

BOOK REVIEW

Gary Bankhead, *Textile Manufacture, Taxation and Trade in late- and Post-Medieval Durham City. Underwater excavations at Elvet Bridge, Durham* by Gary Bankhead 2008-2022. Pp 261, numerous illustrations. ISBN 978-1-7391074-0-6. Durham: Architectural and Archaeological Society of Durham and Northumberland Report 8, 2022. Price: £35

Reviewer: Dr Anne Allen

Gary Bankhead will be well known to members of the Trust for his pioneering underwater archaeological excavations in the River Wear. He has been investigating remains on the riverbed beneath Elvet Bridge since 2008. In this monograph he catalogues, illustrates and analyses in detail an assemblage of 334 lead cloth seals recovered from what is described on page 2 as a 'find site' just downstream of the 12th century bridge.

The monograph is written for both a general audience and small finds specialists. There is a helpful glossary of specialist terms related to textile production such as *alnage*, a form of regulation requiring a fee or duty to be paid by the weaver to the crown (or bishop) per newly woven cloth. I'm intrigued to know more and discover that controlling different countries' standards of weights and measures was such a problem in importing cloth that the *Magna Carta* enacted an Assize of Cloth and alnage officials were appointed to check and seal cloth to verify its quality and standard.

The overarching aim of the book is to explore the insight that this assemblage of alnage and cloth workers' seals, spanning the mid-14th to early-19th centuries, gives into textile production and trade.

The assemblage is just a part of an incredible 13,500 small finds that are now collectively known as the Durham River Wear Assemblage which Gary has generously donated to the Museum of Archaeology at Durham University. The story of their discovery was brought to life in an exhibition curated by postgraduate students in 2021 and is still available onlineⁱ.

The book jacket gives a fascinating introduction to Gary's journey from a British Sub-Aqua Club diver to underwater archaeologist. The monograph has grown out of his MPhil thesisⁱⁱ. It is worth looking this up. It outlines the skills he has learned to bring the book to fruition – cataloguing conventions, archaeological finds illustration and photography, scientific analytical techniques and documentary research. The MPhil is also searchable. I discover 254 references to alnage.

The first two chapters of the book (70 pages) introduce the chronological and historical context and provide the background to the cloth industry and textile trade over the 14th to 19th centuries. Chapters four to six (pp 79 – 222) catalogue every single seal, set out a typology and chronology and present the findings of the scientific analyses. As a

resource for future research and comparison to other sites the image bank is invaluable and would benefit from being digitised.

As an archaeologist I am left wanting to know more about the archaeological site. How did so many objects end up in the river? Are they a single deposit, or did they accumulate over time? An earlier articleⁱⁱⁱ (Bankhead, 2018) explains that this part of the river is characterised by gullies in the sandstone riverbed and that the artefacts were buried in stratified layers in an anaerobic environment that has helped in some cases to preserve fragments of textile. There are no plans or photographs of the artefacts *in situ*, or drawings to show the stratigraphic relationships of the finds. We assume that artefacts may have been accidentally lost, deliberately jettisoned from stalls and booths on the bridge itself or accumulated as rubbish from riverside tenements.

It is in chapter three (pp71-78) that we discover the importance of the assemblage. Here the author pieces together the history of Elvet's textile industry from a combination of historical sources and the archaeological evidence. The cloth seals reveal trade links that are not recorded in the written sources. For example in the 14th and 15th centuries high quality linen and woollens were being imported from Flanders and Brabant, including important textile production centres in Malines, Tournai, Arras, Ypres, Lille, Douai and Rouen. In the 16th century Hanseatic cloth 'fustian' – a linen/cotton mix arrived possibly via London and York. In the 17th century Haarlem cloth seals evidence a continuing demand for European fine linens but English centres of production took over.

The book makes an important contribution to understanding textile trade over the 14th to 19th centuries and adds significantly to our understanding of cloth seals and alnage. As a catalogue of the seals themselves it is invaluable. It would be interesting to explore further the relationship with other artefactual evidence of textile-production in the River Wear Assemblage. The illustrations of spindle whorls, weights and pins etc on pp68-69 indicate there is more to learn. This volume covers just 2.5% of the Durham River Wear assemblage.

The Trust is supporting the publication costs of the next volume in the series which is now in production. This will be titled *Pilgrim Souvenirs, Devotional, and other objects of Faith*.

ⁱ Hidden Stories from the River Wear – Exploring 1000 years of Durham History. [Online]. Available at: <https://stories.durham.ac.uk/riverwear/> Accessed 19 May 2025

ⁱⁱ Gary Bankhead, 2016. A cultural, scientific and technical study of the Durham lead cloth seal assemblage. Master of Philosophy Thesis. [Online]. Available at: <https://etheses.dur.ac.uk/11867/> Accessed 19 May 2025.

ⁱⁱⁱ Gary Bankhead, 2018. 'A late-medieval pectoral cross recovered from the River Wear near Elvet Bridge, County Durham', *Durham Archaeological Journal*, 21: 83-102.