

## **Flemish Exiles in 14th Century London and Their Economic Impact on England**

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### **Abstract**

Throughout the first half of the fourteenth century, Edward III issued several letters of protection encouraging Flemish textile workers to establish their trade in England. The patent letter of general protection for foreign cloth-workers was promulgated in 1337. However, the expected wave of immigration would take place only a bit later on, as an influx of immigrants did not immediately follow its promulgation. My research has shown that during the 1350s, at least 2000 people from the Low Countries crossed the channel and settled in England. Most of these immigrants were Flemish weavers who had been exiled from their home country for their involvement in an armed rebellion against their prince. Favourable economic conditions and lack of workforce in England caused by the Black Death opened the door for a lot of Flemings to go to England on a voluntary basis as well. Flemish exiles settled both in the old and newly established textile centres. From 1351 onwards, there is repeated mention of the Flemings in the sources available in London, Winchester and York. The newcomers also made an intensive use of Colchester tribunals, its borough courts in particular. The most numerous were the ones to settle in London, of course, as a major trade and administrative centre it was characterized by better employment opportunity. Very quickly after their arrival, they became organized group and were granted the right to have their own guild and act independently from the London weavers' guild. As is clearly illustrated in the primary sources, one notes that they are in direct contact with the natives, with contact ranging from minor crimes such as trespassing, physical violence, litigation for debt or breach of contract, to accusations of serious crimes such as rape, adultery or murder. This paper will explore the professional identity of these exiles and the economic influence of the migrant community which was forced to leave their own country, on the development of English textile industry, based on the combined research from English and Continental primary sources.