

14th century English Sumptuary Laws

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The stated reason for enactment of the 1363 English sumptuary law is because of “the Outragious and Excessive Apparel of divers People, against their Estate and Degree, to the great Destruction and Impoverishment of all the Land.”¹ The king, or his councilors and parliament, felt that people were spending too much on their clothing. The law lays out what fabrics, furs, and accessories people of each specific social group of the middle classes could purchase and wear for clothing. It is notable that this law does not mention anyone of the upper nobility or those of the lowest classes. The 1363 law seems to be mostly concerned with the creating of “an absolute social standing,” in which wealth, occupation, and rank are all combined to create one’s social standing.²

The law breaks down the social classes based on a combination of rank and occupation. Knights were the highest social class, by rank, and Merchants were the highest by occupation, but still below knights. Some of the social classes, Knights, Esquires, and Merchants are further divided by their wealth, with some being afforded more expensive cloth for their clothing based on wealth. In this way money is used to allow a more privileged style of dress to those within a social class, but without overlapping into the lowest income of the social class above them. This would help to create a visual separation between classes, and a marketability of status through the use of income as a factor in determining final social status.³ However, even attempts at using multiple factors for determining a final social status were not always accurate since any one of those factors could change, as suggested by Sponsler.⁴ The factors should only be used to determine social status at a particular point in time, since anyone could easily gain or lose money very quickly thus altering their social status.

A possible determining factor that could have influenced the enactment of the 1363 law includes England’s increase in cloth exports over the course of the fourteenth century, probably increasing the wealth of its merchant class.⁵ While the cloth exports did not necessarily bring in more money to the government as the taxes on cloth exports were fairly low, an increase in exports would create more demand for the product, a demand that would work its way backward to those producing the cloth. Merchants exporting the cloth would request more from the drapers and fullers, who would request more from the weavers, who would request more raw material from the spinners and others whose work helped in the production of cloth. The increased demand for cloth would not only bring more money to the merchants exporting the cloth, but also to all of the craftsmen and women who worked in the production of cloth.

¹ See appendix 1.

² Sponsler, *Drama and Resistance*, 12.

³ *Ibid.*, 12.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁵ J. L. Bolton, *The Medieval English Economy: 1150-1500* (London: Billing & Sons Ltd., 1980), 287, 290, 292; Munro, *Wool, Cloth, and Gold*, 6-7.

With the Black Death and the extreme decrease in population experienced in England afterwards, labor costs increased as the supply of labor had trouble meeting the demand. It should be noted that the craftsmen producing the cloth were considered the lowest of the middle classes mentioned according to the 1363 law.⁶ The classes not mentioned in the law were the peasants and servants that were below the craftsmen in social standing, and those above the Knights, the upper nobility. This suggests that any increase in wealth experienced by the merchants was trickling down to those who worked as craftsmen and that they were possibly also using their new found wealth to buy more expensive fabric for their clothing.

Other factors to consider include the Black Death Plague Epidemic of the late 1340's during which between 30% and 50% of the English population died. With a large loss of population it would be expected that there would be a realignment of wealth amongst those whose families had died during the plague. This combined with the focus on the middle class, by the law, leads to the idea that there could have been a significant increase in wealth amongst the middle classes, and that they were spending their new wealth on clothing. While a realignment of wealth is suspected in this case, it cannot be confirmed without further research into mid-fourteenth century social economics and the effects of the Black Death on redistribution of wealth. What is known is that there had been a gradual increase in the wealth of merchants and others of the middle class during the twelfth and thirteenth-centuries. As early as the eleventh-century fairs increased in size and number in order to accommodate the growth in commerce and trade of the high Middle Ages. Although, by the fourteenth-century commerce was centered around the cities rather than the rotating fairs.⁷

The English royal laws can be found translated from French and transcribed in a series titled *The Statutes of the Realm*. The transcriptions were requested by King George III of England in the first decade of the nineteenth century. The available volumes are facsimile copies of the originals and were printed in 1993. The laws from the fourteenth century were written in French and in the transcription are shown side by side with an English translation. Unfortunately the *Statutes of the Realm* volumes do not cite the names of the original documents, and it is unknown how many of the original documents still exist as they are somewhat difficult to locate. Even an inquiry to the British Library did not return any results regarding which manuscripts might contain the original documents.

⁶ See appendix 1.

⁷ Lester K. Little, *Religious Poverty and Profit Economy in Medieval Europe* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978), 11-13.

Appendix 1:

Break down of the 1363 English Sumptuary Law with excerpts from the Law.

Social Class	Limitations	
Grooms, and Servants of Lords	Whole cloth shall not exceed 2 marks No Gold or Silver embroidered, or aimeled No Silk	1l. 4s. 8d.
Wives, Daughters, and Children	The same No Veils over 12d a veil	
People of handicraft, and Yeomen	No cloth over 40 shillings the whole cloth No Stone No Cloth of silk or silver No Girdle, knife [harnessed], button, ring, garter, owche, ribband, chains, seal, bendes of Gold or Silver No embroidery, aimeled, or silk	2l.
Wives, Daughters, and Children	the same No silk veils, only veils of [yarn] made within Great Britian No Fur, or Budge, only Lamb, Cony, Cat, and Fox	
Esquires and All Gentlemen under 100 pounds/year	No cloth over 4.5 marks the whole cloth No cloth of gold or silver No embroidered clothing No owche of gold (ounce?, Fr. <i>nouche dor</i>) No ribband of gold or silver No stone No Fur	3l. 1s. 6d.
Wives, Daughters, and Children	the same no turning up or purfle (ME trim, border) No gold, silver, or stone	
Esquires and all Gentlemen over 200 [Marks]/year	Cloth up to 5 marks the whole cloth Cloth of silk and silver Ribband, Girdle, or other Apparel reasonably garnished with silver	3l. 8s. 4d.
Wives, Daughters, and Children	the same may wear fur turned up of Miniver No Ermins or Letuse (weasle) No apparel of stone except for their heads	
Merchants, Citizens and Burgesses, Artificers, and People of Handy-craft of the value of 500 pounds/year	see Esquires and Gentlemen to the value of 100 pounds/year	

Merchants, Citizens and Burgesses, Artificers, and People of Handy-craft of the value of 1000 pounds/year	see Esquires and Gentlemen above the value of 200 marks/year
Knight worth 200 pounds	No cloth over 6 marks the whole cloth 4l. 2s. No cloth of gold No fur of Miniver or Ermins No apparel embroidered with stone
Wives, Daughters, and Children	the same No turning up of Ermins, or Letuses No apparel of stone, except for their heads
Knights worth 500 marks to 1000 pounds/year	Can wear at their pleasure No Ermins or Letuses No apparel of Pearls or Stone, except for their heads
Carters, Ploughmen, Drivers of the Plough, Oxherds, Cowhers, Shephards, [Deyars, (swineherds, dairymen,)] and all other Keepers of Beasts, Threshers of Corn, and all Manner of People of the Estate [of a Groom, attending to Husbandry,] and all other People, that have not 40s.	No cloth, except for Blanket and Russet of Twelve-pence Shall wear girdles of linen according to their estate

Appendix 2:
Commonly Used Conversions

Fabric Measurements

1 ell = 1 ¼ yards

Whole cloth = 28 yards of Ray cloth or 26 yards of Colored cloth

Stik = ¾ yard

Pre-Decimal English Money

1 shilling = 12 pence

1 pound = 20 shillings = 240 pence

1 mark = 2/3 of a pound = 13 shillings 4 pence = 160 pence

Appendix 3:
Wardrobe Examples:

Item, That the People of Handicraft, and [] Yeomen, shall [not] take nor wear Cloth of an higher Price for their Vesture or Hosing, than within Forthy Shilling the whole Cloth, by way of buying, not otherwise; not Stone, nor Cloth of Silk nor of Silver, nor Girdle, [Knife [harnessed], Button,] Ring, Garter, nor Owche, Ribband, Chains, [Seal, Bendes,] nor no such other Things of Gold nor of Silver, nor no Manner of Apparel embroidered, aimeled, nor of Silk by no Way; and that their Wives, Daughters, and Childrean, be of the same Condition in their Vesture and Apparel; and that they wear no [Veil] of silk, but only of [Yarn] made within the Realm, nor no Manner of Furr, nor of Budge, but only Lamb, Cony, Cat, and Fox.

In the case of a yeoman, fabrics would include mid to rougher quality worsted wools and linens. Woolen fabrics would not be included unless the fabric was only fulled and not teased and sheared, the time consuming and expensive part of the production. Silk fabrics would be specifically prohibited. Other restrictions include no gold or silver, on anything, and no embroidery, this does mean you could have pewter buttons on your clothing, but if you look at images from the Luttrell Psalter the household servants do not wear buttoned clothing.



Item, That Esquires and all Manner of Gentlemen, under the Estate of a Knight, which have no Land nor Rent to the Value of an Hundred Pounds by Year, shall not take nor wear Cloth for their Clothing or Hosing of an higher Price, than within the Price of Four Marks and a Half the whole Cloth, by way of buying nor otherwise; and that they wear no Cloth of Gold, nor Silk, nor Silver, nor no Manner of Clothing imbroidered, Ring, [Buttons,] nor owche of Gold, Ribband of Gold nor of Silver, nor nothing [of Stone] nor no manner of Furr; and that their Wives,

Daughters, and Children be of the same Condition, as to their Vesture and Apparel, without any turning up or purple; and that they [wear] no Manner of Apparel of Gold, or Silver, nor of Stone. But that Esquires, which have Land or Rent to the Value of ii. C. [Marks] by Year and above, may take and wear Cloths of the Price of v. Marks the whole Cloth, and Cloth of Silk and of Silver, Ribband, Girdle, and other Apparel reasonable garnished of silver; and that their Wives, Daughters, and Children, may wear Furr turned up of Miniver, without Ermins or Letuse, or any manner [of apparel] of Stone but for their Heads.

In the case of a higher income Gentleman or his wife, fabrics would include high quality worsted wools and linens, and silk fabrics. Some woolen fabrics could also be included, but they would be of much lower quality than the ones available to higher income Knights. Additionally, they would have been allowed silver adornments for their clothing including buttons and embroidery.

Item, That Knights, which have Land or Rent within the Value of ii. C. [li.] shall take and wear Cloth of vi. Marks the whole Cloth, for their Vesture, and of none higher Price: And that they wear not Cloth of Gold, nor [Cloths,] Mantle, nor Gown furred with Miniver nor of Ermins, nor no Apparel broidered of Stone, nor otherwise; and that their Wives, Daughters, and Children be of the same Condition; and that they wear no turning up of Ermins, nor of Letuses, nor no Manner of Apparel of Stone, but only for their Heads. But that all Knights and Ladies, which have Land or Rent over the Value of iv. C. Mark by Year, to the Sum of M. li. [by the year] shall wear at their Pleasure, except Ermins and Letuses, and Apparel of [Pearls and Stone, but only] for their Heads.

In the case of the lower income Knights and their wives, fabrics and adornments were the same as those available to the higher income Gentlemen although they were allowed to spend a little bit more on the fabrics. And the higher income Knights could wear just about whatever they wanted.



Appendix 4: Glossary

Many of the terms used when referring to medieval fabrics and clothing are the same or similar to words still used today, but many of their meanings have shifted slightly in modern speech, so that they no longer mean what they did in the late fourteenth-century. To that end I am providing a list of words that may not be familiar to the reader, or may have another meaning to the reader, and their definitions from the fourteenth-century.

banquerre - Most likely; **banker** (n.) Also **banc(o)ur**, **bankquer**, **banqwer**, **bankert**. [OF **banquier**] A covering, of tapestry or other fabric, for a bench, couch, or chair; also, an ornamental hanging for a room, altar, or bed; ~ **cloth**. (MED)

baudekyn - **baudekin** (n.(1)) Also **baudakin**, **baudkin**, **ba(u)ldekin**. [OF **baudequin** & ML **baldaquinus**.] (a) Oriental cloth woven of silk, shot through with gold (or silver) thread, or brocaded; brocade; ~ **cloth**; (b) a rug or drape of this cloth. (MED)

bokeram - (n.) Also (early) **bougeren**, **bokram**, **buk(e)ram**. [OF **bo(u)querant** & It. **bucherame** (named for Bukhara).] A fine costly cloth, apparently of linen or cotton (for curtains, bedspreads, banners, lining, etc.). (MED)

burnet - (n.(1) & adj.) Also **bornet**, **brunet**, (pl.) **burneys**. [OF **brunet** adj. & **brunete**, **burnete** n.] (a) Of cloth, a garment: brown; (b) a brown woolen cloth of fine quality; **blak** ~, **bright** ~; (c) a garment or bag made of this cloth. (MED)

camaca - (n.) Also **kameka**, **cam(m)oka**, **kamaca**. [OF & ML] A rich fabric; ?a kind of brocaded silk. (MED)

carde - (n.(3)) [ML **carda**] (a) A kind of fabric, carde; (b) ~ **blod**, carde of a certain color (prob. blue); ~ **lombard**, carde of a kind imported from (or associated with) Lombardy. (MED)

Also possibly; Fabric made by carding the wool instead of combing it prior to spinning, a new practice in the fourteenth century.

chokette - Most likely; **cokke** (n.(2)) Also **cok**, (error) **cocto** & **coccin**. [L **coccum** & **coccinum**.] Scarlet; scarlet cloth, scarlet garment. (MED)

Also possibly; **coket** (n.(1)) [OF] (a) A seal of the King's Customs of England; (b) a document sealed with such a seal certifying a merchant's payment of export duties; (c) a customs duty levied on merchandise (as on wool, cloth, etc.); **coketed** (ppl.) [OF; cp. **coket** (1).] Of merchandise: certified for customs duties paid. (MED)

dossere - dowry wreath (William Whitaker's Words, Online Latin Dictionary)

Elsham - A village in North Lincolnshire, England

faldyng - **falding** (n.) 1. A kind of woolen cloth, prob. coarse, sometimes napped, and often described as of Irish manufacture; ~ **cloth**, ~ **ware**. A mantle or cloak made of (coarse) woolen cloth; ?a woolen blanket or wrap worn over the shoulders; ~ **cloke**, ~ **cloth**, ~ **mantel** (MED)

frenes - **frenge** (n.) Also **frang**. [OF **frenge**, F **frange**.] (a) An ornamental border of cloth or thread (on a garment, saddle, etc.), a fringe; (b) an ornamental strip suitable for use as a border on clothing, etc; esp., fringe material sold in lengths. (MED)

fulling - A process by which woolen fabric is beaten in water to felt the fabric and create a densely woven fabric.

garde - ?

linen - The fiber from the flax plant. When processed and spun looks similar to cotton.

livery - Clothing worn by members of a household, guild, or other group to identify allegiance.

maskle - Most likely; **mask(e** (n.) Also **masce**, (error) **maste**. [OE **max** (from ***masc**) & ON; cp. OI **möskvi**.] Mesh of a net; pl. the openings between the cords of a net, interstices.

Also; **maskel** (n.) Also **maskle**, **mascle**. [ML **mascula**, from Gmc.; cp. ME **mask(e**, OE **max**, MDu. **masche**, etc. Also cp. ML **macula** & OF **macle** & **macule**.] (b) pl. the strands or cords of a net; also, the openings between the strands or cords of a net; (c) **gise of ~**, ?lozenge shaped.

murrey - Also **murrei** (n.(1)) **murrai**, **murri**, **murre**, **murret** & **morrei**, **morei**, **morri** & **murr**, **morr**. [OF **moré**, **morey**.] (a) A dark red or purplish-red color, mulberry color; (b) cloth of mulberry color.

nap - The raised fibers on the surface of a fabric.

ray, cloth of - striped fabric, most often in the direction of the warp.

russet - (n.) Also **russette**, **ruset**, **rosset**, **roset(te)**. [OF **rosset**, **rossete**, AF **russet** & ML **russetum**, AL **rossetum**.] (a) The color russet, grey or dull red, brown, etc., suitable for working clothes; (b) a serviceable woolen cloth, usu. of plain or subdued color & usu. worn by the poor or by workingmen (also by the Duke of Suffolk as a sea-cloak); a length of such cloth; (c) **brod ~**, russet cloth of double width; **colchestre** (**cottenhames**, **cotoun**, **frensh**) ~, a specific kind of russet; (d) a garment of russet. (MED)

samit - (n.) Also **samitte**, **samet(te)**, **samed**, **sanite**, **sayntes**, **samer**. [OF **samit** & ML **samitum**, **samittum**, **sametum**.] (a) A kind of silken cloth, often embroidered or interwoven with threads of gold or silver, samite; ~ **tir**, clothing made of samite; **double ~**, heavy samite; (b) a piece of samite; a garment made of this material. (MED)

sanqwyn - (n.) Also **sanguin(e)**, **sangwin(e)**, **sangwen**, **sangewin**, **sanguen(e)**, **sangwein(e)**, **sangine** [OF **sanguin(e)**, **sangwine**, **sangin** & L **sanguis**, **-inis**; ML **sanguinea** neut.pl.adj. as n.]

(a) A blood-red color; also, rosy hue [last quot.]; (b) a rich cloth of a blood-red color; also, a piece of such cloth. (MED)

say - (n.) Either *sai* (n.(2)) Also *seu*. [OF *saie*, *seie*, *sö*, vars. of OF *soie*, & AL *seia*, var. of ML *seta*. Cp. ME *sai(e* n., to which some of the following quots. may belong.] Silk; ~ *worm*, the silkworm (*Bombyx mori*). (MED)

Also possibly - *sai(e* (n.) [OF *saie* & ML *saia*, var. of L *sagum*; cp. ME *sai* n.(2).] (a) An esteemed variety of woolen cloth, perhaps rather heavy; ?also, a small piece of such cloth [quot.: ?c1475]; **double** ~, such cloth in two layers; **worsted** ~, a piece of worsted; (b) a curtain, hanging; ~ **coverture**, cover, curtain; (c) ?a net-like fabric. (MED)

sericulture - The process by which silk worms are raised for the production of silk fiber.

sendale - (n.) 1. Also *cendel*, *sendal*, *-el*, *-il*, *sindal*, *sandel* & *cendre*, *sendre*. [OF *cendal*, *-el*, *çandal* & *cender*.] A kind of costly fabric (apparently of linen or cotton); **silk and** ~; ~ **clout**; ~ **goun**. (MED)

2. A fine silk fabric used, esp in the Middle Ages, for ceremonial clothing, etc. (Collins English Dictionary)

stik - Also *stik(e* (n.(2)) Pl. *stikes*, *stikk*es. [MDu. *stic*, *sticke*, vars. of *stuc*.] A measure of cloth, approx. 3/4 yard. (MED)

sumptuary law - Any law designed to regulate consumption of goods, often found in relation to fabrics, clothing, and accessories.

teasing - A process by which fulled fabric is combed to create a nap on the surface of the fabric, the nap is then sheared to create a very smooth finish on the fabric.

whole cloth - According to the 1353 statute a whole cloth measured 24 yards for a ray cloth, and 26 yards for a colored cloth.

wool - The hair fiber from sheep, goats, and other animals. In this paper it is specifically refers to the hair fiber from sheep.

woolen - Any fabric that has been woven with short staple wool fibers and then fulled, teased, and sheared to create a very densely woven and smooth fabric.

worsted - Any fabric that has been woven with long staple wool fiber, often lighter in weight than wools.

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