



Guilds, Wool, and Trade: Medieval England in a Global Economy

Around 1250-1350, an archipelago of trade stretched across Afro-Eurasia. Nick and Trevor explore the role of the wool trade in this system and its impact on England.

00:01

*Nick Dennis and Trevor
Getz in a grassy field
surrounded by sheep*

NICK: Hello, I'm Nick Dennis, fellow of the school city projects and a history teacher in the UK.

TREVOR: And I'm Trevor Getz, professor of World History at San Francisco State University. We're standing here in the February cold in a field in southern England, with some sheep, for some reason.

NICK: It's to talk about medieval trade routes.

*Photos of a cotton field in
India, a silk farm in China,
a salt mine in the Sahara
Desert*

TREVOR: Right. And all I'm saying is, we could easily be standing in a field in India where they grow cotton, or a silk farm in China, or a salt mine in the Sahara Desert—all places where people were actively producing highly desired goods in the 13th century, and all places that are a lot warmer than this one.

00:57

An Archipelago of trade

Map of the globe

Archipelago: *a cluster or
scattering of islands, cities,
or other things*

NICK: Traditionally, historians who have written or thought about medieval Europe, Asia, and Africa, have thought of them as separate places, but we now understand that these communities were connected to each other in a big trading system—one stretching far back in time. This system sometimes grew, sometimes shrank, and reconfigured several times, but it turns out it was especially large and complex in the century between 1250 and 1350 CE. So rather than think of these 14th century trading centers as lonely islands, separated by a vast ocean, let's think of them as an archipelago: a chain of islands that were all connected to each other.

*Map shows overlapping
and intersecting trade
routes*

TREVOR: Historian and anthropologist, Janet Abu-Lughod, saw this archipelago as a world system. A vast and integrated network, with a bunch of circuits running within it. Groups of merchants moved within each circuit in caravans of camels, or with mule trains, or by ship. Where the circuits intersected, there was trade between these groups of merchants.

02:00

Map zooms in on Europe

NICK: One circuit operated in Europe, connecting wool producers in England and Flanders in northwest Europe, to markets in France and traders in Italy and the Mediterranean. One way to study this vast trading system, and the circuits within them, is to follow one particular product, how it is made, and how it gets traded. For example, we can look at wool, the product that dominated English exports in the 13th century, and was part of that European circuit.

02:00

**The Trade in English
Wool**

*early drawings depict
the production of cloth;
a painting of a farm in
Flanders*

TREVOR: Why did England export wool? Wool, of course, gets turned into cloth, and cloth gets turned into clothing—and everyone needs clothing. In the 13th century, the biggest cloth manufacturing regions in Europe were in northern Italy and in Flanders, just across the channel from England. But although people in these regions were good at turning raw wool into cloth, they didn't really produce much high-quality wool of their own. The best wool in Europe came from England. In fact, English wool was so good, that when the duke of Austria captured the English King Richard the 1st, his ransom was largely paid in wool instead of money. 14th century English documents even describe wool as "the sovereign merchandise and jewel of this realm of England".

03:16

Very early paintings of people tending to a flock of sheep

In the late 13th and early 14th centuries, large portions of the English population were involved in producing wool. Some individual peasants owned small flocks of sheep, while many villagers held their flocks in common, sharing ownership. Noblemen, like the Duke of Lancaster, or the wealthy Clair family, owned big flocks. So did the church. The Bishop of Winchester was one of the largest producers of wool of all, owning 29,000 sheep in 1259. In just one county, Hampshire, as much as 30% of all land belonged to the Bishop of Winchester for the use of his sheep.

03:53

NICK: At first, much of the wool trade was dominated by merchants sent by the manufacturers in Flanders and Italy, but English merchants soon became important. In both cases, the merchants often advanced money to the owners of the sheep, in essence, guaranteeing they would get wool every year, and sometimes charging interest of a sort. The merchants would then go around and gather the wool every year. By the 14th century, some wool merchant families living in towns across England, had become as rich as the nobility. These merchants were called Woolmen.

04:27

The Wool Traders' Guild

NICK: I'm here with Bill Clark, Past Master of the Worshipful Company of Woolmen. So when was the company set up?

BILL: Well, we don't know for sure, but we've got records that show it was around in 1174, when they began to build the original London Bridge, and we definitely know they were around in 1180, because they were fined that year for operating without the King's license.

NICK: And why was it set up?

BILL: It was set up because a lot of other organizations were getting together—all the grocers were getting together, the pepper importers were getting together—it just made sense for them to form a guild for mutual support and mutual profit. The Worshipful Company of Woolmen is a livery company.

Guild: *an organization of craftsmen or merchants who come together to promote their industry*

Livery Companies: *the name given to guilds in London*

artwork shows the coats of arms of the livery companies of London (sort of like badges – each livery company had their own unique coat of arms)

Now, livery companies, I think there are about 110 in the city of London at the moment, are groups of people who used to work in the same trade, live in the same areas, and were there as a sort of self-help organization to make sure that everybody thrived and prospered in that particular trade. And as such, they would go to the same churches and get involved in the same activities. And eventually, the idea came that they'd wear the same clothes, and their clothes were known as livery. And so they became called Livery companies.

05:38

Livery: *a uniform worn by people of a guild or servants of a noble family*

Now, to become a liveryman, you, first of all, have to be a freeman of the City of London, and being a Freeman of the City of London, the biggest advantage of that was that you could trade in the city, and you couldn't do that unless you were actually free of the city, as they say. And so, if you were free of the city, you had a number of advantages. Not just trading in the City of London, but you were also allowed to carry a naked sword in public, so that you could defend yourself, if you,

*Modern day video footage
of sheep crossing the
London Bridge*

06:37

The Importance of Wool

*Early painting of a Flemish
city*

07:15

*Painting of a war taking
place in England*

08:00

Footage of a flock of sheep

*Artworks depict trade for
a barrel of wine; for furs*

08:20

The Decline and Continuity of the Wool Trade

Timeline:

*1270 – height of the
medieval English wool
trade*

*1335—English wool trade
hits lowest value*

*1337—Hundred Years War
begins*

*1348—black death arrives
in England*

um, overindulged one night, and you weren't too steady on your feet, then the watch would see you home and nothing further was said. If you committed a capital offense, you could be hung with a silken rope, which is probably not much different from being hung with a hempen one, but anyway, it was a privilege and a right. And of course, you had the right to take the tools of your trade across London Bridge, and of course for the woolmen, the tools of their trade were their sheep.

NICK: Why was wool important for England?

BILL: Wool was known as the sovereign merchandise for two reasons. One was, it was the king of merchandise as it was so valuable, and the other reason was that the King traded in wool, and so it was also a sovereign merchandise for that reason. Certainly in the early 12th century, there were English traders who were trading in wool and so on, but then of course Flanders got involved. When they had their shortage of wool, they came across and they were buying all our wool, and most of the wool went to the Flemish cities of Ghent and Bruges and so on.

And then of course, the Italians got involved. The Italians suddenly thought that, um, if there's money in wool, we want to be there, and they were the ones who actually got very close to the king and said to the king, "if you want to make some money, just add a bit more tax on the wool, and then everybody collects the taxes all the way along, and you'll get an extra bonus". And so the king thought this was a good idea, because several kings in a row wanted to fight quite a number of wars, and so Edward the 1st, Edward the 2nd, and Edward the 3rd financed all their wars from wool. In fact, he even bought allies with wool. And so, wool was, as I've said before, it was a sovereign merchandise, it would open all doors.

NICK: In return for their wool, English merchants would buy all kinds of goods—French wine of course, and ceramics from Flanders just across the channel, but also Russian and Swedish furs, precious metals from Central Europe, and silks from as far away as Asia.

In the late 14th century, with the advent of the plague known as the Black Death, and a 100-year war between England and France, the English wool trade collapsed. However, it would recover in the later centuries, and eventually form the basis of the first industry of the Industrial Revolution in the late 18th century—an era where England would dominate the world of cloth, not only as a producer of wool, but also as a manufacturer of cloth, made of wool, cotton, and other fibers.

TREVOR: Some of the best wool in the world still comes from England—heck, I'm wearing some right now!

NICK: Often when we think about continuity and change in history, we focus on wars, personalities, and disputes. What we can miss by focusing on these large, eye-catching events, is that there are currents under the surface, moving steadily. By looking closely at trade during this period, we can see how the lives of ordinary people, thousands of miles apart, were connected. And we marvel that many of these networks still exist today, and still shape the clothing that we wear.