

# The Business of Dyeing: Matthews of Bristol and Lydia of Thyatira

*Richard Higginson recounts the stories of two historical figures who were in the dyeing trade. He wonders whether they related this business to their faith, and whether they confronted ethical questions about wealth and the health of their workers.*

## Arnos Vale Cemetery

A pleasure of moving to Bristol has been the close proximity of Arnos Vale Cemetery, which is situated less than five minutes' walk from our home.

It was opened in 1839 as a private company in response to the city's parish graveyards becoming overcrowded and a health hazard. Today the Cemetery is a very beautiful public space covering 45 acres, located on a wooded hillside, and containing the graves of 170,000 people. These include many eminent Victorian men and women associated with Bristol, a whole string of businesspeople, politicians and social reformers (and some who were a combination of all three). There are regular guided tours of the cemetery and I have become a volunteer leading some of them.

The original cemetery was split into two halves: one, an area of consecrated

ground for Anglicans, with a chapel to conduct their funeral services; the other, known as unconsecrated ground and with its own chapel, for Nonconformists and others. However, this bipartite arrangement begged the question of what a family did when a marriage entailed two strands of 19th century Christianity coming together. Such was the conundrum facing young Robert Matthews when his Nonconformist mother Mary died following the death of his father Thomas Gadd Matthews, an Anglican, in 1860. The solution? Robert bought a huge plot of land, large enough for seven graves containing five people each, in a central position straddling the consecrated/unconsecrated divide. Thomas is buried on one side of the divide and Mary on the other. The monument which marks their graves and those of other members of the

family is one of the largest and most magnificent in the whole cemetery.

However, Thomas Gadd Matthews is also of interest because of the work that he did. Born in the Gloucestershire village of Gatcombe<sup>1</sup>, he moved to Bristol in his early 30s and went into partnership with a local merchant, Robert Maynard Leonard. Thomas's marriage to Leonard's daughter Mary 'sealed the deal'. He was a versatile businessman: he developed sawing machinery, was an oil merchant and a drysalter dealing in different types of chemical. But Matthews became wealthy mainly through the business of dyeing. He imported indigo dyes from Jamaica and sold these to clothing manufacturers, including those who made naval uniforms. The standardisation of uniforms in the 1850s created a strong customer demand which T. G. Matthews & Co was very proficient in satisfying.



**Tomb of Thomas Gadd Matthews,  
Arnos Vale Cemetery**  
Photo: Wikimedia Commons

## The History of Dyeing

Dyeing is a very ancient practice. There is evidence of textile dyeing which dates back to the Neolithic period, and indigo dye was used in many ancient civilisations including China, India, Mesopotamia and Peru from the 6th century BC onwards. Dyes were extracted from plants or animals with the aim of providing attractive and lasting colour both for clothing and furnishing purposes. More recently (since Matthews' heyday in the mid-nineteenth century) artificial dyes have been created to achieve a wider range of colours and render the dyes more stable for washing and general use. Today, almost 20,000 tonnes of indigo dye are produced annually worldwide, mainly for the production of blue denim jeans.

The Old Testament contains numerous references to colourful clothing and furnishings. Many of these are found in the book of Exodus in relation to Moses's divinely inspired instructions for the pilgrim people of God. See e.g. 'You shall make the tabernacle with ten curtains of fine twisted linen, and blue, purple and crimson yarns' (Exodus 26:1 NRSV). Bezalel and Oholiab, the master craftsmen on the tabernacle, were filled by the divine spirit (the Holy Spirit, no less) with 'skill to do every kind of work done by an artisan or by a designer or by an embroiderer in blue, purple and crimson yarns, and in fine linen' (Ex 35:35 NRSV). The priests' ephods were made 'of gold, of blue, purple and crimson yarns, and of fine twisted linen, skilfully worked' (Ex 28:6 NRSV). Ordinary Israelites were instructed to make fringes or tassels on the corners of their garments with a blue cord, to remember God's commandments (Numbers 15:37-39). This leaves us in little doubt that God is a creative God who embraces colour. He made a colourful world and he takes pleasure in the people he has created wearing colourful clothes.

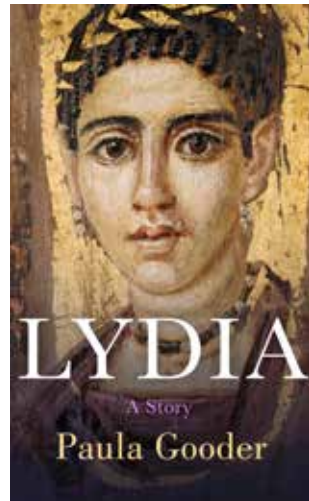
## The Aura of Purple

By the time of Christ, one colour had established itself as of special significance, carrying very high social status: purple. Purple was hugely sought after in the Graeco-Roman world. It was

the colour of kings, aristocrats, military commanders and magistrates, as well as priests. If an entire garment wasn't coloured purple, purple trimming was standard fare on a toga. In the fourth century BC a pound of purple silk was worth three times the equivalent in gold. The two came together when a military triumph was held during the Roman Republic, with the honoured general wearing a purple toga bordered by gold.

The most famous and oldest form of purple dye from that civilisation is Tyrian purple, derived from a shellfish or sea snail called murex found along the coast near Tyre in Syria. The process of extracting and producing the dye was lengthy, hot and smelly. But another shade of purple dye – redder in hue – was developed from the root of the madder plant, which came from Thyatira in what is now south-west Turkey. Thyatira was an important trading centre and from the mid second century BC part of the Roman empire. So by the time of Christ, there were different shades of purple on offer, with the possibility of mixing them together to form a different colour again.

## Lydia



This brings us to the biblical character Lydia,<sup>2</sup> mentioned by Luke in his eye-witness account of her encounter with St Paul at Philippi in Acts 16. This is what he writes:

*On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. A certain woman*

*named Lydia, a worshipper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul. (Acts 16:13-14 NRSV).*

The biblical scholar and popular author Paula Gooder has written an imaginative reconstruction of Lydia in her recent book *Lydia: A Story*.<sup>3</sup> She makes no pretences that the story she tells is true – she calls it a fiction – but it certainly carries a plausible air. A third of the book comprises notes in which she explores the known historical background to the events she describes. These notes include discussion of whether Lydia was simply a dealer in purple or a dyer as well.<sup>4</sup> We cannot be sure, but the fact that she had moved to the Greek city of Philippi from Thyatira where the madder form of purple dye originated suggests that she was close to the manufacturing process. In her story, Paula hypothesises that Lydia sold a variety of purples in Philippi, bringing a male colleague to Philippi to oversee a dyeing workshop situated outside the city. Lydia was wealthy enough to have her own house, and a woman of sufficient self-confidence to invite Paul and his companions to stay with her, also offering hospitality to them after their release from prison (Acts 16:15, 40).

## A Christian Perspective on Dyeing?

In the providence of God, it so happens that I have read Paula Gooder's *Lydia* at the same time as I have been learning about Thomas Gadd Matthews. This has led me to make connections between them: two followers of Christ who made a living out of dyeing – the one specialising in purple and the other in indigo.

What I would love to know is whether being a follower made a difference to the way that they practised dyeing. Did they develop a Christian perspective on dyeing? Did they take seriously Paul's exhortation to 'present your bodies as a living sacrifice', 'not to be conformed to this world' but 'to be transformed by the renewing of your minds' (Rom 12:1-2) in such a way that they practised their trade in a way different from your



common-or-garden dyer? Or is that an absurd – perhaps anachronistic – question to even ask?

The fact is, of course, that we simply do not know. We do not have evidence to judge one way or the other. After Acts 16, Lydia disappears from the pages of the New Testament. She doesn't get a mention in Paul's letter to the Philippians. My question is not one that Paula Gooder pursues; her focus lies elsewhere. In Lydia's case, one difference becoming a Christian might have made is seeking to make the purchase of purple something less dependent on wealth and less associated with status. She might have sought to make purple more accessible to the masses, either by changing the price or the product. But that is pure conjecture. One interesting detail that Paula does include in her story is that she imagines a potential customer who couldn't afford Lydia's purple but was a gifted artist; Lydia accepts a barter form of payment from him in the shape of his painting beautiful murals of biblical stories for the atrium in her house.

As for Matthews, we know little about either the depth of his Christian commitment or the nature of his business practice. We do know that he had the reputation of being a reliable and honest businessman, not only in Bristol but in the manufacturing districts of the Midlands, Liverpool and London. It was said that he was kind to his employees and mindful of their welfare.<sup>5</sup> A question I can't help wondering is whether this extended to the treatment of workers in Jamaica, from where the dye was imported. If Matthews had lived a short

time before, the indigo crop would have been the result of labour performed by enslaved Africans and African-Americans. By the 1850s, slavery in the West Indies had been abolished but the institution doubtless still left its mark on the organisation (and certainly the memory) of labour.


These two stories also raise questions about the Christian perspective on wealth. Jesus persistently criticised people of status and authority and warned that it was easier for a rich man to go through the eye of a needle than to enter the kingdom of God (Mark 10:25). Yet he still reached out to and engaged with that sector of society. He loved the rich young ruler, accepted an invitation to a meal with Simon the Pharisee (Luke 7:36), healed the daughter of Jairus the synagogue official (Mark 5:22) and unwittingly availed himself of the generosity of a rich man, Joseph of Arimathea, who gave Jesus his tomb for a decent burial (Matt 27:57). Wealthy people like Lydia and Matthews still have a role to play in God's purposes when they use their resources to help other people. The abiding temptation, however, is to do this from a position of privilege while still retaining the bulk of one's riches for personal benefit. Matthews' monument flaunts his family's wealth.

## Abiding Ethical Issues

The issues that I have raised regarding Thomas Gadd Matthews and Lydia of Thyatira illustrate the perennial nature of business ethics, shot through (where Christians are concerned) with the call to be faithful disciples. The

key questions almost always concern relationships with other people; in business terms, stakeholders. In Matthews' case, I have speculated about the treatment and work conditions of his suppliers in a far-off country across the Atlantic. In Lydia's case, I have wondered (no more than that) about her customer orientation, since dealing in purple entailed the bolstering of status and privilege for a high-end market. The challenge for Christians who seek to live by the ethic of 'love of neighbour' (taught by Jesus to be universal<sup>6</sup>) is that we have a responsibility to treat *all* our stakeholders well, respecting their human dignity in its fullest and deepest sense. Even though the details have changed (e.g. where suppliers operate and which customer group we serve) those of us who work in manufacture and retail face similar challenges.

With regard to the specific issue of dyeing, a further ethical challenge has emerged, that of environmental impact. The manufacture of synthetic dyes tends to be highly pollutive. Disposed water from dyeing processes carries chemical substances which are often highly toxic. Operating these processes increases the risks of incurring cancer.

This is not to suggest that dyeing is fundamentally flawed or that it should be an ethical 'no go' area. But like every other area of business or industry, it should be conducted in a reforming spirit to the highest standards possible. Even though we have lots of unanswered questions about Matthews and Lydia, what we do know provides plenty of stimulus. They inspire us with the possibility of dyeing well to live well. 

1. Gatcombe Park is the estate where Princess Anne, her husband, daughter and son-in-law now live.
2. Lydia has always been one of my favourite biblical characters. We named our younger daughter after her. Appropriately, she is a designer and maker of clothes.
3. Published by Hodder in 2022.
4. Paula Gooder here acknowledges her debt to a helpful article by David E. Graves, 'What is the Madder with Lydia's Purple? A Reexamination of the Purpurarii in Thyatira and Philippi', *Near East Archaeological Society Bulletin*, 2017, pp.3-29.
5. <http://arnosvale.org.uk/thomas-gadd-matthews/>.
6. Notably in the parable of the Good Samaritan, Luke 10:25-37.



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