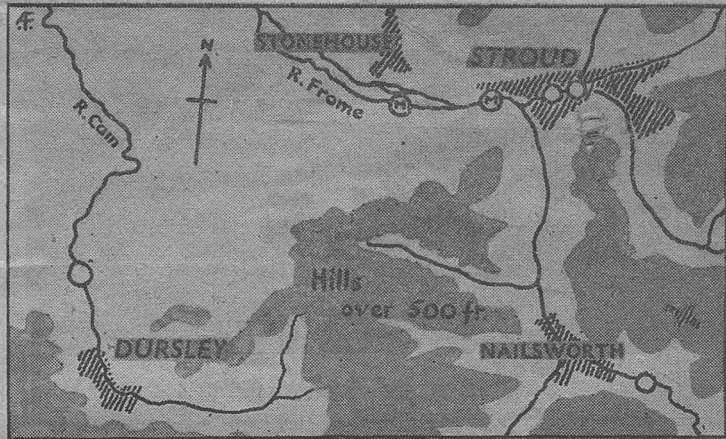


MADE IN THE STROUD VALLEYS—5

Woollen Cloth For Ladies' Suits



WEST OF ENGLAND cloth, although it is only a tiny fraction of the country's output, is famous all over the world for its high quality. There are now only three organisations in this area making it — Winterbotham, Strachan & Playne, who control Cam Mills, and mills near Stroud and Nailsworth; Howard & Powell and Marling & Evans.

Our investigator recently visited Marling & Evans' mills at Ryeford and Ebley, and saw the cloth in all stages of manufacture. The amount of cloth which the Government permit to be exported is only increasing very slowly, as the Board of Trade consider that it is needed at home to meet the post-war demand, and to maintain full employment in the tailoring and other trades using the cloth.

The wool comes chiefly from Australia. After scouring it is dyed in great vats taking 600 lb. at a time. It is then mixed by a novel method. After passing between spiked rollers it is blown to a mixing chamber on the floor above, where it is spread evenly all over the floor by a rotating device in the ceiling. It is passed through the machine twice more, never being touched by hand except to be poled through holes in the floor with a pitchfork. These holes connect with large pipes which take the wool to an automatic feed on the machine. During one passage through the machine it is sprayed with oil to prevent breakage in subsequent carding and spinning. The last time through the machine it is blown into huge sacks, which can often be seen going from Ryeford to Ebley on a "Queen Mary" trailer.

This plant has been shown to other textile firms, in the belief that the reputation of West of England cloth can best be maintained by co-operation in technical advances.

The wool then passes through carding machines, which lay all the fibres in the same direction. It is wound on rollers in thick soft threads, which receive their strength from a spinning (twisting and stretching) process in a "mule"—a machine which has a temperament like its namesake, but is popular because it can be adjusted to produce many different types of yarn.

Best of the Year

The spun yarn is woven into many different patterns. Most of the output is material for women's suits, about half of it "Utility." One design was that chosen by "Vogue" as the best of the year—but it looked as if someone had just ruled rectangles in two colours on an orange background!

The cloth has to be carefully inspected, and all flaws and joins removed. Several shops are occupied with this. They are spacious and well-lit with recently installed fluorescent lamps, which, unlike ordinary artificial light, enable the cloth to be seen in its true colours. The work is

clean and highly skilled. A grey-haired lady, who was removing knots from a piece of red and black herringbone cloth said that she had worked in the department almost all her life, and found the work varied and interesting. Other workers were sewing in lengths of yarn to replace missing and broken threads. These have to follow the weave of the cloth, and the completed repairs are invisible. Rather surprisingly, this process has proved a serious bottleneck, probably due to the five years' break in recruitment during the war.

Before the cloth is finished, it still has to be scoured and shrunk. This is done by passing it through a narrow opening and under a weighted roller, while wet. It is dried partly by suction and finished in a heated chamber—we went inside this, and it was surprising to see, as we came out, the thermometer showing 205°F., only 7° below boiling point. Apart from a very slight shortness of breath, this temperature does not seem to be objectionable for short periods.

Different Coloured Doors

The two mills where all this goes on are fairly old. Part of Ebley Mill was designed by Bodley, the architect who was responsible for Selsley Church—a man with some reputation in his day—but it hardly conforms with modern standards of beauty and convenience. Improvements, though, are constantly being made. A "tower" of lavatories is being added, so there will be some on each floor. Every door in this building is a different colour, which helps one to learn the way about, but it must have taxed the colourman's catalogue severely!

The present management has only been in control since 1939. The new directors are comparatively young, and have ambitious plans to make their works a show place. In spite of the "occupation" of Stanley Mills by the Admiralty, they have made much progress. New machines were installed every year. Carding machines and mules are being fitted with ball-bearings (some made locally) in vital places, which help to reduce noise and increase efficiency. The ground has been cleared for a new weaving shed at Stanley Mill, and permission has been obtained to buy some precision - built high - speed looms from Switzerland, which will increase output and reduce strain on the weaver. The operation of looms is generally considered women's work, but young men are being recruited to run the more complex modern machines.

Another great change is that, while Trade Unionism was discountenanced before 1939, there is now full co-operation with the Textile Workers' Union, and there is a flourishing Works Council at each mill.

Marling & Evans seem to be making good progress in conversion from war conditions, and will be able to make their full contribution to the prosperity of our valley.