

The Plight of the Handloom Weavers and the state of Industry in Lancashire and Staffordshire, 1827

(Second Report of the Select Committee on Emigration from the United Kingdom, *Parliamentary Papers*, 1826-1827, V, pp. 3-7; in A. Aspinall and E. Anthony Smith, eds., *English Historical Documents, XI, 1783-1832*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1959, pp. 518-23.)

...In addition to those ordinary causes, which in many parts of the United Kingdom appear to have led to a superabundant population, or rather to a disproportion between the demand and the supply of labour, an important change has been wrought, and is still in gradual but certain progress, in the condition of some of the manufacturing districts, by the transition from handloom to power-loom weaving. For some time the advance in the cotton trade was so rapid as nearly, if not altogether to absorb in the more productive system, the hands thus thrown out of employment. But difficulties arising from a temporary check in trade shortly fell upon the weavers with the double pressure of these two combined causes, a diminished demand for the produce of their industry, and an increased facility of production.

Your Committee are fully sensible that, to a certain extent, these disastrous consequences to a portion of the community must follow upon every new invention by which human labour is abridged: and that it is more especially the interest of a commercial country, far from discouraging, to afford every protection to such inventions: and while your Committee lay down this doctrine in its fullest extent, they feel themselves bound to add that those who in the present instance are the chief sufferers appear to manifest juster ideas and a more ready acquiescence in this general principle than could have been expected from their situation in life, and from the personal feelings with which their view of the case must be mixed. But . . . two circumstances . . . appear to distinguish this special case from those of ordinary occurrence. Independently of the extent of the change, the time at which it has taken place, with reference to their peculiar branch of trade, is for the weavers most unfortunate; and most, if not all, the ordinary channels of labour are in such a state of repletion that it is difficult for them to transfer their industry elsewhere.

Though the state of distress bordering upon actual famine which these causes have produced in districts extensively concerned in the cotton trade is so notorious as hardly to require pressing upon the House, your Committee have had it confirmed by the strongest and fullest evidence. These districts appear to embrace in England a large portion of the county of Lancaster, together with parts of Cheshire, of the West Riding of Yorkshire, and of Cumberland; and in Scotland principally, so far as the evidence . . . has gone, the counties of Renfrew and Lanark. In mitigation of this extensive distress sums to a very large amount have been raised . . . and have mainly tended to preserve those districts from the immediate horrors of famine and from the possible evils of riot and disturbance. But your Committee deem it their duty not to conceal from the House that, notwithstanding the temporary aid thus afforded, the long continued pressure of

the lowest class upon the poor rates . . . has extended the distress to the ranks immediately above; and that not only the local funds appear in many instances nearly exhausted, but the lower order of rate payers are become themselves dependent upon casual or parochial assistance.

Under these circumstances, the Manufacturers' Relief Committee . . . agreeing with your Committee in opinion that there is little hope that any revival of trade can bring back the employment of the distressed hand-loom weavers, and that the fulness of the other branches of labour renders it difficult for them to transfer their industry; aware also, that temporary aid . . . can only produce temporary benefit . . . [and] satisfied of the efficiency and permanence of the benefit to be afforded by emigration, they have signified their readiness to contribute in furtherance of these objects the sum of £25,000 . . . provided the farther sum of £50,000 can be obtained from other sources.

Your Committee . . . are satisfied . . . that the sum Of £75,000 if raised, will be sufficient to remove, provision and locate in the North American colonies above 1,200 families, amounting to between six and seven thousand souls

In the districts above alluded to, and more especially in Lancashire, there appears to be among the hand-loom weavers two classes almost wholly distinct from each other: the one, who though they take in work in their own houses or cellars, are congregated in the large manufacturing towns; and the other, scattered in small hamlets or single houses, in various directions throughout the manufacturing country. It is to the situation of this latter class, though both are in a state extremely deplorable, that your Committee would chiefly wish to direct the attention of the House. It appears that persons of this description for many years past have been occupiers of small farms of a few acres, which they have held at high rents; and combining the business of a hand-loom weaver with that of a working farmer, have assisted to raise the rent of their land from the profits of their loom. Upon this class it is that the distresses of the times have fallen with peculiar hardship. While the decline of their got up at Darlaston, Willenhall, and in their neighbourhood. Most of these manufactures have suffered more or less by the war; though I understand, the trades of nails and saddlers ironmongery are pretty good; buckles and locks indifferent; and the steel-toy trade almost annihilated. These manufactures suffered a similar, or perhaps greater depression in the American war; but were extremely and uniformly flourishing during the peace, from the conclusion of the American war to the commencement of the present. This is a sufficient proof that their flourishing state is consistent only with a state of peace.

The manufacture of potter's ware in the north of the county is very extensive and important, the value of the manufactured article being, as it were, a creation of the manufacturer, from a raw material of no value.

The potteries consist of a number of scattered villages, occupying an extent of about ten miles; and may contain about twenty thousand inhabitants, including those who depend upon them for employment and subsistence. They have not been so flourishing since the war. Stafford, the county town, has a very considerable manufacture of shoes, both for home consumption and exportation; and the tanning and other different branches of the leather trade,

and also the manufacture of hats, are carried on upon a large scale in many other towns in the county.

The cotton manufactures of this county are not inconsiderable; those of Mr. Arkwright at Rocester, and elsewhere near the Dove, are upon a large scale and employ a great number of hands; and those of Messrs. Peele and Wilkes, at Fazely and Tamworth, are very considerable; besides which there are extensive cotton works at Burton and Tutbury. This manufacture has a great tendency to promote our national industry, by finding employment suitable to both sexes in early youth, and thus initiating them in early habits of industry. The country is much obliged to those gentlemen by whose exertions and perseverance this manufacture has been introduced and established.

Leek has a considerable manufacture in the silk and mohair way, the manufactured goods from which are, sewing-silks, twist, buttons, ribbons, silk-serrets, shawls and silk-handkerchiefs. In these manufactures . . . are employed about two thousand inhabitants of the town, and one thousand of the adjacent country. In this trade some good fortunes have been made, and it has been very flourishing; but the check on paper credit, which in a great measure hurt the confidence of all connections, diminished the trade here: and the war must in some degree have damped the demand for it abroad: yet the trade is now in a flourishing state, and considerably better than it was some months ago.

Cheadle and Teyn have a considerable manufacture of tape, which finds employment for the industry of its inhabitants.

The woollen manufactory within this county is not very considerable, and a large proportion of the raw wool grown therein is sold into the clothing and stocking countries; yet there are wool-combers in most of the towns, and some which push a considerable business; and a good deal of woollen cloth is got up in the country by private families, though in less quantity than formerly.

There is no considerable public manufacture of linen, but a good deal of hurden, hempen, and flaxen cloth got up in private families; a great many people resident all the country being now, and having long been, in the habit of growing a patch of hemp and flax, which is generally manufactured within the county.

Of the population of Staffordshire, I suppose one-third are supported by agricultural or other professions or employments thereon depending, and two-thirds by manufactures, commerce, and mines....

The extent of the iron trade in all its varieties, wrought and unwrought, for agricultural and other internal purposes, and for home consumption and exportation, under its innumerable shapes and forms, is now so very great, as to rival even that of the great staple, wool; and to make the superiority of the latter somewhat questionable; and from the abundance of iron ore and fuel with which this country abounds, the trade, particularly so far as relates to the production of the metal, is capable of being much extended; and there can be little doubt of the possibility that this country will wholly supply itself with that article....