

CRESSBROOK AND LITTON MILLS: AN ALTERNATIVE VIEW

By S. D. CHAPMAN

IN an interesting article in the last issue of this *Journal* Miss Mackenzie reconstructed the story of Litton and Cressbrook mills and their early partners.¹ She skilfully pieced together the scattered fragments of documentary evidence and attempted to explain how the Tideswell joiner William Newton showed his business ability and honest virtues in the service of the two cotton mills, while the later notoriety of Litton is attributed to the limited ability of Ellis Needham (its principal partner) and his collaborator, the "astute careerist" Parson Brown. The record is assembled with scholarly patience and makes good reading, but it fails to take adequate notice of the economic movements and forces that are not explicit in the meagre documentation of these two mills, and so misses some of the main perspectives in the history of the early English cotton industry. It is neither desirable nor possible to write that history here, but I hope the editor will allow me to defend an interpretation which I outlined in lectures to the Society in 1966 and 1967.²

William Newton plays the leading part in Miss Mackenzie's drama, and she complains that "It is difficult to see why Dr. Chapman doubts his outstanding ability as a framesmith". My brief references to Newton were made in the context of the whole midlands textile industry, and it must be insisted that, compared with the well-known millwright engineers of the period, he was not a particularly important figure. The last two decades of the 18th century saw a very rapid expansion of the cotton industry, and the skills of able mechanics were very much at a premium. Local newspapers, memoirs, private correspondence, and high wage rates all bear testimony to the acute shortage of craftsmen whose skills could be applied to textile machine building, to the installation of water-wheels and transmission systems, or to the management of cotton mills.³ When, for instance, Matthew Boulton of Birmingham approached John Rennie for a millwright-manager in 1791 he was told that "at present I have not a man in my service . . . fit to send from here on any trifling business, far less the management of your mill — the fact is some Danish and

¹ M. H. Mackenzie, "Cressbrook and Litton Mills, 1779-1835", *D.A.J.*, LXXXVIII (1968), 1-25.

² Subsequently published in the author's *The early factory masters* (1967).

³ See, for example, G. Unwin, *Samuel Oldknow and the Arkwrights* (1924); R. Owen, *Life of Robert Owen* (1857); and McConnel & Kennedy MSS., in letters 1795-6, 1797 (Manchester University).

American pimps that have been for some time strolling about London have deprived me of several of my best workmen . . . and I am reduced to the necessity of making foremen of men scarcely fit to be hinds men. In respect to workmen, the cotton trade has deprived this place of many of the best clockmakers and mathematical instrument makers, so much so that they can scarcely be had to do the ordinary business".⁴ Replying to a similar inquiry, another master millwright, Peter Ewart, wrote from Manchester "I haven't been able to find a good millwright here. A few good filers and turners, all engaged for terms of years in the cotton mills . . ."⁵ Ewart himself received numerous offers of partnerships in cotton mills, and Robert Owen's *Life* suggests that any capable man could name his own salary.⁶ Newton was in direct contact with Manchester during these halcyon years,⁷ yet (according to Miss Mackenzie) he remained on the edge of the industry in Tideswell, hating the drudgery of a badly-managed and small cotton mill. Why did he not move to Manchester, and enjoy the brilliant Literary and Philosophic Society that Robert Owen (newly arrived from the country) found so congenial?

The answer must be that the basic framework of facts given by Miss Mackenzie covers only part of Newton's activities. The other part of his career can be traced in the fire policy registers of the Sun and Royal Exchange Companies,⁸ which not only provide inventory valuations of numerous early cotton mills, but also name the partners and give their place of origin. Litton mill was insured in 1792, and the partners listed as Ellis Needham, Thomas Frith, and Francis Haywood of Manchester, but Newton's name does not appear.⁹ He appears instead as junior partner, first with Benjamin Pearson and Champion Bray at Brough cotton mill (1794),¹⁰ and then in 1797 as partner in an even smaller mill at Castleton.¹¹ He may have worked at Litton mill in the 1790s, but his main interests were elsewhere in the district. The usual type of Arkwright mill of 1,000 spindles was insured for about £3,000, and the 2,000 spindle prototype for about £5,000.¹² The Brough and Castleton mills were insured for £1,500 and £950 respectively, and the "millwright's work" at the latter was valued at only £50, and was probably a horsewheel. Clearly Newton was not in the first league of professional millwrights, which consisted of men like Lowe of Nottingham, Sutcliffe of Halifax, and Wrigley of Manchester, who in the 1780s and 1790s were constantly touring the textile districts of the north of England supervising the erection of new mills for high fees.¹³

⁴ Rennie to Boulton, 19 November 1791. Assay Office Library, Birmingham.

⁵ Ewart to Boulton, 12 December 1791 at same Library. (I owe these references to Dr. J. Tann.)

⁶ W. C. Henry, *A biographical notice of . . . Peter Ewart* (Manchester, 1844), 14; R. Owen, 27-9.

⁷ Litton mill served the Manchester market. *Nottingham Journal*, 12 August 1786.

⁸ At Guildhall Library, London, E.C.2.

⁹ Royal Exchange Registers 22/128180 (1792).

¹⁰ Sun Registers, C.S. 4/625167, 9/640651.

¹¹ Sun Registers, C.S. 20/667941.

¹² S. D. Chapman, "Fixed Capital Formation in the Early British Cotton Industry", *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser. XXXIII, no. 1, August 1970, 235-66.

¹³ A. E. Musson and E. Robinson, *Science and technology in the Industrial Revolution* (1969), Ch. XII; S. D. Chapman, *Ec. H.R.*, 1970.

A realistic assessment of Litton and Cressbrook mills must place these two small concerns in their proper context in the industry by comparing their size with that of other mills at the period. The Royal Exchange insurance valuation of Needham, Frith & Haywood's mill¹⁴ places it readily in the category of small Arkwright type cotton mills:

Cotton mill at Litton (Derbyshire)	£450
Utensils, including machinery, water-wheel and gears	2,550
Warehouse, counting house, smith's shop and offices	50
Utensils and stock	250
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	£3,300
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This valuation did not include Frith's small carding shop at Tideswell which was insured, with three adjacent houses, for £650 in 1793.¹⁵ Nor, of course, does it take into account Haywood's Manchester warehouse and calico mill at Wild Boar Clough¹⁶ (above Macclesfield), which were probably operated as complementary enterprises during the period from about 1788 to 1798 when Haywood was Needham's partner. Cressbrook mill was insured for £1,700 in 1791 when Edmund Baker and Barker Bossley sold it to Watts, Lowe & Co., a firm that already had a small mill in Lumsdale, just to the north of Matlock. (Job Watts was a Bristol hosier, and Thomas Lowe a Matlock mechanic¹⁷). New investment on the site in the early 1790s raised the value of the mill slightly:¹⁸

Cotton mill at Cressbrook, near Bakewell	£700
Millwrights work	400
Clockmakers work [machinery]	900
Stock	200
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	£2,200
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Clearly the fixed capital invested in both mills was modest, and placed them well behind the important pioneer concerns in the midlands, Lancashire, Yorkshire, and Scotland.¹⁹ If Ellis Needham had any great standing in the early cotton industry, it was the consequence of his partnership with his brother-in-law in Manchester.

The economic problems of the first generation of entrepreneurs in mechanised cotton spinning derived from the erratic trading conditions brought by commercial crisis and war, and necessitated a much larger working capital than fixed capital. The better documented experience of James Longsdon, who had a carding and spinning mill at Great Longstone

¹⁴ Royal Exchange Registers 22/128180.

¹⁵ Sun Registers C.S. 1/622458.

¹⁶ John Graham, *History of printworks in the Manchester district 1760-1846* (MS., Manchester Public Library); *Manchester Mercury*, 9 July 1799.

¹⁷ Sun Registers O.S. 378/588793, 370/572862.

¹⁸ Sun Registers C.S. 8/640372, 18/666373.

¹⁹ S. D. Chapman, *Ec. H.R.*, 1970, Appendices giving insurance valuations of leading cotton firms.

and partners in Manchester and St. Petersburg (Russia) in the 1780s, reveals the financial strains to which smaller manufacturers were often subject at this period. Andrew Morewood, his Manchester partner, wrote in 1785 that his brother in Russia "says his prospects still wear a favourable appearance, and that if it was not for our circumscribed capital he should be filled with very gay hopes, but with it he sees it as utterly impossible to make any figure in trade, for when business promises well we have it not in our power to take advantage of it by materially increasing our manufactory, and when it wears an unfavourable aspect we are not in a situation to keep up our goods but are under the necessity of selling them to keep the little machine in constant motion".²⁰

The important point is that most of the local families who embarked on cotton spinning in the Peak District had to rely on outside sources of capital. The Gardoms of Calver mill drew capital from Pares of Leicester and Heygate of London, Arkwright or his son lent money to James Longsdon, Samuel Oldknow, Ward of Belper, and Twigg of Ashover, and (as already noted) Cressbrook was financed by Watts of Bristol for a period.²¹ Francis Haywood was a wealthy Manchester merchant — in 1792 he had £39,000 in stocks of cotton alone²² — and there can be very little doubt that Needham and Frith leaned on his financial strength. When he became bankrupt, in 1798,²³ during the period when Manchester manufacturers were switching over to mule spinning,²⁴ the prospects at Litton were obviously dim, and the wonder is that the concern continued so long as it did. Cressbrook mill, which saw numerous changes of ownership, only survived because Phillips of Manchester (one of the established merchant houses that turned to manufacturing in the 1790s) were prepared to invest something like £12,000 in the elegant building we see today.²⁵

The decline of Litton and Cressbrook mills must therefore be seen, in the first place, as part of the contraction of spinning on the Arkwright model that took place after about 1795, and Needham's tactics interpreted as the response of an isolated entrepreneur trapped by the collapse of the warp spinning industry in which he had invested his capital, social credit, and best years of his life. As a desperate last resort, he was foolish enough to try to cut costs by employing unwanted juvenile labour.²⁶ The *Blincoe Memoir* is a grim monument to this miserable phase of the mill's history, but there is no need to regard the conditions it described as typical of the early cotton industry. To write this is not to "whitewash" over Needham's notoriety, but an attempt to restore perspective to a polemical document.

²⁰ Quoted in S. D. Chapman, "James Longsdon, farmer and fustian manufacturer. The smaller firm in the early English cotton industry", *Textile History*, II (1) (1970) (forthcoming).

²¹ *Textile History*, II (1) (1970).

²² Royal Exchange Register, 21/128862.

²³ *Manchester Mercury*, 9 July 1799.

²⁴ J. Montgomery, *The Carding and Spinning Master's Assistant* (Glasgow, 1832), 145-6; Crompton's 1811 Survey of Cotton Industry, Irving Bequest, Bolton Civic Centre Museum.

²⁵ Cressbrook Mill MSS. (Derbys. R.O.); Sun Register C.S. 148/1022643 (1824).

²⁶ No apprentice house appears in advertisement in *Nottingham Journal* 12 August 1786 or Royal Exchange Register 22/128180.

John Brown's horrific *Memoir of Robert Blincoe* has cast a long shadow, and it is still hardly possible to discuss the book without being challenged by some emotional argument about cruelty to children. But what is now at stake is not the exploitation of juvenile workers, but the maintenance of a balanced historical record. Miss Mackenzie finds it necessary to enter into a minute commentary on the tortures described by Brown, even though she has clearly recognized his unreliability, and finds no support for his allegations of cruelty in the reports of visiting justices. In Blincoe's childhood public hangings and brutal floggings of minor offenders, sound beating of wayward wives and children, and cruel sports for popular entertainment were still familiar events in the north of England, and it is difficult to know what to consider abnormal. The soundest judgement must surely be that of an able and informed contemporary. The third volume of John Farey's *Agriculture of Derbyshire* was written during Blincoe's time at Litton by an outsider distinguished for his ability, meticulous observation and scrupulous judgement. "I am far from intending to insinuate that great care, and even kind attention, is not bestowed on the cotton mill apprentices in general throughout this country", he wrote. "In several cases I have seen this to be the case, and a rather sedulous inquiry on this head from others has not disclosed even suspicious hints to the contrary in any instance, as far as I can recollect; nor am I disposed to think or represent that any very considerable or remedial degrees or vice or immorality exist in these apprentice houses or mills, nor that their employ is as unhealthy as some have represented . . ."²⁷

²⁷ Quoted in S. D. Chapman, *The early factory masters*, 205. Farey's acknowledgements suggest that his principal informant on the cotton industry in the Wye valley area was James Longsdon, who, to judge from his extensive correspondence, was no particular friend of Needham's.