9: The Yorkshire teazle merchants after 1914

The dramatic effects of World War I on supply and demand were first seen amongst the Leeds and Huddersfield merchants during the war itself. With the final disappearance of teazle cultivation around Sherburn and South Milford, and the death in March 1915 of Gibson Bortoft, the firm of James Bortoft & Sons, which up to the war still conducted its main operation from South Milford, with two stores in Leeds, at Wormald's Yard, and the South Market, came to an end sometime around 1915. Firms that depended on imports in particular, such as J. Sloman and McLaughlin Brothers, must have been affected by a variety of factors, including the fact that France, the main foreign supplier, was fully engaged in the war, whilst exports from Austria stopped, and shipping across the Atlantic was also seriously affected. It may be that, as happened in World War II, there were some imports from Spain to offset shortages, and in any case, both of these merchants continued in business through the war, as did William North & Son, who were also dealing in items such as cider, corn and peat moss as sidelines, and S. Bumby. This last firm, though continuing in its business in English and foreign teazles, in stems and spindles, experienced a temporary disruption for some reason around 1916, moving for a time to Redhall Farm, Town Street, Beeston, before returning to Old Lane. However, towards the end of the war Charles Yendole & Co. appear to have ceased trading. The Huddersfield firm of Edmund Taylor also underwent a move, accompanied by a change in ownership, leaving the impressive warehouses on Dundas Street, for premises out of the town centre on Manchester Road, near Longroyd Bridge.[1]

The process of reorganisation and change, not all of it directly attributable to the war, went on into the earlier 1920s. During this period, the various merchants used advertising and trade listings to establish their own niche in the market, and to promote their own standing, reputation and identity. This involved variously, the publication of the year of establishment; the adoption of an appropriate telegraphic address; the specifying of the kind of demand catered to, in stem and spindle teazles, sometimes with the names of the makes of raising or brushing machines for which teazles could be provided; illustrations of stem and spindle teazles; lists of the types of teazles stocked; the insertion of the word 'Teazle' into the name of the business; and the offering to customers of a particular guarantee or speciality, whilst some also specifically invited export orders. With the exception of the large amounts of unprocessed English teazles in stavs still taken in the 1920s by Wormald & Walker's of Dewsbury, the business was entirely in trimmed and sorted stem teazles and spindle teazles ordered to specification, and two of the teazle merchants operated from what were already named 'teazle works'.

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Up until at least 1923, the oldest of the Leeds teazle merchants, William North & Son, was still managed by William North's son, George Edward North, then in his seventies,[2] though by 1927, he appears to have died, being succeeded as 'governing director' by W. C. North. In the early 1920s, the emphasis on teazle production was reinforced by the alteration in the name to William North & Son (Teazle) Ltd. Supplying both English, which by then meant Somerset teazles grown in the Taunton area, and foreign, the company offered its customers teazles in any quantities, any quality, any length and any diameter, and their speciality, illustrated by means of a carefully proportioned representation of a spindle teazle, was a uniform diameter for spindle teazles to ensure even raising. Preparation was carried out by the firm itself at what was referred to as their teazle works at 100 Gelderd Road.

After World War I, Jacob Sloman's widow, Jane Sloman, continued to exercise a role in

the running of the firm of J. Sloman, as a 'teazle merchant' herself, up to the time of her own death in February 1928, at the age of eighty-four. Earlier, though, by 1920, it would seem, as a result of what many years later Alfred Sloman's son Harry Sloman referred to as the 'family quarrel', there was a disagreement between the two members of the family who were most involved directly, Alfred Sloman and his brother Solomon Sloman. According to Solomon Sloman's daughter Mrs P.M. Smith, it centred around a matter of personal preference extending into commercial policy, as her father, Solomon Sloman, did not wish to, or perhaps no longer wished to be placed in the position of having to supervise the numbers of 'girls', or female workers, usually employed to clip and sort stem teazles. Instead, he wished to concentrate on the production and supplying of spindle teazles, which although it was the smaller part of the business, compared with the stem teazle market, could be carried on profitably enough with a smaller, and mostly male workforce.[3] The upshot was that Solomon Sloman, who as the manager there before World War I, seems to have been more directly engaged with the running of the operation at 106 Skinner Lane, retained the Exchange Teazle Works, whilst Alfred Sloman set up in business separately. At the firm of J. Sloman, Solomon Sloman turned out mostly spindle teazles using French and Normandy teazles and also handling American and English, as a small stock of stem teazles was always kept for the convenience of customers, though most likely, the business in American, probably always pretty small, came to an end in the course of the 1920s.. The firm was able to feature the original year of establishment, 1850, in its advertising, and the telegraphic address of 'Punctual, Leeds', was adopted as a sign of the attention given to the needs of the customers, which the firm always tried to maintain. In the 1930s, buyers were asked to try a sample order in order to be satisfied with the quality of reliable and durable teazles, and a further guarantee was given on quantity that orders would be supplied fully, complete to a single teazle. These were factors to consider in a trade where, probably at any time and in any location, samples have not always been what they should have been as guides to condition and quality, and quantities too, from the point where they were cut onwards, were not always accurate either. J. Sloman also sought export orders as well as catering to the home markets. It was probably in the later 1920s, or in the 1930s, that Solomon Sloman's daughter, Phyllis M. Sloman, who was born in 1911, joined the business alongside her father.

When Alfred Sloman went into business separately in 1920, it was initially with his oldest son, Herbert Sloman, who was then about twenty-seven years old, with his second son Harry, who was then sixteen, beginning to work his way through the workroom procedures. By 1921, however, a Mr Smith, possibly of the Avignon firm of French exporters, who during the war were still able to supply teazles to the British market through their agents in Bradford and Paisley, had been brought in, to form the partnership of A. & H. Sloman & Smith.[4] The main kinds advertised, in order of importance, at the start of the 1920s were, Normandy, French, Spanish, which may have been a survival of wartime importing, American and English. These were mainly intended for the stem teazle trade, the firm's speciality being teazles with the stalks cut short, ready for immediate fixing in all makes of brushing machines, and the telegraphic address, appropriately, was 'Cutstalk, Leeds'. However, spindle teazles were also supplied, though to start with, some of the procedures on that side were a bit rudimentary. Initially, the new firm was based at Bank Top Mills, Mill Street, but subsequently moved to Fearns Island Mills, Neptune Street, East Street, below Crown Point bridge on the north bank of the Aire. Through the 1930s, the trade was mainly in French, with some Normandy and English teazles, some of the West of England woollen manufacturers requesting Normandy in particular for the high quality cloths they were making. According to Harry Sloman, who looking back from the depressed conditions of the 1970s, thought that when he had come into it in 1920, the teazle trade was still a very busy affair, Sloman & Smith once had one hundred women workers, mostly engaged in clipping and sorting stem teazles, and Solomon Sloman, on a visit there at an unknown time, counted thirty. In the 1920s, Sloman & Smith revived an

older practice once followed by some teazle dealers by taking hosiery waste to offset the cost of the teazles to customers, with the offer, 'Let us exchange your waste for teazles'. Export business was undertaken.

During World War I, the Leeds branch of McLaughlin Brothers had had its own problems. The war itself 'wrecked havoc with the McLaughlin Brothers teasel business in Leeds' according to Henry W. McLaughlin, a son of Charles James McLaughlin in an account of the family quoted in an article on the Internet by Jack Major. Not only were UK orders cut, but exports for instance to Sweden, were halted. Although the branch at Macaulay Street Mills continued to trade, around the middle of the war it would seem, Charles James McLaughlin returned to America, and then found himself unable to come back again. It was not until the end of the war that it was possible for him to sail to Britain essentially to pick up his wife and children, and close the Leeds branch, which was last heard of in 1920.

In America, the McLaughlin family involvement with teazles went on for another forty years. On his return, Charles James McLaughlin settled at Syracuse, where he set up his own business as a teazle merchant, buying Skaneateles teazles and preparing them for sale to mills in the United States, Canada, Denmark, Sweden and Iceland. His father's company closed down around the period. After Charles James McLaughlin died in 1938, his son Henry W. McLaughlin carried on the business, in which there was a brief revival before World War II, as there was in the trade in Britain. The Charles James McLaughlin company finally closed in 1960, and Henry W. McLaughlin, who had been born in Leeds in 1907, retired to Orlando, Florida, where he died in 1979.

S. Bumby of Old Lane, Beeston, continued in the 1920s and 1930s to handle English and foreign teazles for both the stem teazle and the spindle teazle markets, also undertaking export orders. This firm's activities may have been on a smaller scale than those of the other merchants, it being the only West Riding merchants never mentioned during the recollections of a number of individuals in Yorkshire with a knowledge of the trade going back to 1920, though it was referred to by one of the old Somerset growers.

The Huddersfield teazle merchants Edmund Taylor underwent one, and possibly two, changes in ownership, starting in 1915. There was a move out to Manchester Road, Longroyd Bridge, where the business was still located in 1917. However it was said to have been in 1915 that it was bought by E. J. W. Johnson and Walter Shaw, who by 1922 had transferred it to Storths Mill, Wakefield Road, Huddersfield, where Shaws of Huddersfield had their main operation as vinegar brewers and manufactures of sauce and pickles.[5] Although Edmund Taylor handled both English and foreign teazles, sold in both stems and spindles, they did a large amount in Somerset teazles for the stem teazle trade with mills using gigs, and in the 1920s, were suppliers of West of England teazles in stavs to Wormald & Walker's of Dewsbury, who had their own people to clip and sort them as well as set them.[6] In February 1936, the business was made into a limited company by the partners, there being a change of name to Edward Taylor (Teazle) Ltd. The telegraphic address was 'Teazle, Huddersfield'. It was in the interwar period, possibly in the 1930s, that the concern began to set teazles, sending out rods to mills that needed them, but did not have a setter available themselves. It was at the end of the 1930s that the firm, which required a good deal of storage space, moved to the neighbouring Carr Pit Road into a building named Chardon Mill, in recognition of the import trade in French and Normandy teazles, even though these formed a relatively small part of their business.

The general effects of World War II on the merchants were similar to those experienced during the First World War. The occupation of France, which caused the cutting off of supplies of Normandy and French teazles, was a particular problem for the merchant firms which depended on imports, and J. Sloman, and perhaps others, managed to make up part of the deficiencies with Spanish teazles.[7] All of the firms of merchants, nevertheless, remained in business through the war, and after 1945, the earlier pattern of supply and demand gradually re-established itself up to the end of the 1950s, when the first serious

post-war crisis occurred in the trade.

Amongst the five Leeds and Huddersfield teazle merchants, J. Sloman continued to specialise in the spindle teazle market as imports of Normandy and French teazles were resumed. In 1949-50, the business moved from Skinner Lane to Low Fold, coincidentally, not far from Sloman & Smith at Fearns Island Mills. At the new Exchange Teazle Works, the production of spindle teazles was undertaken by Solomon Sloman with two or three men workers, Miss Sloman also being involved. At one time, Solomon Sloman sometimes went, like the other merchants, down to the West of England to buy the standing crop, so as to have a certain supply of English teazles on hand for stem teazles, but latterly in this period, did comparatively little in English, in order not to need to have 'girls' working on them. However, as growers, J. Sloman kept up a regular connection with the last Gloucestershire grower, so that a small supply of English teazles was maintained. Overall, with its smaller workforce and workroom operation, J. Sloman tended to act more as merchants compared with some of the other firms which worked more on the raw teazles, sometimes importing teazles already cut by the supplying growers or merchants in France. The sales of teazles were mostly in the heavy woollen area of Yorkshire, the mills in places such as Batley, Morley and Ravensthorpe, and in Leeds itself. Outside the West Riding, teazles were sold around the United Kingdom, in the Shetlands, Northern Ireland, the Isle of Man and elsewhere. They also sold teazles to machine makers, who themselves stocked them for sale to the purchasers of their own raising machines. Occasionally, the firm found that customers who had changed over to wire raising, returned to teazles. The stem teazles that they sold were used for raising cloths such as billiard table coverings. Abroad, sales went to mills in countries such as India, Pakistan, New Zealand, Australia, Uruguay, Denmark and Finland. Individual sales were often of one or two cases of spindle teazles which would last a buyer a year or two, J. Sloman was particularly keen to maintain its reputation on both the quality and the quantity of the teazles it supplied.[8]

Alfred Sloman died in 1941, leaving the business in the hands of his sons Herbert and Harry, together with their younger brother. The participation of three in such a family business was a distinct advantage, making it possible to have, for instance, one in the office, one supervising the workshop and one on the road. The main trade was still in stem teazles using imported French and Normandy, and also English teazles, which Sloman & Smith bought regularly in Somerset for years, with a female workforce to clip and sort. Some spindle teazles were also produced. The market for stem teazles was mainly amongst the mills of the heavy woollen district around Batley and Dewsbury, with other sales in Scotland and the West of England. Their customers represented essentially the manufacturers of the best quality cloths, though across a wide range of kinds, including blankets, Crombie overcoatings, uniform cloths for the police and the services, and billiard cloth. They also did business with the hosiery trade, in the Leicester sock manufacturing industry, for instance. Teazles were also sold to a number of foreign countries.[9] In his private life, Herbert Sloman was a serious amateur photographer, reaching the high standard needed to qualify as an Associate of the Royal Photographic Society. A competition photographer, and a member of the Leeds Camera Club, in 1955 he presented to the club a large silver cup, the Herbert Sloman Progress Trophy, to encourage improvement amongst the members. This trophy, which was awarded annually between the years 1956 and 1982, is now kept by the West Yorkshire Archive Service Leeds, amongst the records of the Leeds Camera Club, which include one of Herbert Sloman's own competition entries.

Nothing is known about the business in this period of the other two Leeds merchants, William North & Son (Teazle) Ltd., and S. Bumby, except that one of the older Somerset growers recalled in the early 1970s, that Bumby had once appeared looking for teazles to buy.

In Huddersfield, Edmund Taylor (Teazle) Ltd., was still a family business. At the time of

the centenary of the firm in November 1949, when the employees were treated to a celebratory night out, E. J. W. Johnson and Walter Shaw were still directors, with W. G. Ledger, the son-in-law of Walter Shaw, as managing director. Also in 1949, Cyril George, who had married into the Ledger family, joined the business. The quantities of teazles handled were in the region of 15,000,000 each year, 95 per cent of them English, bought amongst the forty or so growers still growing teazles in Somerset. One of the old Somerset growers, Mr Brunt of Horton near Ilminster, recalled George Ledger as having been a particularly hard bargainer, squeezing the teazles to test their hardness till the blood ran from his hand. Around 1949, the firm employed around a dozen, mostly 'girls' to clip and sort the teazles, though into the 1950s, the number may have risen, some of the women workers being part-timers. Some 30 per cent of their turnover was exported at the time, especially to Australia, New Zealand, Canada and India. The setter in 1949, was the third member, in the third generation of his family to have worked there as a setter, his grandfather and his uncle having preceded him. Subsequently, two setters were employed, one of them being Norman Dawson, who had worked for a long period at Wormald & Walker's. Many of the rods were set for local woollen firms. Particularly large numbers were sent by Crowther's of Milnsbridge to be set and returned.[10]

In 1957-58, the woollen trade underwent a recession. This slump had an almost immediate effect on the traditional stem teazle trade for gigs in the West Riding, and on the teazle merchants involved in that part of the market. Two of them, William North & Son (Teazle) Ltd., and Samuel Bumby, went out of business between 1958 and 1961. In 1961-62, there was a further recession, and over the next ten years or so, the decline in the traditional stem teazle business by four-fifths, and other changes in the pattern of supply and demand, had consequences for the three firms of merchants that remained in business into the 1960s. The firm of J. Sloman was affected not only by the changes in the conditions of trade, but by the death in 1959 of Solomon Sloman, which left his daughter, Miss P. M. Sloman, as the sole original family member amongst the directors. By 1961, the firm had become a limited company, as J. Sloman Ltd.

The conditions of 1958 put J. Sloman's business into the doldrums, but starting in 1959, in their particular part of the trade, selling mainly spindle teazles, they enjoyed record sales for three or four years owing to the fashion in the knitwear industry for scarves, jumpers and cardigans, dealing with mills locally, and around the country in places such as Kilmarnock and Leicester. However, their supply position was affected adversely by the disappearance around the early 1960s, of the Normandy teazle cultivation, whilst costs of French teazles were also rising. Being particularly dependant on imported teazles from France, J. Sloman Ltd., was further affected by the 10 per cent import surcharge imposed in the middle of the 1960s. Eventually, in 1968, J. Sloman Ltd. closed, the commercial assets being acquired by Edmund Taylor (Teazle) Ltd. Sloman & Smith continued to do business, in stem teazles mainly, into the 1960s, but by the end of the decade were finding it harder to obtain supplies as a result of the disappearance of the Normandy teazle, the declining cultivation in the south of France, and the drastic reduction of growing in Somerset. By 1973, Edmund Taylor (Teazle) Ltd. having secured the available French supplies from the last remaining grower or merchant in the south of France, Sloman & Smith were buying Spanish teazles and at one point in 1973-74, were compelled to buy some sheets of Somerset teazles from Edmund Taylor (Teazle) Ltd., their rival, in order to help to keep their trade going. By that time too, Herbert Sloman, the oldest brother and partner had already died, leaving Harry Sloman and his younger brother to continue with the firm's business, aided by a single woman worker to clip and short-stalk the teazles. Sloman & Smith ceased business in the middle 1970s.

Despite the casualties amongst the teazle merchants, there was still in the 1960s and 1970s a certain amount of separate supplying of teazles by firms such as Fairbairn Lawson Co. Ltd., P. & C. Garnett Ltd., Tomlinsons (Rochdale) Ltd., and Joseph Sellers & Co Ltd. of Cleckheaton. These would appear to have fallen into the class of textile

machine makers to which J. Sloman sold teazles, or they perhaps in some cases may have acted as agents for, or suppliers of, fully prepared and sorted French teazles. Amongst the teazle merchants themselves, though, already into the 1960s, Edmund Taylor (Teazle) Ltd. had become the largest of the three surviving firms. Its traditional business in stem teazles for raising gigs in the mills of the West Riding was, however, in serious decline, and the remaining demand for teazles was increasingly to be found in the spindle teazle part of the trade, with overall, Scotland becoming the chief consuming market. Because the English crop with its larger proportion of waste and small sizes was unsuited to spindle production, in the second half of the 1960s, the company found it necessary to reduce the number of growers in Somerset from whom it usually bought teazles, from about twenty-five to around five. These were the ones that experience suggested would provide the care and attention necessary for the growing of better quality teazles. One of those dispensed with was the last Gloucestershire grower, taken over from J. Sloman Ltd. The remaining growers grew various amounts of around three to five acres each. At the same time, increased amounts of French teazles were imported mainly in order to supply the larger sizes needed for cutting into spindle teazles.[11]

By 1973, however, with confidence amongst the growers in the West of England weakening, only two growers in Somerset were cutting teazles in that year, whilst on the foreign side, difficulties were also being encountered, 1972 in particular being a ‘fiasco’ for Edmund Taylor (Teazle) Ltd. The usual practice in the 1960s had become to order around 60 cartons of various sizes from France, mainly for spindle teazles, but with some stems to make up the shortfall in those in the West of England output. Until 1970-71, business had been very quiet during something of a slump, only picking up again at the very end of 1971. It was found that the main grower, or merchant, in the south of France with whom most business had regularly been done, Edmund Taylor (Teazle) Ltd. being his biggest single customer, had suddenly retired after forty years, leaving the French trade in the hands of one remaining grower. The teazles from this remaining grower were less good, less well sorted and rose in price with successive orders, growing in France also being on the decline, whilst the deliveries of cartons came all at once instead of being more conveniently spaced out. It had already become by the early 1970s necessary, as a result, to import Spanish teazles, previously only a last recourse. However, teazle growing in Spain, although there were still four merchants, was also decreasing, and problems over the samples on which foreign teazles were bought, were encountered with one particular merchant, which was perhaps the reason why in at least one subsequent year in the 1970s, Cyril George and Terry Ledger went out to Spain to inspect the growing crop, the usual procedure when teazles were bought in Somerset.

The company’s workforce engaged in clipping and sorting stem teazles and making spindle teazles had become smaller since the pre-1957-58 period. However, one setter was still employed at Chardon Mill in the early 1970s, setting rods sometimes for mills as far away as the Isle of Man or Scotland. In addition, facilities were offered to woollen manufacturers to send a workman of their own to train as a setter, though this seems to have had only a moderate outcome. Despite rising prices for teazles, and the fact that in the 1970s, Edmund Taylor (Teazle) Ltd. had a virtual monopoly, it was necessary to try as far as possible to keep prices to customers steady, so as not to induce them to go over to other methods of raising such as wire, or artificial teazles, like those made of plastic. The company was involved in a continual juggling act to try to balance all the factors governing supply and demand, in order to keep meeting the needs of those firms of manufacturers producing cloths such as llama, vicuna, cashmere, mohair, and billiard and tennis cloths, for which the teazles were still indispensable. By the early 1970s, the small industrial group, to which Edmund Taylor (Teazle) Ltd. belonged, had diversified into weaving at Green Lea Mills, Dalton, Huddersfield.

At the end of the 1970s, the usual annual turnover amounted to around 6,000,000 teazles, and there were still, according to one report, 200 customers on the books. The

trade was mainly in spindle teazles, but one setter was still employed to set rods for customers with teazle gigs. Between 1979 and 1980, demand dropped by one quarter, but an enquiry and an initial order for 5,000 teazles resulted in the development of regular business with eight woollen manufacturers in Iceland, against competition from German merchants, this amounting to one fifth of the company's business.

By 1985, however, the company had left Chardon Mill for Green Lea Mills, and the number of workers had dropped to about half a dozen. It was about at that time that the setter, who had worked for the firm for thirty-five years, retired. In 1987, Cyril George retired, handing over to his nephew, Timothy Ledger, and his son Martin George, there being then only one other employee. By 1998, the business had moved again to within Moorbank Mills, New Mill, Holmfirth.[12]

In 2003, Edmund Taylor (Teazle) Ltd. was acquired for a nominal sum by Border Technologies of Cleckheaton, some of whose customers had asked them to take on the business to ensure continuity of supply. They now handle already clipped and sorted stem teazles, and drilled and sorted spindle teazles from a firm in the Spanish province of Navarra, for seven customers in Great Britain, and a couple abroad. Those in this country are mostly in places such as Elgin, Ayr and Galashiels making cashmere, scarves and blankets using stem teazles. There are also a couple of others, one in Peterhead, that buy spindle teazles. A mill in Delph in Saddleworth also uses stem teazles in the finishing of particularly high quality uniform cloths. Rods are set by a retired person working for Border Technologies to be sent to the mills in Scotland that use them. Abroad, a mill in South Africa has bought stem teazles, and there is another buyer in Mongolia.[13]