

William Cobbett on the decline of the Old Woollen Towns, 1826

(William Cobbett (1763-1835), a farmer, journalist, Tory Radical and later MP for Oldham, published articles on his travels through England during the 1820's in his periodical, the *Political Register* and in book form in his widely read *Rural Rides* of 1830. William Cobbett. *Rural Rides*, 1893 edition, II, 78-80, 95, 103, 105, 163-4; in J. T. Ward, ed., *The Factory System, Vol. I, Birth and Growth* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1970), pp. 174-178.)

[Salisbury, 30 August, 1826]

The villages down this Valley of Avon, and, indeed, it was the same in almost every part of this county, and in the north and west of Hampshire also, used to have great employment for the women and children in the carding and spinning of wool for the making of broad-cloth. This was a very general employment for the women and girls; but it is now wholly gone; and this has made a vast change in the condition of the people, and in the state of property and of manners and of morals. In 1816, I wrote and published a *Letter to the Luddites*, the object of which was to combat their hostility to the use of machinery. The arguments I there made use of were general. I took the matter in the abstract. The *principles* were all correct enough; but their application cannot be universal; and we have a case here before us, at this moment, which, in my opinion, shows that the mechanic inventions, pushed to the extent that they have been, have been productive of great calamity to this country, and that they will be productive of still greater calamity; unless, indeed, it be their brilliant destiny to be the immediate cause of putting an end to the present system.

The greater part of manufactures consists of *clothing* and *bedding*. Now, if by using a machine, we can get our coat with less labour than we got it before, the machine is a desirable thing. But, then, mind, we must have the machine at home, and we ourselves must have the profit of it; for if the machine be elsewhere; if it be worked by other hands; if other persons have the profit of it; and if, in consequence of the existence of the machine, we have hands at home who have nothing to do, and whom we must keep, then the machine is an injury to us, however advantageous it may be to those who use it, and whatever traffic it may occasion with foreign states.

Such is the case with regard to this cloth-making. The machines are at Upton-Level, Warminster, Bradford, Westbury, and Trowbridge, and here are some of the hands in the Valley of Avon. This valley raises food and clothing; but in order to raise them it must have *labourers*. These are absolutely necessary; for without them this rich and beautiful valley becomes worth nothing except to wild animals and their pursuers. The labourers are *men* and *boys*. Women and girls occasionally; but the men and the boys are as necessary as the light of day, or as the air and the water. Now if beastly Malthus, or any of his nasty disciples, can discover a mode of having men and boys without having women and girls, then, certainly, the machine must be a good thing; but if this valley must absolutely have the women and the girls, then the machine, by leaving them with nothing to do, is a mischievous thing and a producer of most dreadful misery....

[Warminster (Wilts.), 1 Sept. 1826]

I set out from Heytesbury this morning about six o'clock. Last night, before I went to bed, I found that there were some men and boys in the house who had come all the way from Bradford, about twelve miles, in order to get *nuts*. These people were men and boys that had been employed in the *clothfactories* at Bradford and about Bradford. I had some talk with some of these nutters, and I am quite convinced, not that the cloth making is at an *end*, but that it *never will be again what it has been*. Before last Christmas these manufacturers had full work, at one shilling and threepence a yard at broad-cloth weaving. They have now a quarter work, at one shilling a yard! One and threepence a yard for this weaving has been given at all times within the memory of man! Nothing can show more clearly than this, and in a stronger light, the great change which has taken place in the *remuneration for labour*. There was a turn out last winter, when the price was reduced to a shilling a yard; but it was put an end to in the usual way; the constable's staff, the bayonet, the gaol....

[Sept. 2 1826]

[Frome] appears to be a sort of little Manchester. A very small Manchester, indeed; for it does not contain above ten to twelve thousand people, but it has all the flash of a Manchester, and the innkeepers and their people look and behave like the Manchester fellows. I was, I must confess, glad to find proofs of the irretrievable decay of the place. I remembered how ready the bluff manufacturers had been to call *in the troops* of various descriptions. "Let them", said I to myself, "call the troops in now, to make their trade revive. . . .". . . .

The first factories that I met with were at a village called Upton Lovell, just before I came to Heytesbury. There they were a doing not more than a quarter work. There is only one factory, I believe, here at Warminster, and that has been suspended, during the harvest, at any rate. At Frome they are all upon about a quarter work. It is the same at Bradford and Trowbridge; and, as curious a thing as ever was heard of in the world is, that here are, through all these towns, and throughout this country, weavers from the north, singing about the towns ballads of Distress! ...

[Ryall (Worcs.), 29 Sept. 1826]

I have observed, in this country, and especially near Worcester, that the working people seem to be better off than in many other parts, one cause of which is, I dare say, that *glove manufacturing*, which cannot be carried on by fire or by wind or by water, and which is, therefore, carried on by the *hands of human beings*. It gives work to women and children as well as to men; and that work is, by a great part of the women and children, done in their cottages, and amidst the fields and hop gardens, where the husbands and sons must live, in order to raise the food and the drink and the wool. This is a great thing for the land. If this glove-making were to cease, many of these women and children, now not upon the parish, must instantly be upon the parish. The glove-trade is, like all others, slack from this last change in the value of money; but there is no horrible misery here, as at Manchester, Leeds, Glasgow, Paisley, and other Hell-Holes of 84 degrees of heat. There misery walks abroad in skin, bone and nakedness. There are no

subscriptions wanted for Worcester; no militia-clothing. The working-people suffer, trades-people suffer, and who is to escape, except the monopolisers, the Jews, and the tax-eaters, when the government chooses to raise the value of money and lower the price of goods? The whole of the industrious part of the country must suffer in such a case; but where manufacturing is mixed with agriculture, where the wife and daughters are at the needle, or the wheel, while the men and the boys are at the plough, and where the manufacturing, of which one or two towns are the centres, is spread over the whole country round about, and particularly where it is, in very great part, performed by females at their *own homes*, and where the earnings come *in aid of the man's wages*; in such case the misery cannot be so great; and accordingly, while there is an absolute destruction of life going on in the hell-holes, there is no *visible* misery at, or near, Worcester; and I cannot take my leave of this county without observing, that I do not recollect to have seen one miserable object in it. The working people all seem to have good large gardens, and pigs in their styes; and this last, say the *feelosofers* what they will about her "intallectual enjoyments", is the *only* security for happiness in a labourer's family.