

‘The greatest clothier in the kingdome’: estimating the wealth and trading output of John Ashe, clothier-politician, of Freshford in Somerset (1597–1659)*

by John Gaisford

Abstract

‘Frome water’, a tributary of the River Avon, flows through a valley of woodland, arable and pasture on the Somerset-Wiltshire border, between the towns of Frome and Bradford-on-Avon. In the early modern era, this rural district was nationally important as a broadcloth-manufacturing centre. At least eleven fulling mills operated along the river, and thousands of men, women and children earned at least part of their income from the cloth trade with London and the continent. Using data drawn from contemporary account books and other surviving documents, this article describes the valuable business built up in the 1620s and 1630s by the clothier John Ashe in and around the small village of Freshford in Somerset, traces his growing wealth through the decades of Civil War and Interregnum, and considers his enduring impact on this rural society.

The value and profitability of agricultural landholding in the seventeenth century has interested many historians. Among them, two previous editors of this journal, Joan Thirsk and Richard Hoyle, have made important contributions on the subject. Early in her career, Thirsk described the trade in confiscated royalist lands during the Interregnum and Restoration, and Hoyle has taken a particular interest in wealth-generation by improvement, by tenants as well as landlords, while critiquing the financial exploitation of land assets.¹ Yet the profitability of early modern cloth-making, perhaps the most widespread of the agrarian processing industries,

* My thanks are due to Somerset Record Society (SRS) for encouraging my research into the Ashe family, and transcriptions of their account books, to be published as *Clothiers and merchants of the Spanish cloth trade, 1627–1665*, SRS vol. 101. Also to the History of Parliament Trust for access to draft articles by Andrew Barclay on John, Edward and James Ashe, MPs, for the forthcoming volumes on the 1640–1660 parliaments; and to the editor and referees of this journal for their comments and suggestions.

¹ Joan Thirsk, ‘The sales of royalist land during the Interregnum’, *EcHR* 5 (1952), pp. 188–207, and ‘The Restoration land settlement’, *J. Modern Hist.* 26 (1954), pp. 315–28; Richard Hoyle (ed.), *The estates of the English crown, 1558–1640* (1992) and *id.*, ‘Some reservations on Dr Ward on “Rental policy of the English peerage, 1649–60”’, *AgHR* 40 (1992), pp. 156–9.

frequently conducted in the countryside by landowners who also had farming interests, has not previously been considered in these pages. Indeed cloth-making in the countryside has rarely been discussed here except as an example of by-employment for agricultural workers, although two such analyses have revealed cloth-making and weaving as by far the most common occupations after farming in the rural areas studied by their authors.²

The international and domestic trade in cloth has, of course, been closely studied by economic and social historians. These have typically focused on the major themes of product innovation, regulation, technological development, regional distribution, economic cycles, and the social consequences of boom and bust; or on studies of the most prolific cloth-producing areas of the era: Yorkshire, East Anglia, Kent, Berkshire, and – most important of all – the West Country, whose undyed ‘white’ broadcloths were exported to the continent in vast quantities during the sixteenth century.³ But the significance of individual cloth entrepreneurs in linking some rural districts far more closely than others to this international economy, and the impact of such men on their local communities, has not often been highlighted.

There have been a few studies of individuals, including brief descriptions of the early Tudor clothiers William Stumpe of Malmesbury in Wiltshire, d. 1552, and John Winchcombe of Newbury in Berkshire, d. 1558; and of the Jacobean merchant-clothier Benedict Webb of Kingswood, now in Gloucestershire but formerly an outpost of Wiltshire, d. c.1632.⁴ But not even these have made a serious attempt to assess the wealth generated by their subjects, almost certainly because the evidence is insufficient. The purpose of this article is to address that unanswered question by focusing on the career of a single West Country clothier, who left sufficient traces in the documentary record to be studied in some depth. John Ashe is of unusual interest because he developed his business in the 1620s, a decade usually associated with economic crisis and decline, made his fortune supplying fine cloth for the French market in the 1630s, and sustained it through the extraordinarily adverse conditions of the 1640s and 1650s. Analysis of his career illuminates a relatively under-studied sector of the western broadcloth manufactory, as it expanded through innovation, struggled through the disruptions

² John Patten, ‘Village and town: an occupational study’, *AgHR* 20 (1972), pp. 1–16; Sebastian Keibek and Leigh Shaw-Taylor, ‘Early modern rural by-employment: a re-examination of the probate inventory evidence’, *AgHR* 61 (2013), pp. 244–82.

³ For economic and social studies, see Negley Harte and Keith Ponting (eds), *Textile history and economic history* (1973); Eric Kerridge, *Textile manufactures in early modern England* (1985); Joan Thirsk, ‘Industry in the countryside’, in F. J. Fisher (ed.), *Essays in the economic and social history of Tudor and Stuart England* (1961), pp. 70–88; Barry Supple, *Commercial crisis and change in England, 1600–1642* (1964); Paul Slack, *Poverty and policy in Tudor and Stuart England* (1988); Craig Muldrew, ‘“Th’ancient distaff” and “whirling spindle”: measuring the contribution of spinning to household earnings and the national economy in England, 1550–1770’, *EcHR* 65 (2012), pp. 498–526. For studies

of regional production see H. Heaton, *The Yorkshire woollen and worsted industries* (1920); Michael Zell, *Industry in the countryside: Wealden society in the sixteenth century* (1994); Christine Jackson, ‘The Berkshire woollen industry, 1500–1650’ (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Reading, 1993); Julia de Lacy Mann, *The cloth industry in the west of England, 1640–1880* (1971); Ken Rogers, *Wiltshire and Somerset fulling mills* (1976); John Gaisford, ‘Capital in the countryside: social change in west Wiltshire, 1530–1680’ (unpublished PhD thesis, Birkbeck University of London, 2015).

⁴ G. D. Ramsay, *The Wiltshire woollen industry in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries* (1943), pp. 31–7; Christine Jackson, ‘Boom-time freaks or heroic industrial pioneers? Clothing entrepreneurs in sixteenth and early-seventeenth century Berkshire’, *Textile Hist.* 39 (2008), 145–71; E. E. Moir, ‘Benedict Webb, clothier’, in *EcHR* 10 (1957), pp. 256–64.

of civil war and privateering in the Channel, and faced strong competition from the clothiers of Leiden in Holland.

I

On 16 March 1643, in the sixth month of the war, the royalist newsbook *Mercurius Aulicus* reported that an important blow had been struck against one of the king's enemies in the West Country:

Certain news came this day, that Sir Arthur Aston had seized on seven cartloads, one wainload, and 24 horse loads of broad fine cloth, amounting in the whole unto 380 clothes, and that in many of the packs were found some belts and bandaleers, and great store of match, and a considerable sum of money. All which were sent towards London from one Mr Ashe, the greatest Clothier in the Kingdom, as it is conceived.⁵

The victim of this raid, John Ashe of Freshford, had recently emerged as one of the most vigorous parliamentary leaders in the west. Elected MP for Westbury in Wiltshire to both the Short and Long Parliaments, he had attracted attention in August 1642 as one of the deputy-lieutenants for Somerset who raised 'the power of the county' against troops led by the Marquess of Hertford and Sir Ralph Hopton at Wells and forced them to retreat into Dorset.⁶ Ashe would become chairman from August 1643 to March 1650 of the Goldsmith's Hall committee for compounding with royalists and delinquents, and MP for Somerset in Cromwell's Protectorate parliaments.

Political historians have noted the funds Ashe raised for parliament in the 1640s and his support for Cromwell in the late 1650s, well documented in the parliamentary journals and state papers.⁷ His career as a clothier, however, which spanned some four decades from around 1620, has not been so closely examined. While he is well known as an early producer of the expensive fabric known as 'Spanish medley cloth', a lightweight broadcloth made from pre-dyed wool – of mixed colours – the scale of his output has only ever been summarized, most notably by Julia de Lacy Mann in her authoritative account of the West Country cloth industry from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century:

John Ashe of Freshford, who was said in 1656 to have £3,000 per annum and to be worth £60,000, sent up to his brother [Edward, a London merchant] between April 1640 and April 1641, 682 cloths valued at £12,400, and in the following year 761 valued at £13,407; and this may not have been the whole of his production.⁸

⁵ P. Heylin, *Mercurius Aulicus* (1643–5), p. 137. The munitions and money were presumably intended for the defence of London.

⁶ Ashe wrote two accounts of this exploit, which were both printed by order of parliament: *A perfect relation of all the passages and proceedings of the Marquess Hartford, the Lord Paulet, and the rest of the cavalleers that were with them in Wels*, written on 7 August

1642 in Freshford; and *A second letter sent from John Ashe*, written there the following day.

⁷ David Underdown, *Pride's Purge: Politics in the Puritan Revolution* (1971) and *id.*, *Somerset in the Civil War and Interregnum* (Newton Abbot, 1973); John Wroughton, 'John Ashe (1597–1659)', *ODNB*.

⁸ Mann, *Cloth industry*, p. 91.

Such figures are easily skimmed over in a reference work, but these are huge sums for the period and worthy of deeper consideration. The business historian Richard Grassby found that very few of London's wealthiest seventeenth-century aldermen could command a fortune as high as £50,000, and only six exceeded £100,000.⁹ It seems unlikely, then, that many clothiers could have reached a worth of £60,000. So how did Ashe achieve it? Mann's authority, the MP and diarist Thomas Burton, tells us 'per clothing'.¹⁰ But could one really amass such a huge fortune on trading revenues of £12–13,000 per year? And is the annual output of about 700 cloths or more suggested by Mann's summary credible in the mid-seventeenth century? (Elsewhere she tells us that 200 cloths per year was a sizeable output 50 years later.)¹¹ Can we square the estimate of 700 cloths per year with the capture by Aston of 380 cloths in a single convoy? Or should we conclude with the Bath historian John Wroughton that – contrary to the newsbook report that all were sent from Mr Ashe – the seized convoy included cloths dispatched by other producers?¹²

None of John Ashe's own trading accounts survive, but account books produced by his clothier father, James Ashe of Westcombe in Somerset, and by his brothers, Edward and Jonathan Ashe, cloth merchants in London, were deposited in Chancery in 1681 during an inheritance dispute.¹³ Edward Ashe's ledger for 1640–43 is the source of Mann's figures quoted above, and other account books in the same deposit have been used anecdotally by a few cloth trade historians.¹⁴ But, analysed systematically, the accounts can give a much fuller picture of John Ashe's trade. In the following pages are set out first a summary of his career, in the context of the West Country cloth manufactory and politics; then an analysis of the financial data relating to him that can be drawn or inferred from the Ashe family accounts; and finally a brief assessment of the trading output and wealth of this notable clothier-politician, and his impact on society in rural east Somerset.

II

In 1685, John Aubrey made notes of 'A Digression from Samuel Ashe of Langley Burrell Esq', a younger brother of John Ashe. According to these notes, Samuel had told Aubrey that 'Benedict Webb of [Taunton in] Somersetshire was the first that made medley cloths ... Mr John Ashe of

⁹ Richard Grassby, 'The personal wealth of the business community in seventeenth-century England', *EcHR* 23 (1970), p. 227. Grassby's subjects are predominantly London merchants.

¹⁰ J. T. Rutt (ed.), *The diary of Thomas Burton Esq* (4 vols, 1828), I, p. 127.

¹¹ Mann, *Cloth industry*, p. 33n.

¹² John Wroughton, *An unhappy Civil War: the experiences of ordinary people in Gloucestershire, Somerset and Wiltshire, 1642–1646* (Bath, 1999), p. 153. Wroughton cites reports in parliament that cloths seized at Reading had been returned to other clothiers, but not to Ashe: *House of Lords Journal*, 5, 24 March 1642/3 and 6, 15 April 1643.

¹³ *Goodall v Dutell*: TNA, C 107/19. The litigants were

the widow of Jonathan Ashe, remarried as Rebecca Dutell, and her younger sister Mary Goodall. The dispute concerned the estate of their brother Thomas Leaver, an East India merchant for whom Jonathan had served as custodian and executor. Most of the 13 account books exhibited by Rebecca are unrelated to the dispute, which is described fully in A. L. Brock and M. Ewen, 'Women's public lives: Navigating the East India Company, parliament and courts in early modern England', *Gender and Hist.* 33 (2021), pp. 3–23.

¹⁴ Mann cites TNA, C107/20/3, fos 22, 45, 72, 92, 100. See also Supple, *Commercial crisis*, p. 151 fn.; Ken Rogers, 'Paul Methuen (1613–1667)', *ODNB*; Gaisford, 'Capitalism in the countryside' pp. 160–2, 192–4.

Freshford was the second that made medleys, who improved the art and got a great estate by it *tempore Caroli primi*.¹⁵

As Esther Moir first revealed, Benedict Webb (1563–1632?), later of Kingswood in Gloucestershire, was a remarkable entrepreneur. Apprenticed to a London linen draper, he served as a factor in Rouen and Paris during the 1580s. Back in England by 1589 he began producing a smooth, lightweight, medley broadcloth in ‘divers and sundry colours’, which were created not by a combination of dyes but by blending dyed wool of different colours before spinning.¹⁶ By the turn of the seventeenth century Webb’s medley broadcloths were being sold at a high price in London’s Cheapside by the Mercer William Stone, who named them ‘Spanish’ cloths.¹⁷ Moir noted that Webb had a brother named Robert, but did not identify him as the clothier Robert Webb of Beckington, Somerset, just a few miles south of Freshford; nor did she note that Robert’s grandson sold his estate to John Ashe, or that John’s brother Edward married Benedict’s granddaughter, Elizabeth Joliffe.¹⁸

These connections, however, highlight that (and perhaps how) Webb’s innovation spread south and east from Gloucestershire into Somerset, and especially to ‘Frome water’ – the valley of the River Frome, which flows into the Avon at Freshford. The springs flowing into the Frome from the Mendip Hills, like those of the Cotswolds around Kingswood, produced water soft enough to be suitable for dyeing.¹⁹ It is likely that the Freshford landowner Henry Davison, who bought the local fulling mill in 1612, became aware of this, and took advantage by bringing John Ashe to Freshford as his son-in-law and eventual successor.²⁰ Freshford itself was a small village of perhaps 50–60 households, and a population of 250–300 in mid-century, located in a deep, wooded valley between towns of Frome and Bradford-on-Avon, with a stone bridge spanning the Frome just below the mill.²¹ Steep, narrow lanes gave Freshford mill access to Bath and Bristol in the west, and to Trowbridge, Reading and London in the east. A mile or so west of the village, an important north-south route led via Frome and Warminster to Salisbury and the Channel ports.

Ashe’s origins were in a different area from Webb’s: near Shepton Mallet in Somerset, where there was a long tradition of making coloured cloth. He had been brought up at Westcombe, about 20 miles southwest of Freshford, where his father James was a clothier, and perhaps

¹⁵ Moir, ‘Benedict Webb’, p. 256, citing Bodleian Library, MS Aubrey 2, fo. 144, (author’s italics).

¹⁶ Moir, ‘Benedict Webb’, p. 257; Mann, *Cloth industry*, p. xv.

¹⁷ Mann, *Cloth industry*, p. xvii. Stone died in 1607: TNA, PROB 11/110/269. The term ‘Spanish cloths’ has caused confusion because of the widespread but incorrect assumption that they were always made with Spanish wool: Mann, *Cloth industry*, pp. xiv–xvii. While Spanish wool was certainly imported in increasing quantities by the mid-seventeenth century, the name ‘Spanish cloth’ seems at first to have described not the wool used, but the colour, quality and lightness of the cloth.

¹⁸ TNA, C 3/294/81; *The visitation of the county of Worcester ... 1682–3*, ed. W. C. Metcalfe (Exeter, 1883), pp. 65–6.

¹⁹ J. Gaisford, ‘Elizabethan entrepreneurs: three clothiers of the Frome valley, 1555–1600’, in James Bowen and Alex Brown (eds), *Custom and commercialisation in English rural society* (2016), pp. 203–24; Mann, *Cloth industry*, p. 10, citing R. P. Beckinsale, ‘A geographical survey of the textile industries of western England’, (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Oxford, 1949).

²⁰ Rogers, *Woollen mills* (1976), p. 195.

²¹ Alan Dodge, *Freshford: the history of a Somerset village* (2000), p. 76. At the end of the eighteenth century, Collinson described the landscape as ‘well cultivated, and rendered picturesque and romantick by a pleasing intermixture of hills, woods, glens, and deep vallies’: J. Collinson, *The history and antiquities of the county of Somerset* (3 vols, Bath, 1791), I, p. 124.

tenant of a fulling mill on the River Alham; another branch of the Davison family lived in the same village.²² The Ashe family had manufactured dyed blue cloth for some generations. As early as 1539, a Thomas Ashe of Batcombe (of which Westcombe was a tithing) had bought Toulouse woad from the Bristol merchant John Smythe, and supplied him with 'penny hews' at £3 10s. per cloth.²³ James Ashe made coloured cloth at Westcombe: in 1610 he had ordered 12 cwt of woad from Henry Sherfield of Salisbury.²⁴ James would have been well aware of opportunities along the Frome.

John Ashe's marriage to Elizabeth Davison by 1621 joined the dyeing techniques of Westcombe to the spinning, weaving and fulling assets of Frome water. Ashe also brought other advantages to the match. His brother Edward was already in London, an apprentice Draper who became free in 1624 and soon bound apprentices of his own at premises in Canning (now Cannon) Street.²⁵ This gave John Ashe access to both domestic and overseas markets. He was evidently successful from the start. Within four years of his marriage, in 1625, he bought the Freshford mills, a 'mansion house' and 44 acres of arable land, meadow and pasture from his father-in-law.²⁶ The house, of which fragments remain, stood beside the watermills about half a mile from the village. It was a typical West Country manor house, built of limestone with mullioned windows, with two storeys plus attics and two projecting bays with gables; in 1665 it was rated as having 11 hearths.²⁷ With outbuildings for cloth-making and agricultural uses, it would have served as a farmhouse as well as home to Ashe's family and servants.²⁸ The mill buildings housed a corn mill for grain as well as fulling stocks for cloth.²⁹

In 1630 Ashe enlarged his Freshford estate with two messuages, seven cottages and 66 acres bought from his father-in-law.³⁰ These were hard times for the white broadcloth trade, with a deep recession in 1620–24 and a complete breakdown of trade with Flanders in 1630–31 impoverishing many in west Wiltshire and east Somerset. In November 1630 a large crowd seized seven sacks of grain from a packhorse train on Midford Hill, a mile or so west of Freshford itself.³¹ But John Ashe was clearly flourishing. He must in most years, if not in 1630, have provided a significant level of local employment well beyond the small village of Freshford, as well as purchasing large quantities of wool from local farmers.

As demand for Spanish cloth grew rapidly, John and his father James at Westcombe refined their range of colours and commissioned the dyers, wool-sorters, spinners and weavers of

²² M. Bodman, 'Mills along the Alham', *Somerset Industrial Arch. Soc. Bull.* 86 (2001), pp. 16–25. Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre [hereafter WSHC], 221A/27/7 (1622) and Somerset Heritage Centre [hereafter SHC], DD\BR\lw/4 (1624) both name a Thomas Davison of Westcombe, gent.

²³ J. Vanes (ed.), *The ledger of John Smythe, 1538–1550* (Bristol Rec. Soc., 28, 1974), pp. 70–1.

²⁴ J. H. Bettey, *Wiltshire farming in the seventeenth century* (Wiltshire Rec. Ser., 57, 2005), pp. 283–4.

²⁵ 'Records of London's Livery Companies Online Apprentices and Freeman, 1400–1900', www.londonroll.org.

²⁶ WSHC, 1742/1608. A 1628 document clarifies that

Ashe held the property 'in fee': TNA, C3/394/44.

²⁷ The house can clearly be seen in a nineteenth-century painting reproduced in Dodge, *Freshford*, p. 187; TNA, E 179/256/16.

²⁸ There was a farm associated with the mill site until the end of the eighteenth century: Dodge, *Freshford*, p. 63.

²⁹ The mills were specified when Davison bought them in 1612: WSHC, 1742/2865.

³⁰ WSHC, 1742/1608, 1609.

³¹ Supple, *Commercial crisis*, pp. 53–8, 116; Buchanan Sharp, *In contempt of all authority: rural artisans and riot in the west of England, 1586–1660* (Berkeley, 1980), pp. 28–9.

Frome water to produce medley cloth to a high standard. The Cloth Sales book of James Ashe records that by 1632 he was sending cloths to several merchants in London in colours described as mussel, wheat, peach, columbine (dove grey), blackberry and beaver, produced by about seventy different suppliers.³² The cloths were produced in grades, or 'marks' of fineness, ranging from coarser red marks, with around 1,800 warp threads, through blue, mixed, white and green marks, all the way up to 'superfine' yellow mark cloths, with as many as 2,400 threads, and were priced accordingly, from around 14s. per yard up to 22s. and higher. The length of Spanish cloth was standardized for customs assessment at 25 yards, the width at 6 'quarters' (4 feet 10½ inches), and the weight at 43lbs.³³

By 1633 John Ashe had outstripped his forerunner, Benedict Webb, who had fallen into severe financial difficulties at Kingswood and was perhaps already dead.³⁴ That year, Robert Webb's grandson and heir, also Robert, came into his estate at Beckington and sold it to John and Edward Ashe, together with the corn and fulling mills, for the substantial sum of £7,550.³⁵ This large investment suggests that John Ashe was generating a substantial surplus. In the same year, James Ashe took a mortgage on the manor of Wingfield, with a fulling mill at Stowford, on the Frome between Beckington and Freshford.³⁶ These investments constituted a major advance for the Ashe family, extending their influence almost to the town of Frome.

As their output grew, John Ashe and his father became major employers in the villages along Frome water. In 1634 they assured the Privy Council during a trade investigation that 'by making [of Spanish cloth] ... the materials are improved to a higher value, and more labour afforded poor people than by any other drapery ever invented.'³⁷ In January 1637, when John Ashe was summoned to London during a Privy Council investigation into the circulation of puritan tracts, he was permitted to return to Somerset because 'thousands of poor people, his workfolks' were dependent upon him.³⁸ Later the same year, with five other West Country clothiers, Ashe petitioned against a ban on the import of foreign soap, declaring it essential for the production of Spanish cloth.³⁹ Also in 1637 he acquired a mansion house and lands at Shaw, in Wiltshire.⁴⁰

Increasingly John and his brother Edward were drawn into politics. In 1640 they bought the manor of Westbury Mauduits, some five miles east of the River Frome, in Wiltshire, and (for £3,000) the nearby manor of Heytesbury, on the road from Westbury to Salisbury.⁴¹ That same year John Ashe was elected MP for Westbury to both the Short and Long Parliaments, and Edward was returned for Heytesbury to the latter.⁴² It is reasonable to assume that their growing prosperity – and their need to protect it – lay behind their strong identification with

³² TNA, C 107/20/1.

³³ *The rates of marchandizes as they are set downe in the book of rates, for the custome and subsidie of poundage, and for the custome and subsidie of clothes* (1635).

³⁴ Gloucestershire Archives [hereafter GA], D12960/1. Webb is last heard of alive in January 1632.

³⁵ GA, D2700/NR/12/2. The lordship of Beckington included the 'suit of the tenants and farmers of the messuages, cottages and lands within the manors of Beckington unto the said mills.'

³⁶ TNA, CP 25/2/527/9CHAS1Easter.

³⁷ J. Bruce (ed.), *Calendar of State Papers Domestic [hereafter CSPD], Charles I, 1634–5* (1864), p. 24.

³⁸ Bruce, CSPD, *Charles I, 1636–7*, pp. 393–4.

³⁹ TNA, SP 16/366, fo. 138.

⁴⁰ *Victoria County History [hereafter VCH], Wiltshire*, VII, 'Melksham: Manors'.

⁴¹ *VCH Wiltshire*, VIII, 'Westbury: Manors'; TNA, CP 25/2/511/15CHASMICH.

⁴² A. P. Barclay, 'John Ashe (1597–1659)' and 'Edward Ashe (1599–1656)', in *History of Parliament: House of Commons [hereafter HoP], 1640–1660*, draft.

the parliamentary cause. In Clarendon's view they exemplified the 'people of inferior degree, who by good husbandry, clothing and other thriving arts, had gotten very great fortunes,' who led the rebellion in the West Country.⁴³

In July 1643, Bristol fell to Prince Rupert's army and control of the Frome valley passed to the Royalist garrison at Farleigh Hungerford, just three miles south of Freshford. John Ashe and his father James moved their households to London and settled in Fenchurch Street, where Edward acquired a large house and storerooms, formerly the Fullers' Hall, the following year.⁴⁴ For two years their trade was interrupted; but Bristol was recaptured by parliament in September 1645 and by the spring of 1646, with the roads to London safe again for trade, both households had returned to Somerset.⁴⁵ James Ashe, in his sixties now, never resumed production; but cloth-making slowly revived at Freshford. The business must for long periods have been managed by John's wife Elizabeth or a trusted agent, since John Ashe remained in London for much of each year, until at least 1650.⁴⁶ The parliamentary cause was unquestionably a major drain on both his time and his financial resources – in 1646 he petitioned for the repayment of £9,400 that he and others had laid out to support the armies in the west.⁴⁷ Yet he remained a powerful and influential figure.

During the 1640s and early 1650s, Ashe invested avidly in property. In 1647 he acquired the manor of Freshford, and two years later a 23 acre meadow with a sheep-house on the west bank of the Frome.⁴⁸ To provide long-term security for his children (as many as seven sons and five daughters survived to maturity and beyond), he also acquired several estates in Wiltshire, including lands at Fyfield which became the seat of his eldest son James, a lawyer and MP for Bath; the manor of Longstreet bought from the same owner, Henry Cuss; and the rectory manor of Melksham, formerly held by the dean and chapter of Salisbury, in 1650, when cathedral lands were being sold off by Parliament at just ten years' purchase, or annual income.⁴⁹ Two further properties had been owned previously by the sequestered royalist James Ley, third Earl of Marlborough, who was obliged to part with the small manor of Heywood near Westbury in 1648 and his ancestral home of Teffont Evias near Salisbury in 1652.⁵⁰ In

⁴³ E. Hyde, Earl of Clarendon, *History of the rebellion and civil wars in England*, ed., W. D. Macray (6 vols, 1958), II, Book 6, s.5.6.

⁴⁴ Clothworkers' Company Archive, CL/b/1/8, fo. 97v.

⁴⁵ TNA, C 107/20/4, fo.10 left. John Ashe himself, however, returned only for three weeks, 'for the ordering my affairs, and settling my Estate there': John Ashe, *An answer to divers scandals* (London, 1654), p. 69.

⁴⁶ Edward Martyn is named as John Ashe's 'servant' on several occasions during these years and witnessed John Ashe's will in 1657. Another 'faithful servant', John Brownjohn of Holt, was an overseer to the will: TNA, PROB 11/293/280.

⁴⁷ With interest, the total claim amounted to £10,920: J. Stowell, *The vindication of Sir John Stawell's remonstrance* (London, 1655), p. 11; Cambridge Univ. Lib., MS Add. 89, fols 110–11.

⁴⁸ WSHC, 1742/2891; Colin Brett, *The Manors of Norton St Philip and Hinton Charterhouse, 1535–1691* (Somerset Record Society, 93, 2007), p. 460.

⁴⁹ *VCH Wiltshire*, XVI, 'Milton Lilbourne: manors'; A. P. Barclay, 'James Ashe, c.1625–1671', *HoP 1640–1660*, draft; TNA, PROB 11/205/356; *VCH Wiltshire*, XI, 'Enford: Manors'; *VCH Wiltshire*, VII, 'Melksham: Manors'; C. H. Firth and R. H. Raitt (eds), *Acts and ordinances of the Interregnum*, II, 30 Apr. 1649.

⁵⁰ Edward Ashe's cash book records a payment to the Earl of Marlborough of £171 'in full' for the 'Manr of Harwood' on 20 Mar. 1648: TNA, C 107/17/5, fo. 16 right, but this was perhaps just a final instalment. Teffont Evias was acquired in 1652: TNA, CP 25/2/608/1651/52HIL; *VCH Wiltshire*, XIII, 'Teffont: manor'. In Apr. 1652 Ashe committed to pay the earl an annuity for life of £250: TNA, C 5/521/49.

1642 Ashe, his father and Edward had also invested a total of £1,200 in parliament's Adventure for Lands in Ireland, which in 1654 yielded John and Edward a large estate in the barony of Clanwilliam, in Co. Tipperary.⁵¹ At his mother's death in July that year John inherited his father's leasehold lands in Westcombe.⁵²

Ashe's defeated Royalist opponents saw injustice in his conduct as chairman of the Committee for Compounding, and in the awards made to him by parliament. As one wrote bitterly: 'John Ash had given to him out of Master Coventries composition 4000l out of Sir Edward Mosleis 1000l out of Mr Edward Phillips 1200l out of Sir John Stowels Estate 8000l and (which is worth all this) was the great Chairman at Goldsmiths Hall (is not this better than Clothing?)'⁵³ The awards cited had been granted by parliament to repay Ashe's loans and disbursements, but the accusation that he had been enriched by his chairmanship of the Committee was stinging.⁵⁴ In 1646 John Ashe became embroiled in a public feud with Sir John Stowell, the leading royalist in Somerset, who was charged with treason that year after spending several years in Newgate for refusing to compound. Among many other complaints, Stowell accused Ashe of attempting to buy a property in Wiltshire from him for less than half the price Stowell had paid, and of inflating the loans and disbursements claimed from Parliament.⁵⁵ Ashe denied both allegations, but a similar accusation was made after the Restoration by Samuel Cuss, heir to the former owner of the Fyfield estate, who claimed his father had been prevented from recovering the property, first conveyed only by mortgage in 1648:

so it is that said John Ashe being powerful in the late times & the said William Cuss being low in estate & having been always in the service of the late king against the Parliament either the said John Ashe did refuse to perform his promise or the said William Cuss durst not not press him thereunto.⁵⁶

Despite the demands of their commercial interests, both John and Edward Ashe continued to serve in the Rump parliament until 1653. Edward's career as an MP ended then; he was elected alderman for Vintry ward later the same year, but died in 1656.⁵⁷ John was elected for

⁵¹ R. P. Mahaffy (ed.), *Calendar of State Papers, Ireland, Charles I, 1642–59* (1903), p. 157; *id.* (ed.), *Calendar of State Papers, Ireland, Charles I, 1647–60* (1903), pp. 517, 523.

⁵² TNA, PROB 11/196/50. That was the full extent of John's inheritance from his father. His mother Grace Ashe's residuary estate was left to John's younger brother, Samuel: WSHC, 118/108.

⁵³ *A List of the names of the members of the House of Commons ... together with such summes of money, offices and lands, as they have given to themselves, for service done, and to be done, against the King and kingdom* (London, 1648), no. 37.

⁵⁴ 'Order of the House of Commons of 17 July that the fines of Sir Edward Mosely, John Coventry, and Sir John Stowell, be paid John Ashe and others for engagements and disbursements of the State, amounting to 10,920 *li*; any overplus remaining after expenses to be

paid Ashe for losses and damages': M. A. E. Green, (ed.), *Calendar of the proceedings of the Committee for Compounding with Delinquents* (5 vols, 1889–93), I, 30 July 1645. In 1654, however, Ashe claimed that he was still owed £5,000 because Stowell had refused to compound: J. Ashe *An answer to divers scandals* (London, 1654), p. 10.

⁵⁵ The property was the manor or farm of Avebury in Wiltshire, which Stowell had bought for £8,000 in 1640. Ashe denied the accusation both at Stowell's trial and by pamphlet: J. Stowell, *The humble remonstrance of Sir John Stawell* (London, 1653), p. 28, and *Vindication*, pp. 14, 30; Ashe, *An answer* (1654), pp. 9, 17.

⁵⁶ TNA, C 9/40/24 (1668). Samuel Cuss was a younger son of Henry Cuss, d. 1648; William his elder brother.

⁵⁷ A. B. Beaven, *The Aldermen of the City of London* (2 vols, 1908–1913), II, p. 82.

Somerset to the Protectorate parliaments of 1654 and 1656.⁵⁸ Throughout the decade a younger brother, Jonathan Ashe, handled the day-to-day business in London, while much of John's work as a clothier must again have been delegated, since even when he was in Somerset he now had many responsibilities as a JP.⁵⁹ In December 1658 John Ashe was elected to Richard Cromwell's parliament, this time for Edward's old seat of Heytesbury, but soon afterwards fell ill and did not recover.⁶⁰ He was buried at Beckington on 26 February 1659.⁶¹ His widow Elizabeth and a younger son, Edward, kept cloth production going at Freshford until 1660; in London, Jonathan Ashe continued as a merchant until May 1665.⁶²

III

No accounts survive for the first part of John Ashe's long career – the two decades from his arrival in Freshford until 1640, when he was establishing his position as the leading clothier of east Somerset. For this period the only relevant documents that survive are the Cloth Sales account of his father, James Ashe, and two summary accounts provided to James by Edward Ashe.⁶³ The absence of accounts specific to John Ashe means that it is impossible to track his early progress; but it is evident from Edward Ashe's ledger of 1640–43 that by 1640 John had overtaken his father. Since James's accounts are the only benchmark we have for estimating John's early output, the Cloth Sales account from 1627–43 is summarized in Table 1.

Perhaps the most notable features of Table 1 are the volatility of the early years, from 1627 to 1632, including the complete lack of sales in 1630 when Flanders was closed to English merchants; the lean years of the mid-1630s; and the strong revival from 1638 until the first months of 1643, before James' business ceased at the start of the Civil War. At first, James's London customers were evidently supplying Antwerp rather than Paris, but this changed during the 1630s as James supplied an ever-greater share of his output to Edward. The table makes clear the scale of James's business, with annual output frequently under 200 cloths, and exceeding 400 cloths in only two years, 1632 and 1639. The average value per cloth over the whole period comes to £17 5s. 4d.

From 1640 onwards, there are detailed sources for calculating John Ashe's own output. The most important are the Great Ledger of Edward Ashe, covering the three years from April 1640 to February 1643; his Cash Book for 1646–55, when Edward and Jonathan Ashe operated as a partnership held two thirds by Edward and one third by Jonathan; and two journals compiled by Jonathan for 1645–51, as junior partner to Edward, and for 1656–60, as a sole trader after Edward's death, referred to below as Journals A and B.⁶⁴ The ledger and journals record *inter alia* the cloths sent from Freshford to Edward and Jonathan in London, and the goods they bought and sent to Somerset; the cash book records income received from customers, and payments to suppliers, including payments to John Ashe or made on his behalf.

⁵⁸ Barclay, 'John Ashe'.

⁵⁹ E. H. Bates-Harbin (ed.), *Quarter sessions records for the county of Somerset: Commonwealth* (Somerset Record Society, 28, 1912), p. 10.

⁶⁰ Barclay, 'John Ashe'.

⁶¹ The register entry reads 'John Ashe Esq, Landlord

of Beckington, being the age of sixtie one years'.

⁶² TNA, C107/18/1; C 107/20/5.

⁶³ TNA, C 107/20/1; C 107/17/1 & 2.

⁶⁴ TNA, C107/20/3, inscribed 'Groot Boeck', Flemish for 'great book' or 'great ledger'; TNA, C 107/17/5; TNA, C107/20/4 and C107/18/1.

TABLE 1. James Ashe's cloth sales by year, volume and value

	<i>Units</i>	<i>£</i>	<i>s.</i>	<i>d.</i>
1627 (7 months)	111	2007	6	11
1628	317	5985	17	7
1629	188	3453	12	4
1630	0	0	0	0
1631	173	2514	15	7
1632	420	6871	1	10
1633	219	3728	16	1
1634	129	2954	19	6
1635	138	3068	2	6
1636	121	2229	14	9
1637	82	2028	17	6
1638	365	3270	8	6
1639	413	7799	1	3
1640	329	5949	5	3
1641	304	5731	18	6
1642	347	5838	16	0
1643 (3 months)	154	2356	14	0
Total	3810	65,789	8	1
average value £17 5s.				

Source: TNA, C 107/20/1.

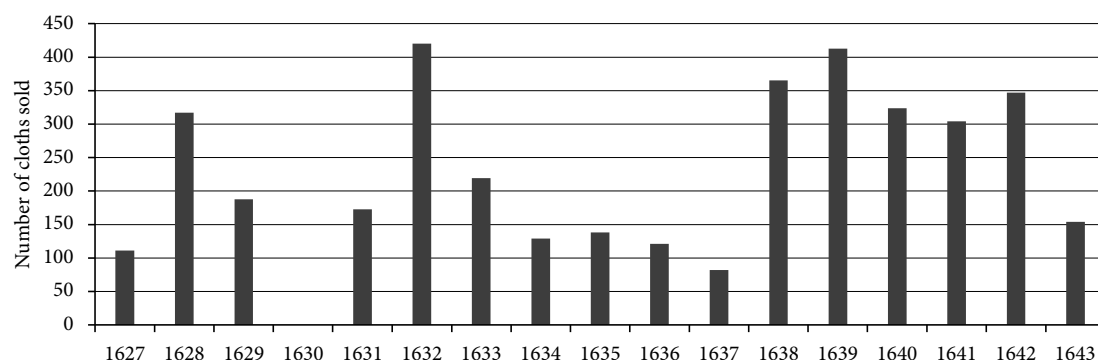


FIGURE 1. James Ashe's cloth sales by volume, 1627-1643

Through these accounts, we can track the commercial progress of a highly labour-intensive operation that began with the clothier's purchase of large quantities of wool and dyestuffs. For Spanish cloth the wool was dyed first, then the fibres were mingled to create the required colours – both were specialist jobs, perhaps carried out at Freshford. Hundreds of local women and girls working at their own homes would have been needed for spinning. They received or collected the wool from Freshford and returned it as yarn, which in turn was supplied to

dozens of weavers – men working in pairs, with a boy to help them. After two or three weeks the woven cloths were brought back to the fulling mills at Freshford, Stowford and Beckington to be washed and felted, rinsed clean, measured and hung out to dry; then sheared to a smooth nap, pressed, folded, numbered, and packed for dispatch to London, a journey of about four days, by wagon, cart and packhorse.

On arrival at King's Arms Yard at Holborn Bridge, where the Freshford carrier stabled his horses, the packs were unloaded from the larger vehicles and taken to Edward's warehouse in Fenchurch Street. There the cloths were checked, measured again and stored on shelves beside those from other suppliers. Faulty or damaged cloths were sent out for repair by members of the Clothworkers' Company, whose hall was close by, just south of Fenchurch Street. When orders were received, the cloths were packed in bales painted with Edward's merchant mark and carted across London Bridge for dispatch to the Channel ports of Dover, Rye or Lewes. There an agent arranged for them to be loaded aboard hoys bound for France, and paid the customs duty and harbour and town dues. Unloaded at Dieppe or Rouen, the cloths were then carted, or shipped up the Seine, to Paris, where Edward's most important customers by far were Marie Moulard and her husband Nicholas Héron of the rue St-Honoré beside the Louvre, and Jacques and Nicholas Le Couteulx of the rue de la Grande Truanderie in Les Halles.⁶⁵ The whole journey from London to Paris might take a week or more, during which risk in the goods passed from seller to buyer when the bales were laded in the English port.⁶⁶

Payment from these customers was made in a steady flow of bills of exchange sent from Paris and drawn on other London merchants. These were entered on the debit, left-hand, side of Edward's ledger and cash book, and the proceeds were kept securely at Fenchurch Street or placed on deposit. With the dangers of inland transport during this period, Edward rarely sent cash to his main suppliers in the west; instead he kept their revenues on account and made numerous part-payments of sums up to £200 or so to John Ashe and his servants when they were in London. He also paid merchants in the City on John's behalf, and bought supplies of wool, oil and soap for dispatch to Freshford, along with household items such as newsbooks, sugar, tobacco, wine and – occasionally – sturgeon and neats' (ox) tongues.⁶⁷ Many smaller entries in the cash book relate to payments made to or on behalf of John Ashe's children when they came to live in London. All these payments were entered on the credit, right-hand, pages; and a balance was calculated at the end of every month. The account was always kept in credit. As Craig Muldrew has noted, it was crucial for merchants to ensure that there was sufficient cash on hand to meet anticipated demands and thus maintain a reputation for financial stability.⁶⁸

The records in the Great Ledger reveal for the first time the scale of John Ashe's trade with Edward, and allow us to compare his output with his father's: the respective figures are set out in Table 2.

⁶⁵ R. H. de Villefosse, *Les Halles: de Lutèce à Rungis* (Paris, 1973), pp. 176–7; M. Zylberberg, *Capitalisme et catholicisme dans la France moderne: La dynastie Le Couteulx* (Paris, 2001), pp. 241–2. In 1650 the Le Couteulx company moved to new premises in the rue Neuve-St-Honoré, now the rue Faubourg-St Honoré, north of the Champs Elysées: *ibid.*

⁶⁶ The only cloths on which sea freight was charged were a very few sent at the Ashes' own risk.

⁶⁷ The oil was used in preparing the wool, spinning and weaving; the soap for cleansing the woven cloths.

⁶⁸ C. Muldrew, *The economy of obligation* (1998), pp. 61–2.

TABLE 2. Cloths bought by Edward Ashe, 1640–43

	<i>Units</i>	<i>£</i>	<i>s.</i>	<i>d.</i>	<i>Average value</i>	
					<i>£</i>	<i>s.</i>
James Ashe						
1640 (9 months)	207	3677	7	0	17	15
1641	291	5401	1	0	18	11
1642	333	5634	4	0	16	18
1643 (2 months)	54	807	8	0	14	19
Total	885	15,520	0	0	17	10
John Ashe						
1640 (9 months)	469	8553	0	0	18	4
1641	683	12,292	10	0	18	0
1642	604	10,140	0	0	16	16
1643 (2 months)	116	1791	10	0	15	8
Total	1872	32,777	0	0	17	10

Source: TNA, C 107/20/3.

There are three key points to take from these figures. First, that in this period John's trade with Edward was approximately double the size of his father's, both by volume and by value. Second, that his annual trade when calculated by calendar year was somewhat lower than suggested by Mann's 'annual' figures of 682 and 761 given above; part of the reason being that hers were not true annual figures.⁶⁹ John Ashe's average output for the only two full calendar years in the ledger was 643.5 cloths, at average annual value of £11,216. The third point is that the accounts make it inconceivable that the 380 cloths seized by Sir Arthur Aston in mid-March 1643 had all been sent by John Ashe. The 116 cloths received by Edward in January and February that year were entered in his ledger in three fortnightly consignments of 48, 30, and 38 cloths, the last of them recorded on 16 February. So John had not been building up a large stockpile, to ship in one well-protected convoy. It is far more likely that the intercepted consignment, due in London by the first week in March, was again of 30–40 cloths – just a tenth of the stocks seized by Aston. The mid-February delivery was the last consignment from John Ashe to reach Edward and be recorded in the ledger.⁷⁰

From 1646 onwards, John Ashe's consignments to his brothers are recorded in Journals A and B, with a gap between them of nearly five years from October 1651 to July 1656 for which we have only the Cash Book records of payments on account until December 1655. The volumes and values in the journals are set out in Table 3, and the values from the Cash Book in Table 4. It can readily be seen in Table 3 that production at Freshford recovered slowly after

⁶⁹ As Mann's footnote acknowledges, the first 'year' covered a thirteen-month period, from April 1640 to April 1641: Mann, *Cloth industry*, p. 91 fn. The exact

period of the second is not clear.

⁷⁰ TNA, C107/20/3, fo. 92. The entries on fo. 100 of the ledger predate this account.

TABLE 3. John Ashe's cloths purchased by Edward and Jonathan Ashe, 1646–60

	<i>Units</i>	<i>£</i>	<i>s.</i>	<i>d.</i>	<i>Average price</i>	
					<i>£</i>	<i>s.</i>
1646	21	380	7	6	18	2
1647	242	5355	6	6	22	2
1648	516	11968	15	8	23	4
1649	342	7609	18	4	22	5
1650	411	9256	13	0	22	10
1651 (10 months)	344	8166	8	6	23	15
Sub-Total: 1646–51	1876	42,737	9	6	22	16
No records October 1651–July 1656						
1656 (6 months)	81	2452	12	7	30	6
1657	160	4445	16	8	27	16
1658	96	2746	14	0	28	12
1659 (2 months)	44	1388	5	9	31	11
1660	2	41	8	6	20	7
Sub-Total: 1656–60	383	11,074	17	6	28	18
Total: 1646–60	2259	53,812	7	0	23	16

Sources: TNA, C 107/20/4, C 107/18/1.

the household returned to Somerset, which is hardly surprising since the property had been under royalist control – any stock remaining in 1643 would have been seized and sold.⁷¹ Output rose to a high point of just 516 cloths in 1648, then fell back to 342 in 1649, for the first half of which England and France were effectively in a state of war following the trial of Charles I. Journal A shows that Edward's cross-Channel trade ceased until the summer. After a modest recovery to 411 in 1650, John's output as recorded in the journals never again approached the scale he had achieved in the early 1640s, and dwindled to levels that would not distinguish him from numerous other clothiers. In the last two full years of his career, 1657 and 1658, when he reached 60 years of age, John Ashe produced well under 200 cloths per year, though their average value increased substantially. A range of factors contributed to this decline, from John's own priorities and those of his customers in Paris, to competition from domestic and overseas suppliers.⁷²

However, as Table 4 shows, Edward's Cash Book follows a rather different course, with little sign of a decline in the early 1650s. While the full value of John Ashe's account is never stated, it

⁷¹ In his petition to Parliament, John Ashe claimed to have 'lost the greatest part of his personall Estate, and three whole years Renew of his Lands, by the Plunder and cruelty of the said Enemy', Stawell, *Vindication*, p. 11.

⁷² Among other West Country producers, Ashe's son-in-law Paul Methuen made substantial quantities of Spanish cloth in Bradford-on-Avon from the late 1640s to the mid-1660s, and was an increasingly important supplier to Edward and Jonathan.

TABLE 4. John Ashe's receipts from Edward Ashe, 1646–55

	£	s.	d.		£	s.	d.
1646	406	7	0	1652	8489	4	10
1647	3519	10	8	1653	6852	19	2
1648	9149	11	11	1654	10,385	6	11
1649	6222	1	1	1655	6408	15	4
1650	9061	16	5	Total	69,507	1	9
1651	9011	8	5	<i>Source:</i> TNA, C 107/17/5.			

is clear he maintained a substantial balance in London, from which Edward deducted the cost of goods sent to Freshford, payments to third parties on John's behalf, and his own share of the rents of Heytesbury manor, which John must have received in Somerset on Edward's behalf.⁷³ By choosing when to make withdrawals from the account, John could flex his income to ride out market fluctuations. Even so, like Journal A, the Cash Book shows a slow rise in income in 1646 and 1647, a boom year in 1648 followed by a lean 1649, and a recovery in 1650, suggesting that the John's income was at that stage aligned fairly closely with his trading revenues. But for the four-year period not covered by either of the trading journals, it shows a high level of payments in 1652, a dip in 1653 and then a record drawdown in 1654 of £10,385 gross income in a single year. Only in 1655 do we see the significantly diminished drawdown to be expected in view of his trading decline. This may have reflected not just concern, but certainty, that a serious slide in income from the cloth trade could be expected in 1656 – the year Edward died, on 31 October, apparently after a period of illness.⁷⁴

By 13 December 1656, when his speech in the Commons was noted by Thomas Burton, John Ashe had suffered a slump in sales from which his business would not recover. As Table 3 shows, during the six months recorded in Journal B after Edward's death in June, Jonathan notes a mere 81 cloths from John Ashe. The bill before the House on 13 December was not about Spanish cloth, but 'for the better ordering and governing the makers and workers of broad, mixed woollen cloths, within the West Riding of the County of York, and for making them a body politic and corporate.' Burton's note reads in full:

Mr Ashe, the elder. I do very much approve of this Bill, and desire it may have a second reading. I gave you the reason before why our manufactures are almost lost, and snatched into Holland only for want of regulation.

He has got £3,000 per annum, and is worth about £60,000 per clothing.⁷⁵

The second sentence is Burton's comment, not part of Ashe's statement, so while Mann did not question his assessment of Ashe's income and worth, her qualification that 'he was said' to have been worth £3,000 a year proves fully justified. In the context of Edward's cash book,

⁷³ Edward's share of Heytesbury rents came to £1223 13s. 4d. over the ten-year period.

⁷⁴ Parish register, All Hallows, Staining; TNA,

C107/18/1, fo. 4

⁷⁵ Rutt, *Burton's Diary*, I, p. 127.

Jonathan's journals and John Ashe's warning to the House, Burton's assessment, perhaps gleaned from a fellow member in the House that day, might say more about Ashe's reputation at the time than the reality.⁷⁶

Competition from Holland, in particular from Leiden, had increased sharply since 1640, with a vigorous renewal of trade between Protestant Holland and Catholic France and Spain.⁷⁷ Dutch production of fine *laken* cloths grew by over 40 per cent between 1650 and 1661.⁷⁸ This was evidently damaging the Ashe family's trade, especially in Paris. As can be seen in Table 3, the average value of John's sales had risen from around £22 per cloth in late 1640s to as much as £30 per cloth a decade later. But this was not wholly good news. The cause of the increase was not a rise in price, but the evaporation of demand for his mid-range cloths, at £20 and below: the products at most risk from Dutch *laken*. John Ashe's cloth revenues would now depend on Jonathan maintaining the residual high price sales for as long as possible; but in 1658, the last full year of John's life, only 96 of his cloths were delivered to Jonathan's warehouse.

When John Ashe died at his sister-in-law's house in Fenchurch Street in February 1659, the executors nominated in his will were 'my dear brothers Joseph and Samuel Ashe, my dutiful son James Ashe, my careful son-in-law Paul Methwin'.⁷⁹ But none of these close and trusted relatives was willing to serve for long. In their place, John's merchant son John junior, who returned from Antwerp at the news of his father's death, was granted letters of administration of his estate on 30 June.⁸⁰ By the end of the year John junior realized he had taken on a thankless task. John Ashe's personal estate proved far smaller than anticipated. This was still causing problems in 1664, when the executor resorted to legal action against Jonathan in the hope that more value could somehow be found by a closer examination of the trading accounts. John junior's bill of complaint set out the financial reality: his father's gross personal estate had amounted only to about £5,000, most of which was in the form of about 200 fine cloths and an outstanding credit balance of some £1,500, all in the hands of Jonathan Ashe. Against this he had left debts of about £5,000 and monetary bequests of £4,000.⁸¹ It would take several years for this troublesome situation to be resolved.

John Ashe's will and his son's bill of complaint clarify the clothier's cash position at the time of his death, but also help answer another key question about his trade, raised by Julia Mann – whether his sales to Edward and Jonathan constituted all, or at least the bulk, of his production. In his will John Ashe stated that:

⁷⁶ Burton was then in his first term in Parliament.

⁷⁷ J. I. Israel, *Dutch primacy in world trade, 1585–1740* (1989), pp. 194–6, and *id.*, *Conflicts of empires* (1997), pp. 307–17; K. Davids, *The rise and decline of Dutch technological leadership* (2 vols, Leiden, 2008), I, p. 125.

⁷⁸ E. Hiemstra-Kuperus, L. H. van Voss and E. van Nederveen Meerkerk (eds), *Ashgate companion to the history of textile workers, 1650–2000* (2010), p. 367, tab. 14.1.

⁷⁹ TNA, PROB 11/293/280. No associated inventory has been traced. The date of death was given by John

Ashe junior as 'about the ninth of Februarye': TNA, C5/44/4.

⁸⁰ W. D. Macray (ed.), *Calendar of the Clarendon State Papers preserved in the Bodleian Library*, III (1872), p. 251, where a letter from John Shaw is incorrectly calendared to the previous year.

⁸¹ TNA, C5/44/4. Defending a separate case the same year, however, John junior deposed that John Ashe's personal estate had amounted only to about £2,500, 'nothing neare sufficyent to pay his...debts': TNA, C5/56/43.

my personal estate consisting of cloth, wool and yarn is now in the possession of my said son John Ashe and his brother-in-law John Shawe at Antwerp, and in the possession of my brother Jonathan Ashe of London, merchant, and in the possession of my dear beloved wife of Freshford.

There is no mention of any other merchant or factor holding stock, the possibility hinted at by Mann. The 1664 bill of complaint provides a value only for the stock held by Jonathan, suggesting that there had been little of significant value either at Freshford or in Antwerp; and the evidence of the Cash Book and journals supports this hypothesis.

The Cash Book reveals that John Ashe junior had moved to Antwerp in 1648 or 1649, when he was about 21, apparently to replace his uncle, Joseph Ashe, a close business associate of John Shaw. Before the Civil War Joseph had not bought cloth from Edward, and took just 201 cloths at an average value of £15 4s. in the three years 1647–49.⁸² It seems likely that he, like Shaw, focused primarily on trade with Spain in tobacco and hides, and perhaps wool, wine and bullion.⁸³ In October 1649 Joseph paid customs duty on 48 cloths sent to his nephew in Antwerp, suggesting that John junior was at that time acting as his factor, though he may subsequently have traded on his own behalf.⁸⁴ There are no other references in the accounts to cloths being sent to Antwerp until 1657, when Journal B records: ‘memo. Shipped and delivered and sent by John Ashe [of Freshford] his order to Antwerp [on the account of] John Ashe there via Flushing, these clothes below mentioned at several times and by several ships’, a total of 109 cloths.⁸⁵

The same memorandum, scribbled inside the back cover of the journal, makes clear that at least 49 of these were cheaper red and mixed mark cloths, usually valued at 14s. to 17s. per yard, which had originally been supplied by John Ashe to Edward and Jonathan but remained unsold at the time of Edward’s death. The implication may be that they were being sent to John junior because Jonathan no longer had a market for them in Paris. If so, it seems likely that John junior’s stock-holding at the time of his father’s death was whatever remained from this transfer of old, unsold cloths sent to him in 1657.⁸⁶

The value of the stock held by Elizabeth Ashe at Freshford is also likely to have been small. It would have consisted of undyed wool stored there or held by dyers; of dyed wool and yarn held by spinners and weavers; and of a few woven cloths at the fulling mill. As Table 3 shows, over the whole of 1659, the year of Ashe’s death, only 44 cloths valued at £1,388 5s. 9d. were sent to London on his account, and just 2 cloths in 1660, at £41 8s. 6d. Thus there is no evidence in any of the data relating to Antwerp or Freshford, or in John Ashe’s will, to suggest that he

⁸² TNA, C 107/20/3, fos 47, 93; C 107/20/4.

⁸³ Shaw’s activity in 1652 is described in passing in G. F. Steckley (ed.), *The letters of John Paige, London merchant* (London Rec. Soc., 21, 1984), nos 57, 58a. The same year Shaw testified at the High Court of Admiralty about the price of Spanish wool in Antwerp: TNA, HCA 13/66 (unfolioed).

⁸⁴ TNA, C107/17/5, fo. 28 right.

⁸⁵ TNA, C107/18/1, fo. 361, ‘memoria Shiped & dell & sente p[er] Jno Ashe [of Freshford] his order to

Antwerpe Ac Jno Ashe there via Flushing these Clothes belowe mentioned at seaverall times @ p[er] seaverall Shipes’.

⁸⁶ A letter to John Ashe in London from ‘John Johnson’ in Antwerp, probably an alias for John junior, was intercepted by Thurloe’s agents. Dated 22 Feb. 1657 (new style), it discusses the difficulty of selling the stock received, and asks for a shipment of red marks. T. Birch (ed.), *A collection of the state papers of John Thurloe* (7 vols, 1742), VI, p. 56.

had any significant production beyond than that which was sent to his brothers in London. He may have course have made some small sales to local merchants in Bristol, Exeter or Salisbury, as his father certainly did in the 1630s, but not enough to materially affect our perception of his trading output.⁸⁷

IV

John Aubrey, in the remarks that opened the previous section, said that John Ashe had 'got a great estate by [clothing] *tempore Caroli primi*.' The evidence set out above suggests that this statement was both correct and precise as regards to timing: the greater part of Ashe's cloth revenue was almost certainly generated in the 1630s and early 1640s; under the adverse conditions of the civil wars and Interregnum his output declined significantly, while his investment in property increased. John Ashe's worth, however, is more difficult to assess than his trading revenues. Worth was the product of retained profits, which are impossible to be sure of because we do not know his costs of production. The Ashe accounts show the costs of materials purchased in London – wool, oil, soap and some dyestuffs – together with the costs of carriage; but no figures survive for labour costs in Somerset, or for materials purchased in the West Country. While out-work costs could be estimated from other sources, it is much harder to assess John Ashe's establishment costs: we have no way of knowing how many workers he kept permanently employed in his dye-houses, fulling mills and shear-shops, nor indeed how many of these premises he held, and what they cost to maintain.⁸⁸ It is much more straightforward to consider his potential profit at a range of different percentages of revenue.

From Edward's ledger, we know that between 1640 and 1643 John sent twice as much cloth to London as his father James. If we apply the same ratio to James's total output, recorded in his Cloth Sales book, including his sales to other merchants in London and the west, we can estimate John's total sales for the period 1627 to 1643 (15 trading years) as 7,620 cloths at a value of £131,579, to which we could add perhaps £30,000 for 1621 to 1626, when he was establishing himself at Freshford.⁸⁹ Between 1646 and 1659, his revenues in Journals A and B (eight full trading years) come to £53,812, and if we add a further £35,000 for sales in the missing period of October 1651 to June 1656, his estimated total career sales come to £250,391.⁹⁰ At 5 per cent profit, that level of turnover would yield £12,520; at 10 per cent, £25,039; at 15 per cent, £37,559; and at 20 per cent (an extraordinarily high level to sustain over four decades), £50,078. To generate a 'worth' of £60,000 solely 'per clothing', even at 20 per cent profit, would require total revenues of at least £300,000 and must be regarded as implausible.⁹¹

Estimating worth, however, raises the question of what exactly is meant. While in some early modern contexts worth has been narrowly defined as the value of moveable goods

⁸⁷ In his last five full years of trading, 1638–42, James sold just 127 cloths in total to these customers: TNA, C 107/20/1.

⁸⁸ Mann, *Cloth industry*, Appendix 4: 'Wages' provides a range of relevant data.

⁸⁹ Adjustments made for 1631, a year of zero sales,

and for a gradual start-up from 1621.

⁹⁰ £131,579+£30,000+£53,812+£35,000=£250,391.

⁹¹ Similarly, John Ashe could only have 'got £3,000 a year per clothing' in 1656 through deferred income – his sales revenue that year was less than £2,500: see Table 3.

(including capital and debts due) less the value of debts owed, it seems unlikely that this was the measure Burton had in mind.⁹² Throughout Ashe's career as a clothier, he had channelled much of his trading profit into immoveable property and by 1656 was a substantial landowner in Wiltshire, as well as holding property at Freshford and Westcombe and in Ireland.⁹³ In the absence of contemporary surveys of his lands, it is impossible to value his yield from rental income, leases, agricultural produce and the sale of resources such as timber and building stone, but the valuation of farmland in the seventeenth century often reached 20 times the annual yield; and indeed, this is the ratio in Burton's estimate of £3,000 per year income and £60,000 'worth'.⁹⁴ It seems likely that he viewed Ashe's investment in property as part and parcel of his trading activity; and on this basis his statement becomes more credible.

Returning to the episode with which this analysis started, how confident can one be that John Ashe had been 'the Greatest Clothier in the Kingdome' in 1643, when his cloths were seized near Reading? He may well have been worth over three times his father's fortune, said to be £15,000 in 1637; but may still have fallen far short of his contemporary Thomas Guyon (1592–1664) of Coggeshall in Essex, said to have amassed £100,000 as a clothier.⁹⁵ In the first decade of the eighteenth century, when the Spanish cloth trade was booming again in east Somerset and west Wiltshire, Defoe wrote 'they told me at Bradford[-on-Avon], that it was no extraordinary thing to have clothiers in that country worth from ten thousand to forty thousand pounds a man'.⁹⁶ Amongst these, no doubt, would have been John Ashe's grandson Anthony Methuen (whose father Paul Methuen, d. 1667, was himself described by Aubrey as 'the greatest clothier of his time').⁹⁷ By 1710 Anthony Methuen had not only succeeded to his father's trade in Bradford but acquired John Ashe's former estates at Beckington and Freshford.⁹⁸ Such comparisons suggest that, although the royalist newsbook may have exaggerated Ashe's national stature for propaganda value, he was credibly the greatest clothier in the West Country in his day.

To conclude: from the available evidence it is hard to believe that John Ashe's cloth production alone, exceptional as it undoubtedly was during the 1630s, could have generated the fortune estimated by Burton in 1656. If Ashe was 'worth' as much as £60,000, then much had been derived from investing in property, of which perhaps half may have been acquired at fire-sale prices during and soon after Ashe's chairmanship of the Goldsmiths'

⁹² A. Shepard, *Accounting for oneself: worth, status, and the social order in early modern England* (2015), pp. 37–8, shows that this was the definition employed in church courts. Nonetheless, 'it is likely that [gentlemen's] statements of wealth ... [were based on both] moveables and real estate', p. 91.

⁹³ John Ashe's total outlay on lands can only be estimated, but was probably in the range of £10,000–12,000, with a yield at 5–7.5% of up to £1,000 per annum. By 1656, the estates bought jointly with Edward early in their careers were held separately. John had relinquished his share of Heytesbury but gained sole ownership of Westbury Mauduits, Beckington and Clanwilliam. Fyfield and, perhaps, Teffont Evias had

already been settled on his eldest sons, James and John respectively: WSHC, 929/1; monument at St Michael and All Angels, Teffont Evias.

⁹⁴ R. Grassby, 'The rate of profit in seventeenth-century England', *ECHR* 84 (1969), p. 739.

⁹⁵ TNA, SP 16/356, fo.103; E. E. Power, *Medieval people* (1924), p. 196.

⁹⁶ Daniel Defoe, *Tour through the whole island of Great Britain*, ed., G. D. H. Cole and D. C. Browning (2 vols, 1962), I, p. 281. Defoe's visit to Bradford has been dated to 1705.

⁹⁷ John Aubrey, *The natural history of Wiltshire*, ed., J. Britton (London, 1847), p. 113.

⁹⁸ Collinson, *Somerset*, I, p. 126; II, p. 200.

Hall committee. And while a fortune of even £50,000 would have put Ashe in line with the City's wealthiest aldermen, it should also be set in the context of the West Country gentry. In 1651–52, parliament's contractors sold off the sequestered properties of Ashe's old adversary, Sir John Stowell, 'a gentleman of one of the largest estates that any man possessed in the west.' They brought in more than £63,000, even at the distressed prices of the day.⁹⁹ And around 1664, Ashe's fellow MP and Wiltshire landowner, Sir Edward Hungerford of Corsham, was reckoned to be worth around £4,000 a year, suggesting a fortune of perhaps £80,000.¹⁰⁰ If these figures would also bear close scrutiny, the greatest landowners of the west were wealthier than its greatest clothier.

Nonetheless, it is clear that Ashe had a major and enduring influence on the society of east Somerset. Over four decades he returned substantial sums from London to the countryside to fund his cloth-making, underpinning local wool prices and providing small yet critical incomes to a very large and widespread rural workforce with otherwise limited access to employment. As Buchanan Sharp has shown, this area experienced significant population growth during the seventeenth century, both by natural increase and by the movement of landless labourers; Sharp goes so far as to characterize a 'rural industrial proletariat' liable to riot when severe recession in the cloth trade coincided with poor harvests and the resultant surge in food prices.¹⁰¹ Thanks to the success of the Spanish cloth trade, such episodes were rare along Frome water, considering the repeated challenges of these decades. But there is no question that the largest nearby towns of Bradford-on-Avon and Frome were indeed growing steadily during Ashe's career at Freshford, with hundreds of cottages built on their wastes.¹⁰² The rural population could not be sustained by farming alone. As governments well understood, only the labour-intensive cloth manufactory, exposed though it was to fluctuating demand, international competition and political turmoil, was capable of stabilizing the variable agrarian economy; and the health of the manufactory depended on its entrepreneurs.

In societal terms, the lasting value of John Ashe's career lay not in his personal wealth, but in spreading the innovation of Spanish cloth and promoting the skills needed for renewed economic growth during the last decades of the century. By the time of Defoe's visit in the early 1700s, this legacy was abundantly clear. Spanish cloth, 'with which all the gentlemen and persons of any fashion in England, are clothed, and vast quantities of which are exported to all parts of Europe ... maintains and supports so many poor families, and makes so many rich ones'. The town of Frome was 'now reckoned to have more people in it, than the city of Bath, and some say, than even Salisbury itself'; and Bradford and Trowbridge were also thriving.¹⁰³ It is clear that, from farmhouses and fulling mills deep in the countryside, Ashe and his fellow clothiers had brought rapid and enduring change, not only to Frome water, but throughout east Somerset and west Wiltshire, and played a major part in the agrarian history of the region.

⁹⁹ A. Davidson, 'John Stowell, (1600–1662)', *HoP*, 1660–1690. For the impact of political risk on prices paid in the 1650s see H. J. Habbakuk, 'Public finance and the sales of confiscated property during the Interregnum', *ECHR* 15 (1962), pp. 81–2.

¹⁰⁰ B. D. Henning, 'Edward Hungerford (1632–1711)',

HoP, 1660–1690.

¹⁰¹ Sharp, *In contempt of all authority*, p. 3.

¹⁰² Gaisford, 'Capital in the countryside', pp. 245–9: by 1676, the estimated population of Bradford was over 4,500; that of Frome perhaps 7,000 or more.

¹⁰³ Defoe, *Tour*, I, pp. 271, 280.

Appendix: Selective pedigree of the Ashe family

