

The history of flannel and its story in Newtown.

The name flannel seems to be derived from the Welsh word for wool ('gwlanen') and it has been described as a fabric of plain or twill weave made from woollen yarn.

Flannel has been made in Wales for centuries, but the name itself became more common in the 16th and 17th centuries, and it was so common that it gets a mention in Shakespeare's *The Merry Wives of Windsor*. "I am dejected, I am not able to answer the Welsh flannel" (Falstaff). By this time the woollen trade was organised through the Draper's Guild in Shrewsbury and increasing amounts were exported to London, Europe and beyond, so the word became absorbed into the English Language.

The local mid-Welsh cloth was also known as Welsh plains or web. Recent research is highlighting the fact that the fabric was part of the supply chain in the slave trade, with each slave allocated five yards of cloth per year. Originally made on the farms as a means of supplementing the income from agriculture, by the 19th century mid-Wales seems to have been centre of production as the processes became industrialised and centralised, firstly with the water-driven fulling and carding mills, and then later with steam-powered mills.

Flannel woven on hand-loom in buildings such as the Textile Museum was highly prized as being of superior quality to the mechanical loom cloth. Pryce Jones used the term Welsh flannel as a means of indicating superior quality in his garments.

A downturn in trade in the 1830s can be traced not only to the decline of the trans-Atlantic slave cloth market, but also the loss of monopoly status of the Drapers Guild in Shrewsbury. Newtown's Flannel Market, built in 1832 helped to fill that gap. The first successful mechanical mill in Newtown was running in 1853, however the hand-loom continued to produce cloth until the early 20th century.

At late as 1891 the census shows there were still twice as many flannel weavers as woollen weavers in the Penygloddfa area of Newtown, though the trade was dying because of increased competition from Lancashire and Yorkshire. The large mills had had periods of boom and bust in the late 1800s, and in 1912 the largest mill, The Cambrian, was

destroyed by fire. There was no interest in rebuilding, the town had lost its major industry.

Follow these links for more on the slave trade.

<https://ramblesandstudies.wordpress.com/2019/06/16/some-thoughts-on-wales-wool-and-slavery-and-what-it-all-means/>

<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-wales-48624937>