Fustian cutting

 The word 'fustian' is derived from El-Fustat in Cairo. During the middle ages women's apparel and priests vestments were made of 'fustian', but latterly the material was commonly used for labourers clothes. It is the cotton equivalent of silken velvet. 'Jean' cloth which is a thick tweaked or twilled cotton cloth is one kind of 'fustian'. 'Fustian' was dyed using many colours mostly dark.

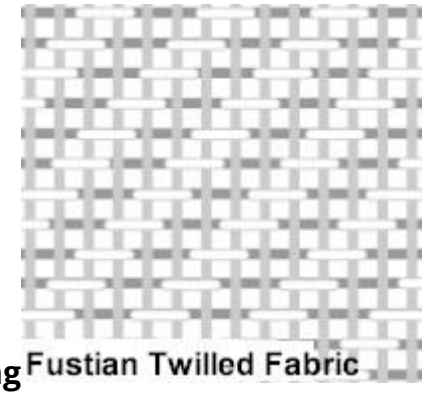
The history of 'fustian cutting' in Lymm can be traced back to the early 1860's. The 'fustian cutters' would produce endless cutting strips of weft threads, this required a degree of skill, good eye sight and the use of very sharp knives. The 'cloth piece' was nominally 100 yeards in length and was usually supplied by manufacturers in Manchester. The 'cut pieces' then went back to the original manufacturer who then paid the 'fustian master' the agreed price.

Fustian cutting was probably one of the last textile trades to be mechanised due to difficulty in designing a machine to do such precise cutting work.

Evidence of the early fustian cutting houses are still discernible today, most notably on Church Road, near the junction with Elm Tree Road.

but fustian cutting cottages on Church Road and Arley Grove do survive at lymm

http://www.lymmvillage.co.uk/about/history-of-lymm/Lymm-Industries



Fustian Twilled Fabric

Fustian Cutting

Textiles, fabrics or cloths are flexible woven materials consisting of a network of threads or yarns. Yarn is produced by spinning or twisting raw fibres of flax, wool, silk & cotton into to long strands. Textiles are then formed by weaving (or knitting, crocheting or knotting) the yarns together to form the network of longer threads or warps with a set of cross threads or wefts.

Fustian is a type of cloth believed to have originated in 2nd Century Egypt, at a place called Fustat. Fustian had a strong linen warp, and a cotton weft, a long lasting, lard wearing coarse twilled fabric with a slight nap.

Linen had been produced from the flax & hemp grown on every farm from way back; this was a 'cottage industry'. When cotton was first imported into London around 1600 basic fustians, with the lined warp and cotton weft, began to appear. Particularly around the Bolton / Blackburn area.

Fustian was also the old name for corduroy, a kind of cotton velvet. This basic cloth had extra looped wefts woven in as it was made. The rolls of cloth, 18-24 inches wide, were then sent to specialist fustian cutters. In a well lit room the cloth was pulled tight over benches up to 150 yards long and stretched with rollers at either end. The cutters would then insert a sharp knife like instrument with long guide into the loops, called a race (a tunnel of loops). The threads were cut with a sweeping movement as they walked the length of the cloth. This was similar to opening a letter with a knife but considerable dexterity and accuracy was needed. The cut wefts formed the pile. The cloth was then brushed to raise the pile.

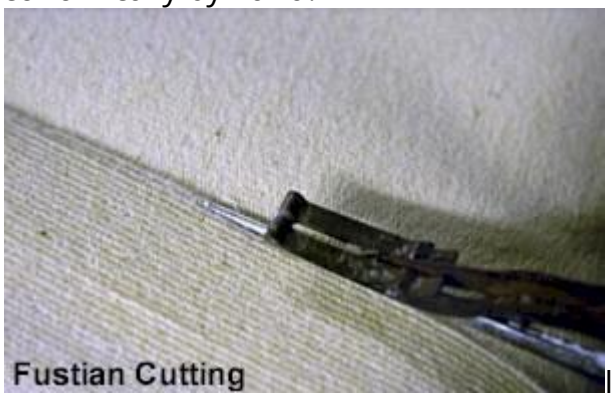
All this sounds simple but the best quality fustian, like velveteen needed 40 cuts per inch. This meant that a worker had to walk many miles a day to cut the wefts. If they made a mistake during the

cut, they would be penalised, like wise, if they left a cloth for someone else to finish this again would lower the value. This is due to the fact that every individual held their knife at different angles which resulted in slightly different piles. Also a worker would loose money if they broker the knife, as they would have to wait for a master to sharpen the tool, he in turn would probably be cutting and would not want to stop, as he would be loosing money. The more you cut, the more you were paid. Men had a slight advantage over the women in the trade, firstly they could walk more miles per week, secondly many could hold two knives at once, thus doubling their income.

A two yard length of cloth two foot wide could take about an hour to cut. In the 1850s 2½d might have been paid. Later payment by the piece was introduced and cutters might earn up to 15s per week for ten hours work per day.

Or course flax and wool had be spun and woven into cloths by hand in England for centuries. The work was done in almost every dwelling in the land. Flax drying to produce linen had been carried out in Liverpool since at least 1540, as an order forbidding the drying of flax inside houses because of the risk of fire was made in that year. By the late 16th century linen production centred on Manchester had spread to Blackburn, Burnley, Preston and Oldham. The growing demand for a linen warp for the expanding cotton industry boosted production. The first cotton based cloths to be produced in Lancashire were fustians, which were cloths with a stronger linen warp and a cotton weft. These were being produced from the 17th century.

However the breakthrough into mass production in manufactories started slowly in the 18th century as centralised water power was harnessed and spinning & weaving machines developed. The first powered machines were developed to produce silk yarn which required extensive twisting to produce the strong fine yarn required for quality garments. Almost impossible to do economically by hand.


Fustian Cutting

In the 19th century, silk & velvet producers, began to set up separate mills where they would employ many cheaper youngsters to cut fustian for them as cotton became all the rage and silk production declined. Numerous fustian mills sprang up where labour was available and cheaper ... Newcastle-under-Lyme, Hebden Bridge, Lymm, Wilmslow, Middlewich, Winsford ... places where the men often worked but the

girls were without jobs ... for sure, fustian cutting revived the fortunes of the Congleton textile trade in the 1860s after the decline of the silk industry. This followed the free trade agreement of 1860 between the United Kingdom & France, the Cobden-Chevalier Treaty, the Congleton silk industry could not compete, real wages were too high. The advantages of free trade were little understood as unemployment rose and Congleton lost its glorious silk industry.

Production of fustians became more important than linen, although linen, wool, silk, fustian & cotton inevitably coexisted as economics and fashion ebbed and flowed. But why fustian?

Fustian was worn by workers during the 19th century. Radical elements of the British working class chose to wear fustian jackets as a symbol of their class allegiance. This was especially marked during the Chartist era ... the origin of the modern denim 'jeans'?

Fustians enjoyed a period of great demand until imported cotton goods from the Indian subcontinent began to be popular with the more affluent and those who sought to emulate them. Fustians had a resurgence when acts were passed banning cotton imports which were damaging the woollen and silk industries. The invention of Arkwright's water frame made the spinning of strong cotton warps possible and that plus the superior quality and versatility of cotton meant that by fustian production was vulnerable.

English fabrics followed fashion and economics from linen, to wool, to silk, to fustian, to cotton to man made fibres ...

http://www.themeister.co.uk/birchall/fustian_cutting.htm