

Earby Through 60 years

After Victoria Mill Fire

Personalities Among Spinners and Doffers

(by John Hartley)

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." father was "Tommy o' Sam's." 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 Joggler), 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.

Thus 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'Sploge's," 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.