

Letters on the Cloth Districts of Yorkshire, 1849-50

(In 1849-50, the *Morning Chronicle* published a series of letters on Labour and the Poor in the Metropolitan, Rural, and Manufacturing Districts of England and Wales. Angus Reach wrote the letters on the industrial districts. Here he describes the West Riding woollen industry in the mid-nineteenth century. Note that a great deal of the work in the cloth district of Huddersfield and Bradford, despite the prevalence of factories, was still done within a domestic industry in the mid-19th century. From the *Morning Chronicle*, 18 and 22 Jan. 1850; in J. T. Ward, ed., *The Factory System, Vol. I, Birth and Growth* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1970), pp. 160-174.)

LETTER XIV

[Monday, Dec- 3, 1849] *Supplement to the Morning Chronicle*, 18 Jan 1850

The town of Huddersfield is a species of minor capital of the broad and fancy cloth-working districts of Yorkshire; Leeds being taken as the general manufacturing metropolis of the county. In Huddersfield and its neighbourhood, however, a very important proportion of the cloth-working of the entire district is carried on, and much of the fine-textured stuffs, conventionally known as "West of England goods", is spun, woven, and finished on the banks of the Colne. The town of Huddersfield contains rather more than 36,000, and the district comprehended by the Huddersfield union is peopled by somewhat more than 108,000 inhabitants. The number of paupers at present accommodated in the several workhouses of the union amounts to about 250, and the amount of out-door relief granted during a single week in the beginning of the present month was £186. In the year 1846, Out of 939 couples who married, 378 men and 696 women signed the register with their marks. The value of life in Huddersfield, as stated in the Registrar's General Report, is 1 in 49 as regards males, and 1 in 52 as regards females; showing a degree of mortality less by nearly 10 per cent than that of Chorley, the healthiest of the cotton towns.

The population of Huddersfield and the surrounding districts are almost entirely engaged in the manufacture of wool-the scattered cotton and silk spinning and weaving establishments which may be found here and there being merely exceptions to the general rule. By far the greater part of the woollen manufacture of Huddersfield is carried on, in all its stages, in the mills. When weaving is put out, the work is generally executed by country people living within a circuit of some half-dozen miles. The species of fabric so manufactured is commonly that distinguished, in its different kinds, as fancy goods. The Ten Hours Bill applies to woollen factories just as it does to cotton mills. In the woollen districts, however, there seems to have been no attempt made to get rid of its restrictions. No mill, so far as my inquiries have extended, has sought to work by means of the relay system; and in the vast majority of instances, at least so far as regards the

woollen in opposition to the worsted trade, no children are employed until they are above thirteen years of age.

The town of Huddersfield belongs to one ground landlord Sir John Ramsden. No building leases are granted, and the inhabitants are therefore, pro tanto, tenants at will. The town has sprung up almost entirely within the last sixty years. Previous to that time it was but an insignificant cluster of irregularly built lanes. The small manufacturers around brought in their wares upon packhorses, and on the market-day exposed them for sale on the churchyard-wall. When the Cloth Hall was opened, many of these humble producers had not sufficient capital to rent a stall. Although thus comparatively a new town, Huddersfield is by no means a well-built town....

I have already sketched the principal features of the long staple woollen manufacture-my *information being* derived from a careful inspection of several of the mills, great and small, in Huddersfield and in the surrounding district. The processes of *converting the wool* into broadcloth or fancy goods are carried on both in and out of the mills; but the strong tendency of the trade is to concentrate itself in the factories under the eyes of the proprietors, who very generally complain of the dilatoriness of the home workmen, and the *uncertainty of* their completing their tasks by the stipulated time. The workpeople, on the other hand, maintain that they suffer from the caprice of the employers in bestowing work, and from the frequency with which they are compelled to make repeated journeys to the warehouses or mills before they obtain the yarn which they are to spin and weave in their own homes.

The houses inhabited by the factory hands of Huddersfield consist in most cases of a large parlour-kitchen *opening from* the street, with a cellar beneath it, and either two small bedrooms or one. large one above. In some *instances a* scullery is added to the main apartment. The general style of furniture is much the same as that which distinguished the operative dwellings of the cotton districts. If there be any difference, I should say that that of Huddersfield seems the more plainly substantial of the two. The clock and the corner cupboards, and the shelves glittering with ranges of dishes and plates, are to be found as universally as in Manchester, and a plentiful supply of good water is in general conducted into every house.

Taking wages as the test of social condition, the operatives of Huddersfield may be considered as very fairly situated. Children below 13 years of age are seldom employed in the mills, and the average earnings of those over that age may be 5s- weekly. The earnings of the women may vary from 7s. or thereabouts obtained by those who pick and boil-to 9s. or 10s., or thereabouts, obtained by those who weave. The average may be about 8s. 6d. The average wage of the women is raised by the number of their sex who work at the loom, as the average wage of the men is depressed by the same cause. Slubbers, carders, spinners, dyers, fullers, raisers, and finishers may average about 18s. a week. Taking into account the number of adult males employed as weavers, both by power and hand, the general average sinks, and may be placed at from 14s. to 15s. per

week. Admitting these estimates to be generally correct, the average wage earned by adults in Huddersfield may be placed at 11s. 6d. a week-an amount very similar to the general run of wages in the cotton districts, while the average earned by all sexes and ages may be estimated at something more than 9s. . . . The rents paid range from £7 to £8, or about 3s. per week.

The yarns given out by the mills to be spun and woven at the homes of the workpeople, are taken to the rural districts around, or to the remote suburbs of Huddersfield. At a little village called Paddock, about a mile from the town, a number of looms are generally going. Proceeding there, I entered upon a series of domiciliary visits. The general arrangements of the houses were similar. The looms invariably occupied the first floor. In some cases, one and two uncurtained beds, almost invariably left unmade, were placed in corners. In other instances, the sleeping arrangements were upon the groundfloor, or within a third chamber roughly partitioned off from the loom apartment....

In another house I found that only two people resided, a man and his wife.... There were two looms here for the husband and wife. The man, who was busy, stopped his shuttle to speak to me. For the cloth which he was weaving he could have got, seven years ago, 10d. a yard; the price now paid was only 4 1/2 d. When he had pretty regular work, his average weekly earnings were about 10s. For this he frequently worked from six o'clock in the morning until eight o'clock at night. Last summer trade had been bad with him, and one week with another he had not much above 8s. The earnings of his wife generally amounted to about 3s. 6d. per week. Taking an average, he thought that their united earnings might be about 12s. 6d. or 13s. a week. This was when trade was tolerably good. Sometimes they could not make more than 10s. a week between them. He paid for his house £8 10s. per annum. The poor-rates were 6s. 3d.; the highway rates, 3s. 3 1/2d.; and the charge for water 5s. The woollen hand-loom weavers about Huddersfield were very ill off. "If they have young families", said the woman, "that is, families over young to help them by working in the mills, they don't get half enough to eat

The small town of Dewsbury holds, in the woollen district, very much the same position which Oldham does in the cotton country. The reader will remember that an essential feature in the manufacture of the latter town is the spinning and preparing of waste and refuse cotton. To this stuff the name of shoddy is given; but the real and orthodox shoddy is a production of the woollen districts, and consists of the second-hand wool manufactured by the tearing up, or rather the grinding, of woollen rags by means of coarse willows, called devils; the operation of which sends forth choking clouds of dry pungent dirt and floating fibres. The real and original "devil's dust" having been, by the agency of the machinery in question, reduced to something like the original raw material, fresh wool is added to the pulp, in different proportions, according to the quality of the stuff to be manufactured, and the mingled material is at length reworked in the usual way into a coarse and little serviceable cloth.

There are some shoddy mills in the neighbourhood of Huddersfield. but the mean little town of Dewsbury may be taken as the metropolis of the manufacture, and thither I accordingly proceeded. The first mill I visited was that belonging to the Messrs. Blakely, in the immediate outskirts of the town. This establishment is devoted solely to the sorting, preparing, and grinding of rags, which are worked up in the neighbouring factories. Great bales choke-full of filthy tatters lay scattered about the yard, and loaded waggons were fast arriving, and adding to the heap. As for the mill, a glance at its exterior showed its character. It being a calm still day, the walls and part of the roof were covered with the thick clinging dust and fibre, which ascended in choky volumes from the open doors and glassless windows of the ground floor, and which also poured forth from a chimney, constructed for the purpose, exactly like smoke. On a windy day I was told that the appearance of the place would be by no means so bad, as a thorough draft would carry the dust rapidly away to leeward. As it was, however, the mill was covered as with a mildewy fungus, and upon the grey slates of the roof the frowzy deposit could not be less than two inches in depth.

We went first into the upper story, where the rags are stored. A great wareroom was piled in many places from the floor to the ceiling with bales of woollen rags, torn strips and tatters of every colour peeping out from the bursting depositaries. There is hardly a country in Europe which does not contribute its quota of material to the shoddy manufacturer. Rags are brought from France, Germany, and in great quantities from Belgium. Denmark, I understand, is favourably looked upon by the tatter-merchants, being fertile in morsels of clothing, of fair quality. Of domestic rags, the Scotch bear off the palm; and possibly no one will be surprised to hear, that of all rags Irish rags are the most worn, the filthiest, and generally the most unprofitable....

Under the rag wareroom was the sorting and picking room. Here the bales are opened, and their contents piled in close poverty-smelling masses, upon the floor. The operatives were entirely women. They sat upon low stools, or half sunk and half enthroned amid heaps of the filthy goods, busily employed in arranging them according to the colour and the quality of the morsels, and from the more pretending quality of rags carefully ripping out every particle of cotton which they could detect. Piles of rags of different sorts, dozens of feet high, were the obvious fruits of their labour. All these women were over eighteen years of age, and the wages which they were paid for ten hours' work were 6s. per week. They looked squalid and dirty enough, but all of them were chattering, and several singing, over their noisome labour. The atmosphere of the room was close and oppressive; and although I perceived no particularly offensive smell, we could not help being sensible of the presence of a choky, mildewy sort of odour—a hot, moist exhalation—arising from the sodden smouldering piles; as the workwomen tossed armfuls of rags from one heap to another. In this mill, and at this species of work—the lowest and foulest which any phase of the factory system can show—I found, for the first time, labouring as regular mill-hands, Irish women.

The devils were, as I have said, upon the ground-floor. The choking dust burst out from door and window, and it was not until a minute or so that I could see the workmen, moving amid clouds, catching up armfuls of the sorted rags, and tossing them into the machine to be torn into fibry fragments by the whirling revolutions of its spiky teeth. So far as I could make out, the place was a large bare room-the uncovered beams above, the rough stone walls, and the woodwork of the unglazed windows being, as it were, furred over with clinging woolly matter. On the floor, the dust and coarse filaments lay as if to use the quaint phrase of a gentleman present-"it had been snowing snuff ". The workmen were of course coated with the flying powder. They wore bandages over their mouths, so as to prevent as much as possible the inhalation of the dust, and seemed loth to remove the protection for a moment. Not one of them, however, would admit that he found the trade injurious....

In Batley I went over two shoddy establishments-the Bridge Mill and the Albion Mill. In both of these rags were not only ground, but the shoddy was worked up into coarse bad cloth, a great proportion of which is sent to America for slave clothing. In one of the mills in question, the two rag-grinders at work were Irishwomen whom I have mentioned. They laboured in a sort of half-roofed outhouse, the floor littered with rags and heaped with dust, the walls and beams furred with wavy downlike masses of filament, as though they had been imbedded in clusters of cobweb; while the air, stirred by the revolving cylinders and straps, was a perfect whirlwind of pungent titilating powder. Through this the women, with their squalid dust-strewn garments, powdered to a dull greyish hue, and with their bandages tied over the greater part of their faces, moved like reanimated mummies in their swathings: I had seldom seen anything more ghastly. The wages of these poor creatures do not exceed 7s, or 8s. a week. The men are much better paid, none of them making less than 18s. a week, and many earning as much as 22s....

The weaving is, for the most part, carried on at the homes of the workpeople. I visited several at Batley Car. The domestic arrangements consisted, in every case, of two tolerably large rooms, one above the other, with a cellar beneath-a plan of construction called in Yorkshire a "house and a chamber". The chamber had generally a bed amid the looms. The weavers were, as usual, complaining of irregular work and diminished wages. Their average pay, one week with another, with their wives to wind for them- i.e., to place the thread upon the bobbin which goes into the shuttle-is hardly so much as 10s. a week. They work long hours, often fourteen per day. In one or two instances I found the weaver a small capitalist, with perhaps half a dozen looms, and a hand-jenny for spinning thread, the workpeople being within his own family as regular apprentices and journeymen. . . .

"Shoddy fever", is, in fact, a modification of the very fatal disease induced by what is called "dry grinding" at Sheffield; but of course the particles of woollen filaments are less fatal in their influence than the floating steel-dust produced by the operation in

question. The value of life in the Dewsbury district is about 1 in 47- It is always to be distinctly understood that the rag-grinders constitute an exceedingly trifling minority of the workpeople employed. The operations which succeed that in which the devil plays the most prominent part, seem to be just as healthy as in those mills which prepare from the finer wools the finer cloths.

LETTER XV

[Thursday, Dec. 6, 1849] *Supplement to the Morning Chronicle*, 22 Jan 1850

... When "stuffs" are woven, they may-except, perhaps, for the operations of the dye-house-be considered as ready for sale, such fabrics not involving the multiform finishing processes necessary in the production of glossy broadcloth.

So much for the technical differences between woollen cloths and stuffs. In these differences are involved matters tending to produce, to a very considerable extent, different social phases amid the workpeople. Stuff manufacture is a much cleaner trade than woollen manufacture. Stuff mills rival, if they do not surpass, silk mills in cleanliness and coolness, and sweetness of atmosphere. The dye is rarely applied until the fabric is turned out of the factory. There is little or no oil used in, or evolved by, the process. No high temperature is requisite, at least so far as the mills go; and altogether the work carried on in the stuff factories is well calculated to exhibit in the most favourable light the physical condition of the labourers. Notwithstanding all this, however, the stuff manufacturers are worse off than the woollen manufacturers, when tried by the grand test of the labourer's condition-his wages. In the stuff-mills there are employed, at the very least, a score of women, boys, and children, to one man. The adult males employed at the machinery are either the few who are overlookers, or the rather larger number who are forced to compete with women and girls at the power-loom. The great bulk of the male worsted population work at the unwholesome, easily acquired, and miserably paid for-because easily learned-labour of wool combing. Thus the average of wages is kept lower than in the cotton and cloth, and about as low perhaps as in the silk, districts. The average wages of adult male workmen engaged in the stuff trade cannot be above 10s. a week, at the most liberal estimate. That of women ranges closely up to them - for a female weaver will earn as much, or more, than a male comber. And as for the children, the average of the wages which they receive is kept down by the great number of "half- timers"-boys and girls under thirteen years of age-who are employed. Exclusive of half-time workers and young persons, the average weekly wages of male and female adults may be reckoned at from 8s. 6d. to 9s. 6d. -lower by about 2s. 6d. than the average wages in the cotton districts, reckoning in both cases on a time of fair prosperity, and a period of ten hours' daily toil.

Halifax and Bradford are ... the centres of the stuff manufacture. The former town possesses, however, other industrial resources than that of the staple trade. The mayor,

Mr. Crossley, for instance, is the chief partner in an immense carpet manufacturing establishment, employing about 1,500 hands, principally adult males, and paying about ;£1,000 weekly in wages. Besides this and other establishments of different kinds, the worsted manufacturers of Halifax prepare so great a variety of the staple production, that periods of distress fall in general lighter upon them than on their Bradford neighbours. The latter town is, perhaps, more quickly and keenly affected by the variations of trade than any other manufacturing depot in England. The masters are generally reputed as bold speculators; and the mill owner who ventures his money freely, hazards, of necessity, the wages of his people as well as his own profits. In Halifax, however, things are conducted more slowly and quietly. Compared with Bradford, the place has a touch of antiquity in its aspect and its tone. So far as appearance goes, no two towns can be more dissimilar. Halifax is an ancient borough, girdled by an *enceint* of mills and mill-hands' dwellings. Bradford seems spick and span new from the centre to the circumference. There are points in the town of Halifax, from which the gazer will be put in mind of the quaint cities of Normandy and Bavaria-Rouen or Bamberg-so steep and narrow are the streets, and so picturesque the plaster walls, streaked with chequering beams of blackened wood-the numerous street-turned gables-the ledge-like stories, each overhanging the other-and the grey and time-tarnished hue of the great coarse slates which form the high crow-footed and ridgy roofs. . .

Mr. Smith, of Deanston, in a sanitary report made about 1837, describes Bradford as being the dirtiest town in England. Mr. Smith must have written ere he extended his researches to Halifax. At all events, Bradford is rapidly improving....

The first factory in Halifax which I visited was that of the Messrs. Holdsworth. It is a vast establishment, weaving all manner of stuff goods, situated upon the outskirts of the town, and surrounded by the dwellings of the workpeople. The active and energetic chief of the firm conducted me through the works. The weaving shed is one of the noblest structures of the kind I have ever seen, perfectly lighted, not only by ordinary windows, but by means of a species of serrated roof, the perpendicular portion~ of which are glass. That the arrangements for ventilation are excellent, was sufficiently proved by the perfectly fresh state of the atmosphere, and the workpeople laboured with spirit and energy. There were a few jacquard looms in the shed, but the greater number were of the ordinary kind. There might have been about one man to every ten women and girls. The wages of the former average 10s., those of the latter 8s. -weekly.

In estimating the remuneration of workpeople, I am frequently puzzled to reconcile the statements of the operatives and those of their masters, and yet I believe both to be grounded on fact. Where the amount of wages fluctuates with the skill of the workman and the quality of the fabric wrought, two parties looking at the question from different points of view will almost invariably state results each of which is capable of being supported by figures representing the sums earned or the sums paid, but neither giving a really fair view of the case. The ill master will frequently strike an average from

what his best hands working at the best jobs may earn. The labourer will just as frequently base his calculations upon what the most ordinary hands working on the most ordinary jobs do receive. In neither case can you complain of absolute want of truth, but in both cases you will have to lament an equal absence of candour....

To return to the workpeople of Messrs. Holdsworth's factory. The vast majority of weavers were young women. In neatness and propriety of dress they rivalled the silk spinners, and shawls and bonnets were hung along the walls, as I have described them in Macclesfield. In a smaller spinning room the machinery ran quicker-so quickly, indeed, as to cause a perceptible tremor in the building; and here the wages of the workwomen ranged somewhat higher. To be removed to the quick spinning room was to be promoted. In the carding, drawing, and spinning departments, the mechanism was almost exclusively looked after by young women and girls, at the low wages of 5s and 5s, 5d. The men employed were overlookers, and earned from 15s. to 22s. The ventilation in these rooms was hardly so good as in the weaving shed, but still I cannot say that there was much to complain of. The girls looked hale and hearty, and Mr. Holdsworth was energetic in calling my attention to their plumpness, a quality which, in a large majority of cases, they certainly possessed to a very fair degree....

From the Messrs. Holdsworth's mill I proceeded to another-that of the Messrs. Ackroyd. The average wages paid in this establishment were thus stated to me by a very intelligent overlooker. The adult males, not including the weavers, might have about 17s. a week; female adults might average, in the spinning and drawing rooms, about 6s. or 6s. 3d.; young persons from 13 to 18, about 4s. 9d.; and children from 8 to 13, working five hours a day, from 1s. 9d. to 2s. 3d. In the weaving department my informant thought that the average rate earned by men and women might be somewhat above 8s. per week. As in the case of the former mill, the factory in question was kept as clean as possible. . . .

Of course there are a great number of woolcombers in Halifax, but the account which I shall give of these workmen in Bradford will suffice for both.

Let us now proceed, then, to the latter place. In an architectural point of view, the best features of Bradford consist Of numerous ranges of handsome warehouses. The streets have none of the old-fashioned picturesqueness of those of Halifax. The best of them are muddy, and not too often swept. Mills abound in great plenty, and their number is daily increasing, while the town itself extends in like proportion. Bradford is, as I have said, essentially a new town. Half a century ago it was a mere cluster of huts: now the district of which it is the heart contains upwards of 132,000 inhabitants. The value of life is about 1 in 40. Fortunes have been made in Bradford with a rapidity almost unequalled even in the manufacturing districts. -In half a dozen years men have risen from the loom to possess mills and villas. At present, stuff manufacturers are daily pouring into the town from Leeds; while a vast proportion of the wool-combing of the empire seems, as it were, to have concentrated itself in Bradford. . . .

As I have hinted, the Bradford employers are, in the slang of the manufacturing districts, accounted "high-pressure men". I have been told that a mere spirit of rapid demand is sufficient to cause loom-shed after loom-shed to arise. The fabrics manufactured being also of the same general class, their sale increases and diminishes simultaneously; and the consequence is, that every shade of variation in the market means hundreds of dinners the more or the less in Bradford. A town of this class is just one of those on which, in prosperous seasons, the flood of agricultural pauperism bears down. Trade is at present exceedingly brisk in Bradford-so brisk that even stables are put into requisition to contain the wool, for lack of warehouse room. . . .

As I have stated, the greatest part of the labour of male adults through the worsted districts consists in combing wool. In Bradford I was told, on good authority, that there are about 15,000 woolcombers. These men sometimes work singly, but more often three, four, or five, club together and labour in what is called a shop, generally consisting of the upper room or "chamber" over the lower room or "house". Their wives and children assist them to a certain extent in the first and almost unskilled portions of the operation, but the whole process is rude and easily acquired. It consists of forcibly pulling the wool through metal combs or spikes, of different lengths, and set five or six deep. These combs must be, kept at a high temperature, and consequently the central apparatus in a combing room is always a "fire-pot", burning either coke, coals, or charcoal, and constructed so as to allow three, four, or five combs to be heated at it; the vessel being in these cases respectively called a "pot o' three", a "pot o' four", or a "pot o' five". When coals are burned, the pot is a fixed apparatus, like a small stove, with a regular funnel to carry away the smoke. When charcoal is used, the pot is a movable vessel, without a funnel, the noxious fumes too often spreading freely in the room. Scattered through the chamber are frequently two or more poles or masts, to which the combs, after being heated, are firmly attached, while the, workman drags the wool through them until he has reduced it to a soft mass of filament-when he educes the substance as it were, draws it by skilful manipulation out of the compact lump into long semi-transparent "slivers", which, after certain minor operations, are returned to the factory to be subjected to the "drawing machines". The general aspect of a combing-room may therefore be described as that of a bare chamber, heated to nearly 85 degrees. A round fire-pot stands in the centre; masses of wool are heaped about; and four or five men, in their shirtsleeves, are working busily....

Woolcombers' hours are, I believe, proverbially long. The men in Bradford said they were sometimes forced to work most of the night. Low as their wages are, they were recently still lower; but since the revival of trade in the district, the wool combers have raised the amount of their remuneration upwards of 3s. by three successive strikes. The combers have now to compete with machinery. Each machine will do about ten times the work of a hand labourer, but it employs several hands, two of whom get good wages. These machines are in general, however, only used for the coarsest work, and did not

seem to excite any great apprehension among the workmen. Woolcombing is the only branch of manufacturing industry which I have yet met with supporting a fair proportion of adult Irish males. A number of them have been bred to the employment at Mount Mellick, in Queen's County. The mass of the woolcombers of Yorkshire includes natives of almost all the southern counties of England. One and all, they were loud in their denunciations of the accommodation provided for their labour. In the south the masters used to provide shops for the work. Here the men had to labour in their houses, and often to sleep in the room in which they toiled...