

LIFE IN OSSETT IN THE 18th AND 19th CENTURIES

The town of Ossett occupies a hill top site off the line of major roads, although the Wakefield and Halifax Turnpike (1741-1870) passed about half a mile to the north of the town centre. By the early **1700's** handloom weavers were working fifteen hours a day at home, the early 'cottage industry', to produce broadcloth. Many homes in Ossett had one or more looms and whole families, including the **Scott and the Wilby families**, might have been involved in the various operations of making cloth. It is thought that the Wilby family lived in or about the Yard since the 1750's – and maybe earlier- and censuses from 1841 showed that both families worked, almost exclusively, in the weaving and woollen industry. Consequently some of what follows traces the history of weaving as well as the history of the town in which they lived.

In **1764** the population of Ossett was about 450 mainly living at or close to the existing town centre but with other small settlements in other locations including around Middle Common. In the town's Market Place - a Victorian place name – stood the Grammar School, established in 1737-38 as an elementary school (rebuilt in 1834) Around this time James Hargreaves developed the Spinning Jenny which, unlike previous spinning machines, could spin a large number of threads at once. This and the development of the Arkwright waterframe and Crompton's spinning mule meant that handloom weavers were guaranteed a constant supply of yarn, full employment and high wages.



This period of prosperity for handloom weavers was not to last very long and by **1785** Edmund Cartwright had invented a weaving machine which could be operated by horses, a waterwheel or a steam engine. The power loom took a while to become established and even by **1800** only a few hundred were in operation in Britain. However the decline of the handloom weaver was inevitable when the news became widespread that an unskilled boy could weave three and a half pieces of material on a power loom in the time a skilled weaver using traditional methods could weave only one.

Those who owned or worked the power loom were to become prosperous and the home handloom cottage industry continued to decline as the demand for cloth produced by handloom weavers lessened. Those who still found masters willing to employ them had to accept far lower wages than in the past.

In his book *Origin of Power Loom Weaving*, published in 1828, William Radcliffe described the weavers he knew at the end of the 18th century.

Their dwellings and small gardens clean and neat - all the family well clad - the men with each a watch in his pocket, and the women dressed to their own fancy - the church crowded to excess every Sunday - every house well furnished with a clock in elegant mahogany or fancy case - handsome tea services in Staffordshire ware.

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time of the first national census in **1801** population of Ossett had increased to an eight fold increase over only 40 years those working in the weaving industry, including the Pickards, were no doubt affected by the inevitable decline of the handloom industry. Throughout Britain, early years of the 19th Century, there major demonstrations, some violent, in support of workers' demands for a minimum wage in the industry. By 1812 of Luddites were attacking mills and factories in the North West which were

using the power looms

17th Century properties formerly on Illingworth Street

By 1815 handloom weavers were having great problems finding work as they struggled to compete with the power loom. In attempts to earn a living they sold their cloth at a lower price than that being produced by the local factories. As a result, the average wage of a handloom weaver fell from 21s in 1802 to less than 9s in 1817.

The extent to which the Scott and Wilby families were affected by these changes is unknown but it would have depended upon their willingness and ability to embrace the industrial changes as they impacted upon their lives. If they were able to move away from the handloom and into mills using the power loom then they may escaped many of the deprivations suffered by those who were not as

fortunate.

A letter signed by a 'weaver from Bury' appeared in the *Manchester Observer* on 22nd August, 1818.

A weaver is no longer able to provide for the wants of a family. We are shunned by the remainder of society and branded as rogues because we are unable to pay our way. If we apply to the shopkeeper, tailor, shoemaker, or any other tradesman for a little credit, we are told that we are unworthy of it, and to trust us would be dangerous.

It is known that the majority of workers went into the mills, which were involved in various stages of yarn and cloth making. The mills in Ossett were relatively small compared with those of other towns. It is known that Spring Field Mills was on the site of Ossett's documented powered textile Mill, for scribbling, built in 1780/81, and further powered mills were built from the onwards. There were mills and dye works at Spring at Spring Mill and Victoria Mills and so the area was located in this respect. It is more than likely therefore those who lived there would benefit from these rapid technological advances. In addition to the woollen industry, small scale coal mining had existed in the area even earlier times.

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extensive commons and greens of Ossett were enclosed the powers of a specific Act, the Ossett Inclosure Act of and allotted in 1807/08, although an official award was signed until 1813. This was due to the death of Thomas the commissioner appointed by the Government to undertake the allotment of lands. Gee's replacement was by a group of six major Ossett landowners. Not far in the 1820's, the area known as Ossett Spa possessed bathing establishments whose "waters are celebrated for the gout, rheumatism and the scrofula". Later in 1877 were plans to develop these into a second Harrogate. In the "Ossett Observer" carried the following advertisement for the baths;-

"The original Ossett Spa Baths are open daily from 8a.m. and 8p.m. The waters are recommended by the faculty for Scorbutic and Rheumatic Complaints. Sulphureous Baths 1s 3d; Hot Baths 1/-; Cold ditto 6d. Every accommodation in Refreshments, Beds and Stabling" George Shaw Proprietor

Meanwhile, in 1813 in nearby Batley, the processing of woollen rags was developed. The techniques enabled waste woollen material to be broken down to a fibrous state and worked into virgin wool to make cloth. The products were called mungo and shoddy. Ossett became an important centre of the 'rag trade', particularly the initial process of rag sorting.

Rags arriving in Ossett from a wide area had to be sorted according to colour and quality. In some cases, rag merchants delivered bags of rags to cottages, where women sorted and cleaned them. They were collected and replaced by further waste material, thus providing households with a steady income. The sorted rags were sold to mungo and shoddy manufacturers for processing and after carbonising (to destroy the cotton) and grinding (to pull the fibres apart); the resultant materials were usually mixed with new wool. The processing of rags and the production of mungo and shoddy were to revolutionize the industrial life of Ossett over the remainder of the nineteenth century and whilst handloom weaving continued in Ossett throughout the reign of Queen Victoria, albeit on a slowly decreasing scale, powered looms were not introduced until the beginning of her reign in about 1840.

Ossett's hill top location had resulted in early railway routes and communications by-passing the town; the Manchester and Leeds Railway, opened in **1840**, passed in the Calder Valley to the south, while subsequent railway promotions, including an atmospheric railway to Ossett, had failed. It was to be another 22 years before Ossett was to achieve its first railway link. In 1851 the first Ordnance Survey Map of Ossett was made and this shows numerous tenters, where woven blankets were hung; several of these were at Low Common and one was located at the junction of what is now Station Road and Manor Road. It can be seen in the maps reproduced elsewhere. In 1906 The Ossett Observer carried a series of articles based on personal reminiscences of Ossett half a century earlier in the **1850's**.

At that time the core of Ossett consisted of one main thoroughfare – Dale Street, leading through the town to Queens Street and The Green. Dale Street started at Town End on the old Wakefield and Halifax Turnpike, which also passed close to Gawthorpe. Repairs were made to the roads in those days by spreading a few loads of dross on the surface, to be flattened by horses hooves and the passing traffic. Church Street was a private road known as Dark Lane or Field Lane. Headlands Road was called Westfield Road (not surprisingly this was in the 'westfield' of Ossett); Prospect Road was then Back Lane. Wesley Street was Pildacre Lane (since Wesley didn't come along until later) with a sewage dike along one side. Indeed several of the wretched roads incorporated this feature with the sewage finding an outlet where it might.

The site of the present Station Road was then open fields. A few public wells were constructed from which inhabitants fetched their water in cans often having to queue. Those who could afford them had private wells; the 1890 Ordnance Survey map shows a well situated in Scotts Yard.

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small and damp cottages, perhaps flooded cellars were not ideal to bring up large families

Cottages on Bank Street

The death rate was high, particularly amongst babies and young children. Homes were lit with candles, naphtha lamps or rush lights. Some children ran about barefoot and barelegged, and in summer amused themselves by burying each other in the dust of the roads. There was no compulsory education, but several private schools, with fees varying between 4 1/2d and 8 1/2d per week, were kept, one by Timothy Kitson in Dale Street. Such fees were beyond the means of most families. However, reading, writing and arithmetic were taught in the Sunday schools. Families with a piece of land (*including the Wilbys and maybe the Scotts though I rather think they were a class above this type of work*) maybe kept a pig or two, a cow and a few chickens. Farming families, as well as tilling the land, probably kept cattle but a cattle plague in the 1860's caused severe hardships. Prize fights, cock fights, dog fights, bull baiting and fox hunting were carried on.

The economy of Ossett also relied on its coal mines. Whereas males and females were engaged in textile manufacture, coal mining was male dominated. However in the 1850's several women went round hawking coal, because a full load was too expensive for many householders. The Wakefield and Leeds Railway was opened to a temporary terminus at Flushdyke in **1862**, and extended to Ossett and on to Batley in 1864, when the line was doubled throughout.

The following is an extract of evidence given to Lord Ashley's Mine Commission of 1842 and tells the story of the life and work of a 15 year old female mine worker: -

Patience Kershaw aged 17, May 15.

"My father has been dead about a year; my mother is living and has ten children, five lads and five lasses; the oldest is about thirty, the youngest is four; three lasses go to mill; all the lads are colliers, two getters and three hurriers; one lives at home and does nothing; mother does nought but look after home.

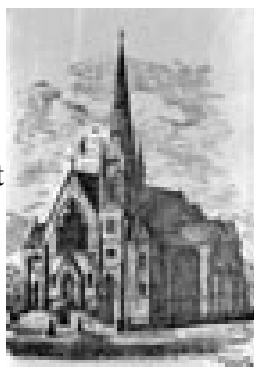
All my sisters have been hurriers, but three went to the mill. Alice went because her legs swelled from hurrying in cold water when she was hot. I never went to day-school; I go to Sunday-school, but I cannot read or write; I go to pit at five o'clock in the morning and come out at five in the evening; I get my breakfast of porridge and milk first; I take my dinner with me, a cake, and eat it as I go; I do not stop or rest any time for the purpose; I get nothing else until I get home, and then have potatoes and meat, not every day meat. I hurry in the clothes I have now got on, trousers and ragged jacket; the bald place upon my head is made by thrusting the corves; my legs have never swelled, but sisters' did when they went to mill; I hurry the corves a mile and more under ground and back; they weigh 300 cwt.; I hurry 11 a-day; I wear a belt and chain at the workings, to get the corves out; the getters that I work for are naked except their caps; they pull off all their clothes; I see them at work when I go up; sometimes they beat me, if I am not quick enough, with their hands; they strike me upon my back; the boys take liberties with me sometimes they pull me about; I am the only girl in the pit; there are about 20 boys and 15 men; all the men are naked; I would rather work in mill than in coal-pit.

This girl is an ignorant, filthy, ragged, and deplorable-looking object, and such an one as the uncivilized natives of the prairies would be shocked to look upon."

The subsequent Mines Act of 1842 resulted in the prohibition of mine working by boys and girls under the age of 13. I doubt life was much different for those working elsewhere. Ossett's ancient small-freeholders, or those of small-copyhold status, had contributed to the strength of nonconformity, and the town's manufacturers were commemorated with substantial memorials in the various chapel yards, and to a lesser extent in the churchyards. Religious zeal led to the erection of various Nonconformist chapels (Methodist, Baptist and Independent) each one seeming to be in competition with the other. The chapels as well as being places of praise, prayer and preaching became social centres with many mid week activities. Their cry for total abstinence from strong drink manifests itself through the Band of Hope.

The Green Congregational church (below)

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Chapels themselves marked the major ecclesiastical and social significance of nonconformity; the Wesleyan Chapel of **1868** in Wesley was a building with a fine classical façade; the anciently established Congregational cause at the Green was housed in an enormous new chapel in 1883. The Church of England ancient chapel of ease in the Place, existing since medieval times as a chapel to Dewsbury Church, replaced in 1864/65 by a new parish church, described as a miniature cathedral, while the architecturally humbler church at South Ossett was consecrated in 1851; the nearby Roman Catholic chapel of St Ignatius built in 1878. The Wakefield and Barnsley Bank opened its doors in Sadly, when chapel attendances started to decline in the mid 1900's the large and splendid buildings would become a liability.

Until **1871** the whole township of Ossett cum Gawthorpe had been civilly administered by the usual township officers of honorary overseers of the poor, constable, surveyor of highways (and chapel wardens earlier), with paid assistance, and from that date a Local Board elected by the ratepayers administered the township. An 1875 Act of Parliament gave Ossett borrowing powers to spend up to £50000 on street improvements, sewage disposal and water supplies. Civic improvements followed in the form of a public water supply negotiated in **1874** and completed in 1877; sewerage came from 1877 onwards; the new Mechanics Institute and Technical school in Station Road was erected in 1890, and the Temperance Hall in Prospect Road in 1887. Public lighting was installed in the late 1870's through the local Gas Company of 1855. Ossett Coop opened in 1873. At this time Isaac and his family were still employed in the woollen industry, but by 1881 he had begun to turn his hand to farming and is shown as a cow keeper. his son John was a blacksmith and 16 years young Isaac junior was a factory hand.

Opposite: Barnados Boy 1875

In **1877** an ambitious scheme was promoted for the development of the two bathing establishments at Ossett Spa; this was to make the Spa and Low Common into a second Harrogate, with sites laid out for residences, boarding houses and other public buildings, the streets being planted with trees 'after the continental style'. Only a very small part of the scheme was implemented, Goring Park Avenue commemorating the scheme and the proposed associated Montpelier Pleasure Grounds.



A new Ossett railway station was opened in **1889**, some 27 years after the temporary terminus was established at Flushdyke, and in conjunction with it, Station Road was developed as a major local artery with the first being turned in 1888. From **1890** the full civic panoply of be-robed and be-chained mayor (Edward Clay) with four aldermen and twelve councillors marked Ossett's situation among the industrial communities of the great West Riding. Ossett had received its Charter of Incorporation as a Borough. In fact what had been a series of small and physically separate communities until the mid 19th century, had by 1890 become largely physically connected, and now only the twin communities of Ossett and Gawthorpe were readily recognizable as different places.

The economy was essentially one based on textiles coal and agriculture. The Wilby and Scotts' lives and the history of The Yard, through the connections with textiles and agriculture in particular, mirror the history of the town. A free library was established in 1890 and was taken over by the new Corporation in 1898; an infectious diseases hospital had been established; a separate Commission of the Peace for the Borough was created at the end of 1893. The London City and Midland Bank opened in 1892

During the same decade the town rejoiced in the existence of flourishing Liberal (1893) and Conservative clubs, a Temperance Society, a Band of Hope, a Benevolent Society, a Tradesman's Association, cricket and football clubs. What had been a series of independent hamlets was now a recognizable town, with the appendage of the still isolated village of Gawthorpe to the north.

By 1891 the population of the town had grown to 10984. In 1880 the population was 10959; the population had hardly grown since 1870 and the town remained dependent upon its staple industries for its wealth and for the employment and well being of its residents. It was essentially a place of small mines and small mills, and although a number of low quality army cloth manufacturers had made fortunes during the Franco-Prussian war, and textile manufacture had continued to be of significance during the ensuing years of depression, the mills of Ossett in West Riding were but small, and their specialties remained in shoddy and mungo manufacture. Some of the mill owners had been able to build their substantial houses although none of these were of mansion status. At Gawthorpe a parish church was built in 1899.

The new century saw many new schools being built especially since West Riding County Council took over responsibility for education under an Act of 1902; Southdale School was opened in 1908 to accommodate 750 children and Flushdyke in 1912 for 264 children. Station Road built in 1889 when the new Ossett railway station was opened was to be part of the route followed by the electric tramway system connecting Ossett with Horbury and Wakefield, and operated from **1904** until 1932; the trams of a different company connected Ossett with Dewsbury and beyond, from 1908. The Grammar School which had stood in the Market Place since being built in 1834 (replacing the earlier one built on the same site in 1737-38) remained in use until 1903, being pulled down in 1906 to make way for a new Town Hall which opened in 1908. New shop and villa sites in the centre of the town still



abounded at the turn of the century and the census figures indicate that Ossett was about to undergo a further period of modest growth and expansion.

In 1911 909 males and 946 females were engaged in textile manufacture and 1344 in coal mining; still by far the two largest categories of employment. Not much later in 1912 Henry Castile Scott passed away and left his land ownerships to his children.



- - Station Road about 1900 - -