

Coventry's influence extended past Exhall and Bedworth to Nuneaton eight miles to the north through a coalfield whose character was memorably captured by George Eliot:

'In these midland districts the traveller passed rapidly from one phase of English life to another: after looking down on a village dingy with coal-dust, noisy with the shaking of looms, he might skirt a parish all of fields, high hedges, and deep-rutted lanes; after the coach had rattled over the pavement of a manufacturing town, the scene of riots and trades-union meetings, it would take him in another ten minutes into a rural region, where the neighbourhood of the town was only felt in the advantages of a near market for corn, cheese, and hay ... The busy scenes of the shuttle and the wheel, of the roaring furnace, of the shaft and the pulley, seemed to make but crowded nests in the midst of the large-spaced, slow-moving life of homesteads and far-away cottages and oak-sheltered parks. Looking at the dwellings scattered amongst the woody flats and the ploughed uplands, under the low grey sky which overhung them with an unchanging stillness as if Time itself were pausing, it was easy for the traveller to conceive that town and country had no pulse in common, except where the handlooms made a far-reaching straggling fringe about the great centres of manufacture'.⁵

The 1831 census recorded only 260 plush weavers in England and Wales, most of them in the Banbury area. The term plush refers to a range of fabrics, whose common feature was a long pile, which for many kinds of cloth was cut. Most plushes were mixture fabrics in which cotton or worsted warps were combined with silk, worsted or mohair wefts. The weights and uses of plush fabrics varied from exceptionally heavy pieces, sometimes called 'strongs', employed in the finishing of other kinds of cloth, to lightweight fabrics for kimonos in Japan or for covering silk hats.⁶ The best-known uses were for upholstery and uniforms. The technology of plush manufacture was expertly described by Vera Hodgkins in 1980, and need not be repeated here, except to emphasise its complexity – even commercial plush went through more than 30 processes – and the variety of methods of finishing fabrics. From 1837 Gillett's were able to emboss plush using a machine designed for

⁵ George Eliot, *Felix Holt: the Radical* (Blackwood edn., n.d.), p. 5.

⁶ G. Herbert, *Shoemaker's Window* (3rd edn., Banbury: Gulliver Press, 1979), pp.3-4.