

# Reports of the Inspectors of Factories to Her Majesty's Principal Secretary of State for the Home Department.

REPORT OF ROBERT BAKER, Esq., Inspector of Factories, for the Nine Months ended the 31st of January, 1865.

(Continued from p. 795.)

## FUSTIAN CUTTERS.

On the 19th of August I visited Warrington, to inspect some of the fustian cutting shops there, and to introduce the law to the workers, in fact. They form a considerable body as a trade, mostly consisting of women and girls, of from nine years old and upwards, and are located in and about Warrington in Lancashire, Lymm in Cheshire, Cadishead, Irlam, and Hollings Green, with here and there a few in the more southerly parts of Cheshire.

The total number of such works in my district is 173, and the number of persons employed about 420 males and 1,060 females, of which latter 200 are children.

A more singular trade, as a trade, whether with respect to the neglected state of the workers both in shop accommodation, habits, and intelligence, I have seldom witnessed.

The fustian cutter is a person who not only makes the cotton fustian with which we are so familiar by name, but velvets also, both of cotton and silk. The operation consists in raising a pile or nap upon cotton or silk cloth, by dividing with an exceedingly finely-pointed and sharp instrument the fibres of the thread of which it is composed, and is one which requires so much aptness and delicacy of touch in the performance, that though many thousands of pounds have been wasted upon experiments, as yet it has not been possible to supersede the present mode of cutting, by machinery.

A piece of cotton cloth, which is very solid and thick, varying in length from 50 yards to 150, the threads of which contain a large amount of twist, and which has been woven hard and stiffened, is brought by the master cutter from Manchester or elsewhere, in exchange probably for one finished and returned. This, is then placed on a board about three yards in length and a yard in width, and is opened out the whole length of the board and then "limed," i. e., it is brushed over with a sweeping brush, dipped in lime in thin solution, and damped all over, in order to "harden the fibres, and make it cut easier;" and it is also soaped at one end to assist the exit of the knife without marking the piece. The cutter then takes in her hand an iron rod, of about two feet in length, having a handle at one end like that which is placed on the tool of a line engraver, for the purpose of steadying the knife during the cut, and at the other end, one of the most delicately tempered blades in the world, which is sharpened on one side for about two inches, by being held on a grindstone turned in water, lest the temper of the steel should be affected by the friction. This knife is then passed through a hollow guard, having a slit in its upper side, through which the blade of the knife just appears when it is pressed home, the guard also having a point, as fine as an ordinary needle, and is then ready for use. The cutter then, taking her stand by the side of the bench or table, introduces the delicate point of the guard under the fibres of the cloth at the end of the board nearest to her right hand, pushes up the guard till the knife reaches the fibres, and then delicately but quickly runs it through the whole three yards of cloth, severing the fibres instantly. This process is repeated on every row of fibres, which amount to about 900, across the cloth, giving therefore 900 cuts to every length, as it is called. With every length the knife requires regrinding, an operation which is not always performed by the cutter, but by the head of the shop, or by a person appointed for that purpose. It is this peculiar delicacy of touch, which shows the cutter when she is cutting wrongly; when she has either missed a thread or is taking two; an accident which would

spoil her work, and occasion a severe deduction from her wages.

A master or a mistress cutter may have a shop from home, or he may have it in his own house. He may employ a number of girls or women, or only the members of his own family; he may be in good circumstances, and so command an extensive trade, or he may be a pauper half the year, receiving parish pay and breaking stones at the parish cost, and a **fustian** cutter the other half. Of this example, I saw several instances. He may be a master, to all intents and purposes possessing fairly the respect and obedience of his workpeople, or he may be one who fuddles his brain at the public house half the week, utterly reckless how his work goes on, on an equality with his hands, and entirely at their mercy whether they will work or not. There are all grades of cutters, and therefore all grades of workers, and altogether, they are, perhaps, as ignorant a class of operatives as can be found in any district in the kingdom. In these shops, as they are called, there may be two or even fifty frames, one person working at each; or the shops may be in flats, one above another. They vary very much in height, in dirt, in the number of broken squares in the windows, in tumble-down ceilings, in dangerous staircases and floors, in an absence of whitewash and paint, and in outside abominations. In some, though in a very few, the visitor passes up a staircase through the living rooms; along the corner of one of the sleeping rooms, redolent of the aggregate breathings of five or six persons, whence a generation has just risen from the stench of their pestilential mode of life, of curtainless beds, and without any apparent separation of the sexes, into another room the whole length of the house, where there are three or four cutting boards, at which the children of the family or the hired cutters, work from day to day.

The hours of work on a Monday are equally various. For even the most careful employers, very few of the hands work on a Monday. With the fustian cutter, as with the potter, Monday is the patron saint, and is most religiously worshipped, and not only so, but the incense which he leaves behind him is equally worshipped till nothing remains. Tuesday indeed, does not always see the cutters at work, or if so, only for half the day; and it is often Wednesday before the business of the week really begins. Even then, it is not continued all the day, for "they must have a stroll in the market-place to see what is going on." Thus Thursday and Friday become what are called "double days," in which all the time previously lost is attempted to be regained by working night and day. They come early, some of them as early as 5 o'clock, and work till 8, 9, and 10 o'clock at night, and now and then till 2 o'clock in the morning, and on Saturday, till 6 or 7 p.m., or later, until the aggregate week's work is accomplished. I questioned several of the young women as to the reason for this excessive idleness and industry, and was answered, "because it was the custom of the place," a custom which they declared themselves unable to break through, however unwilling they might be to continue it; but it was a custom that both masters and workers hoped to see an end put to by the new law. "If there was one thing more than another that they hoped for from the new law, it was, that work might in future be regular from day to day; and that on Saturday it might be discontinued after dinner."

One may fancy, but can scarcely realize the wretchedness which this condition of labour produces; the social irregularities, the grossly animal propensities which it incites and perpetuates. Without moral training, and apparently without religious feeling, these females are brought up from their earliest years in intimacy with associations which are most degrading; so much so, that one wonders to observe and compare the amenities of middle life, and the features which characterize the fustian cutter's existence; but how much more is that wonder excited, when we draw the comparison between them and the highest forms of civilization.

The Factory Act has been in operation for some time at Warrington, and for the size of the place, a good many persons are employed therein. It thus often happens, that where a parent has two daughters, one employed at the factory, and the other at fustian cutting, the advantages of the Factory Act, and the disadvantages of labour unregulated by law, are prominently exhibited. The factory worker rises at half-past 5, has her meals at regular intervals, and ends her ordinary day's work at 6 P.M., and on Saturdays at 2. The fustian cutter works when she likes, snatches a meal when she can, goes to bed by 12 P.M., and is, perhaps, the slave of a drunken mother, and has to attend to house work in her mother's absence, when she ought to be earning her own wages. These disjointed meal times in a poor man's house, and irregular hours of work, render the maintenance of a family doubly and trebly expensive, and afford none of that comfort which they might otherwise enjoy.

With respect to wages for this kind of labour, a steady cutter will earn 5s. 9d. for a hundred yards, *i.e.*, on an average she will cut 12 lengths a day for four days, each piece amounting to 96 yards. The pieces, however, vary, and the receipts also. "They say," said a mistress cutter to me, "we get as much in proportion for long lengths as short ones, but I know we don't." Adult men and young persons of 16 earn about the same wages, children earn 1s. 9d.

On being asked, why with such wages, the men did not carry their labour to a different market, they only intimated, "that fustian cutting was the trade in which they were brought up, and they were neither fitted nor cared for any other."

I did not notice any cases of distortion from fustian cutting. Any similar irregular labour, with irregular and meagre meals, and especially where such gross habits prevail, would produce some deformities unquestionably. But under restricted hours, I do not see any reason to apprehend evil consequences from it. There is some reluctance on the part of a few cutters to comply with the law. I have had to prosecute two or three, and I have since heard, with the best effect.