

All the Britons dye themselves with wood which makes them sky-blue in colour and thereby more terrible to their enemies.

THE PLANT with which the ancient Britons stained themselves blue was grown in the Lincolnshire and Cambridgeshire Fens. With the dark blue juice of the wood plant squeezed all over the body, the ancient British brave struck terror into the heart of his enemy, or fancied himself invincible in his gala suit. The Saxons used wood in such quantities to dye their stuffs of homespun that a brisk trade in wood sprang up with the Continent.

Algarth, Mr. Graves at Skarbeck, Mr. Short at Wylberton, and Mr. Howard at Parson Drove, near Wisbech.

When March blew itself into April, the wood seed was thrashed with the flail — those strong-pointed sticks. Then came the dishing of the seed into hand that had been almost partially prepared, the wood-workers following the machine with hand-rakes. Far out in the open fields, during the weeding operations, which lasted for some weeks, men and women crawled



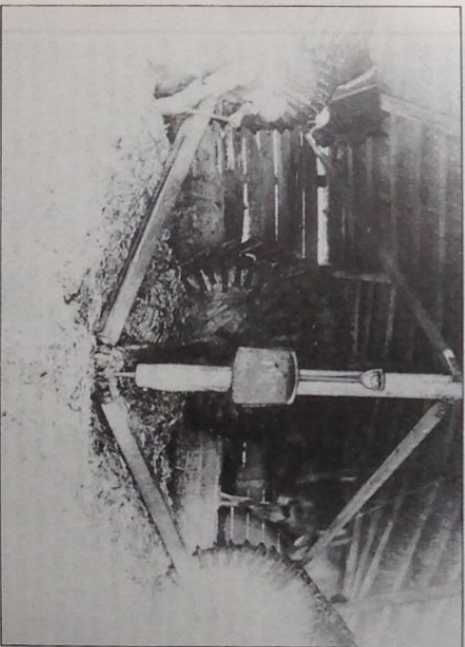
across the ground on their hands and knees, making use of a peculiar-shaped dwarf hoe called a wood spud. For protection the men wore knee pads and the women wrapped coarse sackings round their ample skirts. The harvest was spread from August to the beginning of November, as the plots were sown in succession to meet the working capacity of the factory. The first in-gathering was always plucked by hand, when the plant was about a foot high, and then thrown into large baskets and carried to the mill. But at the second cropping that was obtained from each plot, the cutting was done with the spud. In full growth wood reached from two to four feet high, bearing a branching stem of

WOOD

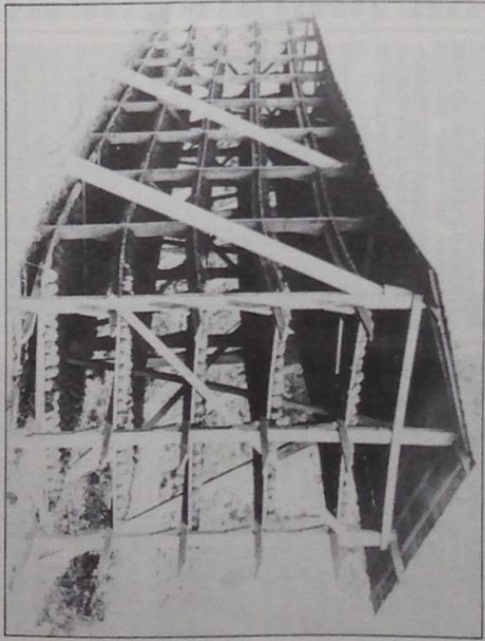
delicate cross-formed yellow flowers. Picking gangs of eight or more, often from the same family, were called waddles.

When taken into the mill the wood underwent a number of operations, being first thrown under the crushing mill — a merry-go-round like structure with three large heavy iron-ribbed wheels springing from a central shaft. In the old type of mills such as that at Parson Drove, the mill was sunk in a shallow circular pit, the power being supplied by a horse harnessed to vertical shafts hanging from the outer edge of the framework. At Algarth the green wood was thrown onto a raised oak-paved bed and the mill was worked by steam.

Drying Shed with bolts of wood on racks. Roller wheels, driven by horses (in background) crushed the wood plants on the stone floor. ▶



After crushing the blue vegetable dye was drained off as commercially valueless, indigo having taken its place. The most pulp that remained was fermented, hand-balled into six inch diameter balls (staining the hands black which was impossible to remove) and laid out to dry for many weeks in open-sided racks but protected from the rain. Broken open, the little black loaves were a beautiful violet colour inside and emitted a sweet scent. From the drying shelves, the wood



balls were broken up and fermented for 50 days in the couch shed, where windows and doors were closed to keep the heat in. It was then packed in large barrels ready for market. The largest buyers were English and American dyers and the Yorkshire woollen manufacturers, who used the material as a base for black dyes, to 'set' the colours and to obtain a high 'finish'. Woaded cloth was expensive but its appearance was excellent and cloth so treated was much valued.

Molly of the Wood, and I fell out. O What do you think it was all about. For she had money and I had none. And that is how the strigle began!

Down the centuries the wood growers became a people apart, living the life of nomads, as the proper cultivation of the plant requires a constant change of soil. Well into the last century the industry flourished until, with the coming of indigo, it gradually dwindled away. But by government express command, all naval, military and police uniforms were 'woaded', for cloth so treated retains its colour longer than is the case with any other method.

Although wood was grown near Market Rasen in the 16th century, by the late 18th century it was mainly confined to that part of Lincolnshire so aptly called Holland and along the neighbouring border of Cambridgeshire. The places included Long Sutton and Moulton Commons, and at Brotherton where Mr. J. Cartwright had a wood farm of 1,100 acres. It was the former hamlet of Laska named after leads, part of the Latin name for wood. By the end of the 19th century the main wood growers were Mr. Nossy at



▶ Wood pickers at Parson Drove. The Mill House with cone shaped thatch roof and two wings. On the left is wood ready for crushing.

Two hundred years ago men made fortunes out of woad, but later on the industry was kept alive by government demands rather than by general trading. Parson Drove was the last place in England where woad was cultivated and prepared in the manner described. When the industry finally fell into decay, the land on which the mill stood was sold to the Isle of Ely (Cambridgeshire) County Council for small holdings and the old wood mill and other buildings were demolished.

The passing of Alderman Fitzalan Howard JP, of Spalding, an extensive landowner and former High Sheriff of Lincolnshire, removed the last proprietor of the historic old Wood Mill at Parson Drove. The Howard family, who belonged to Long Sutton, were growers of woad for over 130 years, the business having been started by Alderman Howard's great-great-grandfather, passing to his father in 1809 and then to Alderman Howard himself in 1860.

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