

Flax

Flax was an important crop in the mediaeval period, useful both for fibre for linen and for its oil-rich seeds for lamp-oil and cooking. It is a blue-flowered annual which grows around a metre high, and prefers a mild, damp climate. Extracting the fibres from flax was a complex series of processes: rippling, retting, pounding, scutching and heckling. This took several months, so it seems likely that particular locations would be reserved for it. Since the process required water, and the retting produced an offensive smell, a meadow beside a stream and away from the village (like Hacklingcroft Meadow) would be ideal.

The plant would be pulled up and dried in the sun, then shaken to release the seeds from the pods. The stems were then 'rippled' (pulled through a comb) to remove the pods. The fibres can only be extracted after the outer stem has rotted away, and this (known as 'retting') was done by soaking the stems in a ditch or river. Flax seeds, pods and stem fragments have been found in an excavated gully close to the Thames at St Aldates.

The retted stems were dried, and then the brittle parts were beaten against a stone using a round wooden pounder. Then bundles of stems were laid over a board and the waste fragments swept away ('scutched') using a scutching blade. The bundles of fibres were known as 'tow', which had to be split into separate filaments by heckling. A heckle was a wooden board set with spikes, and the tow was drawn through ever-finer sets of these until the flax was ready for spinning.¹ At this stage the fibres are long, soft and very pale – illustrating the phrase 'flaxen hair'.

The flax could then be spun and woven into the soft cloth known as linen.

Flax production dwindled once cotton became available in the eighteenth century, but when imports were limited in World War II, farmers were encouraged to grow it again. It was used to make everything from parachutes to ropes.²

1. Penelope Walton Rogers, *Cloth and Clothing in Early Anglo-Saxon England, AD 450–700* (York: Council for British Archaeology, 2007) 14.

2. BBC2 TV programme: *Wartime Farm*. Broadcast Autumn 2012.