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Hand-loom weavers in England during the first half of the nineteenth century.

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An examination of English industrial history, during the period when social effects of the industrial revolution were beginning to be so apparent, when cries of the workers for assistance were rising so loud, and when it seemed as though whole industrious classes were doomed to a modern slavery set round by freedom, and to starvation in the midst of plenty, reveals no class of workers whose condition was quite as forlorn as that of the hand-loom weavers. It will be the purpose of this essay to show the conditions of the weavers in the period of the opening of the industrial revolution, the attempts at amelioration, and finally the condition of hand-loom weavers during the second half of the nineteenth century.

Very early in the eighteenth century it was becoming manifest that England's trade in woven goods-as ut was in textile generally was increasing very rapidly. A contemporary writing in 1739, said of Manchester that the town was growing rapidly because of the manufacture of cotton goods, mixed and plain. The export trade was developing: Defoe, in his works concerning his travels through England a few years later, reveals the fact that textile work, including weaving, was a common occupation. The number of weavers engaged in making woolen goods filled him with amazement:\* In fact he wondered that the nation was able to supply the manufactures with wool. The active weaving industry in Westbury and Warminster in Wilts caused these remarks; the woolen trade at Sudbury was reported by him to be in a very flourishing condition:\*\*

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\* Daily Advertiser Sept. 5, 1739 - From Baines E. "History of Cotton Manufacture". 108.

\*\* Defoe D. "Tour through Great Britain".

\*\*\*Defoe op. cit. 1.32.

Norwich in those days was an active manufacturing town. The habit of having weaving done in the city itself had by 1745 begun to be apparent for Defoe's estimate of the population of Norwich and vicinity 120,000 was based on the number of looms in the city. During the day he found the city to be deserted "for the inhabitants being all busy at their manufactures, dwellin their garrets at their looms." Evidently this growth of city manufacture was not yet a growth of concentration in factories, but of "out of door" labor, that is, work done in the weavers own homes\*.

There is more light given on the actual condition of the weavers toward the end of the eighteenth century, for which A Young, the Secretary of the Board of Agriculture, an enthusiastic believer in the extension of agriculture, and an extensive traveler must be thanked. Although his main interest was the use of the land for productive purposes, his active eye and mind caused him to see and comment upon other phases of life. In his "Six Months Tour" the condition of the hand-loom weavers is indicated in several places. On the whole their condition was good. The manufactures gave out work to be done without waiting for orders, basing that action on expectations of spring orders\*\* The cotton trade was growing rapidly, in places rivalling wool. The north of England was then growing rapidly into a great manufacturing district.

The salaries of the hand-loom weavers were not high according to Young. At Kendal in the Lake District cotton weavers, mostly women, received an average of 4s.3d. a week, but the linsey-woolsey

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\* Ibid I 59.

\*\* Young, A. "Six Months Tour". III. 189.

\*\*\*Aiken, J. "Description of the Country around Mabchester."

weavers received as high as nine or ten shillings. This weaving was done in the town. At Sudbury weavers of "says" -a woollen cloth earned ten shillings per week.\*\* At Warrington weavers of sailcloth received nine shillings for men, five shillings for women, and three shillings for boys. Weavers of sacking received nine shillings.\*\*\*

It is on the question the interrelation of agriculture and weaving that the most evidence has been left. Attention is brought to this connection by a calculation in 1784 of all the earnings of textile workers in Suffolk. One-twelfth of the earnings of all classes was deducted to allow for work done in the fields during the harvest period:\*\*\* In fact, Young jealous of manufacture as a rival of agriculture, complained that the former in one place at least, while carried on in connection with it, overshadow the latter:\*\*\*\*

The developement of this system of weaving and farming had reached the point where it had considerable economic effect. Rents went up, remarkably, in one place from ten shillings to seven pounds seven shillings. This rise, Young would have us believe, came from manufacture. The weavers could afford to pay these rents, in order to live in the country or suburban districts, through the union of the earnings from agriculture and those from the looms. These weavers bought their wool, spun and wove it, and sold it at the market:\*\*\*\*\* The picture which this raises is a pretty one of an existence almost idealic, and paints the weavers life in colors of somewhat rosy hue.

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\* Young. Ibid. III 135.  
\*\* "Do. "General View of the County of Suffolk."  
\*\*\* Do. "Six Months Tour". 163  
\*\*\*\* Do. "General View of Suffolk"  
\*\*\*\*\* "Annals of Agriculture" IV. 157.  
\*\*\*\*\* Do. XXVII. 309.

Whether or not it was Young's liking for agriculture or not would be hard to say, the fact remains that he considered these country hand-loom weavers to be fortunately situated. Some of them owned a small lot or farm "merely for the convenience of keeping a few cows for milk for their children, apprentices and inmates, and a horse to job to and from the mills, markets, etc,"\*

But the condition of all hand-loom weavers just at the dawn of the nineteenth century was not quite so rosy. Those who could own a cow and ride to market behind their own horses were, on the whole, woolen weavers. The cotton weavers were not so well off. They were already beginning to gather in the cities. It seems to have given Young considerable satisfaction to note that the country weavers were so much superior in physical condition to the city weavers. The former could employ their free hours in "care of their gardens and other portions of ground they might possess". This caused them and their children to be stronger, "and to imbibe more virtuous principles" than were commonly met with among the city weavers.\*\* The condition of the former was superior also through their having steady work, since agricultural pursuits and weaving in the farm-house could be made to dove-tail very profitably. Not having such a safety valve the city weavers more often took part in "popular riots, insurrections and complaints" a fact to Young, clearly indicating that they did not meet with such steady work as their regular maintenance required\*\*\*

The fact weavers had so much time at their disposal indicates an interesting phase of their lives up to the latter part of the

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\* Annals of Agriculture" XL 135. Quoted from Cunningham "Growth of English Industry" II 565.

\*\* Ibid. XXXVIII 548.

\*\*\* Young "Farmers Letters" I 22.

eighteenth century. In order for the weavers to be kept constantly at work a steady supply of spun yarn was essential. In the days before any mechanical inventions had increased the output of the looms the weavers had been able to secure yarn to eliminate any great amount of lost time. While any pressure there was came from the weavers yet a reasonable equilibrium was maintained between spinning and weaving. This was changed when John Kay invented his flying shuttle in seventeen thirty-eight. By the new plan the shuttle was caused to mechanically shoot across the loom. Not only did this cause a weaver to work more rapidly, but it also set at liberty those who had been necessary when wide cloth was woven. Each weaver so liberated set up a loom of his own, and those increased the output. The speed of weaving was again increased by a member of the Kay family when Robert Kay in seventeen sixty invented his "drop box" arrangement to allow the use of different weft without stopping to change the thread in the shuttle. Several shuttles in boxes arranged in tiers, and operated by the left hand as the loom worked, accomplished this saving of time. Naturally this increased the speed of weaving.

As a result a great need for yarn arose. The single thread spinning wheels in the farm houses were still the main source of supply, and it was not strange these unimproved methods soon fell behind the improved weaving loom, for to quote Baines, "the one thread wheel though turning from morning till night in thousands of cottages could not keep pace with the weavers' shuttle or demands of the merchant".\*

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\* Baines -op. cit. 117.  
Young - "Farmers Letters" I 22, & "Six Months Tour." 163

This condition was productive of many schemes to once more balance the two chief branches of the textile industry. Lewis Paul and John Wyatt patented a mechanical spinning contrivance in 1738, of which little was heard. Arkright's water-frame appeared some years later- his ideas may have been copied from Paul and Wyatt,\* and his rollers greatly increased the supply. His machine was supplemented in 1767 by James Hargreaves spinning jenny, and these were united about ten years later by "mule" of Samuel Crompton. From then the spinning of yarning became an increasing of the number of spindles on a machine, and of connecting sufficient driving power with the requisite number of machines.

With these changes in the spinning of yarn the weaver had, instead of human individuals, many mechanical men toiling to keep him supplied. Hand-loom weavers entered upon a period of comparative prosperity. The older witnesses who testified before the committees of 1834-35 looked back at the period of 1800-1815 as one of plenty.

It ought to be remembered that it is not wise to place too much credence in statements of what happened thirty before a witness was speaking. A tendency very commonly found is that of lauding the times that were at the expense of those that are, and therefore, to turn backward and sigh for the days of old. Naturally such a tendency is stronger when the early days in general really were better.

Even allowing for exaggerations of witnesses the woolen weavers at least were well off at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The testimony of Mr. H. Mackenzie summarised the probable condition at the time. "The hand-loom weavers were a frugal people, industrious, supporting friendly societies, building their

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\* Baines op. cit. 140

own homes with their own saved up means, supporting their families in the usual comforts of life, living upon meat, oatmeal, bread and milk, rearing up their family in good clothes, and educating them in Sunday Schools\*. A statement from another witness was even stronger. He Mr. Makin - spoke for the cotton weavers and referred to a time just after the attempt of weavers to have a minimum wage bill passed. His statement therefore appears to have been too favorable, but it shows the impression which the period made on the people in comparison to the days which were to follow. "At that time," the witness said, "it was the trade of a gentlemen; they brought home their work in top boots and ruggled shirts; they had a cane, and took a coach in some instances, and appeared as well as military officers of the first degree when they appeared alone!"\*\*

That such an account of conditions among cotton weavers was inaccurate is clearly shown by the records left by law and parliamentary discussion. While the weavers condition was not as bad as it became later, the differences between masters and workers because of reduction of wages attracted attention. In 1800 an Act, commonly called the Arbitration Act, passed Parliament. Part of the preamble read:- "Whereas considerable abuses have for several years past subsisted in the trade or manufacture of cotton weaving in that part of Great Britain called England, to the great oppression of the persons engaged in the manufacture thereof". It then proceeded to establish Arbitration Boards to be selected by both sides in case of any dispute between workers and masters. In case no agreement was reached by the Board

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\* Reports 1835 XIII 4  
\*\* Do 1834 X 418



the question was to be submitted to a justice for decision.\* In spite of the Act wages continued to decrease, and, though amendments to the Act were tried within five years conditions grew worse.

The next attempt to remedy conditions was through the use of that panacea now looked upon as being almost ultra-modern the minimum wage. On May 19, 1808 Mr. Rose asked leave to present a bill to limit the depression of wages of persons employed in the weaving of cotton. He himself was not certain of the propriety of the measure, but acted "in compliance with the wishes of a numerous and respectable class of persons who were now suffering peculiar hardships, and who were at the same time supporting them with a patience and resolution which did them credit."\*\*

The reception such a request would be given in an early nineteenth century House of Commons can easily be imagined. A measure so clearly and radically violating the sacred doctrines laissezfaire could not be tolerated. The opposition did not condemn merely because of possible injury to the manufacturer, but because it would injure employers alike. In opposing the request one gentleman remarked that wages had been too high resulting in too many entering the business, and consequent depression; to fix wages by law would be to induce ignorant persons to bring up their children in this line and still further over stock the market\*\*\* Lord Milton thought the bill would have a direct tendency to ruin manufactures and further increase the distress of those employed in them; while Sir Robert Peel, the author of the first act to ameliorate the evils of child work in factories, heartily disapproved

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\* 40 Geo. III. c 90  
\*\* Hansard XI. May 19, 1808.  
\*\*\* Do  
\*\*\*\* Do

through a true "regard to the interest of the work people themselves".\*

However a committee considered the proposal. But it was equally opposed to anything likely to fetter the freedom of competition, and its report was adverse. The proposition was "wholly inadmissible in principle, incapable of being reduced to practise by any means that can possibly be devised, and, if practicable, would be productive of most fatal consequences".\*\*

Two years later a committee which had looked into the advisability of restricting the number of apprentices as a means of improving conditions, called the scheme inadmissible, and productive if passed, of the greatest misery to the manufactures as well as to the laborers.\*\*\*

The weavers, after this set back, tried in another way to remedy the evils they felt were oppressing them. The law 5 Eliz, part of which is commonly called the Statute of Artificers, and which contained sections pertaining to the assessment of wages was still on the statute books, and the cotton weavers turned to it for assistance. They began to appeal to the justices of the Peace and Magistrates, as the law specified, to have their wages regulated. This appeal to acts passed in the days of an outlawed political economy promptly aroused the devotees of laissez-faire, and an act was introduced into Parliament to repeal that part of the laws of 5 Elizabeth which allowed such an adjustment of wages. Petitions against the repeal promptly began to come in. That of the cotton weavers particularly was a very human document from which some quotations will be of interest. "The petitioners are much concerned to learn that a bill has been brought into the House to repeal so much of the Statute 5 Elizabeth as empowers

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\* Do.

\*\* Reports 1809. From Webb B. & S. "Trade Unionism".-49 (Original

\*\*\* Ibid.

and requires magistrates in their respective jurisdictions to rate and settle the prices to be paid to laborers, handicrafts, spinners, weavers, etc., and the Petitioners have endured almost constant reductions in price of their labor for many years, - during the last thirty months they have continued, so low, that the average of cotton weavers do not exceed five shillings per week though other trades earn from twenty to thirty shillings per week". The petitioners proceeded to state that food prices were very high. They then told of the attempt at relief seen in the Arbitration Act and its amendments, and of their failure; that now the act in question had been restored to with a certain amount of success in some cases, and concluded by saying "altho the laws of 5 Elizabeth were wisely designed to protect all trades and workmen yet none will essentially suffer by its repeal but the cotton weavers. The silk weavers have law to secure their prices as have other citizens. Tradesmen generally receive their contracted wages when their work is done, but the cotton weavers know not what they shall receive."\*

This and other appeals showing conditions of suffering did not have the weight necessary to overturn carefully thought out rules of economy. The individual had to be left free to compete in open market, whether in the market of labor or in that of manufactured product. Therefore the appeals of the cotton weavers came to nothing, and the parts of 5 Elizabeth in question ceased to be law\*\*

Prices had been rising greatly during the first years of nineteenth century, and undoubtedly this had much to do with the suffering of which the weavers complained. The figures on wheat,

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\* House of Commons Journal Feb. 25, 1813.

\*\* 53 Geo. III 58.

barley and oats will serve as an indication of the upward trend. In December 1803 wheat was at 52s.6d\*, barley at 23s.11d., and oats at 21s.1d\*\* by August 1812 wheat had risen to 155s., barley to 79s.10d., and oats to 56s.2d. At the same time wages of hand-loom weavers, with some fluctuations, declining. Weavers of cambric in the north of England, who received 29 shillings in 1802, in 1812 received 14 shillings\*\*

Although the wages of the hand-loom weavers were anything but satisfactory, they were not bad enough to make an investigation of them of first importance. In the third and fourth decades of the nineteenth century there came a realization of the seriousness of condition of the children employed in factories. After an investigation an act was passed which applied to children working in power driven mills and factories\*\*\* This had no direct bearing on hand-loom weaving.

As the decade of the twenties passed into that of the thirties the condition of the hand-loom weavers became steadily worse. Early in the thirties petitions from weavers and from those who observed their condition became more and more frequent. In 1830 Sir M. S. Stewart presented to the House of Commons a petition from the Operative Weavers of Glasgow. These people prayed for some relief from the sinking distress under which they suffered. Although 4,600 individuals had signed that was, Sir Stewart declared, but a small portion of the number of weavers affected by suffering because of the extremely low rate of wages. The petition stated "the average income of each family, according to strictest investigation, amounts only to about 3 shillings six pence of

\* Tooke "History of Prices" (Edition of 1838) i 238  
\*\* Tooke. - I - 336  
\*\*\* Reports 1840. XXIII. 592.  
\*\*\* 2&4 Will. IV. c.103.

clear money per week, or does not exceed four, and that after 96 hours incessant labor."\* By 1833 the number of petitions reached 53; in 1834 it mounted to 87, and the total from 1833 to 1837 was 288. These were not all from entirely different places. Glasgow an partess or organizations of that city sent eight petitions, Bolton four, Airdrie three, Aberdeen two, etc. The largest number received in any year was 90 in 1835.\* These petitions were not all from workers themselves. One of them came from the Provost, Magistrates, Council of the Borough of Calton. It called attention to the sympathy which the petitioners had long felt for the numerous operative hand-loom weavers whose remuneration was insufficient, for the most laborious earned with difficulty the means of scant subsistence.\*\* Another petition of Landowners, Constables, Owners of Cottages, Shopkeepers and others of pull prayed the House to institute an inquiry into the "distressed state of persons employed in the business of hand-loom weaving."\*\*\* All petitions appealed for some definite action. The majority looked for assistance through a Board of Trade; others wanted direct legislative enactment as seen in a petition from Bethnal Green;\*\*\* while others merely requested an inquiry.

As a result of such petitioning it was moved on the eleventh of June 1834 that the petitions presented by hand-loom weavers be referred to a select committee to examine the same, and to report their observations to the House. The motion was carried by a vote of 70 to 42;\*\*\*\* The committee appointed numbered originally fifty, to whom at various times nine others were added. It included such men as Sir Robert Peel, Mr. H. Lytton-Bulwer, Lord Ashley, and Mr. E. Baines;\*\*\*\*\*

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\* House of Commons Journal LXXXVIII-XCII  
 \*\* Do. Apr. 29, 1833 (vol. 88)  
 \*\*\* Do. Vol. 89, 283  
 \*\*\*\* Do. Vol 90/ 367  
 \*\*\*\*\* Do. Vol 90, 381  
 \*\*\*\*\* 1835 X 1

The committee made a long examination in which they considered the truth and extent of the alleged distress; its causes and the possible means of improving conditions. During the course of the investigation they summoned masters, operatives, and persons described as "observing by-standers".\*\* The fifty-seven witnesses could be divided into three classes. Twenty were dignified in the lists of witnesses by having "Esquire added to their names - of these four were members of Parliament; sixteen were called "Mister"; and twenty-five, a plurality, were merely named, and were evidently ordinary folk of the masses.\*\*\* Such a distribution is of interest. The committee was, it would seem, determined to hear all sides of the question, and to have ground sufficiently broad to base conclusions upon.

The investigation showed that the conditions among hand-loom weavers were utterly bad. The statements concerning wages at once showed that the power of that class of workers to purchase necessaries, adequate either quantitatively or qualitatively, was entirely below what it should have been. However, in reference to statements of wages care must be taken to distinguish between gross and net wages. Weavers gross wages included charges for loom hire, cloth dressing etc. While this was not so important in the case of weavers who owned their own looms, in some cases it amounted to a difference of as much as two shillings!\*\*\*

A wage is a comparative matter. Its power to sustain life in a given way or up to a given standard is that by which it is judged. A salary which in the United States at present would be

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\* Reports 1835 XIII III

\*\* Dp.

\*\*\* Reports 1834 XII & 1835 XIII

\*\*\*\* " 1841 X(296)14

poor, keeping its recipient on the verge of starvation, in England hundred years ago would have been a very good income, making its recipient a moderately well to do man. Such a statement is a truism and emphasis seems hardly necessary, but to remember it is vastly important. The fact that a weaver received 5, 6 or 7 shillings means nothing until it is discovered just how well he could live on such an income.

While wages had been going down more or less steadily, the prices of many commodities had been doing likewise. It has been shown how high wheat, barley and oats had risen toward the close of the Napoleonic wars.\* In December 1833 wheat was at 515.4d, barley at 315.2d, and oats at 195.9d,\*\* while in December 1835 wheat had reached the abnormally low figure of 345 and 11d.\*\*\* At Paisley butter, from 1824 to 1834 had gone from one shilling to seven pence; tea from six shillings eight pence to five shillings eight pence. The authorities at a hospital near Paisley vouched for the accuracy of the following figures.

	1814	1824	1834
Meal	15.8d	15.6d	11½d
Butter	15.8d	15.1d	10d
Cheese	11d	9d	5½d

Notwithstanding the reduced cost of living the weavers were in an abominable condition. All witnesses told the same tale. The silk and cotton weavers particularly emphasized the conditions

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\* Above page 11

\*\* Tooke ii, 231

\*\*\* ii, 234

\*\*\*\* Report 1834 x 92

under which they lived. The continual falling off in the food, clothing, and furniture of the weavers was repeatedly brought out. They almost all looked back to other days a decade or two before when times had been good and wages more adequate to meet high prices than present ones were to meet low ones. One witness made it clear.. It was quite common for a hand-loom weaver to lay in as much meal, potatoes, cheese and butter in harvest as would serve till spring, coal was laid in, in large quantities, and very commonly hand-loom weavers salted meat at Martinmas for the winter, now it requires the clubbing of all the little earnings of the family on a Saturday night to make provision for the house-keeping. The principal articles of food were oatmeal, potatoes and bread, not much meat - twice or three times a week in small quantities. They used sugar, in considerable quantities, and tea in place of other food.\*

A Mr. Ashworth, woolen manufacturer of Manchester gave what he considered a comparison between the wages and expenses of a weaver, at that one of the best. He selected a man and wife and two children in gingham weaving, and supposed them to be able to earn fifteen shillings. He took two shillings, three pence for rent, one shilling for fire and light to work by, or a total of three shillings, three pence, leaving eleven shillings nine pence which divided amongst four, left less than three shillings a head for meat, drink, clothing and bedding:- but very few families could earn above ten shillings a week then, as work was not so good.\*\*

The witnesses were very emphatic in declaring that the spiritual condition of the people was deteriorating very rapidly. This was partly due to over-work during the week and need of rest on

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\* 1834. X 61  
\*\* 1835. XIII, VI



Sunday, but the chief reason assigned was that the weavers had no presentable wearing apparel and had no means with which to secure it. The committee on presenting its report complained that due and usual attendance at Divine Worship is neglected, this arose from shame in the first instance at appearing at church in rags: the writings of Carlile and Taylor had obtained a great spread, and the witness had seen companies of men applauding those who have argued against the existence of a God. The witness attributes this awful state of things to no innate vices and infidelity of the people themselves but solely to that recklessness which originates in want and despair.\*

Intemperance was increasing due to the distress of the time.\*\* General degradation and lack of well equipped homes went along with this though, of course, no rule can be laid down that all squalid homes were those of heavy drinkers. Furniture had in some cases worn out and the weavers were utterly unable to buy new at that time.\*\*\* Their houses, on the whole, were poorly furnished, and one weaver categorically said that some houses had no furniture in them:\*\*\*

The education of children was largely neglected. Weavers did not have sufficient means to send all the children of the family to school, not could the pittance the older children earned be easily spared, nor could enough good clothing be secured. In some cases one child was sent to school at a time for a short period while the others either remained at home idle, or else worked in the mill or at the loom assisting the father. An easier

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\* 1835. XIII.V  
\*\* 1834. X-80 and 1835. XIII. VI  
\*\*\* 1834. X 52  
\*\*\*\* 1834. X Question 1286

way, and one more frequently followed, was to give the children no education at all.\*

The clothing issue was indeed a serious one. One witness had to borrow clothes in order to appear before the committee in respectable garb;\*\* while another maintained that even on working days they went to the warehouses on the back roads to avoid former acquaintances bad was the condition of their garments!\*\*\* It is perhaps superfluous to add anything more to such a statement of conditions, and to say that they were abominable is more repetition. In their own day, the comment of those well fitted to judge was that the hand-loom weavers were in an awful plight. In fact, the Overseer of the township of Gorton - near Manchester - stated very specifically that the hand-loom weavers are the most miserable part of the population, they scarcely see meat once a week!\*\*\*\* Baines, a contemporary witness, remarked in his book published in 1835 that the hand-loom weavers were so different from the other laborers employed on cotton they needed distinct notice. Their implements of labor had been static, rather than constantly being improved, and that was the class which had sunk into distress and degradation!\*\*\*\*\*

After such a review of the actual conditions of the weavers it is hardly necessary to go into a discussion of the actual amount. That they were woefully inadequate is fully apparent. It may be of interest, however, to show the earnings of just a few. The silk weavers wages were very low. This class of weavers

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\* 1834. X - page 60 and Question 1290  
\*\* 1835. XIII VII  
\*\*\* 1834. X Question 286  
\*\*\*\* 1833. XX D.2, 136  
\*\*\*\*\* Baines 484.

present a particular interest. In the eighteenth century the great bulk of the silk weaving was done in the Spitalfields district. An act was passed for the regulation of prices of silk weaving in Spitalfields and the vicinity of London. The weavers of the district looked on the Act as their Magna Charta.\*\* Certainly they had been generally prosperous under it. By it committees were selected by both manufactures and weavers if these could not agree the Sessions decided on wages by determining the living cost. It continued in force till 1824. In the mean time there were several periods of distress. One of these - in 1812 was attributed to their not being a young queen to hold drawing rooms, and promote fashionable expenditure in silk. A memorial was sent to the prince regent, setting out the cause of the distress and praying him to promote the trade by holding drawing rooms. He did interfere, and it had a very desirable effect.

When the silk industry grew up in Manchester and other places away from London, Parliament had either to repeal the Spitalfields act or extend it to cover all manufactures. The action of a Parliament in which Ricardo was a ruling spirit could not be a matter of doubt. The Act was repealed\*\*\* Ricardo spoke for the repeal\*\*\*\*.

By the time the Hand-loom Weaver's Commission investigated it was evident that the silk weavers were in a bad condition financially. For weaving a certain kind of silk the pay was ninepence in 1825 and five pence in 1834. The latter figure meant a weekly wage of seven and a half or eight shillings after six days

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\* 13 Geo III C.68

\*\* 1840 XXIII. 539 sq.

\*\*\* 5 Geo. IV C 66

\*\*\*\* Hansard N.S. IX. 381

toil for twelve or fourteen hours a day. That amount of labor in 1824 would have earned twice that amount. In 1826 a weaver could earn twenty shillings, from then there was a decided a fall in prices.\*

Wages were poor all over. The committees presented figures showing the average wage of weavers in various places in 1835.

Oberdeen	3s 6d to 5s 6d.net.	
Bolton	4s 1½d	"
Dundee	6s to 7s	"
Forfar	6s	"
Glasgow	4s to 8s	gross
Huddersfield	4s.6d. to 5s.	
Lanark	5s/ 1d	net
Manchester	5s to 7s.6d	
Paisley	6s to 7s.9d	gross
Perth	4s.9d to 7s.9d	net
Preston	4s.9d to 6s.6d	gross
Spitafields	7s.6d to 8s	
Stockport	9s	
Coventry	7s.6d	net

It has been remarked that the wage a person has is large or small in proportion as its purchasing power is large or small. The committee in presenting its report - 1835 gave some figures throwing light on this aspect of the situation. It was stated very definitely that the wage decrease had been much more rapid than the decrease in the cost of living:\*\* In that regard the committee

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\* 1834. X Questions 87-95  
\*\* 1835 XIII - XII  
\*\*\* 1835 XIII - XIII

included in its report a table of the purchasing power of salaries. This was compiled by Mr. R. Needham. From 1792 to 1804 a weaver could earn 26s.8d per week, which would buy him 100 lbs. of flour, or 142 lbs. of oatmeal, or 826 lbs. of potatoes, or 53 lbs. of butchers meat an average of 281 lbs. From 1804 to 1811 the wage average was 20s.3d and it would buy a food average of 238 lbs. From 1811 to 1818 the wages had gone down to 14s.7d and the food averages to 131 lbs; for 1815 to 1825 the average respectively were 8s.9d and 108 lbs. from 1825 to 1832 6s.4d and 83 lbs. In the first of the specified periods six prices of woven cloth would pay the rent, in the second nine pieces, in the third twelve and one third, in the fourth sixteen, in the fifth twenty-two, in the last twenty five pieces.\*

In presenting its report the Committee said, Your committee---- have made inquiry into the facts and alligations contained in the Petitions of the hand-loom weavers,-----and they feel deep regret at finding the sufferings of that large and valuable body of men, only not exaggerated, but that they have for years continued to an extent and intensity scarcely to be credited or conceived and have been borne with a degree of patience unexampled---\*\*

To go into a discussion of the causes of these conditions would be too lengthy, too involved, and not sufficiently *à propos*. It is interesting to note that, contrary to the usual opinion, the use of mechanical power was not assigned as though one great fundamental cause. One cause was over production. Other causes were increased competition, foreign shipments, lack of union among weavers, etc. A surprising number of witnesses stated their belief

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\* 1834 X.III

\*\* 1834 X Questions 548-557,625

that power looms had not adversely affected them, at least not to an appreciable degree.\* Others, however, were equally emphatic in declaring their firm conviction that the power loom was at the bottom of the trouble to the greatest extent.\*\*

No definite legislation resulted from this inquiry, although there was an attempt made to have legislative action taken. A bill was presented to the House of Commons on December 21, 1837. It read, "That there is in this Kingdom an immense body of hand-loom weavers suffering unparalled distress, and that this distress arises through unprecedented low rate of wages that the weavers are paid for their work, and from the heavy taxes imposed by this House on the food and other necessities of life, a sufficiency of which their wages should enable them to purchase; that the work a large proportion of these weavers execute consists of articles indispensibly necessary to the personal comfort of the higher and middle classes of the community or of articles exported to foreign countries, and these exchanged for comforts or necessities, to increase the comfort and affluence of those classes; that it is therefore the interest as well as the duty of the Representatives of the people in this house, immediately to devise and enact such laws as shall raise the wages of these distressed Weavers to a scale adequate to maintain them comfortably, or that shall so reduce the Taxes imposed on the necessaries of life, and to alter the mode of collecting such Taxes, as that no part of the wages paid to these weavers shall be abstracted from them, by either direct or indirect taxation on those necessaries\*\*\* The motion was.

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\* Report 1834 X, Questions 126-128, 465-66;  
\*\* Report 1834 X, Question 5389, Report 1835 XIII, 17  
Hansard N.S. XXIII 542.  
\*\*\* House of Common Journal Dec. 21, 1837.

supported very vigorously by Mr. Fielden a member of the Committee 1834-35. Referring to Manchester, he stated that there were at least 6,000 weavers some of whom had been visited by persons appointed for the purpose. The results showed 876 families whom they had visited containing 3,274 persons depended on the income of 1,740 looms employed. The average earnings of these looms did not exceed 3321 6s 3d weekly, leaving an average of 28½d a week for each person, and deducting 1s 2d a week for rent, fuel candles, and soap, the average for the support and clothing of each person per week would be only 10½d or 1½ per day. It had been proven that these men worked twelve to fifteen hours a day, and yet they were unable to support themselves by their labor. Mr. Fielden thought a minimum wage to be the correct solution to the problem.\* Mr. Fleetwood in seconding stated that he looked to a reduction of taxation as the solution; the conditions to be bad for among his constituents were found numerous families who worked sixteen hours a day in damp places underground.

Opposition of course was at once voiced but even those who advanced strong opposition admitted that it was impossible to exaggerate the distress.\* Some, tho they admitted the distress, seemed bent on laying the blame on the weavers themselves because they were too numerous, or on general conditions that made remedial action impractical if not possible,\*\*while others blamed Mr. Fielden for presenting the motion in such a form as not to admit to those who wished to do justice to the poor hand-loom weavers, to give him their support\*\*\* The proposal was rejected by a vote of eleven to seventy-three.

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\* Haneard Vol. 39 1405-6  
\*\* Ibid 1409-1411  
\*\*\* Ibid 1410-1414  
\*\*\*\* Ibid 1413-1417

One step toward a still clearer understanding of the conditions of hand-loom weavers was taken when Commissioners were appointed to actually go and see how the people lived and thereby obtain first hand information. These investigations were carried on during 1838 and 1839, their reports were presented to Parliament and were printed in 1840 and 1841.

The accounts set before the country, by the Assistant Commissioners who were actually on the field in the fulfillment of their duty, and by Mr. Hinkson a Commissioner who took it upon himself to tour the country in order to be better fitted to deal with the reports of the Assistants, were certainly full of facts the truth of which was hardly conceivable in such dire straits did they show the hand-loom weavers to be. The accounts given color the ordinarily prosaic and dull blue books with a vital human interest which, as page after page is read, grows constantly more intense. In fact it becomes hard to believe that the people discussed could have lived in England in the second quarter of the nineteenth century.

The condition of the silk weavers in the Spitalfields district was deplorable to a very great degree. The people were short of stature, a condition which had become notorious, a few of the young men had finely developed bodies, but those were few. Those were days when visitations of cholera were by no means rare, and the feebleness of the weavers constitutions and their general unfortunate surroundings were partly shown by the fact that the disease always attacked them first and did most damage amongst them, while a fever epidemic found among the Spitalfields weavers its earliest and easiest victims. The description of the environment of the weavers was a classic of its kind. The streets were stated to be the worst that could possibly be imagined; they had no common sewers.



The houses generally of two stores, had foundations on turf and vegetable mold, and possessed no ventilation space between earth and the floor of living rooms. Such houses were always damp except in the driest of weather, and in the wet weather these conditions were worsened by the fact that the roofs were practically all in a leaky condition.\*

The weavers were a unit in looking back at the old days of the Spitalfields Act as those of prosperity and happiness. The Act itself they regarded as their Magna Charta, gone for the time being but, of absolute necessity, bound to return. The decline of wages began as all examined declared, immediately after the repeal.\*\* The highest paid class the Assistant Commissioner reported received an average of about twenty shillings, the lowest about half that\*\*\* These figures appear to be high in proportion to what was earned at a distance from the Metropolitan district. It should be remembered that if wages were higher so was living hence the bad conditions even where wages were slightly higher. At Braintree a Silk Weavers Committee stated that weavers worked fourteen hours a day for from six to nine shillings a week, while those engaged in crepe weaving worked the same time for from five to seven shillings\*\*\*\* In Manchester the average sum earned per loom per week, with all deductions made, was eight shillings six pence\*\*\*\*\*

In connection with Spitalfields the Assistant Commissioner - Mr. Mitchell threw light on two interesting points. He showed the difficulty of deciding on the real number of hours worked. The

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\* Acct's & Papers 1840 - XXIII 239  
\*\* Ibid 359  
\*\*\* Ibid 229  
\*\*\*\* Ibid 400  
\*\*\*\*\* Acct's & Papers XXIV (639)14

work was done at home, and the weavers naturally began and finished when he pleased. Some, who toiled under greatest pressure, were exhausted before those who were more deliberate in their endeavors. The accounts of sixteen or seventeen hours work in a single day were possibly treacherous misrepresentations, while such work might at times be done, it was only at times of unusual stress. When meal time was deducted from the twelve or fourteen hours so glibly talked about, the actual labor was shown to be not longer than ten or twelve hours, but that was a longer time than had been necessary in the good old days, in which times the necessity of Sunday work was practically, if not entirely, unknown.\*

The second point Mr. Mitchell brought out was in regard to education. It was hard to get any figures except to show that education was woefully inadequate and insufficient. Statistics given did not apply especially to the hand-loom weavers, but to the district as a whole where not more than 2,000 children enjoyed the "advantage of daily instruction" according to the Assistant Commissioner 10,000 were left to wander during the week in ignorance and sin.\*\*As it was shown that the hand-loom weavers were in the worst condition of any of the classes, it is perfectly fair to assume that they did not have a larger percentage of children in school than did the other classes. Thus it is reasonable to say that of the weavers' children not more than one in six enjoyed any continuous week day training.

Bad as was the condition of the silk operatives that of the cotton was worse. Mr. Hinkson expressed this from personal observance in highly graphic language. Domestic weaving among hand-loom weavers "he said", is carried on in circumstances more prejudicial to health

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\* Acct's and Papers - 1840 XXIII. 237  
\*\* Acct's and Papers - 1840 XXII. 295

and at greater sacrifice of personal comfort than weaving in any other branch. The great majority of hand-loom weavers work in cellars, sufficiently light to enable them to throw the shutter, but cheerless because seldom visited by the sun. The reason cellars are chosen is that cotton requires to be woven damp. The air therefore must be cool and damp, instead of dry and warm. I have seen them working in cellars dug out of undrained swamps, the streets formed by their houses without sewers and flooded with rain, the water therefore running down the bare walls of the cellars and rendering them unfit for the abode of dogs and cats. The descent to these cellars is usually by a broken step ladder. The cellar is but seldom boarded or paved; a proper place for coals and ashes, but less fitted for a workshop than even an Irish hovel. This description is not universal. In some instance small modern built houses have convenient, light apartments in cellars, in others weavers work on the ground floor in an unboarded room.\*

The evidence given by manufactures and employees alike showed that the income of cotton weavers would not allow many of them to live in apartments any more prosperous in appearance than the above description showed. One firm in the south of Scotland stated that the average wage was four shillings and six pence. For seven years wages had fluctuated somewhat but had always been low. The lowest had been in 1832 when the average was four shillings three pence, and the highest in 1836 when six shillings and six pence was reached, from these figures deductions averaging eight pence per week had been made. Thus the average net wage per weaver per week was, in 1838, three shillings and ten pence.\*\* This statement

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\* 1840 XXIV (639)7

\*\* 1839 XLII.(152)1-58

should not arouse too much sympathy. It is an average of the wages of the men, women and children employed by the firm. While women and children did not occupy the place in that branch of the textile industry, which they did in others, yet their smaller wages reduced the men's average somewhat. The men's wages in Glasgow show the soundness of that view. A Glasgow witness stated net wages to be five shillings and nine pence, his gross wage was one and four pence more. The same number of hours in 1814 would have produced about four times the wage.\* The lowest wages Mr. Hinkson found among cotton weavers were in Ireland where a young lady worked for two shillings six pence per week and a man twice that sum. The highest ~~he~~ discovered were at Preston in Lancashire where he found a woman paid as high as twelve shillings six pence and some men receiving sixteen to nineteen shillings. Lancashire places showed a decided variation.\*\* The family average at Ashton-under-Lyne was five shillings less a fraction of a penny while at Patricroft near Manchester hand-loom weavers working in a factory received nine shillings and those working at home seven shillings.\*\*\*

Comparatively speaking conditions were better in the linen and woolen weaving branches of the industry. Some places conditions were almost good. In Newark, Nottinghamshire, the manufactures built houses for the work people and fitted looms in them, then the house, thus equipped was let to weavers at a reasonable figure:\*\*\* Under favorable conditions the weavers of Dorset earned seven to fifteen shillings a week. A very few were able to obtain from fifteen to eighteen or even twenty shillings. But these favorable conditions had not prevailed for years, and the diminishing demand caused the labor market to be over crowded, and wages had been reduced even in linen the workers claimed the hand-loom weavers

\* Ibid

\*\* 1840 XXIV(639)8

\*\*\* 1840 XXIV(639)10

\*\*\*\* 1840 XXIII. 449

demand caused the labor market to be over crowded, and wages had been reduced. Even in linen the workers claimed the hand-loom weavers to be worse off than workers in the other branches of the textile industry.\*

Wages in Gloucestershire had decreased greatly. The average from 1808 to 1818 was put at 18 shillings; from 1819 to 1828 at thirteen, from 1829 to 1835 at twelve, in 1836 at eleven, and in 1838 at ten. Thus the total decrease in that county was thirty-seven and a half percent.\*\*

Not every where was the conditions of the weavers and the moral life stated to be very bad. In Coventry it was found that the status of the weavers was higher. There the proportion of those dissolute was stated to be low - only about one-sixth. The better class were decent, well doing people whose habits were generally good and who, in poor times kept off the rats, while the more dissolute were promptly thrown on public charity as soon as trouble came. Both the men and women had savings clubs altho these were centered at the "poor man's club" the public house.

The figures for the earnings of woolen weavers indicate differences in wages between various places. In Bradford - Wilts - there were 68 woolen hand-loom weavers. Of these the Assistant Commissioner for the district made a careful census.\*\*\*

4	earned	between	1	shilling	and	3	shillings	a	week
2	"	"	3	"	"	4	"	"	"
11	"	"	4	"	"	5	"	"	"
4	"	"	5	"	"	6	"	"	"

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\* Ibid  
 \*\* 1840.XXIV.  
 \*\*\* 1840.XXIII.432

22	earned	between	6	shillings	and	7	shillings	a	week
3	"	"	7	"	"	8	"	"	"
11	"	"	8	"	"	9	"	"	"
7	"	"	9	"	"	10	"	"	"
1	"	"	12	"					
2	"	"	12	"	"	14	"	"	"
1	"	above	15	"					

At Leeds the gross factory earnings were from sixteen shillings to one pound six shillings; those who worked at home earned from eight shillings to about a sovereign \* those are net amounts. In an investigation\* of home weaving which included thirty-three workers it was found that

4	earned	over	20	shillings
9	"	from	16	" to 20 shillings
13	"	"	12	" " 16 "
4	"	"	10	" " 12 "
3	"	under	10	"

These figures applied to full time work only. When the investigation was made it was necessary to allow from one shilling three pence, to two shillings and five pence to account for time unemployed. But even deducting two shillings, a generalization from these figures shows that the big bulk of the weavers actually earned, at the time of the inquiry, over ten shillings with a goodly percentage over twelve shillings. That is certainly an higher average than could be claimed for the cotton weavers, if not the silk and linen workers.

Up until 1842 conditions had not improved-at least not in

Lancashire. In 1842 Mr. W. C. Taylor traveled through Lancashire with the purpose of investigating conditions there. Conditions of all textile workers were then bad, but Mr. Taylor found conditions worst in a town whose textile workers were all hand-loom workers. The proprietors of that village - Padiham refused to allow any mill or factory to be built there. The complaint was raised that mill owners would work at a loss rather than let the capital be entirely idle, but the employers of labor such as that at Padiham were "knocked up" at every temporary crisis, and left the hands starving. Mr. Taylor found an attitude prevalent which gives an other side of the weavers' condition, a side which for obvious reasons would not be shown to a Parliamentary Committee or be expressed in a petition to Parliament asking help. That phase was the bitterness of the people toward the owners, manufacturers and others who were industrially above them. This applied to all trades, but Mr. Taylor did say that the hand-loom weavers were more patient and submissive than the workers in other trades.\*

As this attempt to show conditions of hand-loom weavers is to be restricted to the first half of the nineteenth century, it will not be possible to follow their fortunes or misfortunes any further. But what has been said furnishes ground for at least two generations both of which gave the writer a new impression of the subject.

Previous to the study the impression was strong that relatively early in the period of the industrial revolution all work of weavers in their own homes had ended, that mills and factories, springing up like mushrooms in towns and cities drew into their wide-yawning doors the people from the valley, hillside and plain to satisfy the

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\* W. C. Taylor - Notes of Tour 94.

insatiable appetite of industry. Another notion was that the labor of the hand-loom weavers was ended by about the third decade of the nineteenth century, the tiring human muscles and sinews having given way before the tireless mechanical men who needed little fuel and less rest. The new impressions gained in this investigation showed both ideas to be utterly wrong.

Instead of the old domestic system ending soon after the development of textile manufacture because of inventions, its hold was not relaxed for a long time. Arthur Young in the last volumes of the Annal of Agriculture showed it to be still firmly established in some country and suburban districts\*. In their report - 1826-27 Vol.5 the special Commission on Emigration called attention to the suggestion that certain low-land Scotch hand-loom weavers would make good emigrants because they were accustomed to agricultural pursuits, and had been accustomed to the cultivation of small pieces of ground.\*\* These people had been accustomed to putting aside their weaving at harvest time, and to going into the fields as laborers. Even as late as 1838 Mr. Hinkson was responsible for as surprising a statement as the following: "The men who earn most inconsiderable sums at weaving are family men above the age of forty, too much advanced in life, or too infirm of constitution, or too fixed in their habits to think of changing their trade for a better. When younger men they are rarely persons having no other resources than the loom. They calculated upon field work in harvest time, upon the product of their potato settings, in some districts upon fishing, and upon occasional employment in various capacities\*\*\*"

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\* Annal of Agriculture - 34 - 244-259 38.546  
\*\* 1826-27 V.-62  
\*\*\*1840 XXIV (639)11



The conception that workers were gathered into factories and mills was also erroneous. Though connection with other labor had undoubtedly died away to a considerable extent, the custom of weaving at home was - in 1840 - still very popular, in fact it was but little touched by factory concentration. The evidence of the Assistant Commissioners was too strong, on that aspect of weaving, not to be believed. In silk manufacture at Norwich there were, in 1839, 4,059 looms employed, of these only 656 were in factories.\* In Gloucestershire among approximately 3,000 weavers but 911 were in factories.\*\* The same report stated that the cotton weaving was carried on to the greatest extent at home, but that the custom of factory work was beginning to extend itself to that industry\*\*\* The total number of hand-loom weavers south of the Forth and Clyde was 37,189 of whom only 3,505 worked in factories:\*\*\*\*

In 1841 the final report of the Commissioners, based on the investigations of the Assistant Commissioners was published. One paragraph is especially valuable in this connection. "At first the weaver was both capitalist and laborer, as linen weaving is still carried on in many parts of north Ireland. In every other branch of weaving----in Great Britain the material is supplied by the capitalist or manufacturer to the weaver and he is paid on returning a given quantity of finished cloth. In most cases the looms belong to the weavers or are hired by them. If he has not a loom he must work either at a loom belonging to some other weaver or at one belonging to a manufacturer. In the former case he is

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\* 1840. XXIII - 298  
\*\* 1840. XXIV - 386  
\*\*\* 1840. XXIV - (639)9  
\*\*\*\* 1839. XLII - (159)4

called a journeyman, and the weaver at whose he works the master weaver. He is paid by the master weaver. The weaver who works on the loom belonging to the manufacturer is called a factory weaver or shop weaver. Neither factory weavers nor journeymen form large portions of the factory population. The bulk of the hand-loom weavers own or hire their own looms, keep them in their own cottages and perform themselves, assisted by their wives and children, both the weaving and the operations subsidiary to it.\*

It is unfortunate but no adequate idea could be gained from any data observed of the number of hand-loom weavers at any time up as far as this investigation goes. There was no census taken of them. The number of factory workers was given, but as this total included only workers in power driven factories it was not of any use in regard to hand-loom workers.\*\* Even had hand-loom weavers been included in factory enumeration that would not have included the out of door workers, the great bulk of the hand-loom workers. The scheme of going over the Assistant Commissioners reports place by place to find the total from the number reported from each place had to be abandoned since the number of towns for which no figures were given would have utterly vitiated the reliability of any total found in this way. Yet in some districts the total could be approximated or stated quite positively.

Assistant Commissioner Mitchell reported that the Spitalfields district had 10,146 looms\*\*\* We have seen that the southern parts of Scotland had over 37,000 hand-loom weavers in 1838, that at the

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\* 1841 X (296)2

\*\* 1836 XLV (256) and 1839 XLII (41)

\*\*\* 1840 XXIII. 219

same time Gloucester had 3,000 weavers, and that in the silk trade at Norwich there were some 4,059 looms employed. But these statements are rare, and only of local interest because no total can be secured from them. In giving some figures on Leeds the Commissioner, Mr. H. S. Chapman, added that no note had been made concerning the number of linen hand-loom weavers. Another, and important, drawback, to the use of these figures is that they are not all gathered on the same method of classification. Some reports stated the number of weavers, others the number of looms, and in the latter case the observers at times forgot to report the very interesting data concerning the number of looms that were busy.

Hence the problem of determining the number of hand-loom weavers seems like an impossible one - at least as far as we have gone. Here and there a flask of light is seen through the gloom of uncertainty. It is but a flask serving to light merely some small space, and to accentuate the surrounding darkness.

It is at an uncertain period that we have <sup>to leave</sup> the hand-loom weavers. Their extinction or survival appears to have been in the balance just before the decision, expressed through the agency of economic forces, that they should decline. One who has traveled in England realizes how full the change has been, but to follow that change to its completion would be to go far beyond the period set at the commencement of this study.

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