

The Untold Story of Lymm's Victorian Fustian Cutters.

The first half of the nineteenth century was a time of massive change all over the country as a result of the Industrial Revolution and nowhere was this change more evident than in the North West of England and in particular around Manchester which saw huge growth in the cotton industry.

It was during this period that what had started as a cottage base occupation of handloom weavers consolidated into an industry of huge mills which dotted the landscape in and around Manchester and Salford. Working conditions in these mills were, by today's standards, atrocious but for many there was no alternative but to seek employment there.

The area had some of the best communication links in the country including the Duke of Bridgewater's Canal. Originally constructed to carry coal from Worsley to Manchester it opened as early as 1761 and an ambitious extension saw it extend to Runcorn with access to the sea in 1777. It was this extension that took it through the heart of Lymm and it was set to bring about huge changes to village life.

The growth of the cotton industry was enabled by the development of new machinery, availability of fuel and raw material as well as improved transport but the one commodity that was always in short supply was manpower (or womanpower or childpower come to that).

The cutting of fustian had always tended to be a cottage industry, carried on in homes or small workshops close to the place of manufacture of the cloth e.g. Manchester and Salford. It required a careful eye and a steady hand but apart from that the skill level was seen as low so it attracted very poor wages. As a result when the mills expanded in Manchester many left this work to go to the mills and manufacturers were forced to look further afield for a labour force.

Lymm was a particularly attractive prospect. The fact that it stood on the canal meant that the heavy cloth could be easily transported to and from Manchester. And importantly there was no competing industry in Lymm which was an almost exclusively agricultural settlement at the start of the nineteenth century.

Some sources report Lymm's fustian cutting industry as traceable back to the 1860s. In fact it goes back much further. The first reference we have found to fustian cutting in Lymm was one William Clayton who in 1804 was described as both a fustian cutter of Lymm and a gamekeeper to Sir Peter Warburton of Arley Hall. Perhaps he, or his wife, boosted their earnings by some home working.

There was certainly a workshop in operation in Lymm as early as the 1820s – run by one John Massey and the growth in numbers of the next twenty years was huge, with sixteen workshops established by 1850. Many of these workshops were in specially built three storey premises of terraced cottages where the top storey was one continuous room. This would have enabled the cloth to be laid on long tables which possibly made the cutting process more efficient but also meant that more workers could be managed and supervised in one space.

To understand more about the actual process of fustian cutting and read an on the spot description from 1865 [CLICK HERE](#).

The fustian cutting trade brought major social change to Lymm. In most other places the work was done predominantly by women and children but Lymm also employed a considerable number of men. When one man was asked by an inspector in the 1860s why so many took on the work when it was so poorly paid he answered that he had never known anything else.

That could well be true. It is quite likely that this man might have spent his infant years at his mother's feet in the workshop, pacified by laudanum or some other concoction of morphine and alcohol that was advertised by the local chemist as soothing baby's teething pains. (Such medication may well have led to the stunted growth described by other inspectors.) With little or no schooling before Lymm's first parochial school was opened in 1863 the boy could have been effectively working full-time by the age of 8 or 9. And full-time meant what it said. The day would typically start between 6 and 7 and go on for at least 12 hours, sometimes longer, working with eyes strained by candlelight if there was an order to be completed.

In some ways the pattern of life for the fustian cutter was very different from that of the mill worker. In the mills the machinery was everything and once it started up workers had to keep pace or face the consequences. The cutting trade on the other hand was totally manual . The process was too precise to be mechanised until early in the twentieth century. Everyone was on piece work with a deadline, sometimes real, sometimes concocted by the local fustian master in order to get more work out of people.

Over the years a pattern emerged to the week. Monday was the rest day. That sometimes spilled into Tuesday or even Wednesday if work was slack. Hours would then build up over the week as deadlines loomed. There are stories of cutters working through the night to get jobs finished on time. There was little sense of loyalty to an employer. Workers would switch from shop to shop on the promise of better pay or perhaps because of a row over punctuality or quality.

This chaotic approach to life spilt over into domestic arrangements. Normal family life disintegrated under the pressure of constant work. Food was snatched during short breaks and just once in the week a family would perhaps sit down together, typically on a Saturday evening, for one "blow-out" meal.. mainly vegetables but possibly a rabbit, some tripe or another cheap cut. There are many stories of "loose morals", illegitimate children and drunkenness but there are also tales of suicides possibly as people succumbed to the misery of their existence and saw no way out. There is a particularly sad account of a young 21 year old, Mary Ann Platt, a fustian cutter who in 1881 found herself in court charged with unlawfully throwing herself in the Bridgewater Canal in an attempt to "murder herself". Fortunately the magistrate took pity on her and she was acquitted though what became of her we don't know. Others completed the job and were dragged, dead, from the canal.

As early as 1846 Lymm sent representatives to a meeting of fustian masters in Manchester. James Clayton (son of William?) and Thomas Butterworth, both masters of their fustian workshops in Lymm were there to lobby for a fair price for work done so that wages could be maintained and also to try to move for parliament to ban children of under thirteen being employed in the trade.

This seems to have had little effect. Seventeen years later it was Thomas Gatley, himself just a working cutter, of Lymm who was speaking up about the workers' plight and encouraging the Government Commissioners to come to Lymm to see things for themselves.

Thomas, who could neither read nor write also undertook his own count of the number of workers in Lymm, no mean feat in itself as there were by then at least twenty-five workshops in the area. The number he came up with in total was 720 (out of a total population just over 4,000.) Over 100 of these were children aged thirteen or less and some were as young as 8 and 9. And even this may not be a true figure as some masters may have tried to hide the number of children employed while others may have been working at home on smaller tables.

The commissioners were horrified by what they found in Lymm. Some children were found to have been working for twenty-four hours at a time. A day of twelve hours or more was typical with no break other than a brief respite for toilet and a meal of bread and potatoes. They described the children as *“ badly clothed and badly fed; pale dirty little wretches with the painful look of premature old age.”* Many died young. Those that survived were often recognisable as from the cutting trade by their knock-knees and rounded shoulders.

A further visit in 1865 by a JP, Robert Baker similarly reported , rather unkindly, *“they are as ignorant a class of operatives as can be found anywhere in the country”*.

The whole trade was subject to the fluctuations in trade of the wider cotton industry with the result that from time to time the rest of the community had to step in just keep the cutters fed and from death's door. In 1862 there was a public subscription and food parcels made up for starving families. In 1887 the local gentry, the Dewhurst family stepped in and provide £200 for road-making to give temporary employment to some of the local men. This probably involved breaking up stones to lay on the rough tracks. In 1891 the Lymm workers attempted to organise themselves and combined with cutters from other areas to form a union. They went on strike. A spokesman for the Lymm cutters told the press at the time *“ The trade has always been hard and poorly paid but the last five years have been desperate so that we can barely hold body and soul together or feed our children.”* The strikers even marched through the village. They must have been a sad, forlorn sight. But it was to no avail, as without the wider support they had been promised they were quickly forced back to work.

By the early years of the twentieth century the number of fustian shops had declined dramatically as cheap imported cloth started to compete and the market sought more attractive cloth than the heavy working fustian . Where fustian was required then there was also a mechanised process which was developed and deployed in other places like Congleton.

There is no record of the last cutter in Lymm but it quite likely to be the parent of some-one still living in Lymm today. There were certainly workshops operating in 1917. Can anyone help us with that challenge ?

There is so much more to be said about this rarely told story of Lymm's Victorian fustian cutters.

Watch this space.

Or if you would like to get involved in researching this fascinating and important topic further drop us a line ..

