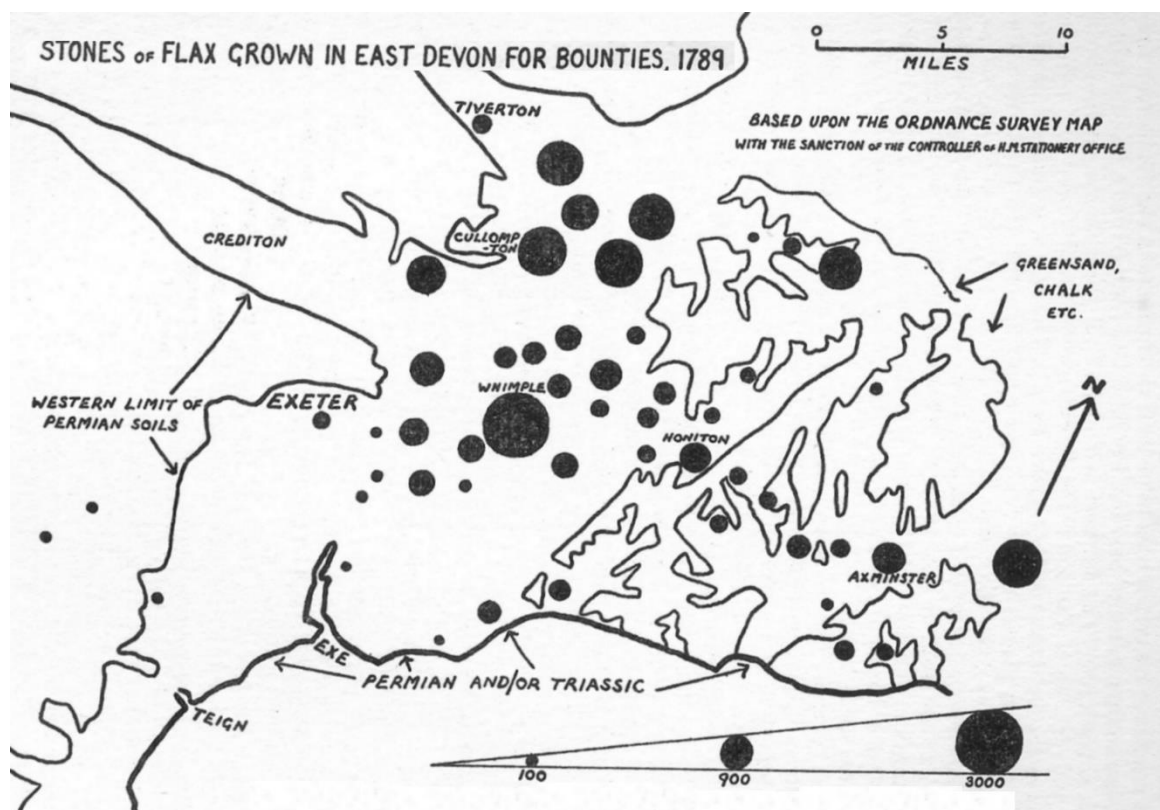


## Flax Growing in East Devon in the Late 18<sup>th</sup> Century

Flax (also known as hemp) is now cultivated for its seeds (also now known as linseed), which are rich in oil and used as livestock feed and in some health foods. In earlier times it was grown for its fibre, which was extracted via a process known as 'retting', and spun into fibre. It was particularly important around Chard, Crewkerne and Bridport, where it was processed into linen, rope, nets and sail cloth. It was also used in the backing of some of the carpets made at Axminster.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century flax was relatively widely grown in East Devon for its fibre, and we know that late in the century some flax was still being grown around Axminster. Evidence for this comes from the 'Hemp and flax bounty papers' from 1785 to 1790, a transcript of which with relevance to Axminster is accessible on-line via the Axminster page of the [genuki.org.uk](http://genuki.org.uk) website. The full set of bounty papers were used to create the map below for 1789.



Source: an article by Alfred H Shorter in 'Devon & Cornwall Notes & Queries', (Vol.XXIV Part II, April 1950). This article contains some further general information on flax growing in East Devon at that time.

Furthermore, the (admittedly recent, albeit historically-based) use of the name 'Flax Meadow Lane' in Axminster, and the survival locally of the surname Retter (from 'retting'), both bear testament to the former importance of this crop.

However, we also know that by 1808, when Charles Vancouver carried out his influential review of agriculture in Devon, the cultivation of flax was in general decline, and nothing like as extensive or rewarding in the Axe valley as it was in South Somerset, or on the red soils

around Whimple and Cullompton. Vancouver also noted how flax grown on the red soils west of Honiton had a pink colour which no amount of bleaching could remove.

Like butter, flax was generally produced on a contract basis, with the farmer preparing the ground and receiving a rental payment of between £3 and £6 per acre from a specialist grower who had a relationship with a merchant-processor. The grower would supply the seed and agree to have the crop harvested by a set date, usually in late October. Vancouver evidently found it hard to get a clear picture of exactly how the processing was organised.

Despite the decline in local cultivation, Pigot's 1830 Directory shows that at that time the Town Mill at Axminster still included a flax spinner. It is also understood that there was at one time a rope factory above Dalwood, on the Corry, no doubt using flax as its raw material.

Information on the growing and processing of flax can be found on-line (e.g. on [wildfibres.co.uk](http://wildfibres.co.uk)) and several local museums including Bridport and Crewkerne hold a lot of information about flax growing and processing in their areas.