

Kilkenny Crafts

BY PATRICK WALSH

Kilkenny has long been associated with the ancient crafts, spinning and weaving of woollen and other fabrics. But the first reference to an organised industry was during the latter half of the 17th century when the Duke of Ormond planned a large scale woollen industry in Callan. The draft of the orders given by the Duke are still extant but as far as can be ascertained the industry was never launched. During the next century the industry was firmly established particularly in or near Kilkenny City and was flourishing during the closing decades of the 18th century. About 1800 capital to the extent of £36,000 was invested in the manufacture of woollen goods.

The industry gave employment to about 800 hands in the city area. It was firmly established and was one of the principal centres, for the production of woollens.

After the passing of the Act of Union in 1800 and the scaling down of the duties imposed by Grattan's Parliament the industry suffered a sharp decline. The following example will suffice to show the disastrous impact, the loss of the Irish Parliament of the time even with its limited powers had on the woollen and other industries. From 1800 — to about 1820 woollen goods to the value of about £20,000 were produced per annum, in the three principal centres of the woollen industry of which Kilkenny was one. About 1840 only £20,000 worth of woollen goods were produced in the three centres by the above year. Kilkenny's famous carpet industry which gave employment to about 200 employees had been completely wiped out after the removal of the duties which had been agreed upon.

At the passing of the Act of Union the country was flooded with dumped goods and mature industries without Government support and encouragement were forced to close down.

Spinning and weaving of woollens were carried out on a fairly large scale on the southern slopes of the Walsh Mountains. Skilled craftsmen who had been shipwrecked off the Waterford coast were induced to settle down in South Kilkenny

and instruct the local people in the superior methods of the production of woollens. These men were of Flemish origin and were highly skilled and efficient.

Kilkenny had four great fairs each year known as the Frieze Fairs which were well patronized. Carts loaded with furs and woollens came from Carrick-on-Suir, Iverk, the Walsh Mountains, Carlow and other centres.

There were eight woollen mills in the city area, woollen goods were also manufactured at Thomastown, Muckalee and Castlecomer. At the latter place a school was established with a qualified instructor to instruct the young operatives in the latest methods of production. Some time later the factory was burned down and the project abandoned.

The growing and processing of flax was never seriously undertaken in Kilkenny. Near the City, at Greenville, a bleach yard was established, but, this was closed down a few years later as a manufacturing concern.

Spinning and weaving were carried on at the Pococke School, near the City, under the guidance and direction of Doctor Richard Pococke. The project was unfortunately abandoned after many years of successful trading. Louis Connellion of Huguenot descent who did so much for the Linen Industry in the North planned a large scale linen industry for Kilkenny which would have made the Marble City the Irish Linen Metropolis. The project aroused opposition and jealousy from Cross Channel industrialists and the project was never put into operation.

BLEACHING

“ John Shearman of the City of Kilkenny begs to inform his friends that he intends to carry out his bleaching business in the most perfect extensive manner in his bleach green, near the city. Satisfaction in colour and wear of such linens as may be committed to his care. Linen will be taken in at his home at St. Canice's Steps, and laid down beginning of March”.

Finn's Leinster Journal Dec. 23, 1786. Shearmans occupied this site till about 70 years ago. Now the residence of Mr. S. Monahan, Fruit Importer, and known as 1, Dean Street.