

Any work that wanted doing

How disabled people
contributed to the textile industry
in 19th century Leeds

by Gill Crawshaw

October 2023



This zine was created to accompany the exhibition of the same name that took place at Leeds Industrial Museum at Armley Mills (once the largest

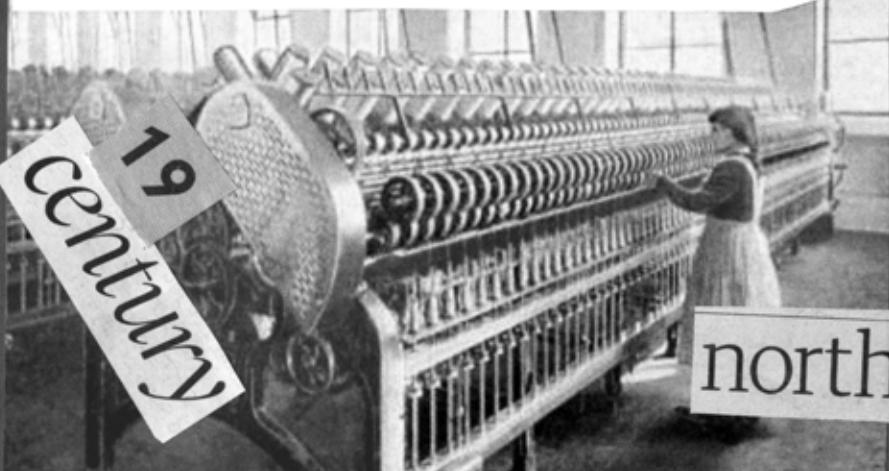
woollen mill in the world) during Leeds 2023 Year of Culture. As well as being a record of the research that informed the exhibition, this zine forms part of the legacy of the project.

Any work that wanted doing showed disabled artists' responses to the research, installed amongst the museum's collection of textile machinery. The artists made connections between the past and the situation of disabled people today, informed by their own experiences and those of other disabled people.

Find out more at <https://anywork.org.uk/>

Introduction

Disabled people have always been part of the textile workforce in Leeds, as well as the wider region, but their contributions have often gone unrecognised. Once the industrial revolution got underway, particularly in the 19th century, the narrative that disabled people were unable to work and had to depend on the workhouse or on charity took hold. This idea of disabled people as being dependent and needy continues to this day. But it's not the whole picture.



I've been trying to give a more balanced view by researching the lives of disabled mill workers in the north of England. These stories aren't always easy to find. The mills didn't keep any records of disabled workers, it wasn't considered to be important. And few mill workers were able to read and write so didn't record the details of their lives. However, local archives, libraries, censuses and other sources reveal some nuggets of information.



industry

heritage

This zine gives an overview of some of the things I've found out. It includes examples of disabled people who worked in textile mills in Leeds.

These stories can help us to think differently about disabled people's role in society - today and in the past - not as dependent or scroungers, but as active contributors to their communities. Disabled people were not bystanders, but played their part in Yorkshire's leading industry: textile production.

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Gill Crawshaw

An occupational hazard

It's well-known that weavers and other workers in the textile factories became expert lip readers. They had to be - the factories were such noisy places that a combination of lip-reading and hand-signing was the only way to communicate. Lip reading was more than just a practical form of communication, it was a badge of honour. It showed that you were used to hard, manual work - no matter that you were now deaf as a result - and set you apart from the mills' office workers. It was also a means of passing messages which the overlookers and managers couldn't understand!



People had been working in textile factories or mills, amongst the tremendous din of power-looms, spinning mules and other machinery, since the early part of the 19th century. Unsurprisingly, deafness was common.



A century later, it was considered an occupational hazard, the workers took it for granted. And the government and employers did little to protect mill workers 'hearing until the late 20th century.

The NOISE level in the weaving shed is between 100 and 130 decibels.

This is the equivalent of listening to a road drill. In order to communicate between themselves many weavers

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According to the Health and Safety Executive's website:

Noise is one of the commonest health problems in the textile industry and problems can be difficult to detect because the effects build up gradually over time.

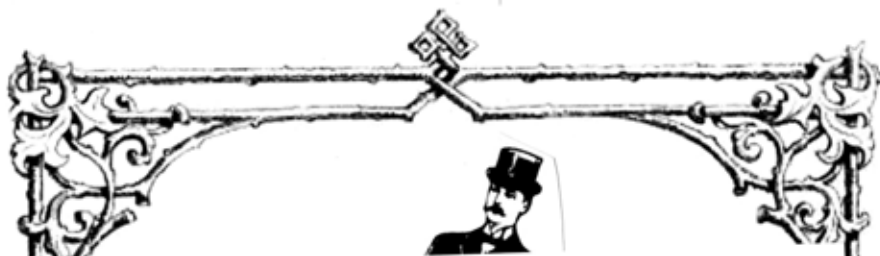
As well as the constant loud noise, there were other hazards in the early factories. Accidents from unguarded machinery, having to stand all day while doing repetitive and awkward movements, and the effects of working in dusty, unventilated premises led to great numbers of workers becoming disabled, including those who had started working as children.



This wasn't necessarily linked to a lack of productivity, and many of these disabled workers continued or returned to work. They often had little choice, as they would have wanted to avoid the even harsher conditions of the workhouse if at all possible.

So, while the textile industry was a cause of widespread disablement amongst its workers, many disabled workers proved to be resilient and carried on.

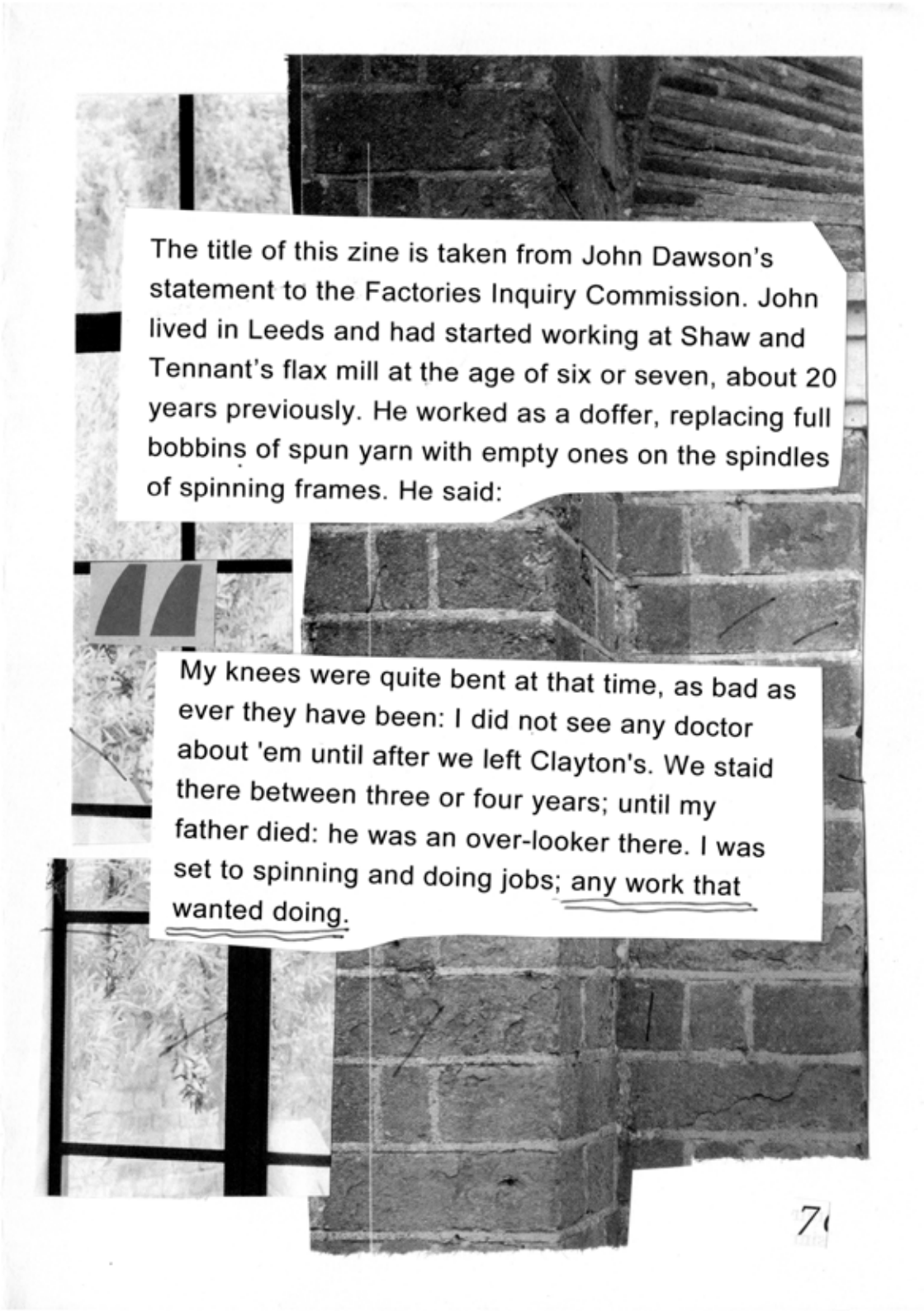
Speaking up for reform



The 1832 parliamentary Committee to investigate factory conditions, chaired by Leeds MP Michael Sadler, followed by the government's Factories Inquiry Commission of 1833, gave disabled workers the chance to speak up. Giving evidence meant that they were not merely victims of industrialisation, but that they were contributing to the movement for reform. The resulting reports led to legislation which reduced working hours, set up factory inspections and made further improvements to working conditions.

There were many witnesses to these committees from Leeds, Bradford, Keighley and other northern textile towns. Their stories are remarkably similar, particularly when they tell of the toll that strenuous, repetitive tasks had taken on their bodies.





The title of this zine is taken from John Dawson's statement to the Factories Inquiry Commission. John lived in Leeds and had started working at Shaw and Tennant's flax mill at the age of six or seven, about 20 years previously. He worked as a doffer, replacing full bobbins of spun yarn with empty ones on the spindles of spinning frames. He said:

My knees were quite bent at that time, as bad as ever they have been: I did not see any doctor about 'em until after we left Clayton's. We staid there between three or four years; until my father died: he was an over-looker there. I was set to spinning and doing jobs; any work that wanted doing.

John Dawson was a tailor when he gave evidence, and stayed in that profession for several years after 1833. In the 1841 census he was 35 years old, recorded as a clothier, another name for a tailor. He lived in Blayds Yard with his wife Hannah, 30, and four children aged 2-10 years.

Blayds Yard still exists, off Lower Briggate in what is now the Gay Quarter of Leeds city centre, with Blayd's Bar occupying part of the yard. This narrow street has a number of listed buildings, some now luxury apartments. In the 18th and 19th centuries, however, they were shops, workshops and living quarters combined. One row of buildings forms an important surviving example of the type of housing built for textile workers within the centre of Leeds in the late 18th / early 19th centuries, in the rear yard of an 18th century townhouse. Tall first-floor windows suggest that those rooms were workshops, and perhaps John ran his business from one of them.

Here is an excerpt from David Bywater's evidence to the Sadler committee:



You said that you was selected as a steamer by the overlooker, on account of your being a stout and healthy boy? - Yes, he said he thought I was the strongest, and so I should go.

Were you perfect in your limbs when you undertook that long and excessive labour? - Yes, I was.

What effect did it produce upon you? - It brought a weakness on me; I felt my knees quite ache.

Had you pain in your limbs and all over your body? - Yes.

Show what effect it had upon your limbs ? - It made me very crooked.

[Here the Witness showed his knees and legs.]

Are your thighs also bent? - Yes, the bone is quite bent.



How long was it after you had to endure this long labour before your limbs felt in that way? - I was very soon told of it before I found it out myself.

What did they tell you? - They told me I was getting very crooked in my knees; my mother found it out first.

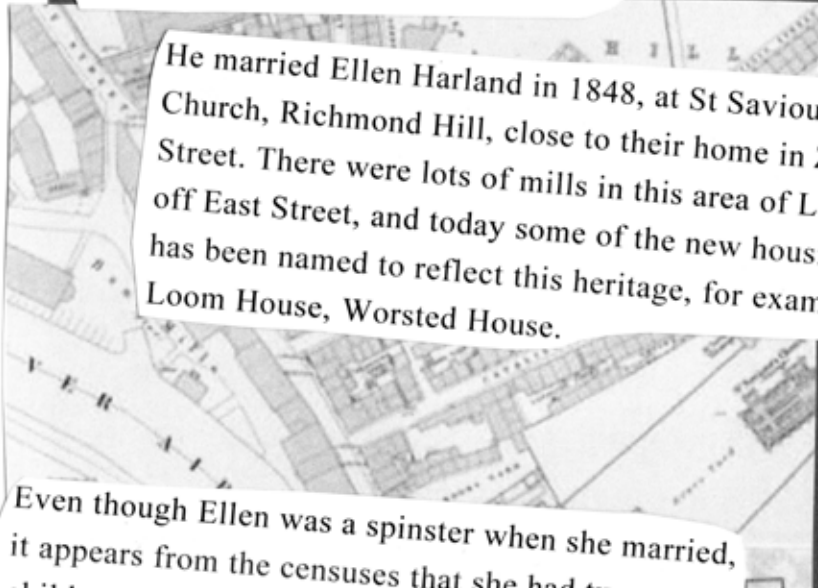
What did she say about it? - She said I should kill myself with working this long time.

If you had refused to work those long hours, and have wished to have worked a moderate length of time only, should you have been retained in your situation? - I should have had to go home; I should have been turned off directly. ”

Even though David had become considerably impaired, and his mother was worried for his very life, he explains how he had to continue to work excessive hours, otherwise he would have lost his job. Other witnesses said the same thing.

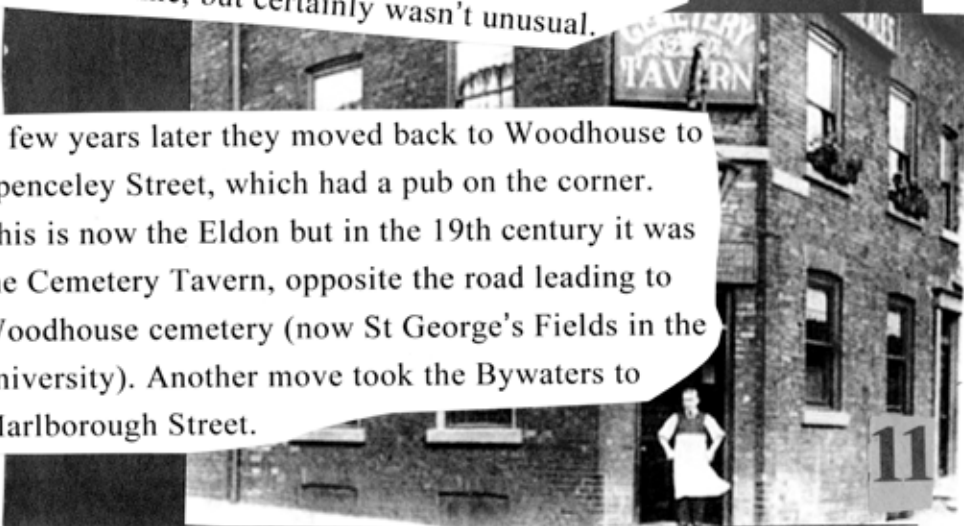


David Bywater made a career as a cloth dresser or cropper, using shears to give finished cloth a smooth surface. In 1841 he was 25, lodging with the Harland family of mill workers in Woodhouse.



He married Ellen Harland in 1848, at St Saviours Church, Richmond Hill, close to their home in Zion Street. There were lots of mills in this area of Leeds, off East Street, and today some of the new housing has been named to reflect this heritage, for example, Loom House, Worsted House.

Even though Ellen was a spinster when she married, it appears from the censuses that she had two children of her own. This might have been frowned upon at the time, but certainly wasn't unusual.



A few years later they moved back to Woodhouse to Spenceley Street, which had a pub on the corner. This is now the Eldon but in the 19th century it was the Cemetery Tavern, opposite the road leading to Woodhouse cemetery (now St George's Fields in the university). Another move took the Bywaters to Marlborough Street.



Elizabeth Bentley told the Factories Commission that she'd become ill through breathing fibres in the carding room of a south Leeds mill. However, her move to the weighing room was no improvement:



“

Weighing was too hard labour for me; it made me both bad in health and pulled my shoulder out; it was one shoulder, which slipped out of its place from weakness. I used to have to pull a basket with my right hand, which was too heavy for me. The deformity has come on gradually. It was about three years I was in the weighing room, working at the same basket. I had been about a year, or not so much, when my mother found the shoulder was getting wrong. It got worse all the time I staid, which was two years longer at least.

”



William Dodd was an important figure in the factory reform movement. He described himself as a “factory cripple” in his 1841 account of his working life. This began in mills in Kendal, where he became disabled, and he writes that there were other disabled workers there. Dodd tried to get other jobs, but they didn’t work out and he was dismissed. Still, he didn’t go to the workhouse, but returned, as a disabled person, to the woollen mills.

NARRATIVE

OF THE

EXPERIENCE AND SUFFERINGS

OF

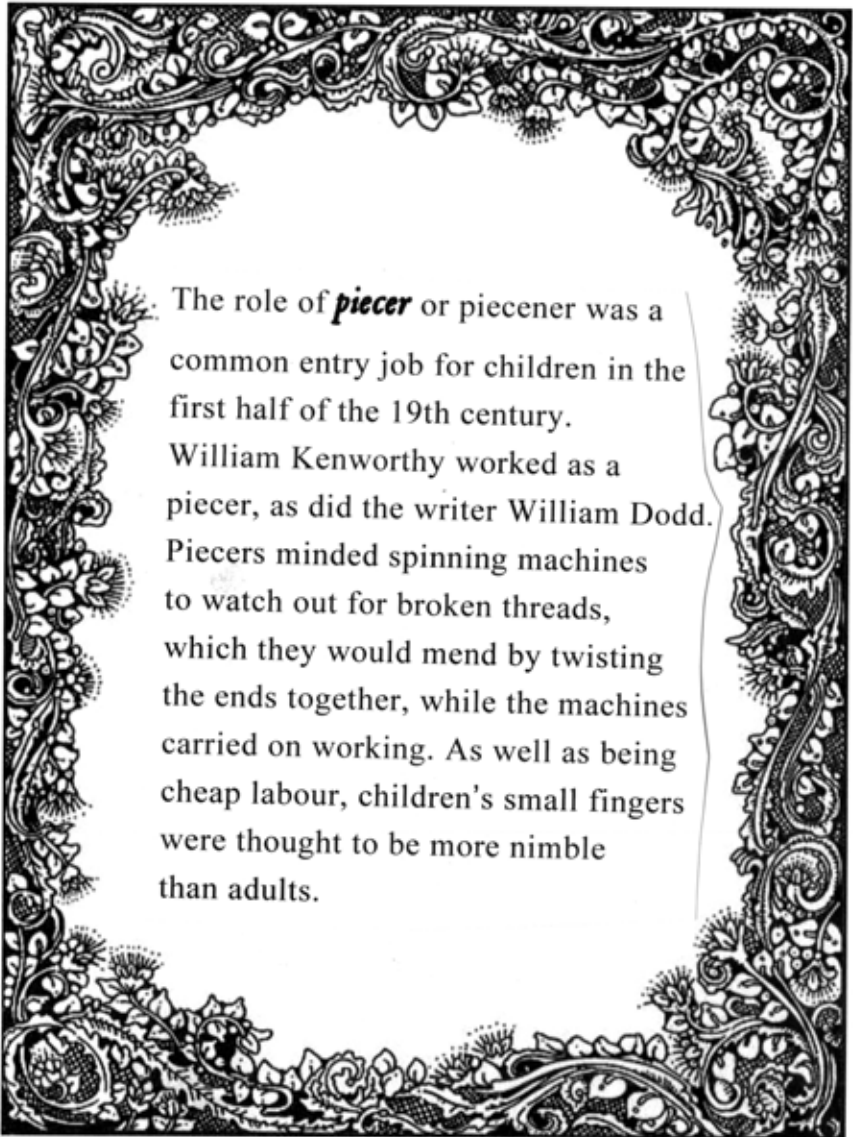
WILLIAM DODD,

A FACTORY CRIPPLE.

WRITTEN BY HIMSELF.

GIVING AN ACCOUNT OF THE HARDSHIPS AND SUFFERINGS HE ENDURED IN EARLY LIFE, UNDER WHAT DIFFICULTIES HE ACQUIRED HIS EDUCATION, THE EFFECTS OF FACTORY LABOUR ON HIS MIND AND PERSON, THE UNSUCCESSFUL EFFORTS MADE BY HIM TO OBTAIN A LIVELIHOOD IN SOME OTHER LINE OF LIFE, THE COMPARISON HE DRAWS BETWEEN AGRICULTURAL AND MANUFACTURING LABOURERS, AND OTHER MATTERS

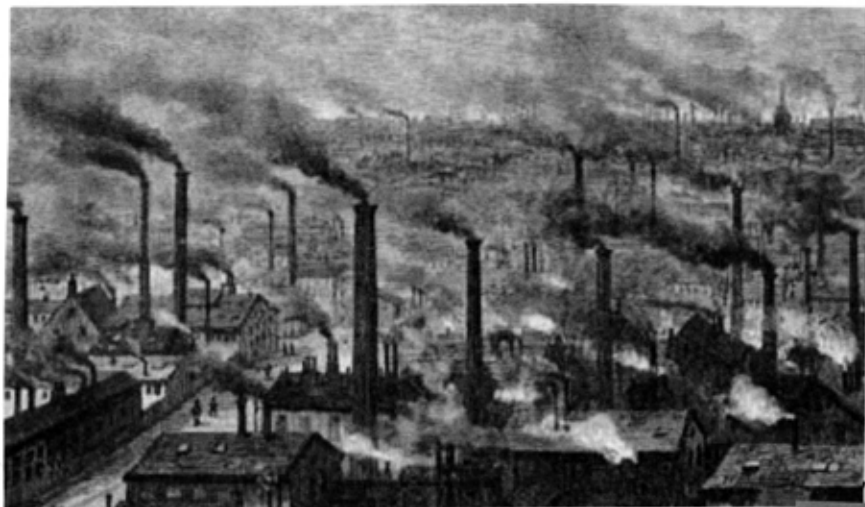
Dodd started out as a piecer, but after he realised he would be working in the mills long-term, he managed to get a slightly better job, “where the labour was not so very distressing, but the care and responsibility was greater; and although I was a complete cripple, I now began to feel a little more comfortable.”



The role of *piecer* or piecener was a common entry job for children in the first half of the 19th century. William Kenworthy worked as a piecer, as did the writer William Dodd. Piecers minded spinning machines to watch out for broken threads, which they would mend by twisting the ends together, while the machines carried on working. As well as being cheap labour, children's small fingers were thought to be more nimble than adults.

Of course, there were people whose injuries meant that they were no longer able to work, and did end up in the workhouse. However, many other disabled people stayed in work - because they were able to, their experience was valued, or through sheer necessity.

They were also meeting the demand of the industry for a large workforce. The mills drew workers from their surrounding area - men, women and children. This would have included those disabled people who could get themselves to work, or who could be taken there with the help of family members.



Workers needed

By the mid-19th century, two out of every five workers in Leeds worked in the textile industry. In Morley alone there were over 50 mills. The larger places employed hundreds of workers to carry out the many stages of producing cloth and to keep the huge factory running smoothly.

Some of these jobs could be done sitting down, such as spinning thread and twisting the ends of warp threads together. William Kenworthy of Leeds told the Sadler Committee of his relief at getting a physically less demanding job, after years of being a piecer had damaged his legs:

“ What sort of business is the scribbler-feeder? It is easy work; we have just to lift the wool and lay it on the feeder, and then sit down while it is run in. I had not been a scribbler-feeder above half a year, when the overlooker told my mother that he could put me to an easier job, I being grown so lame, and my mother said she would be very much obliged to him if he would, till I got strong again. ”

William Kenworthy stayed in the mills, working as a woollen cloth presser for decades. He married Clotilda, and they had five daughters and a son. In 1851 when William was 35 and the children were young, they lived in Victoria Street, Holbeck. The family later lived at Bruce Street, Wortley, for many years.

After Clotilda died in 1889, William moved in with two of his daughters, a son-in-law and two grandchildren, to Westfield Crescent, Burley. William carried on working as a presser well into his 70s.

[REDACTED]

Even when a job could be done seated, if only for part of the time, many mill owners wouldn't allow it, and workers would be punished if they found a surface to rest on. Overlooker John Hannam, who had worked in many Leeds mills, told the Factories Inquiry Commission:

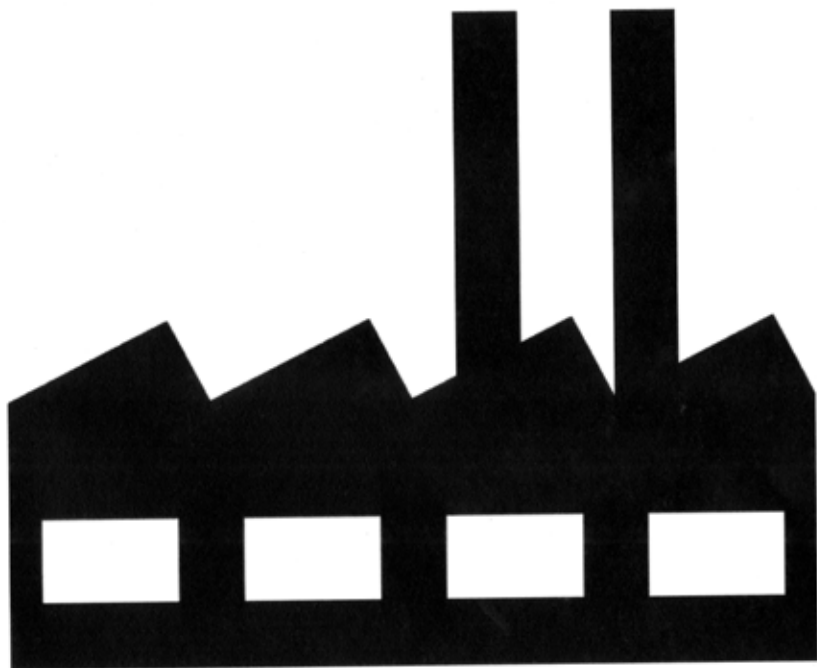
I consider that not being allowed to sit down is a great grievance. It is no loss to the master to allow them to sit down. I believe they would do it better when they do sit down. Where seats are not allowed, they will get to sit down in a window, or where they can, and there is a fine for that.



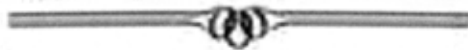
Other mill tasks were part time or temporary, away from the dangers of the machinery, such as clearing out the boilers or packing and moving lengths of cloth. Some disabled people might have been employed in these jobs, while others would have worked on the factory floor, wherever they were needed and in whatever work that wanted doing.

Disabled people organise

Workers didn't just passively accept the terrible conditions in the mills. In the 18th and 19th centuries they started to come together, in the face of opposition from employers and the state, to resolve issues at work. If the textile workforce had a high proportion of disabled workers, then it follows that these emerging trade unions would also have had many disabled members. David Turner and Daniel Blackie, in their book *Disability in the Industrial Revolution: Physical impairment in British coalmining, 1780–1880* (2018), show that this was certainly the case in mining, where disabled miners were active trade unionists.



Many trade union banners emphasised the welfare support that unions provided for their sick or injured members. The pictures painted on the fabric depicted disabled and sick workers, conveying the message that disabled workers would not be abandoned or forgotten about by their comrades. The unions declared that they were "United to protect, not combined to injure". Trade unions recognised the disabling effects of the textile factories from the beginning, through bitter experience. They fought for better conditions with and for their disabled members, whether in work or not.



Towards the end of the 19th century, disabled people began to form their own organisations. Controlled by disabled people themselves, these were a radical counterpoint to the growth of charities in the Victorian era. Supposedly acting in disabled people's interests, charities' paternalistic approach instead resulted in institutionalisation, segregation and confinement, and shaped attitudes towards disabled people that still endure.



NATIONAL LEAGUE OF THE BLIND
OF GREAT BRITAIN & IRELAND
LONDON DISTRICT COUNCIL

The National League of the Blind was a progressive disabled people's organisation, registered as a trade union in 1899. Their slogan "Justice Not Charity" made their intentions clear. A variation on this, "Rights Not Charity", has become a rallying cry of the disabled people's movement, as relevant today as it was one hundred years ago.



Deaf mill workers

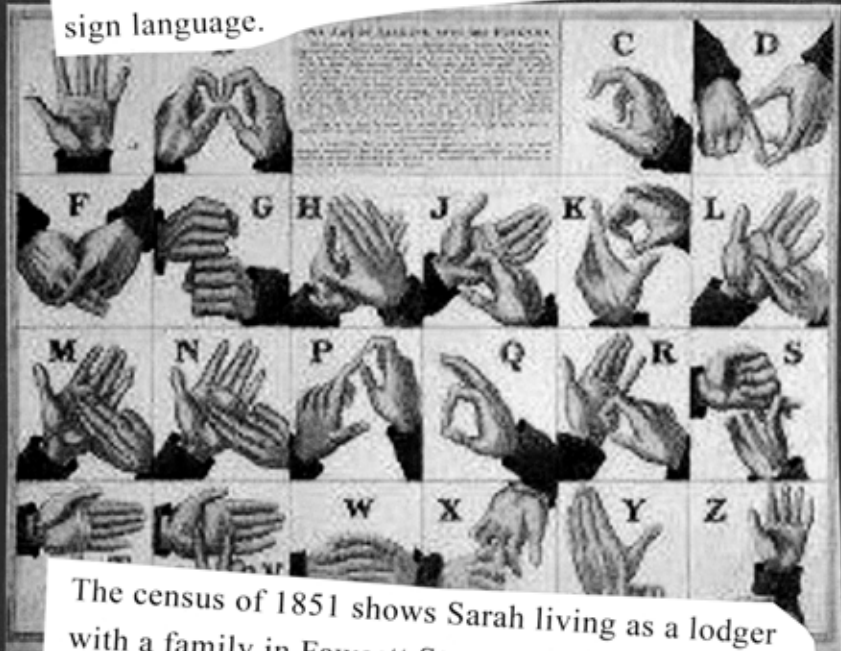
Deaf people, that is, those born deaf or who became deaf early in life, were amongst those who were able to get work in the mills across the county. They weren't at a disadvantage in the noisy environment!



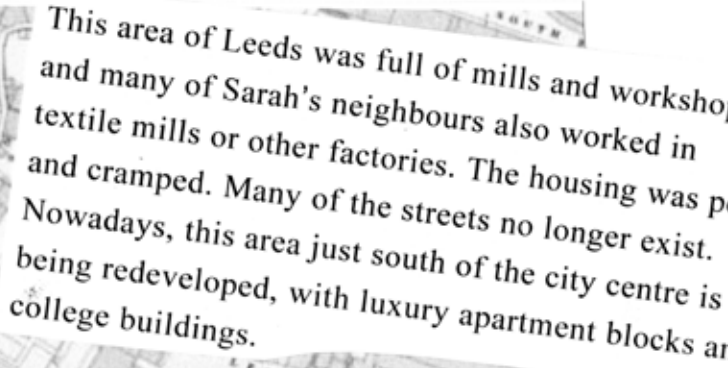
Thanks to the surveys carried out by the Yorkshire Institution for the Deaf and Dumb (as it was then called), we know the names of some of those Deaf mill workers. In 1844, with updates in 1847, 1854 and 1859, the institution published the Results of an Inquiry Respecting the Former Pupils of the YIDD. This survey went to parents, employers and other people who knew the former pupils of the school to find out what they were doing now. The school wanted to show that the education that they'd provided had turned out useful, productive citizens.

The survey returns showed that the young people had left school and gone into a range of occupations and trades. Many of them had, unsurprisingly, taken up jobs in Yorkshire's textile industries, including the woollen, worsted and flax factories of Leeds.

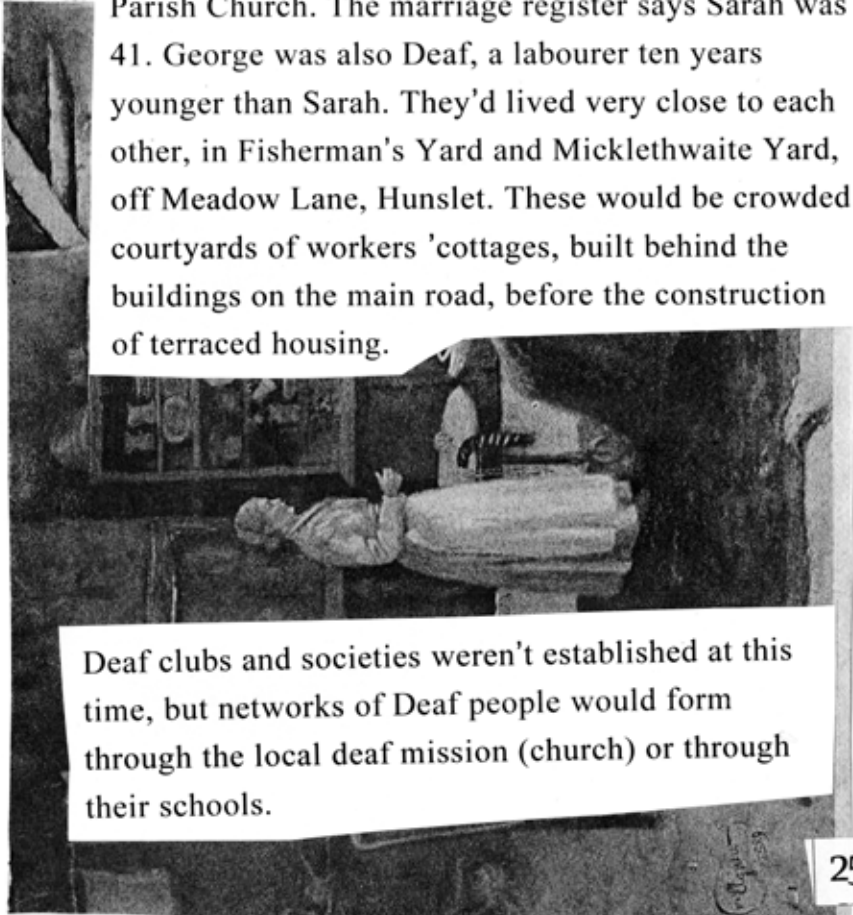
Sarah Hartley went to the Yorkshire Institution from 1830-35, and was amongst the first girls there. In the school's survey, her classmate Jane Holmes worked in the same mill doing the same job of bobbin winder. Presumably they were friends who would have been able to communicate fluently in sign language.



The census of 1851 shows Sarah living as a lodger with a family in Fawcett Street, Hunslet. She was 33 (although census records could be inaccurate), an unmarried stuff weaver, stuff being another name for worsted. This would have been a step up from her previous job of bobbin winder, according to the 1844 YIDD report, as weaving would have been better paid. Perhaps she continued to work at Dickinson and Barraclough, who operated from a mill on Hunslet Lane. So Sarah wouldn't have had far to walk.



This area of Leeds was full of mills and workshops, and many of Sarah's neighbours also worked in textile mills or other factories. The housing was poor and cramped. Many of the streets no longer exist. Nowadays, this area just south of the city centre is being redeveloped, with luxury apartment blocks and college buildings.



In 1859 Sarah married George Stables at Leeds Parish Church. The marriage register says Sarah was 41. George was also Deaf, a labourer ten years younger than Sarah. They'd lived very close to each other, in Fisherman's Yard and Mickletwaite Yard, off Meadow Lane, Hunslet. These would be crowded courtyards of workers' cottages, built behind the buildings on the main road, before the construction of terraced housing.

Deaf clubs and societies weren't established at this time, but networks of Deaf people would form through the local deaf mission (church) or through their schools.

George had attended the school in Doncaster, for five years from 1840, so even though they weren't contemporaries, their school might have brought them together.

Another ex-pupil, but from a later decade again, was one of the witnesses at the wedding. Hannah Newsome was originally from Otley and was at school from 1851-53, but by 1859 she was working in a spinning mill and then in a cloth mill, according to the YIDD inquiry. Deaf people were staying in touch, becoming friends – and partners.

According to later censuses, Sarah didn't have an occupation following her marriage. The couple remained in Hunslet, in Holdroyd Court, another yard off Meadow Lane. They didn't have any children. Sarah died in 1875, around 60 years old. George died in 1883, aged 54. Both are buried in Beckett Street Cemetery, Leeds. George's burial was performed by Mr Foulstone, the deaf missionary for Leeds.

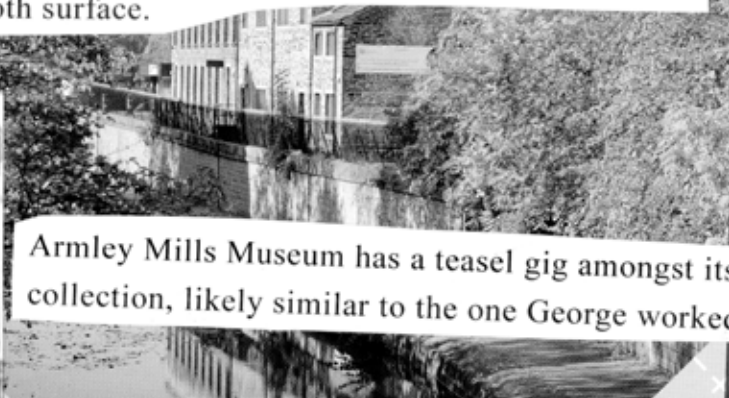
George Thompson worked at Armley Mills, which is now Leeds Industrial Museum. It was owned by the Gott family at the time, prominent Leeds industrialists. George was a handle setter, working in cloth finishing. His job was fixing teasels into metal frames to raise the nap of the fabric. His manager responded to the YIDD survey:

50. GEORGE THOMPSON. Armley, Leeds.
Employed as a handle-setter in cloth-dressing.
He acquired the business equally fast, and as well as
others.
His conduct has been good.
When he is of age he will be able to earn as good wages
as any other men in the same employment
Forwarded by MESSRS. W. & J. GOTT, of Leeds.

George later worked as a dyer, married, and raised a family. His sister Harriet, also Deaf, worked in a mill too.

George and Harriet Thompson's community

George attended the Yorkshire Institution from 1832-1836, leaving at about 11 years old. Perhaps he went straight to work. By 1851 he was 26, working at Gotts mill as a handle setter. This was a task towards the end of cloth production, in the finishing stages. It involved fitting teasels onto metal frames, or handles, that were fixed onto rollers on a machine. The cloth would be fed through the rollers so that the spikes teasels raised the surface of the cloth. The raised nap would later be cropped close with large shears, giving a soft, smooth surface.



Armley Mills Museum has a teasel gig amongst its collection, likely similar to the one George worked on.

Before he became a handle setter, George may well have worked as a preemer. This job was usually done by young boys and involved cleaning the fibres from teasels so they could be used again.

In 1851 George lived with his parents and younger brother and sister at Low Fold, Armley. So he would have been close enough to walk to work, along well worn paths along with his neighbours and other workers.

George's sister Harriet was also Deaf and had attended the same school. In 1851 she was 21, working as a burler, another job in cloth finishing, removing slubs, burrs and other imperfections from the fabric. Perhaps she worked at Gotts mill too? It was certainly a large employer.



In 1855 Harriet married William Rayner, a Deaf man who she knew from school. One of the witnesses was Elizabeth Crosfield, another old schoolmate.

Elizabeth lived in Armley and would have been about 20 yrs old at the time of the wedding. She started off in dressmaking then by 1861 she was, like Harriet, a cloth burler, a job she continued to do for many years. Elizabeth and Harriet ended up living close to each other and working at the same job – maybe in the same mill.

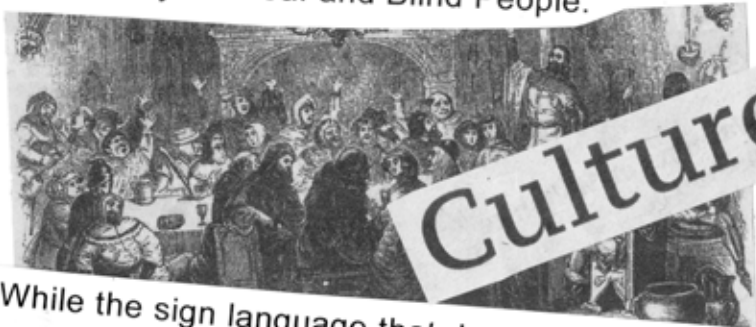


William worked as a cloth presser and Harriet continued as a burler for a few years, which was unusual for married women. Catching up with them in 1891, 68 year old William was working in the same type of role, a cloth press setter, which suggests he was settled and supporting his wife and children – there's no occupation entered for Harriet. By 1901 William was a widower

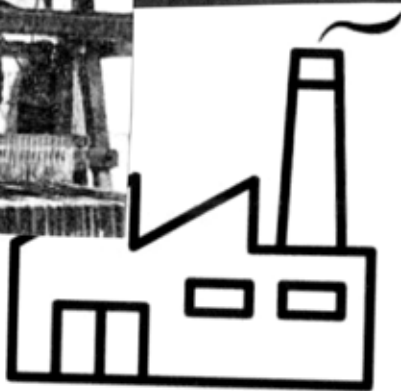
The image shows a handwritten census form with a grid structure. The text is written in cursive and is mostly illegible due to the angle and handwriting. There are some large black scribbles over parts of the form.

George Thompson married Sarah, who was also Deaf, and they had two daughters. They moved to a few different addresses, always in Armley. In the 1891 census it says George and Sarah have never had an occupation, which is clearly inaccurate. But it maybe reflects a miscommunication between the couple and the census officer. Ten years later, George was 77. The entry for his occupation is indistinct, but could refer to him receiving charity support – he would have been retired at that age.

Deaf communities were developing at this time in cities around the country, and the pupils of Deaf schools would have been at their heart. The Leeds United Institution for the Blind and the Deaf and Dumb was established in 1866. This is still in existence today as Leeds Society for Deaf and Blind People.



While the sign language that deaf people used was different and more complex than that used by hearing textile workers, communication in the mill might well have been facilitated between the different groups of Deaf and deafened workers through their use of signs and facial expressions.



Conclusion

This zine reveals some hidden histories of disabled and Deaf workers in Leeds 'woollen, worsted, flax and other textile mills, which broaden and enrich our understanding of the past. It also encourages us to think about history in a different way, to ask new questions; in this case, to put disabled people at the centre of the industrialisation and manufacturing processes, rather than pushing them to the margins.



These are just a few stories - there certainly more to discover. They perhaps challenge some widely-held notions of disabled people. They are important because they show that disabled people were, and are, part of the world. Not dependent, not tragic, not inspirational, but reliable colleagues, friends and family members with valuable contributions to make.

About the author

I am a disabled curator with a particular interest in the intersections of textiles - textile history as well as contemporary textile art - with disabled people's lives. I've organised a number of exhibitions and events that have textiles as the subject or that use textile materials. I first started researching the lives of disabled mill workers while preparing for an exhibition in Leeds called Shoddy, several years ago. I want to challenge stereotypes and to show that disabled people play a part in society, despite the barriers that society puts in our way.

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Further reading and resources

For information about the 2023 exhibition Any work that wanted doing, visit <https://anywork.org.uk/>

I've shared some of my research in a series of blog posts, including testimonies from parliamentary committees and stories of former pupils of the Yorkshire Institution for the Deaf and Dumb:

<https://shoddyexhibition.wordpress.com/category/any-work-that-wanted-doing/>

I've also written a post for Leeds Libraries, focused on books in their collection:

<https://secretlibraryleeds.net/2020/11/20/hard-workers-not-burdens-disabled-and-deaf-mill-workers-in-yorkshire/>

and one for Leeds Museums and Galleries:

<https://museumsandgalleries.leeds.gov.uk/featured/hidden-histories-of-disabled-workers/>

James Scott, a Deaf mill worker from Horbury is the subject of zine, produced thanks to a grant from Unlimited:https://issuu.com/gillcrawshaw/docs/a_hands_ome_testimonial_lo_res_zine

William Dodd's *A Narrative of the Experience and Sufferings of William Dodd a Factory Cripple* was originally published in London by L&G Seeley in 1841. It's available online in Google books, or here: <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=iau.31858046453001>

I wrote a blog about disabled mill workers in Lancashire, for the Lancashire Textile Gallery: <https://www.lancshiretextilegallery.com/exhibition/skilled-responsible-hardworking/>

David M. Turner and Daniel Blackie's book, *Disability in the Industrial Revolution: Physical impairment in British coalmining, 1780–1880* (2018), looks at disabled workers in coal mining rather than textile mills. It also challenges ideas that disabled people didn't work in the major industries of the time. As well as being available in libraries, it's also available as an open access document: <https://library.oapen.org/handle/20.500.12657/30580>

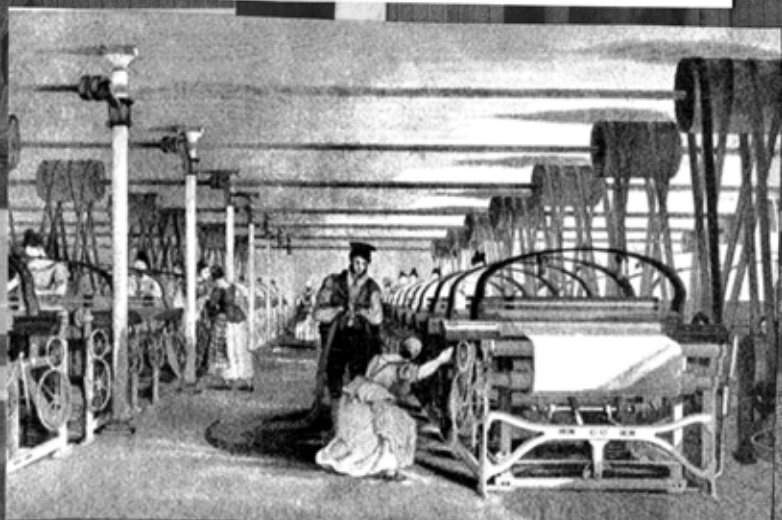
Results of an Inquiry Respecting the Former Pupils of the Yorkshire Institution for the Deaf and Dumb, 1844, reprinted with additions 1847, 1854 and 1859: a copy is available in the public Local History Library, Leeds Central Library. The Special Collections of the University of Leeds Libraries also has a copy.

I was able to read the 1832 Sadler Report thanks to a research pass at the Leeds Library:

<https://www.theleedslibrary.org.uk/> . I accessed the 1833 Factories Inquiry Commission reports at the British Library's reading room in Boston Spa.

A history of the textile industry in Leeds:

<https://www.aleedsrevolution.co.uk/made-in-leeds-the-story-of-how-textiles-built-a-city>



This zine was made possible thanks to funding from Leeds Philosophical and Literary Society.

