to be

replaced with separate upper and lower garments. And *shirt* gradually became reserved for the upper garment, and *skirt* was reserved for the lower loose-fitting garment.

I should note that there is an analogy here with the words *cape* and *cap*. Both of those words come from the Latin word *cappa* which meant a loose fitting cloak with a hood. But over time, *cape* became restricted to a loose fitting cloak worn below the neck, and *cap* became restricted to a type of hat worn on top of the head. So over time, as fashion evolved, words sometimes became distinct to account for the changing style of clothing.

Now these fashion changes tended to affect the nobles and the affluent first. They were the ones who could afford the new buttons and the new styles of clothing. Peasants continued to wear the traditional clothing for a while, but even their clothing changed over the next couple of centuries.

Regardless of fashion, both peasants and nobles did have one thing in common when it came to clothes and that was the fabric that was used for most clothing items during this period. That fabric was wool. And you can't really appreciate this history of Medieval England without considering the important role that wool played at the time.

I've alluded to the English wool trade a few times in the podcast, but let's take a closer look at why wool was so important to England during this period.

As you probably know, wool is made from the hair of sheep, and sheep were very common in England even during the Anglo-Saxon period. But the engine that drove the English wool industry was really located across the Channel in Flanders – basically part of modern-day Belgium and the Netherlands. A massive cloth industry had developed there in the Middle Ages – really the most important cloth-making center in Europe. And to produce all of that cloth, they needed wool. England became the primary supplier of wool to Flanders. So there was a symbiotic relationship between the two regions. Each one was dependent on the other, and that would have major political consequences as we'll soon see.

Wool emerged as England's primary export, and the English economy made lots of money through this lucrative wool trade. It was so important to the English economy and English society that, even today, the seat of the Lord High Chancellor in the House of Lords is a large square bag of wool called the 'woolsack.' It reflects how important wool was to the English economy in the Middle Ages.

As I noted, wool required sheep, and by the year 1300, the English countryside had about 10 million sheep, and they were producing about 40,000 sacks of wool a year, some of it being sold to Italian merchants in Italy, but most of it earmarked for Flanders.

And speaking of *earmarked*, that's another term that can be traced back to the sheep and wool industry. You might remember from an earlier episode that it was common in the Anglo-Saxon period for sheep and other animals to graze on large fields maintained by the village. This was common land, so everyone used it. But that meant that a 'sheep herder' – or *shepherd* for short – had to keep track of his own sheep. One way to do that was to notch the ears of the sheep. Each

shepherd or farm had their own unique mark. Those notches were called earmarks. And by the late 1500s, the term had been extended to any type of identifying mark. And soon thereafter, the word *earmark* started to be used as a verb with its modern meaning ‘to mark or set something aside for a particular purpose.’

By the current point in our story, a lot of farmers and shepherds were maintaining their own land for grazing rather than using the common land. In order to keep the sheep from grazing beyond that private land, farmers had to construct barriers or fences to keep the sheep in place. Wooden fences were sometimes used, but the most common type of fence was natural. Most farms used hedges to mark the boundaries of the property. These hedges kept the animals in and kept everyone else’s animals out.

Scholars of this period note that the increase in hedges marked a societal shift from a communal society to a society in which private and exclusive property was increasingly the norm. But hedges didn’t always work. Sometimes the animals got out and had to be tracked down and returned. So many sheep farmers had a designated person called a ‘hedge warden’ to keep an eye on the hedges and the animals. Over time, that term ‘hedge warden’ was shortened. In the same way that ‘shire reeve’ was shortened to *sheriff*, and ‘sheep herder’ was shortened to *shepherd*, the term ‘hedge warden’ was shortened to *hayward*. The ‘hay’ part of *hayward* didn’t have anything to do with hay. It was a shortened version of the word *hedge*. This contracted word actually appeared for the first time in the Ancrene Wisse. And I mention the job of the hayward for a couple of reasons.

First, it is the ultimate source of the surnames *Hayward* and *Haywood*. Surnames were relatively new at this point, but they were starting to become common. And many early surnames that were based on a person’s job or profession. And the surnames Hayward and Haywood were based on the common job of the hayward in the Middle Ages.

The other reason why I mention the role of the hayward is because it helps to explain the meaning behind a very well-known nursery rhyme. If you’re familiar with the nursery rhyme “Little Boy Blue,” and you’ve ever wondered what it was about, well Little Boy Blue was a hayward. As was common at the time, his job was to keep an eye on the animals, and if the animals got out, his had a horn which he could blow to inform others to come and help retrieve the animals. Here’s a common version of the nursery rhyme:

Little Boy Blue, come blow your horn,
The sheep's in the meadow, the cow's in the corn.
But where is the boy, who looks after the sheep?
He's under a haystack, he's fast asleep.
Will you wake him? No, not I,
For if I do, he's sure to cry.

So Little Boy Blue was a hayward, and *hayward* literally meant ‘hedge warden.’ Now today, we still use the word *hedge* to mean a row of bushes, but we also use it as a verb when we ‘hedge our bets’ or you might make a particular investment as a ‘hedge against inflation.’ It has a sense of protection or a defense against a risk. The financial sense also created the term ‘hedge fund’ for a specific type of financial investment. So how did a row of bushes become associated with money and finance? Well, it had to do with the sense of protection that was afforded by hedges. Hedges provided shelter for birds and other small animals. And as I noted, hedges not only kept a landholder’s animal in, it also kept everyone else’s animals out. So there were always a defensive or protective aspect to hedges. And by the late 1300s, the word *hedge* was being used a verb meaning ‘to protect or secure against a loss.’ And that helped to provide the connection between hedges and financial investments.

And speaking of financial investments, we’ve seen that one of the biggest financial investments in Medieval England was a large flock of sheep. They not only provided milk and cheese, they also provided wool, and that’s where most of the money was made.

Now as I’ve noted before, the word *sheep* is an Old English word, but it wasn’t the only word for the animal. In Old English, a sheep was sometimes called a *wether*. It specifically referred to a male sheep and usually a castrated male sheep. It was common for the shepherd to put a bell around the neck of one of these castrated sheep so that he could lead the flock. So this sheep or *wether* became known as a *bellwether*. The *bellwether* was usually the sheep at the front or head of the flock. And over time, it came to mean anything that signals future trends. Today, a *bellwether* is a sign of things to come.

So if you are a ‘hedge’ fund manager, you might ‘ earmark’ certain funds for investment in a certain new industry, and you might invest some of those funds in a ‘bellwether’ stock which is stock in a company considered to be a leading indicator of that industry. As you can see, these old sheep words still have financial implications to this day.

Now, not all sheep were created equal. English sheep tended to produce a very fine wool which was why it was such high demand on the continent. The fine wool was necessary to produce a high quality cloth. So when the sheep were sheared, the wool was bundled in what were called sacks, and much of it was sold to foreign merchants.

Some of the wool was retained for local cloth-makers, but up to this point, England’s cloth-making industry was very small and limited to local consumption. For the most part, the wool was sold to Flanders where it was turned into cloth, and then England would turn around and buy the finished cloth from the Flemish cloth-makers.

Again, this meant that England and Flanders were tied together at the hip. England depended on the export of wool to Flanders, and Flanders depended in the import of wool from England. But that didn’t mean the two regions always saw eye-to-eye. Flanders imposed customs duties on English merchants, and in the year 1270, a dispute arose over the payment of those duties. The Count of Flanders took the drastic step of imposing an embargo on English wool, effectively shutting down the import of wool from across the Channel. It was an attempt to force the issue

over those unpaid duties, but the matter remained unresolved for several years. Increasingly, English farmers sold their wool to Italian merchants who used it for the cloth-making industry in Italy.

This was the state of things when Edward I became king in 1274. You might remember from the last episode that Edward was on his way home from Crusade when he found out that his father had died in England, and that he was destined to become the new king.

I mentioned that Edward took his time returning to England. It actually took about two years for him to make his way back. Well, part of the reason for that delay is because Edward was attending to other matters on his return. And one of those matters was that embargo on English wool in Flanders. On his way home, Edward met with the Count of Flanders, and together, they resolved the trade dispute. The Flemish market was once again opened to English wool. So when Edward finally arrived back in England, he enjoyed the support of the nobles and wool merchants who depended in that trade.

As soon as he was crowned king, Edward called his first Parliament. And Edward followed Simon de Montfort's example by calling representatives of the towns and cities, as well as the merchants. So commoners joined the nobles at the Parliament. And there was a good reason for that.

As was the case with his father and grandfather, one of Edward's biggest concerns was money. Edward was heavily indebted to the Italian merchants from whom he had borrowed large sums of money before he became king. Crusades were not cheap. Nor was the general lifestyle of an English prince. So like his predecessors, Edward needed money, and that meant new taxes. But he also knew the problems that his father Henry and grandfather John had encountered when they pushed the barons too far with taxes. He didn't want to risk another baronial revolt by having his first act as king to be a large tax on the baron's lands. So he did something else. He imposed a tax on wool exports. The wool merchants didn't really object because Edward had just negotiated an end to that wool embargo in Flanders. And maybe this was all part of Edward's master plan because Edward got his wool tax with virtually no objection. In the end, even with the tax, the wool producers were in a whole lot better shape than they had been before Edward came to power. So Edward got his tax, and the wool merchants got entry to the Flanders market again.

The tax was relatively modest – a half a mark on every sack of wool exported. That was 7 shillings and 6 pence. This became known as the 'Great and Ancient Custom,' and it was really the beginning of the long-term policy of taxing exports. By the mid-1300s, all goods imported and exported were taxed. And this shows how the feudal system was eroding. Rather than traditional feudal taxes on barons and nobles and other landholders, we see the English crown looking to tax trade and commerce. This reflects a break from tradition, and it shows the rising power and wealth of the merchant class as opposed to the traditional nobility. For the rest of the Middle Ages, the taxes on imports and exports were the crown's largest source of income.

So with the Flanders market re-opened, English wool was once again exported across the Channel in massive quantities. Once the wool was received, it was then processed into cloth. So let's consider that process. The steps were basically the same whether they were done for the local market in England or for the international market in Flanders.

The first step was to sort through the wool and divide it into three grades – fine, medium and coarse. The wool was then washed in lye to remove grease. Then it was spread on boards to dry. Soil and other particles were then removed by hand or cut out with shears.

Now at any point in the process, the wool could be dyed. It could be dyed at this point when the wool was still unprocessed, or it could be dyed after it was spun into yarn. But most of time, it was dyed at the very end after it had been woven into cloth. The dyes sometimes faded and gave up their color over time, but if the wool was dyed at the beginning of the process – before it was spun into yarn and before it was made into cloth – it tended to hold its color better and longer. The color was more firmly fixed and didn't tend to break down or lessen over time. That basic fact gave us the modern phrase 'dyed in the wool.' Today, it usually refers to someone who has very strong beliefs that are unwavering or unchanging. So you might have a dyed in the wool Chicago Bears fan, or a dyed in the wool conservative or liberal. They hold onto their beliefs and passions in the same way that dyed wool holds onto its color.

Now whether or not the wool was dyed during this initial stage (and it usually wasn't), the next step in the process was called carding or combing. When the wool was cut from the sheep, it consisted of clumps and curls that had to be straightened out. So this step literally involved a type of combing procedure where the wool was disentangled and pulled into long straight fibers.

Once the wool fibers were prepared in this way, they could then be spun into thread or yarn. Traditionally, this was done by hand with a couple of instruments called a distaff and a spindle. A distaff was basically a stick with wool gathered at the top. The wool was pulled out in long strands and gathered around the spindle which literally spun and twisted the wool forming a tightly-wound thread or yarn. But around the current point in our story, a new invention allowed spinners to produce a lot more yarn much quicker. That invention was the spinning wheel.

The spinning wheel was first introduced to Europe in the late 1200s. It may have originated in the Near East because the oldest known illustration of a spinning wheel is from Baghdad in the early 1200s. The device quickly made its way to Europe because the first references to it in Europe occur around the year 1280 – so just about six years after Flanders market was re-opened to English wool.

At first there was resistance to the spinning wheel because it produced a lower-quality thread that was rough and uneven. And that was the context for the first references to the device in Europe. Like most professions, spinners were organized into guilds, and guild regulations from this period banned the use of the spinning wheel because it produced lower quality thread. But after some modifications were made to the device, those problems were solved. Soon, the quality of the thread produced by the spinning wheel was just as good as that produced by the old-fashioned distaff and spindle. It also meant that the thread could be spun much faster and more efficiently.

Now this was a period in which many professions were largely restricted to one gender or the other. And the spinning of wool into thread or yarn was very much a woman's profession. In fact, it was one of the few careers that welcomed women. Those women were called *spinsters*.

Now they weren't called *spinnners* because the '-er' ending was traditionally a masculine ending. In Old English, '-er' was used to indicate a male worker, and '-ster' was used to indicate a female worker. So theoretically, a *spinner* would have been a male worker and a *spinster* would have been a female worker. But since males spinners were very rare, almost all people involved in this profession were *spinsters*.

Now younger women who had this job often got married and had children, and they stopped doing this work at some point at least as a career. But women who didn't get married or have children usually stayed on and continued to spin well into old age. So it was very common to find older unmarried women engaged in this profession. And over time, the word *spinster* became synonymous with older unmarried women, and that gave us the modern sense of the word *spinster* as an old maid.

Now I should note that the '-ster' ending found in a word like *spinster* has undergone some changes over time. And some of those changes were underway in early Middle English. Today, we still use that old ending, but it is no longer restricted to women. We use it in words like *gangster*, *shyster*, *mobster*, *prankster* and *pollster* – none of which are limited to any particular gender. So what happened?

Well, part of the answer is that that old feminine '-ster' ending started to lose its association with females in Middle English and started to become more gender-neutral. This happened first in the north of England. It didn't really reach the south until the end of the Middle English period. At the same time, English was also in the process of adopting the '-ess' ending from French which is the ending we tend to use today as a feminine ending for a particular job or profession. So we might have an *actress*, or a *seamstress*, or a *princess*. That ending can ultimately be traced back to Greek, and it had passed through Latin into French, which is where English started to acquire it. You might remember that one of the first French loanwords that we saw way back in the Peterborough Chronicle was *countess*. So this ending became very familiar to English speakers during the Middle English period. And over time, that ending really replaced the more traditional '-ster' ending that had been used in Old English. And *spinster* is one of the few words with the '-ster' ending that still retains its original feminine sense.

So spinsters played an essential role in the cloth-making process – turning raw wool into thread or yarn. Once the thread and yarn was produced, the next step was weaving those materials into cloth. Traditionally, this was a job that could be handled by either gender, and that explains the origin of two very common surnames – *webber* and *webster*. A *webber* was technically a male weaver, and a *webster* was a female weaver with that feminine '-ster' ending. In Old English, a *web* was something that was woven. And of course, that original sense still survives in a term like *spider web*, but it could also refer to cloth, and webbers and websters turned thread and yarn into cloth.

That *Webster* surname is kind of important to the history of English because it was the surname of Noah Webster who produced the early dictionary that really shaped the beginning of American English. So even today, Webster's is a synonym for dictionary in the US.

Over time, the term *weaver* was also applied to this profession. And of course, that was the origin of another common surname – *Weaver*.

Now once the weavers were finished, there was actual piece of cloth, but it wasn't ready for the market yet. The cloth was loose and not really fit for making clothes. So the next step was called fulling. This is what actually produced finished cloth. Fulling involved the soaking of the cloth in a vat or trough. Workers then walked on the cloth in the vat to get the desired product. The water in the vat was mixed with a substance called 'fuller's earth.' That was a type of fine mineral or clay that helped to cleanse the cloth. It was also common for cloth makers to add urine to the mix. So the people who had to walk in those vats had a dirty and unpopular job. Once again, this job gave rise to a couple of common surnames. The surname *Fuller* is derived from this job, as is the surname *Walker* because these people were sometimes called 'walkers.'

The fulling process matted and shrunk the fabric and pressed it together. It made the cloth harder and firmer. It also cleaned the cloth by removing oil and grease.

The cloth was then hung to dry on a wooden frame called a *tenter*. This allowed the cloth to dry and also stretched the cloth. The tenter had a series of hooks, and the cloth was hung from those hooks. Now given that this was one of the last steps in the cloth-making process, most cloth makers were eager for the cloth to dry as quickly as possible so they could get it on the market or get it over to the dyers who would add color the cloth before it was sold. It was probably hard for the cloth makers to wait for this process to be completed. And that led to another common expression – 'to be on tenterhooks' – meaning to be tense and held in suspense. So if you ever find yourself on tenterhooks, know you know that it's an expression that goes back to the Medieval cloth industry.

By the way, the technical term is *tenterhooks* with a T, not 'tenderhooks' with a D. The phrase is commonly rendered as 'tenderhooks' in part because American English tends to convert a 't' sound in the middle of a word into a 'd' sound. And also because most people are familiar with the word *tender*, but they've probably never heard of the word *tenter*.

Now when the cloth was finally dry, there were often little fuzzy bits of wool on the surface of the cloth. These little pieces of wool were called the nap, and they had to be sheared off in order for the cloth to have a smooth surface. The person who sheared or cut off the nap was called a 'shear man' which actually gave us the common surname *Sherman*. Now outside of the cloth industry, we don't tend to use the word *nap* very much, but it has produced a slang term that is somewhat common in American English. That's the word *nappy*. Today, it's usually used as a derogatory term for frizzy hair, but it's ultimately derived from the rough surface of cloth called *nap*.

Now at this point, the cloth typically still had its natural color. As I noted, dye could theoretically be added at any step in the process, but it was usually left undyed until the very end. So this cloth was still in a somewhat pure and natural state. And sometimes it was sold as is without dye.

A common French word for cloth was *drap* or *draperie* which gave use the word *drapery*. And that word appeared in English around the year 1300. And over time, it even became a verb ‘*to drape*’ meaning to cover with a cloth or have the appearance of being covered with a cloth. Well, it appears that English speakers sometimes referred to this natural undyed cloth with that same French term – *drap*. This drap cloth was dull and lacked any real color. And it appears that drap cloth evolved into the word *drab* by the early Modern English period. When the word *drab* first appeared as a distinct word, it was almost always used in reference to this type of cloth. So today, when we describe something as *drab*, we’re really referring back to the color of undyed cloth.

So that type of cloth typically required one final step – the dyeing process to add color. Dyeing was a specialized trade regulated by guilds. In fact, most dyers only worked with one particular type of dye and one particular color.

Dyes could be made from lots of substances. Some were made from animals, some were derived from plants, others were acquired from minerals. Some dyers made their own dyes, but many of them purchased dyes made by other experts. In fact, some of the dyes were very difficult to obtain. And of course, expert dyers could produce a large variety of colors – both basic as well as subtle shades and blends.

I noted in an earlier episode about the Medieval book trade that our words for primary colors were much more limited in early Middle English. There were native Old English words like *white*, *black*, *red*, *yellow*, and *green*, and I noted in that episode that words for those colors entered most languages in that same basic order. English was no exception, but English also had the word *purple* which had been borrowed from Latin and had a close association with the Roman Emperors and early Medieval royalty. So up to this point, English had words for most of our primary colors, but not all of them. English still did not have the words *blue* or *orange* yet. And the word *brown* wasn’t being used to refer to a specific color. Well, that started to change around the current point in our story because it was finally time for blue to make its appearance – at least time for the word *blue* to make its appearance.

The word *blue* is first attested in English in a document that dates to around the year 1300. The document is a poem called “The Infancy of Jesus.” It is contained in one of the manuscripts that also had one of the original copies of King Horn which I discussed in the last episode. When the word *blue* is used in that poem, it’s specifically used in reference to cloth. Here’s the line from the poem:

Pis on schal beo fair blu cloth, þis oþur grene. (Which translates as. . .)
This one shall be fair blue cloth, this other green.

So where did the word *blue* come from, and why did it come into English at this point? Well, the word comes from French, but beyond that, the history is a little unclear. Some sources suggest that French inherited the word from Late Latin because Late Latin had the word *blavus* meaning blue and *blavius* specifically meaning blue cloth. These Latin words appear to have been borrowed from the Germanic languages.

Other sources suggest that French borrowed the word *blue* from the Franks, and that provides the Germanic source of the word. Other than noting an ultimate Germanic source, and the fact that the word *blue* is cognate with the word *black*, it's difficult to say much definitive about the history of word prior to this point.

Prior to borrowing the word *blue*, English had used native words like *hæwan* and *woad*, but those words usually referred to pigments and dyes. In fact, woad was actually a plant which produced a blue dye. Even though woad was common as a blue dye, the blue cloth it produced tended to have a grayish washed-out tone. It was mostly worn by peasants, and it wasn't highly valued.

Another blue dye was indigo, and it could produce a more desirable color of blue. But indigo came from a plant found in India which is why the Romans had called it *indigo* – actually *indicum*. It produced a brilliant and concentrated blue color, but the form in which it was exported was insoluble, and it was mostly used by painters. European cloth-makers had a tough time figuring out how to use indigo to dye clothing with that color. It was actually Marco Polo that helped to solve this problem. His book contained a first-hand account of how indigo was used to dye wool from his travels through India. Based on that description, dyers in Venice started to use indigo to produce a much more vibrant blue cloth.

In the rest of Europe, dyers also started to figure out how to produce a much more stable bright blue with their native dyes. This color was soon adopted by the nobility, and it appears that this more vibrant color became known as *blue* as opposed to older terms like *hæwan* and *woad* which were more associated with a duller color. Over time, the word *blue* pushed those other words out of the way leaving *blue* as the primary word for that color in English today.

So that's blue, but let me mention a couple of things about the color red. In order to dye the cloth red, dyers would sometimes use a substance called madder. It was derived from a plant that was grown in Europe. But many dyers preferred a different substance to get a bright red color, and that substance was kermes. Kermes specifically referred to a small insect with worm-like larvae found in the Mediterranean. The larvae were used to make the dye. Kermes actually gave us the word *crimson* meaning a deep red color. *Crimson* was borrowed from French and Latin in the 1400s.

Since kermes was an imported dye, it was quite expensive. So dyers sometimes used it for the finest quality woolen cloth which was called *scarlet*. Now today, *scarlet* refers to a bright red color, but originally it referred to a type of fine woolen cloth dyed with kermes. The word *scarlet* in this original sense as a type of fine cloth first appeared around the current point in our story in the mid-1200s. Now again, the word originally refer to cloth – not color. Kermes produced a

vibrant red cloth, but sometimes other dyes were added in, like woad. So you could actually have a purple scarlet or even a bluish scarlet, but most of the time scarlet cloth was produced without other dyes leaving that pure red color. Over time, the cloth was so closely associated with that bright red color that the word *scarlet* came to refer to the color itself.

So once the dyers finished coloring the cloth, the process was essentially complete. The cloth was then brushed, pressed and folded. And from there, it hit the market and was available to buyers.

The cloth could appear in a variety of textures and thicknesses. One type of thick woolen cloth called *carpet* was used for a variety of purposes. It was mostly used as a bedcover or tablecloth. Some religious orders even used it as a garment. Over the next couple of centuries, people started to place these thick bedspreads and tablecloths on stone floors to protect against the cold. And that gave us the modern sense of the word *carpet* as a floor covering. The word *carpet* meaning a thick cloth was borrowed from French and Latin, and it's found in Latin documents in England in the late 1200s, and it appears in an English document for the first time in the mid-1300s. So *carpet* is another word that can be traced back to this period.

I noted that carpet cloth was commonly used for bedspreads and tablecloths, and that helps to explain a very common expression using the word *carpet*. If someone is in trouble, they might be called "on the carpet." Well, originally, that phrase referred to a council table covered with carpet cloth. When a matter was under discussion or consideration, it was done "on the carpet" meaning 'at the council table covered with a carpet tablecloth.' So if you're called "on the carpet," you're really just being called to the table.

Now speaking of tablecloths, we have another group of related words that show how versatile cloth was in the Middle Ages. Those words are *map*, *apron*, and *napkin*. Believe it or not, all three words come from a single Latin word that meant cloth. The original Latin word was *mappa*. It meant cloth, and in a time before paper was common and when parchment was very expensive, it was common to use pieces of cloth to draw directions or other topographical features, and that ultimately gave us the word *map*. But that word was a relatively late borrowing in the 1500s.

Now the same Latin root word passed into early French, and the 'm' sound switched to a 'n' sound in the process. It produced the French word *nappe* which meant a tablecloth. English borrowed this word in the 1300s and added the English ending '-kin' to the end. This was an English ending that was used to indicate something small. And the result was the English word *napkin* which literally meant a small tablecloth, but it came to mean a towel or cloth used at the table to wipe one's face and hands. The connection between tablecloths and napkins becomes more apparent if you realize that it was common in the Middle Ages for tablecloths to hang long on the side of the table where people ate. That way, they could just use the excess tablecloth to wipe their faces and hands. So the tablecloth was like one big communal napkin. But that custom gave way to personal napkins over time – thankfully. So English reduced the French *nappe* or tablecloth to English *napkin*.

And French actually had the same idea. It also created a variation of *nappe* to mean smaller cloth, but rather than adding the English ‘-kin’ to the end, they added a French ending which converted *nappe* into *naperon*. Again, this new word had a sense of a smaller cloth used in a kitchen or dining area. Within French itself, it also came to be mean napkin over time, but the word was borrowed into English around the current point in our story in the early 1300s. And within English, the word came to refer to a small piece of cloth worn around the body to protect the clothing from stains while cooking. Of course, we know that word today as *apron*. So how *naperon* lose its N and become *apron*.

Well, it was a process I’ve mentioned before where people got confused by the article at the front of the word. In early Middle English, the word *an* started to be used a generic article before nouns. And it was soon shortened to just *a* when it appeared before nouns that began with a consonant. So ‘an apple’ and ‘a dog.’ But people sometimes got confused when a word began with an N – especially a new word like *naperon*. When people said ‘a naperon’ were they saying ‘a naperon’ or ‘an aperon’? Did the N go with the article or the noun? Over time, this confusion led people to shift the N over to the article, and ‘a *naperon*’ became ‘an *apron*.’

So English ended up with the words *napkin* and *apron* from a word that originally meant tablecloth. I should also mention that the word *towel* was also borrowed into English during this same period. It was borrowed from French, and first appears in English in the late 1200s (1284).

So up to this point, we’ve seen how the wool industry was an important economic engine for England, and it was also the source of many new English words. And as we’ve seen, England mostly provided the wool as a raw material while the cloth itself was made elsewhere in places like Flanders or Italy. England did have some small-scale cloth-makers, but they mostly sold to local buyers. They didn’t really produce cloth for export, but that started to change during the 1300s. And there were several factors that contributed to that change.

One factor was a new invention – the waterwheel and water-powered machinery. Traditionally, the cloth-making process was done almost entirely by hand with the help of a few simple tools. And that was because that was all people had to work with. That started to change with the introduction of the spinning wheel which I discussed earlier. The spinning wheel increased the production of thread and yarn, but the big change took place when the power of rivers and streams was applied to the fulling process.

As I noted earlier, the fulling process was the part that took place near the end when the cloth was soaking in a trough and people called ‘fullers’ or ‘walkers’ had to walk on the cloth for an extended period of time. The material in the trough was dirty, and it was not a fun job at all. But by the late 1200s, people had started to harness the power of the rivers with waterwheels. An axle extending from the waterwheel could reach into a building where a series of pistons or hammers would raise and lower as the wheel turned. Originally, this type of mill was used to grind corn or wheat or other grains into flour, but in the 1200s, it started to be used for the fulling process. Now, rather than having people walk over the cloth, those water-driven pistons and hammers could do all the work. That meant that a lot more cloth could go through the fulling process much quicker.

England had rivers and streams that were perfectly suited for these types of fulling mills, and they soon spread across the English countryside, especially in the west and in the north. Again these were called fulling mills, but in the west country, they were sometimes called ‘tucking mills.’ And in the north, they were sometimes called ‘walk mills.’

The first known fulling mill was built in Yorkshire in the late 1100s, but they didn’t start to become common until the mid and late 1200s. And by the 1300s, they were allowing England to produce enough native cloth that the country actually started to export the finished material.

Another factor that contributed to the growth of the English cloth industry was the arrival of immigrants from Flanders in the 1300s. Political problems in Flanders led some to seek employment across the Channel in England’s burgeoning cloth industry. The English crown welcomed the immigrants, and that also played a role in the development of the industry.

In fact, the founder of the first recorded textile factory in Bristol was a Fleming named Thomas Blanket. He produced a thick woolen cloth that people could put on their bed to keep warm in the cold winter months. And it was once a commonly-accepted etymology that Thomas Blanket gave his name to that cloth which became the modern word *blanket*. In actuality, the word *blanket* is found in English for the first time around the year 1300 – several decades before Thomas’s arrival in England. It’s derived from the French word *blanc* meaning ‘white.’ The word originally meant ‘white wool stuffing.’ So Thomas Blanket probably took his surname from that material rather than the other way around. As we’ve seen, lots of surnames were derived from various aspects of the cloth industry.

Now even though the word *blanket* was not apparently borrowed from a Flemish immigrant, several other English words related to cloth were borrowed from Dutch during this period. And that was likely due to the overall influences of the Flanders cloth industry, as well as the many new Flemish arrivals in England in the 1300s – some of whom spoke Dutch.

One of the new words borrowed from early Dutch during this period was the word *spool* which was an item essential to spinsters. More notably, English borrowed several Dutch words during this period related to packing and shipping, and it is likely that much of that packing and shipping involved wool and cloth. Those other new Dutch loanwords include the word *pack*, as well as *bundle*, and the word *bale* – B-A-L-E – as in a large bundle of something like a ‘bale of hay’ or a ‘bale of wool.’

English also borrowed another Dutch word which is somewhat relevant here. The word wasn’t actually borrowed into English until the 1500s, but I would be remiss if I didn’t mention it here. Do you remember earlier when I was discussing the French word *nappe* meaning tablecloth, and I mentioned that English borrowed that word and gave it a common English suffix at the time which was ‘-kin’? That suffix meant ‘little or small.’ And it gave us the word *napkin* meaning a small cloth used at the table.

Well, Dutch had essentially the same Germanic suffix, and it was added to the word *man* to create the Dutch word *manikin* which meant ‘little man.’ This word actually entered English in the 1500s. The spelling varied, but it was usually something like M-A-N-I-K-I-N. Of course, the word also passed into French, and that’s where we got the modern spelling of the word – M-A-N-N-E-Q-U-I-N. The clothing industry still relies upon mannequins to display its apparel, but the word actually comes from Dutch – not French.

So we’ve seen that the English cloth industry was spurred on by the rise of fulling mills and Flemish immigrants. But there was also another factor. And that takes us back to Edward I.

As I noted earlier, one of Edward’s first acts as king was to impose a modest tax on the export of every sack of English wool. At the time, no one really objected because the tax was small and because Edward had just negotiated an end to the embargo on English wool in Flanders.

Well, all good things come to an end. The tax on wool proved too lucrative to resist. And by the last decade of the 1200s, war with France loomed on the horizon, and Edward needed money. So he decided to return to the well. In 1294, Edward ordered the seizure of all the wool in England. It’s release was only permitted upon the payment of a tax in the amount of 40 shillings per sack. The old customs tax had only been about one-sixth of that amount. Whereas the wool producers and merchants tolerated the first tax, this one was called the ‘maltolt’ – a French term that meant ‘the evil takings.’ It could mean either the government’s evil taking of their wool in the first place or the government’s evil taking of their money in order to get the wool back. Either way, there wasn’t much they could do about it other than pay. The tax was lifted a few years later, but it set a precedent that Edward successors also tried to exploit. As English wool growers found themselves having to pay more and more to export wool, it became cheaper to sell it to native cloth makers. So even though the wool merchants weren’t happy about it, the crown’s increasing taxes on wool exports actually bolstered the growth of the English cloth industry in the 1300s.

I wanted to conclude this episode with Edward’s changing attitude towards the wool tax because it marks an important period which I want to explore in the next episode. As I noted, Edward became more desperate for taxes from wool because war appeared to be looming on the horizon. He had ambitions in Scotland which he wanted to pursue, but he also had lands in southern France that he was trying to hold onto in the face of renewed challenges from the King of France. The French challenge led Edward to appeal to English nationalism in a way that was really unheard of since the Norman Conquest. Edward told his people that the King of France intended to wipe the English language from the face of the earth. It was an appeal to the English language as a national rallying cry. That’s something we might expect from Alfred the Great, not some Plantagenet king who claims to the throne flowed from some Norman conqueror. But it shows how much of a comeback English had made by the turn of the century.

So next time, we'll look at the threat that led Edward to make this appeal. And we'll also look at the evolving relationship between English and French in Medieval England. In some ways, French was experiencing a notable decline in England, but in other ways, it was as strong as ever, and a mass influx of French words into English was only just beginning. So next time, we'll try to sort through those conflicting signals.

Until then, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.