

CRESSBROOK AND LITTON MILLS: A REPLY

By M. H. MACKENZIE

I SHOULD like to thank Dr. Chapman for publishing in his critique of my article on Cressbrook and Litton mills¹ the relevant references to the fire policy registers of the Royal Exchange and Sun companies. He does not explain, however, how this material and the Cressbrook papers have made him change his position.² The fire policy registers have enabled me to correct the mistake I made in assuming that William Newton was at Litton mill from 1786 to 1797. It is now clear that the latter was third partner and frame-smith at Brough and Castleton for certain periods within these dates. The information about Francis Hayward's bankruptcy has also been useful but, except on these points, there is little common ground between us. I work from the local records, but Dr. Chapman evidently thinks that the idiosyncrasies of personality matter less than the working of economic laws. As Professor Ashton has observed, detailed studies of businesses are needed before the economic historian can profitably offer his generalizations.³

A case in point is Dr. Chapman's attempt to denigrate William Newton in the light of what he considers irrefutable economic evidence. If Newton had been a first-class frame-smith, he would have toured Derbyshire for high fees, instead of staying in Tideswell as Anna Seward's protégé: "he undoubtedly owed his original preferment to a few lines of poetry published in the *Gentleman's Magazine* rather than to his ability as a mechanic".⁴ "His original preferment" refers presumably to the Brough partnership. But people do not necessarily respond to economic stimuli in the same way. There is evidence that William Newton's work was good, that he managed to combine visits to other cotton mills in the district

¹ S. D. Chapman, "Cressbrook and Litton mills: an alternative view", *D.A.J.*, LXXXIX (1969), 86-90.

² S. Chapman, *The early factory masters* (1967), 92, 206; J. M. J. Fletcher, "William Newton", *D.A.J.*, XXXIV (1912), 168.

³ T. S. Ashton, *Peter Stubs of Warrington, an 18th-century industrialist* (1939, reprinted 1961). Professor Ashton did not see fit to change the opening paragraph in 1961.

⁴ Chapman, *ibid.*, 92.

with his duties at Brough and Castleton⁵ and that, except for the disastrous venture of The Peacock, he was fairly prosperous. It may have been, as a result of a visit to Litton mill to repair or perhaps reconstruct the water machinery, that Mrs. Sterndale in her obituary of Newton wrote that perplexing sentence: "the important concerns with which Mr. Newton was connected at Cressbrook and Litton evince his scientific and practical knowledge". Anna Seward's part in the Brough partnership was limited to a loan of £50 to Newton. Champion Bray and Benjamin Pearson, the owners of Brough cotton mill, approached Newton in 1786 or 1787 because he was a competent frame-smith.

Dr. Chapman asks why, if William Newton had any pretensions to intellectual interests, he did not join Robert Owen in Manchester. This is a non sequitur. Manchester provided Newton with a living, but Hartshead, Sheffield, gave him mental stimulation. For forty-five years, while working in Derbyshire or Cheshire, he received by carrier his weekly copy of the Sheffield *Iris*. For the first seven or eight years he was a contributor and, in spite of Anna Seward's unfortunate influence on his writing, there was a general development of his powers: his surviving poems and prose articles have earned him a short mention in the Dictionary of National Biography.⁶

I accept, with reservations, Dr. Chapman's thesis that the decline of Litton mill was due to the introduction of the steam-driven mule in Manchester in the 1790s and to the bankruptcy in 1798 of Francis Hayward, Ellis Needham's rich brother-in-law, but reject the further suggestion that: "Needham tactics (must be) 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". "Needham's tactics" — i.e. the introduction of apprentice labour, insufficient food, very long hours, night work and overcrowding — cannot be justified by special pleading. Moreover, he was not "an isolated entrepreneur". There were four other warp-spinning mills in the Tideswell district — Cressbrook, Brough, Edale and Castleton. Cressbrook and Edale were more isolated than Litton, and they all faced the challenge of the mule.⁷

In his closing paragraphs Dr. Chapman dismisses the Blincoe Memoir and, at the same time, inconsistently adds: "there is no need to regard the conditions described as typical of the early cotton industry."⁸ But

⁵ A further study of Newton's contributions to the Sheffield Register and *Iris* suggests that for part of the year he was a travelling frame-smith and that, when busy, may have spent several days at one place. He wrote under a variety of pen-names and addresses, which directly or indirectly were nearly always connected with a cotton mill. Thus for the year 1788:

26 January. "Lines on the entrance of a New Year", Hathersage.

15 March. "Advice", Chesterfield.

17 May. "On the burning of Grassbrook cotton mill near Tideswell in 1785, written at the time the conflagration happened", Litton.

9 August. "Hymn", Brough cotton mill.

⁶ During the years when Newton was a contributor, the newspaper files were very incomplete; some of his writing must have been lost. For opinions on his ability and poetic gifts see following article.

⁷ Between 1820-30 Brough and Edale went over to doubling for the lace industry.

⁸ Chapman, *D.A.J.*, LXXXIX (1969), 89.

who has suggested that there is such a need? Far from conditions at Litton being typical of the cotton trade at the time of Ellis Needham's bankruptcy, they were inferior to those found in most mills.

Dr. Chapman complains of my attempt to analyse Blincoe's grievances, which may have been magnified by John Brown, but analysis is the best method of dealing with allegations: Blincoe's statements about food and hours of work can be proved and accepted and his sensational exaggerations about the number of deaths disproved and rejected. I would not expect to find evidence of the thrashing or teasing of apprentices in a J.P.'s report; overseers and manager would be on their best behaviour during inspection, but I would expect the justices to notice if the children had been knocked about and, for lack of any reference to such ill treatment, I suspend judgment on this question. What the reports of 1807 and 1811 disclosed were basic deficiencies in the running of the factory and apprentice house, which would damage the reputation of any mill owner.

There were two problems at Litton, the farm and the cotton mill. For some time before Francis Hayward's bankruptcy in 1798 the mill had been less prosperous, and Ellis Needham, whose real interest seems to have been farming, was trying to economise. In my article⁹ I put the introduction of apprentices at Litton too early, but, at some date after the unsuccessful attempt to sell the mill in August 1786 and before 1793¹⁰, Litton mill-house was built and a certain number of apprentices were introduced. In 1795 the Taddington apprentice house followed and, wherever possible, apprentice labour was substituted for free labour, but Ellis Needham lacked Barker Bossley's interest in and feeling of responsibility for the welfare of the children. He probably calculated that on his diet, provided almost entirely from the home farm, their maintenance would cost less than the wages' bill and, on this unsatisfactory basis, the mill was worked down to 1811 and provided a living for John Needham. From this date to January 1815, Ellis Needham managed to stave off bankruptcy and, when the blow fell, he handed over to his fourth son, Robert, who, in turn, kept the mill going until his sudden death in December 1816. Needham brinkmanship was astonishing, but it was the apprentices who suffered.

Dr. Chapman insists that the charge of cruelty cannot be proved against Ellis Needham on the grounds that his conduct must be judged by the standards of his times. How then can Barker Bossley's conduct be explained? In her review of Dr. Chapman's book, Miss J. de L. Mann, the Oxford textile historian,¹¹ takes up this point: "Dr. Chapman devotes a considerable amount of space to a defence of the factory master from the charge of cruelty to the children in their mills", and notes that, though "he does not appear to be certain what made a 'good' employer", he always sees the master with a bad reputation as the victim of local prejudice. He refers to the justices' reports in order to point out that they

⁹ M. H. Mackenzie, "Cressbrook and Litton mills 1779-1835", *D.A.J.*, LXXXVIII (1968), 15.

¹⁰ Derbyshire deeds, Derby Borough Library. MSS. 3541, 1 February 1809.

¹¹ J. de L. Mann, *Textile history* (1967), 122-4.

did not accuse Ellis Needham of cruelty, then, ignoring the Memoir, the settlement papers and Blincoe's evidence in *Factories Inquiry*, 1833,¹² finds justification for his views in Farey.

Farey's evidence on cotton mills in general, and on Litton in particular, is not sufficiently informed to be accepted as the final judgment. This statement is not intended as a derogatory criticism of the whole work; Farey was aware of his limitations. When he came to Derbyshire in 1807, he knew little about cotton mills and asked questions about pauper labour, because these mills were so obviously connected with the industrialization of the countryside, a development in which he was very interested and which he deplored. He was always assured that the children were well treated and as a result wrote the report, which has made such a deep impression on Dr. Chapman.¹³ If Farey's informants had in mind such mills as Pleasely, Edale, Cressbrook, Mellor or Styal, they were right. Farey was on friendly terms with Ellis Needham, because the latter was an agricultural "improver". In volume II of his book Farey found ten points in Ellis Needham's agricultural practice to commend and presented him as an example of a manufacturer who was also a good farmer, but he never attempted to assess Needham's capacity as a mill owner. Farey made no reference to the visitors' reports. He knew that there were apprentices at Litton mill and commented on the recipe used for their oatcakes and the working of an ingenious potato machine, yet, according to Dr. Chapman, he was "the only responsible outsider to visit the scene of Blincoe's apprenticeship". Farey's lack of knowledge on this particular subject must give way to the better informed opinions of the visitors.¹³

¹² *Factories Inquiry*, R. Com., 2nd Rep. 1833, 17.

¹³ J. Farey, *General view of the agriculture and minerals of Derbyshire*, III, 205.