

THE CITY'S TEXTILE INDUSTRY

The boundaries of the combined Ward of Cripplegate are in the shape of a rough-sided triangle:— at the north, one side runs from the YMCA building to BP's Brittanic House, the other two sides meeting at the point where Wood Street joins Cheapside.

Every working day, thousands of people move in and out of that triangle, many of whom commute to the various office buildings, devoted primarily to financial services. The remainder is made up of an extraordinarily wide range of interests — residents, schoolgirls and students; actors, musicians and patrons of the arts; tourists, conference delegates and exhibition visitors — and more besides. Few, if any, of this great mix of people could believe that, for nearly a century prior to 1940, the Cripplegate triangle had been very largely occupied by one commercial activity — textile distribution. Indeed, this activity expanded into neighbouring areas:— south, through Bread Street and Watling Street, to Cannon Street and St. Paul's Churchyard and, to a lesser extent, west, across Aldersgate to Bartholomew Close, Little Britain and part of Newgate Street. At its peak, the "rag trade" dominated as much as an eighth of the "square mile" — it was, indeed, a City industry.

The purpose of this paper is, briefly, to discover how this rather unlikely concentration came about, to describe the various elements that made up the "industry" and to recount the story of its slow demise — for, contrary to general belief, it was a long time a' dying.

From early civilisation, man has been endowed with an extraordinary, perhaps instinctive, ability to produce yarn from animal and vegetable fibre and to convert the yarn into fabric to meet his need for body cover and other forms of protection from cold and heat. Furthermore, it has been evident throughout history that man — and woman — have not been content with plain, unadorned garments. And so, in parallel with the development of fabrics, there have been, on the one hand, colour — achieved by dyeing and staining and, on the other, embellishment by such additions as ribbons and braids, buckles and belts, clasps and buttons — in a word — "haberdashery".

With that background, there is no doubt that some form of trading in textiles has always existed in the City and in the eighteenth century this trading started to take a shape. By then, in addition to wools from Bradford and cottons from Manchester, such specialised products as laces from Nottingham and hosiery and knitwear from Leicester were becoming available in some quantity — all these sources being to the north of the capital. Also, as trade with the new world developed, imports and exports moved through the western ports. The limited road network from both north and west led the great horse-drawn waggons through the "Crepelgate" and thence to the nearest coaching inns that

could accommodate them — the most important being grouped in an area to the west of Guildhall. They were huge establishments, usually with the stabling and the accommodation for the waggoners surrounding a large courtyard which provided the space for the waggons. To give some idea of their size, one of these inns extended along what is now Gresham Street from Wood Street to Aldermanbury, with entrances in all three streets. It was thus Aldermanbury that became the first centre of the trade, much of the business being conducted in the inns, which could therefore claim to be the earliest form of “warehouse”.

As volume grew, supplemented, it should be said, by large imports from the East arriving through the Port of London, and as the increasing population spread further and further from the centre of the capital, the bulk handlers, or wholesalers, began to separate themselves from the stalls and shops that served the public — and their need for warehouse space became insatiable. As land values rose, first the gardens of the residences in and around Aldermanbury and Wood Street were sold, followed, in due course, by the residences themselves and, by about 1820, the area had become established as the principal wholesale textile market for London and the south of England.

The next and most important event to contribute to the local development of the trade was the coming of the railways. In addition to the advantages in the movement of the merchandise, the benefits were two-fold. First, as this movement shifted from road to rail, the need for the inns was correspondingly reduced and the space they occupied could be used for further warehouses. Secondly, the work-people, instead of having to live within walking distance — so called, for some of these distances were quite excessive — could now move a few miles out to the dormitory areas that were being developed and travel by train. This greatly reduced the problem of staffing to keep up with the growing trade but some of the major houses still continued to provide the sleeping-in accommodation which they had previously found to be an effective way of attracting and keeping employees.

From Aldermanbury, expansion westward and northward into Wood Street continued as quickly as suitable space became available. The coming of the Metropolitan Railway had reduced even further the need for residences but it was a fire in 1884, destroying much of the northern part of Wood Street and opening the door for really substantial development, that eventually led to that street becoming synonymous with textile business.

While progress, particularly in communications, was to have considerable impact on the manner in which the business was conducted over the years, the fundamentals remained unchanged for as long as it survived. The Cripplegate triangle, with its satellite areas, was made up of “middle men” — the meat in the sandwich — with manufacturers, British and foreign, on one side and the retail outlets on the other. By the turn of the century, the stage was set for the

halcyon days that were to continue, in spite of a number of setbacks, right through to the 1939 war.

The, now firmly established, trade was headed by the large, multi-department warehouses, about ten in number and each carrying an astonishing variety of items. In charge of each department was the buyer, a man who had normally worked his way through his domain and who possessed considerable power and authority, so much so, that many became mini-tyrants. The departmental manager, known as the "first man" — there were no sex discrimination problems in those days! — was responsible, with the aid of numerous staff, for the movement of goods inward and their methodical disposition in the maze of stock fixtures, in order to facilitate the making up of orders for which he and the staff were equally responsible.

There were also extensive counters on which were displayed small quantities of the majority of the items carried in the department. This display was largely for the benefit of the small shopkeepers who visited their suppliers almost weekly to replenish their stocks. At busy times, the scene often appeared chaotic and the receiving room and despatch department were frequently overwhelmed. But the movement, in and out, was maintained, despite the fact that the great volume of parcels, bales and cases had, in many instances, to be manhandled on and off the vans and across the footway and that the only mechanical assistance consisted of external and internal hoists, platform lifts, operating from ground to basement level, and spiral chutes running from top to bottom of the building. Lifts were normally for passengers, only, and often reserved to customers and senior staff.

Where goods-lifts were installed, they were mostly inefficient and unreliable, partly due to their being constantly overworked and overloaded.

The next category were the several specialist houses, some of which were established by provincial manufacturers in order to insure that their own products were readily available to the retailers, particularly where the sheer bulk of the items made it impossible for the general houses to carry sufficient stocks.

Morley and Wolsey, familiar names as manufacturers of heavy underwear and hosiery, so essential in those days as protection against the cold, were typical examples, while others included several of the Luton millinery manufacturers. Further smaller houses were those that limited themselves to clearly defined sections of the trade, perhaps broken down into three or four departments — a tenth of the number in some of the general houses. These included menswear, childrens' wear and baby-linen and that very important ancillary, haberdashery.

Also, there were the dealers in various piece-goods — from dress and

furnishing fabrics to laces, frillings and ribbons — all sold by the yard.

Again, there were a number of “smallwares” firms, carrying such items as ladies’ collars and blouses, or scarves and handkerchiefs and offering a wider choice in their specialised fields than the major warehouses could afford to provide. Indeed, it was this same need for a large selection of small items that protected the haberdashery firms from serious competition from the “big boys”.

Acting as the “go-betweens”, were the local representatives of the manufacturers — the agents, of which there were hundreds — mostly working from small offices and earning their living solely by commission. Given good manufacturers, capable of maintaining a high standard of competitive products, year in and year out, an agency could provide a reasonable, even substantial, income. But for many it was a tough life spent “Bag carrying” and knocking on doors, often with little or no reward. There was no security, the manufacturers were not above unfair behaviour and the more tyrannical buyers sometimes treated the agents like dirt. Despite all that, they were never in short supply!

Over the years, a number of small manufacturers appeared, usually with part of their processes being parcelled out to “home-workers”. Their products were limited to such easily handled items as mens’ ties, artificial flowers and, again, ladies’ collars and blouses. These mini-manufacturers were very conveniently situated, being able to pop into the nearby fabric departments and haberdashery houses for their materials and to call on most of their customers within an easy walking distance. Many of them made a lot of money!

The final ingredient was the shipper. With communication by sea, weeks or months could elapse between the sending of a communication and receiving a reply. In these circumstances, sending a range of samples was impractical, particularly when season dead-lines and the fickleness of fashion had to be taken into consideration. To overcome these problems, the overseas houses had set up buying offices in London, the majority of which were situated in or just outside the City’s northern boundary, along Barbican, Beech Street and Chiswell Street. The buying capacity could be very substantial and the orders or indents would be placed through agents to their manufacturers. Great responsibility was placed on the buyers, who, in meeting the outline requirements given by their opposite numbers in, say, Melbourne, had to rely entirely on their own judgement while sitting in an office thousands of miles away from their market.

With all this activity, the trade prospered and proved very resilient. The 1914 War brought restrictions and shortages but the basis remained intact and post-war recovery was rapid. The general strike in 1926 was soon forgotten and

the most serious setback came with the slump in the early thirties. Business was badly affected, some firms were forced to close and, everywhere, staff were dismissed. The hardest hit were the importers. In those days, unlike today, few in the trade had heard of rates of exchange and such things as falling pounds. But the facts were that, by 1931 the British currency was very weak, the overseas suppliers knew it and they were taking safeguards. The Swiss, for example, were endorsing all order confirmations and invoices — “Payable at 25 Swiss francs to the £” but this was largely ignored. (Incidentally, the rate today is less than a tenth of what it was then!) To many of the buyers and, indeed, their directors, the £ was a £ and, if anything went wrong, the foreigners would have to sort matters out for themselves. When, in September, the U.K. came off the gold standard, the franc slumped to around 13 to the £ and chaos set in. The wholesalers could not accept that their purchases — much of them still to be delivered — would nearly double in price and they simply refused to pay the difference. However, the “foreigners” duly sorted matters out by bringing a test case which settled the argument. Losses were obviously very considerable and the buyers, whose income was made up largely of commission on their department’s profits, were not amused by their harsh lesson in economics.

From about 1934 there was a slow but steady recovery but this was always haunted by the threat of war. When that war came, imports ceased almost overnight but business in home-produced goods continued under the quickly established control by quotas and rationing. A few firms suffered damage or destruction during the early days of the blitz but it was on December 29th, 1940, that the hammer-blow fell, when an intense incendiary raid nearly, but not quite, obliterated the whole of the textile areas. In Cripplegate, two, relatively modern, non-textile buildings survived, together with those either side of Wood Street where it joins Cheapside. This was ironic, for the street was extremely narrow at this point and widening plans were already in hand before the war. In the event, this bottleneck was not removed until many years after the war ended. More importantly, one Cripplegate warehouse managed to escape, that of Bradbury, Greatorex on this very site of Guildhall’s West Wing, thanks largely to the heroic efforts of the members of staff who were on fire-watch duty that night.

Outside the Ward, in St. Paul’s Churchyard, Cooks of St. Paul’s and Pawsons & Leaf’s, two more of the large general houses also survived, although the former lost one of its two buildings, and, in Little Britain, two haberdashery firms were among the few lucky ones.

Those that had lost everything proved to be made of strong stuff. There were many empty premises in the West End and, in no time, the old names were appearing on new homes with such unlikely addresses as “The Fore Street Warehouse Company, Bond Street”. Oddments of furniture, much of it filched from homes, and anything that could be turned into stock fixtures

were acquired and such restricted supplies as were available began to flow again. Meanwhile, ledgers and cash-books, together with any other documents that had been placed in the safes and strong-rooms that withstood the intense heat of the blaze, were being recovered under police supervision.

Tight restrictions on supplies continued throughout the war and for some years after but, with gradually increased home production and the introduction of an import-quota scheme, the old order was beginning to return by the late forties.

In the meantime, the question in many minds was whether the trade would return to the City. During and immediately after the war there had been talk of setting up some form of "textile exchange" where the wholesalers would have show-rooms, while the warehouses holding the stocks would be established in the suburbs or even further out, something that was now quite feasible with the improvements in transport and communication. This idea never got off the ground but the Corporation had been left in no doubt that textiles would return. The Holford plan, published in 1950, showed a large part of Cripplegate and small areas immediately to the north and south of St. Paul's as being reserved for textiles in the diagram entitled "Proposed distribution of trades and activities". But this, like so many of the grand post-war concepts, came to nothing.

A few small wholesalers and a surprising number of agents did return, finding accommodation in buildings that had survived the blitz in various parts of the City but, when redevelopment commenced a few years later, they were quickly forced out.

The biggest house to make a comeback was William Williams, perhaps the largest of the haberdashers, who took a building in Aldersgate Street. Two new warehouses were built, each with the proceeds of compulsory acquisition, Dominant House in Queen Victoria Street by Hitchcock, Williams and Ivanhoe House in Aldersgate Street by Bradbury Greatorex. This was to be the peak of the trade's relocation in the square mile, for other forces were now affecting the situation.

Even before the war, a number of the major retailers had realised that they could more economically purchase a large proportion of their requirements direct from the manufacturers. After the war, the expansion of the chain-stores and the practice of major retailers being formed into groups led to a rapid acceleration in direct buying. The first victims of this fundamental change were the small shops that relied entirely on the wholesalers for their supplies and who now found their prices constantly undercut by the bigger stores up the road. They were followed by the wholesalers who were now finding themselves more and more isolated and one after another decided that it was not worth carrying on.

The process was accelerated further by the appearance of predators who were now taking over a number of the major wholesalers, whose assets made them very vulnerable — even before the enormous rise in property values around 1970 made it almost impossible for them to resist offers. The Courtauld organisation turned out to be the biggest such operator — nation-wide. In London, they moved Cooks into inferior premises in Queen Street, Pawsons were shifted to Old Street and the biggest baby-linen and childrens' wear house, having found a post-war home in Old Bailey, was suddenly decanted to Swindon. Bradbury's, in their new building, also went into the Courtauld net.

This was by no means the end of the moves. Within two or three years Cooks and Pawsons were again shifted, this time to join Bradbury's in their Aldersgate Street home where Hollingtons, a menswear house, was moved in shortly afterwards, the four names stretching the full length of the fascia. To cap it all, Courtaulds instituted central buying and this in Birmingham! Other similar, if smaller, amalgamations were taking place and, simultaneously, yet more firms were disappearing, no longer able to compete with the strength of chains like Mothercare and the low-priced merchandise now pouring in from the Far East.

Meanwhile, the shipping trade was also fading away, as the advance in all forms of communication, the growth of local manufacturing and the availability of products from new and nearer sources, together destroyed the need for the London buying offices.

To make matters even worse, in addition to the near elimination of the small shops, many manufacturers now found that, with their limited output and relatively high labour costs, they, too, could no longer compete in a market of mass demand and mass production. The stage had been reached where there was very little meat left in the sandwich and the bread on both sides had crumbled away.

Today, a handful of smallware and haberdashery firms manage to continue to trade, largely due to the fact that they can still meet the need for that wider choice in their limited and specialised wares. Not one is in the City, where the last survivors were those in the two new warehouses built after the war.

During the seventies, Hitchcocks had been reducing their occupation of Dominant House floor by floor until they retained only the basement before finally closing down. Then, in 1980, the Corporation granted permission for Ivanhoe House to change from warehouse to office use and, about eighteen months later, the last of the thousands of doors was shut.

It is a fitting epilogue that this home of a great Company, with its origins in Aldermanbury where it all began, has just been demolished. Perhaps the replacement building should carry a memorial plaque with the inscription: "Here died the City's once great textile industry. R.I.P."