

SHORTER CONTRIBUTION

A SURVIVAL FROM LAVENHAM'S CLOTH INDUSTRY

by Alec Betterton

The highly successful and nationally important clothmaking industry, which by 1524 had made Lavenham the fourteenth wealthiest town in England,¹ has left a notable legacy of fine timber-framed buildings. A remarkable number of medieval and Tudor wills of Lavenham clothiers survive to furnish details of their wealth, of the organisation of their industry and of the tools, methods and raw materials of contributory occupations. Other documents, such as aulnagers' accounts,² quantify the great output of broadcloth over a very long period.

Yet there remains disappointingly little archaeological or material evidence of all this activity. The writer knows of no recorded discoveries of artefacts associated with Lavenham's early cloth industry. It is to be expected that implements or apparatus made almost entirely of wood should have been dismantled for re-use or for burning when of no further technical value. The more sophisticated metal tools, like the great cropping shears, must have found their way to busier clothmaking centres when Lavenham's industry declined. The discovery, therefore, of the major part of a tenter-frame buried in the fabric of a Lavenham house is of the first importance.

Most local medieval and Tudor clothiers had tenter yards or tenter gardens on their property. Thomas Sexten, in his will made in 1529,³ described his tenter yards as lying between his house and Lavenham Church, a locality still named 'Tenter Piece'. Tenters erected in these yards were free-standing wooden frames long enough and strong enough to accept a broadcloth of at least 28 yards in length and high enough to accommodate its width of at least 1¼ yards.⁴ After being fulled a cloth was suspended by its selvedge upon closely spaced tenterhooks fixed along both the top and the bottom horizontal members. The hooks on the upper member pointed upwards while those on the lower one pointed downwards. The lower member was adjustable vertically which enabled the cloth to be stretched to its appointed width ('tentered') and there secured during its drying out. This was an important and indispensable operation in the manufacture of cloth.

When No 80 Church Street, Lavenham changed hands a local building firm, W. A. Deacon and Sons, was engaged to restore the fabric and modernise the appointments. The house is a jettied, timber-framed building apparently modified in the 16th century and later 'Georgianised'. An inserted staircase was screened from a passage from street to garden by a wall constructed of timber lathed and plastered. This wall was to be removed and it was when it had been stripped of its plaster and laths that Mr David Deacon noticed what appeared to be regularly spaced hooks, now hammered flush with the surface, along one face of most of the timbers of the frame (Fig. 77). Suspecting that these timbers were re-used members of a tenter frame he halted their removal and reported it for confirmation. Close examination of the wood and of two hooks which were loose in a partly rotted section left no doubt about the timbers' former use. Where they came from cannot be established with any certainty but it is highly likely that they were the redundant property of one of the former owners of the premises, known to have included clothiers, weavers and woolcombers.⁵ The builders kindly left most of the wall frame undisturbed while measurements were taken and further examinations made. The frame was constructed of seven vertical 7ft (2.12m) timbers spaced at slightly varying intervals over a distance of 10ft (3.05m). Two diagonal strengthening members intersected six of the verticals. From this eleven lengths of oak were salvaged bearing rows of tenterhooks fixed at an average interval of 2½ in (6.3cm) along one face (Fig. 78). With one slightly larger exception the timbers

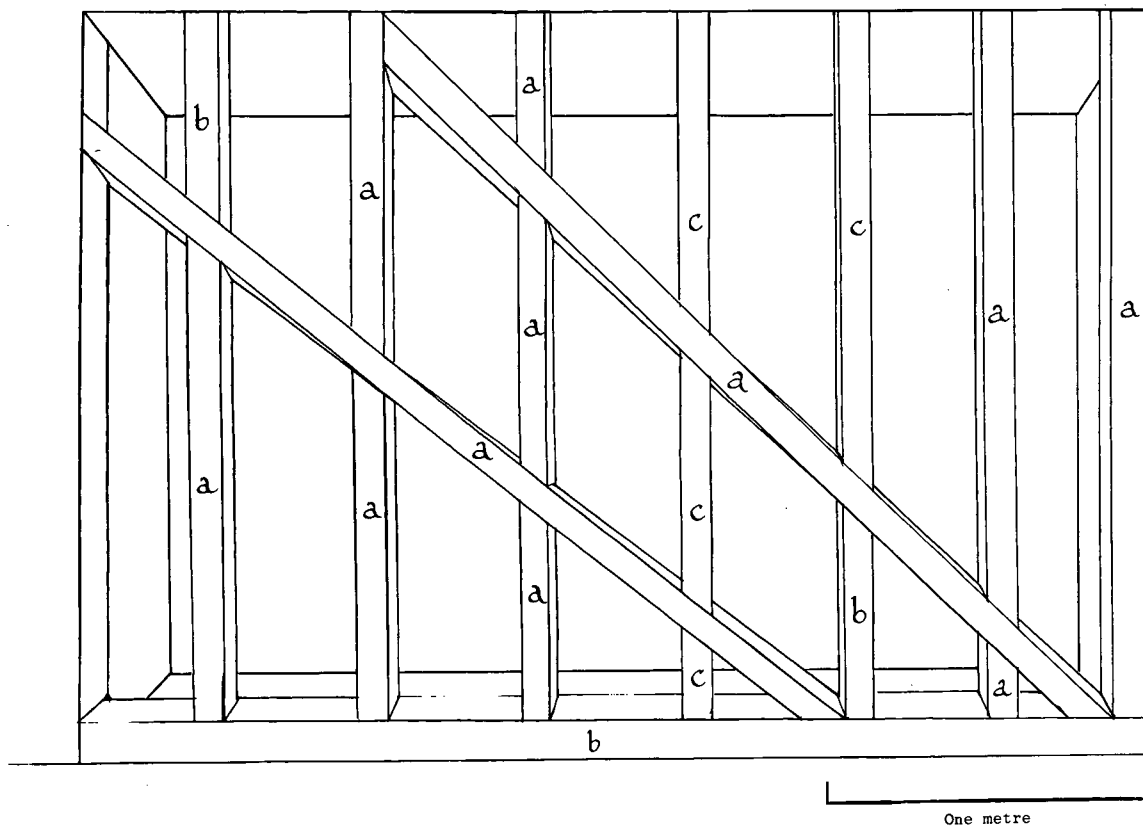


FIG. 77 — Internal wall (now removed) at No. 80 Church Street, Lavenham: wall frame with laths and plaster removed, showing *a* — timbers bearing complete rows of tenter-hooks; *b* — timbers with no tenter-hooks; *c* — missing timbers.

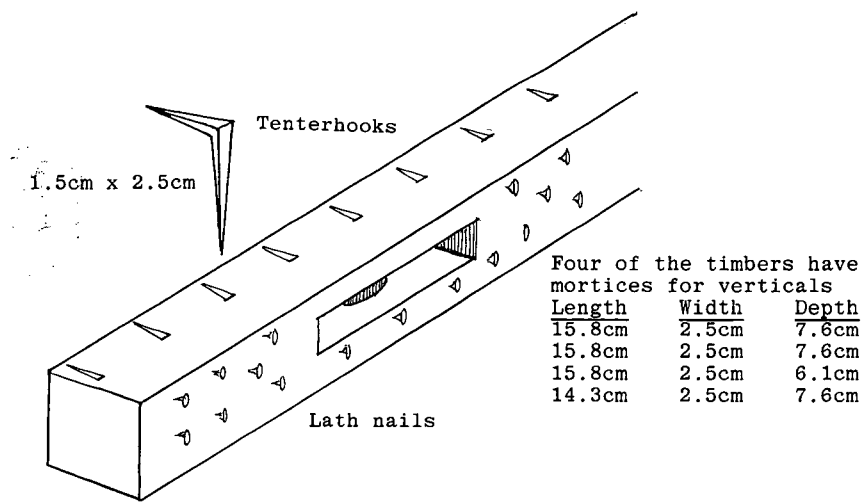


FIG. 78 — Detail of tenter rail.

SHORTER CONTRIBUTION

measured 3ins x 3½ins (7.8cm x 8.8cm) in section. Four of the timbers had mortices cut into them, presumably to receive the tenter frame's verticals, and these faced in the opposite direction to the points of the hooks. It could therefore be argued that an upper rail of a tenter had been re-used here since a lower one would have been moveable and not permanently fixed to a vertical. More advanced weathering on what would then have been an upper face of most of the timbers seemed to confirm this. A horizontal baulk of timber at ground level was of much larger section and unlikely to have formed any part of a tenter.

The wall on the other side of the passage is to remain but some plaster had been knocked off at one corner revealing a timber which also bore a row of tenterhooks. If, as seems likely, this structure too was created from disused members of a tenter frame it now appears probable that the greater part of a tenter was used for this scheme.

The owner, Mrs Russell, has kindly donated the removed timbers to Lavenham Guildhall Museum, where an example is exhibited in a permanent display illustrating the history of the local cloth industry.

Notes

- ¹ Hervey 1910; Hoskins 1972, Appendix 1, 239.
- ² P.R.O., E101. For a full account of Lavenham's cloth industry see Dymond and Betterton 1982.
- ³ P.R.O., PCC 15(23) Jankyn.
- ⁴ Dimensions of broadcloth were established by statute. The great Clothing Act of 1551 re-affirmed a series of long-standing regulations covering, among many other things, sizes of cloths, limitations on stretching, and insistence on tenting in the open air (*Statutes of the Realm*, IV (1), 136-41).
- ⁵ Title deeds relating to this property survive from 1612 onwards. A full calendar may be consulted at the Suffolk Record Office (Bury St Edmunds Branch).

References

- Dymond, D. and Betterton, A., 1982. *Lavenham: 700 Years of Textile Making*. Woodbridge.
- Hervey, S. H. A. (ed.), 1910. *Suffolk in 1524, being the Return for a Subsidy Granted in 1523*, Suffolk Green Books, No. x. Woodbridge.
- Hoskins, W. G., 1972. *Local History in England*. London.