There were five basic steps to converting flax to linen. Flax was sewn in April and seed was mainly Dutch or Baltic. It was harvested by pulling the plant out whole. It was not cut in the same way as corn or barley. This was done when the stalks were turning from green to yellow (if the crop was for seed it was allowed to stand for another two weeks). Pulled flax was allowed to dry for a few days in the field and then taken in bundles for “rippling” (removal of seed).

This was done by two men at either end of a long board, in the middle of which was fixed a “rippling caemb”. It was like a large hairbrush with wooden or iron teeth. It was hard monotonous work, each man striking alternately, and it was done in the late summer or early autumn. It was always a relief to finish and gave rise to the old Scots’ proverb “Everything has its time and so has the rippling caimb”.

The flax was then tied in bundles and taken for steeping in pools of stagnant water (lint pots) or backwaters in the burn. Stones or turfs were put on top to sink it. The purpose of steeping or “retting” as it was often called was to allow separation of the outer woody part of the flax from the fibres proper, a process lasting a week or more. Landowners would not allow retting in running water because of a belief that the flax would poison the water and so ruin the fishing.

After steeping came “scutching”. The flax was taken out of the lint pots, dried out in the fields and crushed in the flax-brake or beaten over a baulk of wood, with wooden mallets until the flax stems were completely broken and the bark removed. Like rippling, it was very hard work and by the end of the eighteenth century it was taken over by mill-scutching, and there were several hundred of these water powered mills in Scotland.

After scutching came “heckling”, a form of combing by which the fibres were drawn out for spinning. Heckles were all different to suit the flax. Some were wider and longer than others and it was a skilled occupation, as even flax from different parts of the same field would require different heckles. It was highly skilled and hecklers were well paid. They worked in a much quieter atmosphere and hecklers were renowned for their politics and thirst. Hence the term heckling at Political meetings.

Of the remaining three stages spinning and weaving are well known. The amount of yarn spun was measured by winding on to a roll which was by law in Scotland, 90”. Once round the reel made a thread or spindle of yarn and this contained, by official description “no fewer than 5,760 threads or 14,400 yards of single yarn”. Yarn was then sold by the spindle or “hank” (a hank being ¼ of a spindle).

The weavers first boiled the yarn to remove the dirt and saliva (the spinners often moistened the yarn) before rewinding it on to bobbins or pirns. Each weaver had his own pirn-wife. After weaving came “bleaching”. Dundee was not renowned for the quality of its bleaching. It involved repeated steeping of the cloth in a hot alkaline solution (“the ley”), washing it out, drying the cloth and then applying an acid (“the sour”). This was repeated until the cloth was as white as required.

Wood weed or kelp ash was used for the ley before chlorine was discovered and bran, or buttermilk was used for the sour, although by the 1740’s sulphuric acid was used. In 1726 the Convention of Royal Burghs set up a Board of Trustees to oversee the industry. In 1727 a network of stamp offices was formed to guarantee the length and breadth of the web. This bore the stampmaster’s personal seal, which bore his name, the place of his office and the length and breadth of the cloth. Stampmasters were forbidden to have any personal dealings in the cloth they stamped. There was an office in Dundee. This regulation was repealed in June 1823.

In 1751, the powers of the guild weaver incorporations in the line industry were broken by a clause in the Act amending the linen laws which allowed the “every weaver or manufacturer of linen, flax of hempen cloth… to exercise the said respective trades within the City, Town of Burgh in Scotland, without any let or hindrance…and without being chargeable or charged with payment of any entry money”.

This stripped the Incorporations of their power. They appealed to Parliament in 1753 but it was a lost cause.