

This article is best read online at www.NorthCravenHeritage.org.uk under Publications. NCHTJ 1995.

Austwick Weavers

Stan Lawrence



In Austwick, if one mentions weaving, local people immediately think of "The Weaving Shed", now a private house, which Marie Hartley and Joan Ingleby, writing in the 1950's, referred to as "a long, low, deserted building on the outskirts". But the Weaving Shed represented only the final phase of a once thriving industry, an epitome of many local villages.

The story of Austwick's textile industry goes back many centuries and includes the weaving of woollen cloth, hemp (sacking or harden), linen, cotton, muslin and silk.

The earliest record available lies in the Poll Tax returns of 1379, two years before the Peasants' Revolt. In the list are to be found four weavers (a textor and three websters), a tinctor (dyer) and a chaloner who wove coarse blankets called chalons. The neighbouring village of Clapham also had a chaloner.

Inventories (lists of the property for Probate purposes of a person who had recently died) from the time of Elizabeth I (1558-1603) to



[J1995p1_9_files/tmpCBC-6.jpg](#)

Austwick, The old Weaving Shed.
The hut was used until about 1920 by Mr F. Foster, who lived at Pant Head, as a Cobbler's Shop. Mr Jackie Holme then had it for about three years for a cycle repair shop, until it burned down.

about the time of Bonnie Prince Charlie (1745) show many people to have had materials (hemp, wool and flax) and equipment (cards, reels, spinning-wheels and looms) for making cloth. For example, in 1592, Alexander Banckes had a pair of looms (what we would now call a loom) and William Beecroft, in 1710, left wool and cloth, looms, etc., worth £9, quite a large sum in those days. He was a clothier, i.e. a middleman who bought wool which he distributed for spinning in people's homes, collecting the yarn and again putting it out for weaving.

The inventory of Robert Bentham, made early in 1666 (the time of the Plague and Fire of London) not only includes a considerable amount of farm stock and produce, but also £4 worth of harden cloth uncut and hemp and flax, the raw material of harden and linen. There was also woollen and harden yarn worth 15 shillings. He too, would have "put-out" the work of preparation, spinning and weaving of wool, harden and linen into the local cottages and farms.

It is quite probable that Harden Bridge, which existed in the seventeenth century if not earlier, took its name from the fabric of that name.

Thomas Bentham, a nephew of Robert's, described as a

"coverlet weaver" in 1681, also had wool, hemp, harden yarn plus "a pair of coverlet looms and other materials for the same".

Although the Parish Registers for Clapham (which included Austwick) in the first half of the eighteenth century, list a number of weavers, sometimes mentioning the farms where they lived, no materials are specified. However, later in the century, deeds mention both linen and woollen weavers.

In the latter part of that century, another material entered the local industry: cotton. In 1792, Jeremiah Taylor and Robert Parkinson, two Lancashire cotton spinners, bought the old corn mill near where Silloth House now stands but on the opposite side of the road. In the next two years they converted it into a three- or four-storey cotton mill, powered by a thirty-foot diameter waterwheel driving a dozen cotton-spinning frames and four flax-spinning frames. The water was carried from higher up the beck, nearer to Wharfe, in a trough mounted on pillars. Similar mills were functioning at this time at Clapham, Bentham, Burton-in-Lonsdale, Ingleton, Langcliffe, Rathmell and Settle.

In 1803, out of 112 men between the ages of 17 and 55 registering for military service

in the Napoleonic Wars from Austwick, 19 gave their occupation as "weaver". Presumably the spinners were mainly women and/or children. At the same time, Clapham had 22 weavers and 3 cotton-spinners out of 130.

Taylor and Parkinson were bankrupt by 1795 and the mill was sold to Robert Burrow who owned the mill at Westhouse. His brother, John, managed Austwick Mill for a few years, after which it was advertised as "To Let". In 1817, James Birley used the mill for "combing, carding, drawing, roving and spinning silk". By 1850 the cotton mill was only a ruin, apparently the result of a fire, and the seven cottages specially built nearby had also reached the end of their days.

At this time, weaving was still carried out on handlooms in cottages, but small weaving-shops did exist in the village. One such utilised the old Well House in Low Street, which, in 1823, was converted into a Methodist Chapel. This was not the present Chapel, but what later became "Chapel House".

Unfortunately, the heyday of the cotton handloom-weavers was coming to an end. After overcoming many problems, power-looms had been improved to the point where they had become an attractive proposition to the

manufacturers. The number of power-looms increased rapidly. In the early 1820's there was prosperity for the manufacturers brought about by a boom in exports, but for the handloom-weavers there was a steady increase in the hours they needed to work to maintain production and a steady decrease in their income.

By the beginning of 1826, there was considerable discontent among the handloom-weavers of north-west England. In some parts of Lancashire this resulted in riots, loss of life and severe punishments, including transportation to Australia. On 14 April of that year it had been suggested by some of the mill-owners in Burnley, that the local Overseers of the Poor might provide support for the weavers. Unfortunately they were too late as riots swept the area within a fortnight.

In Austwick, however, the troubles seem to have been averted by the foresight of some local leaders: George Clapham, William Batty, James Burton, Joseph Willis, Leonard Chapman, Richard Baynes and Charles Ingleby. They formed a committee "to enquire into and purchase warps and weft and also to employ what number of looms they think proper in each house". A thousand pounds was to be raised to carry on the work. The purpose was to set

up a sort of co-operative to employ the poor handloom-weavers in their own trade of weaving cotton pieces.

This happened a month before Burnley's failures. A similar scheme was set up on the same day for Clapham although results there do not seem to have lasted so long.

At the end of the first year, 6,135 cotton pieces had been woven in Austwick at a cost to the Poor Rate of £54, a subsidy which amounted to just over twopence (2d) per piece.

The accounts of the Overseer of the Poor in 1835, record the rebuilding of a weaving-shop at the expence of the Parish.

The building of the Union Workhouse at Castlebergh in Giggleswick in the 1830's led to changes, the Austwick weaving-shops being sold in 1839, most of the proceeds going towards Austwick's share of the cost of building the new Workhouse. The property sold consisted of two groups of three houses with a weaving-shop and a group of four houses plus a weaving-shop, although their exact location has not yet been verified.

The census of 1841 names 82 weavers (46 male; 36 female) but only specifies cotton weaver as the occupation of two of them. Most of the weavers were in their teens

and twenties: the oldest, aged 66, was John Ellison, while the youngest was Sarah Carradice, aged 7.

In 1851, the census was more specific with 50 weavers, almost all described as "Cotton weavers", of whom 18 were further described as "Handloom-weavers", the oldest being a 74-year-old man and the youngest three 14-year-old girls.

What is now known as "The Weaving Shed" seems to have started at about this time. (There were other weaving-sheds, e.g. one on the site of the present Parish Hall.) During the ensuing decade the type of cloth produced by the handloom-weavers became diversified and there were more worsted weavers (41) than cotton weavers (34). Two of them wove silk.

During the 1860's, Austwick's textile industry was dying. By 1870, Storey Brothers of Lancaster, who, for some time, had been putting-out work in the village, ceased to employ the handloom-weavers. Several families left the district and the 1871 census records only six weavers, five of them in receipt of Poor relief. The village had fallen on hard times when farming was also entering a distressed period. A few elderly handloom-weavers probably continued to produce a small quantity of cloth for local use, but by 1880 the

Austwick textile industry was dead.



[J1995p1_9_files/tmpCBC-6.jpg](#)

Austwick, The old Weaving Shed.

The hut was used until about 1920 by Mr F. Foster, who lived at Pant Head, as a Cobbler's Shop. Mr Jackie Holme then had it for about three years for a cycle repair shop, until it burned down.