

# The Collins of Chard

## Setting the Scene

In the West Country, close to the town of Chard, is a grassy mound and the remains of a trench - of an Iron Age settlement – a ditch and earthworks, which had its own-hutted encampment. Rough grass now grows within the enclosure giving cover to the rabbit... that never travels far from the warren. Close by, the partridge – neck thrust forward keeping low to the ground, scuttles for cover. Everything of consequence lay at the foot of the hill... those things beyond gives a backdrop to my tale - country life a generation ago, and the effect it all had on me.

From the top of the earthworks is a beautiful view... over hill and dale. It is the type of picture which lightens and warms long winter evenings – stirs the memory – remind one of summer skies and the call of birds – of wind blown sward – waving fronds of fern and nettle. The bees are there making full use of the wild flowers as they return repeatedly to carry the next golden harvest... back to the hive. In the distance a plume of smoke rises from the charcoal burners mound, disappearing in the grey streamers of cloud, interspaced with brilliant blue, that skate by above - toward the darker grey horizon – heralding rain. Scudding lower down a puffy white cloud goes gliding by, as graceful as a swan. The suns rays penetrate the breaks in the clouds to illuminate by turn the fields, the hill, and distant farm buildings.

The grass-decked mound, its past associations with ancient folk recognised and considered, prompt us to seek out their source of fresh water - needed for drinking. There, issuing from numerous springs clear water brooks, streams and watercourses are formed... winding down to the river. The ancient inhabitants of the settlement chose their encampment well.

Not far away, a ribbon of road carries a wagon pulled by a pair of horses enters a field. As your eye travels along the track, you spy a rick that has a bite out of it. It is to this that the wagon draws up for another load to be cut out for carting away. The driver saws out the next series of straw blocks, which make up the next load to make his way back over the bridge to the group of buildings lying in the distance.

The stream that travels under a bridge starts near to where you are standing... is a little lower than the warren. It wends its way down the hill, you can just make it out... to run by field and farm through field and dale to land up, eventually, on either side of the main street of Chard, where my brother and I sailed our match stick boats; then divides to become the River Isle that runs north and River Axe that heads south – towards Tatworth. To the east of the town is a ridge, which carries an important Roman road giving ease of access - for the legionnaires to March and chariots to drive... westwards. These old Roman roads built so long ago are discernable today and purposely laid, with their attendant forts, taking the easiest, straightest route. On the uphill side of the paved way is the fosse – the ditch to take away storm water that is now full of weeds and grass. This gives the road its name - Fosse *Way*.

The geography of the market town of Chard - that sits upon this main arterial road, which leads to Honiton and London, Bath and Bristol, made it a valuable ‘trade’ link. This geographical reason made Honiton one of England’s main lace production centres - gave the driver of the pack-horse caravan a route to Somerset and beyond...to Devon villages, that lay in the valleys, particularly those to the south towards Axminster, and Lyme Bay. It is believed, the skill of lace making began in the late 1300s, in Beer, Branscombe, Honiton, Otterton and Sidbury.

This close relationship is typical of trade routes – from outworking ‘cottage industry’ to make-up centres in towns. Horse and wagon, pack animals and walking trader made their way to outlying town and port. Ships carried the finished products...across the channel to the continent.

The discovery or invention of any industrial product tends to lead to the formation of a factory... near to a source of power, a natural source of material or pool of skilled labour. This in turn leads to associated trades forming close by. When one product is overtaken by fashion or new technology, the former adapts. This occurs particularly when a product or technology is found in large towns or cities where local wealth relies upon maintaining full employment. So it was in this instance...

Chard's industry grew in the fifteenth century from tanning leather. A hundred years later wool production took over as the major trading product. It would also be natural and convenient to expect wool to be used locally to weave. The cloth trade gave much employment in the town – spinners, carders, shermen, fullers and dyers all were needed; so too, shuttle-makers, tearers, weavers and loom-makers... all giving industry to the area. The manufacture of woollen cloth was his town's only industry in the 1550s. It was indeed fortunate for the town and its citizens that the materials and skills needed for weaving and lace making were interchangeable... not forgetting Chard's geological position - close to two rivers, on a trade route – from coast to London. Three-quarters of the male population and ninety percent of women could not read... and most goods were manufactured in the home. In the late sixteenth century silk weaving and the knitting of silk stockings complimented the wool trade each using similar crafts... both offered skills to the lace-maker. Bone lace received its title by the use of sheep's trotters for bobbins. Fish and bird bones provided the pins.

The weaving of silk on handlooms still operated in 1870. It began in England during the reign of James I who promoted the skill of knitting silk stockings. Mulberry-trees were planted to feed the silkworms and there were many gardens that catered for this industry. Another village industry was cheese making, producing cream and butter – the village of South Chard, within walking distance of Tatworth, had the butter factory where granddad, and my uncles, worked, just before and during, The Second World War. The factory was modelled on cleanliness, an important factor for butter making.

About the same time as weaving silk stockings, introduced lace making was encouraged. In about 1570, Flemish refugees, who fled to England, settled in Hertfordshire, and later to Buckinghamshire. King William III's annual bill for lace amounted to £2459.19s., and his wife, Queen Mary, £1918. These were considerable sums of money - demonstrate the importance of the trade. By the 1700s, lace making was a skill very much based in Honiton served by outlying villages as a cottage industry.

The wold gave up its brush - to become cultivated to grow woad for the dyers. The workers, with other woodlanders, lived off the woods and forests... the summer work went on... growing the crop, cutting the leaves, grinding them into a paste... then shaped into balls, to dry in the sun...

In England, the wool industry was linked to rural life - using cottage craftsmen. There was no production line excess was bartered and interest led to skills being perfected. Later, the need for mass production, prompted the workers to join forces - to form communes - relying upon each other. This voluntary act prompted by an obvious need became a necessity... finally, an important part of the areas economy... a relied on source of trade for local and national exchequer. Many trades' people hired out manufacturing equipment and raw materials – particularly cloth. Whole families would turn their hand to help spin and weave. Cloth was England's largest export. The major agricultural improvement came with the invention of a modern plough that considerably increased output. The Enclosure Acts replaced the old 'open field' system. A system that helped achieve proper drainage, crop rotation and hedging.

In the 1648, the Manor of Chard was taken away from the church and king's steward and given to Col Nathaniel Whetham, as part payment for services rendered. The manor was land granted by the king as an inheritance subject to the performance of such services and yearly rents - as were specified.

A cottage, according to a statute of law – proclaimed by Edward I, is a house with land attached to it. An even earlier definition was, 'those who dwelt in cots or cottages, were 'bound' freemen - to provide a fixed service for the lord of the manor and not work for anyone else. The Collins were a family long established in Chard and its sub-Manor Tatworth. Their life a reflection of many others that make-up England's heritage.