

## MR SHENTON'S SILK MILLS AT WINCHESTER, 1796–1829

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### ABSTRACT

*The fortunes and misfortunes of Mr Shenton's Abbey Silk Mills in Winchester are described, with details of the mill machinery, hours of work, wage rates, the sources of child labour and the possible reasons why the enterprise ultimately failed. The operation of this mill is set in the context of the silk trade in Hampshire and England generally, attitudes concerning the use of child labour in factories, and the operation of the poor laws in England at the time.*

### INTRODUCTION

Hampshire's involvement in the extensive silk trade in England was small compared with the counties of the north such as Cheshire, Derbyshire and Lancashire (Warner 1921, 329). The first continuous production silk-winding factory in England was Thomas Lombe's silk mill at Derby, built in 1721 (Prosser & Christian 2008). When his patents lapsed in 1732, others were quick to follow, at Stockport in 1743, Macclesfield in 1744 and Congleton in 1753 (Warner 1921, 127, 147, 264). The silk arrived from Italy, China and India as hanks of raw silk reeled from the cocoons (Warner 1921, 204). A single silk fibre is finer than a human hair and between 5 and 30 of them had to be twisted or 'thrown' together to provide a thread strong enough for use on a loom. Although the use of water power and machinery speeded up the production process many times, the bobbins needed constant attention by relatively unskilled labour, deemed to be especially suitable for the nimble fingers of children.

Silk manufacture made a significant contribution to the economy of Hampshire, an otherwise mainly agricultural county, in the late-

eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries but subsequently declined. In 1890, T W Shore, the principal founder of the Hampshire Field Club, wrote an article entitled 'Decayed Hampshire Manufactures' which included the silk industry:

Throwing mills were established in 1792 in St Peter's Street, Winchester, the machinery being turned by manual labour. This was improved upon in 1796 by the removal of the works to a site near the Abbey Mill to get the advantage of water power. The industry seemed to have grown, for in 1807 there were mills working at Andover, Odiham, Alton, Whitchurch and Overton. At Overton, a silk factory was working as early as 1791 and so continued for more than half a century. At Andover, silk manufacture had superseded the making of shalloons by 1840. About the same time, silk weaving was the employment of many of the inhabitants of Odiham. It was still carried on by Mr J. Hide at Whitchurch, then the only remaining silk mill in the county (HI 1890, 2c).

There is an error in Shore's account in that the Overton mill was built in 1769 (HRO 11M59/E2/OVE/153985). It was probably the earliest large-scale water-powered silk throwing mill in the south of England. There was also a silk mill at Brook Street, Basingstoke (Attwood 2001, 82) and another small manufactory in Southampton (Eden 1797, 229). The histories of the Whitchurch and Overton silk mills are well documented (Deveson *et al.* 2016; Waldram 2016) but a search of the records reveals little more than the existence of silk manufactories at Alton, Andover, Basingstoke, Odiham and Southampton.

There were certainly silk weavers in Hampshire, notably in Basingstoke (Attwood 2001, 82), Winchester (Vancouver 1810, 411) and Odiham (Kerridge 1985, 136) but the bulk of

the weaving trade in England was at Spitalfields, just outside the walls of London. With the arrival of Huguenot refugees from France, Spitalfields had 15,000–18,000 hand looms by 1713 (Page 1911, 132). Even there, silk weaving was essentially a cottage industry until the importation of the mechanised Jacquard loom from about 1820 (Warner 1921, 454). Coventry was the centre for silk ribbons (Warner 1921, 107) and the best silk stockings were made at Christchurch in Dorset (Vancouver 1810, 418).

### MR SHENTON'S SILK MILL AT WINCHESTER

The archives of the Pescod family, who owned the Abbey flour mill in Winchester, contain the following proposal from Mr John Shenton (HRO 15M50/1172):

'The object which Mr Shenton has in view is to erect a building on the same principle with the Overton Silk Mill in spinning and manufacturing silk. For this purpose he intends building a working house on the south side of the Abbey Mill.'

He pointed out that silk mills need little water power and that the flour mill could remain in use and continue to perform to the public benefit. He also stressed the benefit to the city of Winchester by the employment of 300 hands and easing the burden of the poor rates on the parishes. Lastly, he claimed to have orders from the East India Company to supply all that he could manufacture.

It appears that Mr Shenton was keen to point out the public benefits of his scheme in order to get the best deal for purchasing the lease. The Abbey Mill was in Colebrook Street, east of Winchester Cathedral. It had been part of the property of St Mary's Abbey, demolished in 1535 (Ashok 2003, 49). There was already a silk manufactory in St Peter's Street, now the Royal Hotel, where the machinery was turned by hand. Mr Shenton's plan was to divert this production to his new mill driven by water power (Shore 1890, 102).

In 1796 the mill was built and John Shenton married Miss Sarah Kernot of Twyford,

Hampshire (HC 1796, 4d) However, the whole enterprise almost foundered when the flour mill caught fire (HC 1796, 4e):

On Thursday morning between two and three o'clock, the Abbey Mill was discovered to be on fire. The flames increased rapidly and, it being some time before the engines arrived, the whole of the building was consumed. The fire was prevented from doing any damage to Mr Shenton's newly erected silk mill by the great exertion of the officers and privates of the Northampton Militia in barracks there.

The mill consisted of three floors, each about 70ft. by 30ft. with a stoving room, two light tram shops, about 50ft. by 14ft. with a loft over; a counting house, sorting and ware rooms, 'very conveniently arranged with the valuable machinery on the most approved mechanical principles', working upwards of 2,000 spindles and 500 swifts, with winding and doubling engines, all driven by a breast-shot water wheel with a constant supply of water (HC 1817, 1f).

There were no looms so presumably the silk thread produced was sold to silk weavers in the city and elsewhere. The following year the business seems to have been thriving as Mr Shenton put on a public relations exercise which was duly reported in the Hampshire Chronicle (HC 1797, 1e). The correspondent pointed out the benefits to the poor and to the city of constant employment and bringing the poor the habit of industry, making them useful members of society.

Saturday March 11th, 1797, presented a spectacle pleasing to every lover of industry and commerce. The women and children, employed in these silk manufactories, formed a procession from the new mill in the Abbey to the old mill in Peter Street, where they were all regaled with a plentiful dinner at the expense of the proprietors. A flag proceeded, whereon was painted on one side, 'Youth and Age supported by Industry' and on the other, 'Prosperity in the Winchester Silk Mills.' Immediately followed an old woman of more than eighty years of age leading a child of four years old, both of whom are employed in the manufactory; as is also a blind woman, who likewise walked in the procession. The rest followed in regular order, each woman and child bearing something belonging to the manufactory, decorated with



Fig. 1 Winchester Corn and Silk Mills, 1816. Watercolour copy by Beatrice Olive Corfe c1900 of an original print by an unknown artist. Hampshire Cultural Trust, A.292

ribbons. The happy countenances of the children on this occasion must have caused a sympathetic hilarity in the breast of every humane spectator.

The article also contained a complex calculation concluding that the mill was capable of winding 13,764 miles of thread in one week on based on a ten-hour working day for six days of the week. There is another version of this account in the Hampshire Repository, 1800 (HRO 942.27, 77) with added details of earnings and some advice for parents:

In this business the children earn from 1s. 6d. to 3s. per week attending the engines. They are also brought forward to draw it single and clear the same of gouts and pickings, preparatory to being drawn into threads for which many of them receive 5s. per week; when more expert they are taught to make threads and the pay is advanced in proportion; therefore it will be found highly advantageous to parents to send children into this employ at an early period, before they contract the habits of idleness which is the usual foundation of every criminal vice.

The article did not explain why Mr Shenton wanted to advertise that the children he employed were healthy, well dressed and happy but it may have been to attract more apprentices. In February 1799, he was advertising to Overseers of the Poor in the Salisbury area (SWJ 1799, 3d) for healthy girls from 9 to 14 years of age to be taken as apprentices for the term of seven years to work in the silk mills. Estimates vary, but a labouring man probably earned about 10s. a week at this time (Clarke 2001, 477). Having a six-year old at the mill would have increased the family income by 15% and an older child earning 3s. a week would represent an increase of 30%. It certainly sounds as though it would have been attractive to a very poor family.

Mr Shenton's child workers came from three sources. Parents could engage their children with him as 'free' apprentices for a term of years in which case the family benefited from their wages. Others came from the Winchester workhouse and they got anything that remained after deductions for the cost of their board and lodging (HRO 71M81W/PO80). There were 30 poor people employed in the workhouse or at the silk mills. There were also 33 other paupers

in the workhouse, consisting of infant children and old indigent people incapable of working. Other 'parish' apprentices came from as far away as Milford (HRO 31M67PO16/1), Poole (HRO 31M67/PO16/2) and Lyndhurst (HRO 25M84/PO54/11). The arrangement was that children were indentured as apprentices for a term of seven years in a complicated legal process involving the Overseers of the Poor and Justices of the Peace.

Mr Shenton paid for 'good and sufficient food, drink and lodging' (presumably at the mill), whilst the parish paid for their clothes. Mr Shenton insisted that the girls should have a gown to wear on Sundays. If they proved to be infirm or 'not well disposed' they could be returned to their parishes (HRO 25M84/PO54/11).

Four girls from Lyndhurst were described as infants (HRO 25M84/PO54/11). Their ages are not given but, in early-nineteenth-century parlance, an infant was a child too young to be put to work which in practice meant under the age of 6 (Wilderspin 1825, 196). At the Overton Silk Mill, which provided Mr Shenton with his business model, about fifty children were taken 'in their infant state...until they are capable of work' (Sullivan 1780, 46). This was regarded as being highly charitable but it also ensured a steady supply of labour when the children became old enough to be useful. In 1810, it was reported that 300 hands were employed at the Abbey Mills and the surveyor found the children to be as 'healthy and contented as children in rural occupations' (Vancouver 1810, 410).

In 1817, John Shenton died at the age of 47 (HRO 113M86W/14). The business continued in the names of his widow, Sarah, and his brother William (HRO 113M86W/12) but there are no records of how it was faring except that the silk mill had been unsuccessfully offered for sale in 1812 (HC 1812, 1d). In 1823, Mr W. V. Shenton of Winchester was awarded a medal for the invention of an improved trammig machine but there is no record of whether it was effective (Anon 1832, 41). In 1825, Sarah Shenton approached the parish officers of Twyford, her home town, with a proposal to set up a silk manufactory there at the firm's expense (HRO 71A05/5). A lease was

taken out for a site near Twyford Bridge in the names of Sarah Shenton and her sons John and William Kernot Shenton (HRO 46M72/E130). Presumably, the Abbey Mills were profitable and the Shentons were looking to repeat their success at Twyford. However, there are no records to show that it was ever built.

Times were changing rapidly. In the interests of free trade, the Silk Act of 1824 all but abolished the import duty on raw silk and the duty on thrown silk was reduced by half. Foreign-made finished articles had previously been banned but the Act allowed their importation of from 5 July 1826 with a 30% rate of duty (Lardner 1832, 71).

In 1826, Sarah Shenton & Son petitioned Parliament, along with others (HOC 1826, 91), saying that they faced ruin, begging the House to repeal the Act of 1824 and to refrain from passing any measure for reducing the duty on foreign-made silks. There were similar petitions from all over the country to the same effect that year, including the minister, church wardens and inhabitants of Overton (HOC 1826, 817). They claimed that the Overton mill would have to close and the workers would become dependent on the parish poor rate which the petitioners could not afford.

The first indication that the Abbey Silk Mill was in trouble came in September 1828 when William Kernot Shenton advertised a new sawmill, run from the Abbey Mill water wheel, inviting customers to have their wood machined there (HC 1828, 1a). It seems they were diversifying in order to keep the mill profitable. Then, in June 1829, the Abbey flour mill and the silk mill were put up for sale at auction (HC 1829, 3f) and William Kernot Shenton, then aged 29, emigrated to Australia taking the saw mill machinery with him (Demelza 2014). That was the end of silk thread production in Winchester. The silk mill was converted to a private house (HRO 113M86W/20) but was later demolished (Turle 2004, 3).

The proprietors of the Overton silk mill survived bankruptcy in 1821 (Bankruptcy Directory 1821, 417) and struggled on until 1848 when the machinery was sold and the mill was demolished to help pay the creditors (HRO 34M87/26). Building of the Whitchurch

silk mill did not start until 1817 (Deveson *et al.* 2016, 154) and it probably never prospered but it did survive and is the only remaining silk mill in production in England on its original site.

## DISCUSSION

### *Child labour, the poor laws and the Factories Acts*

It is quite evident that Mr Shenton and those who commented on his mill clearly considered child labour to be a mutually beneficial situation for the child, the family, the rate-payers and the mill owner. Textile mills would not have been profitable without the use of child labour (Honeyman 2007, 111). Mr Shenton's banner, 'Youth and Age Supported by Industry' paraded by his workers through the streets of Winchester, neatly summarised this belief.

The benefit was perceived to be not only economic but also moral as it was considered that employment reduced 'idleness and vice.' The Visitors and Guardians of the Winchester workhouse stressed the moral aspect very strongly in 1799 (HRO 71M81W/PO80), claiming that their object was not just to reduce the poor rates, but was equally directed to the still more desirable one 'of bringing up the children in the habits of religion, morality and honest industry, thereby rendering them useful members of society who would, but for this institution, have been strolling and begging in the streets, abandoned to ignorance and vice, at once both the wretched outcasts and pernicious pests of society'. In other words, they would be stealing to say alive.

A Select Committee of the House of Commons in 1817 recorded that the amounts expended on the poor rates more than doubled between 1785 and 1803 (HOC 1817, 10). They attributed the rise to population growth, reduced wages, poor harvests in some years, the increased price of corn and, in some cases, misapplication of funds. Anyone offering to employ children was welcomed by the rate payers.

The Overseers in Winchester were working to Thomas Gilbert's Act of 1782 (Vancouver 1810, 410) which enabled parishes to provide a workhouse for 'children, the Aged, Infirm,

and Impotent' who were 'not able to maintain themselves by their Labour' (Shave 2008, 1). The other main task of the Overseers was to provide employment for the able-bodied within the workhouse (which was then called a 'House of Industry') or to find them jobs with other employers.

Mr Shenton may have been a relatively benign employer by the standards of the time since his apprentices only worked a ten-hour day when some manufacturers were making them work for over twelve hours and at night (Honeyman 2007, 234). Taking on parish apprentices from a distance, as Mr Shenton did, was not unusual. At this time, many London parishes exported young children for factory work not only to the home counties but also to the Midlands and the north of England (Honeyman 2007, 52).

However, not everyone at the time believed that all this was benign and beneficial. The first of a series of scandals about conditions in cotton mills (Honeyman 2007, 239) was at the Radcliffe Mill, Manchester in 1784. The four doctors who wrote the report effectively said that the children were being stunted or deformed by long hours of labour (Meiklejohn 1959, 68). The social reformer, John Thelwall, who visited the Overton silk mill in 1797, asked (Thompson 2008, 187), 'What is a huge manufactory but a common prison house in which a hapless multitude are sentenced to hard labour so that an individual may rise to unwieldy opulence?' William Blake's reference to 'dark satanic mills' in his poem 'Jerusalem' (1804) is thought to be a reference to conditions at the Abbey Flour Mills near his home in London which was destroyed by fire in 1792 (Eadle & Eadle 2013, 124).

This agitation was taken up by Robert Peel and Robert Owen and resulted in the first of the Factories Acts in 1802 which banned night work and limited the working day to twelve hours. Robert Peel's Cotton Mills and Factories Act of 1819 forbade the employment of children under the age of nine and the distance from home that parish apprentices could be sent to work. However, there was still no means of enforcement and it was widely ignored (Honeyman 2007, 52). Proprietors successfully claimed that the environment in silk mills was much less dusty and 'not injurious to health'

(McCunnie 2002, 57). Neither of these Acts applied to silk mills, despite the fact that the children working there tended to be younger and worked longer hours (McCunnie 2002, 58). The long campaign to end child labour and provide compulsory primary education did not finally pass into law until the Education Act of 1880.

### *The silk trade*

Silk was a luxury product and fortunes could be made when times were good but silk mills were also a risky investment. Even before 1826, over a thousand English proprietors in the silk trade went out of business every year (HOC 1832, 436). Between 1773 and 1824, including the period of the French wars, the English home market was protected by a ban on imports of manufactured silks and there was little reason for the weavers to improve their art. Smuggled French goods of good quality were eagerly sought, which made home manufacturers nervous about removal of the ban. Silk manufacture was also liable to serious fluctuations with every change in fashion and this constant alternation of prosperity and distress had always attended the silk trade of England. It was with a view to lessen this fluctuation that, in 1824, the whole system was changed. It was hoped that during the two years before the admission of foreign manufactured goods in 1826, the weavers would have been able to prepare for successful rivalry with the foreign weaver (Lardner 1832, 71).

The results of the Act were disastrous. A Select Committee was set up in 1831 to enquire into the state of the industry. Controversially, it did not publish a report but did circulate the evidence taken (HOC 1832, 436). It was worse for silk throwsters than for weavers because setting up a throwing mill involved a large expenditure of capital whilst weavers only had to bear the cost of a hand loom. In summary, the evidence showed that imports of raw and thrown silk rose dramatically but the foreign throwsters used the best quality raw silk, leaving the lower quality raw silk for export to England. Wages in the Italian and French mills were much lower than in England, so the English throwster, despite the remaining duty, could

not compete on price. Wages in the English mills fell and thousands of workers became dependent on parish poor relief. The number of bankruptcies in 1826 more than doubled and remained high for the rest of the period. The smaller firms suffered most because they had little capital to see them through hard times and could not improve their methods or the quality of their products. We do not know exactly why the Abbey silk mill failed in 1828 but it was certainly not alone.

## CONCLUSIONS

The story of the Shentons' silk mill at Winchester between 1796 and 1829 provides us with an insight into attitudes concerning child labour,

the operation of the poor laws, and the state of the silk trade in England during this period.

It is evident that the authorities were struggling to cope with a system of poor relief that was failing because demand had increased and budgets were out of control. The provisions of Gilbert's Act were humane and did provide care for those unable to support themselves. The aim was to get the able-bodied poor into work and, at a time when the great majority of children were not in school, they were part of the solution. Whilst John Shenton may have been a benign employer, others were not and it was during this period that ideas about universal human rights, especially those of children, began to be applied to the factory system of employment.

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