

AN INTRODUCTION TO BROMPTON'S LINEN INDUSTRY

This article is a consolidation of Jennifer Allison's talk to the Brompton Heritage Group on Tues 4th Nov 2003. Jennifer would like to emphasize that this is Jennifer's personal interpretation based on a number of pieces of work by other people. We are grateful to Jennifer for making these notes available for all to read.

The advertised subject was Brompton in the 19th Century, but Jennifer started much further back, and worked around the theme "Why Linen?" as Linen manufacturing was a major industry in Brompton and indirectly the reason that the Brompton Heritage Group came into existence.

Even before the Norman Conquest of 1066, Brompton was special, with so much Anglian and Danish stone carving found in the church, particularly the Hogbacks.

It was a biggish village in 1066, the Domesday book shows that part of it was a manor of 14 carucates taxable worth 40 shillings before the conquest which is not small, compared to Scruton (also 40) and Bedale 20.

After the Norman Conquest, the entire village became part of the demesne of the Bishop of Durham.

Around 1100-1200, Brompton like many villages was re-arranged from hamlets to create one central village with open fields round it, and there is a lot of evidence of Brompton being large then, even if in 2 blocks. Water End and the East side of the Green still show the layout of "tofts and long crofts" - houses at the front with a long strip of land behind. Around the village would be open fields, cultivated jointly by the villagers.

In the Poll Tax records of 1377, the number of tax payers indicates the size of towns and villages :-

Northallerton 372 (typical small market town);

Brompton 114 - that's big for round here, compare it to

Great Smeaton 124

Borrowby 104;

Danby Wiske 100

Osmotherley 55,

Ainderby Steeple 51,

Romanby 78,

Dighton 62.

Jumping forward to the 17th century we can see that it grew particularly fast in the 17th century. What evidence is there for this?

First, look at the Baptism & Burial Records in the Parish Registers held at the North Yorks Record Office. Just looking at the typed transcripts, you can count the numbers of baptisms and burials, and see that in most years there are significantly more baptisms than burials. (Exceptions were 1623-4, 1651,

1681, with many burials presumably due to a disease such as plague). Secondly, The Quarter Sessions for 1621 say ' 8 men to be discharged from their ordinary day and night watch in Brompton by reason of their dwelling in new erected houses distant from the said town'. Thirdly, the Hearth Tax of 1673 shows 81 households, meaning approx. 320-400 people, (Northallerton about 1,000). Brompton was now clearly bigger than Danby Wiske and Borrowby. The Hearth Tax also shows it was not a village of rich people. The tax was based on how many hearths a house had, so that is recorded. Clearly, more hearths = larger houses = richer people. Only one person in Brompton, Richard Walker, had 6 hearths, a few had 3 or 4, the rest had 1 or 2. However in Northallerton there were several people with 7 to 9 hearths, so evidently more wealthy.

By the end of the 17th century, the open field system in the Northern Vale of York and Cleveland was superseded by enclosed fields (enclosure), and most of Brompton had been enclosed, except for Bullamoor. The drive behind enclosure was largely economic, as livestock could be more easily grazed in enclosed fields. Butter and cheese in particular were important, and numbers of cattle increased with enclosure. The North Riding seems to have captured the London butter market at this time. The other effect of enclosure was that people had more "spare" time, so they took up other activities alongside farming - up in the dales, spinning & weaving wool, knitting, lead mining, but in Brompton, linen. This was not new, some flax was grown and linen made in the Middle Ages, but there was certainly a huge growth from the late 17th century. Firstly more in the towns (the will of George Robinson of Northallerton in 1683 has an inventory including a house with 8 rooms and a separate workshop with 2 looms plus stock, total value £140.) But only 4 Brompton wills have been found for 1660-1710 with looms, and only one of those had 2 looms. There was a gradual move away from the towns, and there is certainly evidence for Brompton in the early 1700s. A researcher has found them in Quarter Sessions records and we have examples in the registers:

1728 Ann, daughter of Chris. Langdale, weaver, baptised.
1728/9 Mary, d of Thomas Jackson, weaver, buried.
1729 Ann, d of Ambrose Jackson, weaver, baptised.
Same month, April, John Catrick, weaver, buried.

After these few the occupation is not given in the mid 18th century but burials from 1779 show plenty of weavers and baptisms in the early 19th also show masses of weavers
So, why linen? Jennifer suggested the plentiful supply of labour, and closeness to Northallerton's markets which expanded massively in the 17th and 18th centuries.

How fast did it grow? Clear evidence is in the first census of 1801 [which didn't list names]. We find 206 households, more than doubled from 1673 making a

population of approx 994. Of the 206, 55 are listed as being in 'manufacturing', more than in agriculture. Then in 1823 we have Baines Directory. This gives a population of 1223, which is up 229 in 22 years.

Moreover, it says 'over 300 weavers are employed'. This is huge growth.

Who is employing them? Baines Directory of 1823 shows 8 linen manufacturers in Brompton. This is more than elsewhere, most villages have one or two, Northallerton had 3.

See the directory at

<http://www.genuki.org.uk/big/eng/YKS/NRY/Northallerton/Northallerton23.html>

Jennifer's ancestor, Nathaniel Russell of Northallerton was a linen manufacturer, but was apparently put out of business by Brompton people. Why was Brompton more successful? Possibly due to water power, able to provide cheap power for spinning, possibly in old corn mills. The 1856 ordnance survey map shows an un-named building by the river - was it a water mill?

At the beginning of the 19th century, the employers were capitalists, organising the 'putting out' and probably the bleaching at Osmotherley. Most weavers probably rented their shops and looms.

In 1809 George Wilson of Brompton was putting out to Hutton Rudby and Appleton Wiske as well as Brompton.

John Pattison & John Wilford are also in the 1823 directory, and make earlier appearances in the Vestry Minutes of 1816. These surnames become very important later.

Also in Baines is Samuel Atkinson, slay and geer maker (slay = a weavers reed. And a weaver's reed? A comb like implement for separating warp threads and bringing the weft into proper position)

The late 18th & early 19th century was a time of great fluctuation in trade and consequent hard times when trade was poor, partly due to the effects of the Napoleonic wars. There were food riots in Northallerton during the wars, but a worse slump came afterwards in 1815.

As things got better, workers were likely to strike, even though trade unions were illegal. In December 1818, the York Herald reported 'We understand that the weavers of Brompton, near Northallerton, a few days ago unanimously turned out for an advance of wages. They assemble twice a day and conduct themselves with regularity and decorum.'

However by the following February, the paper reported 'Yesterday week, John Ayton, James Lee, Smith Long and Thomas Thompson of Brompton, journeymen linen manufacturers, were convicted at Northallerton before Richard Blanchard and Henry Hewgill Esqs. and the Rev. William Dent, three of his Majesty's Justices of the Peace for the North Riding, under the acts for entering into an unlawful combination for obtaining an advance of wages which subjects the parties to confinement in the House of Correction with hard labour for the space of 2 months.

They appealed and their conviction was overturned.

In 1824, the Combination Acts were repealed, and in April 1825 the York Herald reported 'The linen weavers of Northallerton and Brompton, in consequence of the great rise in the price of provisions, turned out last week for an advance of wages. After a few days consultation the masters acceded to their demands.'

Things got worse in the 1830's and 40's, and the country came close to revolution. There is much evidence of hard times locally. Brompton's poor house had its own weaving shop in 1822, and in 1831 Ann Irwin disliked it so much she broke out!(She must have been young, elderly inmates were regularly supplied with rum and ale)!

A Government inquiry showed appalling wages in all the linen villages and a report to the Brompton Primitive Methodist circuit says 'A great part of our members being weavers or otherwise connected with that business our finances have been affected by the depression in that trade' and in 1838 Peter Consett gave £50 to the poor of Brompton to buy blankets.

Jennifer thinks many supported Chartism.

In 1832, there was a major political change, the Great Reform Act, and what happened locally tells us something of the significance of Brompton's industry. Before 1832, Northallerton was a closed borough, with 2 MP's who were more or less appointed by Lord Harewood and Henry Peirse. After 1832, voting was opened up to householders with property worth £10 or more per annum (but not to everybody) so in Brompton 30-40 people got the vote, as well as significant numbers in Northallerton.

This was a cause for celebrations, which were centred on Brompton (not Northallerton). According to a York paper "An entire fat ox was set to roast at midnight, attracting visitors from Northallerton and other places during the morning. A half moon battery and 6 pieces of cannon fired repeated volleys during the day. The Royal George and the Union Jack flew.

Then a procession set out, also from Brompton, with a band, colours and banners flying and above all, a tableau on a wagon. There was a stage erected upon a waggon, on which a flax dresser, stripped, with tucked up sleeves and paper cap, was adroitly combing the flax before him; upon a form sat a weaver, throwing quite at his ease the swiftly gliding shuttle, ever and anon receiving his supply of bobbins from a fair maiden, who calmly and deftly turned her wheel to keep him in continual action; while an aged dame, attired in a blue gown of ancient make, sat with the utmost composure against the jovial flax dresser, drawing out the lengthened thread.' (The writer does point out that spinning is now in water powered mills)...On the front of the wagon was an 'enormously large' broom to sweep out the rotten borough."

The parade went to Northallerton and back but the dinner was on Brompton Green. There was a range of tables with a "triumphal arch of oaken boughs ornamented with flowers' for each...500 sat down to dine." BUT who was presiding?

Mr. Wilford, with Mr. Pattison the Vice.

Why them? There is evidence that much of the support for the Whig party and the Reform Act was from the Industrialists. There was no industry on this scale

in Northallerton!!

(The dinner was a huge success, with a copious supply of good ale, and afterwards about 300 females sat down to an excellent cup of tea, plum cake etc.)

Captain Boss the candidate at the next election had a committee which included 'Mr. Wilford and his three sons Aaron, John and Bartholomew, and William and John Pattison' and at the election Mr. Bartholomew Wilford was his proposer.

By 1851 the linen industry had disappeared from Northallerton & most other villages. But it stayed in Brompton - 249 looms in 1838, 238 hand loom weavers & 21 ancillary workers in 1851.

Brompton linen was noted for its quality.

In 1812, during the war with the USA, the Wilford's sold linen to The White House! A directory of 1849 said 'this place is noted for its linen weaving and the best drills manufactured in the country are said to be produced here.'

Wilford & Pattison persuaded the Leeds & Stockton railway developers to run it through the village, beside the river, and built their mills close to both. The river provided water for the steam, the railway delivered the coal and took away the finished goods. This was the start of very successful factories which ran to the 1950's, the basis of Brompton's economy.

The Pattisons and Wilfords also supported many village activities, supporting the Wesleyan Church and the British School. They continued to be powerful. Bartholomew Wilford became chairman of the new Board of Guardians for N/A and district after 1834. Benjamin Wilford's obituary in 1896 shows he was a JP, Chairman of Board of Guardians, member of County Council and workers at both mills had the day off to go to his funeral!

Much linen working was a family affair, for instance in the 1851 census we find the Atkinson family at 24, Water End

Thomas Atkinson, 58, head, weaver.

Maria Atkinson, 56, winder

Jobling Atkinson, 26 weaver

Samuel Atkinson, 23 weaver

Hannah Atkinson, 15 winder

Thomas Atkinson, 11 weaver

How long did handloom weaving last?

The 1881 census still shows some, and there is evidence there were still 3 looms in 1917 (one elderly lady at the meeting recalled her grandfather's looms).