

HELMSHORE TEXTILE MUSEUMS

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The Museum site at Helmsore comprises two mill buildings and associated ponds with the River Ogden (a tributary of the River Mersey) flowing from North to South through the site. Although originally separated by only a few feet at one point the twentieth-century commercial history of one mill has been completely different from the other. The older mill was built in 1789 as a woollen fulling mill through the combined resources of six members of a family called Turner. Three of these Turners were in the cotton trade in the Blackburn area, the other three in the wool trade at Martholme. It is perhaps not surprising to find that after a little while the three Turners with cotton backgrounds had dropped out of this woollen enterprise.



Higher Mill built in 1789

It was the son (William Turner 1793-1852) of one of these founding Turners who made a very large impact on the area. He it was who had constructed the adjacent larger mill probably in the late 1820s. This mill seems to have been for the carding, spinning, and weaving of wool and at least some of the resulting cloth must subsequently have been finished in the adjacent fulling mill. The East end of the present structure probably contains elements of the late 1820s mill but a fire in 1857 destroyed most of it, so that the greatest part now

to be seen dates from the rebuild of approximately 1860.

Following William Turner's death in 1852 the later mill (today referred to as Whitaker's Mill) was switched between wool and cotton a number of times under a succession of operators. In the 1920s a condenser cotton spinning plant was installed and it remained in that business using much of the original machinery, until it closed down at Christmas 1978.

The fulling mill (today referred to as Higher Mill) did not suffer changes

of use following William Turner's death and came to be operated by a Lawrence Whittaker around 1875. His descendants continued to run it as a fulling mill until its closure in June 1967.

The Museum has had to contend with a difficult problem of names associated with the two mills. In 1789 the Turners bought a green field site in the parish of Musbury. There was no population in the immediate environs, and the village of Helmsore did not exist. The Turner enterprise brought people to the area round the mills and William Turner was responsible for virtually all the early development of Helmsore. When he died in 1852 the two existing mills were part of the Helmsore Mills Estate and later both became known as Higher Mill. The fulling mill was subsequently run by one Lawrence Whittaker (one of whose sons bought the freehold of both mills).

In the 1920s the operation of the later mill (Whittaker's Mill) was taken over by a local textile firm called L. Whittaker & Sons who converted it to condenser cotton spinning. It was not until 1959 that they bought the freehold of it from the Whittakers. The families Whittaker and Whittaker are related some generations back but by the time they were both on this site together there were no Whittakers in L. Whittaker & Sons whereas the



Whittaker's Mill

fulling mill Whittakers were a well known and respected local family.

Situated only a few miles from the Lancashire-Yorkshire border it is perhaps not surprising that the Rossendale valley (in which the mills are situated) had become a wool textile area. Later, in the nineteenth century, condenser cotton spinning started in the valley and from then on these two types of textile industry formed the industrial base of the area until quite recent times.

Although the Turner family made quite a small beginning in Rossendale by building the fulling mill in 1789 it was not long before they became a major force in the valley. Fulling, which shrinks and thickens the woollen cloth, can be carried out by hand, or more correctly by feet (walking the cloth); but having been mechanised early it had long been the practice by the eighteenth century to carry out the operation in mills driven by water power. The carding, spinning and weaving of wool was still very much a cottage industry. Since the open weave woollen cloth produced in this way had to be fulled to be of much practical use fulling mill owners like the Turners were important figures. Soon they came to control the carding, spinning, and weaving in the area even though these continued to be carried out at home. Later they began to invest in mills where these processes were water and/or steam powered. The mill now called Whitaker's Mill seems to have been built for that purpose by William Turner. The local hill farms, however, still continued to produce woollen cloth in addition to farming long after large scale production was centred in the mills.

After William Turner's death in 1852 the mills closed because his will instructed that in the absence of surviving male issue all his vast estate of mills, cottages, and land in Helmshore and elsewhere was to be put on the market. William had two daughters by his first wife and nine by his second, but no son! When Higher Mill subsequently reopened the control of production in the area was no longer with the fullers. Lawrence Whittaker operated his fulling business at Higher Mill in a generally similar way to a modern finishing plant. That is to say he provided, and charged for, the fulling and finishing service his customers wanted applying to their cloth. In this way the business was carried on at Helmshore through three

generations of Whittakers.

William Turner was very energetic and innovative in the conduct of his business affairs. By the time of his death in 1852 the fulling mill had already been completely re-equipped at least once since its construction in 1789. The present waterwheel (dating from the late 1840s) was the third, and final, phase of waterpower at Higher Mill. None of the surviving machinery seems to pre-date 1849 (this date is cast into one of the fulling stock backs), and had the Turner dynasty continued to run the mill further major changes might have been expected. The Whittakers who took over were less innovative with the result that under their care Higher Mill remained with much of its mid-nineteenth-century machinery in place up to closure in 1967.

Although the Whittakers retained five fulling stocks (including at least one which is presumed to be part of the group of six stocks which William Turner had installed along with the present waterwheel) they used rotary milling machines to an increasing extent in the twentieth century. Two rotary milling machines were installed alongside the stocks and a new brick building (now gone) was erected in about 1922 to accommodate more rotary milling. They also introduced an electrically powered hydro extractor or "whuzzer" (like a large spin-drier) but this, like the machines in the brick building, was lost after the mill closed.

During the 1950s when the fulling and finishing business was becoming less prosperous Higher Mill with its waterwheel and antiquated machinery was observed by local enthusiasts

(Christopher Aspin and Derek Pilkington) who were keen to see it saved. Closure seemed inevitable and was made even more likely by the fact that the owner/operators, Rossall and Edith Whittaker, had one daughter but no son. For the second time the fate of a Turner mill was influenced by the lack of a male heir. Higher Mill closed as a commercial concern in the summer of 1967.

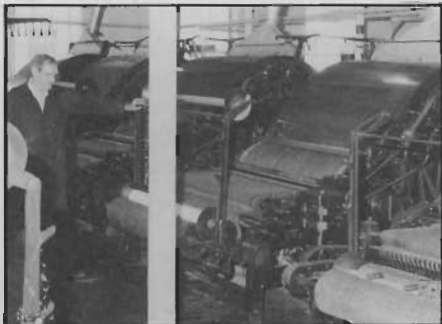
As a result of the efforts of a number of people Higher Mill was scheduled as an Ancient Monument and once a Trust had been formally set up the mill was purchased from the Whittakers. Soon Higher Mill was receiving quite a number of pre-booked parties of visitors. These were usually given guided tours of the mill by either Christopher Aspin (Hon. Secretary of the Trust) or Derek Pilkington (Hon. Curator).

Helmshore also housed the research headquarters of the major firm of textile machinery makers by then known as Platt International Ltd. (based on the famous firm of Platt Bros. of Oldham). This company looked after an important collection referred to as the Platt Collection of Early Textile Machines and this too was available to parties only 150 yards down the road from Higher Mill.

Much of the material in the Platt Collection was acquired by Platt Bros. in the last quarter of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. During the early years of this century several of the items, particularly the Arkwright machines and the Spinning Jenny, travelled extensively to textile machinery exhibitions, no doubt to contrast with



Waterwheel and fulling stocks in Higher Mill



Finisher carding engines

Platt Bros. modern machinery displayed on the same stands.

By 1971 it was agreed between Platt International Ltd. and the Trust that the Platt Collection should be rehoused at Higher Mill and the machines were transferred to the two upper floors of the mill. Demand from the public to visit Higher Mill was strong and the burden of guiding groups of visitors as well as keeping on top of the building maintenance problems became increasingly difficult for the Higher Mill Trust. By 1975 agreement had been reached for Lancashire County Museum Service to become responsible for running the mill and the Authority took over on a 99-year lease from November of that year.

A considerable amount of maintenance of building, ponds and waterwheel was carried out between 1975 and 1979. In 1985 Lancashire County Museum Service purchased most of the Platt Collection when changing fortunes in the textile industry had made it of less direct importance to Platt Saco Lowell (as Platt International Ltd. had by then become).

Most of the Platt Collection is now shown on the first floor of Higher Mill, including a complete range of Arkwright-type preparatory machinery. Through this collection it is possible to demonstrate the development of spinning from the early drop-spindle, via the great wheel to Hargreaves' Jenny, and via the Saxony wheel, to Arkwright's Water Frame. Arkwright's 96-spindle Water Frame is the most important machine in the collection, being the only complete production machine of its type in the world. A few items, including an early woollen ring spinning frame, are at present in store awaiting future developments. There are also a number of early handlooms which, together with additions made by the Higher Mill Museum Trust, are now on display on the second floor of Higher Mill to continue the story of early textile production.

Conditions in the Lancashire textile industry continued to be difficult and at Christmas 1978 the firm of L. Whitaker & Sons shut down the condenser cotton spinning plant right next door to Higher Mill. It was clear that the subsequent fate of this building would have a large effect on Higher Mill. This consideration, combined with a desire to see the museum develop to include more of the story of Lancashire's textile industry, resulted in the purchase of Whitaker's Mill and its condenser cotton plant by Lancashire County Council (with assistance from the Department of the Environment and the Science Museum).

Condenser cotton spinning is a shortened form of cotton processing which turns cotton fibre into a soft thick yarn suitable for the weft in absorbent cotton cloths such as flannelette and towels. The process uses waste cotton as its starting point. Waste is generated at various stages in the spinning and weaving of cotton in the conventional trade.

When condenser cotton spinning came to Whitaker's Mill in the 1920s part of the ground floor housed the various machines for opening and for blending the various types of waste cotton. The two upper floors were used for carding and spinning. Unlike most other cotton mills the two functions of carding and spinning were not separated. Instead each of the two floors housed self-contained units, consisting of breaker carding engines, Derby doubler, finisher carding engines and mules. The machinery installed on the two floors was similar, although not identical. Most of the machinery was acquired secondhand and adapted if necessary. There is some evidence to suggest that the mules on the second floor were purchased new. The museum possesses a specification from Messrs Taylor Lang for the installation of four mules a Whitaker's in 1925.

During the last 25 years of the working life of the mill a number of changes were made to the machinery. A decision was taken to concentrate the blending function at another mill (Spring Vale Mill) in Haslingden, resulting in the removal of the opening machinery from the ground floor. Bales of blended cotton waste were then transported from Spring Vale Mill to Whitaker's Mill for carding and spinning. During the 1950s the existing breaker carding engines on the first floor were replaced (with second-hand machines). At the same

time the number of mules was reduced to two pairs, eliminating a single mule. New legislation forced the fitting of covers and dust hoods with ancillary fans, ducting and filtration plant to all the carding engines. Now each carding engine had its own electric motor but the mules continued to be driven by line shafting from a single electric motor on each floor.

A combination of nineteenth-century machinery together with a demand for fine, strong yarn meant that a lot of cotton was rejected at various stages of the process in the conventional cotton spinning trade. While the industry was large and the production of a significant amount of waste was considered normal condenser cotton spinning was profitable. However, the Lancashire cotton industry has continued to contract since the First World War. Also, since the 1950s, spinning technology has changed substantially; modern mills make less waste, and most of their own waste can be used internally. The condenser cotton spinning plant at Whitaker's Mill closed down at Christmas 1978.

Following the acquisition of Whitaker's Mill by Lancashire County Council the intention was that some original machinery would be retained on the first floor although some would be removed in order to create space to show other forms of spinning. The top floor was to be cleared of all the existing machinery and used to display weaving and finishing processes. The area on the ground floor used for opening and blending, known as the "Devil Hole", was to be retained incorporating machines brought back from Spring Vale Mill when it too closed. An adjacent part was to become a display gallery telling of the development of the Lancashire textile industry. The remaining ground floor area was to provide the various necessary visitor facilities.

In the event, while the ground floor adaptation proceeded as planned and the machinery was removed from the top floor, only minor changes, to meet



Condenser cotton mules

safety legislation, have been carried out on the first floor. The spinning room thus remains an almost unique example of an early textile workplace just as it was during commercial operation.

An interesting comparison can be made between the early machines in the Platt Collection housed in Higher Mill and the later examples in Whitaker's Mill. In the long term the museum's aim is to expand the story of the development of textile production machinery by showing a mule which is only semi-automatic and power looms made by E. Leach of Rochdale which, while probably dating from the 1850s, are of a very early style.

The present stage of development is not seen as the final phase of the museum by any means. The state in which the two mills were acquired has meant that considerable emphasis has been placed on the workplace environments represented by the fulling mill and the condenser cotton spinning room. While these are unique, and powerful arguments can

suitable ring frame is still sought (something like a Platts M1 or earlier) - can anyone help?

The existence of Queen Street Mill at Burnley (the last surviving steam powered weaving shed) has somewhat complicated forward thinking at Helmshore because of the uncertainties which have surrounded that project in recent years. At the moment the possibility of Queen Street Mill being operated as part of the Lancashire County Museum Service is being actively considered. If Queen Street Mill becomes allied to Helmshore Textile Museums in this way it would enable the bulk of the reserve collection of looms at Helmshore to be rehoused at Burnley. The second floor of Whitaker's Mill could then be devoted to medium/fine spinning (to which the building is far better suited than to weaving) while still leaving space for a library and temporary exhibitions area.

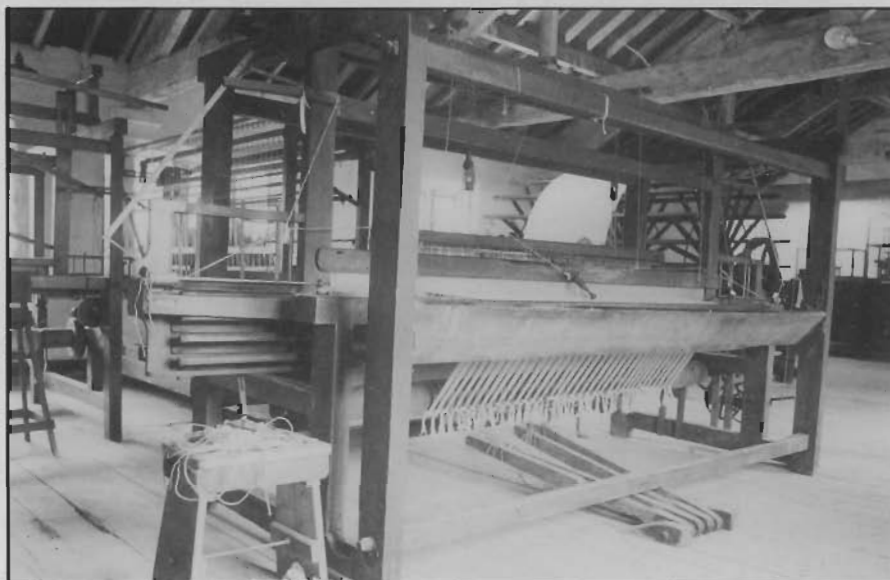
Inevitably the coverage of an industry as complex as the Lancashire textile industry can never be uniform and

The fact that Lancashire County Museum Service is administered through the Authority's Library, Museums and Arts Committee has enabled Helmshore Textile Museums to acquire a large collection of books relating to the textile industry as, with the diminishing demand in recent years, libraries have been disposing of such works. Although the collection of textile industry related books housed at Helmshore now runs to something like 2000 titles together with periodicals, catalogues, textile patent abridgments, negatives and photographs acquired from Platt Saco Lowell, William Tatham, and other firms and individuals, they are unfortunately not yet housed in such a way as to be accessible to the general public.

Considerable emphasis is placed on demonstrations of machinery for visitors. In Higher Mill the waterwheel and fulling stocks run when the site is open. Upstairs, carding, spinning and weaving by hand can be seen. In Whitaker's Mill daily demonstrations of the breaker carding engines, Derby doubler, and finisher cards occur. For many visitors the highlight of their visit is the spectacle of the spinning demonstrations carried out on the 714-spindle Taylor Lang mules which were built in 1903.

Problems will clearly arise when no more operatives with first-hand experience of running some of the complex machinery are available to carry out demonstrations. No foolproof way of avoiding such difficulties has suggested itself. Efforts will be made to see if the present carder and spinner can pass on their skills to successors as retirement age approaches. Since, however, there is no guarantee of retaining staff, work is being carried out to record as much as possible so that training might still be a practical proposition in their absence.

The pattern of opening at Helmshore Textile Museums varies as efforts are made to optimise opening times within available resources. Access is readily available between 1st April and 31st October, while many schools and prebooked parties also use the museums in the Winter. A letter or telephone call to **Helmshore Textile Museums, Holcombe Road, Helmshore, Rossendale, Lancashire BB4 4NP (Tel. 0706 226459)** will provide opening details, admission charges and information about special events.



Fly shuttle hand loom with drop boxes, Helmshore

be invoked to support their remaining unchanged, they are not wholly representative of the mainstream of the Lancashire textile industry. At the present time visitors do not normally see any powerloom weaving because the only suitable loom on display is in the gallery. This despite the fact that a range of different types of loom is held in store. Similarly, there are no machines on display to illustrate the spinning of fine yarns, other than by the Arkwright Water Frame. Here again, appropriate preparatory machinery and a medium count Asa Lees' mule are held in store, but a

complete. Whilst aspects of various ancillary industries such as reed & heald making, shuttle making and bobbin manufacture are shown together with appropriate machines, major areas such as textile finishing are poorly covered. The scale of the plant and machinery used for cloth finishing (for example, bleaching and dyeing) is beyond available museum space. However, where information can be gathered from workers' reminiscences, photographs, catalogues, and books, Helmshore Textile Museums seeks to obtain such material when resources permit.