Trading Stories, Working Lives

Graham Barker continues his occupational history series with a Victorian spinner, James Powell of Loughborough

Pause for a moment in Loughborough Market Place. A portly bronze man sits upon a podium, left leg outstretched; with a gentle smile he admires his single sock, patterned with zig-zags and dots. This is the Sock Man, a sculpture created by Shona Kinloch in 1998 to celebrate Loughborough's hosiery heritage.

Many of my ancestors – almost too many to count – worked as framework knitters, trimmers and seamers in Loughborough. They formed the very fabric of the town. Yet when I see the Sock Man, one ancestor in particular springs to mind: it's time to take a closer look at the working life of James Powell (1824-1906), a spinner of Pinfold Gate.

A quick shuttle through the census returns (www.ancestry.co.uk) reveals that James – the son of stocking maker John Powell and Catherine (nee Taylor) – spent almost his entire working life as a spinner. What's more, he lived on what is essentially one street – Pinfold Row, Street and Gate – for seventy years or so. Could I add a few zig-zags and dots to this rather plain material, spin a little colour into James Powell's life story?

Pigot's trade directory (1828) helps set the scene: "The manufactures of this town consist of cotton, worsted and merino hosiery, and bobbin-net lace, the latter an article of great beauty and durability, for which a patent was obtained, and until a few years ago the whole of the patentee's machinery was worked here; but great damage having been done to it by the Luddites, part was removed into Devonshire … The hosiery and lace branches, however, continue to flourish here very extensively."

The Luddites had indeed made their mark on Loughborough. As a young boy, James Powell would have heard stories of the night in June 1816 when a band of frame-breakers smashed all 55 lace-making machines at John Heathcoat's factory, just off the Market Place. As it happens, a certain James Powell ("Known as Uncle" according to the press reports, and possibly part of the extended family) was amongst those held hostage whilst the Luddites rampaged.

Despite this backdrop, Loughborough's hosiery trade remained at the forefront of factory automation. Two long-established firms were particularly innovative, as Wallace Humphrey writes in A History of Loughborough 1810-1870: "Richard Cartwright and Joseph Paget were two eighteenth century hosiers actively seeking improvements in materials. Paget had introduced worsted hosiery before 1792. At about the same time, Cartwright introduced the carding and spinning of cotton and a fine wool known as Merino, to produce an 'unshrinkable' thread, patented in 1794. In partnership with Edward Warner, he opened a mill and equipped it with Arkwright and Crompton machinery."

So, by the late 1830s – when James Powell is ready to start work – factories are very much part of the Loughborough landscape. Our earliest references to his employment show him simply as 'Factory' (1841) and later working as a 'Card Cleaner' (1845, 1846). Carding is one of many processes involved with preparing fibres prior to spinning; by mechanically moving two surfaces – or 'cards', studded with pins – in different directions, the fibres are disentangled and aligned, ready for combing and spinning. After a while, the cards become clogged with fibres – hence the need for card cleaners such as James.

Carding, like other steps in yarn making, had originally been carried out by hand, using two pads rather like square studded table tennis bats. But James starts work at a time of great change – Loughborough led the country in harnessing steam power for hosiery manufacture. Paget's introduced partial steam power into their factory in 1839, and this was followed a year later by Cartwright and Warner using steam in their shirt making section.

We can track James Powell's progress through the census returns:

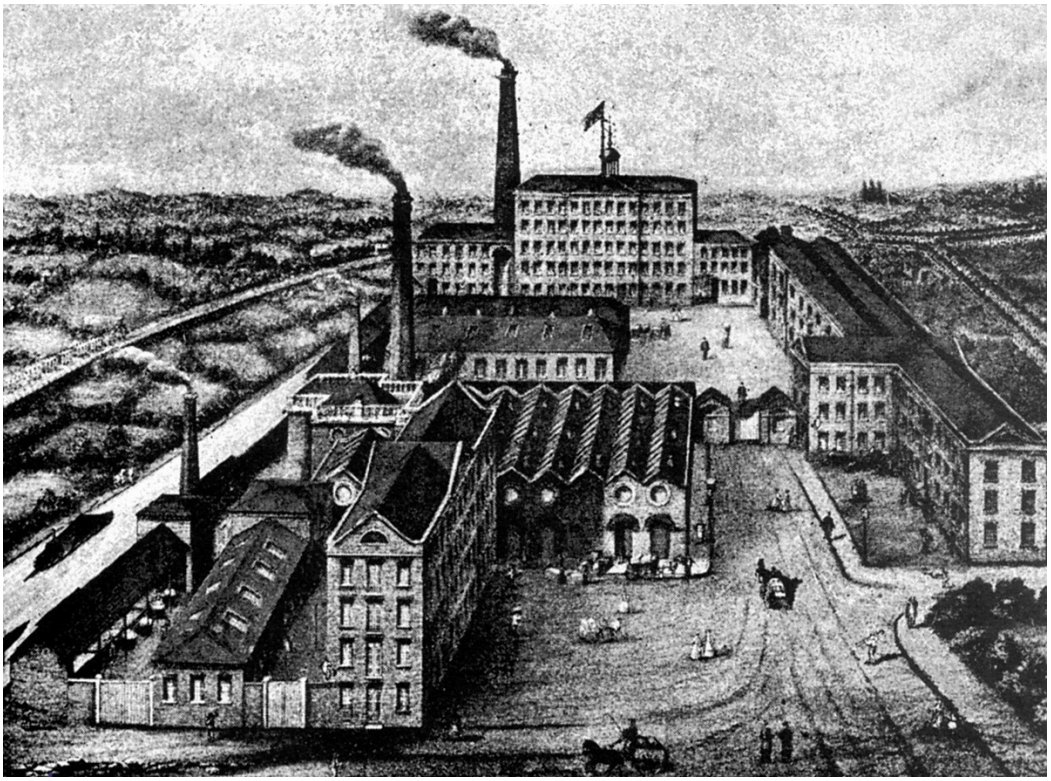
1841	Pinfold Row	Factory
1851	Pinfold Row	Angola Spinner
1861	Pinfold Street	Angola Spinner
1871	Pinfold Gate, 4 Court E	Angola Spinner
1881	Pinfold Gate, 4 Court E	Merino Spinner
1891	71A Pinfold Gate	Worsted Spinner
1901	71 Burder Street	Retired Spinner, Living on Own Means

Without employee records we can't be quite sure where James worked, but this long-time association with Angola spinning suggests one particular hotspot: Cartwright and Warner's factory. Angola – a fleecy wool mix – was a somewhat specialised branch of the trade. In 1851, for example, only 19.7% of Loughborough hosiery workers worked with Angola, compared to 45.9% in

cotton, 26.7% in worsted, and 7.7% others (principally merino, with some cashmere, silk, lamb's wool, berlin and mohair). White's 1846 trade directory highlights Cartwright and Warner as the Angola specialists at North Street (later Nottingham Road).

Warner, Cartwright, and Warner, (and Angola yarn spinners,) Clarence mill, North street

Most of their factory buildings on Nottingham Road have since been demolished (just one block on Mill Lane survives, along with the 1875 mending works on Clarence Street) but we're fortunate to have an illustration. Even allowing for artistic licence, it was an extensive site, strategically located beside the canal, railway and road connections.

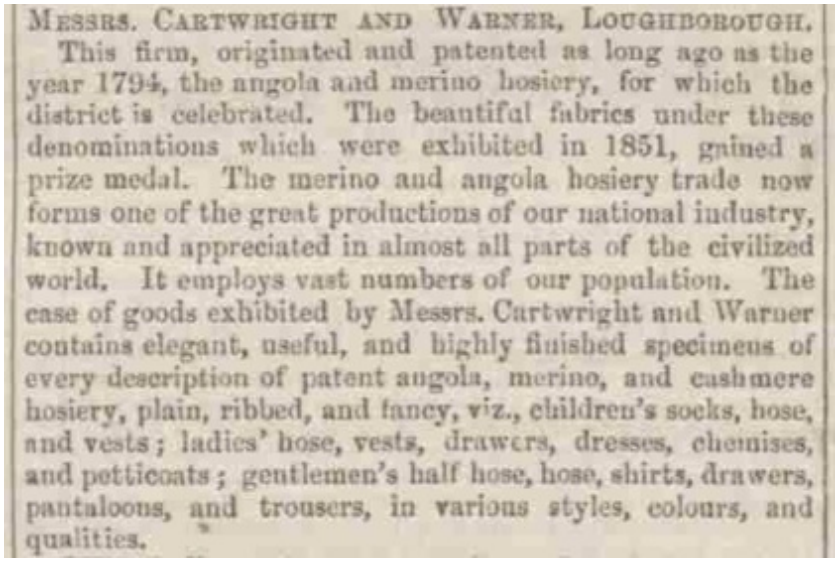


Newspaper snippets (www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk) develop a more detailed picture of life at Cartwright and Warner. Let's take a walk around, with a Leicester Chronicle report (1828): "To convey an adequate idea of it I may state, that I counted ninety-six windows in the front, which is about 200 feet, the width thirty feet, and five stories high. The operations are performed by a very superior steam-engine, of thirty horse power… It gives employment to about one hundred and sixty men, women, and children, who earn from 10s to 2s 6d per week, for about twelve hours' labour each day."

It continues, "The Angola hose is made on the principle of combining worsted with cotton, in nearly equal proportions… and the close and intimate intermixture of the fibres of the wool and cotton. The separate materials are

first passed through a machine called a picker and blower, the object of which is to clean and lighten it... They are then carded together by carding-machines, part of each material being dyed blue or black, and the intermixture is effected by the carding. It is then spun of various fineness by throstles and mules, and of these I counted twenty, each having one hundred and ninety-two spindles… The yarn is then given out to be woven; and this department affords constant employment of about 1000 stocking-frames… by which the weaver gets from 10s to 12s per week. The quantity made by a frame varies with quality, or from three or four dozen to a single dozen." A photo of spinners at Armley Mills in Leeds helps picture life on the factory floor.

James and his fellow workers no doubt puff with pride when the firm sends four large chests of goods to be shown at the Great Exhibition of 1851, and then in 1862, another consignment to the International Exhibition:



MESSRS. CARTWRIGHT AND WARNER, LOUGHBOROUGH.

This firm, originated and patented as long ago as the year 1794, the angola and merino hosiery, for which the district is celebrated. The beautiful fabrics under these denominations which were exhibited in 1851, gained a prize medal. The merino and angola hosiery trade now forms one of the great productions of our national industry, known and appreciated in almost all parts of the civilized world. It employs vast numbers of our population. The case of goods exhibited by Messrs. Cartwright and Warner contains elegant, useful, and highly finished specimens of every description of patent angola, merino, and cashmere hosiery, plain, ribbed, and fancy, viz., children's socks, hose, and vests; ladies' hose, vests, drawers, dresses, chemises, and petticoats; gentlemen's half hose, hose, shirts, drawers, pantaloons, and trousers, in various styles, colours, and qualities.

On the whole, employee relations at Cartwright and Warner seem to have been amicable – strikes over reduced wages (1847) and reduced hours under the Ten Hours' Bill (1848) were quickly resolved. There were moments of relaxation too, most notably on the annual August works' outing. In 1873, for example, James joined upwards of 800 colleagues "conveyed from the station amidst the enlivening strains of the Rifle Band. After an hour and a half's agreeable ride, the joyous freight found itself amongst the scenery of Matlock, from whence many of the recreative throng radiated, in various groups, to find new beauties in the surrounding neighbourhood. Thus passed a day of real enjoyment, until the evening hours gave warning that the train awaited to pass them to their homes again."

Notwithstanding such jolly beanos to Matlock and Buxton, James Powell's working life as a spinner was undoubtedly tough – long hours spent feeding, fixing and cleaning spinning mules and throstles as they turned out yard upon yard of Angola, merino and worsted yarn. As time went on, his eldest children followed suit, starting out as factory lads and girls and later working as framework knitters, trimmers and hosiery hands.

In 1900, Mitchell and Kenyon shot a one-minute silent film (player.bfi.org.uk) at the Cartwright and Warner factory gates – James had retired by this time, but I like to imagine my Powell relatives are amongst the workers clocking off, decked out in their bonnets and bowlers. And in any event, there's always the Sock Man sitting in Loughborough Market Place – staring admiringly at his knitted sock – to echo back to the spinners and knitters in our family trees.

Auntie Mabel: inspiring family histories
To read Graham's previous 'Trading Stories, Working Lives' articles, visit www.auntiemabel.org; as well as stories about Barrow lime workers, Loughborough boatmen, and postmen in Victorian Leicester, the site includes ideas for writing your own family history.