

Coventry Blue

Have you ever wondered why a football club becomes associated with a particular colour? I can't explain why the Red Devils are not Green Devils (and anyway it's outside my area), but I can hazard a guess as to why the Sky Blues of Coventry have always been sky blue.

Whatever the 20th Century did to it, Coventry can still look back at having been one of the greatest cities in medieval England, third only to London and York. It was already growing fast when Leofric, Earl of Mercia, built a great Benedictine abbey in the heart of it. The ruins of that abbey (later downgraded to a priory) can still be seen below the cathedral today.

What we know of the Benedictines (as well as the Cistercians) was that they were considerable landowners, and that land would have been well-stocked with sheep. The production of wool was England's largest medieval industry, and Coventry was one of the first towns to profit from the trade.

Surplus sheep and the wool from their backs would have been traded in Coventry's earliest market-place, close to the abbey in Cross Cheaping. And from there the raw material found its way to the domestic workshops and looms which rapidly grew up. By about 1200, then, when we have our earliest evidence, Coventry was well known as a cloth town.

Whereas the management of sheep needed few hands, the production of cloth was labour intensive, and by a process of vertical integration all the elements of the trade were able to be concentrated in a town the size of Coventry. The process itself began with the spinning and weaving, through to fulling and shearing and on to dyeing.

I should probably explain that shearing had nothing to do with removing the wool from the sheep. The shearman's job was to raise the cloth with a teasel, and the top taken off with a huge pair of shears. This made for a much stronger (and more expensive) piece of cloth.

Each part of cloth production had its own practitioners, who protected their interests by forming trade guilds. A list of the Coventry guild members in 1449 names no less than 57 weavers, 64 tailors and shearmen, 27 fullers and 37 dyers, and on top of these were the mercers, who dealt with the finished product. All this in a city with a population of only 4,000 or so.

The Corporation of Coventry monitored and controlled the trade in two halls, side-by-side in Bayley Lane. The Wool Hall was the place for buying and selling the wool itself, while next door in the Drapery the finished cloth was weighed and taxed. The weighing was less to judge the quantity of the cloth as its quality, the more tightly woven (more threads to the inch in the weft) being more heavily priced and taxed.

By 1400 Coventry was manufacturing something like 3,000 whole cloths each year,

a whole cloth in contemporary parlance being 24 yards long and almost 2 yards wide. It would take two individuals around eighty hours to weave a single cloth on a medieval loom, and twenty times that long to produce the thread itself. In addition to these "broadcloths" the city also made a host of lesser textiles such as caps, lesser cloths and stockings.

To answer the question we posed at the start we need to concentrate on the dyers, whose guild was formed around 1400. Medieval dyeing relied upon the use of a variety of natural dyes, some more expensive than others. Brazilwood made a cheap red dye, but one which rapidly faded; madder produced a more consistent russet red colour.

Most popular of all, at least in Coventry, was the cloth dyed blue with imported woad. Cloth stained with woad came out a pale blue, roughly the colour of a Coventry City footballer's shirt.

This did not mean that, to wear a garment of Coventry cloth, you had the choice of only two colours. Both madder and woad acted as "background" colours, and once the broadcloths left Coventry (mostly for export to the Continent) further dyes were often applied to them. Ships with Coventry cloth headed for Gascony in France, and to Spain and Portugal, and regularly returned with woad to dye the next set of cloths.

And thus, by the High Middle Ages, the colour one associated with Coventry was blue, as blue as the heavens that seemed to smile benignly upon the city.

It did not smile benignly for ever, of course. Ask any Coventrian and they will tell you that all the great Coventry trades have come and gone at some point, from cloth and cap making to ribbons, watches, bicycles, sewing machines and cars.

Nevertheless - like the cloths themselves - the Coventry cloth trade took a long time to die. Even as late as Tudor times it was still possible to make a decent profit from the city's first native industry. But by then the sky blue had faded' new materials and new dyes had elbowed out the old colour. Come the 17th Century, the industry had given way to ribbons.

Indeed, when the Corporation, and then the football team, adopted sky blue their colour, it was probably consciously nostalgic, looking back to the heady days when Coventry Blue was as famous as Lincoln Green.