

## **A stronghold of liberalism? The north-east Lancashire cotton weaving districts and the First World War**

**Jack Southern**

The First World War fundamentally altered the cotton ‘weaving belt’ areas of Lancashire, and was, despite a temporary reprieve in 1919/1920, to spell the start of a slow, painful, economic and social decline. The disruption of trade arising from the war ultimately commenced the transformation of an area that prided itself on its independence and ability to ‘make’ money, to one that by the 1930s both operatives and owners looked to escape. As a reporter from the *Burnley Express* stated in 1930: ‘I have heard scores of millowners say, “happen what may, my son isn’t going in t’mill” a remarkable attitude in a county and industry where family tradition has always been strong.’<sup>1</sup>

The cotton industry had, up until 1913, experienced an ‘Indian summer’,<sup>2</sup> and in some towns it was still expanding.<sup>3</sup> There was a steadfast belief in the long term viability of cotton and in the global importance of cotton towns. Socially, however, a number of issues had developed which had been masked by the positivity emanating from the industry itself. The impact of the short, sharp drop in productivity and disruption caused by the outbreak of war caused these issues to manifest across social relations locally, and confidence to erode. Therefore, the impact of the war in several ways polarised and split apart the communities of the area, challenging the established modes of life.

The focus of this chapter is the impact of the war on the cotton operatives of the ‘world’s weaving centre’ Burnley,<sup>4</sup> with reference to the surrounding districts.<sup>5</sup> This chapter explores how the experience of war fundamentally challenged the local confidence in the cotton industry by primarily looking at the cornerstones of local life: the weaving family unit and trade unionism. Indeed, Burnley was regarded contemporarily to have suffered ‘more than any other

textile district' from the First World War,<sup>6</sup> and the aim here is to explore the key changes and events the outbreak of war sparked that left a lasting effect on labour.

Little interest has been paid to the combined impact of international war in 1914-18 and the ensuing economic uncertainty upon the cotton weaving towns of north-east Lancashire in a social sense, although the decline of British cotton has been long debated.<sup>7</sup> However, external issues in world markets and internal structural issues together removed the Lancastrian hegemony over cotton. As shown in Fig.1, the decline of cotton was dramatic, but for much of the interwar period this was seen as temporary. The impact that the process of decline had upon the weaving communities, focussed on the export market, therefore demands attention.

Figure 1: World trade in cotton textiles (millions sq. yards/000 quintals)<sup>8</sup>

	1882-1884	1910-1913	1926-1928	1936-1938
United Kingdom	4410	6650	3940	1720
Europe	770	1900	2320	1490
U.S.A	150	400	540	250
India	50	90	170	200
Japan	...	200	1390	2510
Other countries	...	260	190	290

The industrial structure of north-east Lancashire was unique. In 1911, for example, the weaving districts employed around three times the amount of females (as a proportion of the population) than the national average.<sup>9</sup> Weaving was also dominated by small manufacturers (rather than a small number of large manufacturers as in other industries), with the belief that the majority of mill owners had worked their way up from the 'shop floor'.<sup>10</sup> It was difficult for a collective identity to develop amongst the employer classes, and this sense of individual endeavour spread to operatives. The common belief was that 'anyone' could make their fortune in cotton through hard work and luck. This had two main effects. Firstly, it lessened class distinction, and as a result, created more opportunity for what Jeffrey Hill called 'political action'.<sup>11</sup> Secondly, it encouraged a community-wide engagement in both political and economic life. As such, this

was reflected in both the wide-ranging labour movement, and the impetus for the Liberals to respond. In the less urbanised areas, there was a tendency to stay staunchly loyal to the Liberal Party, but within the larger population centres, there was great overlap between the Liberal-Labour ideologies. The reliance upon liberal, laissez-faire ideals meant that the wider area was regarded as a ‘stronghold of liberalism’,<sup>12</sup> mentally and politically. As Hill again describes, Burnley especially had a ‘radical tradition’ that remained strong and ‘presented a picture of the classic Victorian alliance of small owners and workers against the forces of privilege.’<sup>13</sup> Unlike other northern industrial towns, it remained wedded to this particular Lancashire cotton spirit and epitomised the mentality that was described in 1928 by Ethel Dietrich: ‘it has acquired a proud tradition which is shared by employers, investors and operatives who have with their ancestors been born and bred in the industry. Nowhere have the shibboleths of laissez faire clung with such persistence until Lancashire individualism has become a byword’.<sup>14</sup> In the midst of decline this bullish attitude had come to hinder the industry, but, in a practical sense, prior to the war, the collective spirit stood for more than just an individual, and extended to the family and local community units as the basis of local society.

#### The impact of the war on family structure and the role of women

Weaving dominated the local economy in north-east Lancashire. In Burnley in 1915, out of a population of 106,000 around 40 per cent of male labour, and 76 per cent of female labour, was engaged in the cotton industry.<sup>15</sup> The only other industries of note were coal mining and machine building, both of which were ancillaries to, and reliant upon, the fortunes of cotton. There had been little industrial diversification during the years prior to the First World War. In Nelson and to a lesser extent Colne, progress had been made through the incorporation of ‘fancy’ or ‘fine’ cloths, which catered to several markets but, for the majority of the area, the staple good was either ‘grey cloth’ or medium quality goods, produced for the export market.

Traditionally, operatives tended to live in walking distance from the mill in clusters surrounded by their own extended family.<sup>16</sup> The bonds of family and kinship were also reinforced, and amplified, within the mill environment. Family members were known to work alongside each other, with some sharing the looms. It was also common for multiple generations of families to work in the same mill, whilst the methods of training weavers entailed an apprenticeship to a family member, or by a 'surrogate'.<sup>17</sup> The familial system was, in theory, mutually beneficial for operative and employer. For the latter, it served as a form of maintaining discipline, and creating a sense of loyalty to the mill. For the operatives it was the basis of the family wage, in that both parents and any children were expected to contribute to a combined income, which individually would be insufficient, but combined meant that the weaving districts were comparatively well paid compared other industrial communities. As well as providing for a higher combined total wage, this system encouraged forms of social security and encouraged savings, further complemented by local institutions such as the Cooperative. Due to the unique pay structure in Lancashire weaving districts, women were sometimes paid equally or close to men. As Hill argues, this meant that the status of women was not 'structured in inferiority', and gave them a 'sense of importance and self-confidence.'<sup>18</sup> As was shown in a report into family wages in 1909, the averages between six weaving towns and six spinning towns highlighted that although male spinning operatives were paid on the whole nearly double female spinning operatives (31s 8d to 17s 4d) weavers were paid generally closer (28s 1d to 20s 8d) on average.<sup>19</sup> In some towns, such as Nelson, women were paid closer to 30s per week.<sup>20</sup>

Overall, the familial system created a patchwork of dependency, reinforcing community ties.<sup>21</sup> The sense of mutual dependency extended into industrial relations, where the emphasis was on the 'collective good' of the industry. Since the acceptance of the Brooklands Agreement in 1893, the focus of industrial relations was the idea of the 'joint

relationship', and of maintaining stability.<sup>22</sup> The familial system also permeated into most aspects of local society, and the self-confidence of women helped create what Michael Savage has called 'a general equality' between men and women at a level not seen outside of the county.<sup>23</sup> Despite the more balanced, family based structure, Carol Morgan has argued that cotton women were not positioned 'nor did they position themselves as equals.'<sup>24</sup> They were however involved in decision making, both in the home and workplace. They had roles in trade disputes, local politics, and forms of 'soft' authority in respective spheres.<sup>25</sup> The system provided a cultural structure for communities which was stable, established, and passed on to future generations.<sup>26</sup>

Women in north-east Lancashire had an active role economically and socially in everyday life. As Susan Pyecroft argues, the role of women nationally, in a general sense, before the war 'reflected the traditional view that women's work was of lesser value and therefore deserved lower pay.'<sup>27</sup> She details a shift for women into more visible public roles and positions through the onset of war, and also from 'hidden' worlds including textile factories. Yet, the societal freedoms enjoyed by cotton operatives was different than in other parts of the country. One local newspaper report describing the popularity of hockey in 1914 highlights the differences between the young female workers of Burnley and London, and reinforces the dominant local cultural identity:

The Lancashire lass is not poor as girls go. To say that hockey is cheap would seem a mockery to a London factory hand. A set of London jam or match-factory girls could not hope to play such a game unless they were subsidised by kind ladies. Besides it would make them too hungry. The Lancashire girl can, if she will, organise and run a hockey club without charitable aid.<sup>28</sup>

The established familial system came under attack almost immediately from the outbreak of war. The rivalry that developed between local male weavers and colliers to outdo each other's recruitment figures meant a quick removal of males from the workplace, and a void socially, culturally and industrially. In addition, a number of men who did not enlist were requisitioned to other roles. For example the husband of leading female Labour figure Selina Cooper was moved to the local postal service.<sup>29</sup> There thus existed a recalibration of the norm, which although expected under wartime conditions, was exacerbated by perceived external interference of 'outside' bodies.

There grew a belief that those 'outside' of the area did not understand the situation, and if they did, simply did not care. One local survey in 1917 responded to the publication of a Board of Trade report into food prices by arguing that:

To the wearied and worried housewife, frantically struggling to provide substantial and nutritive meals for her family, the estimate of the Board of Trade ... in the price of food ... had little significance. Such estimates are of value chiefly to those whose business it is to represent human life in figures.<sup>30</sup>

The lack of stable work, as mills closed with alarming frequency under declining trading conditions, removed a key element in the established coping mechanisms of the mill community and a shift to external solutions. Women had to adapt to performing a more outwardly authoritative role. For the older married women, there was a shift in emphasis to act as a solo breadwinner. Yet, although relief schemes were undertaken locally, these were generally aimed at men. Added to this, the drop in trade meant that the local union, the Burnley Weavers Association (BWA), could not issue any form of unemployment relief for long periods.<sup>31</sup> The conditions in September 1914 deteriorated to the level where 5th Battalion of the East Lancashire Regiment sent unconsumed rations to distribute to needy families.<sup>32</sup> By

late August 1915, around 2,000 families needed relief from the Education Committee's distribution of free meals.<sup>33</sup>

Local initiatives were quickly set up to try and ease the burden. By 1916, the League of Social Service had developed alongside other cross-class organizations to counter the increased cost of living brought on by the war, with some run as a 'municipal enterprise' not for profit, but to feed young fatherless families.<sup>34</sup> A particular focus was the number of 'lonely women' in the town who were offered companionship, entertainment and services such as letter writing and literacy classes. The most notable group was the little studied Tipperary Room movement, who specifically set out to create a support network for women and gained particular traction amongst the female industrial populations such as in London, Walsall, and Burnley. Set up originally in London in October 1914, as an 'alternative public house',<sup>35</sup> the movement spread to north-east Lancashire with the opening of a room in Padiham in January 1915,<sup>36</sup> and then to Burnley in February of the same year, followed by two further rooms by April.<sup>37</sup>

Despite the speed in which local initiatives mobilized, problems still existed that challenged the community. Burnley suffered from profiteering – with imported white flour, and the unscrupulous methods of acquisition a contentious issue.<sup>38</sup> The milk supply was generally inadequate, but yielded higher profits for farmers than before the war.<sup>39</sup> Accusations were leveled at the local brewers' inflating prices but they in turn blamed the 'fanatical temperance groups' whom they linked to conscientious objection. They sought to portray their industry as a vanguard against internal enemies and issued statements claiming that only their patriotism had stopped them downing tools in the face of agitation and 'insults'.<sup>40</sup>

In more practical terms, even if work had remained stable, the cost of living now far outstripped wages. Solutions were sought through precedent. Yet, the combination of

depression and war was a wholly new experience, and where kinship and workplace relationships had previously existed as a coping mechanism, these were now diminished. The usual solution, the *Burnley Express* suggested, was that:

Men usually extricate themselves from similar situations by raising loans, and business men in like circumstances pay the increased prices and pass them on; but the housewife, however astute she may be, is unable to circumvent her difficulties in either of these ways ... there is no Solomon among us to tell her by what sorcery she can transform her shrunken weekly income into the necessities of the household from Saturday to Saturday.<sup>41</sup>

There existed a lack of practical strategy to cope with the situation, but the solutions proposed were increasingly women-led, and assertive. The Burnley Association for the Care of Friendless Girls, the Girls Friendly Society, and the League of Social Service, placed emphasis on serving a moral purpose, offering guidance and education to women in need. Many of the organizations had patriotic ideologies. The most famous example in Burnley was 12-year-old Jennie Jackson, who sold 'comforts' for soldiers dressed as 'Young Kitchener'. The Girls Friendly Society described themselves as an 'Imperial Society',<sup>42</sup> whilst The Tipperary Room movement was named after the famous song, and naturally through its links to the SSFA was adorned with Union flags. Patriotism, however, was a complex issue. There had long been a growing peace movement spearheaded by women that from 1917 grew louder in Nelson, and combined with a local ILP campaign to attempt to oust war hero and local MP Captain Albert Smith.<sup>43</sup> The prominence of the peace movement, and the subsequent backlash against it, resulted in 'stormy scenes' that had not been witnessed before.<sup>44</sup> In Burnley, Philip Morrell, a key figure in the Union of Democratic Control and outspoken pacifist stood down in 1918 after the local Liberal Association withdrew their support for him.<sup>45</sup>

The increased assertiveness by women is evidenced by the amount of lectures and events held that focused on the active role women would play politically after the war. A discussion held by the Padiham Women's Emergency Association in February 1915 perhaps best summarized this shift by arguing that 'The coming generation needed them. This was England's call to Englishwomen.'<sup>46</sup>

### **The challenges to trade unionism and labour**

The anti-war movement was linked to an undercurrent still actively engaged in women's suffrage. Some groups in some geographical areas had ceased activities during the war, and indeed softened their ideological position as a sacrifice.<sup>47</sup> Yet in others, such as in Nelson, women campaigners took a more visibly prominent role. The increased female presence in the public arena resulted in successes locally in women's issues such as local facilities for maternity, and women's health more generally. Overall, in Nelson there developed an 'incoherent' mixture of ideologies invested in three broad areas: firstly, conscription and the treatment of conscientious objectors, secondly, maternity, infant welfare and women's health and thirdly, the peace process.<sup>48</sup>

Despite women's causes gaining more attention, the main political forum was within the trade union. Women comprised the majority of members but they did not hold positions of 'hard' authority. At times, dislocation existed between the female weaving body and the male leadership.<sup>49</sup> Within the mill, tacklers and overlookers were universally men, and again were often recruited through familial patronage, further reinforcing a male dominance over the majority female operative force.<sup>50</sup> Trade union leadership was also overwhelmingly male, and as Alan Fowler has argued, officials were selected on their numerical calculating ability, which through the burden of mill and home roles excluded women.<sup>51</sup> They were, however, comparatively more involved than their female counterparts in the spinning section, and did exert 'soft' authority in other spheres outside of the mill. Due to the federal nature of cotton

trade unionism, the strength of the Amalgamated Weavers Association (AWA) was reliant on the dominance of local associations. There was thus at times a lack of central control if local issues took precedence. The main rank-and-file could also direct policy and action through sheer size at times, and did so in the period prior to the First World War.<sup>52</sup>

The primary issue that affected all operatives was the protection and advancement of wages. As Joseph L. White has shown, the frequency of strikes in weaving to perceived attacks on wages is very clear.<sup>53</sup> From the turn of the century, concerns grew amongst the weavers that wages were under attack on two fronts. One was the increasing use of poor quality materials, which due to the fining system in place for poor work reduced wages. Second was the continued existence of non-union workers, which it was believed both undermined the collective strength of the AWA, and allowed said workers to benefit from the efforts of trade unionism without contribution.

A change of leadership for the AWA witnessed an ideological shift leftward around 1910, and increasingly close links to the Labour Party were forged in local districts. This was driven by local associations - especially in Nelson - and from rank and file members. By 1911 unofficial strikes outnumbered official ones by six to one, and in north-east Lancashire were characterized by a new militancy.<sup>54</sup> The result strengthened the membership and created 'a climate akin to a religious revival'.<sup>55</sup> As was argued by AWA Secretary Joseph Cross who was elected in 1906, such enthusiasm was encouraged. He stated that:

In these days it is absolutely necessary for the workman to take a direct hand in politics and make sure that his wants and needs shall receive full attention and satisfaction at the hands of the legislators.<sup>56</sup>

The AWA attempted to utilize this growing enthusiasm, and support its campaign for wage increases by unionizing non-union mills and districts.<sup>57</sup> In 1911 the General Council of the

AWA made the decision to financially support local districts in mills with over 85 per cent union membership in refusing to work with non-unionists.<sup>58</sup> The result, after months of agitation, was the threat of lockout from employers. When an agreement could not be reached, the Cotton Spinners and Manufacturers Association (CSMA) carried out their threat in 1912.

The 'great lockout' caused the first real mass dislocation of the workforce since the Lancashire cotton famine of 1861-65, but had two further reaching effects. Firstly, it pitted operative against employer, breaking the notion of effective collective bargaining, in a battle of conditions that the operatives lost. But secondly it pitted operatives (and groups of operatives) against each other, victimising those who wished to remain outside of the union, for example the Catholic Workers Union in Nelson. More importantly it empowered rank and file unionists to act on their own volition in certain areas, and in Colne and Nelson wildcat agitation continued long after the lockout was settled.<sup>59</sup> Therefore, unlike in areas to the south of the weaving district, where, like Burnley, settlement was treated with 'genuine relief and thankfulness',<sup>60</sup> certain pockets of operatives came out of the dispute with a newfound strength and confidence in local collective action. In regard to Nelson, Hill notes that 'there is little doubt that Nelson weavers were in no mood to be dictated to by either employers or union leaders.'<sup>61</sup> White summarises the lockout as part of a wider movement that 'marked a continuation of the workers' propensity to weave a small, dense pattern of strikes fought over local and immediate issues.'<sup>62</sup>

The immediate decline in working conditions and hence wages that the First World War brought therefore created a great deal of pressure upon the AWA to reaffirm its importance. The AWA's main focus was the cost of living and wage increases. Yet following victory in the lockout, the CSMA and local employers were now a more cohesive body. Shortly before the outbreak of war it was decided, with the operatives' input, to operate on 'short time' - closing for four out of sixteen weeks between the February and June 1914 - a decision that left the

manufacturers in Manchester ‘frankly astonished by the unanimity displayed by the members of the Burnley Manufacturers’ Association.’<sup>63</sup> However the newfound unity of the manufacturers contrasted with operatives being exposed to uneven and reduced working hours. The AWA pressured the Board of Trade to utilise the Unemployment Insurance Act of 1912, and managed to have Emergency Grants made.<sup>64</sup> The emphasis rested with the local associations who were financially hamstrung, and in Burnley’s case making weekly losses of around £600.<sup>65</sup>

One suggestion to alleviate the distress was that the mills of north-east Lancashire should switch to khaki. However, several issues remained. The machines would be able to weave cotton khaki, but not woollen khaki, and the amount able to do this would only be small (estimated to be 5,000 out of 60,000 looms). The looms in Nelson and Colne, already exchanged and adapted for materials such as sateen, were too light to use. The Yorkshire woollen industry in most cases had the spinning and weaving sectors combined (unlike the areas of specialization in Lancashire), which would require those in Nelson to acquire the yarn from Yorkshire. There was thus a preference to maintain the separation of cotton and woollen, and merchants were wary of upsetting the status-quo.<sup>66</sup> Adaptation needed funds and although some mills did seek to modify their looms, the possibility of damage to the machinery through weaving heavier material created further potential economic outlay. For operatives there was also the psychological element of ‘giving up’ on cotton.

One possible solution with governmental support was for weavers in depressed areas to migrate to the areas of the West Riding of Yorkshire, where operatives were needed through shortages and nightshift work in khaki weaving.<sup>67</sup> Yet there were no signs of a collective effort. Firstly, the wages for Yorkshire weavers were lower than in Lancashire by around 30 per cent, and secondly, the lodging houses, taking advantage of the situation, began charging extortionate rates. As the *Burnley Express* argued: ‘Burnley weavers who have gone over the

border have actually returned home poorer in pocket than when they went, and as they say, they might as well stay at home idle, as they would not be any worse off.’<sup>68</sup> Other attempts to get Burnley weavers to migrate or adapt failed. In November 1915, the mills of Rochdale launched appeals to fill the lack of female operatives, with high wages and ‘irreproachable working conditions’ to juveniles and older women.<sup>69</sup> A solution that found favour with both the Burnley and Nelson Weavers’ Associations was the idea of equipping the army with corduroy uniforms, although this again failed to come to fruition.<sup>70</sup>

The main focus for the AWA was the pursuit of wage increases or a war bonus. From February 1915 as conditions showed tentative signs of improvement, the AWA began to pursue wage advances. For the operatives, there was a joint belief that war bonuses were deserved for their efforts, but more importantly that a wage increase to meet the cost of living was also long overdue.<sup>71</sup> The plea was declined, but as the *Burnley Express* explained there was a local belief that ‘no section of the community has been so hard hit as the cotton operatives.’<sup>72</sup> A further application in March for a war bonus on wages was rejected ‘owing to the unprofitable and depressed state of business.’<sup>73</sup> The spinning section, threatening to cause another lockout across the industry, managed to achieve their goal of wage advance in July 1915. Their success offered the weaving operatives encouragement, but also caused resentment at being overlooked. The requests were rejected yet again. To add to this setback, the CSMA issued the threat in August 1915 that if depression continued then wages would be reduced.<sup>74</sup>

The AWA were accused of ineffectiveness, and of detachment from the issues affecting everyday operative. In response, they shifted focus to other ‘enemies’. In an attempt to finally conquer the presence of non-unionists, they launched strike action in the nearby weaving village of Harle Syke, one of the ‘out-districts’ that had operated outside of both the AWA and CSMA. As a smaller village, a number of the workers were shareholders in the mills in which they worked and in exchange for stable, regular work with dividends, accepted lower wages.

These were due to the 'local disadvantages' of incurring extra transport charges from being more remote. The BWA had maintained a long campaign in Harle Syke over the previous years with mixed results but had reached by their own estimates 60 per cent membership of the operatives working there by August 1915.<sup>75</sup>

In August 1915 a rally was held in Burnley to discuss the efforts of the AWA towards the war bonus, the progress in unionising Harle Syke, and to single out the weavers there as the reason for any bonus being withheld. Leading figures from the AWA openly attacked Harle Syke, and portrayed the operatives there as internal enemies. One speech argued that:

Harle Syke is the only place that said 'we won't recognise your union'. Either the Harle Syke employer was superhuman in his majesty or the weaver a little below human in his capacity. Either Harle Syke was right and the rest of the county wrong, or Harle Syke was wrong and the rest of the county right ... the weaver who really had British blood in his or her veins would refuse to accept German methods either from German soldiers or English employers ... the policy of terrorism would be no more successful than the policy of non-recognition of the union ... a soldier who ran away would be a coward for life, weavers who didn't strike would be a knobstick for life.<sup>76</sup>

On August 18th a further application for 5% wage advance was rejected. A day later, the AWA handed in 1200 notices between the eleven companies in Harle Syke. The strike eventually lasted for eight months, but is indicative of the divisions that developed across the local communities of north-east Lancashire. Great emphasis was placed on the financial strength of Harle Syke compared to other districts, and people from across the class spectrum and across north-east Lancashire wrote to the local press to argue the merits and negative aspects of the system that was in place there.

Strikebreaking weavers were assaulted and intimidated, pitched battles were waged with weavers travelling from neighbouring districts to the bus terminus, and as Roland Kippax, a child at the time recalled, the notion of the Harle Syke weavers being traitors was a constant motif. He recalled the placards produced:

One of these showed a little girl asking her dad ‘What did you do in the Great War, Daddy?’ The Weavers' Union taking advantage of this, made a copy which said ‘What did you do in the Harle Syke strike, Daddy?’ And in large capital letters they added KNOBSTICK. These were handed out and pushed through letter boxes of people they knew were working.<sup>77</sup>

For the weavers of Harle Syke, the strike was an attempt to protect a local working environment that had shielded the village from the harsher aspects of the downturn. The mills divided work across the companies, and through sourcing labour from retired locals and working out shift patterns across extended family members, never totally ceased work. The action was undertaken with direct operative input, and they exercised an individualism at odds with the wider collective spirit of the cotton industry. Indeed, at one point when the Harle Syke weavers heard rumours that the local employers had agreed to end the strike with various concessions to the AWA, they launched a counter-strike, downing tools through the indignation at having not been consulted. The *Burnley Express* noted this was ‘Gilbertian in its ludicrousness’ as now non-unionists were striking against the strike, which, it was argued, was effectively being fought to grant the weavers in Harle Syke higher wages.<sup>78</sup> The collective spirit in Harle Syke delayed any possible solution for several months. The Harle Syke employers were reluctant to guarantee the remittance of striking operatives – the majority of whom likely came from outside of the village.

The eventual settlement in Harle Syke in March 1916 after 30 weeks was felt to be a compromise, and further damaged the credibility of the BWA and AWA. Operatives did receive a small concession of 5 per cent war bonus in November 1915,<sup>79</sup> but with the threat of reductions dependent on trade. The strike cost around £1,000 per week, with half of the amount being met by the AWA. Although Harle Syke now recognised the AWA, they in turn had their own special status as having ‘local disadvantages’ recognised, and their desire to pay lower wages accepted.<sup>80</sup> The BWA also launched attacks against other internal ‘enemies’ in their fight against the cost of living. As has previously been discussed, profiteering locally had become a major issue. The BWA thus publicly attacked the ‘unscrupulous profit-makers’, and in February 1915, in their quarterly report asked: ‘The German who is at war with us we shoot. What shall we do with the British profiteer?’<sup>81</sup>

Despite the blustering rhetoric, the effectiveness of the AWA diminished as the war progressed. The introduction of the Cotton Control Board in 1917 was direct governmental regulation which significantly altered both orders and working patterns.<sup>82</sup> It also crucially took the emphasis away from the local weaving associations. The decline of influence from the BWA and in turn the AWA, as well as the notable resentment towards employers was perhaps best articulated in a letter to the *Burnley Express* in the midst of the Harle Syke strike. ‘A Worker’ argued:

...who is responsible for the Harle Syke strike? The Weavers? No because a large number of them did not want to come out; they were quite satisfied and would rather have a little less money and a bit better work than some of the places in Burnley, where they have to pay extra to get the work done. No it is the Burnley manufacturers who are at the bottom of it all. They do not like to see the Harle Syke people get on, and as for the workers missing out on the war bonus, that is all bluff, because the masters never

dreamt of paying one. But it served their purpose to bring Harle Syke in as their excuse ... the union have for once been the tool of their masters.<sup>83</sup>

### **The shift in confidence and the post-war mentality**

The post-war recovery and speculative boom created a new confidence in cotton, manifested in 1919-1920 through the purchasing of mill shares in the area mostly by absentee speculators, paid for with raised prices to cover debts.<sup>84</sup> Such action was condemned in many circles as the end of 'paternalistic capitalism', and by 1928 it was felt that 'nothing worse could have happened to the industry.'<sup>85</sup> Crucially, it removed the shared sense of ownership and participation from the operatives.

In 1919, employment was still generally unstable.<sup>86</sup> There was consequently little work for returning soldiers, of which Burnley had the third highest number in Lancashire behind Manchester and Liverpool.<sup>87</sup> Yet municipally the investment from speculators created a sense of optimism in some quarters that a form of utopia could be built. Investment in other local industries such as building and machinery etc. was undertaken, and profits rose, dividends increased and borrowing and investing were recklessly encouraged. Burnley looked forward to a period of economic prosperity and industrial peace. Redevelopment programmes were proposed to run into the early 1920s,<sup>88</sup> whilst attempts to rebuild local community came through schemes to unite people. Municipal coal distribution, municipal banks handling cheap loans, and municipally owned weaving concerns were all suggested alongside the extension of road building schemes.<sup>89</sup> However, this dawn was a false one in two respects. Firstly, the effects largely failed to be felt by operatives. Secondly, by 1921 the demand for cotton was all but satisfied: profits fell and interest charges mounted in the face of dropping dividends and investments. The message from employers was of cuts to return to pre-war wage levels, and by

1922, there was a total reduction in list prices of 120 per cent, effectively bringing wages back down to the level of 1914. Altogether operatives suffered wage reductions in 1921, 1922, 1929, 1932 and 1935.<sup>90</sup> Labour MP for Clitheroe Alfred Davis summarised the feeling locally: ‘the great forces of wealth and capital were uniting to try and get the workers down to worse conditions of life.’<sup>91</sup>

The AWA never again achieved the stable membership figures it did during the war. In 1914, their membership stood at 197,957, and through the decrease in employment and rising disillusionment, dropped to 169,172 in 1924 and by 1944 had shrunk to 72,556.<sup>92</sup> Operatives were polarized, and in Burnley the National Unemployed Workers Committee Movement became a prominent force in the early 1930s. In Nelson, the same process of an ideological shift leftwards resulted in the town being regarded as a ‘Little Moscow’, and at one point there was the very serious possibility of the Nelson Weavers Association forming a breakaway union.<sup>93</sup> In contrast, the Labour Party strengthened its position in north-east Lancashire, and through the elections of Dan Irving in Burnley, Alfred Davis in Clitheroe and Albert Smith in Nelson and Colne together created an enclave in a Lancashire overwhelmingly behind coalition Conservative and Liberal candidates.<sup>94</sup> Labour held both Burnley and Nelson until 1931, when a decade of trade downturn and a series of industrial unrest over attempts to modernise the industry resulted in the ‘more looms dispute’.<sup>95</sup> The shift towards parliamentary democracy over trade unionism and municipal politics meant that Labour suffered ‘routs’ in the early 1920s that took almost a decade to reverse in both Burnley and Nelson.<sup>96</sup>

## **Conclusions**

The impact of the First World War on the labouring classes of north-east Lancashire were mixed, but it is clear that the event fundamentally altered societal structure. The war years, especially in the case of Burnley, were to be the start of a long, slow and painful decline. Community structure and work patterns were changed, and the cultural norms that had been

the basis of local life were seriously challenged. Long lasting rifts were forged and amplified through trying conditions, and although people did band together, dissent did not disappear with the war. The perceived mistreatment that weaving operatives received both internally and externally created a large degree of mistrust. The attempts to rectify this and heal the cotton communities largely failed, and as the industry proceeded into a decade of downturn, it became increasingly unstable, economically and socially. Many of these problems pre-date the war, but there is little doubt that the outbreak of conflict accelerated and created new divisions.

---

<sup>1</sup> *Burnley Express*, July 5, 1930.

<sup>2</sup> See Andrew Marrison, 'Indian Summer: 1870-1914', in Mary Rose (ed), *The Lancashire Cotton Industry: A History Since 1700* (Preston, 1996), pp. 238-95.

<sup>3</sup> *Burnley Town Guide*, (Burnley, 1936).

<sup>4</sup> Several local and regional newspapers discussed the battle between Burnley and Blackburn for the title of 'world weaving centre', but locally at least, Burnley was considered the leader. See *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser*, February 25, 1913.

<sup>5</sup> The area includes what was the Metropolitan Borough of Burnley, the Burnley Rural District, and the settlements that stretch to Nelson and Colne further north and is collectively referred to as north east Lancashire throughout this chapter.

<sup>6</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, February 21, 1919.

<sup>7</sup> For classic arguments see Lars Sandberg, *Lancashire in Decline* (London, 1974) and John Singleton, *Lancashire on the Scrapheap*, (Oxford, 1991). For a general overview of other key issues see Mary Rose, *The Lancashire Cotton Industry: A History Since 1700*, (Preston, 1996).

<sup>8</sup> Robert Robson, *The British Cotton Industry*, (London: Macmillan, 1957), p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, October 26, 1917.

<sup>10</sup> W.R Mitchell's oral interviews with weaving operatives reinforce the importance of the self-made cotton man. See for example *Mill Town Memories*, (Yorkshire, 1987).

<sup>11</sup> J. Hill, 'Lib-Labism, Socialism and Labour in Burnley, c.1890–1918', *Northern History*, 35(1), 1999, p. 187.

<sup>12</sup> See Frank Bealey, 'The Northern Weavers, Independent Labour Representation of Clitheroe, 1902', *The Manchester School*, (1957).

<sup>13</sup> Hill, 'Lib-Labism', p. 191.

<sup>14</sup> Ethel Dietrich, 'The Plight of the Lancashire Cotton Industry', *American Economic Review*, 18:3, (1928), p. 470.

<sup>15</sup> *Burnley Express*, April 3, 1915

<sup>16</sup> For a discussion of the importance of family and kinship living patterns, see Michael Anderson, *Family Structure in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Lancashire*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1971).

<sup>17</sup> See for example Burnley film maker Sam Hanna's experience of going into the mill and being taught by his mother. Sam Hanna, *Better than Chalk and Talk*, (London, 1991), online version: <http://www.sam-hanna.co.uk/chalk/Contents.htm>, Chapter 6.

<sup>18</sup> Jeffrey Hill, *Nelson*, (Lancaster, 1997), p. 28.

<sup>19</sup> *Manchester Guardian*, April 26, 1909

<sup>20</sup> Hill, *Nelson*, p.27.

<sup>21</sup> For the earlier foundations of this process, see Geoff Timmins, *The Last Shift*, (Manchester, 1993), pp.126-148

<sup>22</sup> The various mechanisms for 'machinery' to negotiate disputes was codified in 1908 under 'Joint Rules'. See Edwin Hopwood, *The Lancashire Weavers Story*, (Lancashire, 1969), p. 58.

<sup>23</sup> Michael Savage, 'Women and work in the Lancashire Cotton Industry' in J.A. Jowitt and Arthur McIvor (eds), *Employers and Labour in the English Textile Industries*, (London, 1988), p. 2.

- 
- 24 Carol E. Morgan, 'Gender Constructions and Gender Relations in Cotton and Chain-making in England', *Women's History Review*, 6:3, (1997), p. 369.
- 25 Morgan, 'Gender Relations', p. 381.
- 26 The tenter system involved a young trainee assisting and learning from an experienced weaver.
- 27 Susan Pyecroft, 'British Working Women and the First World War', *The Historian*, 56:4, (1994), p. 700.
- 28 *Burnley Express*, February 14, 1914.
- 29 Jill Liddington, *The Life and Times of a Respectable Rebel*, (London, 1984), p. 268.
- 30 *Burnley News*, May 19, 1917.
- 31 *Manchester Guardian*, September 7, 1914.
- 32 *Manchester Guardian*, September 7, 1914.
- 33 *Burnley Express*, February 27, 1915.
- 34 *Burnley News*, July 22, 1916.
- 35 For a discussion of other groups in a wider context, see Laura Mayhall, *The Militant Suffrage Movement*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003) Chapter 7.
- 36 *Burnley News*, January 27, 1915.
- 37 *Burnley News*, April 24, 1915.
- 38 *Burnley Express*, October 13, 1917.
- 39 *Burnley Express*, December 5, 1917.
- 40 *Burnley Express*, September 22, 1917.
- 41 *Burnley News*, May 19, 1917.
- 42 *Burnley News*, July 11, 1914.
- 43 Hill, *Nelson*, pp. 69-70.
- 44 *Burnley Express*, August 15, 1917.
- 45 *Manchester Guardian*, October 30, 1916.
- 46 *Burnley Express*, February 27, 1915.
- 47 See Liddington, *Respectable Rebel*.
- 48 Liddington, *Respectable Rebel*, p.268, and Hill, *Nelson*, p.87.
- 49 Hill, 'Lib-Labism', p.191.
- 50 The role of the tackler was a crucial one within the weaving sector. Effectively mechanics, their wages were accumulated through the finished work of a team of weavers. For operatives work could rely on a 'good' tackler, whilst some tacklers were in-turn accused of 'driving' weavers to increase output. For a discussion of some of the negative aspects associated with the practice of 'driving', see Jutta Schwarzkopf, 'Gendering exploitation: The Use of Gender in the Campaign against Driving in Lancashire Weaving Sheds, 1886-1903', *Women's History Review*, 7:4, (1998), pp. 449-474.
- 51 Alan Fowler, 'Lancashire to Westminster: A Study of Cotton Trade Union Officials and British Labour 1910-39', *Labour History Review*, 64:1, (1999), p. 12.
- 52 For a detailed discussion of gender in the cotton industry, see Jutta Schwarzkopf, *Unpicking Gender: The Social Construction of Gender in the Lancashire Cotton Weaving Industry 1880-1914*, (London, Ashgate, 2003).
- 53 Joseph L. White, *The Limits of Trade Union Militancy: The Lancashire Textile Workers 1910-1914*, (London, 1978), p. 94.
- 54 Jowitt and McIvor, *Employers and Labour*, p. 213.
- 55 Bullen, *The Lancashire Weavers Union*, p. 30.
- 56 Hopwood, *Lancashire Weavers*, p. 79.
- 57 White, *Militancy*, p.93
- 58 Hopwood, *Lancashire Weavers*, p. 78.
- 59 Hill, *Nelson*, p. 33.
- 60 *Burnley Gazette*, January 21, 1912.
- 61 Hill, *Nelson*, p. 33.
- 62 White, *Militancy*, quoted in John Benson (ed), *The Working Class in England, 1875-1914*, (London, 2016), p. 80.
- 63 *Burnley Express*, February 12, 1914.
- 64 Hopwood, *Lancashire Weavers*, p. 81.
- 65 *Burnley Express*, January 16, 1914.
- 66 *Burnley Express*, November 18, 1914.
- 67 *Manchester Courier*, November 16, 1914.
- 68 *Burnley Express*, November 18, 1914
- 69 *Burnley News*, November 24, 1915.
- 70 *Wells Journal*, January 8, 1915.
- 71 *Burnley Express*, February 27, 1915.

- 
- 72 *Burnley Express*, February 27, 1915.
- 73 *Manchester Guardian*, March 27, 1915.
- 74 *Manchester Guardian*, August 18, 1915.
- 75 *Burnley News*, August 21, 1915.
- 76 *Burnley Express*, August 21 1915.
- 77 *Burnley Express*, August 1, 1978.
- 78 *Burnley Express*, November 13, 1915.
- 79 Subsequent bonuses were granted included another 5 per cent and a further 15 per cent, and by 1917, the weavers were in receipt of roughly 35 per cent more than pre-war rates.
- 80 *Burnley Express*, March 22, 1916.
- 81 *Burnley Express*, February 20, 1915.
- 82 The Cotton Control Board was formed as a cross industry association appointed by the Board of Trade in 1917. Amongst other things, its function was to allocate raw cotton at controlled prices and implement levies on larger companies to be used as unemployment relief. It also controlled wage agreements, and wielded a great deal of control over industry wide negotiations. See Richard Biernacki, *The Fabrication of Labour: Germany and Britain, 1640-1914*, (California: University of California Press, 1997), pp.495-500. See also, Samuel J. Hurwitz, *State Intervention in Great Britain*, (London: Routledge, 1968), pp.197-200.
- 83 *Burnley Express*, October 29, 1915.
- 84 Peter Firth, *Unemployment and The Weaving Industry In North East Lancashire: 1919-1929*, (Self-published, 1994), p. 3.
- 85 Firth, *Unemployment*, p. 4; *Burnley Express*, January 28, 1928.
- 86 *Manchester Guardian*, February 21, 1919.
- 87 *Manchester Guardian*, April 3, 1919.
- 88 *Burnley News*, December 17, 1919.
- 89 Walter Bennett, *Burnley*, (Burnley: Burnley Corporation, 1948), p. 136.
- 90 Hopwood, *Lancashire Weavers*, p. 95.
- 91 *Burnley News*, June 15, 1921
- 92 Hopwood, *Lancashire Weavers*, p. 188.
- 93 See Hill, *Nelson*, pp. 86-106.
- 94 For example the two seats in nearby Blackburn were won by the Coalition Liberal and Coalition Conservative candidates and in Accrington the seat was won by the Coalition Conservative candidate.
- 95 For a technical history of the dispute, see Sue Bowden and David M. Higgins, 'Productivity on the Cheap? The More Looms Experiment and the Lancashire Weaving Industry during the Inter-War Years', *Business History*, 41: 3, (1999), pp. 21-41.
- 96 Bennett, *Burnley*, p.137, Hill, *Nelson*, pp. 86-89.