

## **Report from the Committee on the state of the woollen manufacture of England, 1806**

*(Journals of the House of Commons, LXI, 696-703; in A. Aspinall and E. Anthony Smith, eds., English Historical Documents, XI, 1783-1832, New York: Oxford University Press, 1959, pp. 505-11. The introduction of machinery into the textile industry resulted in demands by workers for the enforcement of laws on the regulation of machinery and apprenticeship, some of which dated back to the Statute of Apprentices of 1563. Manufacturers opposed all such laws as restrictions on free competition. The apprenticeship laws were repealed in 1813. This Parliamentary Committee report explained the organization of the wool industry in 1806.)*

It is with no small satisfaction that your Committee find themselves able at the outset of their report to inform the House, that the attention of Parliament has not been called to the woollen manufacture in consequence of any decay in its prosperity; on the contrary, it is an acknowledged fact, that it has been gradually increasing in almost all the various parts of England in which it is carried on; in some of them very rapidly; till at length, while our home consumption has of course been increasing with the growing population and wealth of our country, our exports of woollen goods have reached to the immense amount of £6,000,000 official, or near £9,000,000 real value....

The rapid and prodigious increase of late years in the manufactures and commerce of this country is universally known, as well as the effects of that increase on our revenue and national strength; and in considering the immediate causes of that augmentation, it will appear that, under the favour of Providence, it is principally to be ascribed to the general spirit of enterprise and industry among a free and enlightened people, left to the unrestrained exercise of their talents in the employment of a vast capital; pushing to the utmost the principle of the division of labour; calling in all the resources of scientific research and mechanical ingenuity; and, finally, availing themselves of all the benefits to be derived from visiting foreign countries, not only for forming new, and confirming old commercial connections, but for obtaining a personal knowledge of the wants, the taste, the habits, the discoveries and improvements, the productions and fabrics of other civilized nations, and, by thus bringing home facts and suggestions, perfecting our existing manufactures, and adding new ones to our domestic stock; opening at the same time new markets for the product of our manufacturing and commercial industry, and qualifying ourselves for supplying them. It is by these means alone, and, above all, your committee must repeat it, by the effect of machinery in improving the quality and cheapening the fabrication of our various articles of export, that with a continually accumulating weight of taxes, and with all the necessaries and comforts of life gradually increasing in price, the effects of which on the wages of labour could not but be very considerable, our commerce and manufactures have been also increasing in such a degree as to surpass the most sanguine calculations of the ablest political writers who had speculated on the improvements of a future age....

There are three different modes of carrying on the woollen manufacture; that of the master clothier of the west of England, the factory, and, the domestic system. In all the western counties as well as in the north, there are factories, but the master clothier of the west of England buys his wool from the importer, if it be foreign, or in the fleece, or of the woolstapler, if it be of domestic growth; after which, in all the different processes through which it passes, he is under the necessity of employing as many distinct classes of persons; sometimes working in their own houses, sometimes in those of the master clothier, but none of them going out of their proper line. Each class of workmen, however, acquires great skill in performing its

particular operation, and hence may have arisen the acknowledged excellence, and, till of late, superiority, of the cloths of the west of England. It is however a remarkable fact, of which your committee has been assured by one of its own members, that previously to the introduction of machinery, it was very common, and it is said sometimes to happen at this day, for the north countryman to come into the west of England, and, in the clothing districts of that part of the kingdom, to purchase his wool, which he carries home; where, having worked it up into cloth, he brings it back again, and sells it in its native district. This is supposed to arise from the northern clothier being at liberty to work himself, and employ his own family and others, in any way which his interest or convenience may suggest.

In the factory system, the master manufacturers, who sometimes possess a very great capital, employ in one or more buildings or factories, under their own or their superintendant's inspection, a number of workmen, more or fewer according to the extent of their trade. This system, it is obvious, admits in practice of local variations. But both in the system of the west of England clothier, and in the factory system, the work, generally speaking, is done by persons who have no property in the goods they manufacture, for in this consists the essential distinction between the two former systems, and the domestic.

In the last-mentioned, or domestic system, which is that of Yorkshire, the manufacture is conducted by a multitude of master manufacturers, generally possessing a very small, and scarcely ever any great extent of capital. They buy the wool of the dealer; and, in their own houses, assisted by their wives and children, and from two or three to six or seven journeymen, they dye it (when dyeing is necessary) and through all the different stages work it up into undressed cloth.

Various processes however, the chief of which were formerly done by hand, under the manufacturer's own roof, are now performed by machinery, in public mills, as they are called, which work for hire. There are several such mills near every manufacturing village, so that the manufacturer, with little inconvenience or loss of time, carries thither his goods, and fetches them back again when the process is completed. When it has attained to the state of undressed cloth, he carries it on the market-day to a public hall or market, where the merchants repair to purchase.

Several thousands of these small master manufacturers attend the market of Leeds, where there are three halls for the exposure and sale of their cloths: and there are other similar halls, where the same system of selling in public market prevails, at Bradford, Halifax, and Huddersfield. The halls consist of long walks or galleries, throughout the whole length of which the master manufacturers stand in a double row, each behind his own little division or stand, as it is termed, on which his goods are exposed to sale. In the interval between these rows the merchants pass along, and make their purchases. At the end of all hour, on the ringing of a bell, the market closes, and such cloths as have been purchased are carried home to the merchants' houses; such goods as remain unsold continuing in the halls till they find a purchaser at some ensuing market. It should however be remarked, that a practice has also obtained of late years, of merchants giving out samples to some manufacturer whom they approve, which goods are brought to the merchant directly, without ever coming into the halls. These however, no less than the others, are manufactured by him in his own family. The greater merchants have their working-room, or, as it is termed, their shop, in which their workmen, or, as they are termed, croppers, all work together. The goods which, as it has been already stated, are bought in the undressed state, here undergo various processes, till, being completely finished, they are sent away for the use of the consumer, either in the home or the foreign market; the merchants

sending them abroad directly without the intervention of any other factor. Sometimes again the goods are dressed at a stated rate by dressers, who take them in for that purpose.

The greater part of the domestic clothiers live in villages and detached houses, covering the whole face of a district of from 20 to 30 miles in length, and from 12 to 15 in breadth. Coal abounds throughout the whole of it; and a great proportion of the manufacturers occupy a little land, from 3 to 12 or 15 acres each. They often likewise keep a horse, to carry their cloth to the fulling mill and the markets.

Though the system which has been just described be that which has been generally established in the West Riding of Yorkshire, yet there have long been a few factories in the neighbourhood of Halifax and Huddersfield; and four or five more, one however of which has been since discontinued, have been set on foot not many years ago in the neighbourhood of Leeds. These have for some time been objects of great jealousy to the domestic clothiers. The most serious apprehensions have been stated, by witnesses who have given their evidence before your committee in behalf of the domestic manufacturers, lest the factory system should gradually root out the domestic; and lest the independent little master manufacturer, who works on his own account, should sink into a journeyman working for hire. It is for the purpose of counteracting this supposed tendency of the factory system to increase, that a numerous class of petitioners wish, instead of repealing, to amend and enforce the Act of Philip and Mary, for restricting the number of looms to be worked in any one tenement; and with a similar view they wish to retain in force the 5th of Elizabeth, which enacts the system of apprenticeships....

Your committee cannot wonder that the domestic clothiers of Yorkshire are warmly attached to their accustomed mode of carrying on the manufacture: It is not merely that they are *accustomed* to it - it obviously possesses many eminent advantages seldom found in a great manufacture.

It is one peculiar recommendation of the domestic system of manufacture, that, as it has been expressly stated to your committee, a young man of good character can always obtain credit for as much wool as will enable him to set up as a little master manufacturer, and the public mills, which are now established in all parts of the clothing district, and which work for hire at an easy rate, enable him to command the use of very expensive and complicated machines, the construction and necessary repairs of which would require a considerable capital. Thus, instances not unfrequently occur, wherein men rise from low beginnings, if not to excessive wealth, yet to a situation of comfort and independence.

It is another advantage of the domestic system of manufacture, and an advantage which is obviously not confined to the individuals who are engaged in it, but which, as well as other parts of this system, extends its benefits to the landholder, that any sudden stoppage of a foreign market, any failure of a great house, or any other of those adverse shocks to which our foreign trade especially is liable, in its present extended state, has not the effect of throwing a great number of workmen out of employ, as it often does, when the stroke falls on the capital of a single individual. In the domestic system, the loss is spread over a large superficies; it affects the whole body of the manufacturers; and, though each little master be a sufferer, yet few, if any, feel the blow so severely as to be altogether ruined. Moreover, it appears in evidence, that in such cases as these, they seldom turn off any of their standing set of journeymen, but keep them at work in hopes of better times.

On the whole, your committee feel no little satisfaction in bearing their testimony to the merits of the domestic system of manufacture; to the facilities it affords to men of steadiness and industry to establish themselves as little master manufacturers, and maintain their families in

comfort by their own industry and frugality; and to the encouragement which it thus holds out to domestic habits and virtues. Neither can they omit to notice its favourable tendencies on the health and morals of a large and important class of the community.

But while your committee thus freely recognize the merits and value of the domestic system, they at the same time feel it their duty to declare it as their decided opinion, that the apprehensions entertained of its being rooted out by the factory system, are, at present at least, wholly without foundation.

For, happily, the merchant no less than the domestic manufacturer, finds his interest and convenience promoted by the domestic system - While it continues, he is able to carry on his trade with far less capital than if he were to be the manufacturer of his own cloth. Large sums must then be irrecoverably invested in extensive buildings and costly machinery; and, which perhaps is a consideration of even still more force, he must submit to the constant trouble and solicitude of watching over a numerous body of workmen. He might then often incur the expense of manufacturing articles, which, from some disappointment in the market, must either be kept on hand, or be sold to a loss. As it is, he can agree with his customer, at home or abroad, for any quantity of goods; and whether on a long expected or a sudden demand, he can repair at once to the market, and most probably purchase to the precise extent of his known wants; or, if the market happen not to furnish what he wishes to purchase, he can give out his sample, and have his order executed immediately.

While these and various other considerations, which might be stated, interest the merchant, as well as the manufacturer, in the continuance of the domestic system; and when it is remembered that this mode of conducting the trade greatly multiplies the merchants, by enabling men to carry on business with a comparatively small capital, your committee cannot participate in the apprehensions which are entertained by the domestic clothiers. In fact, there are many merchants, of very large capitals and of the highest credit, who for several generations have gone on purchasing in the halls, and some of this very description of persons state to your committee, that they not only had no thoughts of setting up factories themselves, but that they believed many of those who had established them were not greatly attached to that system, but only persisted in it because their buildings and machinery must otherwise lie a dead weight upon their hands. Under these circumstances, the lively fears, of the decline of the domestic, and the general establishment of the factory system, may reasonably excite surprize. It may have been in part occasioned by the decrease of the master manufacturers in the immediate neighbourhood of the large towns, especially in two or three populous hamlets adjoining to Leeds, whence they have migrated to a greater distance in the country, where they might enjoy a little land, and other conveniences and comforts. It may have strengthened the impression, that, as your committee have already stated, three or four factories have, within no very long period of time, been established in Leeds, or its vicinity.

But your committee are happy in being able to adduce one irrefragable fact, in corroboration of the sentiments they have already expressed on this question. This is, that the quantity of cloth manufactured by the domestic system has increased immensely of late years, not only in itself but as compared with the quantity made in factories.

Several factories, it has been observed, had long been established near Halifax and Huddersfield, but the principal progress of the factory system, and that which chiefly created the alarm, is stated to have been, within about the last fourteen years, in the town and neighbourhood of Leeds. Your committee succeeded in their endeavours to discover the quantity of cloth annually manufactured in all these factories, and it was found not to exceed 8,000 pieces.

According to the provisions of the Acts commonly called the Stamping Acts, II Geo. II. and 5 and 6 Geo. III. returns are made every Easter to the justices at Pontefract Session, of the quantity of cloth which has been made in the preceding year; the account being kept at the fulling mills by officers appointed for that purpose. These returns your committee carefully examined for the last 14 years, and find that in the year 1792, being by far the greatest year of export then known, there were manufactured 190,332 Pieces of broad, and 150,666 pieces of narrow cloth: Yet the quantity of cloth manufactured in 1805 was 300,237 pieces broad and 165,847 Pieces of narrow cloth, giving an increase, in favour of 1805, of 109,905 pieces broad, and 15,181 pieces narrow; from which increase deducting the cloth manufactured in factories, there remains an increase of about 100,000 broad, and 15,181 narrow pieces, to be placed to the account of the domestic system. The comparatively small quantity of cloth manufactured by the factories will excite less surprize, when it is considered that they are better adapted to the manufacturing of fancy goods, of which immense quantities and great varieties have been invented and sold, chiefly for a foreign market, of late years....

On the whole, your committee do not wonder that the domestic clothiers are warmly attached to their peculiar system. This is a predilection in which the committee participate; but at the same time they must declare, that they see at present no solid ground for the alarm which has gone forth, lest the halls should be deserted, and the generality of merchants should set up factories. Your Committee, however, must not withhold the declaration, that if any such disposition had been perceived, it must have been their less pleasing duty to state, that it would by no means have followed, that it was a disposition to be counteracted by positive law. The right of every man to employ the capital he inherits, or has acquired, according to his own discretion, without molestation or obstruction, so long as he does not infringe on the rights or property of others, is one of those privileges which the free and happy constitution of this country has long accustomed every Briton to consider as his birthright; and it cannot therefore be necessary for your committee to enlarge on its value, or to illustrate its effects. These would be indubitably confirmed by an appeal to our own commercial prosperity, no less than by the history of other trading nations, in which it has been ever found, that commerce and manufactures have flourished in free, and declined in despotic countries. But ... your committee have the satisfaction of seeing, that the apprehensions entertained of factories are not only vicious in principle, but that they are practically erroneous; to such a degree, that even the very opposite dispositions might be reasonably entertained; nor would it be difficult to prove, that the factories, to a certain extent at least, and in the present day, seem absolutely necessary to the well-being of the domestic system; supplying those very particulars wherein the domestic system must be acknowledged to be inherently defective: for, it is obvious, that the little master manufacturers cannot afford, like the man who possesses considerable capital, to try the experiments which are requisite, and incur the risks, and even losses, which almost always occur, in inventing and perfecting new articles of manufacture, or in carrying to a state of greater perfection articles already established. He cannot learn, by personal inspection, the wants and habits; the arts, manufactures, and improvements of foreign countries; diligence, economy, and prudence are the requisites of his charterer, not invention, taste, and enterprize; nor would he be warranted in hazarding the loss of any part of his small capital: he walks in a sure road as long as he treads in the beaten track; but he must not deviate into the paths of speculation. The owner of a factory, on the contrary, being commonly possessed of a large capital, and having all his workmen employed under his own immediate superintendance, may make experiments, hazard speculation, invent shorter or better modes of performing old processes, may introduce new

articles, and improve and perfect old ones, thus giving the range to his taste and fancy, and, thereby alone, enabling our manufacturers to stand the competition with their commercial rivals in other countries. Meanwhile, as is well worthy of remark (and experience abundantly warrants the assertion) many of these new fabrics and inventions, when their success is once established, become general among the whole body of manufacturers: the domestic manufacturers themselves thus benefiting, in the end, from those very factories which had been at first the objects of their jealousy. The history of almost all our other manufactures, in which great improvements have been made of late years, in some cases at an immense expense, and after numbers of unsuccessful experiments, strikingly illustrates and enforces the above remarks. It is besides all acknowledged fact, that the owners of factories are often among the most extensive purchasers at the fairs, where they buy from the domestic clothier the established articles of manufacture, or are able at once to answer a great and sudden order; while, at home, and under their own superintendence, they make their fancy goods, and any articles of a newer, more costly, or more delicate quality, to which they are enabled by the domestic system to apply a much larger proportion of their capital. Thus, the two systems, instead of rivalling, are mutual aids to each other; each supplying the other's defects, and