

Daniel Defoe on the Yorkshire cloth industry, c. 1724

(Daniel Defoe, *A Tour Thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain*, III, (1724-1727), pp. 97-102, 115, 116-121; in D. B. Horn and Mary Ransome, eds., *English Historical Documents*, Vol. X, 1714-1783, N.Y: Oxford University Press, 1969, pp. 448-52.)

From *Blackstone Edge to Hallifax* is eight Miles, and all the Way, except from *Sorby to Hallifax*, is thus up Hill and down; so that, I suppose, we mounted to the Clouds and descended to the Water level about eight times, in that little Part of the journey.

But now I must observe to you, that after having pass'd the second Hill, and come down into the Valley again, and so still the nearer we came to *Hallifax*, we found the Houses thicker, and the Villages greater in every Bottom; and not only so, but the Sides of the Hills, which were very steep every way, were spread with Houses, and that very thick; for the Land being divided into small Enclosures, that is to say, from two Acres to six or seven Acres each, seldom more; every three or four Pieces of Land had a House belonging to it.

Then it was I began to perceive the Reason and Nature of the Thing, and found that this Division of the Land into small Pieces, and scattering of the Dwellings, was occasioned by, and done for the Convenience of the Business which the People were generally employ'd in, and that, as I said before, though we saw no People stirring without Doors, yet they were all full within; for, in short, this whole Country, however mountainous, and that no sooner we were down one Hill but we mounted another, is yet infinitely full of People; those People all full of Business; not a Beggar, not an idle Person to be seen, except here and there an Alms-House, where People ancient, decrepit, and past Labour, might perhaps be found; for it is observable, that the People here, however laborious, generally live to a great Age, a certain Testimony to the goodness and wholesomeness of the Country, which is, without doubt, as healthy as any Part of *England*; nor is the health of the People lessen'd, but help'd and established by their being constantly employ'd, and, as we call it, their working hard; so that they find a double Advantage by their being always in Business.

This Business is the Clothing Trade, for the Convenience of which the Houses are thus scattered and spread upon the Sides of the Hills, as above, even from the Bottom to the Top; *the Reason is this*; such has been the Bounty of Nature to this otherwise frightful Country, that two Things essential to the Business, as well as to the Ease of the People are found here, and that in a Situation which I never saw the Like of in any Part of *England*; and, I believe, the like is not to be seen so contrived in any Part of the World; I mean Coals and running Water upon the Tops of the highest Hills - This seems to have been directed by the wise Hand of Providence for the very Purpose which is now served by it, namely, the Manufactures, which otherwise could not be carried on; neither indeed could one fifth part of the Inhabitants be supported without them, for the Land could not maintain them. After we had mounted the third Hill, we found the Country, in short, one continued Village, tho' mountainous every way, as before; hardly a House standing, out of a speaking distance from another, and (which soon told us their Business) the Day clearing

up, and the Sun shining, we could see that almost at every House there was a *Tenter*, and almost on every *Tenter* a Piece of *Cloth, or Kersie, or Shalloon*, for they are the three Articles of that Country's Labour; from which the Sun glancing, and, as-I may say, shining (the White reflecting its Rays) to us, I thought it was the most agreeable Sight that I ever saw, for the Hills as I say, rising and falling so thick, and the Vallies opening sometimes one way, sometimes another, so that sometimes we could see two or three Miles this Way, sometimes as far another; sometimes like the Streets near St. *Giles's*, called the *Seven Dials*; we could see through the Glades almost every Way round us, yet look which Way we would, high to the Tops, and low to the Bottoms, it was all the same; innumerable Houses and Tenters, and a white Piece upon every *Tenter*.

But to return to the Reason of dispersing the Houses, as above; I found, as our Road pass'd among them, for indeed no Road could do otherwise, wherever we pass'd any House we found a little Rill or Gutter of running Water, if the House was above the Road, it came from it, and cross'd the Way to run to another; if the House was below us, it cross'd us from some other distant House above it, and at every considerable House was a *Manufactory* or Work-House, and as they could not do their Business without Water, the little Streams were so parted and guided by Gutters or Pipes, and by turning and dividing the Streams, that none of those Houses were without a River, if I may call it so, running into and through their Work-Houses.

Again, as the Dying-Houses, Scouring-Shops and Places where they used this Water, emitted the Water again, ting'd with the Drugs of the Dying Fat, and with the Oil, the Soap, the Tallow, and other Ingredients used by the Clothiers in Dressing and Scouring, &c. which then runs away thro' the Lands to the next, the Grounds are not only universally watered, how dry soever the Season, but that Water so ting'd and so fatten'd enriches the Lands they run through, that 'tis hardly to be imagined how fertile and rich the Soil is made by it.

Then, as every Clothier must keep a Horse, perhaps two, to fetch and carry for the use of his Manufacture, (*viz.*) to fetch home his Wooll and his Provisions from the Market, to carry his Yam to the Spinners, his Manufacture to the Fulling Mill, and, when finished, to the Market to be sold, *and the like*; so every Manufacturer generally keeps a Cow or two, or more, for his Family, and this employs the two, or three, or four Pieces of enclosed Land about his House, for they scarce sow Corn enough for their Cocks and Hens; and this feeding their Grounds still adds by the Dung of the Cattle, to enrich the Soil.

But now, to speak of the Bounty of Nature again, which I but just mentioned; it is to be observed, that these Hills are so furnished by Nature with Springs and Mines, that not only on the Sides, but even to the very Tops, there is scarce a Hill but you find, on the highest Part of it, a Spring of Water, and a Coal-Pit. I doubt not but there are both Springs and Coal-Pits lower in the Hills, 'tis enough to say they are at the top; but, as I say, the Hills are so full of Springs, so the lower Coal-Pits may perhaps be too full of Water, to work without Dreins to carry it off, and the Coals in the upper Pits being easie to come at, they may chuse to work them, because the Horses which fetch the Coals, go light up the Hill, and come loaden down.

Having thus *Fire and Water* at every Dwelling, there is no need to enquire why they dwell thus dispers'd upon the highest Hills, the Convenience of the Manufactures requiring it. Among

the Manufacturers Houses are likewise scattered an infinite Number of Cottages or small Dwellings, in which dwell the workmen which are employed, the Women and Children of whom, are always busy Carding, Spinning, &c. so that no Hands being unemployed, all can gain their Bread, even from the youngest to the antient; hardly any thing above four Years old, but its Hands are sufficient to it self.

This is the Reason also why we saw so few People without Doors; but if we knock'd at the Door of any of the Master Manufacturers, we presently saw a House full of lusty Fellows, some at the Dye-fat, some dressing the Cloths, some in the Loom, some one thing, some another, all hard at work, and full employed upon the Manufacture, and all seeming to have sufficient Business.

I should not have dwelt so upon this Part, if there was not abundance of Things subsequent to it, which will be explained by this one Description, and which are needful to be understood by any one that desires a full understanding of the Manner how the People of *England* are employed, and do subsist in these remoter Parts where they are so numerous; for this is one of the most populous Parts of *Britain*, *London* and the adjacent Parts excepted....

And this brought me from the Villages where this Manufacture is wrought, to the Market where it is sold, which is at *Leeds*....

The Market itself is worth describing, tho' no Description can come up to the Thing itself; however, take a Sketch of it with its Customs and Usages as follows:

The Street is a large, broad, fair and well-built Street, beginning, as I have said, at the Bridge, and ascending gently to the North.

Early in the Morning, there are Tressels placed in two Rows in the Street, some- times two Rows on a Side, but always one Row at least; then there are Boards laid cross those Tressels, so that the Boards lie like long Counters on either Side, from one end of the Street to the other.

The Clothiers come early in the Morning with their Cloth; and as few Clothiers bring more than one Piece, the Market being so frequent, they go into the Inns and Publick-Houses with it, and there set it down.

At seven a Clock in the Morning, the Clothiers being supposed to be all come by that time, even in the Winter, but the Hour is varied as the Seasons advance (in the Summer earlier, in the Depth of Winter a little later) I take it, at a Medium, and as it was when I was there, at six or seven, I say, the Market Bell rings; it would surprize a Stranger to see in how few Minutes, without hurry or noise, and not the least disorder, the whole Market is fill'd; all the Boards upon the Tressels are covered with Cloth, close to one another as the Pieces can he long ways by one another, and behind every Piece of Cloth, the Clothier standing to sell it.

This indeed is not so difficult, when we consider that the whole Quantity is brought into the Market as soon as one Piece, because as the Clothiers stand ready in the Inns and Shops just behind, and that there is a Clothier to every Piece, they have no more to do, but, like a Regiment drawn up in Line, every one takes up his Piece, and has about five Steps to march to lay it upon the first Row of Boards, and perhaps ten to the second Row; so that upon the Market Bell

ringing, in half a quarter of an Hour the whole Market is fill'd, the Rows of Boards cover'd, and the Clothiers stand ready.

As soon as the Bell has done Ringing, the Merchants and Factors, and Buyers of all Sorts, come down, and coming along the Spaces between the Rows of Boards, they walk up the Rows, and down as their Occasions direct. Some of them have their foreign Letters of Orders, with Patterns seal'd on them, in Rows, in their Hands; and with those they match Colours, holding them to the Cloths as they think they agree to: when they see any Cloths to their Colours, or that suit their occasions, they reach over to the Clothier and whisper, and in the fewest Words imaginable the Price is stated; one asks, the other bids; and 'tis agree, or not agree, in a Moment.

The Merchants and Buyers generally walk down and up twice on each Side of the Rows, and in little more than an Hour all the Business is done; in less than half an Hour you will perceive the Cloths begin to move off, the Clothier taking it up upon his Shoulder to carry it to the Merchant's House; and by half an hour after eight a Clock the Market Bell rings again; immediately the Buyers disappear, the Cloth is all sold, or if here and there a Piece happens not to be bought, 'tis carried back into the Inn, and, in a quarter of an Hour, there is not a Piece of Cloth to be seen in the Market.

Thus, you see, Ten or Twenty thousand Pounds value in Cloth, and sometimes much more, bought and sold in little more than an Hour, and the Laws of the Market the most strictly observed as ever I saw done in any Market *in England*; for,

1. Before the Market Bell rings, no Man shews a Piece of Cloth, nor can the Clothiers sell any but in open Market.

2. After the Market Bell rings again, no Body stays a Moment in the Market, but carries his Cloth back if it be not sold.

3. And that which is most admirable is, 'tis all managed with the most profound Silence, and you cannot hear a Word spoken in the whole Market, I mean, by the Persons buying and selling; 'tis all done in whisper.

The reason of this Silence, is chiefly because the Clothiers stand so near to one another; and 'tis always reasonable that one should not know what another does, for that would be discovering their Business, and exposing it to one another.

If a Merchant has bidden a Clothier a Price, and he will not take it, he may go after him to his House, and tell him he has considered of it, and is willing to let him have it; but they are not to make any new Agreement for it, so as to remove the Market from the Street to the Merchant's House.

By nine a Clock the Boards are taken down, the Tressels are removed, and the Street cleared, so that you see no Market or Goods any more than if there had been nothing to do; and this is done twice a Week. By this quick Return the Clothiers are constantly supplied with Money, their Workmen are duly paid, and a prodigious Sum circulates thro' the County every Week.

If you should ask upon all this, where all these Goods, as well here as at *Wakefield*, and at *Hallifax*, are vented and disposed of? It would require a long Treatise of Commerce to enter into

that Part: But that I may not bring you into the Labyrinth, and not show you the way out, I shall, in three short Heads, describe the Consumption, for there are three Channels by which it goes:

1. For the home Consumption; their Goods being, as I may say, everywhere made use of, for the cloathing the ordinary People, who cannot go to the Price of the fine Medley Cloths made, as I formerly gave you an Account, in the Western Counties of *England*. There are for this purpose a Set of travelling Merchants in *Leeds*, who go all over England with Drovers of Pack Horses, and to all the Fairs and Market Towns over the whole Island, I think I may say none excepted. Here they supply not the common People by Retail, which would denominate them Pedlars indeed, but they supply the Shops by Wholesale or whole Pieces; and not only so, but give large Credit too, so that they are really travelling Merchants, and as such they sell a very great Quantity of Goods; 'tis ordinary for one of these Men to carry a thousand Pounds value of Cloth with them at a time, and having sold it at the Fairs or Towns where they go, they send their Horses back for as much more, and this very often in a Summer, for they chuse to travel in the Summer, and perhaps towards the Winter time, tho' as little in Winter as they can, because of the badness of the Roads.

2. Another Sort of Buyers are those who buy to send to *London*; either by Com- missions from *London*, or they give Commissions to Factors and Warehouse-keepers in *London* to sell for them; and these drive also a very great Trade: These Factors and Warehouse-keepers not only supply all the Shop-keepers and Wholesale Men in *London*, but sell also very great Quantities to the Merchants, as well for Exportation to the *English Colonies in America*, which take off great Quantities of those course Goods, especially *New England, New York, Virginia, &c.* as also to the *Russia Merchants*, who send an exceeding Quantity to *Petersburgh, Riga, Dantzic, Narva,* and to *Sweden and Pomerania*.

3. The third Sort of Buyers, and who are not less considerable than the other, are truly merchants, that is to say, such as receive Commissions from Abroad to buy Cloth for the Merchants chiefly in *Hamburgh*, and in *Holland*, and from several other Parts; and these are not only many in Number, but some of them are very considerable in their Dealings, and correspond as far as *Nuremberg, Frankfort, Leipsick*, and even to *Vienna and Ausburgh*, in the farthest Provinces of *Germany*.

On Account of this Trade it was, that some Years ago an Act of Parliament was obtained for making the Rivers *Aire and Calder* Navigable; by which a Communication by Water was opened from *Leeds and Wakefield* to *Hull* and by which means all Woollen Manufactures which those Merchants now export by Commission, as above, is carried by Water to *Hull*, and there shipped for *Holland, Bremen, Hamburgh*, and the *Baltick*. And thus you have a brief Account, by what Methods this vast Manufacture is carried off, and which way they find a Vent for it.