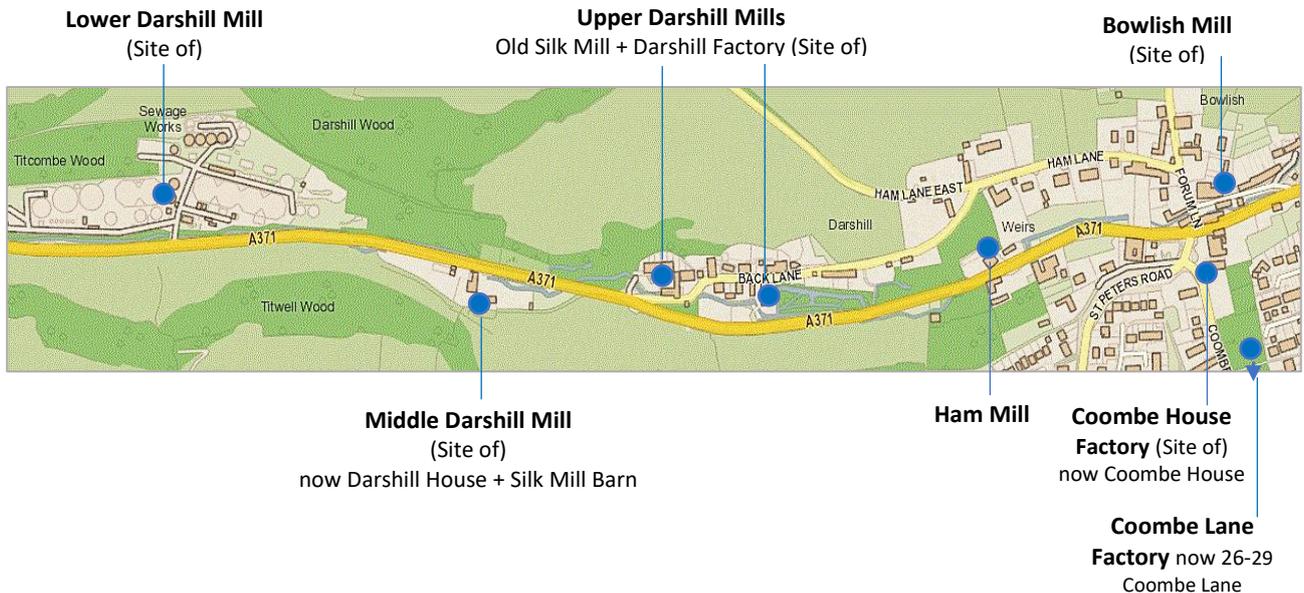


The Darhill, Ham and Bowlish Mills - introduction



Geographical context and location

The location of the historic textile mills and factories of the Darhill and Bowlish areas is shown on the map above. The words mill and factory are often used interchangeably to describe a building or group of buildings where goods are manufactured or assembled chiefly by machine. The source of power in six of the mills being discussed was water from the River Sheppey. Both the factories in Coombe Lane were situated on a small tributary of the Sheppey River which flows north (now largely culverted) beside Coombe Lane to join the Sheppey at Bowlish. The Coombe House Factory was probably water powered but the Coombe Lane Factory further upstream was not and worked by hand.

The River Sheppey rises in a group of springs just west of the village of Doulting, Somerset and travels almost 18 miles south west to meet the River Brue on the Somerset Levels. The Old English name for the river was *Duluting* from which the village was named. This became Doulting Stream or River but for reasons now lost the name was changed to the Sheppey River in the 19th century.



Above: River Sheppey from eastern side of bridge at Upper Darhill.

The river has cut a narrow and in some places steep sided valley through the blue lias limestone for two miles between Shepton Mallet and the village of Croscombe to the west. The fall along its length was advantageous for waterpower and there are at least 20 known mill sites on the river and its tributaries between Doulling and Lower Darshill.

The Table below summarises estimated building dates for the cloth mills and the duration of cloth manufacture (woollen and silk) for those sites between Bowlish and Lower Darshill. All except perhaps Ham Mill were producing woollen cloth by the 18th century and six had converted to silk manufacture by the 1820s. The exceptions were Coombe House Factory which was demolished to make way for a clothier's residence (see Coombe House) and Bowlish Mill which converted to silk in 1861 (see later discussion, Bowlish Mill).

Two mills had closed by 1850; one because of fire and the other through redundancy (See Table below). Two closed between 1880 and 1901 and the last two survived until 1933.



Above: The River Sheppey between Upper and Middle Darshill Mills

Detailed discussion of the development and decline of the cloth industry in the Darshill-Bowlish area follows on the next page. Individual histories for each mill are included as separate documents under their names.

Estimated building dates, and duration of wool and silk manufacture at the Darshill, Ham and Bowlish Mills and Factories

	Estimated building date (century)	Wool manufacture ceased-silk started	Silk manufacture ceased
Bowlish Mill South side of River Sheppey North side of River Sheppey	16 th c1700	Late 17 th - no silk 1840s-1861	1900-1901
Coombe House Factory	Late 18 th	1820s- no silk	
Coombe Lane Factory	Mid 18 th	1820s-c1829	1880s
Ham Mill (combined wool /grain?)	?17 th	?18 th – no silk	Grain only
Upper Darshill Mills Darshill Factory Old Silk Mill	18 th ,rebuilt late 18 th 18 th	1820s-1823/1824 1820s-1823/1824	1933 1933
Middle Darshill Mill	Medieval	1821-1823/1824	c1850
Lower Darshill Mill	Medieval	1812-1815	1843

Development, riches and decline

The River Sheppey and its tributaries which flow through Shepton Mallet may not seem like a significant source of power today, but that is exactly what they were for six hundred years and more.

Rising at Doultling some 2½ miles to the east of the town centre, the river may not be large but it has an impressive drop, falling some 85 metres (278 feet) over the 4 miles between its source and the site of the last mill in our area at Lower Darshill. Prior to the 19th century, it was called Doultling Water.

The earliest records show the development of mills at Lower Darshill and Middle Darshill /Darkeshole in the medieval period when the majority of local land was under the overlordship of Glastonbury Abbey. Other mills developed later and the table on the previous page summarises our findings.

From late 15th century, the principal milling family in the locality was the Strodes, and they held the lease for Middle Darshill/Darkeshole and other local land and cloth-making buildings - including a 16th century dyehouse - as well. After the Reformation, they expanded their portfolio to Bowlish and possibly Ham. It is likely that 'the greatest of all drapperyes' - Spanish Cloth - was first produced at Bowlish by 1610, the land of the cloth-making suburb of Bowlish coming into the family during the last two decades of the 16th century.

'Spanish Cloth' was a dyed-in-the-wool cloth made from thread comprising fibres of more than one colour 'perfectly and undistinctly mixed together', and commonly known as 'medley'. Favoured by the royal courts of England and Spain and exported as far afield as Persia and India, the Strodes and their inter-related families became so phenomenally wealthy that by 1700 they had sold all of their mill interests and diversified their

activities into other, more gentlemanly, things. Another branch of the family centred on Cranmore continued in the locality until late C19.

The use of Spanish wool - softer than most English wool due to the sheep not being reared for meat was an early central component in the cloth, together with techniques of dyeing able to produce a greater range of colours than had been possible even two or three generations before. The Spanish wool was imported from Bilbao into the ports of Bristol and Southampton and transported by cart to the mills along with dyestuffs - principally woad - from the Azores and other places around the Mediterranean, making the specialist English merchants (factors) very wealthy. Spanish wool was often supplemented with fine Isle of Wight wool, imported via Lymington in Hampshire, a trade which grew in Shepton from before 1590. It is probable that Flemish émigres, Huguenots, were instrumental in the development of this finer, lighter, woollen cloth in a greater range of colours than had been made before.

A little later, in 1612, the records of the East India Company include a letter from Thomas Aldworth, William Biddulph and Nicholas Whittington, Company agents in India, which says: "Of all cloths desired the softest in handling are the most request, and therefore your Shepton cloths are far beyond the Suffolk cloths which are hard in handling...".

A 1613 document in the Privy Papers, 'The Abuses of Spanish Cloth', indicates that it was being widely counterfeited by then and was by 'this kingdom and foreign parts wanted', which resonates with the international demand of the East India Company letter. The size of a single Spanish Cloth is given as 22-24 yards in length and was distinctive because the clothier did the dyeing in-the-wool 'himself' 'before it be woven'.

The innovative Bowlish Mill prospered and the

making of Spanish Cloth spread to other factories in the locality as owners converted their broadcloth processes to make the finer, more colourful and more profitable cloth. The clothmaking families inter-married and by the time of the Civil Wars in the 1640s, Spanish cloth was being made by around 30 mills in Shepton Mallet, Batcombe and nearby places. Also, if a 1641 poem is to be believed, more than 'three score thousand poor' had their 'maintenance and livelihood' from the manufacture of woollen cloth in the area¹.

The war and its ensuing Commonwealth upset the established trading patterns and markets for Shepton Cloth and the clothiers had to find new, less grand markets thus accelerating the counterfeiting dilution of the brand and, even with the Restoration, by 1700 the reputation of the 'finest of all drapperyes' had all but gone.

The pressures of competition put the clothiers under sustained pressure from the factors (merchants) they used to sell their cloth who delayed and discounted payments, driving some clothiers into bankruptcy. The foment in the industry gave rise to the petitions to Parliament, the Bruton and Shepton Mallet-originated '*Clothiers' Complaints*' of the 1680s and 1690s: '*..a true account of the present management and abuses crept into the Clothing-Trade...*'.

What was once high-status and low volume had become lower-status and high volume and from about 1700, the number of so-called 'clothiers' taxed in the area actually increased, reaching its zenith between 1740 and 1780.

The 18th century affected owners, tenants and workers too and to understand the circumstances of this, we need a little context around the method of production. Unlike most other areas of the country, the West Country held on to the basis of the medieval system of clothmaking, the 'cottage industry' (or 'putting-out') system, whereby cloth was made by families at home.

Typically, women would spin thread from raw wool (using a drop-spindle and later a spinning-wheel), their husbands would weave it into cloth (a hand loom occupied between 120 and 150 sq ft; 11-14 sq m) and their children kept them both working by supplying raw materials and carrying out household chores.

From the development of fulling mills - a smelly and labour intensive business which matted the fibres of the cloth and cleansed it - in response to the dramatic reduction in the availability of labour following the Black Death c.1350, property owners invested in the development of labour-saving fulling mills and it is these which became the backbone of the industry, driving changes in production methods in most of the country. However, in the West Country, little changed apart from the centralisation of fulling around the mill; the thread and cloth making continuing to take place in people's homes; a formula which continued substantially unchanged until the demise of the industry around 1800.

During this period, the majority of Darshill, Ham and Bowlish residents lived in property rented from one of the woollen clothiers and, typically in the west country, the majority of them would have been weavers, wool-combers and other cloth workers. Several surviving cottages at Darshill and Bowlish are examples of this pattern. At Bowlish, one cottage is named 'The Old Sluice House' although as yet there is no evidence it was let to the person responsible for controlling the level of the millpond.

Over time, economies of scale in the procurement of raw materials and the marketing of cloth had a centralising effect and by the middle of the 15th century, 'clothiers' were in place and their functions developed akin to that of a bank, with cloth-making families allowed credit for the raw materials they used, which they repaid when their cloth was sold.

A contemporary example from the adjacent

village of Croscombe in c.1450 shows that one clothier had almost one third of the cash in his business at any instant being owed to him. Perhaps an international example of a family with its origins in woollen cloth making, which developed through the clothier phase and then beyond into banking will help put into context what happened similarly to the principal families here: the Medici of Renaissance Florence.

However by the 18th century, all was not well for a number of reasons: the cloth makers often chose to take cash from their businesses to build fine houses or improve their social status; the rents charged by the principal landowner, the Duchy of Cornwall, continued to be high; the locality never embraced cotton cloth unlike other areas; and the owners repeatedly chose not to respond to the increases in food prices due to continental wars and a succession of extreme weather conditions affecting crop production (violent storms, a dry first half of the century and many long and cold winters). The latter caused great pressure on wages, borne out of privation, and between 1746 and 1820 there were numerous mass demonstrations and riots in Shepton, then one of the largest woollen cloth-making centres in the sub-region of North-East Somerset and West Wiltshire, which drew striking workers from Warminster, Bradford-on-Avon and Frome. Six of the riots were so serious that the local armed militia was called out as the assembled thousands of angry workers 'threatened the property and even the lives of their employers', according to a 19th century history.

The most serious riot was in 1776 and concerned the introduction of the factory-based steam powered 'Spinning Jenny', which would have put hundreds if not thousands of home-working women out of work. On that occasion between one and three (reports differ) strikers were shot dead at West Shepton on the southern border of Bowlish, the site of the Parish Workhouse (later replaced by the 1848 Union Workhouse and

eventually by the Norah Fry Hospital). As a consequence, the Shepton clothiers were reluctant to invest in enlarged workrooms and steam power, which amounted to the effective death knell of the industry in the town and its surrounding area. As a direct result, surveys of Parish Records show that the population reduced from just under 9,000 in the early 1780s to just over 5,000 in 1801, a reduction of around 40% in 16 years as families migrated and emigrated, desperate to find work. Other towns in the sub-region with similar access to the Somerset coalfields like Bradford-on-Avon and Frome, did invest in the new technology and continued to produce woollen cloth in quantity until the latter half of 19th century.

As a direct result, many mills in the town closed and became derelict but by around 1812, a number of mainly London entrepreneurs had bought or leased them, wanting to make use of their water power to make another form of cloth that was far less labour intensive: silk. Lower Darshill was the first, followed later by the other Darshill, Bowlish and Coombe Lane mills (see previous table for details).

The making of silk cloth in England during the 19th century was widespread, and unlike its woollen cloth predecessor in the West Country it was based in factories rather than homes. Thus the model of producing cloth here changed not only in the kind of cloth made, but also in that the change marked the end of the cottage industry system.

The country's major centres were Macclesfield and London, but smaller and less capital-intensive mills set up in disused woollen mills were able to compete for a while, and factories at Lower Darshill, Upper Darshill and Coombe Lane were refurbished or built, the former having five storeys and the second and latter three, and buildings were converted at Bowlish. Thus workers became employed away from their homes and in much smaller numbers. This had

the effect of releasing the tied nature of some dwellings to become the bases of other businesses, such as stonemasonry at Darshill.

The long-established woollen cloth mill at Lower Darshill was at least three times larger than any other in Shepton and had two water wheels, one 30 feet and one 20 feet in diameter, and by 1815 it had been re-equipped to make silk cloth. Before 1833 the two wheels had been supplemented by a 10 horse power steam engine and production was assured. However, disaster struck in January 1843 and it burnt to the ground, destroying not only the fabric of the buildings but also the approximate 170 people who were employed there. There is an eye-witness account which includes:

“The sight was most awfully grand.....and lit up heavens for miles...Thousands of people assembled...on the surrounding cliffs and edifices and watched the progress of the fire, while others were engaged in trying to save what they could...”.

Thus, the wounded locality received yet another blow.

The silk clothmaking owners here introduced steam power to supplement water very early-on and the depressed local economy following the demise of woollen clothmaking meant that they were able to recruit the factory workers they needed with ease and at lower wage-rates, and were thus able to undercut the prices of cloth made elsewhere. This situation continued at least until 1860, when a deputation from the London Silk Weavers’ Society visited the Shepton factories seeking a rise in worker’s wages, presumably to remove what they saw as wage-undercutting or ‘unfair’ competition. They

succeeded at Coombe Lane and the workers were very happy, but within two decades the owners had closed the site.

The industry as a whole in the first half of the 19th century employed primarily women and children and The Factories’ Inquiry Commission in 1833 identified that 29% of all employees were under 18 years old. In his evidence to the Commission, the co-proprietor of the silk factories at Lower Darshill, Middle Darshill, two at Upper Darshill and Coombe Lane was satisfied that all of his sites only employed children as young as eight years and older despite the fact “..they could accomplish it [the work] even at five years..” Much of their work was the tying together of broken silk threads and for 66 ½ hours work a week, the children were paid 1s. The first Factories Act was passed shortly after and reduced the proportion of children working in silk mills to 14% by 1871.

Many of the women and children working in the local mills lived in the Shepton Workhouse built on the site of the seminal 1776 riot and the records of the now known as Bowlsh Infants School when it opened in 1869, show the majority of pupils came from among the destitute there. Like poor families elsewhere and desperate for the income their children earned, many of the Workhouse children continued to work part-time in the local silk mills as well as attending school, despite schooling until age 13 being made compulsory from 1880.

Some of the Shepton mills continued to make silk cloth into the 20th century, but by 1930 all of the cloth mills in the town had shut to be either left to rot, converted to other uses or simply demolished to make way for housing or other uses.

Reference:

1. Watts, Richard, *A Concise Poem on the Scituation, Trading etc of Shepton Mallet in the County of Somerset in The Younge Man’s Looking Glasse, or, A Summary Discourse Betweene the Ant and the Grasshopper*, London, printed for Edward Blackmore, 1641