

THE COTTON INDUSTRY IN ROTHESAY.

By EX-PROVOST SHARP.

[Read 8th December, 1908.]

I have been asked to give you a short account of the Cotton Industry in Rothesay, and trust I may be able to put before you a few circumstances which were at one time so obvious that they were not thought worth preservation, and are now many of them beyond recovery. Cotton spinning and weaving is an extremely old and almost universal industry in every semi-civilized country. India is perhaps the original home of the trade, and possibly it dates as far back as two or three thousand years before the Christian era. Where carried on in the native villages to-day it is in precisely the same stage as at the beginning. The very finest yarn is spun between the finger and thumb of the operator, assisted with a spindle or distaff. The loom is a collection of wood and string erected over a shallow pit dug under a tree, the native sits with his feet in the hole, his toes thrust into a string which moves the heddles, and with this primitive contrivance he weaves a piece of cloth which looks, when spread on the ground, as gossamer. Perseverance and untiring industry and patience enter largely into the composition of the piece. It is rather curious that India, with its torrid climate, where people could well do without clothing, originated this art, while the British, with their miserable cold wet climate, were entirely ignorant of the art and only learned it from the Romans, who, in the invasion of this country, found the natives nearly naked and clothed in skins.

But let us return to Rothesay from India. I propose to give you the history of the old Cotton Spinning Coy. more

fully than any of the others, because I regard it as the mother of all the others. It was situated at the back of the present Meal Mill and in the Orphanage ground. Most of you will be aware that Arkwright was the perfecter of the spinning machine; he obtained his first patent for spinning with rollers in 1769. Mr James Kenyon, in 1779, had the address to buy off from Arkwright some men who knew how to make his machines as well as work them. With their assistance he proposed to set up works in Scotland, spin yarn and send it back to England; the patent did not extend to Scotland then. The Earl of Hopetoun was approached with a view of obtaining a suitable site, but, although having the management of his own estate, he could not grant a long lease. Mr Robert Oliphant, of Rossie, Postmaster-General, and concerned with the management of the Earl of Bute's estates, hearing of the dilemma the projectors were in, very strongly recommended them to come to Bute, as in every way more suitable for their purpose than Annandale. They were very difficult to convince of this until it was explained to them that there was an unlimited supply of water; the island was close to Greenock, where cotton could be bought and their yarn could be sold in Glasgow and Paisley; if not, it could be shipped by vessel to England.

Rothesay was then as unknown and far off to the average Englishman as one of the West Indian islands is to-day. The coach took 12 hours to travel between Glasgow and Edinburgh, and the mail has been known to arrive from London at Glasgow with only one letter for the latter city. A visit to Bute convinced them that Mr Oliphant's picture was not overdrawn. The Earl of Bute, ever ready to encourage useful undertakings, and anxious to ameliorate the conditions of the town of Rothesay, granted most liberal terms indeed, terms which must have astonished the projectors by their generosity. The matter of the lease being arranged, Mr Kenyon and his friends constructed machinery, and to keep his men employed put them into an old Flax Mill, still standing as a house at the end of the old gas works. This little mill was to serve till their first, or as it was called, old mill, was

built. Workers were trained there, and I may mention that the grandmother of a present live ex-Provost, who was the daughter of the gardener of Mount Stuart and lived in Mr Bateman's house then, walked in and out every morning and night, working as a piecer all day. The wheel of this little mill was next the gas work and driven from the Lade, which then came down John Street.

The Encyclopedia Britannica says that the first mill was erected at Penicuik. Evidently, if so, nothing came of it, so we will hold to the old Flax Mill. I would respectfully recommend that an inscription should be let into the wall explaining the fact.

It is inconceivable to those who are only acquainted with a modern cotton mill how such a humble little place could hold any machinery at all. Still the fact remains, and out of this little beginning sprung the gigantic trade which brought industrious habits, prosperity and comfort as well as riches to so many, and laid the foundation of future greatness, filling all over the West of Scotland numerous little towns with industrious populations, wherever water power was to be had.

While the little, or old mill, a place of about 100 feet by 30 feet and 4 storeys was building, Kenyon's men were hard at work with an excellent machine shop which they erected, making the machinery. At this date (1780) they made most of their own machinery. As there were no machine shops in Scotland, making cotton machinery, workers were trained in the little old Flax Mill.

The first mill having been built and started, I would remark the machinery was very primitive and small, the speeds were slow and much of the work which ultimately was done by the machines had to be then done by the workers. It was, of course, driven by water, a plentiful supply being got from Loch Fad. Steam engines were not used. Watt only obtained his first patent in 1782. Kenyon seems to have sold the Mill in 1785, as the *Glasgow Mercury*, of 28th July in

that year, contained the following advertisement:—"Sale of a Cotton Mill.—To be sold by public roup on Tuesday, the 20th of September next, in the Tontine Coffee House, Glasgow. the Cotton Mill, late erected at Rothesay, in the island of Bute, with the whole carding, roving and spinning machinery therein, complete for near 1000 spindles, all constructed on the most approved principles, and, it is allowed, produces twist of the best quality, as also 20 spinning jennies, all new and in complete condition, and chiefly calculated for fine wefts. The situation is favourable for obtaining any number of hands that may be necessary for carrying on the business." This must have been one of the earliest sales of a Cotton Mill, and would, no doubt, attract much attention. I cannot say why it was sold. We shall see further on who were the new proprietors. All seemed to go on well. I fancy the new company was prosperous, as they built a second mill, facing Mill Street. It was a handsome structure of about 150 by 40 feet, and 5 storeys. This, as shown by a stone preserved in the Bute Estate Office, was erected in 1791. This mill was filled with machinery constructed by Wm. Dunn, of Glasgow, a noted machine maker in his day, and partly of stuff made by themselves. When this place was set agoing I think there was some fear that the manufacture of yarn would outstrip the demand from the loom. One of the men brought by Kenyon from England, Thomas Rogerson, knew all about the Fly Shuttle, invented by John Kay, of Bury (1740), then universally adopted in England, and which greatly increased the production of the hand loom. Indeed it was almost as great an improvement on the old hand loom as the power loom became on the hand loom. Mr Oliphant advised that this man should be sent to Glasgow in the interest of the Cotton Company, to shew the weavers there, who had no knowledge whatever of the Fly Shuttle. He made several looms for them and wove some webs, but such was the perversity of the Scotch that they had to be bribed into compliance with the invention by higher wages; although they could do far more work by its use than by the older and far more laborious way; indeed, a good worker could, I should say, almost double his work. Owing to the large

increase in machinery, the Company, about this time (1800), found themselves getting somewhat short of water, and they had to put in a steam engine of 10 h.p. to supplement the wheel of the first mill, and shortly after a second engine of 20 h.p. was installed to help the wheel of the large mill. What has become of Mr Oliphant's inexhaustible supply of water? I said I thought the mills a success, and I was decidedly startled to find that in 1812, when the mills were owned by Messrs Anderson, Bannatynes, Alex. Dunlop and Fullerton, that Lord Bute's factor had to report to his Lordship that the concern was bankrupt, that the Company was utterly ruined, in particular, that Mr Anderson had put in his whole, a considerable, fortune and was completely cleaned out; it would have to be stopped, and it would be most disastrous to the town of Rothesay, which depended so largely on it. There seemed to be even a difficulty in selling, and it would, if sold at all, only bring about one-third of the price it cost. Immediately after, follows a second letter from the same source, informing his Lordship that Mr George Robinson, a public spirited Rothesay man, ship owner and merchant, who lived in the house within the Castle grounds, exactly opposite the present Bute Estate Office, the house was bought and pulled down by the late Lord Bute when he cleared out the Castle grounds—suggested that as the concern was bankrupt and there was a difficulty in selling, Lord Bute should approach the Government and endeavour to persuade them to buy the mills, and keep a number of the Frenchmen, who were prisoners of war at this time, in them. Think, gentlemen, if this had happened, what a difference it would have made to Rothesay. We might have been initiated into the mysteries of breeding and cooking frogs, eating snails, and no end of other French delicacies, but it was not to be. About this time we were passing through a very severe crisis in the trade. There was a large mill built by Mr Bartholmew, the father of the late Mr Bartholmew, owner of Ann's Lodge, Ascog. He believed cotton spinning was about done, and when he built his mill it was so arranged (fire places being put through the whole of it) that it could be turned into dwelling-houses.

In 1813 the mills were acquired at a low figure by Messrs Wm. Kelly and Robert Thom. Mr Kelly was at one time manager of Lanark Mills, and latterly a partner in the Blackburn Mills, and an improver of cotton machinery. Mr Thom was an eminent C.E., born in Tarbolton, in 1775. He brought the water into Greenock and Paisley, the Loch made by him above Greenock being to this day spoken of as Loch Thom. In 1826 Mr Kelly retired and sold the mills to Mr Thom, who thus became the sole proprietor. Buying the estate of Ascog, Mr Thom assumed Mr Struthers into the firm.

In 1815 Mr Thom constructed a number of water cuts throughout the island. These cuts were fitted with self-acting sluices, and measured in all 6 miles 6 furlongs and 100 yards, and more than doubled the water power. The proprietors were enabled to lay aside their steam engines, thereby saving an expenditure which had rendered their works hitherto so unprofitable. The water power of these mills was now equal to a Bolton & Watt steam engine of 70 h.p. The expense of cutting the $6\frac{1}{4}$ miles of cuts, forming new reservoirs, enlarging old ones and adding to the embankment was about £3000. Mr Thom was supposed to have made the embankment across the Meadow at the High Church, but that embankment was certainly there at the time he was an infant in his cradle, but he heightened and greatly strengthened it when making the cuts. There was a scare in 1840 and again in 1860 that this embankment would burst, and although that did not happen, the Foley Burn burst, carrying away household utensils, poultry, pigs, &c. When the Company's lease was granted they were to have the right to all the water that could be turned into Loch Fad. Mr Thom so effectually scooped up all the water at this time that he took it entirely away from Mount Stuart House. Lord Bute naturally contended that this was never intended, and went to court with him, but the Judges decided that Mr Thom was within his right, and Lord Bute had to find another supply. Some time about now the first or old mill as it was called was burned down. It was, however, rebuilt, and a storey added,

making it 5 storeys, the same as the large, or new mill. No doubt new and improved machinery would be put in, but it was such a narrow house that not much could be made of it. Mr Duncan Salmond along with Mr Struthers purchased the works from Mr Thom. On the retiral of Mr Struthers the works were owned by Mr Salmond. These two mills contained, when at their utmost capacity, 16,000 spindles, and employed 700 hands, but when employing this number of hands they had 200 hand looms scattered throughout the countryside. These were—in Rothesay 113, Port Bannatyne 25, Cumbræ 27, Largs 10, Lochgilphead 13, and Tarbert 12. With the growing demand for their yarns, and the advent of the power loom at the beginning of the century they gradually gave up the hand looms, confining themselves to spinning. Gas lighting was introduced into the town of Rothesay in 1840, but the Cotton Company had their works lit up with gas long before this. Lord Bute recommended the lighting of the town with gas in 1834, but nothing came of it.

With the invention of cotton spinning by power it began to be realised that a power loom must be invented. Many thought this could not be done, but a clergyman of the name of Cartwright thought otherwise, and began a series of experiments, and brought out a very good loom (patented 1778), but after expending and losing from £30,000 to £40,000, his loom was found to be unworkable from the fact that he could not find any means of preventing the shuttle smashing all the yarn when it stuck between the two ends of the loom. This, in other hands, was found the simplest thing imaginable, but for years it puzzled the best mechanics. He was, however, awarded, in 1809, £10,000 by way of compensation, and I daresay the rev. doctor thought himself a very ill-used man by his country. The first Power Loom Mill started in Rothesay was in the old Tan Work, which was built specially by Mr Charles M'Kinlay for his brother-in-law, Mr Doig. It held about 150 looms, and he continued there till he built a new mill in 1840, in High Street, containing 280 looms. Another weaving mill followed shortly after, built in Ladeside Street by Mr John Robertson, who sold it to Messrs A. & J.

M'Kirdy. This mill contained 305 looms, and a little further on my father, with some other gentlemen, built Broad Croft Spinning and Weaving Mills, ultimately owned by myself after my father's death, containing 27,000 spindles and 450 looms. At this time, say 1855, the cotton trade of Rothesay was at its best; there were in all 43,000 spindles and 1015 looms employing—

Old Cotton, say	-	400	spinning.
Broadcroft,	-	130	do.
Do.	-	285	weaving.
A. & J. M'Kirdy,	-	210	do.
Doig & Coy.,	-	190	do.
1215 hands,			
earning £30,000.			

Other inventors were at work on Cotton Machinery besides Arkwright. Hargrave invented the Spinning Jenny first of 8 spindles turned by hand, and then 80 spindles, patented 1770. Previous to this one man or woman wrought only 1 spindle, and it is calculated that 50,000 spindles driven by power could easily have spun all the cotton yarn that was used throughout England. Crompton invented (in 1775) Mule Jenny a compound of Arkwright's Spinning Frame and Hargrave's Spinning Jenny.

Mr Thom was in the belief that, with his sluices and water cuts, he would retain mills and workers in country districts driven by water instead of steam. The problem is still to solve, how to get workers back to the country districts. The country artisan prefers the excitement and carnal joys of the town to the pure air of his native place, with its deadly dullness. They work, in many cases, for less wages in town. Mr Miller, manager of the Blantyre Mills, used to declare that he had taught half the workers of Glasgow. They would set off on a Saturday afternoon, tramp into Glasgow, and never reappear again at Blantyre. One great reason Mr Thom gave for his fondness of country workers was their superiority of character. I was rather struck with this, and, after making

very close inquiry with some prejudice against his doctrine, I am bound to admit that, in the case of the old cotton mills, he was correct. No doubt in the early days of the industry, the Company had the pick of the working class of the West. Before teetotal societies there was no drinking among them worth talking about. So moral were they that they got Mr Salmond to stop the mills to let them get to Church on the preaching Saturday, making up for the lost time of the forenoon by working overtime in the afternoon. After the introduction of the Factory Act this was illegal, but any man or woman had liberty to go to Church if they chose. I never had such a model lot, although I thought I was well served. A man with a horn went through the town in the morning to waken the workers up. They had to start at 5.30 and did not stop till 7 o'clock at night. The children had then to go to the night school, which, when over, meant straight to bed. Pretty hard work in those days, but they had some fun occasionally. As far off as I can remember every Queen's Birthday the cotton mill lads had a large bonfire of old boats from the harbour and shores, and when Bang the Beggar, our one policeman, interfered with them, they had a royal hunt of Bang through the town. The Glasgow people were in the habit of coming to Rothesay for change of air, and they got it. Our harbour was the most evil smelling place conceivable, the public privy being a wooden structure standing in the inner harbour. The mill boys rectified all this by setting fire to the structure and Peter Rankine's fish shop at the Quay head. At the first meeting of Council thereafter, a ponderous and wooden-headed Bailie rose to propose its renewal by observing, "My Lord, a Public Privy is a great necessary," he never got any further with his speech, but I doubt if he saw his own joke. The Spinners enjoyed a monopoly of the profession of precentors, many of them being accounted far above the average.

There was a very fine brass band in connection with the mill, and altogether they were a most orderly and respectable lot of men and women. Some of the young people, owing to the long hours worked, were not of much account, and there

is no doubt that the Factory Acts were much needed and most beneficial. The mills lost nothing in quantity by the first reduction in the working time to $10\frac{1}{2}$ hours per day, as the workers being fresher made up the time lost by a little harder work, but latterly they suffered when the time was brought under the $10\frac{1}{2}$ hours, even although both spindles and looms were driven much faster. There is a limit to speed and workers cannot be altered so quickly as the machines. Almost any weaver can attend to two looms running at 150 picks per minute, but it took altogether a different worker to keep two looms going at 200 picks per minute.

We often had a visit from Inspectors in the interests of the workers, but, curiously enough, all the operatives regarded them as their deadliest enemies, and on their appearance at any one mill it was in some mysterious way known in five minutes throughout the other three mills, even before it was known in the office. If there were any children employed under 13 years of age they had all most miraculously disappeared. I was once visiting an empty flat, and the Inspector was looking out of the window when I observed a large upturned basket moving slowly across the floor like a huge tortoise, without any sign of motive power. Needless to say, we did not remain a moment longer in such an uncanny place.

I have now given you the short story of the Rothesay Cotton Trade. The original mills died a natural death through decrepitude and old age. They were, from their original construction, as I have explained, impossible to modernise, but the others, all excellent and good works, had to shut up, one after another. My own, which had been bought by the Messrs A. & J. M'Kirdy, was the last to go. Sometimes you will hear people, when puzzled what to make of some queer looking building, saying, you might make a kirk or a mill of it. Who would have thought of saying, you might make a mill or a gas work of it. Such was the fate of Broadcroft.

There were several causes operating against the Cotton Trade in Scotland, and more particularly in Rothesay. As they are somewhat controversial I shall not enter into a discussion of the matter, but I most unhesitatingly assert that Free Trade was the last blow which put us out of existence, and as surely as when, in the animal world, a species, by some law not yet quite understood, becomes extinct, that species is never again resurrected, so in the world of trade, Rothesay has lost her spinning and weaving, and her population are destined never again to hear the hum of the spindle or bang of the loom.

TOKENS USED AT THE ROTHESAY COTTON MILLS.

BY MR JOHN H. PRATT.

[Read 8th December, 1908.]

May I, as a small addition to the very interesting account we have just listened to, refer to the "Tokens" that were in use at Rothesay Cotton Mills for payment of wages. These Silver Tokens were of 3 face values, 5s, 3s 4d, 1s 8d. Spanish dollars were made use of for this purpose. The value stamped on face, and "Payable at Rothesay Cotton Mills." The dollar was for 5s, two-thirds of dollar, 3s 4d; one-third, 1s 8d. This third was part cut out of the dollar valued at 3s 4d. It is very probable that these Tokens were in use about 1800 to 1814. It may be asked, "Why were Tokens used?" The answer is this, "The Mills were started at a period when the coinage was in a most deplorable state; so deficient for requirements of the country that the Token became substitute." From 1760 to 1787 there was only one small issue of silver coins by the Royal Mint, and it was only in 1816 that the great recoinage took place, and most acceptable. The Bank of England issued silver Tokens from 1797 to 1816 in various values. What is a Token? Certainly a money Token represents more than the intrinsic value of the metal it is made of, therefore it was required of the issuer to have his name and address stamped on the Token for a guarantee to the public, as for some years Tokens were a legal tender, in fact until 1814, when, by Act of Parliament, all silver Tokens were called in.