

THE PLUSH INDUSTRY IN SHUTFORD

A stranger, visiting the small North Oxfordshire village of Shutford today, would find little evidence of the industry which flourished here a hundred years ago, and indeed persisted until after the Second World War. If he happened across one of the older inhabitants, he might be shown the long, low building with large windows at the top of Cook's Hill, which once housed a dozen or so hand-loom - the backbone of the plush industry. But more likely he would never hear of it.

Indeed, this particular building, even times when trade was brisk, was the only visible evidence of a manufactory in the village, with the exception perhaps of a glimpse of a tall chimney at the back of a row of cottages in West Street, for all the main buildings were situated behind the houses and could not be seen from the road-way.

Many people nowadays do not even know what plush is! They may vaguely connect it is some way with Victorian furniture - but there was more to it than that.

My father, Harold Wrench (1880-1950), was a plush master and manufacturer, as had been his father before him, and his grandfather and great-grandfather. Even before that, members of the family had been weavers of various kinds, certainly dating back to the year 1747. To understand how this came about, it is necessary to know a little of the history of textiles in this part of Oxfordshire.

Weaving and ancillary crafts were an important part of the local economy even as far back as the sixteenth century, though the wool trade was never as important in North Oxfordshire as it once was in the Cotswolds and Stroud valley. By and large, the woollen trade seemed to follow the limestone hill districts, and the area around Banbury was able to support quite large flocks of sheep, giving a certain amount of coarse wool. Streams too were fairly numerous - a necessity for fulling and dyeing purposes.

But the most important factor in the rise of the textile industry around Banbury was the geographical position of the town. Roughly in the centre of the country, with good communications between north and south, east and west. Thus the town itself became an important junction for carriage and waggon traffic, and later on the rail-ways and canal continued this trend. The coaches which called in at the town needed upholstery, the horses needed girths and collars which had to be lined, and the waggons and carts needed awnings. So all these woven articles began to be made in Banbury and the surrounding districts.

In the sixteenth century there are records of a woolstapler, a wool warehouse and a fulling mill in Banbury, and by 1608 the borough had been granted a weekly wool-market, and the freemen of the borough had the right to sell wool and linen anywhere in England, subject to certain limits as to weight. At this time, apart from weavers, there were dyers, fullers and clothiers in the district, and woollen cloths, garter, worsted and linen were produced. From the mid seventeenth century, with Banbury such an important coaching centre, there were many small businesses manufacturing these articles needed for the trade. They were, however, small businesses, with owners probably being allied in some way to agriculture, having land of their own, or possessing a dye-vat or fulling-mill. This alternative employment gave security to the owners, but did not encourage large scale expansion but rather a versatility in changing from one type of fabric to another. Thus a wide variety of different types of materials began to be made.

Gradually, however, weavers began to specialize and in Banbury a narrow fabric similar in structure to the French silk velvets which had been introduced by the Huguenots, began to be produced in Banbury. Instead of silk, however, these fabrics were mostly made of wool or worsted, and the material was called shag. This was a material with a long nap or hairy pile. The word plush, derived from the French word 'peluche', was not in general use until Victorian times although it is recorded that the word was used as far back as 1594.

By the year 1800, the manufacture of worsted shags dominated the local economy, and it was said that the massive oak beams from Banbury Church, which was pulled down in 1799, were in great demand for the making of hand-loom, of which there were about five hundred in the district at the time, employing about a thousand workers. The horse-doths and webbing of earlier days had been almost ousted by the worsted shags, although a few people continued making them up to the 1930s.

Much of the weaving, at this time, was done in cottages and a strict apprentice scheme operated in Banbury, with each weaver being allowed one apprentice only. Women were not allowed to weave at all but could be employed in some of the ancillary processes such as warping or spinning.

In the early years of the nineteenth century, the industry began to decline and there were many unemployed weavers in the district, but those who had an alternative trade came into their own and were able to eke out a living while others had to seek work elsewhere - either going north or emigrating.

At this time there were three fairly large firms in Banbury, but still much of the weaving was done in the cottages, and gradually the hand-weaving came to be done in the villages and the finishing processes in the town.

By 1831, steam-driven looms had been introduced in Coventry, boosting the silk and ribbon industry there, and eventually this type of loom came to Banbury. About 1838, Gillett, Lees and Co. of Banbury acquired Sir Henry Bessemer's embossing machine and this introduction probably staved off the decline of the industry in the area. This machine, rather like a large mangle with the rollers heated internally by gas, had one roller surface cut into a design, so that when the plush was passed through the machine, the pattern stood out in relief on the material. There were six designs, and the rollers had been engraved by Sir Henry Bessemer, of steel fame, himself. Plush to decorate Windsor Castle was embossed on it, as also were furnishings for both the Houses of Parliament. What came to be known as Utrecht Velvet became popular and fashionable as upholstery material, and most of it was embossed, but when the price for embossing it fell, from 2½d. to 1d. a yard, Sir Henry sold his machine, and it came to Banbury. The price was £58.10 with the rolls at between £8.10 and £15.

Now came the era of 'Victorian' furnishing, with curtains, tablecloths, upholstery, overmantles, picture and mirror frames all made of plush - some in silk and some in worsted, and much of it embossed. Census Returns of 1841 show Oxfordshire as having 45% of all plush weavers in England, and all of them, about 116, living in or near Banbury. One forty-five year old woman weaver and thirty-five men, including a Wrench, were listed in Shutford. But with the advent of machines for spinning and the like, there was much unemployment in the area, particularly among women, and consequently great poverty, so that workers in the trade had to seek work elsewhere and many of them emigrated to America or Australia.

Although the exact dates are not known, plush was being made in Shutford in 1747

and several looms in Wrench's possession bore that date. I still have a document signed by 'Thomas Wrench, weaver' and dated 1747. Robert Lees of Banbury had by this time set up a finishing shop in the village, so this work was being done as well as weaving. Over the years, several more Wrenches appear as weavers, and by 1815 they were well established, had bought out Robert Lees, and were employing most of the labour. It was still, however, essentially a home industry, most of the weavers living in the villages round about and working in their cottages, although the weaver's shop at the top of Cook's Hill, which I have previously mentioned, had already been set up.

The Thomas Wrench (1760-1842) at this time was a Plush Master: that is, he bought in the yarns for the ground warps and wefts, and for the pile, which he distributed to the weavers. When the piece was woven, it was brought in to the master's office to be measured. This was always done with a yardstick and a thumb - to allow for shrinkage in later processes. The weaver would then be paid what was owing on his piece, having drawn so much per week while the work was in progress. It took about a month to weave a piece and the average wage would be about 12/- per week. All the details of the work would be entered in the 'Piece Book' and then the Master was responsible for finishing the material and selling it. He was always addressed as Master, as indeed were all subsequent proprietors of the business.

The Old Manor House (not to be confused with the Fiennes Manor in East Shutford) in Shutford was once said to have been a public house known as the "Weavers Arms" and was used when the weavers brought in their pieces to the Master - perhaps having walked from villages as far away as Brailes or Claydon. I have heard lurid tales about another ale house in the village, where drugs were slipped into drinks and weavers robbed of their hard-earned cash, but as I cannot vouch for these perhaps they are better forgotten.

Most of the Shutford trade was concerned with fine plushes for liveries, upholstery and furnishings, the latter giving employment to women with fringing and the like. Then, as hand-woven plushes declined, industrial plushes - sometimes called 'Strong's' - became important. By 1885 there were forty hand-loom working in the village and then power-loom were introduced. The steam-engine which powered the looms used three tons of coal a week, but in 1905 a great saving of fuel was made with the coming of two 20 h.p. Tangye suction gas engines, which produced gas to drive the looms for three weeks on one ton of coal. This coal was anthracite from the Rhondda, and was ordered by truck-load, which was delivered to Bloxham station and then hauled to Shutford by horse and cart, latterly, of course, by motor-lorry.

In 1909 Wrench's bought up the goodwill of Cubitts, the last remaining Banbury firm, and with the other stock and machinery came the Bessemer E:111 bossing machine and the six hand-cut rolls of House of Commons, House of Lords, Cabbage, Reform, Ecclesiastic and Wheel designs.

Back in 1862 the Shutford firm had gained an honour for producing fine, black plush - the Honoria Causa - in London and in 1910 it won two gold and one silver medal at the Brussels International Exhibition. A fire had destroyed the stands and the original material, and another batch had quickly to be prepared and dispatched. Three large framed certificates of these awards hung on the office walls and a bronze replica of the medals reposed in a safe - but the actual gold and silver medals were not there. Costs and customs duties were prohibitive apparently.

By this time, 1910, Wrench's were the only makers of hand-woven livery plush

in the world. It seems almost impossible to believe that, before wars and revolutions completely upset the old way of life, material was specially made in the tiny village of Shutford for the state liveries of royal courts and noble houses all over Europe. Scarlet for the English Court, 'Italian Blue' for the House of Savoy, special green for the Royal Foresters at Windsor, scarlet, blue and black for Spain, cream for the Netherlands, golden yellow for the Earl of Lonsdale, green and purple for the palaces of the Persian Shah, pure white for the Imperial footmen of Germany and blue, gold and scarlet for St. Petersburg. The Lord Mayor of London, the Carlton Club, the embassies of China, Japan, Persia and the United States of America all used liveries made with material from Shutford. At the coronation of the Czar Nicholas II, the scarlet plush of the liveries came from this small Oxfordshire village.

I have a letter from Lady Blanche Gordon Lennox, who at the time was living at Broughton Castle, in which she tells my grandfather that she had showed some plush to the Queen, Alexandra, who liked it so much that she bought some in a rose-colour, and the Empress of Russia, who happened to be with Her Majesty, was 'very interested to hear of the "livery" for St. Petersburg being made at Shutford.'

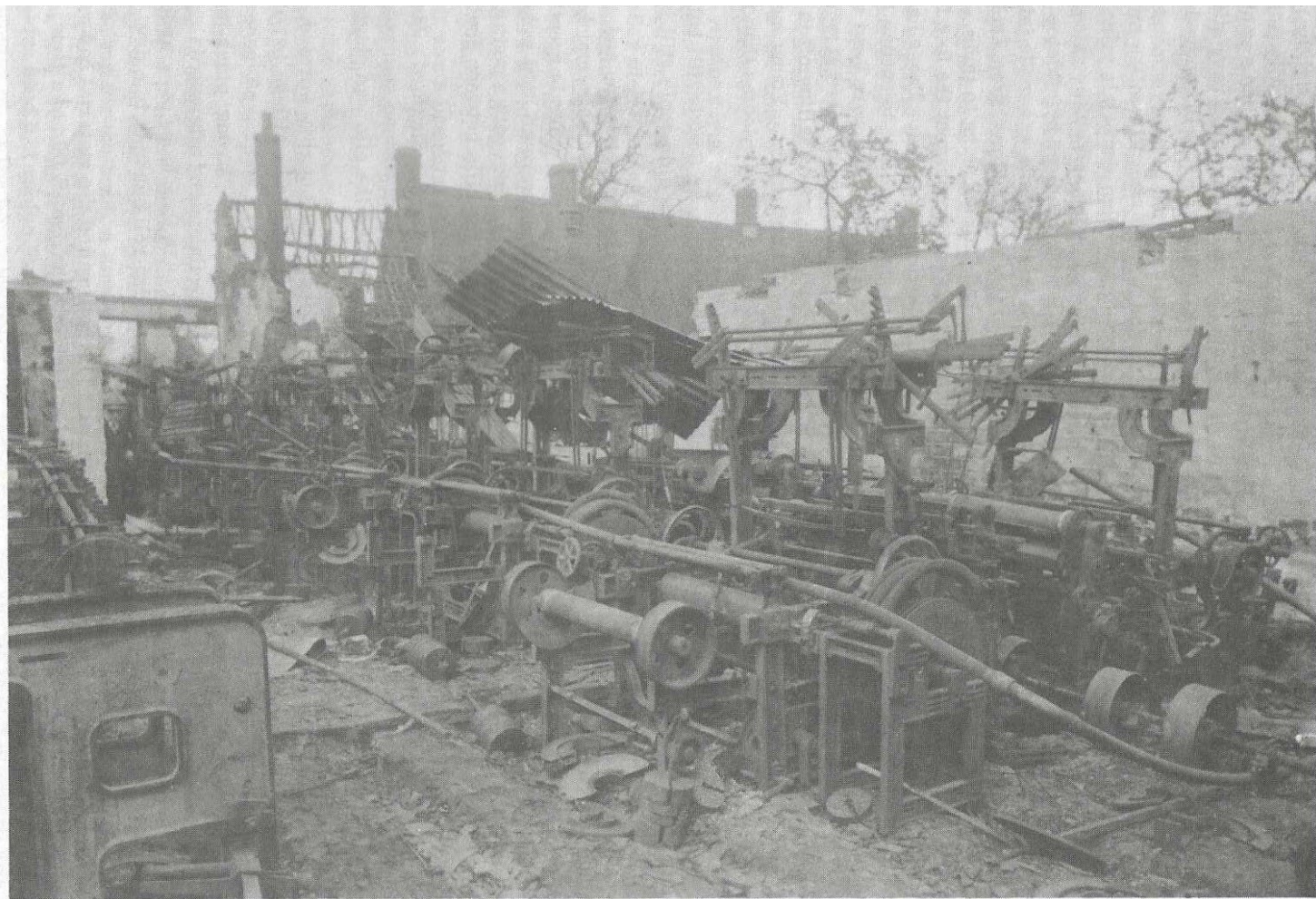
Then one night in April 1913 practically everything was wiped out by fire. It was over an hour before the Fire Brigade from Banbury arrived, and there was not much water, so very little could be saved. Machinery, records, order books and a large consignment of silk plush just made up to go to Turkey - all were destroyed. One order book alone remained - in it an order from a tailor By Appointment at St. Petersburg for one piece of plush for **H.M.** the Emperor.

The business was built up again, however, and between the wars did considerable trade, especially with machinery plushes for the home market and silk plushes for the Far East.

Many differing types of plush were made in Shutford over the years, but before 1885 it was all handwoven. Much of this was left with the pile uncut and used as fustian or corduroy for workmen's clothes. This material was remarkable for its wearing qualities, lasted for years, and was frequently handed down from father to son. A similar type of uncut plush was later used to upholster railway carriages. Uncut plush means that the threads were drawn over wires, and what later was cut to form the pile was left in small loops, the wires being withdrawn. In making the pile a specially constructed knife was used to cut each line of loops, there being grooves in the wires to act as a guide line for cutting. It was hard, laborious work and it took a good weaver to produce one yard per day.

The ground warps and weft of this material were of worsted and the pile was of mohair - obtained from a type of asiatic goat. The plush used in the manufacture of other textiles was never washed but was very stiff and hard when well woven and was made in widths of 18, 21 or 24 inches. The piece was either 40 or 50 yards in length.

After the piece had been brought in to the Master, had been measured and the particulars relating to it had been entered in the Piece Book, it was handed over to women workers, who examined it both sides down the whole length, picked out any knots with tweezers or filled in with needle and thread if a pile thread should be missing. It then had a number sewn on to one end to correspond with that which had been entered in the Piece Book. After this, strong linen cloths were sewn on to each end of the piece and it was ready for the finishing processes. First it went to a cutting machine which evened up the pile and could be set to cut the pile to different depths. Then it was put through a Calender. This machine was fitted with rollers, one of



After the fire

which was heated, and the plush passed between them and then wound very tightly on to a wooden roll beyond, with its end cloth wrapped around it and its identity ticket securely fastened to the end. It was then put into an outside shed, which had a roof but open sides, and left for three months to condition. It was by this time very stiff and hard and ready for sale. This plush was always in the 'grey' - that is, undyed and left in the natural colour of the yarns used.

The uses to which this material was put were varied. Some went to woollen mills for raising the nap on cloth - tweeds, suitings and various woollen materials were passed over rollers covered with the plush which acted as a brush and either raised a nap or gave a smooth finish; some was used for Friction Gloves used by athletes and in Turkish Baths -- mitten-type gloves with the pile inside; some was made into long narrow pads, stuffed with cotton waste and went to the Manchester Cotton Exchange to brush down buyers who had sampled cotton and had fluff adhering to their clothes and some was used on skis - a strip attached to the ski to prevent the foot from slipping. Special pieces were woven for linen manufacturers in Ireland. These had a red thread, woven in a two-inch strip the length of the piece, as a guide to cutting the material into strips. These strips were wound tightly round a roll and were used wet in the making of the finest linen. At one time about twenty hand-loomers were at work on these qualities of plush, but after the First World War there was a falling off in demand and also several weavers who had been called up did not return. Young men coming in to the work after the war were more interested in the power looms than the hand ones.

I can only remember hand-weavers working in the building near Cook's Hill but many of the cottages in the village housed a loom and some of the old people still in Shutford are able to point out where these were.

My father would recall journeys he made, as a boy, to take materials to, and bring home finished pieces from, many of the out-lying villages. He also remembered men carrying a piece to Banbury to put it on to the train when it was wanted urgently and there was no other means of getting it there - and the pieces were no light weight! He spoke, too, of the hazardous journeys he himself had often to take with a pony and cart, to take goods to the station, when winter weather made the hills between Shutford and North Newington extremely difficult to negotiate.

The hand-made plushes I have been describing were made only in Shutford. Many attempts were made to reproduce the material on power looms but with no success. It could not be sufficiently 'knocked-up' as that done by hand and the pile was staggered and did not lie all one way.

A finer kind of hand-made plush was made for liveries. Good quality worsted - which is made of the longest staples of the wool, and is named after a village in Suffolk - and very fine mohair were used. It was made in widths of 27/ 8 and 29/ 30 inches. After weaving, this plush went through the same processes as the 'strong' plush just described and was then washed in hot water and pure soap flakes and afterwards rinsed in clean, cold water. It was then hung out to drip - in long loops over wooden slats in an open shed. When dry it was wound on to wooden rolls and put in a dry stock room ready for dyeing.

This was a difficult process as the dye had to be boiling and the material had to be kept moving continually over a winch, dropping back into the dye, a fold at a time. It had to be kept straight on the winch, and when the required colour had been achieved, it was carefully folded off and put into another tub filled with cold water, to remove all

loose dye. Then it was folded off again, and hug up as before to drip. When dry, linen cloths were again stitched on at each end and it was taken to the Calender, the middle roll of which - there were three rollers on the machine - had been made very hot. This had the effect of ironing the plush on the wrong side, giving it a gloss and making the pile lie smoothly all one way. It was wound off on to a roll, its end cloth wrapped around it and was put away to condition for about three months, when the pile shone like satin and the colour was clear and bright. This was a much more expensive material than the strong plush and was supplied to livery tailors who made liveries for the Royal Household, European Courts and many noble families. The King's Foresters in Windsor and Richmond Park had waistcoats in a special shade known as 'Windsor Green', and the Royal footmen had knee-breeches of scarlet. A special book was kept which recorded the quality and dye and kept a sample of each livery for each Court or Household, but alas this was destroyed in the fire of 1913.

A similar material in 30-inch width, but with a cotton weft, making it more supple, was supplied to a firm of cloth merchants in France. They took a large range of colours over a period of many years.

At one time the Heythrop Hunt had dark blue-green coats of livery plush for the huntsman, but the material was found to be too heavy, especially on wet days.

The last hand-weaver in Shutford was John Turner, who retired in 1944 - staying on a few months longer than William Turner, Jesse Smith and George Ward, who had all given over fifty years' service.

Another type of plush for which there was much call before the 1914 war was silk plush. Most of this went abroad, and very narrow widths of 16 or 18 inches were asked for. The finest and narrowest went to Persia and Manilla - the former having shades of petunia and green and the latter pastel shades of blues, pinks, and creams. The Manilla plush was very fine indeed, and when held up to the light had the appearance of muslin, although the pure silk pile was very thick.

A heavier type went to Japan for winter kimonos - mostly in blue and white. This plush went to Macclesfield to be printed, rather than dyed, and the designs were mostly of chrysanthemums, boats or birds.

There were over 300 shades of silk plush and when large orders were being made up it was a beautiful sight to see the shining piles of silk in gorgeous colours.

The warps for this type of plush were dyed in Lancashire before delivery for special orders, but a large quantity was held in stock in the natural grey shade for dyeing in the piece.

I can remember a large order being made up, printed in special colours with native wording, and going to be used for some ceremonial in Abeokuta - I think it was Liberation Day. Men in procession wore yards of the plush, rather like shawls. There was mention of this in the newspapers at the time, but unfortunately I do not possess a cutting.

Plain coloured 24-inch silk plush was also sent to Africa in three-yard lengths. A simple plan for making this up into dresses was adopted; for, folded in half, with a seam run up each side, leaving enough room for the arms to come through, a hole cut in the top for the head, a smart plush dress was achieved with very little trouble.

A good deal of white silk plush was always in stock and after weaving this had to be bleached. For this it was taken to a small windowless shed where it was hung in loops over glass rods. Pans of sulphur were set about on the floor and ignited, and the door quickly shut and sealed. The plush was left in this shed for three days, and when the

door was broken open, the material was pure white and ready for the other finishing processes.

Much of the coloured silk plush went abroad through merchants, and one of these in Manchester supplied plush coats, much ornamented with expensive trimmings, to various African Chiefs. However, in tropical rainstorms, the plush became spoiled, so a process of waterproofing it was invented, with great success, and orders continued for this type of material for a long time.

A very fine silk plush in super quality was made for use on antique furniture and for hangings - much of it embossed on the machine which I have already mentioned.

As fashions changed, and plush was considered too showy and 'Victorian', and synthetic yarns became available, the demand for silk plush passed away. A certain amount of art silk had been made, but this did not wear as well or look as good as the pure silk.

Much of the considerable stock of the material was made up into cushions, runners, rugs, toys and similar articles and sold locally in a showroom which had recently been built. This was in the early 1930s. A good deal of interest was shown and many visitors came to see the goods available, so much so that not only were all the stocks used up, but special plush had to be woven to fulfil orders.

The last type of plush - which continued to be made right up to the time when the mill closed - was the worsted plush with a cotton ground and weft and which was used for industrial purposes. This was made in many qualities as to thickness of pile, but was always either 24 or 26 inches wide. This material had black ground and weft and the pile was white. Sometimes it was left in this grey shade, but most of it was dyed green - the most restful colour to the eyes. These plushes were all used on machinery making other textiles. Some for 'Drag Cloths' - that is, it was fastened tightly round a roller, just sufficient to fit neatly round, and as the material being 'finished' passed over this roll it was kept straight and taut by the rough worsted pile of the plush. Some was used on cotton spinning frames and was called 'cotton clearers'. When being spun, the cotton threads passed through the thick green pile of the plush, which brushed off loose fibres, and the machine operator could see his threads clearly against the darker background.

There were over thirty processes in the making of this commercial plush, for which the cotton came from Manchester, and the worsted with a 'lesse' in the middle from Bradford usually. The ground warps first went to be dyed black and were sized to make them stiff and workable. It is difficult to explain the lesse in the middle, but when the warps arrived, they looked like enormous balls of crochet cotton, and through all the threads at the ends there would be a white roll of cotton. When this was carefully straightened out, it would be seen to be threaded through the ends alternatively and they appeared crossed. Rods were inserted here in what looked like a 'cat's cradle', and these had to keep the threads in order all through the warp. The reason for the lesse was seen when the warps were beamed - a very skilled job - and put on the loom. In the weaving, a set of threads lifted alternately and the weft went through each set of threads in turn.

All the warps had to be beamed - that is winding the worsted on to the enormous wooden roller with metal ends which fitted in to the loom. By the way, these looms were known as Double Plush Looms, that is two pieces of plush were made at one and the same time, the pile being sandwiched between the two grounds, and automatically cut as it came off the loom, one piece folding off at the top and the other falling into



Mr and Mrs William T. Wrench (1857-1921), Harold Wrench (centre, standing), Stanley Wrench (standing, left; the founder of Wrench's Garage in Banbury), Arthur Wrench (one of the first car drivers in the Banbury area), Lily and Daisy Wrench (in her mother's arms). About 1890.

a well under the loom.

Each thread in the warp had to run straight round the beam in its appointed place, for each end had to be threaded through six sets of harness. Two ground warps were necessary, and one worsted one for the pile, and each completed piece was either 50 or 60 yards long. A weaver usually tended two looms at a time and the work was neither as tedious nor as exacting as hand-weaving, although the noise was considerably greater.

After weaving, the pieces were taken to the finishing shed and put through a fanning machine to free them from fluff, then measured, numbered, and picked over or filled in as described earlier. Next they went through the cutting machine to even up the pile. When six pieces were ready, it made a batch for dyeing and finishing. One day was taken for washing the material in soapy water to get rid of the oil from the worsted, rinsing and folding off. This was done on small tables on wheels, because, when wet, the pieces were too heavy to lift. The big, square, wooden dye tubs, clean and empty, were now filled with clean water and early next day the boiler was going with a big pressure of steam. Perforated pipes ran down inside and along the base of the tub, bringing in the steam to make the water boil. Meanwhile the dye had been weighed and Glauber Salts and Vitriol measured and put in. In later years, chemical dyes were used, but originally they were of vegetable origin. An old dye book exists, containing many interesting recipes and specifying 'an eggshellful of argol', 3 lbs. of sumac or three buckets of logwood chips' among other ingredients. One is entitled 'Father's Pattern' and another 'A Greenish looking Blue.'

The dye was boiled in a bucket under a steam pipe and then emptied into the dye-vat. When thoroughly mixed and cold water added, the plush was dropped in gradually, passing over a winch and with the ends sewn together to make the piece circular. A strap was put onto a wheel, which kept the winch moving and the plush passed continuously through the dye. Then the steam was turned on until boiling point was reached and it was kept at that temperature for one hour. Again the plush passed into a tub of cold water to wash off any surplus dye. Then the process started again for the next two pieces. All this took up the second day. On the third day, all the pieces were taken round the village to a never-drying spring of water called The Tite. Here a winch was fixed over a large wooden tub, and all the plush was thoroughly rinsed in the clear, cold, running water. They were pushed back to the mill on handcarts - or latterly in a small float drawn by a shetland pony - and hung up to dry. The next process was to size the pieces by passing the backs of them over a trough containing a mixture of melted glue and gum and then passing over a hot roller. This was to stiffen them. They were then dried off in a compartment known as the 'Stove', heated all round it and on its floor with steam pipes. After this they were taken to the Tenter, where they were stretched to their full width, then sheared, measured once more and rolled up, ready for sale. If going abroad, the pieces were either packed in units of three and sewn in hessian wrappings or in to tin-lined boxes, which were also made in the village.

A few other more specialized types of plush were made, for instance one for the colour-printing trade. This varied in height of pile and was made in silk, worsted or mohair, always in white except for the silk, which was Tussore silk, very soft and thick, and kept in its natural colour. This latter was made, after many experiments, to take the place of rabbit fur. On enquiry, it was stated that only the fur from under the rabbit's chin was used, and it took a tremendous number of rabbits to cover a



Premises of **W. Wrench and Co** in West Street before the fire. The Wesleyan Chapel and the Old Mannor House at the end of West Street are still standing. The top of the factory chimney can be seen behind the Chapel.



Stanley Wrench in an early car.

long, wide polishing strap!

Other special plushes were used in seed-sorting, and tobacco packing, and a cotton plush with very thick, high pile went for life-saving apparatus, and for warm lining in clothing worn in experiments in the stratosphere.

A dense, black plush was used by gold-miners to strain their diggings, showing up the gold particles easily. At one time, too, many light pastel shades of cotton plush were produced for powder puffs. A very fine, dark red plush was made to exclude light from photographic lenses and this was sold to a firm dealing with Government orders. Thin silk plush for lining jewellery cases and those for cutlery and musical instruments was also produced.

One rather interesting process in the finishing of silk plush, not yet described, came after the plush had been thoroughly brushed to fill out the pile - done on a big round brush as the pieces passed through the machine. Then the whole length of the piece was brushed by hand with wire brushes dipped in water - about three yards being done at a time. It was stretched tightly over a machine called the 'Nelly' and when the pile was thoroughly wet and flat, it was beaten with flexible canes by two men, one standing each side of the machine, and the canes coming down one after the other in perfect rhythm, with resounding thwacks, the noise of which carried all round the village, so that people always knew when 'they were batting at Wrench's.' It was a joke with the men to get strangers to try their hand at 'Batting'. The results were sometimes painful.

So much for the material itself. I feel that some of the people concerned with it should be mentioned. Firstly, of Thomas Wrench, I know very little except the dates of his birth and death (1760-1842) and not a lot more of his son William (1807-1883), although I have heard him called 'That man with a head on his shoulders'. He seems to have been a *pious* man, judging by the letters written to his son when he died - mostly by manufacturers of textiles in Yorkshire and Lancashire. I also have a letter from a brother of his who had emigrated to America, who, after asking for money, writes "William, I hope you have made your peace with God." Be that as it may, it appears that he gave the land and building for the Wesleyan Chapel in Shutford, only lately closed.

The next William (1857-1921), my grandfather, I can remember faintly. He was an Overseer in the village, Clerk to the first Parish Council and later Chairman. He also took great interest in the Chapel and gave it its pipe organ, which he played for many years. He was very musical and had composed some hymn-tunes. He was sitting on the organ-stool in the Chapel, playing at a Sunday-school tea-party, when he experienced the stroke which proved fatal. He had been confidant and friend to many in the village, and seemed to have been something of a poor man's lawyer, sorting out disputes, drawing up wills and so on.

My own father, the second of three sons, carried on these traditions. Indeed, one safe in his office contained little else than other people's private papers and wills. He too had been both Clerk and Chairman of the Parish Council, collected rates and also Income Tax - ultimately becoming Collector-in-Charge of a wide district with an office in Banbury - as well as still running the business in Shutford. He was able to do all the processes in the manufacture of the plush, from weaving to finishing. He was a great gardener and passionately fond of flowers. No-one visited us without leaving carrying a sheaf of his blooms. He was a very kindly man and always showed concern and affection for those who worked with him.



From left to right: Mrs. Stanley, James Griffin, Harold Wrench, Enos Griffin, and Amos Turner. In the 1920s.

His assistant and secretary, Miss Daisy Sharratt, was a remarkable personality. Born near Huntingdon in 1880, she had become one of the first women to join the Police Force in 1914. She became a sergeant and served for some years, mostly in Lancashire. She came to Shutford in 1926 to help my father and soon became deeply involved in everything to do with the plush. She was widely read and took a keen interest in many different things - in fact almost everything. She was a fine craftswoman and a good conversationalist. In her 90th year she was still taking a lively interest in all around her.

Of the weavers, I can only write of those whom I remember. The three Griffin brothers, Simon Barjonah, James Gabriel and Paul Enos. Simon was no longer weaving when I remember him, but he kept bees and did a lot of gardening. He also had a little shop. A photographer also, he was responsible for many early portraits of village people. Jimmy was foreman at the Plush Mills. A dapper little man and a fine musician, who earlier in life had played the clarinet in two of the three bands which Shutford boasted at that time. He was very well-known in the district as a Methodist Lay Preacher. He, too, loved flowers and made the corner of Shutford where he lived beautiful with his little patches of garden, and rows of potted geraniums. But to me, the most lovable of the three was Enos - still coming to work when he was ninety - he died aged ninety-seven. He was 'Gramp' to most of the village children and there were usually one or two of them hanging on to his hands when he was out in the village. He had had a very hard life, having had to fend for himself from the age of seven, picking stones and scaring crows in the fields, and sleeping at night in the loft over a stable - and glad to eat what crusts came his way. His later life was difficult, too, with a crippled son and daughter and a retarded grand-daughter to look after - but he was always cheerful and full of anecdotes and stories. He was not a weaver, but a finisher. He loved a little glass of something - especially the homemade variety - but could not afford to indulge himself often. In this he was not quite so 'respectable' as brother James! When Woolworth's opened in Banbury, it was a delight to him, and often he would buy my mother a threepenny necklace which he would present with great joy - I have some of them still.

Another unforgettable character was Mrs Herodius Stanley, who worked at the mill for over sixty years, as well as bringing up a large family. She had rather a sharp tongue and was wont to call a spade a spade, but she was tireless and always ready to do a bit of nursing when a new baby arrived or a laying-out had to be done. She habitually wore a black straw boater hat, and one man visiting the factory, said to her "My goodness you have been kind to your hat - you were wearing the same one when I was here fifty years ago." Unfortunately the photograph I have of her shows her sporting a hat trimmed with flowers - most uncharacteristic.

Amos Turner and his son William were other well-known personalities in the village - the latter, the best weaver he had ever had according to my father. Jesse Smith, too, who I chiefly remember as a teacher in Sunday School, shutting his eyes and singing "Glowry, glowry, glowry" with the utmost fervour. John Turner, also a Sunday School teacher, and again a very good musician with a fine tenor voice. He was the last of the hand-loom weavers and had made plush for over fifty-seven years. Another good singer was George Ward, who was a power-loom man, as also was William Stanely

Bernard Gilkes must not be forgotten either, for although he did not actually work in the mill, for very many years he hauled coal to Shutford from Bloxham, and he must have taken thousands of pieces of plush in to Banbury station - first by horse and cart

andin later years by motor lorry - always accompanied by his dog.

I cannot really remember them, but my father and mother always spoke with great affection of William Eden and Ned Batchelor, two young men who went to France in 1914 and did not return. I treasure a tiny set of bead furniture which the former left for me as a parting gift.

The earlier weavers seem to have been a somewhat feckless group of men, and I have heard it said of them that at one time they had only one pair of boots between them, taking it in turns to wear them to go to the pub. But I cannot remember that, the ones I knew were all thrifty and industrious.

Some of my earliest memories are, as a child, waking up to hear the men coming to work at 6.30 in the morning. This must have been very unpleasant on winter mornings, with no heating and only oil-lamps for illumination.

The word 'factory' today conjures up a vastly different picture from the one I remember the Plush Mills to have been. The fire of 1913 had gutted the old premises and those which I knew had been rebuilt from them. They consisted of the Office, really a stone-built house, made up of an outer room, furnished with a seven-yard long table, on which pieces were packed, an inner office, surprisingly well-equipped for those days, with steel filing cabinets and table, a larger roll-top desk, two safes and typewriters and adding machines. Over this were two large storerooms, with an attic above them. About 1930 a lean-to showroom was built on to the back of the office. Next was the largish house where my grandparents lived - newly built after the fire, and occupying the space which had previously been three cottages. Then came our two cottages made into one, which had survived the conflagration. When my grandmother died in the late 1920s, we moved into the larger house and Miss Sharratt occupied our old one. Next to our house was another cottage, used as a storeroom, and beyond that the Wesleyan Chapel with a barn under the gallery, which housed a governess cart and various bicycles. Beyond the Chapel were large double-doors opening onto the street. Then came the garage with four stables behind it. In the old days there was always a horse there called either Polly or Dolly, but in later years there were two Shetland ponies. After the stables came a high wall about fifty yards long, and the whole of this from the office to the end of the wall fronted on to West Street. All that area below the Chapel had once been a farmhouse, yard and buildings. The yard was still there and was used for various purposes. Beyond the stables were one or two pig stys - always with pigs in them, and chicken houses and runs with an assortment of hens, ducks, geese and turkeys. There were always cats and dogs and at various times a tarnish fox, the odd ferret and at one time a somewhat worse-for-wear owl, which my brother and I found very difficult to feed. Besides these there was always a rabbit or two. At one end of this yard was the Big Barn, which among other things housed the enormous horizontal warping mill - now in Halifax Textile Museum. At one side of this barn was a large greenhouse, and beyond that the garden, about an acre and a half.

In fine weather, wet plush was sometimes hung on lines in the garden to dry, and the colours vied with flowers always blooming there. There were of course vegetables, too, and over three hundred fruit trees.

At one side of the garden was the dairy, for we also had a small herd of Jersey cows and my mother made butter and cream cheese every week. Beyond this again was a shed where the large spring-cart was kept, the bleach-house, various coal-houses and the large anthracite store. Then came the mill proper - immediately

opposite the larger house and only the width of a path away from it. Thus, my brother and I were brought up in the midst of the plush works and we went quite freely in and out of the mill, and played among the machines, never coming to any harm. Indeed I think my mother was far more afraid that one of us would fall down a well, of which there were six on the premises, than that we would be hurt in the mill.

Entering the mill from the office end, one came into the weaving area. On the left, the silk looms and the worsted ones on the right. Slightly to the right was the engine which powered all the machines - a Tangye Suction Gas engine. In a bay near this was a small store room, a cutting machine, the calender and the embossing machine.

Then came the finishing shed, larger in area than the weaving one. In it was another seven-yard length table, with shelves behind, the tenter, a long machine occupying the whole width of the building, the various cutting machines, the 'Nelly', the 'Tiger', various brushing machines and the rest. The stove-house led out of the finishing shed and beyond that were the dye vats, and beyond again the boiler, which provided the steam for many of the processes. The 'Tiger', by the way, was a sort of carding machine, which was used on some plush to rough up the pile to prevent it being pulled through the ground.

Above the boiler was the tall factory chimney with its lightning conductor. One man, Old Jake as we called him, would always come round to the factory in a thunder-storm, because he felt safe under that conductor. One day in 1928, the chimney blew down in a gale, and it was exciting to watch the steeplejack who came to build it up again.

All round the premises, wherever there was a suitable roof for water to run from, large tanks were placed to conserve the rain water. What had been a cellar in the old house was flooded too, for water was a very precious commodity and no-one was allowed to waste any. Not only was a great amount of water needed in the factory, but there was the spectre of what had happened at the time of the fire because it was lacking.

Many traces of the fire still remained, for not all the sheds had been rebuilt - some had only been 'bodged-up' as we would say. The huge quantities of plush and yarns which had been burned or singed had been dug into the gardens as fertiliser, as shoddy is today, and it was common to come across charred pieces for many years afterwards.

There was no electricity while the factory was working, nor any piped water, so that by today's standards conditions were primitive in the extreme, and it is a constant source of wonder to me that such beautiful materials were produced with none of the modern facilities.

In the early 1930s, when the knitting factory in Banbury was producing long, cardigan-like coats with simulated fur collar and cuffs, a type of plush to serve this purpose was developed. This went from strength to strength and was made into motor rugs, floor rugs and mats and carpets, and boosted up the trade in the showroom already mentioned. Miss Sharratt presided over this department and was full of ideas which she put in to practice to make this retail trade a going concern. Many of the carpets and rugs made in those days are still in use today, for they were all made of pure wool.

Working conditions, when I was young, were very different from those of today. For instance, when work was slack in the mill, men would go into the garden for an

hour or two, digging or picking fruit according to season, or they would do maintenance work about the place. I do not think any of them ever belonged to a union, although once, just after the first war, I have heard that some men threatened to strike over wages, but it did not come to anything. At the end of the 1920s, the highest paid weaver was getting £1. 17. 6. per week, but the average wage was £1. 12. 6. Not a high wage perhaps, but I believe they always compared favourably with those of agricultural workers.

On the whole it was a paternalistic society, and I know my father cared deeply for the men who worked with him, and he was never above taking his coat off and helping with any job they happened to be doing. In return, the men respected him and spoke with affection of "Our Master".

Things went on quietly until the Second World War, when some of the men were called up, materials were difficult to get, regulations were restrictive and ultimately it was forbidden to make any plush other than the industrial variety.

This ban was lifted after the war, but it was still difficult to obtain yarns and there were labour problems. Young men were not attracted to weaving, especially in such an out-of-the-way place, without benefit of modern conveniences and with no empty cottages in which to live. My father was ageing and in ill-health, not having fully recovered from a seizure which had forced him to retire from his Inland Revenue work in 1942. He, Miss Sharratt, one weaver and a boy had virtually done everything in the mill, from buying in the yarns to the packing and despatching of the finished plush, for several years - and there was no prospect of things getting any easier. It was physically too much. So very regretfully, he decided to sell up. Thus, in June 1948, the business was sold to Messrs. Edward Sykes Walker of Dewsbury, and all the machinery was dismantled and taken up there, with the exception of some of the oldest handlooms and the warping mill, which went to Halifax Textile Museum, where it still is. One loom was given to the Museum in Banbury, but there was no room to exhibit it, and I think it has now been passed on to Woodstock.

I believe that all the Wrench men who had worked in the plush industry were of the same mould, each one carrying on the traditions of the one who had gone before. All God-fearing non-conformists, all contributing service for the good of the village and all doing their utmost to produce materials of superb quality. I think the words of my grandfather, when writing to a business colleague, sum up the aims of these men - "I shall always try to do that which is right."

Reading through some old papers, I came across the following extract from the proofs of an article in "The Gentleman's Journal and Gentleman's Court Review" of unknown date but I should think about 1905 - 'The rise of the great manufacturing towns bid fair at one time to kill the industries of the villages and smaller towns, but it is a curious fact, noticeable in other branches of the trade, that the older centres retained the pick of the business, leaving the lower grades of business to the mushroom growths, and in this lies the explanation of the tendency so rapidly growing, to re-establish the village industries. The healthier surroundings and saner ideals of the village community have been proved to affect the quality of the output. All honour to such employers as Messrs Wrench, whose methods of work have preserved the continuity and taught the lesson.'

The stranger visiting Shutford today would hardly believe that, not so many years ago, beautiful material of innumerable shades and colours went to every corner of the world, from this little village.

Sources: Much of this article is obviously based on my own recollections and of what my parents said. I have also drawn on notes by Miss Sharatt in scrapbooks which she compiled for me and my brother when the firm closed down. The general background owes much to Dr R. *P.* Beckinsale's "The Plush Industry of Oxfordshire" in **Oxoniensia**, 28 (1963). The Victoria County History, Banbury Hundred (Vol. **IO**, 1972) contains a short section on the plush industry at Shutford. Finally, the photographs (not reproduced here) in the article referred to in the text from the Gentleman's Magazine are on display in the Banbury Museum.

Slatters Barn
Shutford

Vera Hodgkins