

Samuel Bamford, *Autobiography of a Weaver*, 1849

(Samuel Bamford (1788-1872), a Lancashire Radical in the early nineteenth century, was a weaver who wrote two autobiographical works. Here he recounts his experience as a youth in the domestic weaving industry. Samuel Bamford. *Early Days*, 1849, 1-5, 11-13, 15, 18, 115-20; in J. T. Ward, ed., *The Factory System, Vol. I, Birth and Growth* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1970), pp. 69-75.)

My parents were a worthy and honest couple, residing, when I was born, in the town of Middleton, near Manchester. My father was a weaver of muslin, at that time considered a fine course of work, and requiring a superior hand; whilst my mother found plenty of employment in occasional weaving, in winding bobbins, or pins for my father, and in looking after the house and the children, of whom I was the fourth born, and the third then living. I have always been given to understand that I was brought into the world on the 28th of February, in "the Gallic eara-eighty-eight"; when, certainly, many of the world's troubles, as well as my own, had a beginning. My parents were religious, of which further shall appear hereafter. My father, for his station in life, was a superior man. He had many talents both natural and acquired, which in those days were not often possessed by men of his condition in society. He was considerably imbued with book knowledge, particularly of a religious kind; wrote a good hand; understood arithmetic; had some acquaintance with astronomy; was a vocal and instrumental musician, singing from the book and playing on the flute; he had a deep taste for melody, as I can recollect from the tunes he played; he was likewise an occasional composer of music, and introduced several of his pieces amongst the religious body with which he was connected; he was also a writer of verses, of no mean order, as I shall presently shew,-so that, take him for all in all, he stood far above his rustic acquaintance in the village, and had to endure the usual consequences -envy, and detraction from the meanest of them. During the hot blood of his youth, few young men could stand before him, either in the wrestling bout, or the battle. I have heard it told, that in those days, notwithstanding his taste for books, and music, and other means for true enjoyment, he at times, associated with the wild rough fellows of the neighbourhood, at the Church Ale-house, or at the Boar's Head Inn, and ought with the drank, danced, or, when nothing less would do, fought with the moodiest or merriest of them....

But irregularities like these, of my father's young days, violent probably in proportion to their unfrequency, could not be indulged in without producing their natural consequences. His health was impaired; he took cold after cold, and disregarded them; and at length a violent fever laid him--prostrate at the verge of the grave. On his recovery he was an altered man. His own natural sense, supported by the serious advice of relatives and friends, determined him on endeavouring to lead a different life. Being convinced that the course he had pursued was fraught with evil as well as folly, he sought divine aid in abandoning it, and he joined a society of Methodists, of which his parents and several individuals of the family were already members.

When his health had become re-established, neither his good resolutions nor God's help forsook him. He continued a member of the religious society he had joined; became "a burning and a shining light," as the Methodists term an exemplary young member; and soon afterwards marrying my mother, he set forward, as we may say, on his pilgrimage through this world, and "Zion-ward". In due time a young family began to sprout about his heels, and with a view to meet increasing expenditure, he and a brother of his named Thomas, adventured a small capital of money in the spinning line, which was then done by jenny; and in weaving their yarns into grey cloths. They succeeded in proportion to their most sanguine expectations, for there was then a market for anything which the spindle or the hand-loom could make,-and they were about to realize all they had dared to hope, when a member of their religious body -one of their "brethren in Israel"-piqued as they supposed, by their increasing influence in a religious, as well as worldly sense, suddenly called on them for the repayment of a sum .which he had lent them for the purpose of commencing their business, and persisting in his demand, they sold off their stock of cloth and machinery, paid every farthing they owed, and closed their concern, my father sitting down to the business of schoolmaster, and my uncle resuming the manual operations of a weaver and small farmer. Difficulties still increased with the wants of our family; my father's school profits were not sufficiently steady to be depended upon, and he relinquished them and returned to the loom. The throes of the French Revolution, and the excitement they created in England, soon afterwards deranged both money transactions and mercantile affairs. Banks stopped, payments were suspended, and trade was at a stand. Woe to the poor weaver then, with his loom without work, the provision shop without credit, and his wife and weans foodless, and looking at each other, and at him, as if saying-Husband! father! hast thou neither bread nor hope for us ?... It would be about a hundred and thirty-two years since, or the year 1716, that my father's grandfather, James Bamford, lived in Hools Wood, in Thornham, keeping there a small farm, and making cane reeds for weavers of flannel and course cotton. Of his children I know not anything, save that he had many sons from whom the Barnfords of Middleton, Alkington, Tonge, and some other neighbouring places are descended. According to what was handed down in our branch of his posterity, he was the next heir to the estate of Bamford Hall ... [but] the rightful heirs [were] cut off from the property, which had descended through the ancestors from the time when the Saxon wrested it from the Celt.

My grandfather was Daniel Bamford, the youngest son of this James Bamford. He came to reside at Middleton, and was a small farmer and weaver. He married Hannah, the daughter of Samuel Cheetham, who was a watch and clock maker, and was, consequently, considered something better in condition than common in those days. . . . My grandfather and all his family had been strict church goers, but on their joining the Methodists, their attendance at church was less constant than it had been. . . .

My great grandfather, Samuel Cheetham, was a thorough "King's-man". During the troubles in 1745, he loaded his gun, and swore he would blow out the brains of any rebel who interfered with him; and judging from his conduct on several occasions, there is but small reason for supposing he would not have been as good as his word....

My mother's father, Jeffrey Battersby, who was quite his opposite in person, manner, and sentiment, was with the Pretender's party at the Boar's Head, assisting them in the collection of King's taxes, and in the levying of contributions; in which his local knowledge, and his quick perception, would, doubtless, be very useful. . . .

As I was getting rather too unmanageable for my aunt at the bobbin-wheel, fortunately in this respect, for both her and myself, my brother went to reside at Manchester, and a vacancy thus occurring on one of the looms, I was transferred to it, and became a weaver....

Having now become an active lad, and, from my good temper and willingness to perform any service, now that the abhorrent wheel was not in the way, had made some advances into the kindly feelings of my aunt and uncle, I was at times chosen to assist the latter when he took the work home to Manchester. The family were, at that time, chiefly employed by Messrs. Samuel and James Broadbent, of Cannon-street, and as the work was for the most part "pollicat" and "romoll" handkerchiefs, with a finer reed, occasionally, of silk and cotton "garments", or handkerchiefs, the "bearing home wallet" was often both bulky and heavy; and when it happened to be too much so for one person to carry, a neighbour's wallet would be borrowed, the burden divided into two, and I would go with one part over my shoulder, behind or before my uncle. He being, as already stated, rather heavy in person would walk deliberately, with a stick in his hand, his green woollen apron twisted round his waist, his clean shirt showing at the open breast of his, waistcoat, his brown silk handkerchief wrapped round his neck, a quid of tobacco in his mouth, and a broad and rather slouched hat on his head. So would he appear when setting out on a "bearing home" journey; whilst I, with my smaller wallet, with my rough jacket, my knee breeches, my strong stockings and shoes, my open collared shirt, and pleasure and glee in my heart and countenance, footed the way as lightsomely as a young colt. Our road then lay up the brow at Alkrington, which was a pleasant foot-path through fields,-past Nut Bank, or the Tan-pits, whichever we chose,-along Hill-lane, through the village of Blakeley, over Tetlow Bridge, across Smedley Fields, over the Butter Stile, and along the highroad, and down Red Bank, into Manchester.

The warehouse of Messrs. Broadbent was nearly at the top of Cannon-street, on the right hand side. We mounted some steps, went along a covered passage, and up a height or two of stairs, to a landing place, one side of which was railed off by the bannister, and the other furnished with a seat for weavers to rest upon when they arrived. Here we should probably find some half dozen weavers and winders, waiting for their turn to deliver in their work and to receive fresh material; and the business betwixt workman and putter-out was generally done in an amicable, reasonable way. No captious fault-finding, no bullying, no arbitrary abatement, which have been too common since, were then practiced. If the work were really faulty, the weaver was shewn the fault; and if it were not a serious one he was only cautioned against repeating it; if the length or the weight was not what it should be, he was told of it, and would be expected to set it right, or account for it, at his next bearing home, and if he were a frequent defaulter he was no longer employed. But very rarely indeed did it happen that any transaction

bearing the appearance of an advantage being taken against the workman by the putter out was heard of in those days.

It would sometimes happen that warp or weft would not be ready until after dinner, and on such occasions, my uncle having left his wallet in the care of the putter-out, would go down stairs and get paid at the counting-house, and from hence go to the public house where we lunched on bread and cheese, or cold meat and bread, with ale, to which my uncle added his ever-favourite pipe of tobacco. This house, which was The Hope and Anchor, in the Old Church yard, was also frequented by other weavers; the putter-out at Broadbent's generally dined there in the parlour, and when he had dined he would come and take a glass of ale, smoke his pipe, and chat with the weavers, after which, my uncle would again go to the warehouse, and getting what material he wanted, would buy a few groceries and tobacco in the town, or probably, as we returned through the apple market, to go down Long Mill Gate, he would purchase a peck of apples, and giving them to me to carry, we wended towards home, I, by permission, making pretty free with the apples by the way. Before leaving the town my uncle would probably call at the Queen Anne, in Long Mill Gate, to see if there were any suitable company going our way; if there were, we took a glass until all were ready, and then we walked on together. Another calling house was Schofield's, at Scotland Bridge, and the last in the town was The Flower Pot, on Red Bank. In winter time, and especially when day was closing, the weavers preferred thus returning in groups, for the road was not altogether free of foot-pads any more than at present. In hot summer weather, the weavers would sometimes indulge themselves by a ride in a cart, or they would leave their heavy burdens at The Three Crowns, in Cock Gates, to be forwarded by Abraham Lees, the Middleton carrier. When a party of weavers returned in company, they would generally make a halt at Blakeley, either at The White Lion, or at Travis's, The Golden Lion, over the way. There the wallets, or "pokes" as they were mostly called, were piled in a heap, ale was ordered, seats drawn round the fire, pipes were soon lighted, news interchanged with the host or some of his company; half an hour, or sometimes more, was thus spent, when the shot being called and paid, the travelers took their wallets and climbing the Hill-lane, were soon at home. Such was "a bearing home day" to Manchester in those times.

But even those days, advantageous as they certainly were when compared with the present ones which are devoted to a similar errand, were considered as being greatly altered for the worse since the days which could be spoken of from remembrance. The two classes of workman and employer were already at too great a distance from each other, and it was a subject of observation that the masters were becoming more and more proud and uplifted each day. Some had seen the time when, on taking their work home, and material not being ready, a dialogue like the following would take place.

Master. -Well, William, there will be no piece for thee till afternoon.

Weaver. -Very well, I'll wait for it then: wot time munni come, think'n yo'?

Master. -Why, it's nearly dinner time now, and if thou'll go an' have a bit o' dinner wi' me, th' work will, mayhap, be ready when we come back.

Weaver. -Thank yo, mester, I'll goo wi' yo then.

So master and man would walk together to some decent looking house, in some decent, quiet street, where the master, his wife, his children, and the guest, would sit down to a plain substantial dinner of broth most likely, with dumpling and meat, or roast beef and baked pudding, or a steaming potatoe pie; after which, master and workman would sit with their ale and pipes, talking about whatever most concerned themselves