

Earby Through 60 Years After Victoria Mill Fire Personalities Among Spinners and Doffers

(by John Hartley)

25 March 1938

The rebuilding of the long end of Victoria Mill after the great fire occasioned several changes in the people employed when a restart was made in the early part of 1885. In the top which was used for mule spinning pairs of mules were installed, to pairs which had gone across. In the middle room ring spinning was introduced to take the place of the "Throstle" frames and the bottom was utilised, as formerly, for the processes.

The doffers for the ring spinning room were an almost entirely new set, six for half time turn, with two "setters" as a setter, and my mate, who remained a setter, was Fred whom we all called "Neckem." His father was "Tommy o' Sam's." They were both "curiosities" in physique, of the type which were often in spinning mills of that period.

Another man of that class was called "Little Jack Cropper", and he worked the small hoist which carried the "roving" bobbins from the bottom floor to the upper stories. On one occasion when Mr. Bickards, of Bell Busk, who was the factory inspector, made a raid on the mill for working overtime to six o' clock, he demanded to know Jack Cropper's name, as one under full time age. The inspector was completely non-plussed when he retorted "that he had a wife and two children." Another quaint character was Charles Windle (Charlie Jogger), who worked in the cotton mixing room.

I joined the doffers after three months at setting, and for the next two years we had few changes. They were good pals with one another, and quite an average set of Earby lads, with a few Thorntons added. We worked hard when we were at it, because we found that by getting through our task quickly we could have a good spell of time "laking" - anywhere from half-an-hour to two hours. One side of the frames was shorter than the other, and if we had only the short side to doff in an afternoon we had two hours off duty.

This gave us plenty of time for roaming about and mischief-making, and we were never at a loss to find an outlet for our surplus energy. Our first move was to make a dash for the hoist chain, where the bales of cotton were hoisted up into the cotton mixing room. Springing out of the doorway we grabbed hold of the chain and slid down to the ground. This was rather a frightful ordeal for a new starter who was not tall enough, or long armed enough, to clutch the chain, but we never failed to follow the leader. In the summer time we often resorted to bathing, or jumping the becks and dykes. When the weather was broken and cold we "camped" in the watchhouse, the gas house or the boiler house.

A "Doffers' Band"

After the mill fire there was plenty of old iron lying about, and a favourite pastime of ours was an imitation "brass band." Old "throstles" served for cornets, rods for trombones, roving cans for euphoniums, big weft cans for the drums. We serenaded the streets of "old Earby," and usually finished up at the Grammar School, where we liked to lure old Mr. Bentley out of his den.

When we were expected back the overlookers whistle was sounded, but we were sometimes so far away that it could not be heard, and when we returned late the overlooker was always waiting for us, and we were very fortunate if we dodged his shoe-toe as we filed into the room. But our overlooker, Thomas Smith ("Tommy o' Abes) was one of the better sort, and there was not much of the spirit of aggression behind his "punches."

If at any time one of our number was away ill, or was put to another job, we had his work to do, but drew his wage as well, which gave us more spending money. On these occasions we always "celebrated" with sweet biscuits and "pop" at Elisha Harrison's shop in Water Street, and we had a merry time together. Our head doffer was Robert Hartley, but he was always known as "Bob o'Sploges," the latter being his father's nickname.

The other lads I can recall included Algy and Harry Brown, John and Henry Speak, Harry and George Nussey, Edwin Hartley, Harry Riley and W. Wilkinson (Will o' Tit's)

Towards the end of my doffing career I started learning to weave in the New Shed with my uncle William Duxbury (Bill o' Bob's) who was one of the meekest mannered men I ever knew. Next to him

there worked my Aunt Emma and Aunt Sarah, so I had plenty of scope and was well trained. It was a real pleasure to be associated with them, for I never got anything even approaching a "black look."

Shortly after I got two looms I was transferred to the old shed, where they were taking all the old looms out and replacing them with new Cooper looms. In due course I got three looms, and worked there until June, 1889, when the firm of Dyson Mallinson failed, and the mill with the two weaving sheds were stopped indefinitely.

It was a black "Earby Feast" that followed in July, and everybody was left to shift for themselves. About 18 months before the stoppage my father had, fortunately, been made manager of the "Co-op," but for several weeks my brother and I had no employment. We did a little haymaking, but there were too many available to get much in that line. As the summer wore on we used to roam around Elslack and Marton, gathering mushrooms and watercress, and we sold our surplus stock on our way home.

Tramping to Foulridge

After a time my father arranged with Dan Watson, who was the weaving shed manager for Mr. Walter Bracewell, at Foulridge, to give us a trial, and we were put on four cross-rod looms each. I had never been on four looms before, and I remember it was very hard work. So that we should not be too tired with a fatiguing walk, we had to get up at 4 o'clock in the morning, and after a preliminary meal, we left home at 4:30 to arrive at Foulridge shed by 5:50.

Another arrangement which had been made for our benefit, was to do the morning journey along with old Henry Hartley (Harry o' Jin o' Binns 'a"), whose top speed was hardly three miles an hour. We reversed the order of procedure for the return homeward journey, which we often did in company with long legged Ned Riddiough, who then lived at Higher Stone Trough, Kelbrook. He could easily do five miles an hour, and we trotted along by his side for half the distance towards home, until he reached his destination.

An outstanding incident of our first entry into Foulridge was the finding of a sixpence on the road leading down to the shed. My brother found the treasure, which was devoted to the purchase of three big two-penny current tea-cakes for three days in succession, to supplement our daily rations.

I remember some of the Foulridge weavers showed us much kindness, and the friendly spirit has remained to the present day.

Before the winter set in we got work nearer home at Sough Bridge Mill, which was run by the Smallpage family, of Colne, the title of the firm being "Nathen Smallpage & Sons."

My brother was put to weaving again, but I was given work in the warehouse, as a "lapper up" and the experience I gained proved very useful in later years. The manager was Richard Wright ("Dick Rood") and when he was taken ill, Eli Cowgill, from the Dotcliffe Mill, took his place. Somehow the managers seemed to take to me and I got on well with them.

Mr. Cowgill, who later became a manufacturer at Colne, retired to Morecambe 50 years ago, but during the war he returned to his native village, Kelbrook, where he still resides in pleasant companionship with the friends of his youth. There is no man from whom I have received more sincere encouragement in manifold ways and the glory of our friendship is still undimmed, and abide in strength.

The other men in the warehouse were good to get on with. The senior cut-looker was "Tom Mack" (I never knew his proper name), and he was a rough diamond who was never "donned up." He came from Smallpage's mill at Burnley, and was well liked by "Mr. James," and always looked after his horse when he drove on to the Sough Bridge Mill.

The other clothlooker was John Brown, now enjoying a well-earned retirement in Earby. Jack Clough was the other "wrapper up" and Fred Whipp was the warehouse clerk. His father was the police constable at Earby, and later he was removed to Carleton, where the family were well known and respected.

The tacklers at "Sough" were a jolly lot, especially "Cheed" and Joe Foulds, who was in the prime of his early manhood. Walter Pickles, was an apprentice tackler, and Johnnie Pickles the designer. When the Albion Shed at Earby was built in 1890, we had to submit to another removal, and for the next five years our working activities were continued to the loom alley. The shed was erected by a new company, which was styled the Earby Shed Co Ltd., but the shed was let on a tenancy for a term of

years to Henry Bracewell and Son, of Gargrave and Rawtenstall, who brought their looms out of Lancashire to Earby.

They also took over the Old Shed in New Road, and altogether they ran over 1300 looms, until they went out of business in 1903. For the running of the Albion Shed they had to depend largely upon those who migrated from East Lancashire towns, because the new Grove Shed had absorbed nearly all the old Earby weavers. Many of those emigrants were respectable families, and in the course of time my brother and I "linked up" with two of these "lasses from Lancashire" both in the same family. They, however, were "step sisters," and one was called Annie Cook and the other Mary Jane (Pollie) Howarth. In those days when no provision was made for those who were out of work, unless they were on the verge of starvation, weavers roved about from place to place, and Earby got a good share of "tramp weavers." No matter how undesirable some of those people might be they had a right to work and live, and Earby people did their best to cater for their needs. There were some rough characters, though, men and women who were hardened in a reckless mode of life, and much given to over indulgence in strong drink. Some, when in drink, were rowdy and created much disturbance. One such character was called "Mackrow" (make a row) and I well remember the Saturday night in the summertime, when he had been very troublesome in the White Lion, a crowd came out to watch a stand up fight between "Mackrow" and Jack Procter, from Bleara Side Farm. But "Mackrow" had met one who was more than a match for him, for he ran round and round like a rat trying to find a hole of escape as he was chased by Procter. There were many unwilling spectators of this event, as the Saturday night "Band Meeting" at the Wesleyan Chapel across the road from the "White Lion" was closing at the critical moment of the fray.

There was one woman, who, when drunk, fought like a madman and more than once had to be conveyed to the railway station roped to a handcart, on the way to Skipton. There was real tragedy, too, in those times, and one night, through some apparent carelessness a man and his wife, who occupied as a cottage the old mill office, were smothered to death by an escape of gas.

Cudworth Murder

The outstanding tragic event of that period was the deplorably sad experience which befell a family named Cudworth, who had come to Earby from Whitworth near Rochdale. The father was called Moses and the mother Eliza, and there were several children in the family. I can recall, very distinctly, the day the parents and one of the girls started to work at the Albion Shed. I worked on looms that were "corner beams" to those of Cudworth. He looked a rather strange wild figure, with sandy whiskers tinged with grey.

His wife was a little shrivelled up mortal, and bore traces of a life of dissipation, and therein lay the main cause of the family misery. Sometimes, on the afternoon of payday, which was Wednesday, she would stay at home to bake, and when the husband came home to tea, he found his wife lying "dead drunk" on the floor, and the bread burnt to a cinder.

What took place later is hard to reconcile with the day and the place the dread deed was done. It was as fine a day as can be conceived (the Saturday afternoon before Whit-Sunday), on June 4th 1892, when peace and beauty seemed to prevail on every hand.

On that sunny afternoon Cudworth, with his wife and their little girl, set out to walk to Barnoldswick over the fields. The first part of the journey, after they crossed the Colne to Skipton highway, was up the Old Lane, leading to the Hill Top Farm. The upper part of the lane, for about two hundred yards, is much narrower, and has scarcely room enough for the passage of a horse and cart. At that time the upper portion was rarely used, and foot travellers over the hills almost always passed through a broad gap into the adjoining field. It was in that deserted part of the lane, much overgrown, that the poor woman met her death at the hands of her husband. In a fit of madness he appears to have made an attack on his wife with a jack-knife and then injured her face with a big stone lying near.

He, with the little child, immediately returned home and told some of the neighbours what he had done. Someone went for the village policeman, P.C. White, who was on the Cricket Field not far away from the scene of the crime. He rushed up to Wesley Place, where the Cudworth family lived in the middle row, and, having charged the man, he arrested and handcuffed him, and chartered a milk float to take him to the station, and the poor man was lodged in the cells at Skipton. The preliminary trial took place at the Petty Sessions at Skipton Town Hall, and the major trial was at Leeds Assizes on July 28th 1892. The trial was not prolonged, and a verdict of "Guilty" was followed by the imposition of the death penalty, which took place at Armley Gaol a few weeks later.

In evidence there was some reference to jealousy on account of a lodger whom previously lived with them, but the view was expressed afterwards that if all the circumstances of the condemned mans home life were made known to the court a reprieve might have been obtained.

Attempts had been made previously to effect an improvement in those conditions, and one of the tacklers (Jack Eastwood), who worked at the same shed, took a particular interest in the unfortunate man, as he came from the same place in Lancashire. He actually brought him to a Methodist Class meeting at the Wesleyan School, conducted by the schoolmaster, Mr. Lindley, who joined forces with Mr. Eastwood to try and effect a reformation, but with no apparent success.

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2684 words
December 2005
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