

HANDLOOM WEAVERS AND POPULAR POLITICS IN BOLTON, c.1825-1850

Peter Taylor

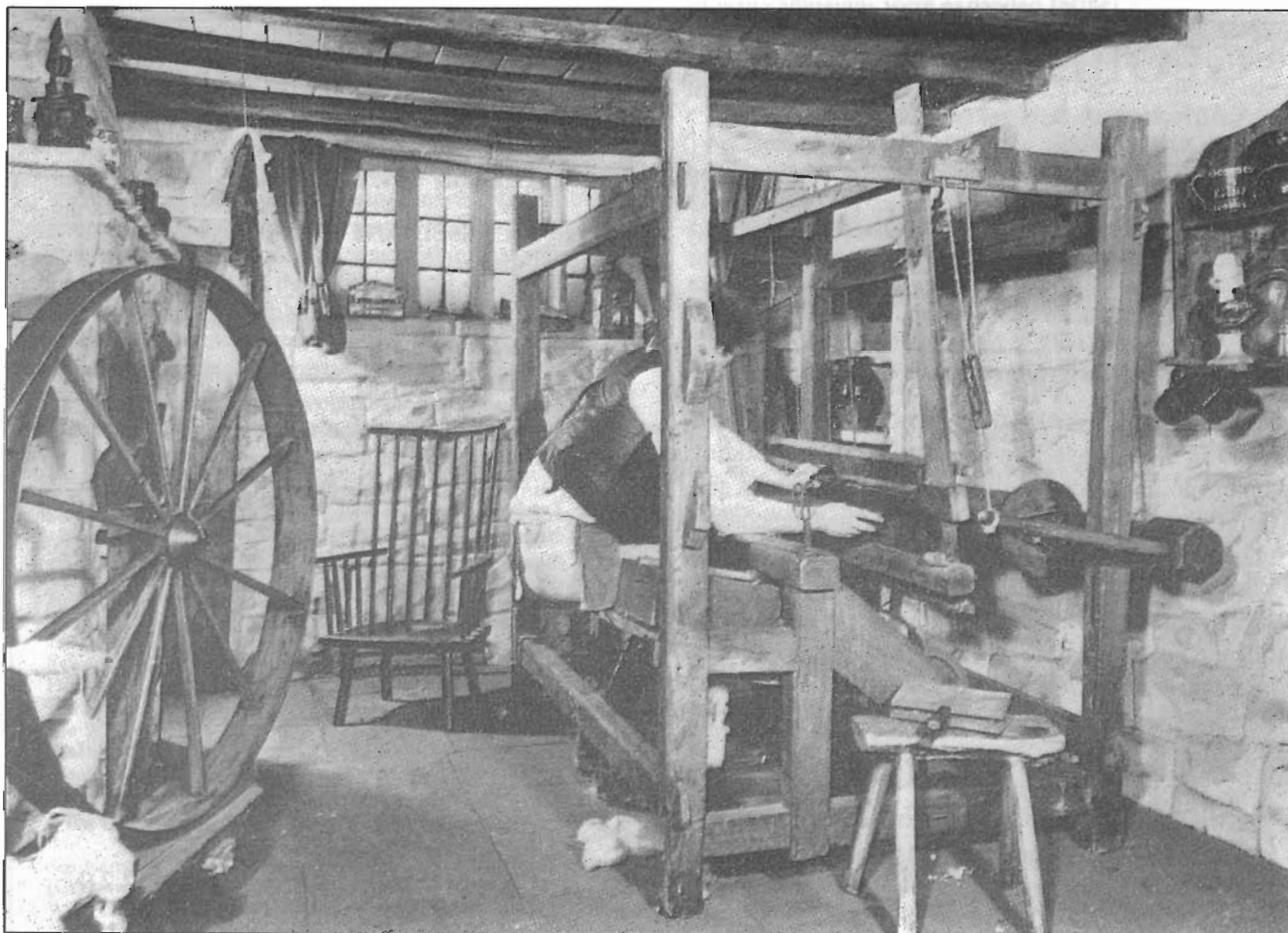
The purpose of this article is to examine the politics of protest of a selected group of the handloom weavers, those in the area of Bolton, in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. This period saw the onset of decline and displacement of the handloom weavers and there seems little doubt about the physical suffering and demoralisation they endured, their attempts to halt their declining situation through sporadic trade unionism, occasional outbreaks of violence and repeated appeals to Parliament achieving few permanent gains. The weavers are also felt by many historians to have given much support to the political radical movements which coincided with their decline, especially Chartism.¹

The pattern of events at Bolton lends credence to this general picture, even if local circumstances produced some variations in experience. Bolton was one of the few centres in Lancashire where handloom weavers were still sufficiently numerous to make a significant impact on local political activity in the 1830s and 1840s (Leigh was another). This is largely attributable to the fact that much of the cloth which was produced in the Bolton district could not be profitably woven by powerlooms before 1850. This enabled

sizable groups of weavers to cling to notions of an artisan status and to build relatively strong trade unions. Such factors, moreover, enabled the Bolton weavers to play a leading role in the national campaigns for some form of statutory regulation of the trade in the early 1830s. And they also gave substantial support to the Reform Bill agitation and the Chartist movement, though the two major parties appear to have been at least as successful as the radicals in gaining the support of the weavers from the early 1830s at least. Notwithstanding the comparatively improved circumstances that the Bolton weavers enjoyed over others in Lancashire, however, their general experience was still one of decline accompanied by mass degradation and impoverishment.

Onset of Decline

To put local developments into context it is useful to firstly consider the regional and local patterns of handloom weavers' decline. For Duncan Bythell handloom weaving markedly declined from about the mid-1820s and had virtually disappeared by mid-century.² This view, however, has recently been challenged by Geoffrey Timmins who maintains that the onset of decline in cotton handloom weaving only really began from the late 1830s. Upwards



Interior of handloom weaver's cottage.

of 100,000 handloom weavers lost their jobs in Lancashire in the 1840s, but Timmins calculates that there were more than 54,000 remaining handloom weavers in Lancashire alone in 1851.³ The spread of the powerloom in cotton weaving had been relentless, yet perhaps 32,000 of Lancashire's handloom weavers were still producing cotton cloth by 1851. About another 5,000 were producing cotton mixture cloths such as mousseline-de-line, whilst in some districts, such as Leigh and Middleton, handloom weavers moved out of cotton into silk.⁴

Some impressionistic local evidence does not show conclusively that the downward trend in the employment of handloom weavers in the Bolton area (or 'division of Bolton') occurred in the 1830s. Rather it suggests that decline had set in sometime after 1817 when a survey found 23,500 weavers in Bolton and nine of the surrounding townships.⁵ Thomas Myerscough, a local manufacturer, estimated there to have been 'upwards of 6,000' weavers in the 'division of Bolton' in 1834, whilst two estimates for 1836 give 6,000 for Bolton and neighbourhood.⁶ When considering the more narrow geographical and administrative area of the *borough* of Bolton, however, the evidence is more supportive of Timmins. Giving evidence before the *Select Committee on Handloom Weavers* in 1834, John Makin, a Bolton manufacturer, and Philip Halliwell, a weaver both argued that the number of handloom weavers in the borough had in fact risen over the past 10 to 15 years.⁷ Estimates of numbers in the borough in the 1830s, taken from evidence given to the Select Committee and the results of a statistical survey undertaken in 1837 by Dr. James Black of the Royal College of Physicians, suggest that numbers employed in the 'fancy' trade remained fairly constant over 1830-37, with figures of 1,000 counterpane weavers and 3-400 bedquilt weavers. But for 'ordinary' weavers Makin gave 7-8,000 weavers in 1834, Black, 4,300 in 1837, while the *Bolton Free Press* estimated there to have been about 4,000 in the borough in 1840, suggesting that many had become unemployed between 1834 and 1837, most of them probably being laid off in the early months of 1837 when recession hit the cotton trade.⁸

Although their numbers were falling, a number of factors ensured that collective action and continued organisation among local handloom weavers remained a viable proposition throughout the period under consideration. Firstly, they comprised a larger proportion of the population than in most other Lancashire towns.⁹ Makin hypothesised in 1834 that the number of handloom weavers and their dependants made up 24,000 out of a total borough population of 42,000.¹⁰ Their sheer numbers alone meant that they were still capable of generating considerable public support, and for the most part they were geographically concentrated – rather than more dispersed as characteristic of many other weavers.¹¹ Of further significance was the fact that as Bolton was the main centre in England of the more skilled muslin weaving, and that the 'fancy' lines of bedquilts and counterpanes were local specialities, there were proportionately more skilled and adult male workers, which in turn appears to have been a significant factor in the relative success of weavers' trade unionism and the attainment of higher rates of wages in the town, especially among the counterpane and bedquilt weavers.¹² A further factor which increased the bargaining power of the weavers was that none of the Bolton specialities could be profitably produced by powerlooms. The powerloom was only slowly adopted in the town; there were fewer than 1500 in 1834 when according to the manufacturer Thomas Myerscough

its use was confined to 'common fabrics', such as calicos, twilled cambrics and dimities.¹³

Such factors, however, whilst ensuring that the Bolton weavers might be comparatively strong, could not prevent their situation from deteriorating and the trend of wage rates was downwards, as several statements in the press and parliamentary papers verify. They were able to maintain a relatively strong trade union organisation, but could not prevent the sort of degradation of working conditions and slide into poverty that weavers elsewhere experienced. Before considering the performance of industrial and political agitations as attempts to arrest decline, the principal problems of the weavers will firstly be outlined.

Hardships of Decline

The story of the hardships endured by the handloom weavers in the period of their decline and displacement is well known.¹⁴ However, it will still be useful to rehearse some of the details of that picture here, not the least because of their impressive support for the popular movements of the 1830s and 1840s and because of the way in which their deteriorating situation affected the consciousness of other workers.

From the perspective of Duncan Bythell, it would appear that the decline and displacement of the handloom weavers would have had little impact upon the outlook of other workers: 'Cotton handloom weaving, from its earliest days, was an unskilled, casual occupation which provided a domestic by-trade for thousands of women and children, whose earnings were normally quite low.' Conditions of entry into the trade were apparently not difficult, the expansion of the trade involving 'the multiplication of low-grade, casual, domestic hand workers.' But once in, those wishing to leave were in a sense 'trapped' and 'could extricate themselves only with great difficulty.' By the 1830s, however, it is possible to detect an improvement in their overall situation. For the coming of the powerloom and the factory system could be conceived as 'a blessing and not a curse to the handloom weavers', providing them with 'the first escape route from this hopeless dead-end job.' Similarly, the 'terrible suffering' of the 1820s, 1830s, and early 1840s 'was really very localised and most of the handloom weavers in the cotton industry were absorbed into alternative employment with remarkable speed and ease.' Thus their plight would scarcely attract the attention or affect the consciousness of the factory workers whose 'whole attitude to work' was so 'completely different' to that of the hand-worker. And in any case, 'Poverty and misery were still seen as the normal lot of most of society.'¹⁵

This picture and the trend to lower wages suggest that the status of the weavers by the 1830s would have been little better than that of casual labourers. As Sykes has argued, however, Bythell's portrayal is more accurate for the plain calico weavers of north Lancashire than for the south of the county. With its collection of more specialist and muslin weavers, organisation in south Lancashire had always been stronger and more continuous, and it was here that the 'big' strikes of 1808 and 1818 had been based. Here the weavers clearly regarded themselves as something more than casual labourers, and a whole panoply of traditions and memories of better days meant that adult male weavers considered themselves as artisans who had lost their status.¹⁶ Indeed, this perspective was shared by many influential commentators outside of their ranks, such as Engels and the prominent south Lancashire Chartist, Peter Murray McDouall.¹⁷ Eighteenth-century idealisations of a 'golden

age' could be reinforced by less distant memories of brief periods of prosperity. Thus John Makin remembered when wages for Bolton weavers rose from 14s. in 1808 to 19s. 6d. by 1810. In 1814, when they reached 24s. for work on standard cloth:

It was the trade of a gentleman; they brought home their work in top boots and ruffled 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.¹⁸

But periods of relative prosperity such as these were already being punctuated by severe depressions and by the 1830s the condition of the weavers was one of permanent impoverishment. Loss of status was accompanied by a decline in home comforts:

Since I can recollect, almost every weaver that I knew had a chest of drawers in his house, and a clock and chairs, and bedsteads and candlesticks, and even pictures, articles of luxury; and now I find that those who have disappeared; they have either gone into the houses of mechanics, or into the houses of persons of higher class.

Now the weavers were to be found 'distress for food', 'clothed in rags', their scantily furnished homes 'generally without chairs' and their bedrooms 'very bare of clothing'.¹⁹

There were many contributory factors to the weavers' decline, including: the general effects of the post-war deflationary decade; the earlier transition to factory production in spinning which allowed English machine-spun yarn to be exported to the Continent in increasing quantities to be woven more cheaply by rivals in continental and even colonial markets; the over-stocking of the trade following the collapse of apprentice regulations; the difficulties in maintaining effective trade unions in the face of hostile authorities and until 1824 the Combination Laws.²⁰

The weavers at Bolton were generally well organised, but, the quilting trade aside, this did not prevent manufacturers from distributing work in less well organised districts (for instance, muslins were also manufactured at Chorley) to break strikes or take advantage of cheaper piece-rates. And strikes put little pressure on most manufacturers' fixed costs: the manufacturer did not suffer in like proportion to the mill-owner from having machinery idle.

The weakness of trade union defences opened the way to wage cutting and growing pressures on profitability gave manufacturers the incentive.²¹ A system of cut-throat competition between manufacturers saw the weavers suffer major reductions before the widespread introduction of the powerloom. A letter from Daniel Cassidy, a handloom weaver, to the *Bolton Free Press* in 1837 (the date is fairly late but corroborates evidence given to the Select Committee) explained the system:

The weavers' wages have been reduced by a regular system, acted upon by a few unprincipled masters, to enable them to undersell all the honest and upright employers. These men reduce the weavers' wages, and are thereby able to sell cheaper in the market; the others seeing the means by which they are undersold, are forced to reduce their weavers' wages to enable them to compete with the unprincipled producers. These then, finding that the others are selling in the market as cheap as themselves, make another reduction of wages – the upright masters are obliged to follow in their own defence. This system

Boroughreeves and Constables
OF
GREAT AND LITTLE BOLTON,
GENTLEMEN.

We the Undersigned, request that you will call a

MEETING

On as early a Day as possible, of the LAND-OWNERS and LEY-PAYERS of Great and Little Bolton and the adjacent Townships, to take into consideration the

Distressed State

OF THE

WEAVERS,

And to co-operate with the Manufacturers in attempting to alleviate their sufferings.

John Jones, Peter Grundof, W. G. Taylor, Jonathan Ylchlin, John Hutton, James Haslam, Thomas Green, Charles Kinsworth,	John Hunt, Robert Gardner, Peter Crook, William Taylor, Joseph Cook, Thomas Broadbent, Richard Byrnes, Hugh Ewells and Co.,	J. & J. Mallett, Thomas Haslam, Samuel Taylor, Robert Asott, Henry Holmes, Thomas Taylor, Roger Haslam, Richard Nightingale,	William Wood, John Riddell, Thomas Pearson, Henry Bond, Robert Walsh, Wm. Moore, John Cartwright,
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In Compliance with the above Requisition, we hereby convene

A MEETING

Of the Land-owners and Ley-payers of Great and Little Bolton and the adjacent Townships, for the purposes above stated, to be held at the

Sessions-Room, in Great Bolton,

On FRIDAY next, the 5th MAY,
AT ELEVEN O'CLOCK IN THE FORENOON.

THOMAS BOLLING, Boroughreeve of Great Bolton,
CHARLES WYLLIE, Constable of do.
JOHN BIRMELEY, Constable of do.
W. G. TAYLOR, Boroughreeve of Little Bolton,
JAMES COBBLE, Constable of do.
STEPHEN HAIR, Constable of do.

BOLTON, 20th APRIL, 1835
J. GAROKE, PRINTER, DEANWORTH, BOLTON.

Poster calling for meeting of weavers.

has not only entailed incalculable misery on the weavers, but it has ruined many upright and honourable masters, who have sustained heavy losses on the goods on hand when the reductions have been effected by the unfeeling grinders.²²

And so began a vicious spiral of ever decreasing wage-rates. According to some calculations by Bythell, an index of piece-rates for muslin weaving at Bolton fell from 144 in 1796, to 100 by 1805, to 40 by 1820.²³ In money terms we have one estimate of wages being reduced from 28s. in 1814 to 5s. 6d. by 1834 for work on a standard 60-reed piece.²⁴ Deductions, moreover, for such things as soap for washing and wetting bobbins, looming, loom rent, oil and grease, would reduce the weavers' net wage. Jonathan Hitchen, a Bolton manufacturer, paid 458 plain and fancy cotton weavers an average of 5s. 10d. per week for one month in 1834, but deductions reduced that sum to 4s. 4½d.²⁵

The individual wage of the weaver might be one of many in the same family, but family incomes were less buoyant from the mid-1820s. A random survey conducted in late 1837, of 35 adult male weavers engaged at work on plain and fancy cloth, gives us some indication of the family wage in Bolton cotton weaving in the 1830s. The cumulative numbers of persons in each family came to 170. Of this number only 69 were in employment and after deductions the average income per head per week was (according to my calculations) only about 13½d. Moreover, 'in addition to the privations entailed upon the Hand-Loom Weavers by the above miserable earnings, they have had to endure the greatest suffering from want of employment.'²⁶ To give some indication of what subsiding on 13½d. per week meant, we can cite the example of a Bolton weaver in 1841, who along with his wife and their seven children (three of whom were earning wages), subsided on 2d. per head per day. Their destitution was such that he claimed to have bought no new bedding for six or seven years. Three of the children slept on the floor 'and the generality of the bedclothes are not worth describing.'²⁷

The long-term drop in piece-rates in the post-1815 period was far sharper than the fall in the cost of living that took

place.²⁸ Weavers were increasingly forced to spend longer hours at their looms and more time in ancillary 'unpaid employments' for an increasingly diminishing wage.²⁹ The supremacy of the powerloom in Bolton lay beyond the 1840s, but there was a large increase in the numbers of dandy-loom in Bolton in the 1830s – this was a form of handloom that was considered by one manufacturer to be 'a sort of medium between the power and the hand-loom'. It operated mechanically as far as feeding the cloth through the loom as it was woven, and it did enable the weaver to produce more cloth. But the work on these machines was considered to be 'arduous and oppressive' and detrimental to the weavers' health.³⁰ The slow spread of the powerloom and the action of three manufacturers in 1834, in inflicting a wage reduction in the face of a labour shortage of 2,000 handloom weavers, meant that internal competition was still seen as the main cause of their distress.³¹ And from about 1837, with the ending of the mid-1830s upturn in trade, there was a constant diminution in their numbers. Many displaced muslin weavers now sought work in the fancy trade which brought down wages in that sector.³² For others, the unparalleled distress of the depression of 1837-42 meant unemployment and destitution. For instance, the handloom weavers constituted the largest group among the recipients for relief from the new charity institutions that emerged at this time.³³

Weavers' Trade Unionism

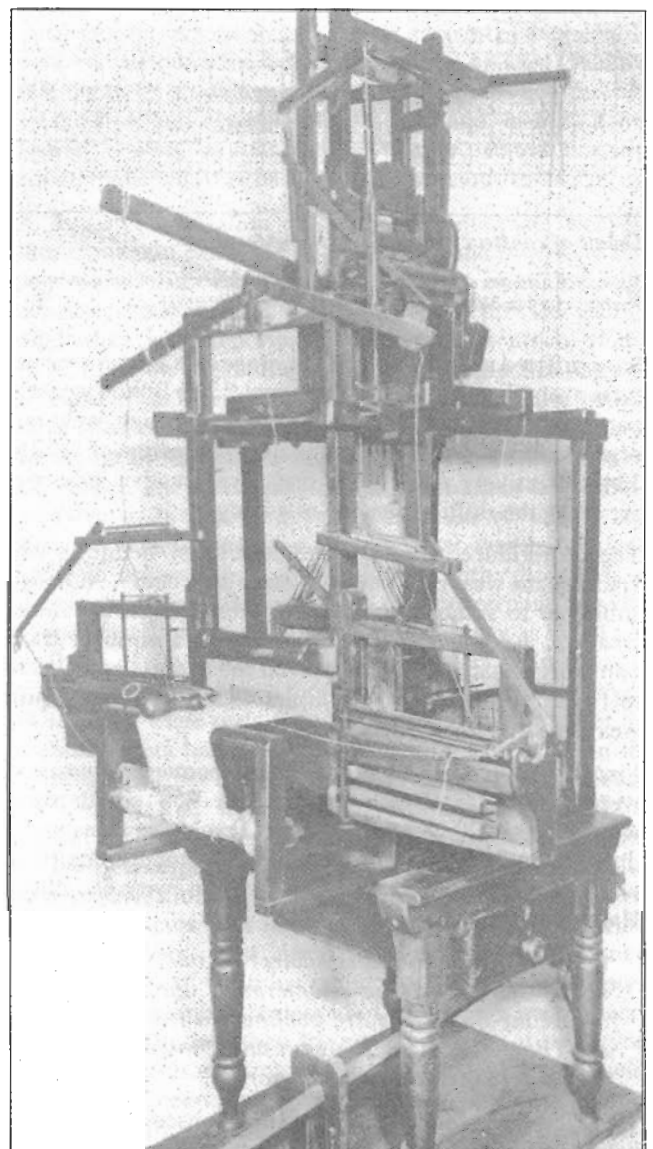
Thus the weavers were among the poorest members of the working class by the late 1830s. But they had arrived at this situation with notions of a lost status and with a different outlook from the labourers. The concentration of the more specialist and better paid weavers in parts of south Lancashire enabled stronger and more continuous forms of organisation to persist and this strengthened the feeling among weavers that they were debased artisans. In general trade unionism among Bolton's cotton handloom weavers was a more viable proposition than among other cotton handloom weavers in the 1830s. Successful industrial action, however, was really limited to the bedquilt and counterpane weavers in periods of good trade and in general failed to arrest a deteriorating position.

There was no general Bolton weavers' trade union at the onset of the 1830s, but the town had a strong tradition of episodic informal organisation dating back to 1799 and this continued to be a feature.³⁴ In the 1830s there were several instances of weavers turning to aggressive industrial action in times of good trade. In 1833, a lappet weavers' union was formed when four manufacturers attempted to reduce wages in a time of favourable trade. The successful resistance of the lappet weavers prompted an attempt to organise all the Bolton weavers, and deputies were sent throughout north Lancashire convening meetings calling on all weavers not to work below the Bolton prices. Over 1,000 Bolton weavers were reported as refusing to work below 10 shillings a cut, which represented a considerable advance. But the union was to be short-lived and collapsed amid angry public meetings and court cases after a few manufacturers who had conceded advances successfully retrieved them.³⁵

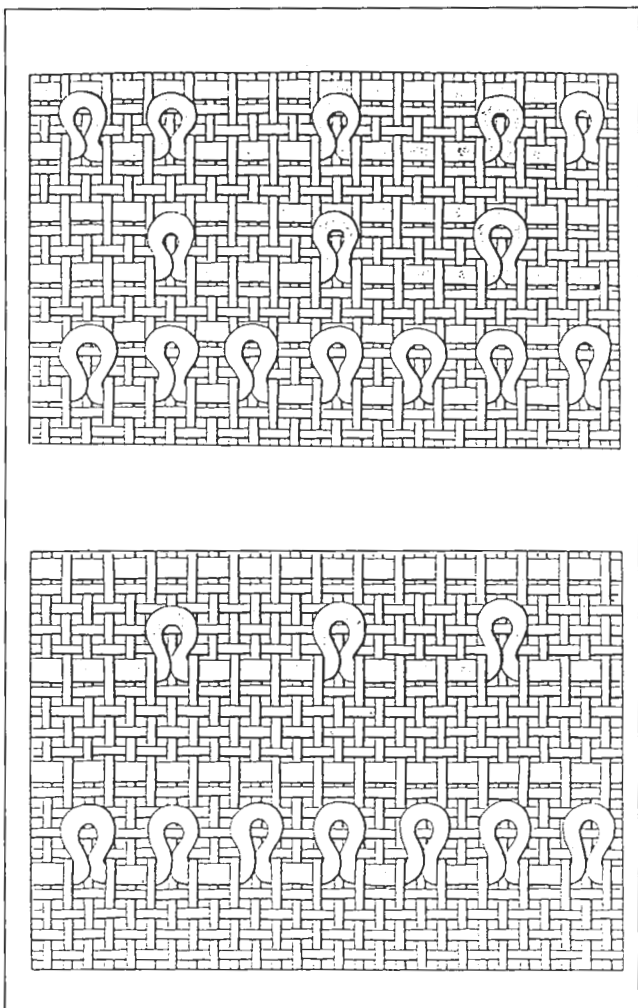
In 1836, however, amid reports of shortages of weavers, another general union of the Bolton weavers was again formed at a public meeting.³⁶ Later, in June, industrial agitation was renewed when a public meeting of weavers expressed its determination to resist two manufacturers who were attempting to enforce wage reductions, and to

stop the spread of forcing the weavers to pay for the sizing of warps. One manufacturer had already adopted this practice and it was calculated that if all weavers were subsequently forced to pay for the sizing of warp then the cost to the Bolton weavers would be in the region of £2,500 per annum.³⁷ An attempt was made to equalise prices and a deputation was appointed to wait upon the masters with a list of prices. But the deputation met with an unfavourable response and this appears to have been a factor behind the strengthening of the informal ties that the union had with weavers in Glasgow, Carlisle and Preston.³⁸

In December the union was reorganised into a branch of the British Association of Hand Loom Weavers amid reports of some manufacturers offering work at reduced prices.³⁹ The union expressed its firm determination to resist but even in the favourable economic conditions of 1836 it enjoyed little success. From the end of 1836 and into 1837, severe economic depression brought widespread distress and undermined the possibility of effective industrial action. Towards the end of May, with over 450 weavers out of work, meetings of weavers resolved to memorialize the authorities – who had already inaugurated a relief fund – for assistance.⁴⁰ In late June, 1,134 weavers were reported to be out of work amid reports of extreme destitution and hardship and by September, although operatives in other trades were said to



A Witch engine pattern loom.



Detail of construction of Bolton counterpanes.

Source: Burnham, H., *Bolton Quilts or Caddours* (from an unnamed source, copy available in Bolton Reference Library).

have suffered no reductions as yet, wage cuts among weavers were averaging from 15 to 25 per cent.⁴¹ The Bolton weavers participated in the Plug Strikes, but although weavers' organisation was not extinguished, the depression of 1837 to 1842 effectively marked the end of aggressive industrial action by the Bolton weavers as a body.

The experience of the more specialist bedquilt and counterpane weavers, however, was a little better. Although subjected to some of the general pressures on handloom weavers, a number of factors promoted a stronger trade union organisation which survived the depression of 1837 to 1842 to grow in strength in the 1850s, as a major quilt weavers strike in 1853 demonstrated.⁴²

Firstly, the numbers of bedquilt and counterpane weavers were small. Dr. Black enumerated 968 counterpane weavers and 390 bedquilt weavers (exclusive of as many draw-boys) in the borough in 1837.⁴³ Secondly, the trade was localised to Bolton. The veteran weaver, Philip Halliwell, believed:

*that we have two manufactures in our neighbourhood, one called the counterpane and the other called the quilt, that are confined to Bolton alone; and I do not know that there are any of this description of goods made in the united world.*⁴⁴

The need for specialist skills and specialised looms would have restricted the ability of manufacturers to get their goods manufactured at a lower price in other districts.

Furthermore, bedquilt and counterpane weaving were predominantly adult male occupations; few females appear to have been in their ranks and 'young men' rather than children were employed.⁴⁵ This may have been due to the heavier nature of the work involved in some or perhaps the majority of the tasks involved. The work on broad bedquilts required 'superior strength' and was the preserve of males, though females could work on narrow quilts and toilet covers.⁴⁶ Furthermore, the production of quilts and counterpanes by powerloom did not even begin to become a commercially viable proposition until the early 1850s. As for wages, one manufacturer in 1834 was paying an average of 10s. a week to his bedquilt weavers and an average of about 8s. a week to his counterpane weavers. In 1838 the average earnings for weavers of broad bedquilts 'the best paid work of any in the weaving line' – was 15s. clear weekly, with weavers of narrow quilts and toilet covers about 8s. These figures compare favourably to the average wage of 5s. 10d. paid to the 458 weavers of plain and fancy cotton goods by 'one of the most respectable manufacturers in the borough of Bolton' throughout April 1834.⁴⁷

Their superior position should not be over-stated, however, for despite their localisation, they were still subject to many of the pressures and conditions of poverty which afflicted other cotton handloom weavers. The number of bedquilt looms had increased from about 200 in 1819-20 to a peak of 500-600 by 1825-6. But, thereafter, reduced demand and cut-throat competition between manufacturers meant a fall in piece rates and a gradual decline in the number of looms to about 300 by the early 1830s. As a response to this threat, 'they went straight forward to keep up their wages'.⁴⁸

Bedquilt Weavers' Union

The bedquilt weavers' union came into existence or was revived in March 1826 after the manufacturers had attempted to inflict a substantial reduction. The weavers were successful in resisting the reduction and at the end of the year a printed list of prices was published bearing the signatures of nearly the whole of the employers, 'binding themselves not to pay less than was specified therein.'⁴⁹ By February 1827, however, one of the signatories of the list attempted a 5 per cent reduction and there were complaints of some masters using the truck system.⁵⁰ Notwithstanding, in the first two years of its existence, the union was successful in preventing an attempted reduction to the amount of 2s. 6d. per week.⁵¹ And they enjoyed success in several disputes at individual firms which probably helped to reduce internal competition between manufacturers. In February 1829 the bedquilt weavers in the employ of Grindrod successfully resisted a reduction after they had struck work with the full backing of the union.⁵² In June strike action was again successful in resisting the attempt of one master to charge the weavers for the use of the looms.⁵³ A dispute at Green's in the following year took longer to resolve. Green tried to enforce reductions in April and October – by which time he was refusing to employ trade unionists. After determined opposition, however, it was announced at a meeting of bedquilt weavers in December that Green was not paying full wages.⁵⁴ The bedquilt weavers were certainly able to subject employers to greater industrial pressure than other weavers. Their higher wages had allowed a strike pay of 7s. in the Grindrod dispute and at the December 1830 meeting they expressed their readiness to resort to the strike weapon to bring *all* low paying manufacturers into line. Newspaper references establish that the majority of bedquilt looms were owned by the employers and were situated in workshops. Thus the fixed costs of the bedquilt manufacturer

were probably higher than for the employers of other weavers and hence strike action was potentially more damaging to the employer.⁵⁵

In general the union was unable to prevent a marked decline in their overall position after 1826, but their stronger bargaining position than other cotton hand-loom weavers continued to be reflected in higher wages and a stronger and more formalised trade union organisation. Thus Myerscough noted that from 1826 their overall situation fell gradually rather than dramatically up to 1834 and that 'the rate of wages was kept up tolerably by the men; they had a club among themselves to keep up wages, and they kept them up a considerable time.'⁵⁶ The union had been successful in several individual disputes. But in the depression year of 1831 no resistance was offered when all the masters collectively inflicted reductions ranging from 3s. 2d. to 4s. 7d. in the pound, depending on the breadth of material produced.⁵⁷ The union was clearly unable to withstand a combined employer assault in adverse economic circumstances and collapsed amid the continuing trade depression of 1831-1833.

One of the problems that the bedquilt weavers shared with other weavers was their failure to enforce a standard rate of wages throughout the town and neighbourhood. The union had some success in preventing the degree of cutthroat competition that was characteristic of cotton weaving in general, but falling demand and the employment structure of the 'fancy' trade tended to depress wage levels generally. In the early 1830s there were 20 to 30 substantial manufacturers operating with 10 to 30 looms each. Many of these larger employers generally concurred with the union in trying to maintain standard wage rates, but the weavers could not prevent some internal competition and some manufacturers paid between 10 and 20 less than others. Another problem was that there were many smaller manufacturers, some with only one or two looms. Many of these were cases of former unemployed operatives, often working embezzled material, and relying on their own and their families' labour. Because of their limited capital and the expense and time involved in marketing their product, they were often prepared to operate by selling their product to the larger manufacturers, a profit in this situation being made due to their lower operating costs (larger manufacturers maintained warehouses, for instance). But their need for an instant sale meant that in general they would sell to 'any persons they could meet with' and being so 'extremely poor', this was usually 'at whatever price any person might be disposed to give them'. This meant that the large manufacturer was often undercut in the market and that prices were depressed generally. The long term effect was pressure on the profit margins of the larger manufacturers, who would then respond by enforcing general reductions as was the case in 1831.⁵⁸

Trade improved in 1834, however, and the union was revived at a public meeting in mid-1835, the stated intention being to bring up low paying employers to the standards of the 1831 list.⁵⁹ They achieved some partial success. In 1836 some of the principal manufacturers agreed to a 12½ per cent increase, though others refused.⁶⁰ The return of depression in 1837 again weakened their union and it was not until 1853 that they were again involved in major industrial action.

Counterpane Weavers' Union

Before commencing with an account of the counterpane weavers it is worth noting that some of the details of this picture of the Bolton specialist weavers complement the work of Sykes. However, one major difference concerns his description of the bedquilt and counterpane weavers

being organised into the same union. For it appears that the bedquilt weavers union that came into existence in 1826 did not organise the counterpane weavers. The point is worthy of correction because Sykes' belief to the contrary leads him to overstate the effectiveness of trade unionism among the Bolton fancy weavers. Newspaper reports usually specify the union as being one among bedquilt weavers and nearly always distinguish between the two groups. Moreover, in April 1838, it was reported that the union had only managed to organise one-third of all the persons employed in weaving bedquilts. This could well mean a low union density, but may be attributable to the counterpane weavers, who amounted to just over two-thirds of the weavers of fancy quilts, being organised separately. Counterpane weavers could, apparently, readily adapt to the work undertaken by bedquilt weavers and it may, therefore, have been in the interests of the bedquilt weavers to organise them. But they do not appear to have done so. After the bedquilt weavers at the firm of Sharples had struck work against a reduction in 1827, he attempted to fill their places with lower paid counterpane weavers. The union responded with an offer that upon application to the union, they would furnish any unemployed counterpane weavers with work. Moreover, the patterns of wage movements and struggles against reductions among the two groups do not strictly correspond and the counterpane weavers were generally less successful in maintaining their position. Furthermore, Thomas Myerscough does not mention counterpane weavers in his account of the bedquilt weavers' union to the Select Committee of 1834. Finally, references to a counterpane weavers' committee in 1837 establishes their separate organisation and, in May 1838, Daniel Brown, a counterpane weaver, stated that the counterpane weavers had no union previous to 1837.⁶²

A formal organisation among the counterpane weavers thus came into existence relatively late and they were less successful than the bedquilt weavers in maintaining adequate trade union defences. In the depressed year of 1829 they were reported as 'suffering as much, if not more, than the generality of the labouring community of this place' and for 'upwards of six months these people have been obliged to submit to a regular and successive reduction of wages, till at least they can barely earn an existence'. They were also less successful than the bedquilt weavers in maintaining an equalisation of wage rates between manufacturers, a problem that was particularly acute in depressions.⁶³ In May 1838, with 'thousands of pieces stored up in Manchester', the counterpane weavers found 'that their wages are reduced to nearly as low a rate as those of the muslin hand-loom weavers.'⁶⁴ In times of good trade they did have more success than muslin weavers in securing wage rises. Thus in September 1836, after the manufacturers had already agreed to a rise of 2d. in the shilling, a further 2d. was conceded after a public meeting of counterpane weavers had demanded the further advance.⁶⁵ The habits of association and the localisation of the counterpane weavers had permitted a form of ad hoc organisation to operate as circumstances dictated. When wage cuts were imposed in 1837, however, a formal union structure came into existence and did have some success in resisting further reductions. Thus Daniel Brown, one of their number, remarked of the union's performance in May 1838, that 'they have been able by it to prevent several reductions from taking place which otherwise would have been made.'⁶⁶ Later in the year an attempted reduction at a single firm was resisted by strike action.⁶⁷ But their success was a qualified one, for the union could

Second Letter.

Fellow Weavers!

SINCE I last wrote to you, I have been considering within myself what class of persons amongst you is injured by Machinery? I shall therefore ask each of them separately, and desire them to put the question to their own breast.

Who is injured by Machinery? As I understand that the *Callers* were particularly active in the late wicked outrages, I shall address myself first to them:—

Callers! Are ye injured by the demand for Coals to work the Steam-Engines, that set in motion the Machinery? Do the Steam-Engines or Machinery consume food?

No.—but they save that which must otherwise be consumed by *Horses*. They are even named from this, as the *ten-horse power* saves the food of ten horses, for the use of man.

Coal-Diggers! Are ye injured? Have not the canals been dug to carry our goods and our coals to other markets, and to bring us food!—At those markets we could not undergo other persons, unless the goods were made cheap by machinery; and both the goods and the coals cheaper by canals. If we could not sell our goods, how are we to pay for our food?

Spinners and Weavers, are ye injured? Least of all persons are ye entitled to complain. For four times your number are employed since the invention of machinery:—and why? because your little children, by the help of machinery, can earn their own livelihood, and it is easy to rear a family.

Smiths, Carpenters, Engine-makers, in short tradesmen of all kinds, which of you is injured by having clothes made cheap, and employment more plentiful?

But if here and there one man has less employment because another makes goods cheaper by improvements in machinery, must it not be so in all trades?

Which of us will not go to the cheap baker, the cheap carpenter, and why not to the cheap manufacturer!—When all but a few receive benefits, what right have those few to complain?

What right has any man to prevent thousands from buying their goods cheap?

Besides in our great concerns cheapness in any one branch gives employment to all. If the thread is spun cheap, the whole piece, when woven, may be sold cheaper, and thus there will be a greater demand both for spinning and weaving.—So if the weaving is cheaper, there will be a greater demand for thread, and more work for spinners. What right then has any man, because his branch of work is made cheaper, to riot and put others out of employ?

I will tell you an instance, to shew you how unreasonable this is, and have done.

A New Bridge was built over the river Thames, above a quarter of a mile wide.

Before it was built, every body was forced either to go round some miles by the Old Bridge, or to go over himself, his horses, and carts by the Old Ferry; and sometimes they were stopped by the wind:—sometimes by the tide:—sometimes the horses were unwilling to go on board the ferry boat, and frequently a horse was lamed in getting on board.

And besides this, they had to pay a considerable Toll. All this trouble, loss of time, and expence, were saved to thousands, and thousands, by the New Bridge.—Yet the ferry-men had the impudence to make a riot!

They were not more unreasonable than those who now provoke a riot, because some weavers have contrived to make goods cheaper by improvements in machinery, and have thus found a New Bridge for sending our GOODS OVER THE WORLD.

I am, as before,

Your Well-Wisher,

An Old Weaver.

W. Cowdroy, Printer, Haverhill-street, Manchester.

"An Old Weaver" argues for the "improvements in machinery".

not prevent serious unemployment among their body from 1837.⁶⁸

In general, while we can say that weavers' trade unionism was a comparatively viable proposition in the town, it would be difficult to overstate its performance. On the whole, effective industrial action was restricted to the more specialist weavers. The industrial bargaining power of all weavers' groups, however, was insufficient to halt their deteriorating situation.

Political Agitations and Minimum Wage Campaign

Industrial weakness was one of the reasons why the weavers regularly turned to political agitation in the struggle for a solution to their problems. This usually involved petitioning and memorializing Parliament with proposals for a legally enforceable system of wage regulation. It was in 1799 that the cotton hand-loom weavers first approached Parliament with a statement of their sufferings and periodically constitutional agitation was revived in attempts to halt their deteriorating situation.⁶⁹ Bolton had always been prominent in these agitations. Indeed, those factors which had promoted a stronger and more continuous form of organisation in the 1830s, meant that the town played a leading role in weavers' agitations at that time.

In 1830 several Lancashire towns petitioned Parliament against the exportation of cotton yarns. The whole campaign – which aimed to provide more work for weavers – was launched and co-ordinated by a Bolton Weavers' Committee.⁷⁰ In the following year William Radcliffe and the Bolton weaver Richard Needham – who had long been active in agitation against yarn exports – presented a memorial to the Board of Trade suggesting the transfer

of the duty on imported raw cotton wool to export yarns.⁷¹ In 1833 the campaign was renewed with the Bolton weavers petitioning Parliament, this time the proposal for the transfer of the duty on cotton wool to export yarns being allied to calls for a minimum wage and a Government inquiry into their conditions.⁷² In 1834 came the national campaign for an equalisation of wage rates by Boards of Trade.

However, of significance in the 1833 and 1834 campaigns was the emergence of strong political disagreements between the weavers. Tories and radicals contested each other over the political composition of the 'representative' committees and witnesses that were summoned to give evidence to the parliamentary investigations into the weavers' conditions. In the early 1830s Tories had been prominent in the weavers' political movements. The weavers Richard Needham and Philip Halliwell and the manufacturer John Makin were all Tories who had successfully managed to act as self appointed representatives of the weavers. But as the Reform Bill agitation showed many of Bolton's weavers were radical in politics⁷³ and in 1833 the 'junto' of 'Needham and Co.' was attacked at a public meeting which endorsed a rival committee of weavers. The issue ended in compromise when the radical weaver William Pilling was selected along with Needham to give evidence to the Select Committee on Manufacturers.⁷⁴ However, 1834 saw a repeat performance when a stormy public meeting of weavers first passed a resolution condemning the activities of the Tory 'self-elected few'. A rival committee of weavers was endorsed which stated its intention of sending two representatives to give evidence before the *Select Committee on Handloom Weavers* and the whole Boards of Trade scheme was denounced as a 'humbug'. Following this pressure the Tories, who had already privately selected the required four representatives, agreed that one of the representatives should be chosen by a public meeting. But the radicals apparently did not vigorously contest the meeting. Halliwell was elected which meant that the four representatives from Bolton who gave evidence were all Tories.⁷⁵

In 1835 there were further developments. A public declaration of support from a Committee of handloom weavers for the Tories Egerton and Bootle-Wilbraham, candidates in the South Lancashire Parliamentary election, was in fact the work of the Tory faction. Later in the year, public meetings again witnessed the dismissal of Needham and his associates as unrepresentative of weavers' opinion. And at a meeting in August, which had been called to pass a vote of thanks to those MPs who had supported the weavers in the 1834 campaign, Needham and his associates were finally disowned. One weaver declared the work of the Select Committee to be a 'Tory trick', and demonstrated the direction in which most weavers were now moving when he asked of Bolling, the town's Tory MP, 'would the Tory member support vote by ballot, Universal Suffrage, or any other description of useful reform? He said no, and against him he would set his face as long as he lived'. The Tory faction organised another public meeting, arguing that the last one had been 'interrupted by a party of intruders for factious purpose'. On this occasion the original motions were passed, but the Tory faction was now effectively isolated and the initiative now shifted to the Liberals and radicals.⁷⁶

These political disagreements and the bitterness felt by many after the 1834 campaign's failure – following as it

5630. And the cost of his lodging and food to be 5s. 5¼d.; leaving him minus 1s. 4d. to supply himself with those lodgings and proper food; you believe this to be a true statement?—I am sure it is true. Richard Needham,
18 July 1834.

This Statement shews the average earnings of a Journeymen Weaver that works a 60 cambric cut per week, and he performs as much labour as any other person employed in the cotton trade per week.

6/4 60 Cambric - - - - 5s. 6d. per cut.

Out of this his employer takes 3d. out of every shilling he may earn for necessary expenses; which leaves him clear money 4s. 1½d. to purchase food and clothing and lodging:

	s.	d.	
For Lodging, he has to pay - - - -	-	9	per week.
Washing and cooking - - - -	-	3	"
Porridge - - - -	-	6	"
Potatoes - - - -	-	6	"
½ lb. of sugar - - - -	-	3	"
½ lb. of butter - - - -	-	4 ½	"
1 lb. of bread, per day - - - -	-	10 ½	"
Tea or coffee - - - -	-	2	"
Milk - - - -	-	4	"
Butcher's meat, 1 ½ per day - - - -	-	9	"
Looming his warp, &c. - - - -	-	3	"
Candles to work by - - - -	-	3	"
Tobacco - - - -	-	2 ½	"
	5	5 ½	"

So that he is 1s. 4d. in debt after he has performed a full week's work, sufficient for any man, and for which he ought to have a living; then nothing left for clothes, so that he must go naked, unless some friend or other gives him some to cover him.

Extract from Richard Needham's evidence to the Select Committee, 1834.

did the repeated failure of constitutional agitation – marked a turning point in the attitudes of many weavers. Notions of a statutory system of wage regulation or of schemes to provide more work for weavers represented a conscious rejection of orthodox political economy, but Tories were more often the dominant element in agitation of this kind. By 1834, however, Makin noted the increasing scepticism among the weavers, the ‘general cry’ among them being ‘O, Parliament will do nothing for you.’⁷⁷ After 1834 demands for a statutory minimum wage subsided. Before the emergence of the Chartist movement, however, the two major parties did have some success in attracting weaver support. In November 1835 the Bolton Operative Conservative Association was formed around the now isolated group of Needham and his associates.⁷⁸ Conservative organisation now played a much smaller role in weaver politics than it had done in the early 1830s, but Liberalism improved its influence and as was the case with the OCA, found its strongest working-class support among the weavers.

Weavers and Liberal Politics

Thus in June 1837, a meeting of weavers resolved to petition Parliament to either repeal the Corn Laws or give protection to home manufacturers, but a weaver who advocated universal suffrage and the ballot was heard ‘with mingled symptoms of applause and disapprobation’.⁷⁹ In August a Liberal Reform Association was formed. It had a committee of non-electors, all twelve of whom were weavers.⁸⁰ These included James McConnell and William

Pilling. The Reform Association was committed to Corn Law repeal and so were McConnell and Pilling, neither of whom became Chartists. In between these events, Maxwell's motion for a commission of inquiry into the conditions of the handloom weavers had received parliamentary assent in July. A Weavers' Committee which was appointed by a public meeting in September to give evidence to the commission was dominated by Liberal-radicals in favour of free trade, and was easily able to resist Tory opposition to its claims that it was fully representative of weavers' opinion.⁸¹ Thus when the representative of the Royal Commission visited Bolton to collect evidence in April 1838, seven weavers were examined, six of whom were reformers. These included Pilling and McConnell and all the six reformers advocated the abolition of the Corn Laws.⁸² The logic behind that opinion was based on a belief that once foreign traders were free to exchange foodstuffs for British manufactured goods, the competitiveness of British manufacturing industry would increase as a result. More work for weavers meant larger incomes and cheaper food would boost the home market by leaving the home population with a greater proportion of its income for expenditure on clothes. These weavers clearly did not believe that wages were necessarily regulated by the price of bread, though one weaver argued that free trade would simultaneously reduce the competitiveness of foreign manufacturers by relieving the surplus of grain on the continent, thus causing its price to rise as it became scarcer, and thereby incurring an increase of costs.⁸³

With the Chartist movement gaining ground in the town in the following year, things began to change. In September 1838, at a meeting to consider 'the propriety of supporting the People's Charter', two of the speakers were handloom weavers.⁸⁴ However, this development has to be kept in perspective. For the Liberal elite did play an important role in the origins of Bolton Chartism: three resolutions at the meeting were moved jointly by middle-class and working-class speakers and the Chartists and Liberals did co-operate in the early stages of the movement.⁸⁵ After the allies had pulled apart over the winter of 1838, the weavers did make an important contribution to what was by then a predominantly working-class movement. An assertion made in 1840, however, that 'the radicals . . . are chiefly of that poor despised class called weavers'⁸⁶, is in need of some qualification, not the least being that it did not reflect the wide occupational base of support that Chartism received in the town. More to the point, the Weavers' Committee continued to act as representative of weavers' opinion and vied competitively with the Chartists for the attention of the weavers over the main Chartist period of 1838 to 1842. The handloom weavers were clearly the group who provided the most unequivocal support among the working class of Bolton for the policies of the Liberals and Anti-Corn Law League. In 1840, a weavers petition calling for the abolition of the Corn Laws was signed by 2,976 weavers (out of an estimated total of 4,000 weavers in existence in the Borough).⁸⁷ In May 1842, only a few months before the Plug Strikes, the Chartists interrupted a public meeting of weavers that had been called for the purpose of inaugurating a weavers' petition calling upon Parliament for the total and immediate repeal of the corn and provision laws and all other duties affecting trade and commerce. However, the Chartists were unsuccessful in attempting to move their amendment.⁸⁸

Class Relations and Attitudes

The success which Tories and Liberals as well as radicals had in gaining support among the weavers raises important questions concerning the forces shaping the weavers' political consciousness and social attitudes. One factor generating support for the Tories in the early 1830s was the support that Tory manufacturers, mill-owners and the town's authorities gave to their campaigns for some form of statutory regulation of the trade. In the 1834 campaign, for instance, three petitions were presented to the House of Commons. The first was from the Boroughreeves, Constables, Churchwardens, and other officers of Great and Little Bolton and was signed by 5 magistrates, 14 clergyman, and a 'considerable' number of mill-owners. Most of these were Tories. The second was from the manufacturers and tradesmen of the borough. The third, from the weavers and 'other artisans', received 10,040 signatures.⁸⁹ All this support derived from economic as well as political considerations. In 1831 a meeting of manufacturers and master bleachers (the great majority of whom were Tories) resolved to memorialize Parliament proposing that the duty on raw cotton be transferred to export yarn. The aim was to stimulate the home market and thereby provide more work for both the bleaching and weaving trades (the home production of cloth being especially important for the finishing trade).⁹⁰ Needham and Radcliffe's memorial to the Board of Trade proposing the transfer of the duty on imported raw cotton wool to export yarn had the support of manufacturers, master bleachers, and the 'most extensive and respectable spinners'.⁹¹ Three-quarters of cotton yarn was exported, but among the town's largest master spinners were Tory supporters of the Corn Laws. In their view, the best market was the home one and was best supplied by a limited number

of large and stable producers.⁹² A transfer of the duty on raw cotton, therefore, held out the prospect of stimulating the home market and reducing costs. To understand why the town's MP, William Bolling, set himself up as the champion of the weavers' cause, we need look no further than to the fact that he was a pro-Corn Law Tory and owner of one of only two Bolton spinning firms that employed 1,000 workers.

The nature of the campaigns of the early 1830s also raises questions about employment relations. As shown above, industrial conflict between weavers and manufacturers occurred regularly, but there were some impulses to cooperation which can be considered. Boards of Trade, for instance, were perceived as a possible means by which the interests of the trade as a whole – both capital and labour – could be protected.⁹³ Many manufacturers were in favour of maintaining an equalisation and stabilisation of wages and weavers commonly differentiated between these 'honourable' employers and the 'unprincipled' ones. While the weavers made sporadic attempts to build trade unions, therefore, it seems that the idea of the desirability and feasibility of meaningful cooperation with 'honourable' employers in the regulation of the trade was never completely dismissed. Moreover, the existence of many small masters, especially in the fancy trade, meant that the division between capital and labour was not as sharply differentiated as it might have been, many weavers holding the small masters principally responsible for the cut-throat competition that afflicted the trade.

The view that cut-throat competition was the main cause of low wages was one shared by manufacturers and weavers alike. Most evidence suggests that it was typically the large manufacturer who favoured an equalisation and stabilisation of wages and prices. Thus in 1827, the 47 signatures attached to a Bolton manufacturers' petition to the House of Commons, which complained that the principal cause of low wages was the inequality of prices paid by manufacturers, comprised 'The whole of the principal Manufacturers, with the exception of one house'.⁹⁴ And in the eyes of many it was the small master, vulnerable in the market, who was typically the low paying employer. For Philip Halliwell, the 'great capitalists' were synonymous with 'the respectable part of the masters' and the cause of cut-throat competition was to be found in the practices of the many masters who had set up on little capital but who collectively produced 'an immense quantity of work'. Their need for a quick sale meant that they hung 'as a dead weight upon the whole trade'. Needham described the workings of the 'system' to the committee on manufacturers: 'the small manufacturers go to Manchester three times a week to sell their goods and if they cannot sell them in the morning they will sell them in the evening at any price, and then they reduce wages'.⁹⁵ The larger manufacturers usually had to follow suit. This view is supported by Bythell,⁹⁶ but there is some evidence that large manufacturers were often the guilty party.

When one bedquilt manufacturer, Sharples, attempted to undercut the other employers by one shilling in 1826, for instance, the weavers found some support from these employers who agreed to delay a reduction to see if the union could first bring Sharples up and collaborated with the union in an attempt to resist Sharples' efforts to employ lower paid counterpane weavers on bedquilt production. The point is that Sharples was no small manufacturer and had reputedly amassed a fortune of £30,000 in the trade. For the muslin weaver William Pilling, Sharples was not the only large manufacturer who oppressed his weavers and of whom 'their country house is their sanctum sanctorum, their Ledger is their Bible, and Gold their God'.⁹⁷ There were similar



Textile outworker, c.1890.

complaints from weavers who compared their own depressed condition with the increasing opulence of many masters – a familiar theme in Bolton radicalism in these years. The deferential Tory Philip Halliwell did not begrudge the cotton spinner and manufacturer Mr Gardner his ‘princely fortune’ or his mansion that was ‘equal to some of our dukes’, but he did feel that he was entitled to ‘bread for my labour’.⁹⁸ Others were less forthcoming. In 1840, by which time many weavers were prominent in radical politics, one weaver noted the tendency of manufacturers to sacrifice wages, but not profits, and considered it ‘monstrous’ that some employers were increasing their opulence while the conditions of their employees deteriorated.⁹⁹ Even if cut-throat competition did put pressure on profits, a manufacturer nevertheless admitted that the weavers had been the ones to suffer, but ‘Among the manufacturers of Bolton a great many have arisen up to comparative opulence during my time in Bolton, and comparatively few failures have happened among the manufacturers.’ The weavers were in a state of destitution but, for the same manufacturer, ‘to live well in society, he has attempted to get more done, the consequence has been reduction after reduction has followed.’¹⁰⁰ Thus the label ‘unprincipled’ could, in many cases, apply to the large manufacturer as to the small.

The extent to which the distinction between the ‘honourable’ and ‘dishonourable’ really served to mask class divisions is not clear. In general there may be much in Sykes’ contention that across a range of trades the distinction between honourable and dishonourable employers did not completely override considerations of class, the former category merely representing those who conformed at any given moment with the wishes of the workers.¹⁰¹ Such notions, however, proved to be remarkably resilient and in many disputes it appears that the weavers did not necessarily become antagonistic towards their employers as a class. There were still about 3,000 specialist weavers by the 1860s, and these now viewed their relations with their employers more clearly in terms of

economic and market evaluations. Up till the early 1840s, however, it seems that some weavers still perceived the trade as a form of community of interests, in which trade unions, in co-operation with the larger manufacturers, would essentially form the central stabilising mechanism in industry, with a view to protecting the interests of the trade in general. Thus in October 1840, a public meeting of weavers again attributed their deplorable condition to the actions of the ‘unprincipled’ masters. This time it was proposed that a union of masters and weavers should be formed and low payers brought under control by publicising their names and actions, or blacklisting them with merchants. In 1843 a meeting of counterpane weavers resolved to make public the names of all manufacturers in that branch who did not honour the terms of a recently negotiated list of prices.¹⁰² Even during the Plug Strikes, many weavers had been intent on securing the cooperation of employers to fix and equalise wages. A team of 30 delegates were chosen at a meeting to wait upon the manufacturers, but only six agreed to pay the level of prices paid in July 1840 and this was conditional upon all masters agreeing and the Chorley district being brought up to the Bolton level.¹⁰³ Following this the Weavers’ Committee appealed for public assistance to relieve their distress and criticised the ‘competing disposition amongst the manufacturers as to which of them can get cloth wove for the least money; never considering what they could afford to pay; but always endeavouring to ascertain how little such and such person pays’.¹⁰⁴ If this was indicative of a hardening of attitudes among some, then it was perhaps too late.

As outlined above, while the weavers were at the forefront of political radicalism in Bolton in the 1830s and early 1840s, they were also prominent in Liberalism and Toryism. Notwithstanding this, their plight appears to have played an important rôle in shaping the overall consciousness and attitudes of the wider working class. The notion of declining and even lost status was a powerful one and did affect the consciousness of other workers. It is worth recalling that the

Bolton weavers were geographically concentrated and still numerous into the 1830s. Thus for many workers, who were themselves now experiencing threats to their own status, skill, independence and security, the weavers' situation certainly seemed to have some relevance to their own experience. For the decline of the weavers presented an example on a massive scale of what their own future debasement might mean. For instance, Makin was aware of the impact that the condition of the weavers had upon the consciousness of the spinners, whose own position was under attack in the 1830s. As he explained in response to questioning from the Select Committee:

Do you think that if the condition of the weavers was raised to what it ought to be, the disposition to unite in unions, for the purpose of maintaining wages among other operatives, would immediately subside? – That would have a tendency to give a feature of security to the operatives; I know that from this remark, when some of our weavers went to certain mills to solicit subscriptions for taking measures for their relief, the spinners said if you get secured we are right, but as long as we have the great example of your oppression we are never safe, we may be brought down to your condition.¹⁰⁵

To conclude, there is no doubt that the Bolton weavers' standard of living, security and working conditions deteriorated in the period under consideration. Even those in the quilting trade were forced to work long hours at their

looms when work was available,¹⁰⁶ but were plunged into destitution and dependence on the Poor Law or on charity in slumps. Their attempts to halt their decline met with little success. Trade unionism was only really effective among the small numbers of bedquilt and counterpane weavers. This remained the case after 1842. The Handloom Weavers United Association was set up in October 1843, upon a combination of orthodox trade union and friendly society principles, to cover the still decreasing numbers of muslin weavers, but a lack of further references to it suggests that it quickly folded.¹⁰⁷ The fancy weavers, however, maintained their unions beyond the 1840s.¹⁰⁸ The repeated appeals to Parliament brought no reward, though the analysis of cut-throat competition that had underpinned the Board of Trade scheme and the distinction between honourable and dishonourable employers proved remarkably resilient. Many weavers supported the radical political movements of the period, but in the early 1830s many also supported the Tories who had supported their pleas for some form of statutory regulation of the trade, while from the mid-1830s large numbers moved into Liberalism. The weavers were thus politically divided during the years of their demise. However, what united them was their notion of themselves as debased artisans. E. P. Thompson has outlined a weaver culture rich in a strong tradition of self-taught literary and academic achievement,¹⁰⁹ and correspondence from weavers to the local press, where their problems were often expressed in verse, bears witness to the perseverance of this tradition through their long decline.

NOTES

- 1 J. Burnett, *Idle Hands: The Experience of Unemployment, 1790-1990* (London, 1994) pp.54-73; D. Bythell *The Handloom Weavers: A Study in the English Cotton Industry during the Industrial Revolution* (Cambridge, 1969) pp.205ff.; E. P. Thompson. *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth, 1968), ch.9.
- 2 Bythell, op. cit., p.53, 255-267.
- 3 G. Timmins, *The Last Shift: The Decline of Handloom Weaving in Nineteenth-Century Lancashire* (Manchester, 1993), ch.4, pp.109-110.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p.111.
- 5 PP.1833, Vol.VI, *Report of the Select Committee on the Present State of Manufacturers, Commerce, and Shipping in the United Kingdom* (hereafter PP.1833, VI), q.11783.
- 6 PP.1834, Vol.X, Report of the Select Committee on Handloom Weavers' Petitions (hereafter PP.1834, X), q.4882; *Bolton Free Press* (hereafter *BFP*), 6 February, 25 June 1836.
- 7 PP.1834, X, q.5054, 5746-7.
- 8 J. Black, *Bolton And Its Neighbourhood, 1837* (c.1837, copy available in Bolton Public Library) p.177; PP.1834, X, q.4396, 5058; *BFP*, 17 October 1840.
- 9 Timmins, op. cit., p.109; R. A. Sykes, *Popular Politics and Trade Unionism in South-East Lancashire*, Univ. of Manchester Ph.D thesis (1982), p.14.
- 10 PP.1834, X, q.5058-5061.
- 11 However, see J. K. Walton, *Lancashire: A Social History, 1558-1939* (Manchester, 1987), p.143, who warns us not to exaggerate the difficulties encountered by dispersal.
- 12 The Bolton weaver, Richard Needham, referred to 7,000 weavers at work on plain and fancy muslins. PP.1833, VI, Q.11782, 11795-11799; fancy muslins were the town's 'chief' manufacture according to the *Bolton Chronicle* (hereafter *BC*), 12 November 1831; Sykes, op. cit., pp.234-5, points out that in the good year of 1836, coarse weavers could only obtain 6-9 shillings, muslin weavers obtained 8-14s. and fancy weavers 12-14s.
- 13 PP.1834, X, q.4590-4596, 5240, 5730.
- 14 Burnett, op. cit., ch.2; Bythell, op. cit.; Thompson, op. cit., ch.9.
- 15 Bythell, op. cit., pp. 268-270.
- 16 Sykes, op. cit., p. 268.
- 17 F. Engels, *The Condition of the Working Class In England (1845)* translated and edited by W. O. Henderson and W. H. Chaloner (Oxford, 1958); *McDouall's Chartist and Republican Journal*, 10 April 1841.
- 18 PP.1834, X, q.5337-5338, 5342.
- 19 PP.1834, X, q.4910, 4977-4980.
- 20 'A Letter Addressed to The Members of Both Houses of Parliament On the Distresses Of The Hand Loom Weavers, As A Remedy For Which The Expediency And Practicability Of A Board of Trade For the Equalization Of Wages, Is Proposed And Considered By the Committee Of Manufacturers And Weavers Of The Borough Of Bolton' (Bolton, 1834), pp.5-6; E. P. Thompson, op. cit., p.327.
- 21 PP.1834, X, q.5228-5230, 5235, 4817-4819. John Makin, a Bolton manufacturer, argued that the average rate of profit had fallen by up to 40 per cent in some instances, with muslin manufactures the worst affected. Thomas Myerscough, another Bolton manufacturer, argued that the profits and conditions of the manufacturers had deteriorated in step with the wages of the hands.
- 22 *BFP*, 30 September 1837.
- 23 Bythell, op. cit., p.99, Table Two.
- 24 PP.1834, X, q.4754, 4759, 4763-4764.
- 25 PP.1834, X, q.5583; *BFP*, 13 November 1841 and *BC*, 18 January 1834 for examples of deductions; Walton, op. cit., p.110.
- 26 PP.1840, Vol.XXIV, *Report From R. M. Mug eridge on the Condition of the Handloom Weavers of Lancashire, Yorkshire, Cumberland, and parts of the West Riding of Yorkshire*, p. 581; *BFP*, 11 November 1837.
- 27 *BFP*, 13 November 1841.
- 28 F. Crouzet, *The Victorian Economy* (London, 1982), p.201; Bythell, op. cit. p.277.
- 29 E. P. Thompson, op. cit., pp.317-318.
- 30 PP.1834, X, q.5037-5045.
- 31 *BC*, 25 January 1834.

- 32 *BFP*, 28 April 1838.
- 33 Bolton Society for the Protection of the Poor and District Provident Society – Reports, 1841-1858.
- 34 Bythell, op. cit., pp.185-190.
- 35 *BC*, 5, 12, 26 October; 2, 16, 23 November; 21, 28 December 1833; 25 January 1834.
- 36 *BFP*, 6 February 1836.
- 37 *BFP*, 25 June 1835.
- 38 *BFP*, 24 September 1836; *BC*, 15 October 1836.
- 39 *BFP*, 10 December 183.
- 40 *BFP*, 20, 27 May 1837.
- 41 *BFP*, 24 June; 30 September 1837.
- 42 *BC*, 8, 22 October; 5, 26 November; 3, 10 December 1853.
- 43 J. Black, op. cit., p.177.
- 44 PP.1834, X, q.5709. There was, however, one small firm at Chorley in the early 1840s (*BFP*, 24 September 1842).
- 45 PP.1834, X, q.441.
- 46 *BFP*, 5 May 1838.
- 47 PP.1834, X, q.4361-4365, 5583; *BFP*, 5 May 1838.
- 48 PP.1834, X, q.4396, 4399-4405. Apparently the wages for the weaving of one particular sort had been reduced from 9s. in 1819 to 5s. in 1831.
- 49 *BC*, 29 September 1827.
- 50 *BC*, 27 January; 3 February; 29 September 1827.
- 51 *BC*, 19 April 1828.
- 52 *BC*, 21 February 1829.
- 53 *BC*, 6 June 1829.
- 54 *BC*, 17 April; 9 October; 4 December 1830.
- 55 *BC*, 29 September 1828, 5 May 1838, 4 July 1835.
- 56 PP. 1834, X, q.4400-4409.
- 57 *BC*, 9 April 1831.
- 58 PP.1838, X, q.4396-4428, 5709. At a public meeting of bedquilt weavers in September 1827, there were complaints that one low paying master had been paying as much as 5d. a quilt lower than others for 4 years (*BC*, 29 September 1827).
- 59 *BC*, 4 July 1835.
- 60 *BC*, 7 May 1836.
- 61 *BC*, 8, 22 October; 5, 26 November; 3, 10 December 1853.
- 62 Sykes, op. cit., pp.240-243; *BC*, 29 September 1827; *BFP*, 2 September 1837; 5 May 1838; PP.1834, X, q.4396-4412.
- 63 *BC*, 8, 15 August 1829.
- 64 *BFP*, 5 May 1838.
- 65 *BC*, 10, 17 September 1836.
- 66 *BFP*, 5 May 1838.
- 67 *BFP*, 30 June, 7 July 1838.
- 68 *BFP*, 2 September 1837.
- 69 Rythell, op. cit., pp. 148-153.
- 70 *BC*, 24 April; 15 May; 19, 26 June 1830.
- 71 *BC*, 5, 26 March, 18 June 1831.
- 72 *BC*, 20 April 1833.
- 73 P. F. Taylor, 'Popular Politics and Labour-Capital Relations in Bolton, 1825-1850, University of Lancaster Ph.D thesis, 1991, ch.1.
- 74 *BC*, 13 July; 3 August 1833; PP.
- 75 *BC*, 5, 12, 19 July 1834.
- 76 *BC*, 15, 22 August 1835.
- 77 PP.1834, X, q.5023.
- 78 See Taylor, op. cit., ch.3 for the Bolton O.C.A.
- 79 *BFP*, 24 June 1837; *Manchester Guardian*, 21 June 1837.
- 80 This was at least the case initially, though later two spinners were also induced to accept office. *BC*, 19 August 1837.
- 81 *BFP*, 30 September, 28 October 1837.
- 82 *BFP*, 28 April, 5 May 1838. One Tory weaver did give evidence to the Royal Commission.
- 83 *BFP*, 28 April 1837; 5 May 1842.
- 84 *BFP*, 22 September 1838.
- 85 Taylor, op. cit., ch.3, for details surrounding the middle-class involvement in Bolton Chartism.
- 86 *Northern Star*, 24 October 1840
- 87 *BFP*, 21 March, 17 October 1840.
- 88 *BFP*, 5 May 1842. The meeting had been called by a requisition signed by over 700 weavers, though only about 300 persons were reported as being in attendance before the Chartists arrived.
- 89 *BC*, 1 March 1834.
- 90 *BC*, 12 February 1834.
- 91 *BC*, 5, 26 March, 18 June 1831.
- 92 *BFP*, 13 April 1839; A. Howe, *The Cotton Masters 1830-1860* (Oxford, 1984), p. 111
- 93 For example, see the 'Letter . . .' cited in note 23.
- 94 *BC*, 24 March 1827.
- 95 PP.1834, X, q.5670-5674. Halliwell thought that the trade should be completely managed by large capitalists with small masters prevented from doing business. PP.1833, VI, q.11837.
- 96 Bythell, op cit., p. 109.
- 97 *BC*, 29 September 1827.
- 98 PP.1834, X, q.5769-5774.
- 99 *BFP*, 24 September 1840.
- 100 PP.1834, X, q.4612-4613, 4615.
- 101 R. Sykes, 'Trade Unionism and Class Consciousness: the "Revolutionary" Period of General Unionism, 1829-1834', in J. Rule (ed.), *British Trade Unionism 1750-1850: The Formative Years* (London, 1988), p.194.
- 102 *BFP*, 17 October 1840, 19 August 1843.
- 103 *BFP*, 27 August 1842.
- 104 *BFP*, 10 September 1842.
- 105 PP.1834, X, q.5177; Bythell, op. cit., pp.178-179, has a different view on the spinners' attitudes to the decline of the weavers.
- 106 Giving evidence to the Royal Commission's representative in April 1838, James McConnell complained that most weavers worked 12 hours per day, though some worked 14 and those with large families up to 16. *BFP*, 5 May 1838.
- 107 *BFP*, 20 October 1843.
- 108 An association of counterpane weavers was actually re-formed in the town as late as 1880. H. A. Turner, *Trade Union Growth, Structure And Policy* (Toronto, 1962), p.51.
- 109 E. P. Thompson, op. cit., pp.322-325.