

St Nicholas Priory



**A day in the life of
a Tudor Spinner**

Dear friend,

My name is Joan and I live in the Devon countryside. My family keep Devon Longwool sheep and I work as a spinner (or spinster) to turn their wool into yarn for the woollen cloth trade in Exeter. Many local families make a living through sheep-farming and wool - they say there are three sheep for everyone person in Devon!

I have been spinning wool doing since I was a little girl. As most poorer children do not go to school, we start work at a very early age. I was probably younger than you when I first learnt to spin wool!

Other people in my family raise and shear the sheep on the farm and then they bring me the shorn fleeces. After it has been cleaned up a little, I begin to spin the wool into yarn on my spinning wheel. As so many of the older ladies in my village are spinsters, we sometimes work together. This gives us a great chance to gossip!

By the end of the day, my hands are aching and my back is very sore. Just one kilogram of wool can turn into one kilometre of yarn if I work very hard! For all of this hard work, I only make around 20 shillings a year, which is about £232 in your modern money.

Once I have spun a good amount of yarn, a 'brogger' comes to buy it and sells it on to the weavers. A weaver's work very skilled. They weave my yarn into cloth on huge looms and get paid a little more than I do. The cloth is then sent off to the city of Exeter to be finished, where it is dyed, softened and trimmed.

The finished woollen cloth is some of the finest in England, and is sold by merchants (like the Hurst family) all over the world. This whole process is controlled and managed by the Guild at Tuckers Hall.

I like to think Devon's woollen cloth is so great because of my hard work and skill, but I know that a lot of people are involved - from the shepherd to the merchant. You might even be able to see some of this fine cloth hanging around the Priory!

Yours sincerely,

Joan

Activities

Do you think Joan is higher status or lower status? Why?

What steps take place between a sheep being reared on the farm, and woollen cloth being exported across the world? Write a numbered list:

Why do you think poorer children start work at such a young age, missing out on school? How would this impact their lives?

Write a letter back to Joan, comparing how your lives are the same and how they are different. Do you have any questions for her about life as a rural spinner in the Tudor period?