

*'Oh what a blissful place! By Severn's Banks so fair
Happy thy Inhabitants: and wholesome is thy Air. . .'*

Robert Parry (Robyn Ddu Eryri), *'An Address to Newtown
Montgomeryshire'*, 1833.

The hyperbole of Parry's Ode masked the reality of the conditions for workers in the flannel industry in the early nineteenth century. For centuries the industry had been scattered throughout the rural hinterland of Montgomeryshire, but at the end of the eighteenth century it had become centred in Newtown itself. The town became a magnet for those poor agricultural labouring families in search of better housing and higher wages. Nevertheless, working conditions remained grim for families like those who moved into our Commercial Street weaving shop.

To contrast Parry's optimistic view of the changes, we have two government reports written in the same decade. In 1832, Parliament undertook an investigation into the extent of child labour in the manufacturing areas of Britain as a prelude to the Factory Act of the following year. Then, in 1840 a second Commission reported on the condition on the handloom weavers of Britain. Both reports featured evidence taken from the inhabitants of Newtown.

On June 16, 1832, Dr. William Lutener, a surgeon who practiced in the town, appeared before the Parliamentary Commissioners to give evidence of the extent of child labour in the water powered carding mills along the river bank. He was appearing before the committee just two or three years after the first weaver families had moved into the building which now houses the Textile Museum. Responding to a series of fixed questions, Lutener paints a lurid picture of exploitation and neglect. He reports that about 260 children of both sexes from the ages of 6 to 16 years of age work for twelve hours a day. At busy times work continues around the clock. He explains that at these times the week is divided up into three 24-hour shifts, with no more than an hour and a half rest. Each shift is separated by a further 24-hour rest period:

'The night work is what is called feeding, it is putting wool into the machine which cards it, and turns it out into what is called rolls, being the first process in spinning . . . but by day there are

a great many more children employed than at night, because they are employed in piecing those rolls, . . . the labour is of a very light kind, it is not so much labour as confinement”.

Despite it being ‘light’, the work remained dangerous, “because the children get sleepy. . .and get their hands in the work; I and my partner have had frequently to amputate the hands and fingers of children”.

The work is unsupervised (“. . .and if they do not attend to their work at night but go to sleep, the employer perfectly well knows how much work ought to be done by the morning on account of the machine”), for which the weekly wage ranges from 1 shilling and sixpence to half a crown with an extra 6d for night work. Lutener concludes that, “the morals of society must suffer greatly by children being thus thrown together, alone, and that by night”, whilst physically, “*they are not those rosy healthy children that our agricultural children are; they are thin and sallow looking, and exceedingly dirty.*”

By the time children reached the age of 16, they were moving on to work in other parts of the flannel trade, most notably handloom weaving. Of the 1100 weavers active in 1840, the report indicates that 62% of weavers were men, 33% were women and 5% were children. It was the employment of women and children which was greatly affecting wage levels. Richard Evans, a weaver of Newtown, complained that, “*children get into the loom at under price . . . the men are underselling one another*”.

There seemed to be little agreement over what constituted an average weekly wage. Some witnesses estimated 11 shillings. John Williams, the official measurer, on the other hand concluded:

“A fair-working weaver earns about 12s 6d weekly; a middling weaver 9s; and women, children and learners about 6s; subject, however, to a deduction of 1s a week for winding and 6d a week for candle”.

There were other causes of concern for weavers, in particular frequent and sudden fluctuation in trade along with the debilitating effects of

competition from the power looms of Lancashire and Yorkshire. Consequently, weavers faced long periods with reduced hours, or no work at all. Even when in work they were prey to the sharp practices of their masters. A petition signed by 394 weavers of Newtown and presented to the magistrate; the Rev. Evors in December 1838 identified three grievances:

“First, the irregularity in the length of warping walls which are now from four yards eight inches to four yards fourteen inches. Second, the breadth of the reed, which originally was by agreement between masters and men three feet, two and a half inches is now reduced in many factories to three feet only, which caused great injury to the weaver, in respect of his earnings . . . Thirdly your petitioners humbly pray that the number of threads in the warp be duly regulated”.

In order to mitigate the downturn in trade, the weavers turned to gardening:

“Almost all the poor people set potatoes in the fallow of the neighbouring farmers paying a ground rent of ten shillings for every strike of potato. The strike is eight bowls, each bowl weighing 24 pounds . . . They also rent small allotment gardens at the rent of £12 per acre . . . nearly all keep pigs . . . when waiting for work they employ themselves in their gardens”.

It is clear from these two reports that life for those involved in the flannel industry in Newtown could be tough, employment uncertain, wages remained variable, families were exploited and child labour remained common. The condition of weavers is best summed up in the words of Mr T. Jones, flannel manufacturer of Newtown, in his evidence to the Commissioners of 1840:

“That the weavers, compared with agricultural labourers, marry young and die young”.