

THE SPITALFIELDS SILK WEAVERS: LONDON'S LUDDITES?

Pretty much everyone has heard of the Luddites, although many people still have a misconception about the reasons why they destroyed machinery. The weavers of Yorkshire, Nottinghamshire, Lancashire and Leicestershire smashed machine looms not because they were blindly opposed to progress, or afraid of new technology, but because the introduction of machinery was undermining the livelihoods of themselves and their communities. They viewed new technology through the eyes of artisans accustomed to a certain amount of autonomy: from being well-paid workers working mainly under their own terms, often in their own homes, they were being reduced to poverty, and clearly saw that mechanisation was transforming them into wage slaves, increasingly forced into factories. Their challenge to new technology was based on both desperation and self-interest: machine-weaving was benefitting the masters and increasing their profits, at the workers' expense, but machines could be used to improve the lives of those who created the wealth, if their use was controlled by the workers themselves.

It's all about who's making the decisions, and in whose interests... A question of control, how new technological developments change our work, strengthening us or those who live off our labour; a question that remains alive and crucial today.

Two hundred years after the Luddite campaigns of machine-smashing and uprisings, many people are rightly remembering them, commemorating their uncompromising collective resistance, as well as continuing the debate about how technology should be used.

Check out two sites of groups involved in commemorating the Luddites and discussing the uses and control of new technologies today:

Luddites200: www.luddites200.org.uk or luddites200blog.org.uk/

Luddite Bicentenary: ludditebicentenary.blogspot.com

Less well known than the Luddites, though, another group of workers also fought the imposing of machinery and the factory system against their interests - the silk weavers of Spitalfields, in London's East End. Four decades before the Luddite uprisings, the silkweavers' long battle against mechanisation came to a head in violent struggles. Like the Luddites, their campaign was volatile and violent, and was viciously repressed by the authorities. But their struggles were more complex and contradictory, in that sometimes they were battling their employers and sometimes co-operating with them; to some extent they won more concessions than their northern counterparts, holding off mechanisation for a century, and maintaining some control over their wages and conditions, at least for a while.

LONDON'S FIRST INDUSTRIAL SUBURB

Spitalfields is one of the oldest inhabited parts of the East End, and one of the earliest to be built up as the fringes of the City of London spread outward. Described as City's "first industrial suburb", from the Middle Ages, Spitalfields, (together with neighbouring areas Bishopsgate and Shoreditch), was well known for industry, which was able to establish here outside the overcrowded City; but also for poverty, disorder and crime.

Outside the City walls, outside the jurisdiction of City authorities, the poor, criminals, and outcast and rebellious clustered here. From medieval times the area's major employer has been the clothing trade; but breweries have also been major employers since 17th century, and later residents formed a pool of cheap labour for the industries of the City and East End: especially in the docks, clothing, building, and furniture trades. Small workshops came to dominate employment here. The relationship between the affluent City of London and the often poverty and misery-stricken residents over its eastern border in Spitalfields has dominated the area's history. More than half the poor in Spitalfields worked for masters who resided in the City in 1816; today the local clothing trade depends on orders from West End fashion shops... The same old social and economic relations continue...

For similar reasons as those that led to the growth of industry and slums here, the area has always been home to large communities of migrants. Many foreigners in the middle ages could not legally live or work inside City walls (due to restrictions enforced by the authorities or the guilds), leading many to settle outside the City's jurisdiction. Successive waves of migrants have made their homes here, and dominated the life of the area: usually, though not always, the poorest incomers, sometimes competing for the jobs of the native population, at other times deliberately hired to control wages in existing trades... Huguenot silkweavers, the Irish who were set to work undercutting them, Jewish refugees from late nineteenth-century pogroms in east Europe, and the Bengalis who have settled in the area since the 1950s...

"A SUBSTANCE SO DELICATE..."

For centuries Silk Weaving was the dominant industry in Spitalfields and neighbouring areas like Bishopsgate, Whitechapel and Bethnal Green, spreading as far as Mile End to the east, and around parts of Clerkenwell further west. Silkweavers were incorporated as a London City Company in 1629. But many foreigners or weavers from northern England or other areas were not allowed to join the Company, and had problems working or selling their work as they weren't members... Silk production demanded much preparation before actual weaving began: throwing, where silk that has been reeled into skeins, is cleaned, twisted and wound onto bobbins, employed thousands in London already by the 1660s, though later throwing was dispersed to other towns.

A nineteenth century commentator described the mechanics of silk weaving: "Most silk goods, like those of cotton, have obviously threads crossing each other at right angles and interlacing; and the same may be said of velvets and of woollen cloths, although the subsequent production of a pile or nap nearly conceals the threads. Those threads which extend length-wise of the woven fabric are called the warp or web, while the cross-threads are termed the weft or shoot. Employing the terms warp and shoot, we may now state that in weaving silk these are made of different kinds of threads, the warp being formed of threads termed organzine, and the shoot by other threads called tram. The raw silk is imported from Italy, India, China, and a few other countries, in the form of skeins, and must pass through the hands of the "throwster" before the weaver is employed upon it. The throwster, by means of a machine, twists the silk into a slight kind of thread known as "singles," and these singles are combined to form tram or organzine. Tram is formed of two or three threads of silk lightly twisted together; but organzine is the result of a larger series of operations, which may be thus enumerated:- the raw silk is unwound from the skeins, and rewound upon bobbins; the silk so wound is sorted into different qualities; each individual thread is then spun, twisted or "thrown;" two or more of these spun threads are brought together upon fresh bobbins; and finally these combined threads are twisted to form organzine. The whole of these operations

are included in the general term “silk throwing,” and are entirely distinct from the weaving: nearly all the Spitalfields population engaged in the silk manufacture are weavers; the throwsters being spread over various parts of the country, and working in large factories known as silk-mills. The reader will understand, therefore, that when the weavers are stated to have preferred Italian organzine, even after the introduction of Lombe’s machine, the preference relates to some particular quality in the Italian production, which fitted it to form the warp or “long threads” of silk goods, the shoot or “cross-threads” being sufficiently well made in England. This preference is said to exist even at the present day, notwithstanding the advance of English ingenuity; and Mr. Porter suggests, as a probable explanation of the alleged inferiority of English thrown silk, “that the climate may influence the quality of a substance so delicate, since it is well known that, during certain states of the atmosphere, the throwing of silk is performed in this country at a comparative disadvantage: or it may be that the fibre of the silk is injuriously affected by its being packed before twisting, or by the lengthened voyage to which it is subjected in its transit to this country; and the higher estimation uniformly evinced by our throwsters for silk of the new crop, over that which has lain for some time in the warehouse, would seem to indicate another cause for the alleged superiority of Italian organzine. It is owing to this preference of foreign thrown silk that, in the face of a high protecting duty, it has always met with a certain although limited demand from the English silk-weavers.”

Spitalfields had a small-scale silk-weaving industry from the fifteenth century, based on early settlements of foreigners outside the City walls, which increased gradually as protestant refugees from Netherlands congregated here, especially during the Dutch wars of independence from Spain in the 1580s to early 1600s. In the early years weaving in Spitalfields was a cottage industry, with many independent workers labouring at home. This quickly developed into a situation with a smaller number of masters, who employed journeymen and a legally recognised number of apprentices to do the work. Numbers of workers, and training, in the Weavers Company were regulated by law and in the Company courts; later wages came to be a matter of dispute and the courts had to deal with this too.

Masters often sub-contracted out work to homeworkers, so that by the end of the 18th Century, many silkweavers were employed in their own homes, using patterns and silk provided by masters, and paid weekly. Later still there developed middlemen or factors, who bought woven silks at lowest prices and sold them to wholesale dealers. This led to lower wages for the weavers themselves.

A twentieth century account described the organisation of weaving in the area, based on reports from the previous century: “The manufacturer procures his thrown ‘organzine’ and ‘tram’ either from the throwster or from the silk importers, and selects the silk necessary to execute any particular order. The weaver goes to the house or shop of his employer and receives a sufficient quantity of the material, which he takes home to his own dwelling and weaves at his own looms or sometimes at looms supplied by the manufacturer, being paid at a certain rate per ell. In a report to the Poor Law Commissioners in 1837 Dr. Kay thus describes the methods of work of a weaver and his family:-

‘A weaver has generally two looms, one for his wife and another for himself, and as his family increases the children are set to work at six or seven years of age to quill silk; at nine or ten years to pick silk; and at the age of twelve or thirteen (according to the size of the child) he is put to the loom to weave. A child very soon learns to weave a plain silk fabric, so

as to become a proficient in that branch; a weaver has thus not unfrequently four looms on which members of his own family are employed...'

... The houses occupied by the weavers are constructed for the special convenience of their trade, having in the upper stories wide, lattice-like windows which run across almost the whole frontage of the house. These 'lights' are absolutely necessary in order to throw a strong light on every part of the looms, which are usually placed directly under them. Many of the roofs present a strange appearance, having ingenious bird-traps of various kinds and large birdcages, the weavers having long been famed for their skill in snaring song-birds. They used largely to supply the home market with linnets, goldfinches, chaffinches, greenfinches, and other song birds which they caught by trained 'call-birds' and other devices in the fields of north and east London."

The wide high windows that shed enough light for their work can still be seen everywhere on older buildings around Spitalfields.

Although skilled, and often reasonably well-paid, the weavers could be periodically reduced to poverty; partly this was caused by depressions in cloth trade (one of the earliest recorded being that of 1620-40). "On the occurrence of a commercial crisis the loss of work occurs first among the least skilful operatives, who are discharged from work." This, and other issues, could lead to outbreaks of rebelliousness: sometimes aimed at their bosses and betters, and sometimes at migrant workers seen as lowering wages or taking work away from 'natives'.

For two hundred years, through the 17th and 18th centuries, the Silk Weavers of the East End conducted a long-running battle with their employers over wage levels, working conditions and increasing mechanisation in the industry. One early method of struggle was the 'right of search': a power won over centuries by journeymen weavers, and eventually backed by law, to search out and in some cases destroy weaving work done by 'outsiders', usually those working below the agreed wage rates, or by weavers who hadn't gone through proper apprenticeships, by foreigners etc. Silkweavers used it, however, at several points from 1616 to 1675, to block the introduction of the engine loom with its multiple shuttles. At this point the interests of masters and journeymen to some degree converged, for the engine loom was being used by total outsiders, and restriction on this technical innovation kept both wages and profits high. But tacit backing of workers' violence by master-weavers was always a risky strategy: since their interests were bound to diverge, class conflict kept breaking through; the masters could not always keep a strong group of workers, used to using force to protect themselves, under control. And continued agitation to keep wages high gradually pushed employers, seeking to drive profits and productivity up, into increased mechanisation...

The journeymen weavers also had a history of support for radical groups, from the Levellers of the English Civil War, through the 1760s populist John Wilkes, to the 'physical force' wing of the Chartist movement of the 1830s. This support arose partly from obvious causes - the weavers' precarious position and uneven employment were always likely to draw a sizable number towards radical politics. But radical activists, like Leveller leader John Lilburne, also campaigned and agitated on the silkweavers' behalf, and populists like Wilkes easily tapped into their grievances... Their fierce collectivity in their own interests extended, for some, to a wider class consciousness; but also made them vulnerable to exploitation by manipulation by bosses and demagogues.

"TO MAINTAIN OTHERS THAT LIVE IN IDLENESS"

Machine looms began to replace handloom weaving for the manufacture of silk ribbons in the 1660s. But in August 1675, in a three-day riot, dozens of bands of weavers roamed the city, smashing machine looms or burning them in the streets; they also attacked french weavers who were accused of competing for jobs. Some of the crowds wore green aprons, a suspect colour politically, being associated with English Civil War radical grouping the Levellers. Following so soon after the 1668 Bawdy House Riots, where wearing of green had been accompanied by more overt slogans about liberty and tearing down parliament, the weavers' movement scared the authorities; although they quickly realised the weavers were centrally motivated by solely economic grievances. However the government worried that such movements could be manipulated by the scattered republican and fifth monarchist underground, which sporadically came up with uprising or assassination plots. The powers that be seized former Fifth Monarchist radical and silkweaver, John Mason, whose interrogation produced "desperate words", looking forward to a time when men would not "labour and toyl day and night...to maintain others that live in idleness." But he had also been more of a victim than a ringleader (having had an engine loom of his own smashed).

The insurrection was suppressed by the army, but a result of the riots was that full mechanisation was delayed in the Spitalfields silk industry for a century. It also left the authorities with a healthy fear of the effects of poverty among the weavers. When recession in 1683 caused great 'distress and desperation among the journeymen weavers', it was suggested that a troop of cavalry be stationed in Whitechapel as a precaution against disorder.

"THESE STRANGERS MAY SERVE FOR PATTERNS OF THRIFT..."

After 1685, thousands of Huguenot refugees from France, protestants expelled by the Catholic French king, swelled the ranks of the weavers, in Spitalfields, West Bethnal Green and Norton Folgate. Some French co-religionists already there, and many of the migrants were clothworkers including weavers from Tours and Lyons, who brought new techniques, designs and materials, working top quality silks - "lustrings, velvets, brocades, satins, very strong silks known as paduasoyes, watered silks, black and coloured mantuas, ducapees, watered tabies, and stuffs of mingled silk and cotton-all of the highest excellence, which previously could only be procured from the famous looms of France" with high levels of skill; their methods, designs and materials spread to the wider population here. John Stow saw this migration as benefitting both the national and local economies, as well as social conditions in the area:

"Whereby God's blessing surely is not only brought upon the parish by receiving poor strangers, but also a great advantage hath accrued to the whole nation by the rich manufactures of weaving silks and stuffs and camlets, which art they brought along with them. And this benefit also to the neighbourhood, that these strangers may serve for patterns of thrift, honesty, industry, and sobriety as well."

Not all migrant communities were to be so welcome in the area... In 1697 there were further riots against imports on foreign silks, widely seen as undercutting prices for East London cloths. Again masters encouraged crowd violence. Weavers besieged parliament, marched on Lewisham's silks mills in Southeast London to smash machine looms operating there; and attacked the HQ of the East India Company, major importer of silks from India. They also threatened the house of Joshua Childs, the East India Company's dictator.

These disturbances as well as pressure from silk-weaving manufacturers' organisations (such as the Royal Lustring Company, which had taken advantage of a Huguenot workman bringing to England the secret of giving a lustre to taffeta) in succeeding years led to several protectionist laws being passed in parliament in the 1690s and 1700 to protect the industry from competition from foreign cloths, especially French silks (though in fact, changes in fashion from the consumer side soon caused the Lustring Company to collapse; also despite improvements in local silk weaving, the connoisseurs still tended to prefer the french product). Later developments also exerted an influence on the silk manufacture: the Italian process of preparing silk for the weaver by machine, for instance, becoming general from the 1710s.

SILK MAKES THE DIFFERENCE

In medieval days there were 'sumptuary laws' which restricted the wearing of silk to the great; mainly to illustrate social position in overt visual terms, distinguishing the better off from their inferiors, though also to prevent the lower orders from acting or appearing above their social position. So, an Act of 1464 ordained that "None of the Garters or their wives should be allowed to wear purple or any manner of cloth gold, velvet or sable furs under a penalty of 20 marks. That none below Knights, Bachelors, Mayors and Aldermen and their wives should wear satin or ermine under a penalty of 10 marks."

Gradually these restrictions ceased to be observed. But according to Peter Linebaugh, in the eighteenth Century, silk and the wearing of it, was still one of the most potent symbols of class divisions. It "was the fabric of power and class command..."; he describes this century as 'The Age of Silk'. A silk dress could cost £50 in materials alone (a huge sum then), but there was a great contrast of consumer and producer: "the ladies strolling in St James's Park, adorned in cascades of silk contrived with cuffs, flounces and bows to capture the wandering eye...the gentlemen in their silk stockings and waistcoats, their brocaded jackets and silken knee-britches, bowing and scraping into lordly favour, awaiting the moment to give a command of battle or to sign a death warrant..." The producers were the thousands of men, women and children in the East End, "winding, throwing, dyeing, weaving, drawing, cutting, designing, stitching in hundreds of attics and garrets". A proverb summed it up: "We are all Adam's children, but silk makes the difference."

The demand for silk was on the whole rising in England - the trade was three times as big in 1713 as in 1664. But huge fluctuations in the silk trade meant intermittent poverty for weavers; the whole area could be plunged into periodic depression and desperation. "As soon as the market stops [the master weavers] stop. If they cannot sell their work they immediately knock off looms and the journeymen as immediately starve."

Even in good times, wages varied widely between the skilled journeyman, who could earn a guinea a week, and the boys who would silk for a few shillings. But expenses such as rent for a loom, cut into even reasonable rates, and masters could pay very different rates, charge for materials, and many were constantly looking to undercut. There was also frequent disagreement as to what a finished piece of work was, and how much it was worth (a list of prices for different items in the 1760s ran to 27 pages), over measurements (a yard or ell of silk was reckoned at any number of different actual lengths), what 'wastage' was. As in many other trades, for instance the shipwrights in the docks, dockers, and many more, there was a constant battle as to what 'offcuts' workers were entitled to take home, and usually sell to top up their pay... (Though there were also cases of silkweavers making flash clothes for

themselves from a fabric they could never usually afford! Like Johnny Cash nicking a Cadillac One Piece at a Time). The weavers were always trying to define larger and larger pieces of silk as 'waste', or 'damaged'; the masters obviously looking to reduce it. Gradually through the seventeenth century these traditional 'perquisites' of a trade were cut down on, by force, legislation and moral control. In the silk trade, new laws had to be continually brought in to outlaw different ways that silk - so valuable as it was - could be 'misappropriated' by its workers; laws that had to be updated as new technological developments in production opened up new and fun ways to skim your masters.

On top of this production of a finished woven fabric depended on the work of many workers - dyers, throwers, drawboys, quill-winders all contributed; a hold-up in one sub-trade, or supplies of materials drying up (raw materials might have to be imported from China, India, Turkey or elsewhere, so war and weather could halt supplies), could leave a weaver standing idle - and not getting paid.

Partly as a result of this unstable economy, crime was rife. Spitalfields was the home parish for 64 of the men and women hanged at Tyburn between 1709 and 1783; many were, or had been, silkwormers, and proportionally Spitalfields, Shoreditch and Bethnal Green provided more than their fair share of those hanged on the 'Fatal Tree', or transported to the penal colonies. Peter Linebaugh suggests that the authorities were more likely to hang lawbreakers from the "textile suburbs" than other parishes - as an example to the rest...

"A GANG OF AUDACIOUS ROGUES"

"Our Ladies all were set a-gadding;
After these Toys they ran a-madding.
And like gay Peacocks proudly strut it,
When in our Streets they foot it."

1719-20 saw another prolonged agitation, this time over imports of calico, dyed and patterned cloth from India, which had become very fashionable. Silk, wool and cotton weavers widely perceived calico as causing reduced demand for their products (calico was quite a bit cheaper than silk..) Calico printing was now becoming an industry of size in London. In petitions to Parliament calico was denounced "as a worthless, scandalous, unprofitable sort of goods embraced by a luxuriant humour among the women, prompted by the art and fraud of the drapers and the East India Company to whom alone they are profitable."

In a pamphlet and broadsheet war, the issue was debated; among broadsides from the wool weavers, a well known 'Ballad of Spittlefields, or the Weavers Complaint Against the Calico Madams', sold on a penny broadsheet, summed up the textile weavers case against calicoes:

In the Ages of Old,
We Traded for Gold,
Our merchants were thriving and Wealthy:
We had silks for our Store,
Warm Wool for our Poor,
And Drugs for the Sick and Unhealthy:
And Drugs for the Sick and Unhealthy.

But now we bring Home
The Froth and the Scum
To Dress up the Trapes like a gay-Dame:
And Ev'ry She Clown
Gets a Pye-spotted gown,
And sets up for a Callicoe Madam.
O! tawdery Callico Madam...

Here they Stamp 'em and print 'em,
And Spot 'em and Paint 'em,
And the Callico Printers Brocade 'em;
Hey cost little pay,
And are tawdery gay,
Only fit for a Draggel-tail madam.
O! this tawdery Callico Madam.

Ev'ry Jilt of the Town
Gets a Callico Gown;
Our own Manufack's out of Fashion:
No Country of Wool
Was ever so dull,
'Tis a test of the Brains of the Nation:
O! the test of the brains of the Nation.

To neglect heir own Works,
Employ pagans and turks,
And let foreign Trump'ry o'er spread 'em:
Shut up their own Door,
And starve their own Poor,
For a tawdery Callico Madam.
O! this Tatterdemalion Madam.

Were there ever such Fools!
Who despising the Rules,
For the common Improvement of Nations:
Tye up the Poor's Hands,
And search foreign lands,
For their Magpie ridiculous Fashions.
For their Magpie ridiculous Fashions.

They're so Callico-wise,
Their own Growth they despise,
And without an inquiry, "Who made 'em?"
Cloath the Rich and the Poor,
The Chaste and the Whore,
And the Beggar's a Callico Madam.
O! this Draggel-tailed Callico Madam.

Nay, who would lament it,
Or strive to prevent it,

If the Prince of Iniquity had 'em:
Or if, for a bride,
They were heartily ty'd
O some Pocky Damn'd Callico Madam.
O some Pocky Damn'd Callico Madam.

In June 1719, thousands assembled in Spitalfields and the Mint, and marched in protest over calico imports; this developed in to rioting, attacks on calico print works, and somewhat dodgily, tactics included attacking any women walking in the City wearing calico, or printed linen.

Obviously this tactic is not without its, er, issues, and one woman, at least, did respond in print, denouncing "a gang of audacious rogues to come and fall on us on the streets, and tear the clothes off our backs, insult and abuse us, and tell us we shall not wear what they do not weave; is this to be allowed in a Nation of Liberty?"

Class and gender relations tangled here in confused ways: the weavers were poor workers, the women targeted mostly middle to upper class; but male power and violence was clearly involved too. The pamphlet war also muddied the water, as not only was the wearing of calico portrayed by some writers (for instance famous author and pamphleteer Daniel Defoe), as unpatriotic, but there was a suggestion that female servants formed a chunk of the market for calico, and some of the agitation seems to have been infected with middle or upper class desire to control these women's 'uppity' dress sense... Old fashioned harassment of women (widespread in London's streets regardless of dress) also often got mixed in with economic grievance, and all sorts got involved in the general ruckus for the hell of it. Although women weavers were also prominent in the calico riots. Hmmm. Discuss.

The Lord Mayor of London called in the 'Trained bands' - citizens enrolled in City militias - to keep the crowds off the streets. Arrested weavers were sent to South London's Marshalsea Prison, but the mob avoided the militia, attempting to rescue the arrestees; the militia wounded several weavers firing on them, and more were nicked and sent to Newgate Prison. In 1720, weavers rallied in Old Palace Yard, Westminster, and more attacks on calico wearers followed. The protests of 1719-20 were to some extent successful, leading to a ban on calico, enshrined in the Calico Act, as well as penalties for anyone convicted of wearing printed calicoes. The London Weavers' Company for a while brought court proceedings against calico-sellers, and paid informers to bring calico-wearers to court, but eventually gave it up as uneconomic. But as late as 1785, people were still having gowns sabotaged: "Last week a gentlewoman of Mile-end had a new linen gown entirely destroyed by pouring spirits on it, by some wicked fellows, supposed to be Spitalfields silk-weavers. This practice is grown so common at the eastern end of the town that most of the females are fearful of leaving home in cottons and linens, especially in the evenings."

So there was an attempt to deflect the direct action of the weavers, as contradictory as it was, into a legal process, though it didn't end calico-madam taunting completely. At the same time heavy sentences were imposed on some caught attacking those wearing printed fabrics, running up to seven years transportation of the penal colonies... High import duties were also imposed in the 1720s on the importing of French made silks, the main competitor for Spitalfields cloth; this led however to a widespread trade in smuggled silks from France. As with the Calico producers, the Weavers' Company spent a great deal of effort trying to prevent and punish smuggling, with limited success.

SAINT MONDAY

The silkweavers' penchant for collective violence in their economic interests was not the only attribute that attracted the denunciations of their betters. At least when trade was good, it was alleged that if many silkweavers could subsist on three days work a week, they would.

Spitalfields silkweavers were often attacked in print for their and drunkenness. 'Saint Monday', taking Monday off (with a hangover, or just to carry on partying), was usually celebrated, and work in the week was often interrupted by talking and tipping. And while Saturday morning was officially a work day, it was usually the day to get piece work together, take it to the master and get paid; another day involving much hanging about, chewing the fat and getting a few bevies in. There were many weavers' alehouses in the area: the Crown and Shuttle, the Mulberry Tree, the Three Jolly Weavers, the Throwers Arms, the Dyers, the eight different pubs called the Weavers Arms, and the three Robin Hood and Little John Inns as well as hundreds of other drinking places. Spitalfields for centuries was known for drink, disorder and poverty: "a land of beer and blood", its prurient vicar would call it in the 1880s.

"Everybody knows that there is a vast number of Journeymen Weavers... who if by four Days Labour in a Week they can maintain themselves, will hardly be perswaded to work the fifth; When Men shew such an extraordinary proclivity to Idleness and pleasure, what reason have we to think that they would ever work..." (Mandeville, 1723) Of course what "everybody knows" is a loaded term: otherwise called propaganda. It's a familiar argument, that wages have to be reduced, new technology brought in, and coercive measures introduced, to make people work harder, respect the proper hierarchies and stop causing trouble; they are poor because their morals are weak and they need to be disciplined. Either that or they're earning too much, more than their bosses can really afford... Many weavers attempted to enjoy their lives in the midst of having to graft in a precarious trade; the urge to work even less when your livelihood is up and down, to do as little for as much as you can get, is a contrary pleasure in itself. The response of the masters was often to shortcut the traditional apprenticeships and collective agreements; more and more as the old London Weavers Company control of the trade was subverted by the industry's growth in the suburbs, new capitalist modes of production were developed, and sneaky practices enriched willing entrepreneurs. 'Putting out' of work dispersed production to garrets and lofts, harder for organised journeymen to demand the right of search upon; cheap unskilled apprentices were hired and viciously exploited - some of them were force labour, 'hired' Oliver Twist style, from the parish poor, or 'employed' for no wages in the workhouse itself (masters like Joshua Gee built fortunes this way).

This is of course a familiar process, which continues, and the moralisation of the modern middle classes and militarisation of labour dance nicely together. English builders are overpaid and lazy, but those Poles work hard for less, eh; prisoners are forced to work for multinationals and government contracts; those on benefits must be pushed to slave in shit jobs as the people who did them for proper wages are laid off; the current austerity economy provides both private and public sector bosses with multiple opportunities to shave a few billion quid off our meagre resources... Such as the current vogue for employing prisoners at £5 a week in call centres and the like... Not just good for the economy, but fits in well with the Heritage Industry too. Maybe the whole working class could be transformed into one of those Victorian Farm reality TV shows.

The avoidance of work among the silkweavers might have for some been associated with getting pissed, but for others time was spent building up a strong culture of self-taught scientific, mathematical and horticultural knowledge, and musical entertainments.

"IN RIOTOUS MANNER"

Although the Calico Acts protected the silkweaving trade for a few decades, increased smuggling, gradual exporting of skills and methods to other parts of the country, slowly eroded the Spitalfields stranglehold on the industry. Sporadic flashes of aggro broke out. In 1739 a master weaver's house in Spital Square was besieged by workers, who tried to destroy it - they were dispersed by guards.

But by the 1760s tensions between masters and workers had grown to eruption point. Dissatisfaction over pay among journeymen silkweavers was increasing; and 7,072 looms were out of employment, with a slump in the trade partly caused by smuggling (carried on to a greater extent than ever). In 1762, the journeymen wrote a Book of Prices, in which they recorded the piecework rates they were prepared to work for (an increase on current rates in most cases). They had the Book printed up and delivered to the masters - who rejected it. Increasingly masters were turning to machine looms, and hiring the untrained, sometimes women and children, to operate them, in order to bypass the journeyman and traditional apprentices and their complex structure of pay and conditions. As a result of the rejection of the Book, two thousand weavers assembled and began to break up looms and destroy materials, and went on strike.

There followed a decade of struggle by weavers against their, with high levels of violence on both sides. Tactics included threatening letters to employers, stonings, sabotage, riots and 'skimmingtons' (mocking community humiliation of weavers working below agreed wage levels: offenders were mounted on an ass backwards & driven through the streets, to the accompaniment of 'rough music' played on pots and pans). The battle escalated to open warfare, involving the army, secret subversive groups of weavers, (known as 'cutters' for their tactic of slashing silk on offending masters' looms), and ended in murder and execution. Some of these tactics had long roots in local history and tradition - others could have been imported with Irish migrants from the Whiteboy movement in Ireland. In 1763 thousands of weavers took part in wage riots & machine smashings, armed with cutlasses and disguised, destroying looms:

"in riotous manner [they] broke open the house of one of their masters, destroyed his looms, and cut a great quantity of silk to pieces, after which they placed his effigy in a cart, with a halter about his neck, an executioner on one side, and a coffin on the other; and after drawing it through the streets they hanged it on a gibbet, then burnt it to ashes and afterwards dispersed."

[From the "Gentleman's Magazine", November 1763]

The military occupied parts of Spitalfields in response. The following year, with the slump worsening, weavers petitioned Parliament to impose double duties upon all foreign wrought

silks. This petition being rejected, crowds of weavers went to the House of Commons on 10 January 1764, “with drums beating and banners flying,” to demand the total prohibition of foreign silks. This was the day of the opening of Parliament: its members were besieged by the weavers with tales of the great distress which had fallen upon them and their families. Parliament did pass some laws lowering the import duty on raw silk and prohibiting the importation of silk ribbons, stockings, and gloves, and dealers in foreign silks gave assurances they would reduce orders for foreign silks, and a contribution was made for the immediate relief of the sufferers. These actions appeased the weavers for a while, and the only violence committed was that of breaking the windows of some merchants who dealt in French silks.

In 1765, however, wage riots broke out again; at a time of high food prices & unemployment. In May 8000 silkweavers, armed with bludgeons and pickaxes, paraded in front of St. James’ Palace with black flags, surrounding the Houses of Lords, after the Duke of Bedford engineered the defeat of a bill in the House of Lords designed to protect the silkweaving trade by placing high import duties on Italian silks. This show of force was bad enough, but when the crowd started questioning the peers as they came out; as to how they’d voted, and roughing up those who had voted against, the cavalry were sent into Palace Yard to disperse them. But they then besieged and attacked the Duke of Bedford’s house, in London’s slightly posher neighbourhood of Bloomsbury. The fourth Duke of Bedford was a whig politician, in and out of various positions of power; leader at one time of a political faction nick-named the Bloomsbury Gang; his extensive interests in the East India Company, which was engaged in importing cheaper Indian textiles (the Company having launched an imperialist war to seize economic power in India, causing genocide and starvation in the sub-continent), also undercutting the weavers’ livelihoods, made him an even more hated target. The Duke:

“sent away his jewels and papers, and demanded a party of horse... and as was foreseen, the rioters in prodigious numbers began to pull down the wall of the Court; but the great gates being thrown open, the party of horse appeared, and sallying out, while the Riot Act was read, rode round Bloomsbury Square slashing and trampling on the mob and dispersing them; yet not till two or three of the guards had been wounded. In the meantime a party of rioters had passed to the back of the house and were forcing their way through the garden, when fortunately 50 more horse arriving in the very critical instant, the house was saved... The disappointed populace vented their rage on the house of Carr, fashionable mercer, who dealt in French silks and demolished the windows.”

(Horace Walpole)

Bedford House was attacked again twice that month, though, and continued rioting by the weavers all month kept London in such a state of general alarm that troops were stationed in Spitalfields and in Moorfields, and respectable citizens enrolled themselves for military duty. As a result of these riots, an Act was passed in 1765 declaring it to be felony and punishable with death to break into any house or shop with intent maliciously to damage or destroy any silk goods in the process of manufacture: this was to be used with devastating effect four years later. In 1767 wage disputes broke out again: masters who had reduced piece rates had silk cut from their looms. At a hearing in the Weavers Court, in November that year, a case was heard, in which a number of journeymen demanded the 1762 prices from their Book be agreed. The Court agreed that some masters had caused trouble by reducing wages and ruled that they should abide by the Book. However this had little effect, and trouble carried on sporadically.

"MUTUALLY COMBINED TO DISTRESS EACH OTHER"

Trouble was also breaking out between groups of workers: single loom weavers and engine looms weavers were now at loggerheads. On 30 November 1767,

“a body of weavers, armed with rusty swords, pistols and other offensive weapons, assembled at a house on Saffron-hill, with an intent to destroy the work of an eminent weaver without much mischief. Some of them were apprehended, and being examined before the justices at Hicks-hall, it appeared that two classes of weavers were mutually combined to distress each other, namely the engine weavers and the narrow weavers. The men who were taken up were engine weavers, and they urged... that they only assembled in order to protect themselves from a party of the others who were expected to rise. As they had done no mischief, they were dismissed with a severe reprimand...”

The events of 1762-7 were, however, merely a curtain raiser, for the cataclysmic struggles of 1768-69. The “Cutters’ Riots” saw a prolonged struggle, with bitter violence, rioting, intimidation of workers and threatening letters to employers, and hundreds of raids on factories and small workshops. Strikers in other trades joined in the mayhem. In 1768 crowds of weavers also forcibly set their own prices in the food markets, in defiance of high prices. It would end in shootouts in a pub, and executions.

THE CONQUERING AND BOLD DEFIANCE

In the Summer of 1769, some of the masters attempted to force a cut in rates of pay. In response, some journeymen banded together to organise resistance, forming secret clubs, including one allegedly called the Bold Defiance, (or Conquering and Bold Defiance, or the Defiance Sloop). This group met at the Dolphin Tavern in Cock Lane, (modern Boundary Street, in Bethnal Green). The Bold Defiance started raising a fighting fund, as part of which they attempted to levy a tax on anyone who owned or worked a loom. Their methods of fund-raising bordered, shall we say, on extortion, expressed in the delivery to silk weaving masters of Captain Swing-style notes:

“Mr Hill, you are desired to send the full donation of all your looms to the Dolphin in Cock Lane. This from the conquering and bold Defiance to be levied four shillings per loom.”

One major silk boss threatened by the cutters was Lewis Chauvet, whose factory stood in Crispin Street, Spitalfields. A leading manufacturer of silk handkerchiefs, who had already been involved in bitter battles against striking weavers in Dublin, Chauvet banned his workers from joining the weavers’ clubs or paying any levies, and organised a private guard on his looms. As a result, the cutters gathered in large numbers and tried to force Chauvet’s workers to pay up. Fights broke out and many people on both sides were badly hurt. Then, on the night of Thursday 17th August, the cutters assembled in gangs and went to the homes of Chauvet’s workers, cutting the silk out of more than fifty looms. Four nights later, on Monday 21st, they gathered in even greater numbers and cut the silk out of more than a hundred looms. Throughout the night the streets of Spitalfields resounded to the noise of pistols being fired in the air.

Chauvet’s response to this episode was to advertise a reward of £500 for information leading to the arrest of those responsible. But for several weeks the people of Spitalfields remained silent, either for fear of the cutters, or because they did not wish to give evidence that might

send a man to the gallows. But on the 26th September, a minor master weaver, Thomas Poor, and his wife Mary, swore in front of a magistrate that their seven looms had been slashed by a group of cutters led by John Doyle and John Valline. However, before giving evidence they had inquired with Chauvet about receiving the reward - and Doyle had already been arrested, so they may have been prompted to name them... Certainly Doyle and Valline later protested their innocence. On 30 September 1769, after a tip off from a master weaver who had had the squeeze put on him, magistrates, Bow Street Runners and troops raided the Bold Defiance' HQ at the Dolphin, finding the cutters assembled in an upstairs room, armed, and "receiving the contributions of terrified manufacturers." A fire started between the weavers and the soldiers and runners, which left two weavers (including a bystander) and a soldier dead; but the cutters escaped through the windows and over roofs. Four weavers who were drinking in the pub downstairs, and one found in bed upstairs, were arrested, and held for a few weeks; though in the end no-one was brought to court over the deaths.

But Valline and Doyle were convicted of the attack on the Poores' looms and sentenced to death under the 1765 Act, despite very dubious identification evidence. They were hanged on the 6th December 1769, at corner of Bethnal Green Road and Cambridge Heath Road opposite the Salmon and Ball pub. Though Tyburn was the usual place of execution, the major silk manufacturers pressured the authorities to have them 'scragged' locally, to put the fear of god on the rebellious weavers. An organised attempt to free them was planned, and the men building the gallows were attacked with stones: "There was an inconceivable number of people assembled, and many bricks, tiles, stones &c thrown while the gallows was fixing, and a great apprehension of a general tumult, notwithstanding the persuasion and endeavours of several gentlemen to appease the same. The unhappy sufferers were therefore obliged to be turned off before the usual time allowed on such occasions, which was about 11 o'clock; when, after hanging about fifty minutes they were cut down and delivered to their friends." Doyle and Valline were offered, proclaiming themselves not guilty of the silk cutting. After their execution the crowd tore down the gallows, rebuilt them in front of Chauvet's factory/house here in Crispin Street, and 5,000 people gathered to smash the windows and burn his furniture.

Two weeks later on December 20th, more alleged cutters were executed: William Eastman, William Horsford (or Horsfield) and John Carmichael. Horsfield had also been implicated by the Poores; Daniel Clarke, another silk pattern drawer and small employer, was paid by Chauvet to give evidence against Eastman, who he claimed had cut silk on Clarke's looms. Clarke had previously tried to undercut agreed wage rates, and had it seems testified before against insurgent weavers, in his native Dublin. Clarke had originally told friends that he couldn't identify the men who'd cut his silk, but after contact with Chauvet (and his money), miraculously his memory changed. It's possible Eastman was a Cutters' leader Chauvet wanted out of the way; Clarke also named one Philip Gosset, locally suggested to be the chairman of one of the cutters' committees (Gosset, however, was never caught). Contradictory evidence, protests, a weavers' march on Parliament to ask for pardon, all fell on deaf ears: the authorities were determined to make examples of the accused. This time, though, afraid of the local reaction after the riots that followed the deaths of Doyle and Valline, they were executed at Tyburn.

Although the repression quietened things down for a year or so, these hangings still had a twist to come. On 16th April 1771, the snitch Daniel Clarke was spotted walking through Spitalfields streets, and chased by a crowd of mainly women and boys, including the widow of William Horsford. He was finally caught, and dunked in the Hare Street Pond, a flooded

gravel pit in Bethnal Green; the crowd stoned and abused him, and after they let him out of the pond he collapsed and died. In Spitalfields this was widely seen as community justice - but the official 'justices' had to squash another open challenge to law and order. Two more weavers, Henry Stroud - William Eastman's brother in law - and Robert Campbell, were hanged on July 8th for Clarke's 'murder'; once again, local punishment was deemed necessary to overawe the uppity weavers, and the men were stretched in Hare Street. Horsford's widow, Anstis, was also charged with murder, but wasn't executed (possibly she was acquitted, I've had trouble following the case reports!). Witnesses had to be bribed to testify, and were attacked; Justice Wilmot, who arrested the two men, only just escaped the justice of an angry crowd, and a hundred soldiers had to be posted to ensure the hanging took place.

THE SPITALFIELDS ACTS

Although prices were fixed between masters and workers, nothing obliged the masters to keep to them. In 1773, further discontent broke out. Handbills circulated, addressed to weavers, coalheavers, porters and carmen (cartdrivers), to 'Rise' and petition the king. Silkweavers met at Moorfields on April 26th, incited by another handbill that read "Suffer yourselves no longer to be persecuted by a set of miscreants, whose way to Riches and power lays through your Families and by every attempt to starve and Enslave you..." Magistrates however met with them, and persuaded them to disperse, promising them a lasting deal.

This materialised in the form of the Spitalfields Acts. The first Act, in 1773, laid down that wages for journeymen weavers were to be set, and maintained, at a reasonable level by the local Magistrates, (in Middlesex) or the Lord Mayor or Aldermen (in the City). Employers who broke the agreed rate would be fined £50; journeymen who demanded more would also be punished, and silk weavers were prohibited from having more than two apprentices at one time. The Act of 1792 included those weavers who worked upon silk mixed with other materials, and that of 1811 extended the provisions to female weavers. However the Acts also correspondingly imposed fines on the journeymen for attempts to combine together... The Spitalfields weavers did manage to form a Mutual Aid Society, a Friendly Society in effect, in 1777:

"some Mutual zealous, spirited and virtuous men proposed to form Aid themselves into a Society in the year 1777, or thereabouts. Society, for mutual assistance should any of their masters oppress them or refuse to abide by the prices for work authorised by the Justices according to Act of Parliament. The Society or Committee was known by the name of the Union, and was held for many years at the sign of the 'Knave of Clubs', in Club Row, Bethnal Green... it took the form of a Committee of delegates from each of the Benefit Clubs and Friendly Societies which were so numerous among the Spitalfields weavers."

Its aim was:

"To secure the price of labour in the broad silk weaving trade, and to defray the expenses of law should any master or journeyman transgress the provisions of the Act of Parliament passed in 1773."

Run by an elected Committee and a paid secretary, met regularly at an appointed 'House of Call,' in order to receive reports from the trade and weekly subscriptions from the membership, who paid a penny a week. This was the first of many attempts to form a united

society of weavers, that all foundered after a shorter or longer existence, over the next hundred odd years, which according to most accounts achieved little for their members, due mainly to the decline in the East London silk trade. (Silkweavers' Unions in other towns, where the trade was expanding, met with more success.) The Acts did enable peaceable bargaining between masters and workers:

“In 1795 a Committee, consisting of delegates from the Union of Journeymen and from a Trade Society which the masters had formed, met and agreed on a general rise of prices. They also decided the rates for newly introduced works of silk mixed with other materials which had by the Act 42 George III, Cap. 44, been brought within the scope of the original Act. This list the justices sanctioned...”

The Spitalfields Acts were renewed several times until 1824. Opinion at the time as to their effect on the local silk industry was sharply divided: in the 1810s/1820s they were the subject of a pamphlet war and verbal exchanges in the newspapers. Historians also disagree. On one hand wages were not reduced to starvation levels across the board, as had happened before. On the other it was claimed they had a negative effect on the weavers and industry; some manufacturers upped sticks and moved to other silk manufacturing towns (Macclesfield, Norwich, Manchester, Paisley and Glasgow among them); the Acts were confined to the County of Middlesex, so they shifted to where they could pay cheaper wages. It did sometimes mean that some men would be working at full rates, while others would have been laid off by masters unable, or unwilling, or who didn't have enough work, to pay the proper rate; a slump in the trade between 1785 and 1798 forced thousands of weavers completely out of work. Although things were better between 1798 and 1815, the post-War recession bit hard; at a public meeting held at the Mansion House on 26 November 1816, for the relief of the weavers, the secretary stated that two-thirds of them were without employment and without the means of support, that “some had deserted their houses in despair unable to endure the sight of their starving families, and many pined under languishing diseases brought on by the want of food and clothing.”

The writers of some pamphlets attacking the Acts claimed that the interference of the magistrates ensured that all work was paid the same rate, machine-woven silk just as hand-woven; this, it was suggested, was handicapping masters, preventing any incentive for technological improvement... The same old argument, which again can be heard today every time workers combine to try and win higher wages - small businesses can't afford to pay a living wage, it'll cripple them and hobble the economy, the state should abolish as much regulation and red tape as possible; the market will set decent wages by its own mechanisms...

Well, we all know what happens when the market takes over...

By conscious and collective class struggle, the weavers forced the state, at least locally, to guarantee a measure of living standards. Obviously the interests of the authorities was partly in social peace; but the ruling elites were divided at the time as to the merits of paternalist intervention in industry, or laissez faire, allowing manufacturers carte blanche to exploit where they would, regardless of the consequences for the workers. Rival factions in the magistracy and London merchant classes could even enter in semi-alliance with rebellious workers or sponsoring strike-breaking gangs, as in the Wapping coalheavers and sailors dispute of 1768. But it's also true that the gains for the weavers were partial; some workers were protected; others may have starved; and the local nature of the struggle meant that

manufacturers were able to up sticks and transfer mechanised weaving elsewhere, eventually contributing to the doing-in for the Spitalfields silk industry. Limited gains are worth celebrating, but now, even more so than then, capital is always mobile, seeking ways to undercut our achievements; especially if we sit back. You have to keep pushing out the boundaries - or else they will push you back. Although there were some communications and solidarity expressed between silkweavers in different cities in the 1760s (for example, the weavers of Dublin warned the cutters about Dan Clarke and the machinations of manufacturers there), over the next few decades the masters were able to move operations without a concerted movement to resist them. We have to be more mobile, more international, even, than them, to even resist the erosion of the little we have - never mind seizing more...

"A STATE OF QUIETITUDE AND REPOSE"

One major result of the Acts, at least between 1773 and 1824, seems to have been an end to weavers' riots and cuttings... or any strikes at all. It is argued in pamphlets in the 1820s that the Spitalfields weavers were also diverted from radical, reforming and revolutionary politics, especially in the 1790s and 1810s when other similar groups of workers were widely attracted to such ideas. For instance, no or few weavers were supposed to have taken part in the widespread food rioting of 1795. Local anger may have also been diverted in 1795 by the opening of London's first ever soup kitchen in Spitalfields. Its founder, Patrick Colquhoun, stated that the aim of doling out free food was to prevent the poor being attracted by revolutionary ideas at the time of the French Revolution and widespread radical activity; he was a clever theorist of controlling the troublesome workers with repression and paternalism hand in hand, and was also instrumental in forming the Thames River Police, an important forerunner of the Met.

Whether the weavers were bought off completely is debatable though, as they were also said to be a significant element in the London artisan radical scene in the 1790s: including the London Corresponding Society and its more conspiratorial offshoots. However it may be relevant that when Leicester framework-knitters met London trade unionists in 1812 during the Luddite upsurge, the Londoners pointed out how the workers in London were all organised, 'combined', "the silkweavers excepted, and what a Miserable Condition are they in." The Acts may have exerted some quietist influence on Spitalfields workers, keeping them from coming together again in their own interest, with the magistrates claiming to be acting for them. By 1812 certainly though, the silkweavers of London were allegedly involved in abortive conspiracies for an uprising with Luddites and others - they and tailors were in fact said by government spies to be the chief London end of a nebulous revolutionary organisation... (although this was possibly invented by spies to justify their pay, and eagerly believed in by authorities and manufacturers as a justification for repression.) Later Feargus O'Connor was to call the Spitalfields weavers "the originators, the prop and support of the Chartist movement."

If it was the case that some weavers were skint while others worked, the Acts may have worked to reduce militancy and split the weavers movement. It's also a factor, that although the rebelliousness of the weavers pushed the local state to step in and acts as an arbitrator, in the end this disempowered the workers. By the time the Spitalfields Acts were withdrawn, the immense pressure the organised weavers could put on the masters had been dispersed, replaced by a reliance on the Magistrates; this collective power couldn't, as it turned out, be rebuilt when it was needed. As we said above, the division over the Acts reflects a split in

attitudes to workers militancy from the authorities: whether to pacify them and reduce trouble, or condone the reduction of wages regardless, and savagely repress any resistance. Sir John Clapham noted that many masters supported the Acts, because they ensured that “the district lived in a state of quietude and repose.” In the 1770s the paternal idea of a local state intervention to keep the peace in everyone ‘s interest prevailed, but in the harsher times of the laissez-faire 1820s they were an expensive anachronism. Manufacturers may well have moved their business out to areas with less of a rebellious tradition however, whether the Acts had existed or not.

It is certain that Repeal of the Acts in 1824, under the ‘progressive’ Whig program of economic liberalisation, was very unpopular among weavers (an 11,000 strong petition was got up in three days against repeal, and there were demos at parliament) and resulted in widespread wage cuts and extreme poverty. The trade was sabotaged. But the fight had seemingly largely gone out of the weavers... Although the repeal resulted in some strikes, loom-cutting and window smashing in the late 1820s, it was ineffective.

"THIS DECAY OF THEIR HANDICRAFT"

Repeal of the Acts led to or coincided with terrible poverty in area: and at least some mass social crime in response. In the Brickfield, in Spicer Street, (now Buxton Street, off Brick Lane), in 1826, 500-600 strong groups met to cook food they had stolen from shops en masse. They also ambushed animals going to Smithfield and Barnet markets and drove them to the marshes to roast them. The Bow Street patrol Horse Patrol were sent in to break up the party.

After 1830, the London silkweaving industry went into a terminal decline. Although in 1831 there were still 17,000 looms in the East End, and some 50,000 people in Spitalfields, Mile End New Town and Bethnal Green were directly dependent on silk weaving, 30,000 were said to be unemployed here at one time later in the 1830s (the average was usually around 4-5000 out of work). The steam-powered loom gradually took over from handloomweaving. Wages were lower by thirty per cent, than in 1824, and they did not average more than eight or nine shillings a week. Although some weavers migrated to other silkworking areas, most remained, many taking to casual work in spells of unemployment, especially on the docks. An 1837 Poor Law Report stated that “a considerable number of the weavers are fellowship porters and are employed in unloading vessels at London docks during seasons of distress.” Many weavers worked half in and half out of the trade through the 1840s and 1850s, hopeful that the good times would return. But the fate of the industry was finally sealed by the Cobden free trade treaty with France in 1860, which allowed cheaper french silks in without duty. In the twenty years following, the numbers dependent on the silk trade fell from 9,500 to 3,300. “Perhaps, 20,000 working weavers are now struggling against this decay of their handicraft, and many of them, in despair, are taking to street hawking.”

A deputation of silk weavers to the Board of Trade in 1866, stated that in the previous six years, their wage rates had been reduced by 20 per cent, and the price paid for weaving standard velvet had fallen front 4s. 3d. per yard in 1825 to 1s. 9d. per yard. A dwindling band of ageing workers remained in the trade, sharing out the limited work that continued to be available. The 1901 Census could only record 548 people employed in the weaving trade in the whole of London, of whom 48 were masters.

Spitalfields has changed immensely since the silkweaving trade turned it into London's first industrial suburb. But the clothing trade has remained a major employer in the area, though today it has moved on from silkweaving, through different branches of tailoring, to wholesaling and retailing clothing. Clothes are still made here, overwhelmingly in small workshops or people's homes, for low pay, usually the province of migrant workers or their children. New communities moving into the area could sometimes be hired to work at lower rates than existing workers. Irish migrants fleeing desperate poverty, moving to the area as a cheap place to live, were hired to work power looms to undercut the rebellious descendants of the Huguenots fighting to defend a living wage... (As well as in other trades, eg building, where their presence caused resentment and riots from 'native' English workers). But in the way that self-interest bridges such divides, men of both Irish and French descent can be found among the 'cutters' (John Doyle being Irish, and John Valline's name indicating French ancestry) uniting against the masters in collective, not communal, violence. Later, Jews escaping pogroms and genocide in late nineteenth century Eastern Europe replaced the Irish as the lowest paid, then were themselves gradually replaced in recent decades by textile workers from Bangladesh.

"A GREAT APPREHENSION OF A GENERAL TUMULT"

The violence of the weavers is interesting, because there were at least three kinds of physical force being employed in (and outside of) Spitalfields in the eighteenth century. At times the rank and file of the weavers were engaged in alliance with the masters against imports; demonstrating and rioting with the tacit approval of their bosses, a cross-class industry-wide unity. This wasn't that unusual in the seventeenth century; a number of struggles and events in London in the late 1700s echo it: the destruction of Dingley's Sawmill in Limehouse, the likely arson of the Albion Mills in Southwark in 1791, to quote two examples. This unity had its basis in the medieval Guilds, organisations that brought those in one trade or industry together, vertically, from biggest master to lowest apprentice, and aimed to work in the interests of them all, with agreed rules, so long as everyone accepted the hierarchies and restrictions. As the industrial revolution gained pace, and British capital spread its influence around the world, social and economic change was rapidly rendering the guilds, and City Companies that they had evolved into, obsolete. Their old function of regulating wages, conditions, behaviour, and apprenticeships, was by the eighteenth century impossible to maintain; however this didn't mean that both some masters and some journeymen looked back to the old system and attempted to revive elements of it. An important development was that the legal requirement of the local magistrates to regulate relations between masters and journeymen had become ineffective; mostly Justices would evade their responsibilities to force masters to pay decent wages and maintain traditional ratios of apprentices (a control to prevent apprentices being used as cheap labour in place of journeymen), while prosecuting any attempt by journeymen to 'combine', to organise together against their employers. Throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, numerous groups of workers got together to try to assert the old 'moral economy': perhaps the Spitalfields weavers were in the minority in succeeding in re-imposing it, for fifty years at least.

However at other times, intermittently, they could be embroiled in full-scale warfare AGAINST the masters over the introduction of mechanised looms, wage levels, rates for piece work: Collective Bargaining by Riot. By the 1770s yet a third struggle emerges, as

groups of workers start to fight between themselves, machine loom weavers against hand loom weavers.

Clearly, at some points employers were willing to back journeymen weavers' violence and identify themselves as having interests in common, but this didn't prevent them from shafting their workers when felt it was in their interests. It's worth remembering that the silk trade consisted of many different levels of manufacture; there were many small masters, operating just above the journeymen, sub-contracting for larger manufacturers like Chauvet. As with many craft-based trades from the middle ages to the nineteenth century, there also existed a mechanism for apprentices to rise to become small or even larger masters, through the recognised structures, which could complicate any naïve vision of a simple division of class interests. Sometimes small masters like the Poors could be virtually united with a mass of journeymen, later they were driven by class struggle and the increasing bitterness of the 1760s into collusion with the major employers.

The masters' drive to cut wages, through mechanisation, was partly driven by the need to reduce costs, stimulated by the widespread resistance to work in the form of absenteeism, by the strength of the weavers' organisations and their preparedness to use force. A further incentive was the increasing threat to their profits coming from silk and other fine cloth smuggling, which had reached a chronic scale: lowering wages and production costs through mechanisation was seen as a way to undercut the cheaper smuggled cloths, since protectionism and legislation was failing. For the journeymen's part, willingness to front for the masters on the one hand didn't blind some of them to the fundamental difference in their interests; the emergence of cutters' groups like the Bold Defiance shows their were elements capable and prepared to take defence of what they saw as their interests to fantastic levels.

Had the Bold Defiance had drifted from collecting contributions to pay for organising costs, into extortion and intimidation? The suggestion that a violent and extreme minority are forcing other workers into supporting rebellious action by force is part of the armoury of your daily mails etc when ranting about any strike etc. These foaming mouths never reckon the violence done on the other side, or the processes of coercion by which poverty, the factory system, submission to dehumanising work are imposed; the morality runs only one way. Collective self-defence is often necessary - sometimes you have to get your self-defence in first. How much it is true that the cutters were forcing other weavers to their side is open to debate; it's impossible to tell two hundred and fifty years later what is truth and what slander. But in the face of the desperate struggle to keep their wages at a level they could survive on, forcing those master weavers they could lean on to pay for their operating costs was only logical. Levying fines and subs on fellow journeymen by force is maybe slightly more questionable... The legitimacy of a militant minority imposing collectivity on a more passive majority remains an open question.

"NO WOMAN OR GIRL TO BE EMPLOYED"

Another thorny issue that comes up is sexism, and the relations between men's and women's work in silkweaving. Thomas and Mary Poor claimed their looms were targetted because the cutters knew Mary had worked them...

As with most industries, there's no doubt that elements of the organised male workforce took a dim view of women working... or more specifically, competing with men who had been through the recognised traditional path of apprenticeship, etc... On the one hand you have

pure prejudice and closed-mindedness; on the other, the undoubted fact that masters seeking to undercut wages had a habit of employing women, children, and young men who hadn't been 'properly' apprenticed, especially on machine looms or in areas of production where deskilling was taking place, to undermine the position of strength of established male workers. Trade unionists into the late twentieth century were still thrashing out this mix of class and sexual relations...

But a more detailed reading reveals a more complex warp and weft of inter-relations. Women and children's labour was in fact always crucial in the old 'domestic' handcraft economy, long before the introduction of power looms. Often kids work was unpaid, supplementing the family economy by supporting work of the parents. But women were at many times predominant in the silk trade; until the end of the fifteenth century, women formed the entire workforce for London silk production, and for centuries carried out all procedures in the manufacture of 'narrow silks': ribbons, laces and corsages. As late as 1765, women and children employed in silk work outnumbered men by 14 to 1. Not just that, but many women had also served time as apprentices, usually when their fathers were in the trade: a position that continued into the early 1800s, and as late as the early eighteenth century, many women were also recognized members of trade organizations. True, women's apprenticeship was never recognized to the same degree as men's. 'Broad' silk weaving, brought in to Spitalfields with the Huguenot migration, did introduce new divisions of labour - the weaving being done by men, the winding, warping and quilling by women and children. This did lead to a gradual loss of status for the work done by women, along with a decline in pay. Restrictions for women in certain jobs began to be introduced in the 1700s, but they tended to be revived or ignored depending on conditions in the trade and demand for labour. In times of depression (eg the 1760s) male journeymen took exception to women 'taking their jobs'; when times were good and work was plentiful (for instance during the Napoleonic Wars c.1800-15) the issue died down somewhat. The process was not all one way, though - while women might be restricted to narrow weaving, if given an opportunity they would take up the more lucrative and higher status broad weaving.

But it was in the late eighteenth century that they began to be excluded: the male Spitalfields silkweavers forced the women out of higher paid work in 1769 (followed by other trades: there were strikes against women's employment in some industries). A passage in the journeymen weavers' *Book of Wages and Prices for the Work of Journeymen Weavers* (Strong Plain, Foot figured, and Flowered Branches), published in 1774, read:

"No woman or girl to be employed in the making of any kind of work, except such works as are fixed and settled at five and a half pence per ell or five and a half pence per yard, or under, for the making; and those not to exceed half an ell in width."

In fact, if women's employment in silkweaving declined in the mid-late nineteenth century, it was partly because of the move away from domestic silk production, and its replacement by the factory and large-scale mechanization. There were other factors, including the gradual separation of work and home, the reduction of women's work to unwaged 'reproductive labour' - childrearing etc. Relatively low population and late marriage in the early eighteenth century, resulting in a fair-sized pool of young unmarried women able to work, contrasts with the situation a century later: rapidly rising population, and earlier marriage (partly again down to lower life expectancy). On top of this, as in many trades, silk weaving suffered periodic gluts of over production, resulting in large-scale unemployment among male weavers. This led to pressure on women's employment. Rather than machine looms allowing

skilled male workers to be replaced by unskilled women, power looms on the contrary threatened skilled women handloom weavers' position. If anything power looms in many cases set women AGAINST women - in other cities studies show that older, married women working handlooms in their own homes were being replaced by younger, unmarried women working power looms, increasingly in factories. Typically, if women, children, and migrant groups like the Irish, were forced into the coarser, less skilled sectors, these were the workers threatened by mechanization. As a result women were also not just victims of male weavers' agitation - they were also centrally involved in the campaigning and demonstrating, and also in the violence. It's certain that in Macclesfield, another silk-weaving centre, women and kids were the most active and violent in the 1719 attacks on calico-wearing ladies, and were also involved in riots in the 1730s against the introduction of the engine loom there; it's a fair assumption that this was also true of London.

SUFFER YOURSELVES NO LONGER TO BE PERSECUTED

So are there easy to summarise reasons why the Luddites of 1811-12 were smashed, while the Spitalfields weavers broadly succeeded in holding off mechanisation, and even achieved a partial stand-off, with a legal minimum wage, for fifty years? Northern weavers and stockingers fought for this in vain. The industrial revolution happened decades earlier in silkweaving than in wool and cotton, so that historian EP Thompson is able to claim that silkweavers' working conditions "anticipate those of the semi-employed proletarian outworkers of the nineteenth century..."

But their resistance to these changes was as fierce as that of their northern counterparts; and partly because the ideology of laissez-faire capitalism was still just taking shape, they were able to prise more concessions, for a time. In 1811-12, the times were very different. Between 1803 and 1814 most of the paternalist legislation that protected wages in British industries was repealed; while these laws had always been as restrictive of the workers as the manufacturers, they did impose some sanctions on the masters, and had a powerful moral significance for the journeymen, even though their real legal bite had been eroded over the preceding decades. The Luddites of 1811-12 were trying to uphold a fragile code that was being swept away. Also, as EP Thompson pointed out, even magistrates steeped in the paternalist tradition had come to fear the poor when they were organised and rebellious: "the old-fashioned squire might sympathise with a famished stockinger who appeared as a passive plaintiff at his door. He had no sympathy at all with secret committees, demonstrations in the streets, strikes, or the destruction of property."

Although the the Cutters did face heavy repression and hangings, the Luddites faced much heavier repression. It is true that on top of the economic hegemony being harsher, the Luddite insurgency took place at the climax of the long French revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars, there had been a massive militarisation of British society. The threat of the radical ideas that the French Revolution had helped to inspire in Britain, and of alliances of homegrown rebels and disaffected workers with foreign enemies, hung over the Luddites' cause: the possibility of inspiring a movement that could topple an unpopular government at a time of crisis. While the Spitalfields weavers were more locally concentrated, and also their trade was in decline, the Luddite movement spread across several counties, was threatening a major driver of the British economy, and seemed to pose a danger to the state itself. Whether or not there really was an insurgent conspiracy in 1812, there seemed no threat of it in 1769.

To the extent that both the silkweavers, and the stockings and framework knitters who made up the broader Luddite movement were attempting to defend a set of economic and social relations that the masters were busy abolishing, or preparing to leave behind, the modern period in British class war that it reminds us of is the late 1970s and 1980s... Although the periods were very different in many ways, the similarity lies in the relatively short but intense period where various groups of workers fought to defend established conditions, and patterns of work, which had evolved over decades (centuries in the earlier case), through long hard struggle, against a capital bent on a new direction, which it imposed viciously, with the active and ideological backing of the state at its highest levels (The Whig administrations of the early nineteenth century and those of the Thatcher years could have been cut from the same cloth). If the Spitalfields Acts, and say the miners strikes of the early 1970s and the Winter of Discontent of 1978-79, reflect temporary highpoints, ultimately the bosses pushed their program through. In both cases this led to catastrophic conditions for working people, both in the 1800s and in the decades since Thatcher.

The Spitalfields weavers were far from unique among London workers for their willingness to use violence, their collective spirit, their resistance to the mechanization that was harshly undermining their ability to make a living, and what they saw as their traditional rights. But for a time at least, because of how fiercely they fought, and despite how viciously they were put down in 1769, they won some element of the protection they were fighting for. True, this protection was double-edged, and was eventually removed, and they weren't able to prevent either the machine-loomers from replacing the handlooms, or the gradual disappearance of their trade. But since the processes they faced continue, the tensions and antagonisms inevitably resurface, the decisions and commitments they made are ones that can inspire and inform us... At this time when a concerted assault is in progress against the conditions, wages, pensions, and working practices of billions of working class people - the stakes have rarely been higher in decades. The inertia and paralysis of the traditional union structures entrap us at every turn; for many new and subversive grassroots ways of getting together offer the only way forward. Glimpses of this are already emerging...

We can all be the Conquering and Bold Defiance...

Isaac Ashley, 2012

This text is an expanded excerpt from a longer work, based on a radical history walk around the Spitalfields and Brick Lane area, covering not only the silkweavers, but earlier and later social and economic conditions and movements there.

It is also available as a free pamphlet... For a copy, send two first class stamps to past tense, c/o 56a InfoShop, 56 Crampton Street, London SE17 3AE. For multiple copies get in touch by email: pasttense@alphabettthreat.co.uk

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However we'd welcome any comments, suggestions, denunciations or corrections of inaccuracies. Past Tense is also always interested in receiving possible texts for publication.

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