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Mid Victorian Coventry, The City, its Workers and Industry
(Unpublished document, Coventry City Records Office).

Chapter II, The Silk Trade

During the time with which this enquiry is concerned, namely the decade between 1851 and 1861, the ribbon trade in Coventry was suffering from a decline. By its very nature the ribbon trade was cyclical, as it depended on fashion, which was then, as now, fickle. However, the downward trend on this occasion was permanent rather than temporary, and was accelerated by other factors. One of these was the changing conditions in the industry, which meant that the 'List of Prices', previously adhered to by masters and weavers alike, was being ignored more and more.

During the Napoleonic wars the old, wealthy 'masters' in the trade were superseded, or joined by the 'undertakers', whose job had formerly been to distribute silk to the weavers. These men now took on the role of masters themselves, cutting out the old masters and dealing directly with the London wholesalers. These new, smaller masters had generally less financial backing than the older ones and were more like to 'pay below the list' in order to compete more effectively with their rivals.

At the same time there occurred the coming of the factory, as opposed to the individual weaver, who jealously guarded his independence. With the factory came the power loom, whose output was far greater than the handloom on which the domestic weaver worked. Employers tended to pay factory weavers a weekly wage, since paying 'by the piece' in the old way would have nullified the advantages of speeding up production. Even though many handlooms remained, being essential for the more intricate work, division had crept into the ranks of the weavers, and there was no longer a unified front in favour of the list.

Finally, in 1860, came the removal of the tariff on imported ribbons, exposing the Coventry product to competition from France, where the raw material did not have to be imported. In the same year came the last great battle over the list – a strike, after which the silk trade, although remaining important, was never again to attain the position it had held until the 1850s as the major employer of labour in Coventry.

It is against this background that the ribbon trade in the selected districts of Coventry must be examined. As Chapelfields, the watchmaker's suburb had only 2.5% (1851) and 2.0% (1861) of its heads of households engaged in the ribbon trade, the real interest must be centred on Gosford Street and Hillfields.

Gosford Street was an established area close to the city centre, whereas Hillfields was a new, still growing suburb outside the medieval wall. In studying these two districts from the point of view of the silk ribbon trade two questions emerge. What evidence, if any, does the census give of the changes taking place in the industry? How far is the theory about the different status of the workers in Hillfields as compared with those in the old city supported by the census data?

Both districts show evidence that times were harder in the ribbon trade in 1861. In both the number of households taking in lodgers had increased; perhaps surprisingly the increase was greater in Hillfields than in Gosford Street. There could be a number of explanations for this, but perhaps the most likely, in view of the claimed preponderance of handlooms weavers in Hillfields, is simply that the district was harder hit by the depression.

Ominously for the future of the industry, there is evidence from both districts that it was being deserted even before the 1860 crisis. Already in 1851 many fathers who were themselves employed in some branch of the silk industry had sons who had been apprenticed to some other trade – in many cases watch making.

This trend was naturally more apparent still in 1861, and in that year was more marked in Hillfields than in Gosford Street. This suggests that the Hillfields weaver, despite his loyalty to the old practices in the trade, had been quicker to recognise the situation. Valuing the tradition of apprenticeship, he had put his sons into a trade which seemed to have more security for the future than his own.

Another possible piece of evidence for the decline of the silk trade is the investigation into the age at which children began work. In both districts the age of starting work for the children of silk weavers in 1851 seems to have been about twelve. Ten years later it was nearer fourteen. It is remotely possible that this is accounted for by an increased value being placed on education, but given the economic circumstances, the most likely explanation is that there were no jobs for the children to go to, so that they were being forced either to stay at school or, possibly, to help their parents.

The census material gives no direct information about living standards, but a considerable amount of indirect evidence can be gathered on this and on the question of factory and handloom weavers. For example, it might be expected that a larger number of servants living on the premises, a larger percentage of children attending school and a smaller percentage of working wives, would indicate a higher standard of living.

Using these factors as a guide, there is little doubt that the silk workers of Hillfields appear to be better off than their counterparts in Gosford Street. In 1851, out of the silk workers' children aged from five to ten years, 62% in Hillfields and 55% in Gosford Street attended school. In 1861 the figure for Hillfields was 61%, but the Gosford Street percentage had fallen dramatically to 23%. The difference between the two years in Gosford Street is remarkable, and might be taken to indicate that in a time of depression the Gosford Street weaver tended to take his children away from school – presumably because of the expense or the fact that the children could earn money. By contrast, it is possible that the Hillfields weaver already pessimistic about the future of his trade placed a high value on education as an aid to securing the future. In 1851 less than 3% of Gosford Street silk weavers' households had servants living in, compared with over 13% in Hillfields. Ten years later this had fallen to 6% in Hillfields, and in Gosford Street no silk workers' households had servants living in. The position regarding working wives was very similar in the two districts, with about 90% of silk workers' wives being in employment. Whatever the difference in the standard of living, it is obvious that few workers anywhere were prosperous enough to exist solely on the husband's income.

Whatever can be established about comparative living standards, there seems no doubt about the different attitude towards the trade in the two districts. There is evidence that the practice of apprenticeship was itself disappearing in Gosford Street, where there are comparatively few apprentices, and where quite young children are often described as 'weavers'. In Hillfields, although many fathers were making their sons desert the silk trade, there is no evidence that the practice of apprenticeship was itself being abandoned. If a father decided to put his son into the silk trade, he had him serve his time as an apprentice. Obviously weaving was still regarded as a skilled occupation in Hillfields. Here again Gosford Street differs. There are many female weavers. Unfortunately the census returns do not clearly distinguish between the different types of loom being used, but it is surely safe to conclude that many, if not all, of the female and child 'weavers' were factory power-loom workers, which explains why an apprenticeship was no longer thought necessary.