HANDLOOM WEAVERS IN MID NINETEENTH CENTURY NORWICH

At the end of the eighteenth century, Norwich had a flourishing textile industry, which produced a wide variety of fabrics and provided employment for thousands of weavers. However, by the late 1830s, it was experiencing severe economic difficulties, due primarily to competition from other parts of the country, like Yorkshire, which were able to produce similar fabrics more cheaply.[1]

This paper examines the position of Norwich handloom weavers in the mid nineteenth century. The first part of the paper examines the number and type of handloom weavers, the nature of the work, and the situation regarding employment, earnings and pauperism. The second part of the paper tells the stories of 3 of the handloom weavers who were inmates of Norwich Workhouse in 1851.

Number and Type of Handloom Weavers

In 1838, there was a census of Norwich weavers. This showed that there were 5,075 looms in Norwich, of which 4,054 were being employed at that time. Of the latter, the majority (3,398) were located in the houses of weavers, compared with 656 located in shops and factories. The table below shows the types of fabric that the weavers working at home were engaged in making.[2]

Table 1: Looms in the Houses of Weavers

Fabric	Men	Women	Boys	Girls	Apprentice Boys	Apprentice Girls	Total
Bandanas	86	65	2	5			158
Bombazines	735	335	7	4	1	1	1,083
Camlets	87	5					92
Camletees	6	13	1				20
Fillovers	89	2	1				92
Gauzes	25	281	6	28		1	341
Princettas	233	7	1				241
Silks	16	22					38
Silk shawls	70	80	3	5			158
Worsted shawls	21	1	3				25
Jacquards	1						1
Lustres	3						3
Challis, Yorkshire stuffs, mousseline –de-laine, fringes etc	491	572	49	33		1	1,146
Total	1,863	1,383	73	75	1	3	3,398

In 1849, the number of handloom weavers in Norwich was estimated to be 2,500, and the number of power-loom weavers to be 750.[3]

Nature of the Work

A glimpse of the work and life of handloom weavers is given in the following extracts from a report of 1850 of visits to Norwich handloom weavers. A fuller account is given in Appendix 2.

Female Barege Weaver, living in White Lion Court, St Paul's

"As usual the loom was in the upper room, which was used as a workroom, bedroom, and in winter, to save a second fire, as a sitting-room. A diminutive little woman – all Norwich weavers are so – was busily engaged at the loom, and during the intervals of putting the fresh bobbins on the shuttle, I obtained the following information from her:-
'I do the best kind of barege work. If I commence work at light, and keep on till eleven at night, without being called off to do anything else, I can weave eleven dozen in a week, and I should get 11s. 11d. for that – that is, 13d. a dozen. I pay a girl, who does the winding, 2s a week and her dinner; then 'beaming on,' candles, and other expenses would be about 10d.- so that would leave me 9s. 1d. for my week's work. I am rather a privileged person, and if there is any work to be got, I usually have the preference, but I am often obliged to 'play'… I suppose for the last twelve months I have played four at least. I am married and have four children; they are all at school. My husband sometimes works at the other loom.'"[4] [To 'play' = to be unemployed]

Male Paramatta Weaver, living in Dible's Hole, St Paul's

"I have only two rooms in this piggery – a place not fit to live in. My eldest child is eleven years old, my youngest was born yesterday. My wife is confined upstairs, in the room where the loom is. Three of my children, myself, my wife, and the young *babby* sleep together; the other two children sleep in a small crib by the side of us. I have been obliged to keep the loom at work although my wife is lying there. The noise of the loom has made her very poorly. I pay 17s. 6d. a quarter rent for the place. I am a paramatta weaver, and as the house I live in belongs to my master, I am pretty well employed, more so than the generality of the weavers. I generally work from six in the morning till ten at night in the summer, and in the winter from half-past six till nine o'clock, and when at work I can earn 10s. a week; but then the candles cost me 7½d., and when my wife is not able to do it, I have to pay, for winding the bobbins, 1¼d. a dozen. My average work is about eighteen or twenty dozen in a week. I generally lose two or three days in getting the work, and as much in putting it on the loom. I have been married twelve years, and have had eight children…some of my children are always ill, and when some are born others of them are dying. I have only five of the eight we have had."[5]

Employment and Earnings

There were two factors affecting the earnings of weavers, the rate of pay and the amount of employment.

Rates of pay were a major issue at this time with both employers and employees. The employers claimed that they could not compete with other areas of the country, like Yorkshire, where rates of pay were lower, and constantly tried to cut wages. In 1829, wage rates were cut by 20%, which was said to be compensating for the rise that had taken place during the war. Numerous other attempts were made to reduce wage rates and to employ village labour at lower rates, which were vigorously opposed by the Weavers' Union.[6] Nevertheless, in 1850, a report concluded that "during the last twenty years, the rate of wages has been gradually but constantly diminishing".[7]

The other issue was that of unemployment and intermittent employment. In 1839, it was estimated that weavers were unemployed for a third of the year, and some for more. This clearly affected earnings and the Parliamentary Report of 1840 concluded that the earnings of Norwich weavers were "very low".[8] In 1850, a report stated that "low wages and uncertain employment have reduced this class of operatives [handloom weavers] to the lowest possible state of wretchedness and misery".[9]

Pauperism

The number of paupers in Norwich, ie those in receipt of poor relief, increased during the 1840s. The numbers receiving relief outside the workhouse (outdoor relief) doubled between 1839 and 1849, from 1,634 to 3,389.[10] The number of poor was, of course, much larger than the number of paupers. In 1847, there were 35,596 people in Norwich who were judged too poor to pay poor rates.[11]

Not surprisingly, weavers formed a substantial proportion of the poor. In 1845, it was calculated that three quarters of the 2,000 to 2,500 people receiving outdoor relief in Norwich were weavers.[12]

The Workhouse

Nationally, the Poor Law Amendment Act of 1834 (New Poor Law) promoted a policy of 'the workhouse test', whereby those seeking relief were to be offered the workhouse rather than outdoor relief.

But Norwich had incorporation status and so did not have to comply with the dictates of the New Poor Law until 1863. Norwich Incorporation thus continued to allow outdoor relief. Indeed until a new workhouse was opened in 1859, the old workhouse only had accommodation for 380 people.[13] So it was only a minority of paupers who were relieved in the workhouse.

In 1851, there were 17 handloom weavers in the workhouse – 11 silk weavers, 3 worsted weavers, 1 cotton weaver, 1 horse hair weaver, and 1 unspecified . Of these, 7 were aged 60 or over, and 2 were unmarried mothers. The full list of handloom weavers is given in Appendix 1. The stories of 3 of the inmates are related below.

THE STORIES OF 3 HANDLOOM WEAVERS

The handloom weavers whose stories are related below were all inmates of Norwich Workhouse in 1851. In this they were unusual, for most paupers in Norwich at this time were relieved outside the workhouse. Nevertheless, their stories are instructive. The two women were both unmarried mothers with young babies and this almost certainly explains why they were in the workhouse. Thomas Denmark is more of a mystery.

Thomas Denmark (born c1803)

Thomas Henry Denmark was born c1803 in St Julius, Norwich. In 1841, he was employed as a weaver and living in Philadelphia, St Clement, Norwich, with Mary Denmark. As relationships are not specified in the 1841 census, it is not clear if Mary was his first wife or his sister.

By 1851, Thomas was an inmate of Norwich Workhouse, described as a silk handloom weaver. With him was his wife, Elizabeth. Given that most people were relieved outside the Workhouse in Norwich at this time, there is no obvious reason why Thomas was there, for he was not old or disabled, and clearly not an unmarried mother. But there he was, and there he stayed.

Thomas remained in the Workhouse until at least 1881, but he graduated to being a member of staff. In 1861, he was a cook, in 1871, a bread cutter, and in 1881, an assistant bread cutter. So perhaps Thomas stayed in the Workhouse because he knew which side his bread was buttered, for at least he had good access to food. Thomas' wife Elizabeth is also generally to be found in the Workhouse, but as an inmate, usually recorded as a charwoman.

Thomas died in Norwich, quarter ending September 1886, aged 83. Thomas' widow, Elizabeth, was still an inmate at the Workhouse in 1891, and, even though she was now aged 89, she was still described as a charwoman. She probably died in 1896.

Hannah Kerrison (born c1820)

Hannah Kerrison was born c1820 in Norwich. In 1851, she was a silk handloom weaver, living in Norwich Workhouse, unmarried with 3 children, Richard born c1841, Jane, born c1849, and baby Elizabeth, aged 1 month.

In 1855, Hannah married James Kemp, who was nearly 20 years older than her. In 1861, they were both silk weavers, living in St Lawrence Lane, Norwich, with 2 sons, Henry and Thomas Kemp, and Hannah's daughter, Jane Kerrison. So where were Hannah's other children, Elizabeth and Richard Kerrison?

Elizabeth Kerrison, like many babies born in the workhouse, as well as outside, did not survive. She died in 1852. Hannah's son Richard fared better. In 1861, he was a boarder

with a shoemaker in Norwich and was himself a shoemaker. It may be that the Norwich guardians arranged an apprenticeship for him, because they had a policy of apprenticing poor boys into trades, and the majority went into shoe-making.[14] In any case, it seems that the trade served him well, because he was still working as a shoemaker in Norwich in 1901.

In 1871, Hannah and James Kemp, were living in St Martin at Oak, Norwich, with sons Henry and Thomas. Hannah and James had adapted to mechanization, for they were both working as power loom worsted weavers. James died later that year, and Hannah died in 1880.

Harriet Spurgeon (born c1827)

Harriet Spurgeon was born c1827 in Catton, Norfolk. In 1841, she was 12 years old and living with her widowed mother Sophia, a weaver, and sister Caroline, aged 11, in Bishop Street, St Helen, Norwich. Both Harriet and her sister were recorded as servants. By 1851, Harriet was a silk handloom weaver and an inmate of Norwich Workhouse. She was unmarried, with a baby, Frederick, aged 1 month. Frederick died soon after.

In 1854, Harriet married Daniel Tidman, but by 1861, she was already a widow. She was then living in Butchers Yard, St James, Norwich, with 5 children, the eldest of whom were 5 year old twins, Daniel and Emma, and the youngest, Henry, aged 8 months. She was reported to be in receipt of "relief from Union".

By 1871, Harriet was once more a weaver, still living in Butcher's Yard, St James, Norwich, with her son Daniel, aged 15, a butcher, and daughter Caroline, aged 12, a machinist. Harriet's 15 year old daughter, Emma, was staying with Harriet's sister Caroline. However, there is no sign of the youngest, Henry, so he may have been the Henry Tidman who died in Norwich in 1861. An Emma Tidman, aged 15, also died in Norwich in 1871.

In 1875, Harriet married George Barker, and in 1881 they were living in Cowgate Street, St James, Norwich. Harriet was a silk weaver and husband George a coal porter. Harriet died in 1893, aged 65.

Harriet's mother, Sophia, continued working as a weaver, and Harriet's sister, Caroline, also worked as a weaver, though more intermittently. In 1851, Sophia and Caroline were living together in Bishopgate Street, St Helen, Norwich, both employed as weavers. By 1861, Caroline had married Henry Ayton, a carpenter. Sophia was living with them in Spitalfield, Thorpe, and working as a cotton weaver. In 1881, Caroline and Henry were living in Plumstead Road, Thorpe, with Caroline employed as a cotton weaver and Henry as a carpenter. Caroline died in 1891, aged 62.

APPENDIX 1: HANDLOOM WEAVERS IN NORWICH WORKHOUSE 1851

NAME	DATE & PLACE OF BIRTH	OCCUPATION	OTHER INFO
ARNOLD William	1797, Norwich	Hand Loom Weaver (Cotton)	Married
DENMARK Thomas	1803, Norwich	Hand Loom Weaver (Silk)	Married
DICKERSON Aaron	1789, Inhood, Norfolk	Hand Loom Weaver (Silk)	Married
GOODMAN John	1787, Norwich	Hand Loom Weaver (Worsted)	Widower
HOOK James	1786, Norwich	Hand Loom Weaver (Worstead)	Married
HOUGHTON Thomas	1802, Norwich	Hand Loom Weaver (Worsted)	Married – wife, dau, & baby in WH
JARVIS Elizabeth	1786, Norwich	Hand Loom Weaver (Silk)	Widow
KERRISON Hannah	1820, Norwich	Hand Loom Weaver (Silk)	Unmarried, with 3 children in WH
MARTIN Amy	1770, Norwich	Hand Loom Weaver (Silk)	Widow
MOSS Joseph	1833, Norwich	Horse Hair Weaver	Unmarried
PLUMMER James	1794, Norwich	Hand Loom Weaver (Silk)	Married
READ Harriet	1815, Norwich	Hand Loom Weaver (Silk)	Married
REEVE George	1793, Wacton, Norfolk	Hand Loom Weaver (Silk)	Married
RICHES Thomas	1787, Wood Dalling, Norfolk	Hand Loom Weaver (Silk)	Married – wife in WH
SPURGEON Harriet	1827, Catton, Norfolk	Hand Loom Weaver (Silk)	Unmarried with baby in WH
WOOLBRIGHT Elizabeth	1824, Norwich	Hand Loom Weaver	Unmarried
WRIGHT Thomas	1780, Norwich	Hand Loom Weaver (Silk)	Widower

APPENDIX 2: REPORT OF VISITS TO HANDLOOM WEAVERS, 1850
(Extracts from the Morning Chronicle, 29 Jan 1850, Letter XVII)

Female Barege Weaver, living in White Lion Court, St Paul's

"The first person that I visited was a weaver, residing in White Lion-court, St. Paul's, who was employed in weaving barege – a fabric of a light gauzy nature, used for ladies' dresses. The court in which he resided was approached from the main street by a low and narrow archway. There were twelve houses in it of two rooms each. There were no back premises to any of them; but in the front were small patches of ground, of about eight or ten feet in length, by about the same in breadth. A row of eight houses occupied one side of the court; the other was occupied by a stable and slaughter-house. At the bottom, or lower end of the court, were four houses, of the same description as the others, in the corner one of which dwelt the weaver above referred to. Immediately facing the entrance to the house, and joining the little fence, was the privy, used by the whole of the inhabitants of the court; by the side of it was an open bin, into which all the refuse matter was thrown, and into the bottom of which the soil from the adjoining privy drained. Some rain had fallen on the night previous to my visit, and the contents of this open cesspool, oozing through the walls, were streaming sluggishly down the path to the house. A part of this filthy fluid was absorbed by the ground, but some parts of it not unfrequently found their way into the house, the floor of which, as if to invite its entrance, was nearly a foot lower than the ground outside.

As usual the loom was in the upper room, which was used as a workroom, bedroom, and in winter, to save a second fire, as a sitting-room. A diminutive little woman – all Norwich weavers are so – was busily engaged at the loom, and during the intervals of putting the fresh bobbins on the shuttle, I obtained the following information from her:-
'I do the best kind of barege work. If I commence work at light, and keep on till eleven at night, without being called off to do anything else, I can weave eleven dozen in a week, and I should get 11s. 11d. for that – that is, 13d. a dozen. I pay a girl, who does the winding, 2s a week and her dinner; then 'beaming on,' candles, and other expenses would be about 10d.- so that would leave me 9s. 1d. for my week's work. I am rather a privileged person, and if there is any work to be got, I usually have the preference, but I am often obliged to 'play'… I suppose for the last twelve months I have played four at least. I am married and have four children; they are all at school. My husband sometimes works the other loom. When I do not have this girl to wind for me I can get it done for a penny a dozen.'

A person unacquainted with the process of winding could scarcely form an idea of the quantity of manual labour thus performed for a penny. The 'dozen' referred to is a dozen skeins, each containing 560 yards, or 6,720 in the dozen; and this quantity has to be transferred from the hank or skeins to small bobbins for the shuttle, by means of a small wheel, turned by the hand of the winder. A great loss of time constantly takes place in consequence of the threads of silk breaking, and of the constant change of bobbins required when full. At the winding it is physically impossible to earn more than from 2s. to 3s. per week. Of course, the great proportion of this kind of work is done by young

children or old persons; but that is not always the case. The person employed as winder in the above instance was a young woman of eighteen years of age, and she received 2s. a week and her dinner; but in addition to winding she was expected to assist in the household duties, in taking care of the children, and other matters, while the woman was at work."

Male Barege Weaver, living in Light Horseman Yard, Pockthorpe

"The next person I visited was a fancy barege weaver, residing in Light Horseman-yard, Pockthorpe. This place, like the former, was approached by a narrow covered passage, leading out of Pockthorpe into a square court with eight houses – some of two, and others of three rooms. The waste water and filth from these houses were conveyed along the surface by means of drain tiles, which had recently been laid down, but previously there had been no drains whatever, the whole of the refuse water either finding its way along the passage which it had worn for itself, or soaking into the ground. The place was disgustingly filthy, and the greatest care was required in stepping to avoid the filth which abounded the place. There, as in White Lion-court, the privy was common to the whole of the inhabitants, and in order to avoid repetition of a disgusting fact, I will state at once that in no one of the numerous courts and alleys which I visited was there to be found a house possessing an exclusive right to a convenience of this kind.

The house in which the fancy barege maker resided consisted of three rooms, one above another. It was an old and ruined place; the stairs (which lay open to the court) were fast decaying; and the flooring of the rooms creaked as you walked over them. The lowest room of the three was occupied by the eldest daughter of the weaver, 24 years of age, who was married. The second room was used as a day room for the family and a bed room at night for the husband and wife and two youngest children, one of whom was six months old. The upper room was occupied by the loom, and was used as a sleeping room by the remainder of the family, eight in number. The part nearest to the window was occupied by the loom; at the opposite side of the room were two stump bedsteads, side by side, and almost touching each other. Across the frames of these a few cords were stretched, and a coarse kind of sack filled with straw lay upon each. Upon neither of the beds was there any blanket. 'There is but one in the house,' said the poor man, 'and that we have down stairs.' One of the beds had an old coverlid, the other a dirty sheet and coverlid. In one corner of the room lay, rolled up, what was called the 'third bed' – a bag of straw without any bed-clothes whatever.

'My eldest son is nineteen,' said the weaver, in answer to my question. 'my eldest daughter, eighteen years old, and the six other children, sleep together in this room. My wife and me sleep down stairs with two of the children; there is an old feather bed there, but it's a very old one – it was given me when I was married. Since last Christmas I have earned – take one week with another – p'rhaps 8s. I can earn, some weeks, if the children do the winding, p'rhaps 14s. a week. I have nothing in pawn; indeed, I've got nothing that they'll take in. I have not drunk a drop of beer since the 28th of last February. I am a teetotaller. Lor, sir, the work is so irregular; all this week I sharn't earn sixpence. They keep me dragging up to the warehouse day after day, and they always say, "There's no

shoot to-day, come to-morrow;" and so it goes on. It would take us 7s. or 8s. a week for bread, if we could have all we could eat; but it's never less than 6s., and when we can't pay for it we're obliged to go on tick for it at the 'fogging shops'; that's where they sell heads and plucks, and all them sort of things. I don't think we have to pay any more for bread in consequence of credit; some other things we do, I dare say; and often I think the flour is very short weight. I have to pay 1s. 9d. a week for rent.'

The whole appearance of this family and of their house and furniture was of the most wretched and deplorable character. The eldest boy was out of work – the daughter worked at the factory, and gave a portion of what she earned to her parents for her wretched food and lodging."

Male Paramatta Weaver, living in Dible's Hole, St Paul's

"The next case was that of a paramatta weaver, who resided in Dible's-hole, a place situated close to the city walls, in the parish of St. Paul. The access to this Dible's-hole was by means of a narrow passage, flanked on one side by the ruins of the old city wall, and upon the other by some wretched-looking houses. Upon descending four or five steps on the left hand, I found four cottages, with a small piece of ground in the front of each, of a few feet in extent, with here and there a sickly looking dahlia, or a consumptive looking chrysanthemum, struggling against premature decay. Proceeding as directed, I entered one of these cottages. I found there a sallow-looking individual, thirty-six years of age, with a family of five children. Having informed him of the object of my visit, he gave the following account of himself and his earnings:-

'I have only two rooms in this piggery – a place not fit to live in. My eldest child is eleven years old, my youngest was born yesterday. My wife is confined upstairs, in the room where the loom is. Three of my children, myself, my wife, and the young *babby* sleep together; the other two children sleep in a small crib by the side of us. I have been obliged to keep the loom at work although my wife is lying there. The noise of the loom has made her very poorly. I pay 17s. 6d. a quarter rent for the place. I am a paramatta weaver, and as the house I live in belongs to my master, I am pretty well employed, more so than the generality of the weavers. I generally work from six in the morning till ten at night in the summer, and in the winter from half-past six till nine o'clock, and when at work I can earn 10s. a week; but then the candles cost me 7½d., and when my wife is not able to do it, I have to pay, for winding the bobbins, 1¼d. a dozen. My average work is about eighteen or twenty dozen in a week. I generally lose two or three days in getting the work, and as much in putting it on the loom.

I have been married twelve years, and have had eight children. My wife has got but this one gown. [An old ragged washed-out gown was here produced by an old woman, who attended to act as nurse during the confinement.] She has none but that one to put on, when she gets up. Three of my children go to school, and I pay 6d. a week for them. I am determined to bring up the children as well as I can – I would rather stint myself of food to give them a little education. It is a mystery to me however we got through it. I have been in this wretched way for years, till I am quite sick of it.

I went a day or two since to Mr. – , and his wife gave me some soup on account of my wife being so poorly, and I took a bit of the meat out of it, and, so help me God, that is the first bit of meat I have tasted for months. My children never see a bit of meat, except what they may see at the butchers' shops as they go to school. Mrs. – was kind enough to lend me a bag of linen for my wife, or I don't know whatever we should have done. There are a many of the weavers worse off than myself, because when there is any work to be got I always get the preference. I have always been suffering ever since I was married, and I am never without some trouble; some of my children are always ill, and when some are born others of them are dying. I have only five out of the eight we have had. I have got nothing at the pawnshop, and before I would go to the pawnshop I would lay down and be trampled on. What little I have got I mean to keep as long as I can. For the last five or six years I have not been out of my house except to go for work. I cannot go to church if I would, for I've got no clothes fit to go in. After paying for the candles, the winding of the bobbins, and the 'beaming-on,' I don't think I make more than 8s. a week. Very often when I go out of doors the fresh air seem to be too much for me, and I often stagger and roll about as if I was drunk.'

The account of this man's earnings was fully corroborated by a reference to the pay-book of the person by whom he was employed. The furniture and everything about the house was more cleanly and comfortable than might have been expected under the circumstances in which the family were placed."

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[1] House of Commons Parliamentary Papers Online, *Handloom Weavers…Report by J Mitchell Esq LLD on the east of England…Part II*, 1840 (43-I), p301-303
[2] Ibid, p309
[3] *Morning Chronicle*, 12 Dec 1849 (Letter XVI)
[4] *Morning Chronicle*, 29 Jan 1850 (Letter XVII)
[5] Ibid
[6] House of Commons Parliamentary Papers Online, 1840, op cit, p336-341
[7] *Morning Chronicle*, 29 Jan 1850 (Letter XVII)
[8] House of Commons Parliamentary Papers Online, 1840, op cit, p311
[9] *Morning Chronicle*, 29 Jan 1850 (Letter XVII)
[10] Digby, Anne, *Pauper Palaces*, 1978, p131-2
[11] Ibid, p133
[12] *Norfolk Chronicle*, 25 Jan 1845.
[13] Digby, Anne, *Pauper Palaces*, 1978, p128
[14] Ibid, p191