

Harding

A work-a-day textile

George Wigglesworth

That which follows is composed from the responses to an enquiry in "The Dalesman" which were summarised in the Yorkshire Archaeological Journal, Family History Section. Over fifty people responded, many of them born before the second world war and some reporting their mother's memories from earlier times. Enquiries in Derbyshire suggest present day knowledge of the term to be mainly north of that county although earlier usage was much more extensive.

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Harden

In reading a booklet "You don't know your Yorkshire" (a challenging title) of uncertain date, but costing 2/6d, written by 'Ben Rhydding' and published by the Yorkshire Evening News, I was reminded of "harden". Seemingly Job Senior, the Hermit of Rombalds Moor, lived frugally and he made his own shirts from harden stitched with hempstring (p 96) My curiosity was aroused if only because I remember the word as "harding" with a final "g". The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary gives "harden" or "hurden" made from "hards" or "hurds" the coarser part of hemp or flax. They say it is now only a local usage. Edward Stanham in the Family Tree Magazine (Feb 2005) gives a 1557 inventory referring to "4 pairs flaxen sheets and 8 of harden" subsequent to a Leicestershire farmer's death. David Hey has seen it in inventories from the 16th to the 18th centuries. A S Boyd, writing about Budworth in Cheshire, makes no reference to harding in a list of fabrics but does mention "hurds" which he explains was the name used for "the coarse refuse of flax or hemp" in the middle of the 18th century. 24lb were bought for about 3d a pound, half the price of flax. Thomas Pennant, in his passage through the English Lake District on his way to his second journey through Scotland in 1772, mentions "a hardened sark" i.e. a shirt of coarse linnen (sic) and seemingly a part of the stipend of the vicar of Crossthwaite. An article in the "Manchester Guardian" Feb 21, 1905 on "Fashions for factory workers" referred to "harden mill-skirts". An 1828 two volume edition of "The Dialect of Craven" says it was 'coarse linen cloth' but it also refers to the word as meaning to advance in price and to encourage, as does also the Oxford.

My correspondents called on remembrances as far back as the beginning of the 20th century, even from as long ago as that from Joyce Rhodes' mother who was then 105. Clearly the most usual memory is of the word being 'harding', maybe without the final 'g' or initial 'h', as far away as in Hampshire but especially in the West Riding (in the broadest sense) but as my query was directed at those interested in the Dales, replies would predominantly be from Yorkshire. Harden is also remembered, as is hurden, in Nottinghamshire and Oxfordshire. As a Yorkshireman I was surprised to find people even bought it off the roll "a bob (1s=12d=5p) a yard" (on Barnsley or Huddersfield Monday Market or in a shop in York,) ours being scrounged as off-cuts from work. My father worked in the woollen industry where it was used to pack lengths of cloth.

What it was used for by correspondents or their older relations reinforces my recollections of workday aprons (for wash day, black-leading grates, holy-stoning steps and window sills, scrubbing floors or to cover grocers' pristine white aprons when doing dirty jobs). Then there was brodding peg rugs (although I had forgotten it being used as lining/backing as well as for the actual fabric.)

A lady in Barnsley, widowed from the Great War, used to be commissioned to make them to order, especially as Christmas approached and folk thought they would have a new rug for the event. You might get a new one every year, passing on the discarded on to another family. (In fact re-use even lead to it being said even the rag and bone man refused things eventually "cast off.") Some offered them for sale, displayed on the front wall outside. You could even buy bags of strips of cloth for making the rugs if you had no children who were so often used to cut up old clothes or fents (the offcuts when making clothes). I was sent an article by Edmund J Pearce from the Christmas Dalesman of 1987 which went very fully into making "pegged" and "hooky" rugs but one writer called them "tabbed rugs" and the cloth pieces "tabs".

I am told handy husbands or weaving overlookers built frames to hold the rugs while they were being made. There were two hooked rollers above one another keeping the harding tight between them, in a frame which stood upright, perhaps by the fireside. These are reported from places as far apart as Normanton and Dent. The rows were cut to length as each row was completed. One reader mentions "noil" rugs used by the better off. Noils are the shorter fibres combed out of wool which, when spun into strings, are cut and individually knotted into harding to make a warm, fleecy rug. "Redicut" from the 1920s onwards seems to have presaged the demise of the home making of pegged rugs.

I was reminded of peg bags, oven cloths and gloves, and told of its use as stiffening for collars of coats made by our mothers-of-many-skills. It was a DIY reinforcement for sagging chair seats but also used by professional upholsterers to protect the seat material from the springs. Old pieces were even used as floor cloths, taking advantage of their absorbency, including drying farmers' hands for instance, and it could also be used to stop harness rubbing.

The use as towels brings tears to one's eyes, but children were tough in those days. When harding towels were used after a zinc bath on Friday in front of the coal fire one correspondent remembers his cheeks used to glow - "all four of them". Miners wanted their backs rubbed with harding, too much bathing weakened them! Gardening husbands were required to wipe their dirty hands on the harding before coming into the house. You can picture Thora Hird in "Last of the Summer Wine" no doubt.

Mainly though, it seems to have been used to protect garments which we must remember were not dry cleaned or easily washable and this was especially a consideration during the shortages of war. Aprons and towels bring to mind the culture of 'Ardin aprons to protect pinnies, layers on layers, harding towels to avoid using proper towels. A case of "keep the nice one clean."

They made a readily sold item at Church Sales. Hawkers sold them - "Dun yer want an apron for a shillin', Missis." One reader remembers the aprons themselves being called "hardings" but at work they were often called 'brats' as Arnold Kellet reminds us in his Yorkshire Dictionary. Correspondents remember them being used by farmers as aprons for sheep shearing, one lady hemmed pieces to wash and dry cows' bags or udders (choose your own word) prior to milking. Harding was used by workers in 'pop' factories, women rolling empty vinegar barrels at work, father picking sprouts on the allotment when string might be used to keep it on, women employed to pick peas. These latter seem to have made extensive use of it, as scarves on their head or neck, aprons and gaiters. They still got wet through! It seems to have been the mother of invention, "Laura Ashley curtains" for allotment huts, screening rabbit hutches at night from the weather or predators, wrapping for parcels for the troops.

It clearly was seen as the most hard-wearing of a range of open weave materials after sacking through to hessian to muslin. Our American cousins refer to "burlap" a word we used long ago. The closer weave of harding held the clips or 'lists' of rugs better. I don't know where it was made but suppose it was Dundee, the home of the flax trade but Yorkshire mills were also dealing with flax.

It was Anne Newman, leading light of the Wigglesworth one-name-society, who told of a little book of Yorkshire Folk Tales published in 1952 which in the introduction to the tale of the Farndale Hob (presumed of the North Riding,) gives this rhyme, ('hardin hamp' being explained as 'farm labourer's smock').

"Gin hob mun hae nowt but a hardin hamp

He'll come no more nowther to berry nor stamp"