The power of water

The easy availability of water from the river was the main reason why this area became such a hive of industry. Water was needed to power the wheels, which drove the corn and fulling mills and was brought from the river via the man-made Higher and Lower Leats. Water was also needed for fulling and dyeing the cloth.

Cricklepit Mill
Opposite is Cricklepit Mill, one of Exeter’s main corn mills. It was almost entirely rebuilt between 1670-1700 when a fulling mill was added to its downstream side. Earlier, three other fulling mills had been built downstream, one by William Hurst who lived in St Nicholas Priory.

Fulling

Celia Fiennes, a female travel writer, visited Exeter in 1698 and gave this description…

“The whole town and country is employed for at least twenty miles around in spinning, weaving, dressing and scouring, fulling and drying of the serges. It turns the most money in a week of anything in England.”

The pub opposite is named after Bishop Blaize, the patron saint of Clothworkers. He was believed to be a late Roman saint who was cruelly martyred by having his flesh torn from him with woolcombs.

Fulling (or tucking) is the process of cleaning and pounding the cloth in water to finish it ready for sale and export. After fulling, the cloth was taken to nearby fields, or to sheds like the Dry House, where it was gently stretched out on large racks, known as tenter frames, to prevent shrinkage. Rows of short iron hooks held the cloth, which is where the phrase ‘being on tenterhooks’ came from.