Research into disabled mill workers

**Any work that wanted doing:**Hidden stories of disabled mill workers

*by Gill Crawshaw*

Disabled people have always been part of the textile workforce in the north of England, but their contributions have often gone unrecognised. Once the industrial revolution got underway, 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 snippets of information that give us fresh insights into their lives.

This article gives an overview of some of the things I’ve found out. It focuses on Yorkshire but I discovered similar evidence for a piece I wrote for the [Lancashire Textile Gallery](https://www.lancashiretextilegallery.com/exhibition/skilled-responsible-hardworking/).

These stories are valuable because they 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.

**An occupational hazard**

It’s well-known that weavers in the textile factories became expert lip readers. They had to be - the weaving sheds 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 for the weavers, 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! 

Weavers had been working in factories or mills, amongst the tremendous din of power-looms, 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 twentieth century.

This is from a study of Huddersfield women textile workers in the 20th century by Belinda Perfitt (2014):

*The noise of the looms was so loud that they learned to communicate with signs and to lip read. None of the weavers I spoke to had been given ear protection; as a consequence they were now suffering from work related hearing loss in their later years.*

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.*

The textile industry was a cause of widespread disablement amongst its workers. Industrial injury was a feature of early factory work, yet many disabled workers proved to be resilient and carried on.

As well as the constant loud noise, there were other hazards. 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.

This wasn’t necessarily equated with 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.

**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 have taken on their bodies.

The title of the exhibition is taken from John Dawson’s statement to the Factories Commission. John lived in Leeds and had started working at Shaw and Tennant’s flax mill as a doffer at the age of six or seven, about 20 years previously. 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.*

Here is an excerpt from David Bywater’s evidence to the Sadler committee (the lines are numbered in the report to make it easier to reference):

* 619. 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.
* 620. Were you perfect in your limbs when you undertook that long and excessive labour?--Yes, I was.
* 621. What effect did it produce upon you?-It brought a weakness on me; I felt my knees quite ache.
* 622. Had you pain in your limbs and all over your body?—Yes.
* 623. Show what effect it had upon your limbs ?- It made me very crooked.
* [Here the Witness showed his knees and legs.]
* 624. Are your thighs also bent? Yes, the bone is quite bent.
* 625. 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.
* 626. What did they tell you? They told me I was getting very crooked in my knees; my mother found it out first.
* 627. What did she say about it? She said I should kill myself with working this long time.
* 628. 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.

Joseph Hebergam of Huddersfield was 17 when he spoke to the committee. He had started working as a worsted spinner aged 7.

* 4182. How long was it before the labour took effect on your health?-Half a year.
* 4183 And did it at length begin to affect your limbs?-When I had worked about half a year, a weakness fell into my knees and ankles; it continued, and it has got worse and worse.
* 4184. Was that weakness attended with very great pain, and the sense of extreme fatigue?--Yes.
* 4185. Had you to work as often as you could under these circumstances? - Yes.
* 4186. Otherwise no allowance would have been made to you by the occupier of the mill ? -No.
* 4187. How far did you live from the mill? A good mile.
* 4188. Was it very painful for you to move? Yes, in the morning I could scarcely walk, and my brother and sister used out of kindness to take me under each arm, and run with me to the mill, and my legs dragged on the ground in consequence of the pain; I could not walk.

It’s hard for us to imagine that disabled children had to be carried, by family members and neighbours, to the factories so they could carry on working. But this was a common occurrence at that time. Richard Wilson of Bradford said:

*I had a brother who went to the mill when he was about 8 years old, and he became so deformed, that he had to be carried backwards and forwards. My parents were poor, and they could not maintain us except we went to mills.*

Elizabeth Bentley of Leeds told the Factories Commission that she’d become ill through breathing fibres in the carding room. 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.*

Samuel Rhodes of Keighley described “waggon-loads” of disabled mill children in Keighley, sometimes whole families becoming “deformed” (as the Sadler committee members put it at the time).

This was borne out by Gillett Sharp, Keighley’s overseer of the poor, who observed “it is my opinion, according to my observation, that there is not another town worse, in proportion to the size of it.”

**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. He mentions other disabled people who worked in the mills. 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.

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.”

Workers didn’t just accept the terrible conditions passively. In the 18th and 19th centuries they started to come together 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. Turner and Blackie (2018) show that this was certainly the case in coal mining, where disabled miners were active trade unionists. Disabled people were shaping the world of factory work, fighting to improve conditions for themselves and the workers who came after.

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 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. Other 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 what ever work that wanted doing.

**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 those pupils were doing now. The school wanted to show that the education that they’d provided had made their pupils into useful, productive citizens.

The survey returns, sometimes with extra comments or letters, 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, in woollen, flax and linen factories. They became power-loom weavers, pattern designers, bobbin winders, worsted hankers, handle setters, wool sorters and pickers, doffers, spinners, woolcombers and cloth dressers.

Many of them stayed in these jobs throughout their lives, as census records show. One of YIDD’s former pupils, James Scott, worked in textile mills for many decades. His employer, Richard Poppleton, gave him a glowing report:

*“I have much pleasure in replying to your inquiries respecting the conduct of James Scott, once an inmate of your Institution. He entered on my service on the 28th June, 1852, as a hanker of worsteds and general packer, at twelve shillings a week, and has been employed at the same wages ever since; prior to that time he had been employed by another firm in a similar manner, from whom he holds a handsome testimonial…*

*“I have inquired of his family this morning as to his general conduct at home, of which they speak very satisfactorily; a married sister, whom I saw, says that he carries his wages home very regularly to his mother with whom he lives, and that he is her main support… He is very attentive to his work and very obliging."*

James was reliable and dependable, rather than dependent - in fact, others depended on him, as he supported his widowed mother until she died.

The survey responses provide a fascinating snap shot of Deaf people’s working lives, and to attitudes of the time. The reports are quite mixed, for example, Sarah Hartley, who was a bobbin-winder, at Dickinson and Barraclough, Leeds:

1. Her employment has been winding bobbins for power-loom weavers.
2. She learned the business with the same facility as others.
3. Her conduct has been proper.
4. She is not quite so even-tempered as other girls in the same employment.

Sarah later became a stuff (worsted) weaver, which would have been a promotion. She married another former pupil from YIDD, George Stables. Following her marriage, no occupation is listed for Sarah in the census.

One worker, George Thompson, actually worked at Armley Mills, owned by Gotts at the time. George was a handle setter, working in cloth finishing. His job was fixing teasels into metal frames to raise the nap of the fabric.

1. He acquired the business equally fast, and as well as others.
2. His conduct has been good.
3. When he is of age he will be able to earn as good wages as any other men in the same employment.

George later worked as a dyer. He married and raised a family. His sister Harriet, also Deaf, worked in a mill too, as a cloth burler, another job in the finishing process.

Deaf communities were developing at this time in cities around the country, and the pupils of Deaf schools would have been at their heart. 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.

**Disabled veterans join the workforce**

Following World War One, there was an influx of disabled workers into industries across the country, including local textile mills such as AW Hainsworths in Farsley and William Lupton’s Whitehall Mills.

This was encouraged by The King’s National Roll, a scheme set up in 1920 to give employment to disabled ex-servicemen, and hundreds of the county’s textile businesses were keen to take part. Disabled veterans took up jobs in all branches of the industry, from spinning and weaving to finishing, bleaching and dyeing. The scheme was a success, proving that disabled people were reliable and useful workers. However, the lessons learned were perhaps short-lived.

**More recent stories**

If more recent accounts of mill work touch on disability issues and disabled workers, they tend to address hearing loss, deafness and lip reading. This is a significant part of the narrative of disabled workers, so other examples are not as common. Like deafness, other forms of impairment were viewed as part of the job by mill workers, so widespread as to be unremarkable.

Olive Brown was a worsted mender, interviewed by Vivien Teasdale for her book Huddersfield Mill Memories (2006), who remarked:

*They always said you had one hip less than the other through carrying the pieces, same with weavers.*

I recently spoke with Frank, a Wakefield man who had been an overlooker and manager in different spinning mills in the district. As well as a long-serving and well-respected Deaf worker, Frank recalled several disabled colleagues who took up roles in yarn production. Some jobs, such as printing the paper bands that go round balls of wool, could be done sitting down, and these jobs, which carried a level of responsibility, could be done by disabled workers. And because lip reading almost “came naturally” to the factory “girls”, they were able to communicate with Stan, their Deaf supervisor, quite easily.

**Conclusion**

This article reveals some hidden histories of disabled and deaf workers in Yorkshire’s 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 are bound to be more. 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.

**Further reading and resources**

I’ve shared more 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 of Horbury is the subject of a zine, produced thanks to a grant from [Unlimited](https://weareunlimited.org.uk/): <https://issuu.com/gillcrawshaw/docs/a_handsome_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>

Belinda Perfitt’s 2014 M Phil thesis, *Women Textile Workers in the Twentieth Century: An Oral History of the Huddersfield Woollen District 1930-1990*is available at: <https://bradscholars.brad.ac.uk/handle/10454/13981>

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. I accessed the Factories Inquiry Commission, 1833, at the British Library’s reading room in Boston Spa.

The venue for *Any work that wanted doing* is Leeds Industrial Museum at Armley Mills:

<https://museumsandgalleries.leeds.gov.uk/leeds-industrial-museum/>

For information on the history of Armley Mills, once the largest woollen mill in the world, see Wikipedia: <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Leeds_Industrial_Museum_at_Armley_Mills>

A comprehensive history of the textile industry in Leeds: <https://www.aleedsrevolution.co.uk/made-in-leeds-the-story-of-how-textiles-built-a-city>

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