

Linen is a very versatile, natural and attractive fabric, which was produced widely in Ireland and was used for clothing, soft furnishing and household textiles, sailcloth, towelling, artist's canvas, surgical sutures, threads and tarpaulins. It is strong, durable, absorbent, watertight (it swells), keeps cool in hot temperatures and is dirt resistant. The Irish linen industry was world renowned and the areas most associated with its production were the Lagan and Bann valleys.

All textiles that are not leather or fur-based are either knitted or woven. The ancient Egyptians are the first recorded people who wove linen and it was often to be found in the tombs of the pharaohs. In medieval times Ireland was famous for its woven wool and there were a number of reasons why the linen industry became so successful in the Lagan Valley.

Sir Fulke Conway bought Lisburn or "Lisnagarvey" as it was called in 1609. It was a meeting place for traders going into the Lagan Valley. Together with his agent, he brought over English and Welsh settlers who were skilled in the production of textiles. At that time linen was produced as a domestic industry. The weavers would have also had farms and the production of linen was a whole family affair with the wives and daughters spinning and the husbands weaving. Children as young as eight or nine would be expected to help out. The farm provided food and shelter and the weaving provided a much needed second income for the household to help subsidise what was often little more than subsistence farming.

Linen was bought from the weavers by "bleachers". This was usually done in the marketplace so in 1627 Lord Conway obtained royal permission to have a market in Lisburn on Tuesdays. This would have been attended by between three hundred and five hundred weavers. The market house in Lisburn was built at this time. The weavers had "webs" of brown linen which they would sell to the drapers who bought it for the bleach greens. Many drapers became bleachers

and were very powerful in the linen industry.

In 1698 King William III invited Louis Crommelin, one of the most prominent figures in linen production, to come from Armandcourt in France to the Lisburn area to develop the linen industry. He established weaving premises and bleach yard at Hilden and through his progressive ideas is largely recognised as the father of the Irish linen industry. The village of Crumlin was named after him. The arrival from 1685 onwards of the Huguenots with their considerable skill in linen production also had a significant effect on linen production in the area. Many Huguenots as protestants settled in Ireland during the Plantations of Ireland to escape persecution from the predominantly catholic population and ruling classes of continental Europe.

In 1711, Louis Crommelin was instrumental in setting up the Irish Linen Board, which gave grant aid, spread ideas and awarded prizes for outstanding work.

In 1728 the White Linen Hall in Dublin was built. This was like an exchange for the finished linen. In the 1780s the Ulster Drapers began to deal directly with the markets in London and Manchester so in 1785 the White Linen Hall in Belfast was built. This is on the site of what is now the City Hall. The linen from the Lagan Valley would have been taken to the White Linen Hall and the warehouses around it before being exported all over the world. The technological developments, capital investments and skills of the area were what made it the most important place for the Irish linen industry.

Damask weaving involved the production of intricate patterns and damask linen was always very highly prized. Damask weavers were the elite weavers. At first damask weaving involved the work of between four and thirteen people. After the invention of the Jacquard loom in the early 1800s it was changed to a series of punched cards which were attached to the loom and created a pattern.

The Story of Linen

In the 1870s, the Jacquard mechanism could be attached to the power-looms, which, meant the factories could produce a large volume of damask linen, which was bought by hotels, shipping lines, railways etc. and together with a shortage of cotton due to the American Civil War, created a boom time for linen.

The linen industry saw resurgence in the years running up to World War I. During the two world wars there was an increased demand because of the demand for uniforms, tenting, webbing, parachute covers and tarpaulins all of which were made out of linen. After World War II competition from the more modern and cheaper man-made fibres meant that the linen industry just couldn't compete. In the 1950s and 60s many places went out of business or changed to man-made textiles.