

Growth of Leeds and its Woollen Industry in the 18th century.

(The growth of the Leeds and its woollen industry is described by H. R. Fox Bourne. *English Merchants: Memoirs in Illustration of the Progress of English Commerce*, 1866, II, 217-18, 219; in J. T. Ward, ed., *The Factory System, Vol. I, Birth and Growth* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1970), pp.37-38.)

All the early prosperity of Leeds sprang from its trade in woollen goods; yet in the middle of the [eighteenth] century this trade was still in its infancy. Leeds itself was, in comparison with its present condition, an insignificant town, hardly longer than the length of Briggate, stretching westward no further than Trinity Church, and with Saint Peter's Church for almost its eastern limit. Saint John's Church, with the Free Grammar School and Harrison's Almshouses adjoining, formed its [northern] boundary; and all the town was contained on the northern side of the Aire. The old Norman bridge at the foot of Briggate still sufficed for the weekly cloth-market; the traders of the town and the country manufacturers being called together by a bell rung in the quaint bridge-chapel, and the merchants of Hull, Boston, and similar places coming there to buy the cloths and carry them away in river-boats. By 1758, however, the trade had outgrown that old-fashioned mart, and, accordingly, a commodious building, now known as the Mixed Cloth Hall, was set up a little to the west of Trinity Church. This structure, thought preposterously large at the time of its erection, formed a quadrangle three hundred and sixty-four feet long, and a hundred and ninety-two feet broad, with an inner court measuring three hundred and thirty feet, by ninety-six. It was accessible by seven doors, was lighted by a hundred and sixty-seven windows, and was large enough, it was reckoned, to hold 109,200 *l.*'s worth of cloth at a time. Within seventeen years from its opening, it was found necessary to build another meeting-place. The White Cloth Hall, between Briggate and Saint Peter's Church, was completed in 1775; and within a few years, nine similar structures were opened in all the trading towns of the West Riding of Yorkshire. All grew with the growth of Leeds. In 1775, Leeds contained 17,117 inhabitants. By 1800 the population had increased to 30,699; in 1821 it amounted to 83,746; and in 1865 it was estimated at 224,025...Most of the wool was made into cloth by small manufacturers scattered about the country, and lodged in the different towns and villages of the West Riding. These manufacturers brought or sent their goods to the markets of such places as Leeds, Bradford, or Wakefield, there either to be sold at once to the wholesale merchants, who came from other parts of England or from foreign countries, or to be collected by the wool-staplers and reserved for subsequent distribution. There were no manufactures conducted on the extensive scale now common, and necessary to the more finished workmanship of modern times, until Benjamin Gott set the fashion.