

A Local History of Textiles (Wool, Silk & Cotton) in Calderdale and Halifax

Calderdale has a rich and expansive history. And that history is exemplified in its cultural heritage surrounding its textile industry. For centuries, the textiles industry was a key factor in Calderdale and Yorkshire's wider development, becoming a main source of income, employment and identity.



Wool, silk and cotton made up the primary textile fibres used in the creation of products for a wide range of purposes. Clothing, bedding and carpets were just a few examples of what Calderdale historically produced internally, with the industry developing through the 1600s and 1700s and thriving by the time of the 1900s. Eventually hundreds of mills were in place across Calderdale, spinning, dyeing, knitting, stitching and weaving the fibres with practised excellence. Weaving and textiles in the local area attracted many people to the area, for the purpose of work or purchase. Expanding Calderdale's local culture and enriching it with an influx of different people.

From the 1670s until around the 1770s the woollen textile industries of the now Calderdale area grew in demand at a rapid pace. The textiles and products made in these towns were widely sought after for their affordability, seen as clothing for the everyday person who could not go to the fine and expensive cloths made in other areas in the West of England or in East Anglia. The price and quality helped the area develop and grow rapidly, with the industry achieving prominence internationally with Brighouse becoming the main centre for silk spinning in the whole of England, and with Halifax becoming home to some of the leading manufacturers of knitting yarn in the world at that time. This growth and incredible expansion of output bolstered the region into a position of commercial prominence. Eventually, the manufacturing potential of Calderdale grew beyond the capability of West England or East Anglia, and Yorkshire became the centre for the production of woollen cloth of all types, with Calderdale at its heart.

The rapid economic and cultural change and expansion came early to the Calderdale area through its prominent textile industry. The traditional local structure of cloth making encouraged the development of a distinctive mixture of communities, cultures and customs. This created a distinct and unique character for the region, where its textile production became the soul for a diverse and prosperous community. Culturally distinct thanks to its textile production and manufacturing offering abundance and success to the many different people that made up the area. This can be seen in historical evidence such as *“Tour Thro’ the whole Island of Great Britain”*, an account of the travels of English author and journalist Daniel Defoe (1660-1731). In this account published in 1724, Defoe writes “...and so nearer we came to Halifax we found the houses thicker and the villages greater...if we knocked at the door of any of the master manufacturers we presently saw a house full of lusty fellows, some at the dye vat, some dressing the cloth, some in the loom.” Accounts such as this and, “These people are full of business, not a beggar not an idle person to be seen. This business is the clothing trade.”, provide an understanding that Calderdale’s textile production and clothing industry founded and developed an age of prosperity for the people of the region.



Although Calderdale and the West Riding of Yorkshire were renowned for wool textiles especially, silk was a prominent textile and industry in the area too. With many silk mills found in the area dating back to the 20th and 19th centuries in places like Hebden Bridge, Huddersfield and Brighouse. Brighouse especially was recognized and described as, “a thriving industrial borough, with some 21,000 inhabitants, has in the course of the past 70 years been made the chief centre of the English silk-spinning industry.”, by Sir Frank Warner (1862-1930), in his work *‘The Silk Industry of the United Kingdom: Its Origin and Development.’* published in 1921. The silk trade in the UK was at its busiest in the late 19th century, with Manningham Mills based in Bradford being the largest silk mill in Yorkshire. Robert Newton and James Burrow also helped introduce silk-spinning as an industry to the area in 1843 when they moved to Brighouse and established their business at the Little John Mill, leading to the silk-spinning industry becoming one of the largest sources of employment in

Brighouse. Some silk mills predated this in the Brighouse area, but Newton and Burrow's business seemed to bring with it a focus on silk-spinning and a prosperity for its industry during this time. By 1870, there were at least 7 different silk businesses in the town, and at any one time approximately 15 silk mills, including Victoria Mill, Little John Mill, Noble's Mill, Clifton Bridge Mill and Woodvale Silk Mill. Silk-spinning became a great source of income in these areas. Due to its history of importation, it was considered a more exotic or distinguished material than wool to some. Like the wider textiles industry in the area, it benefited from various improvements made in the Calderdale and Yorkshire area industrially. The Rochdale Canal, opened in 1798, vastly improved transportation to and from certain areas and ensured the swifter progress of industry. In 1841, the Lancashire and Yorkshire Railway opened its line through the Calder Valley, further improving transport links. The production of artificial silk was introduced to Halifax around 1928, and possibly earlier in other areas where the silk industry and silk mills were more prominent. Despite achieving the zenith of its industrial and financial success during 1880 into the early 1900s, there was a major decline and consequent unemployment beginning at the start of the 20th century and persisting throughout, mirroring the gradual decline of the textiles boom in the area during the mid-20th century and later.

This industry and time of economic and social prosperity was upheld by a diverse range of people sharing unity within a common industry built upon shared social values and an ethic that benefitted all, producer and purchaser alike. Historically, within Halifax parish the term 'clothier' was applied to all who made cloth for sale at the local market. Whether only a single or several pieces were made a week, Calderdale clothiers were an egalitarian collection of local society, dominated by a sort of middle and working class and strengthened by a commitment to work and cooperation. Regardless of output, all clothiers assumed a pivotal role in the work, occupying a position that ranged from labourer to journeyman to merchant. And although many employed others and could enjoy the status of producer, clothiers even at the highest level often laboured alongside their artisans and were regarded as fellow workers. Especially by the 1700s, these work customs reinforced shared social values, and kept animosity to a minimum and cooperation and efficiency to a maximum.

During these times, cloth appears to have been woven by handloom weavers from hand-spun-yarn in their own cottages. It was then taken to a water-powered fulling mill, usually a converted corn mill, where the cloth would be pounded, scoured and textured by heavy wooden stocks. It was then hung outdoors on tenter frames to dry. Various geographical factors help explain the emergence of Halifax as a prominent centre for the dyeing, finishing and marketing of woollen cloth during the later medieval period. The poorer quality of the topsoil, as well as Calderdale's infamous cold and wet climate made for an unfavourable condition when it came to farming. This stimulated the development and importance of textiles as an accompanying industry and economic activity to subsistence agriculture. The evolution of a distinctive dual economy of both farming and textiles in the remote Pennine valley was assisted by another geographical feature. An abundance of swift-flowing moorland streams, which provided a plentiful supply of soft water for the dyeing and finishing of woollen cloth. The valley's agricultural efforts would then further supply the textiles industry, making for a harmonious dual economy that contributed to the area's flourishing. It is safe to say Halifax's economic growth was founded on textiles. A medieval grave cover in the south porch of Halifax Minster is dated from c1150. It depicts a pair of croppers' shears alongside an elongated calvary cross, which provides the earliest piece of surviving evidence of the textile industry in the parish of Halifax.

The rapid increase in the production of woollen cloth during the 18th century was maintained by a growing population. A growth that continued and was sustained by the sheer success of the industry through to the 19th century and the industrial revolution. Parish registers tell us that many skilled workers relied for their livelihood on employment in the textile trades and markets making pieces for clothiers.

"Among the manufacturers houses are likewise scattered an infinite number of cottages where dwell the workmen which are employed. The women and children of which are always busy carding and spinning, so that no hands being unemployed all can gain their bread, even the youngest to the most ancient. Hardly anything above four years old but its hands are sufficient to itself." Daniel Defoe 1724, again from his account of travels. Defoe further comments on his observations of how the textile industry evidently developed Halifax especially into a bustling social environment for cultural and commercial gatherings.

"As for the town of Halifax itself, there is nothing extraordinary except on market day, and then indeed it is a prodigious thing by reason of the multitude of people who throng thither, as well to sell their manufactures as to buy provisions; and so great is the confluences of people hither, that except Leeds and Wakefield, nothing in all the north of England can come near it". Daniel Defoe - *"Tour Thro' the whole Island of Great Britain"*, 1724

Most weavers and artisans regarded taking in work put out by clothiers as an opportunity to enjoy regular employment with relatively high wages. This style of production influenced values and customs. A mutually accepted work culture reinforced an attitude that working for a wage did not induce a sense of dependency upon others. Craft workers considered themselves independent regardless of their wage labour status. Their ability to control the daily pace of work within their own homes placed the control of production truly in the hands of the worker. Weavers even sometimes 'clubbed' their resources together to build their homes and workshops for greater production and efficiency, as well as a sense of collaboration.



The early industrial development of Halifax was concentrated along the Hebble Brook, which provided hydropower for the Dean Clough, Old Lane and Bowling Dyke Mills. This was where the large and impactful Crossley and Akroyd groups developed as major centres of carpet and worsted manufacturing in the 19th century. In 1802, John Crossley, leased the premises at Dean Clough and began setting up his own business when the lease expired in 1822. He was assisted by his wife, Martha, who awoke regularly before dawn to supervise the stitching of the carpets. Three of their sons, John, Joseph and Francis, continued their father's business after his death in 1837, when the firm had around 300 employees, making it the fourth largest in the country. By 1871, they had increased their workforce to 5,000, maintaining this level of work until 1914, when Crossley's was the largest carpet-manufacturing firm in the world.

Dean Clough, the group of large factory buildings built in the 1840s -1860s for Crossley's Carpets, remain a cultural and social presence in Halifax. At its prime,

Dean Clough became one of the world's largest carpet factories (half a mile long with 1,250,000 square feet of floorspace) at the time Crossley's was the largest carpet-manufacturer globally. John Crossley, with his brother, Thomas, and another business partner, James Travis, first leased Dean Clough Mills in 1802. When this lease expired after twenty years, John Crossley took on a new lease in his own name. After his death in 1839, at which time around three hundred people were employed, his three sons continued the business as 'John Crossley & Sons'. They formed a joint stock company in 1864, becoming one of the first limited liability companies in Britain. It was this company that built the large mills on the site between 1841 and 1869, together with large sheds which have now been demolished. Around 1855 the alphabetical naming system was introduced for the mills. There were additional premises elsewhere in Halifax, employing roughly 5000 people by 1900. During the two world wars, production was changed from carpets to military supplies. This included webbing, blankets and khaki yarn for military uniforms. When Chairman Patrick Crossley retired in 1970, the company moved its headquarters to Kidderminster, and it was later decided in 1982 to close the Dean Clough site. After years of declining mill production, it closed in 1983, when it was bought by a consortium headed by Sir Ernest Hall which developed the site for various commercial and cultural uses. As managing director, his son Jeremy Hall, has gradually refurbished the buildings for office and cultural uses by many different companies, and it is now seen as a leading example of successful urban regeneration and the legacy of the mills are well remembered.

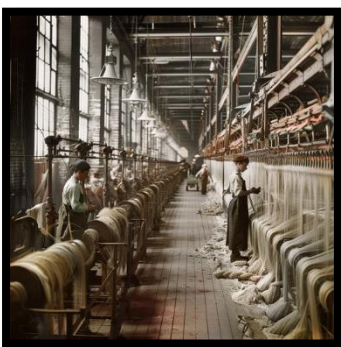


Another prominent name in Halifax's historical textile industry is Elsie Whitely, the namesake for the Elsie Whiteley centre found on Hopwood Lane. Whitely was well known in West Yorkshire and Calderdale as Halifax's pioneering fashion designer and textile entrepreneur of the 20th century. Born in 1903, she started work at the age of 12 as a machinist at a local mill while studying at school. In 1929 she started her own dressmaking business from her very own sitting room at home, becoming so successful that she was soon running a busy factory. Her first shop opened on Athol Mount in 1930, and she would then later open another shop on Keighley Road in Ovenden. With Halifax being her hometown and at the forefront of machine

engineering and amid its thriving weaving and clothing industry, Elise Whiteley launched her own eponymous label from the location. The label specialized in stylish ladies' blouses and became so popular that Whitely was producing from over six mills across Calderdale during its peak and selling to thousands of retailers across the UK. It had its own premises on London's famous Regent Street, but also retailed from major department stores such as John Lewis, Fenwick and Selfridges.

Whitely's own hands-on training as a machinist made her passionate about her work and clothes design, and she saw great success in the still flourishing textile industry of Halifax at the time both as a weaver, designer and businesswoman. Thriving on the opportunity created by the booming textiles industry of her home area. In 1959 her two sons began helping her to manage her growing business and helped Whitely keep up with the ever-changing labour markets and fashion trends. Whitely herself never retired and was still altering garments from her home until her death in 1972.

John Horsfall & Sons Ltd is another company born from the boom of Calderdale's textile prominence in 18th and 19th centuries. Still operating and producing now out of Huddersfield, the company's eponymous founder, John Horsfall, built the company around the Halifax area. Born in 1823, John came of age at the beginning of the Victorian era and at the height of the industrial revolution in Britain. He started the company that now holds his name having had no prior connection to textile manufacturing. Horsfall, like many other classic Victorian entrepreneurs, was drawn to the bountiful success of the textile industry, in his case within the Calderdale area.



During the mid-19th century, the growth of the steam powered textile mill had spread rapidly in Yorkshire and Lancashire. The invention of automated looms and spinning machinery earlier in the century and the arrival of a new railway to the Calder Valley in the 1840's changed the structure of business and allowed for an even easier workflow and distribution. By the 1860's the industrialised textile industry in Halifax was at its impressive and bountiful peak, attracting businessmen like Horsfall from diverse walks of life. Seizing the opportunity to be part of a modern and rapidly growing industry, Horsfall made a life changing career jump in 1863. He formed a partnership with his brother-in-law, James Clay, already a

woollen manufacturer. Trading initially as Clay & Horsfall from a textile mill in Luddenden Foot, the company that would later become known as 'John Horsfall' and later John Horsfall & Sons began.

Stealing cloth was a common offence. Thieves stealing cloth from tenter frames in the bailiwick (A bailiwick is the area of jurisdiction of a bailiff, once applied to territories in which a privately appointed bailiff exercised the sheriff's functions under a royal or imperial writ) of Sowerbyshire were subject to summary trial and execution on the famous Halifax Gibbet, a prototype guillotine, under the infangthief (in Anglo-Saxon law, infangthief refers to the right of the lord of a manor to try and to punish a thief caught within the limits of his demesne, or land) jurisdiction of the lords of the manor of Wakefield. From 1286 to 1650, an estimated 63 felons were beheaded in Halifax, prompting the apocryphal beggars' litany: 'From Hull, Hell and Halifax, good Lord deliver us'. In June 1839, the remains of the crumbling stone platform on which the four and a half metre high wooden gibbet stood was unearthed by workers. Close to the site where the decapitated remains of the gibbet's last two victims had been discovered. The original blade from the Halifax Gibbet has been preserved at the Bankfield Museum.

Attempting to counter theft was one of the contributing reasons that resulted in Halifax's Piece Hall building being constructed. The Piece Hall was built as a cloth hall for handloom weavers to sell the woollen cloth "pieces" they had produced. The hall opened on 1 January 1779, with 315 separate rooms arranged around a central open courtyard. An 1831 description of the Piece Hall says:

"The Piece Hall was erected by the manufacturers and is a large quadrangular building of freestone occupying an area of ten thousand square yards with a rustic basement storey and two upper storeys fronted with two interior colonnades which are spacious walks leading to arched rooms where goods in an unfinished state were deposited and exhibited for sale to the merchants every Saturday from ten to twelve o'clock. This structure which was completed at an expense of £12,000 and opened on 1 January 1779 unites elegance, convenience



and security. It contains three hundred and fifteen separate rooms and is proof against fire.” -Samuel Lewis, *“A Topographical Dictionary of England”*

The earliest known reference to the known Piece Hall was a handbill dated 19 March 1774, although this no longer survives. The hall was built for “the purpose of depositing and exposing to sale the worsted and woollen goods manufactured in this town and neighbourhood”. It was believed that bringing merchants and buyers together in one place would create a more competitive and efficient market and discourage fraudsters, as well as make theft in a public space much more difficult. Initially, two sites were proposed, one at Talbot Croft and the other at Cross Field (which was used in 1948 for the construction of a bus station). After consideration, Talbot Croft was chosen and was purchased in September 1774. The Piece Hall remains open and accessible for commercial use and visit in Halifax, serving as a tourist attraction with independent shops and a courtyard space for gigs and shows. It is the only remaining Georgian-style cloth hall in the UK, and possibly the world. The sole architectural survivor of the great 18th century northern cloth halls, a class and style of building embodying the importance of the trade in hand-woven textiles to the pre-industrial economy of West Yorkshire, dating from at least the Middle Ages through to 19th century.

Shibden Hall is perhaps the most well-known of the famed Halifax houses. The building has been extensively modified from its original design by generations of residents, although its Tudor half-timbered frontage remains its most recognisable feature. The hall dates to around 1420 when it was recorded as being inhabited by local wool merchant, William Otes, already connecting the hall to roots of the textile industry in Calderdale. For more than 300 years, from 1619 to 1926, the Shibden estate was in the ownership of the Lister family. They were wealthy mill owners and cloth merchants, with its most famous and notable resident being Anne Lister who inherited the hall from a relative. Born in 1791, Anne Lister became the sole owner of the hall after the death of her aunt. She commissioned York architect John Harper and landscape gardener Samuel Gray in 1830 to make extensive improvements to the house and grounds. A gothic-style tower was added to the building for use as a library and the major features of the park were created, among these being terraced gardens, rock gardens, cascades and a boating lake. Anne Lister died in 1840, and the estate passed to her partner, Ann Walker. When Walker died in 1854, possession

then returned to the Lister family. When John Lister experienced financial difficulties, Arthur McCrea took over the mortgages and subsequently donated the hall to Halifax Corporation. In 1926, the estate became a public park and in 1935 the hall was opened by the Corporation as a museum.

Social mobility was a notable feature of Calderdale's textile communities at this time. Working for a wage within the domestic system provided both economic stability and security for credit which was easily extended to industrious young workers judged to be sober and of good character. Hard work and credit enabled some weavers to establish themselves as clothiers and manufacture on their own account, no longer just labourers. In Josiah Tucker's 'Instructions for Travellers', published around 1757, the Welsh economist and political writer includes note of the social mobility between labourer and clothier.

"...their journeymen being so little removed from the Degree and Condition of their Masters, are as likely to set up for themselves by their industry and frugality of a few years. Thus it is that the working people are generally moral, sober and industrious and the Goods are well made and exceedingly cheap". Josiah Tucker – *"Instructions for Travellers"* 1757

Tucker was concerned in his works with free trade and included discussions in 'Instructions for Travellers' of moral and practical aspects of travel and economics.

The growing market for cloth created opportunities for local men, and women too closer to the 19th and 20th centuries as times changed, to enter and work in business as manufacturers and leaders of their own enterprise, not just as labourers and weavers. Such was the success of the textiles industry in Calderdale and Halifax, that busy merchants from Leeds, London and Holland who could not regularly attend Halifax market had to hire the services of reliable men to order and buy cloth on their behalf.

A. J. Hirst

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