

LANCASHIRE SINCE 1900: RECENT RESEARCH ON COTTON

John Singleton

Britain's inaugural Cotton Queen, Frances Burgess of Hyde, who was appointed in 1931, died aged 83 in June 1993. At her passing, it was reported that only one working mill remained in Hyde, a town which could once boast over thirty thriving textile factories (McAdoo, 1993). Lancashire's decline during the twentieth century may be illustrated by looking at the falling quantity of raw cotton used in British mills. In 1900 British mills consumed 1737 million lbs of cotton. Raw cotton consumption peaked at 2178 million lbs in 1913; thereafter it fell to 1109 million lbs by 1938, and then to a mere 152 million lbs in 1980.

Lancashire's spinners and weavers have enjoyed only brief interludes of prosperity this century: firstly, during the years leading up to 1914 when employment in cotton reached an all-time high of 620,000; secondly, and very briefly, in the speculative boom of 1918-20; and, finally, during the post-war export drive of 1945-51. By 1970 the remnants of Lancashire's cotton industry had been absorbed into a wider textile complex controlled by Britain's leading multinational artificial fibre producers – Courtaulds and ICI. In the late 1980s only about 13,000 people in the north-west still worked in cotton spinning and weaving. For those who enjoyed life in the mill, the dethronement of King Cotton may be a matter for regret, but for many others who recall unpleasant working conditions and low pay it is a cause for celebration. Of course, for most people born since the Second World War, the cotton industry has never had any direct significance. But it is clear that, whether for better or worse, the contraction of the cotton industry since the First World War has transformed Lancashire life.

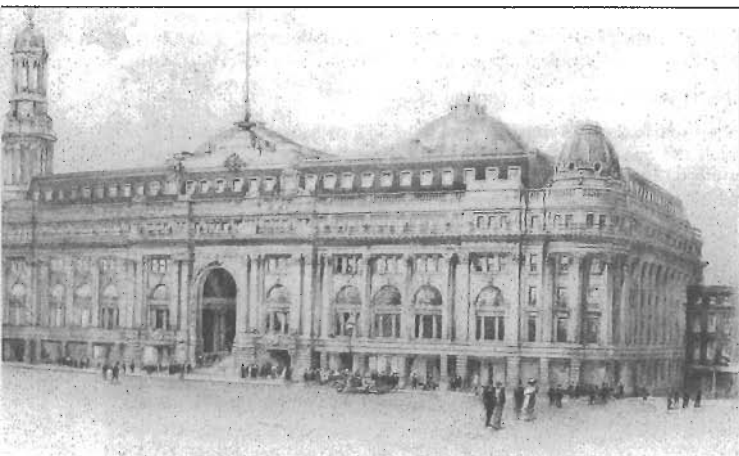
Lancashire's long retreat has attracted considerable interest from economic historians over the last decade or so, but there remains much to be done. Excellent collections of archives have been deposited by textile companies, employers' federations, and trade unions at libraries and record offices around the region, such as the Lancashire County Record Office at Preston, and the Working Class Movement Library at Salford. The twists and turns of government policy towards the ailing cotton industry can

be traced in official documents held at the Public Record Office at Kew in London. Since many archives apply a thirty-year rule of secrecy, it is difficult to gain access to primary material concerning years later than the mid 1960s, and this is reflected in the nature of the work that has been completed.

General Studies

So far, no complete study of the cotton industry in the twentieth century has been written. Cotton has been less fortunate in this respect than the coal industry, which now has an official history running to five monumental volumes, two of which are devoted to the twentieth century. Most research into the history of the cotton industry treats the interwar and post-1945 periods as self-contained. But a handful of important works do succeed in spanning the Second World War. Marguerite Dupree's (1987) edition of the diary of Sir Raymond Streat is a major addition to our understanding of the politics of the cotton industry. Streat, first as Secretary of the Manchester Chamber of Commerce in the 1930s, and then as Chairman of the Cotton Board in the 1940s and 1950s, was at the centre of the debate about the industry's future. In this era Lancashire was anxiously searching for a policy to guarantee its survival in an increasingly competitive world market. Numerous proposals were advanced for reorganizing the industry, and on several occasions thought was even given to nationalization, although Streat was himself strongly opposed to public ownership. Streat's diary provides us with a detailed narrative of negotiations between Lancashire and Whitehall and gives us an incomparable insight into the state of mind of the cotton industry's leaders. Simon Pitt's recent (1989) thesis on the business strategy of the Calico Printers' Association, the largest firm in the printing section of the cotton industry, takes the story of this company from its formation in 1899 right up to the mergers which brought it into the English Calico and Tootal groups in 1968-73. Pitt suggests that in its early years the CPA was better organized than was previously thought, but finds that as a mature enterprise it failed in some critical areas, such as the commercial exploitation of its greatest discovery, Trylene, the world's first polyester fibre. Douglas Farnie (1991) discusses the development of the global textile machinery industry between 1870 and 1960, paying particular attention to the role of leading British firms including Platt Brothers of Oldham. Like the mills they were established to serve, many British textile machinery makers wilted under pressure from overseas competitors during the twentieth century.

William Lazonick's (1983; Mass and Lazonick, 1991) analysis of the cotton industry covers the whole period from the late nineteenth century down to the 1960s. He argues that Lancashire's decline could have been arrested by changes in the cotton industry's structure. Too many small firms were specializing in a single activity – either spinning or weaving or finishing (bleaching, dyeing, and printing) or marketing. This made it very difficult for managers to win large orders, plan ahead, or make the right choices when ordering new equipment. Lancashire's reluctance to replace mule spinning and powerloom weaving



Manchester Royal Exchange. The enlarged building was opened by George V in October 1921.

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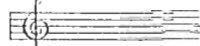
LANCASHIRE COTTON FOR THE WORLD

Here we shall see the peoples of the world, presided over by King Cotton, clothed in the products of Lancashire looms. Seated on the peak of his immense triumphal car, modelled on the most modern lines, King Cotton is drawn into the arena by hundreds of children and takes his place in the centre of the arena. Mannequins follow the car, and then the peoples of the world, robed in Lancashire fabrics, enter in the following order:—

1. Early Egyptians.
2. Red Indians.
3. Japanese.
4. Egyptians.
5. East Indians.
6. Chinese.



Fanfare No. 1 (Gordon E. Stutely)



March: "Spirit of Pageantry"
(Fletcher)



Fanfare No. 2 (Gordon E. Stutely)



March: "The Crown of Chivalry"
(Fletcher)



Fanfare No. 3 (Gordon E. Stutely)



March: "Huldigungsmarsch"
(Wagner)



Chorus: "The Red Rose"
(Gordon E. Stutely)

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"THE RED ROSE"
Music by Gordon E. Stutely. Words by Gordon Phillips.
Published by R. Smith & Co. Ltd., 210 Strand, London.

1
Red was the rose that of old they chose
As the Lancashire badge and sign,
And the red remains where the engine reigns
And a thousand mill fires shine;
Though the gardens gay give way, give way
To the grey of the mart and mill
You will find the rose where the furnace glows
At the heart of the county still!

Chorus:
Loom and spindle, spindle and loom,
Beam and bobbin and lathe and drill!
But you'll find the rose where the furnace glows:
It's there at the heart of the county still!

2
The men of old their hearts were bold
When they took the rose for their crest,
But ours the brunt on a wider front
Than ever the past possessed;
By mill and mine we hold the line
Where the wealth of the land is made,
And the war goes forth from the ringing North
To the ends of a world of trade!

Chorus:
3
Rich was the yield from that wider field,
Where the toil of the county led—
And so may it be for all to see
In the happier years ahead!
May the Red Rose stand for the strength of the land
And Fortune's fair increase
And the skill of man that can work and plan,
In a world of wealth and peace!

Chorus:
Loom and spindle, spindle and loom,
Beam and bobbin, and lathe and drill!
May the Red Rose stand for the strength of the land,
As it glows at the heart of the county still!

with the newer ring spinning and automatic loom systems, resulted from the lack of co-operation between spinning and weaving firms. For ring spindles and automatic looms to be operated most efficiently, they normally needed to be introduced simultaneously, and preferably on the same site. If firms had been willing to merge into large groups which carried out all processes from spinning to marketing (a practice known as vertical integration), as occurred in the United States, Lazonick believes that they would have been better managed and better equipped, and in a far stronger position to stand up to overseas competition. Lazonick also suggests that the rise of the Japanese cotton industry, and its victory over Lancashire, were due to superior management practices, enabling close informal co-operation between firms of different sizes at different stages of the production and marketing processes. Thus, Lazonick contests the common assumption that Japan's triumph was principally due to low wages. This approach to the explanation of Lancashire's problems is both distinctive and challenging, and draws upon the thinking of the leading American business historian, Alfred Chandler, in its emphasis on the strategy and structure of large firms. Lazonick's work on the cotton industry forms part of wider research (1990, 1991, 1992) into the development of modern industry in Britain, the USA, and Japan, in which he concludes that the Japanese approach to industrial organization and labour management is both more efficient and more harmonious than western alternatives.

Between the Wars

J. H. Porter (1979) supplies a concise introduction to the history of the cotton industry between 1918 and 1939. But these trouble-packed years await a more detailed survey. Research has tended to focus on individual pieces of the jigsaw rather than on the story as a whole. Robert Kirk and Colin Simmons (1981) question the assumption that the First World War helped the growth of Lancashire's Asian rivals by insulating them from British competition. Given the conversion of British textile machinery factories to munitions production during the war, and the shortage of shipping, Kirk and Simmons argue that most overseas cotton industries found it difficult to obtain new equipment. Susan Wolcott (1991) focuses on the sudden collapse in overseas demand for British cotton goods in the early 1920s, and suggests that this was due to short-term factors beyond Lancashire's control, such as high postwar inflation in Britain, and a more nationalistic trade policy in India.

Lancashire's difficulties between the wars had a number of causes, including falling incomes in its major export markets, the growth of protectionism all around the world, and the increasing competitiveness of textile companies from countries such as Japan. In 1918 the British cotton industry was remarkably complacent, and it took several years of bad trade in the early 1920s before this attitude started to change. A recent and very useful book by a Japanese scholar (Shimizu, 1986) describes the trade war between British and Japanese textile interests in the markets of the Middle East and North Africa between the wars, and points out that during the 1920s Italy too was a major competitor in this region. Alex Robertson (1991) and Marguerite Dupree (1990) look at the reaction in Lancashire to the increasing threat posed by the Japanese cotton industry, and consider the only partially successful campaign in the 1930s to restrict the entry of Japanese textiles into Commonwealth and Empire markets, especially those in Africa and the Indian subcontinent. Basudev Chatterji (1992) examines more closely the complicated relationship

Extract from *The Lancashire Cotton Pageant organised at Belle Vue in the summer of 1932 to promote the recovery of the industry and the "renaissance of the Lancashire Spirit"*.

Can Lancashire Survive in World Competition?

An Address given by
Frederick W. Tattersall
of Manchester,

To the Members of the
Liverpool Cotton Trade Institute

on
Wednesday, Dec. 11th, 1929.

12 & 13 Mansfield Chambers,
17 St. Ann's Square,
Manchester.

Pamphlet asking what became the leading question for the cotton industry after the First World War.

between the British and Indian cotton industries between the wars. He shows that the Indian cotton industry was divided into two camps. Producers of low quality textiles in Bombay were willing to co-operate with Lancashire in pressing for discriminatory tariffs against the Japanese, but those in Ahmedabad, who produced goods of a finer quality, regarded Lancashire and not Japan as the main enemy.

Within Lancashire itself, the 1920s and 1930s saw a substantial amount of restructuring, but this did not go far enough to satisfy rationalization's most enthusiastic supporters. Douglas Farnie and Shin'ichi Yonekawa (1988) show that, despite the small average size of cotton firms in England, Lancashire also possessed some of the world's largest cotton enterprises. Only the Fine Spinners' Association represented Lancashire among the world's five largest spinning firms in 1918, but by 1933 there were four Lancashire companies in the top five. This dramatic turn of events was the result of two combination movements: the first during the speculative boom of 1918-20, and the second during the late 1920s, when the banking sector, fearing that its loans to textile firms would never be repaid, forced struggling mills to huddle together for safety. James Bamberg (1984, 1988) examines the role of the Bank of England in promoting the creation of the giant Lancashire Cotton Corporation out of the ruins of almost one hundred smaller firms. Its aim was to reduce cut-throat competition, improve the standard of management, close the least efficient mills, and improve the overall profitability of the industry – but it took some years for these objectives to be attained. Most of these amalgamations were horizontal (i.e. confined

to a single process such as spinning), and so did nothing to bring about the vertically integrated industrial structure advocated by Lazonick. Perhaps the government could have done more to force the industry into reorganizing, but as David Edgerton (1986) points out, ministers were reluctant to intervene directly in cotton because, unlike the aircraft industry, it had no military importance.

Post-1945

There is no recent analysis of the cotton industry during the Second World War. Cotton's history since 1945 falls into three relatively neat periods. During the years of the Labour governments from 1945 to 1951 the cotton industry enjoyed great prosperity, while the Japanese and European textile industries were trying to recover from their wartime losses and postwar shortages. The period from 1951 to around 1964 saw a resurgence of overseas competition, especially from Asian Commonwealth countries, such as India, Pakistan, and Hong Kong, and this led to a painful retreat for Lancashire in both home and export markets. From 1964 until the early 1970s a merger wave, instigated by the artificial fibre producers, mopped up most of the cotton industry's important firms.

Singleton's (1986, 1990, 1991a, 1991b, 1991c) investigations into the cotton industry between 1945 and 1970 take a more or less fatalistic view of events. Between 1945 and 1951 exports from the cotton mills played an important role in helping the British economy to recovery from the war – this was the era when Harold Wilson, the President of the Board of Trade, was warning the country that Britain's bread and its bacon ration were hanging by Lancashire's thread. But an undercurrent of opinion in "Lancashire held that cotton's long-term prospects were bleak, given the inevitability of a Japanese revival. This pessimism made firms reluctant to invest in new equipment, despite the offer of government subsidies in 1948. Instead, Lancashire responded to the overseas challenge by pleading for the protection of its domestic and colonial markets. The campaign for protection continued throughout the 1950s, but met with little sympathy in London, where the government felt that it had nothing to gain from provoking a trade war with India and Japan at a time when the unemployment rate in Lancashire remained low. Singleton argues that Lancashire's cotton masters were justified in their caution in the 1940s and 1950s. Even mills sporting the latest equipment found it difficult to hold their own against the low wage producers of the Indian subcontinent and Hong Kong. Even a Lancashire reorganized along vertically integrated lines would have been in severe trouble. Lobbying for protection was a rational response to this crisis, despite the fact that it proved not to be very effective. Singleton concludes that the decline of cotton after 1950 was beneficial to the British economy, because it freed labour and other resources for use in industries with better prospects. To put it another way, the cotton industry was approaching the end of the product cycle. England, with its relatively advanced technology, successfully mechanized the production of textiles during the Industrial Revolution. But England's lead could not be maintained for ever, since its methods could be copied by other countries. Everyone having access to more or less the same equipment, the balance of competitive advantage in textiles shifted in the twentieth century towards those countries with the lowest labour costs.

Several alternative interpretations of the period since 1945 have been advanced. Jim Tomlinson (1991) suggests that a more determined attempt to revitalize the industry in the



Cover of "Cotton" (1945) published by the Labour Party and the cotton unions.

late 1940s, for instance by reinvesting the profits from the export drive, would have given Lancashire a better chance of competing later on. Marguerite Dupree's recent contributions (1991, 1992) emphasize the role of the Cotton Board, led by Sir Raymond Streat, in formulating Lancashire's strategy and encouraging firms to modernize. The Cotton Board included representatives of all sections of the industry, including the unions, and was a force for reconciliation after the bitter infighting of the 1920s and 1930s. Dupree regrets that the Cotton Board failed to obtain stricter controls over imports in the 1950s. She argues that progress in the industry was held back by uncertainty about the level of demand in Lancashire's markets. The regulation of imports into those markets would have reduced this uncertainty. For Dupree, the Cotton Board was the key: it knew what was best for Lancashire and the government was foolish not to have taken more notice of its advice.

Recent work by David Higgins (1990, 1993) uses data from cotton spinning company accounts to generate new insights into the industry's history between 1945 and 1965. He challenges Lazonick's view that single-process spinning firms did not find it worthwhile changing from mule spinning to ring spinning. On the contrary, Higgins finds that after World War Two many single-process spinners did convert from mules to rings: this was due to a shortage of mule spinning operatives, a purchase tax which discriminated against consumers of fine textiles woven from mule yarn, and the existence of a larger and thus more lucrative market for medium quality textiles made from ring yarn. Higgins also shows that, on average, specialized spinning firms were more profitable than vertically integrated firms. Companies possessing both spindles and looms had a restricted product range because of the difficulty of co-ordinating the output of each section of the mill. Higgins argues that informal links between companies, through interlocking directorates and family alliances, acted as a substitute for vertical integration. By these means, firms in different sections were able to cooperate without sacrificing their flexibility. The full implications of Higgins's research are still being worked out, but it seems that the post-war history of the cotton industry may be substantially more complex than earlier scholars, including Lazonick and Singleton, have assumed.

In the 1960s most developed countries around the world, including Britain, adopted a series of measures to restrict *the rate of growth* of textile imports from poorer countries. These import controls, culminating in the Multi Fibre Arrangement, came too late to save Lancashire's mills. The MFA has generated a voluminous and excessively repetitive literature, written largely by outraged economists who disapprove of any interference with the free market. Useful guides to the history and current implications of the MFA may be found in Keesing and Wolf (1980) and Cline (1990).

The mergers of the 1960s are discussed by Donald Coleman (1980), Keith Cowling *et al* (1980), and John Blackburn (1982). In fact, from the late 1960s onwards, it no longer makes sense to speak of cotton as a distinct industry. The spinning and weaving of cotton and of mixtures of cotton and synthetic fibres has been absorbed into the wider textile and apparel industry. It appears that the main objective of Courtaulds was to stabilize one of the most important markets for its synthetic fibres, large quantities of which were spun and woven in the cotton industry on cotton technology. At the time of the mergers, many older mills were closed and large sums were invested in building



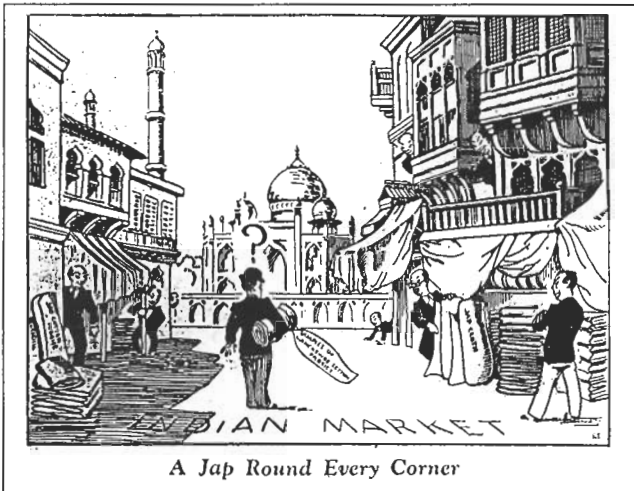
Training a new generation of weavers: a Cotton Board recruitment publication, 1945.

new factories on green-field sites, for instance at Skelmersdale, using the latest capital-intensive technology. G. F. Ray (1984), in a study of technical change, considers the progress of the shuttle-less loom – the successor to the automatic loom – in Britain and abroad during this period.

Despite these reforms, which introduced a far greater degree of vertical integration, the cotton section of the textile industry was facing renewed difficulties by the late 1970s, and some of its most modern plants were standing idle. Geoffrey Shepherd (1983), in a comparative study of European textile industries, suggests that Britain took the wrong path in the 1960s. Courtaulds evidently believed that the way to restore profitability to the spinning and weaving of cotton was to mass produce standardized material using highly automated machinery. This strategy involved meeting its Asian opponents head on and it failed. Cheap imported cottons remained attractive to consumers. Modern British plants could not operate to full capacity due to low order books, and the economies of scale expected from the new machines did not materialize. Shepherd suggests that northern Italy's (formerly woollen) textile industry has found a better solution to the problem of cheap imports. Networks of small family firms, equipped with modern but versatile machinery, co-operate informally to produce textiles with a high added value for fashion-conscious western markets. The Italians were canny enough not to attempt to compete with Korea and the Philippines. The successful techniques of the Italian textile industry, and in particular their use of computers to link networks of firms and markets, are discussed by Antonelli (1988).

The Future

Historians of the Lancashire cotton industry have much to learn from considering the current state of textile production and trade. At the local level, Ronald Dore (1982) has



The threat of foreign competition as depicted in a cartoon from 1935.

described the process of economic adjustment in the weaving centre of Blackburn in the 1970s. Clairmonte and Cavanagh (1981) and Toyne et al (1984) survey the textile industries of the leading industrial countries, and focus on the continuing role of multinational fibre and textile producers from Europe, the USA, and Japan. Kym Anderson (1992) provides an even more recent analysis of the world textile trade, and examines the dramatic rise of the newest Asian exporters, including Thailand and the People's Republic of China. Established Asian producers, such as Taiwan and Korea, with their relatively high wage levels, are finding it difficult to compete against firms from even less developed countries. Japan's once dominant textile industry is also feeling the pinch, and for the last twenty years it has been struggling to cope with problems of redundant capacity and declining competitiveness similar to those afflicting Lancashire in the 1950s and 1960s (Yamazawa, 1987).

Recently there has been a move towards computer assisted design, manufacturing, and marketing in the textile and apparel industries of the developed world, and leading British firms have shared in this trend (Northcott et al 1985; Hoffman and Rush 1988; Mody and Wheeler 1990). It is possible, although by no means certain, that the improvements in productivity brought about by computerization will shift the balance of competitive

advantage in textiles and clothing back towards Britain and other wealthy countries – a reversal of the product cycle. Whether the greater use of computers will most favour large or small firms remains to be seen. Benetton's rise from provincial obscurity to the world stage during the 1970s and 1980s owed much to its innovative use of computers to link sales outlets with its headquarters in northern Italy (Kay, 1993; 'Benetton bucks the trend' 1993). But, now that the multinationals are catching up in the application of computers to all aspects of the industry, it may be more difficult for others to follow in Benetton's footsteps. England's north west region still possesses a significant textile and clothing sector, employing 83,000 in 1989, about 13,000 of whom worked in the cotton section (*Employment Gazette* 1991). It will be interesting to see how contemporary Lancashire responds to these new challenges and opportunities in the coming years.

There is no consensus of opinion on the causes of Lancashire's fall. Was decline inevitable, in the wake of the spread of spindles and looms to countries with cheaper labour, or could earlier action to create large vertically integrated firms have saved the industry? Given that this question is a searching one, the debate is likely to continue far into the future. It is important that too sharp an opposition should not be drawn between the two most distinctive approaches to Lancashire's decline. Proponents of a 'market' explanation, who stress the removal of production in a mature industry to areas of low labour costs, do not deny the significance of industrial structure and business strategy. Nor do the advocates of 'institutional failure' completely neglect the role of market forces in shaping long-term trends.

There is, of course, plenty still to do. The period from 1896, when Douglas Farnie's (1979) classic study of the nineteenth-century cotton industry ends, until the outbreak of war in 1914 has been neglected and, even more surprisingly, the 1920s and 1930s have yet to receive systematic attention. Detailed investigations of particular facets of the industry's history would be very welcome – management, design, training, and marketing spring to mind. Finally, it is important to see Lancashire not in isolation, but in relation to its adversaries. Comparisons with the cotton industries of other countries would add greatly to our understanding the history of Lancashire's mills.

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Master's Degree/Postgraduate Diploma in the History of the Manchester Region

Applications are invited for the MA/ Postgraduate Diploma in the History of the Manchester Region, which has a new intake in September. This well-established part-time course is a linked Master's (three years) and Postgraduate Diploma (two years) programme.

If you have a background in historical studies and wish to develop your historical skills and expertise to a postgraduate level, this course will appeal to you.

The programme of study is carefully structured to develop your skills as a researcher in the field of local studies. It is of particular benefit to teachers and others concerned with regional history.

We have extensive links with local history societies, the national Museum of Labour history, other universities and the Manchester Region History Review which is produced in the University.

The course is taught by academic staff

from a range of departments at the Manchester Metropolitan University. Classes usually take place on one evening a week, plus one Saturday day school each year. Most of the classes are held in the Mabel Tylecoté Building on Oxford road, which is wheelchair-accessible.

In the first year, you follow a core introduction course, and in the second year you select two options. In the third year, you research and write a dissertation.

COURSE STRUCTURE

Master's/Diploma Course

Year I: *An introduction to the History of Manchester Region*

Year II: *Two selected options*

Master's Course

Year III: *Supervised research leading to the submission of a dissertation*

Second Year Options

Students select two options from the following:

- *The Cotton Industry and the Industrial Revolution*
- *Culture and Society in Nineteenth century Manchester*
- *Issues in Women's History*
- *Working Class Movements*

Recent dissertation subjects include:

- *Chartism in Rochdale*
- *The Irish in Salford*
- *The Social Origins of Entrepreneurs*
- *The 1849 Cholera Epidemic in Manchester*
- *Technology in the Cotton Industry 1900-1910*
- *Music and the Middle Classes in Victorian Manchester*

For further information please contact:

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