

Buried in wool

Whilst transcribing some of the burials from the parish registers I came across many entries which stated "Buried in wool" or "in wool only" followed by a comment referring to an affidavit. Although I've been researching family history for over forty years it was a new one on me, probably as I hadn't had access to many original records, only transcriptions.

It didn't take me long to find out what it was all about, so for those who are as intrigued as I was:

The woollen trade has been an important factor in the prosperity of England for hundreds of years, but during the 17th century foreign imports and the introduction of alternative materials, this lucrative woollen business started to come under threat. The members of Parliament became worried as many of their constituencies relied on the woollen trade, as did the landowners (including themselves) who relied on rents from the sheep farmers.

Therefore they passed acts in Parliament between 1666 and 1680 in an attempt to maintain the demand for wool plus the yarn and cloth made from it. Part of the acts required that when a corpse was buried that it should be dressed in garments made of wool. There were some exceptions; those that died of the plague and those that were so poor and so couldn't afford the woollen shroud. The shroud/garments had to be of pure wool and not a mix e.g. with hemp or flax etc..

Each burial in the parish records had to be annotated to show they had complied with the acts, and that an affidavit had been provided within 8 days of the burial. This would be sworn in front of a justice of the peace or Mayor by 2 creditable people. The vicar, curate or parson could administer the oath in lieu of the JP or Mayor. A fine of £5 was levied in the case of non-compliance; the money shared equally between the informer and the poor of the parish.

This procedure was very unpopular, particularly with those that could afford, and wished to be buried in much finer garments, to such an extent they were willing to pay the £5 fine. It was arranged that one member of the family would be the informant so, in effect, the fine was reduced by half!

Legislation was in force up to 1814 but by then it seems it had been mostly ignored since about 1770.