

A Fortune from Flax

Finding jobs for the unemployed or, as it used to be described, "setting the poor to work" has been one of the goals of the British economy for two centuries and more. How to find work that is labour intensive enough to employ many, but profitable enough to be worth doing ?

Last week I introduced you to the formidable figure of Andrew Yarranton, the 17th-century economist and engineer from Worcestershire, whose vision of a commercial revolution in England pre-dated the Industrial Revolution by almost a century.

Yarranton set out much of his thinking in a book - *England's Improvement by Land and Sea* - published in 1677. The volume talks much about improving the country's road and water network as a stimulus to trade, but hidden away within its many pages is an even more radical plan.

Yarranton envisaged his scheme taking place at Milcote, close to the confluence of the Stour and the Avon, south of Stratford-on-Avon. The land at Milcote, part of the estates of the Earl of Middlesex, comprised some 3,000 acres and Yarranton knew them well. Here he would set up "an extensive agricultural and mercantile establishment", similar to one Yarranton had seen at Harlem in the Netherlands. He called it "New Harlem".

The scheme revolved around the growing of flax. Flax is the fibrous plant, which, when properly treated, will produce the thread from which linen is made. Yarranton estimated that each acre sown at Milcote would produce some three hundredweight of the crop, and from that around 500 yards of cloth. That little lot would fetch £600 in the 17th Century.

That process is more easily said than done. Getting from something growing in a field to something worn on the back is a long and complicated procedure. The plant has to be grown, weeded and watered, of course, and then pulled, rotted down, dressed, spun, wound, woven and whitened. But it was the very length of the method - its labour intensiveness - that recommended it. The poor would be set to work in their thousands - Yarranton reckoned 9,000 could be employed at New Harlem - and there will be no need of relief from parish, and "no complaining in the streets".

Yarranton imagined the cloth production to take place in "spinning schools", such as had seen in Germany. In the middle would sit the school mistress in a little box or pulpit, and around her 200 children, aged from six to nine years, spinning away like fury. Each child, then, would eight pence a day in wages to the family income. In Germany, commented Yarranton, the children enrich the father, whilst in England they beggar him.

Better still, the young girls would learn from an early age the qualities of obedience and industry. It's the reason, added Yarranton, that had-working German women "have so little of the twit-twat" compared with their English neighbours.

All these extra workers would need to be fed, of course, and Yarranton devised huge granaries at Milcote, seven stories high, to store the corn for their bread. Then there would be an estate of new houses for the workforce, and canals cut through the land to assist the bleaching of the flax. The finished material could then be transported along the Avon, into the Severn and down to the ports. Helpfully Yarranton drew a map to show exactly how the colony could look.

Like many of Andrew Yarranton's visionary schemes, however, New Harlem came to nothing, and it remained on paper. But it might be said that the man from Astley pointed the direction the future lay: towards large-scale labour colonies and the cotton mills of the North.

There is some evidence that a scheme along the same lines, though on a much smaller scale, was put into effect at Bridgetown near to Stratford by Sir John Clopton. No doubt Yarranton had a persuasive word in Clopton's ear.

Yet, almost 150 years after he devised it, Andrew Yarranton's plan was revived in the most unexpected of places, in Birmingham workhouse.

In 1819 the Birmingham guardians of the poor began to make use of the parish land on Birmingham Heath - what we would now call Winson Green - "to set the poor to work". Unemployed men were paid as farm labourers to grow and tend 30 acres or so of flax on the Heath, and to prepare the crop for spinning.

The fibre was then transferred to the workhouse in Lichfield Street, where the female inmates spun and wove the stuff into cloth. The resulting material was then turned into garments for the paupers to wear, or to provide the sheets for their beds.

And thus the workhouse inmates - all 500 and more of them - were clothed at no additional cost, the rates were reduced and the unemployed were found work to do. It was the most integrated scheme of parish maintenance yet devised.

The arrangement lasted for ten years or so, until the guardians found they could make even more money by renting out the land instead, and so the colony was dispersed and the flax discontinued.