

Discovering the hidden stories of Lancashire's disabled mill workers

Introduction

Disabled people have always been part of the textile workforce of Lancashire, but their contributions have often gone unrecognised. Once the industrial revolution got underway, the narrative that disabled people were unable to work and had to depend on the workhouse or on charity took hold. This idea of disabled people as being dependent and needy continues to this day. But it's not the whole picture.

The stories of Lancashire's disabled cotton workers aren't always easy to find. The mills didn't keep any records of disabled workers, it wasn't considered to be important. And few mill workers were able to read and write so didn't record the details of their lives. However, local archives, censuses and other sources reveal some snippets of information that give us fresh insights into their lives. In this article, Gill Crawshaw shares some of her research into disabled mill workers in Lancashire.

These stories are valuable because they can help us to think differently about disabled people's role in society - today and in the past - not as dependent or scroungers, but as active contributors to their communities. Disabled people were not bystanders, but played their part in Lancashire's leading industry: cotton production.

An occupational hazard

The weavers who worked in Lancashire's cotton mills were known to be skilled lip-readers. They had to be - the weaving sheds were such noisy places that a combination of lip-reading and hand-signing, or *mee-mawing*, was the only way to communicate. Lip-reading was more than just a practical form of communication for the weavers, it was a badge of honour. It showed that you were used to hard, manual work - no matter that you were now deaf as a result - and set you apart from the mills' office workers. It was also a means of passing messages which the overlookers and managers couldn't understand!

Weavers had been working in factories or mills, amongst the tremendous din of power-looms, since the early part of the 19th century. Unsurprisingly, deafness was common. A century later, it was considered an occupational hazard, the workers took it for granted. And the government and employers did little to protect mill workers' hearing until the late twentieth century.

One weaver, Marjory Shaw, recalled her time at work, quoted in Dr. Janet Greenlees' research into the [workplace health of Lancashire mill workers in the 20th century](#):

Oh, it was very noisy. But I knew that. Ahh, I knew it was noisy, but all the family had gone weaving, so I thought, well, it's in the blood. Foolish, you know. Very foolish, but there it is. And, ah, it didn't bother me, cause everybody was talking with yer lips, you know, lip reading, and you could have a conversation and nobody would know what you were talkin', only you who were eye to eye.

Meanwhile, the cotton industry was a cause of widespread disablement amongst its workers. Industrial injury was a feature of early factory work, yet many disabled workers proved to be resilient and carried on.

As well as the constant loud noise, there were other hazards. Accidents from unguarded machinery, having to stand all day while doing repetitive and awkward movements, and the effects of working in dusty, unventilated premises led to great numbers of workers becoming disabled.

This wasn't necessarily equated with a lack of productivity, and many of these disabled workers continued or returned to work. They often had little choice, as they would have wanted to avoid the even harsher conditions of the workhouse if at all possible.

Speaking up

The government's Factories Inquiry Commission of 1833, along with other committees organised by politicians and campaigners, gave disabled workers the chance to speak up. Giving evidence meant that they were not merely victims of industrialisation, but that they were contributing to the movement for reform. The 1833 Commission's report led to legislation which reduced working hours, set up factory inspections and made further improvements to working conditions.

An unnamed 29 year-old Lancashire hand-loom weaver told the commissioners that he "began at eight years [old] in a cotton factory", working "generally from half past five [AM] to eight or half past eight [PM]".

"When did your knees begin to bend inwards?" asked a doctor. He replied: "They began to be so deformed at fourteen years of age."

The words used in connection with disability at that time were different than today. "Deformity", for example, was used regularly.

Thomas Wilson of Manchester also gave his testimony to the commissioners, and showed them the "distortion" of his legs and knees. He was working as a tailor by 1833, but added his voice to the demand for shorter working hours in the mills, particularly for children, based on his own experience:

"What was your work?" - "Piecing at the mules."

"How was you injured by your work?" - "By standing too many hours in the mills."

Of course, there were people whose injuries meant that they were no longer able to work, and did end up in the workhouse. However, many other disabled people stayed in work - because they were able to, their experience was valued, or through sheer necessity.

They were also meeting the demand of the industry for a large workforce. The cotton mills drew workers from their surrounding area - men, women and children. This would have

included those disabled people who could get themselves to work, or who could be taken there with the help of family members.

Workers needed

Harle Syke, a small village on the outskirts of Burnley, had six mills within its boundaries by the end of the 19th century, each vying for workers. One of these, [Queen Street Mill](#), remains an imposing presence amongst the terraced houses. It's now a working textile museum run by Lancashire County Council, the last surviving steam powered mill of its era in the world.

Queen Street Mill alone housed 300 single-shuttle looms, which would have needed 900 weavers to operate them. Not to mention all the other workers needed for the many stages of producing cloth and to keep the huge factory running smoothly.

Some of these jobs could be done sitting down, such as spinning thread and twisting the ends of warp threads together. Other tasks were part time or temporary, away from the dangers of the machinery, such as clearing out the boilers or packing and moving lengths of cloth. Some disabled people might have been employed in these jobs, while others would have worked on the factory floor.

Deaf mill workers

Deaf people, that is, those born deaf or who became deaf early in life, were amongst those who were able to get work in the cotton mills across the county. They weren't at a disadvantage in the noisy environment of the mill! Martin Atherton, in his book *Living, Learning and Working: Deaf Life in Lancashire in 1901*, based on his research of the 1901 census, shows that the main types of work done by deaf people in Lancashire were connected with the textile industries. Atherton puts names to some of the deaf workers who lived in Preston and tells us a little of their lives:

Alice Read, Elizabeth Slater and Alice Green all worked as weavers, as did John Storr and Thomas Proctor, whilst Joseph Holden was a spinner. These were all skilled jobs in the production process for cotton cloth and were rewarded with higher wages... Joseph Holden also worked as a knocker up, going round to the homes of textile workers and knocking on bedroom windows to ensure they were awake in time to get to work. He lived with his sister Isabella, a cotton winder, and presumably needed the extra income this work provided, as it involved getting up even earlier than his fellow workers.

Earlier and subsequent census records reveal a bit more. Alice Green had been working as a weaver for at least twenty years by 1901. She had moved out of her parents' home at some point and was lodging with another weaver. Elizabeth Slater was nineteen in 1901. Her parents and several of her neighbours worked as weavers or spinners, and her younger sister was a doffer in a cotton mill.

To live in streets where so many were employed in the cotton industry was not unusual at the time. There were around 60 mills in Preston, so Elizabeth and her sister probably didn't have far to walk to work. The censuses show how deaf workers lived and worked closely with hearing colleagues and family members, as well as sometimes with other deaf people. While the sign language that deaf people used was different from mee-mawing, communication in the mill might well have been facilitated between the different groups of deaf and deafened workers through their use of signs and facial expressions.

Disabled veterans join the workforce

Following World War One, there was an influx of disabled workers into industries across the country, including cotton production in Lancashire. This was encouraged by The King's National Roll, a scheme set up in 1920 to give employment to disabled ex-servicemen, and hundreds of the county's cotton businesses were keen to take part. Disabled veterans took up jobs in all branches of the industry, from spinning and weaving to finishing, bleaching and dyeing. The scheme was a success, proving that disabled people were reliable and useful workers. However, the lessons learned were perhaps short-lived.

A young man's experience

When Alan Counsell left school in Blackburn in the 1950s he despaired of getting a job. As a young man with cerebral palsy, few employers were prepared to give him a chance. So his mother approached a manager she knew at Audley Hall Mill who took Alan on.

Years later, in 1982, Counsell wrote about his time in the mill in his autobiography, *So Clear In My Mind*. As well as describing the tasks he did, he emphasised the importance of being part of a workforce, having responsibilities and building relationships with colleagues:

The first year has passed all too quickly and I am not prepared yet to cope with the responsibility of being assigned weavers to supervise. Even so, I am given twelve weavers and forty-eight looms, which is half of a full assignment, until I gain more experience.

I don't know why so many of the weavers are saying how happy they are to be on my list ... I have a responsibility to uphold the high standards of the mill and I cannot risk losing professional respect just to be popular with weavers. I intend to be fair and just, but my weavers will soon learn that any defects in their work will be as critically treated by me as by the other cut-lookers.

Because he wrote about it, we know that Counsell took pride in his work, that he worked well with others, made friends and was valued at work. He attended college with other young workers to develop his skills and was moved into different roles to find which suited him best. From his account, we can presume that there must have been other disabled workers like Counsell, as well as deaf workers, within the cotton workforce of the second half of the 20th century. As the industry began to decline in Lancashire and the rest of the country, disabled

mill workers might not have written about their experiences, but they just got on with the business of living and working.

Conclusion

This article reveals some hidden histories of disabled and deaf workers in Lancashire's cotton mills, which broaden and enrich our understanding of the past. It also encourages us to think about history in a different way, to ask new questions; in this case, to put disabled people at the centre of the industrialisation and manufacturing processes, rather than pushing them to the margins.

These are just a few stories - there are bound to be more. They perhaps challenge some widely-held notions of disabled people. They are important because they show that disabled people were, and are, part of the world. Not dependent, not tragic, not inspirational, but reliable colleagues, friends and family members with valuable contributions to make.

Can you help?

Do you have a story to share about disabled mill workers?

Were you a disabled worker yourself? Perhaps you've heard tales from family members or friends about mee-mawing, about carrying on working following deafness or other industrial injury, or about being accepted as a disabled worker alongside workmates in the mill. Maybe you're a member of a local history group that has collected oral histories, studied local papers or gathered other information that can throw more light onto the lives of disabled cotton workers in Lancashire. If so, we'd love to hear from you!

Contact details

Email: gill.crawshaw@gmail.com

Website: <https://shoddyexhibition.wordpress.com/>

Further reading and resources

Lancashire Archives: <https://www.lancashire.gov.uk/libraries-and-archives/archives-and-record-office/>

This is a great place to find some of the reports and documents mentioned, such as Factories Inquiry Committee reports, and the King's National Roll.

Further information about Lancashire's cotton industry, including health and safety, plus records relating to the Amalgamated Weavers Association Convalescent Home at Poulton-le-Fylde, for example, can also be found in the Archives.

Queen Street Mill Textile Museum is open from the end of March till November. Find out more at

<https://www.lancashire.gov.uk/leisure-and-culture/museums/queen-street-mill-textile-museum/>

Martin Atherton's book, *Living, Learning and Working: Deaf Life in Lancashire in 1901*, is available as an ebook for £5. Contact him for details: martinatherton26@gmail.com

Alan Counsell's autobiography, *So Clear in My Mind*, can be found in just a couple of local libraries, Burnley Library and Blackburn Reference Library. Otherwise, it's available for reference, ordering in advance, from Manchester Central Library.

Gill Crawshaw has also written a couple of blog posts about her research into disabled mill workers in Yorkshire:

<https://secretlibraryleeds.net/2020/11/20/hard-workers-not-burdens-disabled-and-deaf-mill-workers-in-yorkshire/>

<https://museumsandgalleries.leeds.gov.uk/featured/hidden-histories-of-disabled-workers/>