

## **A Brief History of Weaving in Kidderminster and The Horsefair**

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***Weaving and the growth of the town and trade in brief*** - Weaving has been undertaken in the Kidderminster area for centuries. In the early 1200's cloth was woven and clothing was manufactured here.

**1500's** - In the mid 1500's Kidderminster town had less than 300 inhabitants (1,125 for the whole parish excluding Mitton). In 1533 a Statute made the manufacture of woollen cloths in Worcestershire restricted to people inhabiting the towns of Kidderminster, Evesham, Droitwich and Bromsgrove.

**1600's** - Home weaving in the countryside continued with the increasing enclosure of the countryside having caused a steady exodus from the countryside to the town the population of Kidderminster doubled in under 50 years up to 1640. **Richard Baxter** records Kidderminster as having 800 families (around 4,000 people) and the weaving of linsey – woolsey (a coarse twill or plain-woven fabric woven with a linen warp and a woollen weft) seems to have been the principle trade. He wrote that ***“My people were not rich, though there were among them very few beggars, because of their common trade of stuff weaving would find work for them all, men, women and children that were able; and there were none of the tradesmen very rich, seeing their trade was poor that would but find them food and raiment”*** and ***“Three of the four of the richest thriving masters of the town but about £500 or £600 in twenty years, and it may be lost £100 of it by an ill debtor. The generality of the master-workman lived little better than their journeymen, only they laboured not quite so hard.”***

In **1671** an Act of Parliament was passed regulating the manufacture of **Kidderminster Stuffs**. There was more movement from cottage rural weaving to living in the town. In 1677 there were in Kidderminster 417 looms, 157 master weavers, 187 journeymen and 115 apprentices. One master had seven looms but most of them had only two or three.

**1700's** - From 1710 worsted stuffs and stuffs of silk and worsted became with carpets the manufacture of Kidderminster. In 1717 Mr Greaves a London tradesman encouraged the manufacture of ***“striped tameys and prunella, and afterwards of various figured flowered stuffs.”*** An early example of the merchants, mainly from London dictating the trade by what was fashionable and what they had demand for. In 1735 the Kidderminster carpet trade was extended and at first they made Scotch or flat carpets without any pile and by 1749 cut carpets after the

manner of Wilton carpets. The town and the trade continued to boom with London merchants and money calling the tunes of what was produced. By 1772 the number of carpet looms was 250; the silk and worsted looms to 1,700. There were now 11 master carpet weavers and 29 silk and worsted manufacturers. Throughout this period and early 1800's the trade of bombazine weaving was significant in Kidderminster but by 1859 **Benjamin John Gibbons** stated that it was “**now wholly extinct**”

**1800's** - The parish of Kidderminster including Lower Mitton in the 1821 Census showed 15,296 inhabitants and in 1831 it was 20,865 of which 17,913 were the returns for Kidderminster Town and Foreign. Overall a 27% increase in population in 10 years. In 1824 the new church dedicated to St George costing over £18,000 to build and the parliamentary commissioners paid all but £2,000 which the locals donated. The altar piece 'embellished with a representation of the descent from the cross, woven in carpet work, with exquisite brilliancy of colour and elegance of design, by Mr. Bowyer, a manufacturer in the town, and presented to the parish.

Nationally textile production was second only to agriculture in economic importance. It employed more people and produced more profit than any other manufactured product. Kidderminster was known as a producer of fine carpets with a variety and elegance of pattern and brilliancy and permanency of its dyes. In a return to Parliament it was noted that by 1835 carpet weaving here took 1 in 28 (3.6%) of all the nations wool fleeces. Weaving here and elsewhere in the nation was of major significance to the wealth of the country. There were two banks and a savings bank in Kidderminster in 1835 all underwritten by London Banks. Many of the large manufacturers also had London addresses like the entry below.

**BOMBASIN MANUFACTURERS.**  
**Lea John and Sons, Mill st**  
**Talbot Geo. & Henry & Sons, Mill**  
**st; and 57 Basinghall st, London**

With the increase in trade and wealth the transport links also grew so in the 1835 Piggott's Directory shows there were coaches calling at the Lion Hotel or The Black Horse Inn to Birmingham daily, to Cheltenham and to Liverpool everyday but Sunday all calling at other towns on route. Carriers took goods to and from London, between them at least four days a week, a timetabled carrier left from the Swan, the Black Star and John Jolly from his warehouse. As with the coaches carriers also went to Birmingham, Bridgnorth, Bristol, Knighton, Ludlow, Stourbridge, **W**olverhampton and **W**orcester. Conveyance by water was also booming to London and all stops from Park Wharf and Old Wharf between the competing companies 4 days a week. Other regular services were run from Old Wharf to Manchester, Liverpool and Shardlow and Stourbridge. Post to London and elsewhere was daily.

In the 1838 there were in Kidderminster 24 manufacturers and 1,765 looms producing Brussels carpets and 11 manufacturers and 210 looms producing Scotch carpets and 7 manufacturers and 45 looms producing Venetian carpets employing 1,905 men; 351 women and 1,760 children in all 24 manufacturers, 2,020 looms and 4,016 workers.

In the following 20 years the introduction of steam power to the production of carpets which **Benjamin John Gibbons** stated in his 1859 lecture that ... *“caused a great amount of suffering during the transition, but calculated, I believe, eventually greatly to ameliorate the condition of the town. We are unfortunate in having lost the trade of other kinds of woven fabrics except carpets; it being very much to the advantage of any town to have a variety of manufactures. We have however, a considerable number of men employed in spinning mills, corn mills, and iron foundries the manufacture of leather, tin-plate works, paper, etc.”*

**The Horsefair** - King Henry III granted an annual fair to Kidderminster in 1238. but by the 1690 the market had become too big for the town centre and the horse fair was moved to an area then known as Whorwood Shipton to the north east of the town.

From the deed box for the land which includes the Weavers Cottages and its surrounds. In 1706 Samuel Hurlstone leased two acres of land from Francis Clare in the common field called Church Field near Whorwood Shipton. On 5th May 1709 Francis Clare leased a messuage (a dwelling house with outbuildings and land assigned to its use) to Edward Jones. On 19th October 1709 Edward Jones assigned the messuage to Samuel Hurlstone labourer. From the deeds it would be reasonable to presume that the labourer Samuel Hurlstone who was assigned the premises in 1709 and his family did live in one of the cottages what is now number 22 was built or close by as he was a labourer subletting the land and dwelling but it may not be one of the existing cottages. Hurlstone was a more common name in Ribbesford, Bewdley parish than Kidderminster although the name appears in Stourbridge and London at that time as well. Samuel Hurlstone was married to Elizabeth and they had two daughter's Jane baptised 3rd May 1700 & Elizabeth baptised 27th May 1704 both in Kidderminster. Between 1704 and 1727 Samuel's wife Elizabeth presumably also died and the only burial records for this period are both at St Mary's Kidderminster Elisabeth Hurlston buried 13 Oct 1727 or another entry Elisabeth Hurlston buried 24 Dec 1727 which seem to be the burials of mother and daughter (aged 23) but the burial entries need more research. There is a marriage for a Samuel Hurlstone in 1726 / 1727 to a Hannah Reynolds but although she only lived for a few years after that she had a child and that child was not mentioned in the subsequent deeds only Jane his daughter so I think it was another family. There is

also a will held by The Hive, Worcester of a Samuel Hulstone of Kidderminster (Diocese of Worcester) dated 25<sup>th</sup> January 1727.

Samuel and Elizabeth Hurlstone's daughter Jane married Francis Slead (son of Samuel Slead & Susannah Cowell) who was a year older than her, he was born and baptised in Kidderminster and he was a weaver. We cannot find any trace of the marriage record in the Parish Records or in the Wallace Batches or anywhere else to Francis Slead / Slade but the fact that they are married and she is Samuel's daughter is clear from the deeds. It may have been a late marriage given the times as Francis and Jane were in their early 30's when son Charles Slade born in 1732 and eight years older when son Thomas Slade was born in 1740 but his baptism & burial records 11<sup>th</sup> July 1740 and 21<sup>st</sup> April 1742 both in Kidderminster show him to be a toddler when he died.

A deed of 1757 is a lease by Francis Clare again, but the son of Francis Clare who leased the property in 1709. (Worcester Archive, BA10470/94) This lease included an additional dwelling house "lately erected" by Samuel Hurlstone deceased. "Lately" is we are advised, a very loose term. It was thought that this dwelling was the Cock Inn which became number 18 The Horsefair and was a large Inn with a garden and brew house. It is suggested that numbers 20 and 21 The Horsefair, the other two Weavers Cottages, were built shortly before 1757 by Francis Clare in between the Cock and no 22.

Throughout the deeds there is much letting and subletting and alterations due to deaths and marriages of the owners and leaseholders. Part of this may be the high cost of this which seems to me staggeringly high for its time £120 a year interest in 1777 for example an equivalent of £18,120 in 2017 put this against an average weekly wage for an employed Bombazine weaver in 1839 it averaged (according to the Parliamentary Commissioners) 12 shillings 6d a week (62.5p) and that was 60 years later. So to spread the financial load of leaseholds costing from £120 upwards a year would have been absolutely necessary.

Francis Slead had agreement to build a house in 1765 which was thought to have been built by adjoining no 22 on its east side (what became the small fish and chip shop) but we can find no evidence that he did build there so it may have been a case of asking for permission but not actually doing it.

We seem to have had a repeated process of Francis Slead being a weaver and then as he got older becoming the victualler (publican probably of The Cock Inn no 18) and his son Charles Slade becoming a weaver and raising his family. Charles and his family moved elsewhere in Kidderminster.

The Horsefair, which may have taken place four times each a year, 'ceased to be held about 1820, after which it became a centre of the shoe trade'. Public Health

Acts started to improve the area and culverts (drains) were built or improved in Horsefair. This improvement, undertaken under an Act of 1813 for 'Paving, Cleansing, Lighting, Watching and otherwise improving the Streets, and other public Passages and places in Kidderminster'.

Within the Horsefair like the rest of the town in where the three cottages were prominent there were a number of entries in Piggott's Directory 1835 of Worcestershire a boot and shoe maker Thomas Knott; two bakers & flour dealers Richard Rogers and James Wooley; two blacksmiths Thomas Lewis and John Wikes; a builder Charles Head; a coal dealer John Jenkins; a confectioner James Wooley; a corn dealer John Jenkins; a gardeners & seedsman William Powick; a grocers & tea dealer John Jenkins; a hair dresser Moses Jeavons; two shopkeepers & dealers in groceries & sundries Richard Rogers and William Sayce; a stonemason John Brown: two taverns & public houses Thomas Verry, New Inn and George Mills, Vine; four retailers of beer John Jenkins, Joseph Pearkes, Elizabeth Roberts and Walter Searl and a millwrights and pump makers Edward Wilkes & Son. These are just the ones that paid to be in the directory although some are repeat names and no doubt diversifying. Like the rest of the town it was a bustling place and known for its colourful characters.

## **Bombazine weaving**

The word is derived from the old French word bombasin applied originally to silk but afterwards to tree-silk or cotton. Bombazine was made in England in Elizabeth I's reign and early in the 19th century it was largely made at Norwich.

Bombazine weaving came from Flanders to Norwich in 1570 which was the UK's centre of such weaving but then to Kidderminster. One can see the attraction of using the relatively small looms in a domestic setting such as the cottages. A scotch loom or the produce of Kidderminster stuff for bedding and other forms of weaving were done in both areas and we can see a trend of weavers producing what the London merchants wanted to meet the demands of their customers and it is very possible that Bombazine and other types of weaves could be set up on these looms especially as we can find much evidence of Bombazine weaving but none of their being a specific loom to do it on.

Quality bombazine was woven with a silk warp and worsted weft which is twilled or corded (later the silk warp was sometimes replaced with cotton and later all wool) and used for dress material. Princess Charlotte's death in 1817 provided an unexpected demand for Bombazine died black for mourning wear which meant that the cloth had massive sales but that does not explain why it was being made in order to have the stockpile to hand when that occurred. Spanish priests, some clergy and in the late 1700's gentleman's frock coats were made of the material.

In a blog about what life was like for a “teenager” in the nineteenth century ([www.nineteen.blogspot.co.uk](http://www.nineteen.blogspot.co.uk)) the blog shares information found when researching for writing young adult fiction. They posted that the governess, aging spinster auntie, poor relation or grieving widow is often dressed in Bombazine fabric, probably because it is usually (in England) dyed black. The warp longitudinal threads in fabric are silk and the weft is wool. The combination tends to make an all season material with very little shine. Our washable wool today might be a good approximation.

Kidderminster town and the trade continued to boom with London merchants and money calling the tunes of what was produced. Increasingly there was more of a specialisation in carpet weaving. Bombazine became less fashionable except with the Spanish speaking areas of the empire and began to be associated with poor female relatives and governesses thus lessening its appeal. Throughout the period of and into the early 1800's the trade of bombazine weaving was significant in Kidderminster but by 1859 Benjamin John Gibbons stated that it was “now wholly extinct” After this period the census returns show unemployed Bombazine weavers living with relatives to get by.

### **Bombazine In literature:**

Moby Dick by Herman Melville published 1851 in chapter 6 Ishmael, the narrator, describes a forester being inappropriately dressed in a bombazine cloak and sou'wester looking for work as a whaler. The Song of the Lark by American author Willa Cather published 1915 she describes a character Mrs Kronborg as travelling to Denver 'wearing a tan bombazine dress made very plainly'. How to Tame a Wilful Wife by Christie English historical romance. A retelling of William Shakespeare's *The Taming of The Shrew*. The book was reviewed in January 2014 on [www.imlostinbooks.blogspot.co.uk](http://www.imlostinbooks.blogspot.co.uk) in and includes new words: Bombazine and an image of a Bombazine dress. A cartoon drawing called *The Fashions of The Day or Time Past and Time Present* representing the Lady Full Dress of **Bombazeen** 1740 and 1807 the **Ladys undres of Bum-be-seen**.



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Being a teen in the Nineteenth Century

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