

Fulling consists of cleaning and thickening the cloth, and it was, and is still, a pretty smelly business.

To clean the cloth in Roman times, slaves called "Walker's" would stand ankle deep in tubs of urine and cloth, stamping their feet, walking round and round.

The urine contained ammonium salts which cleaned the cloth, and was so valuable it was taxed. It's astonishing that our grasping politicians have not cottoned on to this lucrative source of income, but it must only be a matter of time.

In the Middle Ages fuller's earth was used in conjunction with urine and nowadays soap is used. Once the cleaning was done, cloth made from short staple wool had to be strengthened by matting the fibres together; this was unnecessary for material made from long staple wool. Water was used for this, and also to rinse out the foul liquids used earlier in the process. As water mills came into common use, some of them were modified to mechanise the cleaning and thickening by the operation of hammers battering the cloth as it passed slowly through tubs of wash, and then over rollers and a stream of water.

Once this was complete, the cloth was stretched out to dry by being fastened on hooks to a device known as a tenter, hence the expression (to be on tenterhooks) meaning to be in a state of suspense.

If you are careless with woollen jumpers etc, when washing them by using water too hot, or setting the machine on the wrong cycle, you will achieve much the same result, a lump of thick, heavy, and shrunken cloth.

According to the Doomsday Book, there has been a mill on the site at Walk Mill ever since those far off days, and in 1219, the lease for the mill was one pair of gloves. In the mediaeval times, the homes and the rich and (in) famous and solicitors up and down the land, there is currently such talk of pre-nuptial settlements, but this is nothing new. On 21st April 1692 there was a pre-nuptial agreement between John Bruen and Honor Winnington which included Walk Mill and its land. There are two mills at Stapleford, Walk Mill and Stapleford Mill half a mile or so further down the river, and in 1792 they were both sold, along with other land to pay debts to the tune of £6,460 of Richard Ashton, a monumental sum for those times. History does not record how those debts were incurred - slow horses and fast women perhaps? However dedicated he was to these pursuits, it's difficult to believe these debts were solely to blame responsible for his downfall. Walk Mill ceased to be occupied in 1959 and soon became the victim of the lack of use and was demolished in the mid 1960's. The present mill is now a brand new building with a café where confectionary and flour ground on the premises to make bread is sold.