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THE SPITALFIELDS ACTS, 1773-1824

THANKS to Mr. and Mrs. Sidney Webb, the Spitalfields Acts, which no economic historian—hardly even a student—can afford to ignore, have become a classical illustration of the fact “that the House of Commons remained innocent of any general theory against legislative interference long after it had begun the work of sweeping away mediæval regulations.”¹ It was not the business of the authors of the *History of Trade Unionism* to examine the Acts and their working in any detail. But they are worth examination, as is the whole economic history of that product of immigrant skill and extreme mercantilist regulation—the British silk industry of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. A contribution to this wider inquiry was made a few years ago by Mr. G. B. Hertz,² who gave incidentally a fuller account of the Acts themselves than any recent writer; but neither was Mr. Hertz “out for” the Acts, their antecedents, the business and social world to which they applied, what you may call, as you please, their mediævalism or their modern note, their imitations, just how they worked, or why they were repealed. The Parliamentary Papers of the early nineteenth century, together with certain other sources of less value, have a good deal to tell anyone who cares for these things.

There is no need to spend time in proving that the Spitalfields industry of the eighteenth century was mainly “capitalistic.” The normal weaver was, and always had been, a wage-earner, though the masters were not infrequently recruited from among successful weavers, and some of these masters were only in a small way of business. A typical manufacturer, during the whole of the period 1760-1830, would either buy silk, possibly from abroad, more or less ready for the loom, or would have raw silk thrown, twisted, dyed, and in other ways prepared for weaving by throwsters, spinners, and the like, in various districts outside

¹ *History of Trade Unionism* (1902 ed.), p. 48.

² *The English Silk Industry in the Eighteenth Century*, *English Historical Review*, XXIV., 710 (1909).

London.¹ Spitalfields and the adjacent parishes were simply a weaving area, conveniently near to the landing-place and market for the raw silk and to the greatest centre of consumption.

That the trade was what would to-day be called an organised trade before the passing of the Act of 1773 is highly probable. For the Act was connected with difficulties arising from the faulty working of something very like a modern trade agreement in a piece-work industry. There was a "book," or list of piece-work rates, "an agreed list," "that had existed long before I had existence," said an old foreman, by name Edward Jones, who perfectly remembered the facts, which list was, "about the year 1767, broken in upon and violated."² The antiquity of this "book" would be a curious inquiry. Its breakdown produced the usual eighteenth-century expression of public opinion—an outbreak of brutal rioting. Bands of weavers "traversed the streets at midnight, broke into the houses, and destroyed the property of the manufacturers," the old foreman said. A less trustworthy witness, some years later, told how weavers were executed, and how "a person of the name of Clark, who was discovered to have been the informer, was dragged to a pond and thrown in, and was pelted to death."³ According to Jones, one result of the rioting was that masters and men met again and drew up a fresh list in 1769. Four years later came the first Spitalfields Act, 13 Geo. III., c. 68, whose main object was to prevent the recurrence of such troubles; though apparently it was not a mere bit of panic legislation, as was often asserted in after years. It authorised the Justices of Middlesex, the Tower Hamlets, and the City to "settle, regulate, and declare" the wages of silk weavers in their

¹ See for the close of the period the *Report of the Select Committee on the Silk Trade*, 1832, Q. 4805, *sqq.* Q. 5275 *sqq.*, etc. A manufacturer might, of course, be himself connected with a throwing mill. The point is that throwing, spinning, etc., were not London industries. There is an interesting return of looms employed by fifteen Spitalfields manufacturers in the *Report of the Select Committee on the Petition of the Ribbon Weavers*, 1818 (*Accounts and Papers*, IX., 5, p. 195). The average is 58. Only five employed less than thirty looms; three employed over 100. There were, however, still in 1823 a large number "that employ 10, 20, 30, and 40 looms" in the trade, and a few working weavers who bought silk and sold their fabrics to warehousemen. *Lords' Committee on the Bill to repeal four Acts relating to the wages of persons employed in the manufacture of silk*, 1823. *Lords' Sessional Papers*, CLVI. 57, p. 20. (Evidence of Wm. Hale.)

² *Lords' Committee*, 1823 p. 33 *sqq.* The existence of this book is not referred to in the *History of Trade Unionism* (pp. 48-9), where it is implied that the collective bargaining referred to below grew up out of the Act. It looks as if there had been something like it long before.

³ *Handloom Weavers' Commission*, 1840. *Assistant Commissioners' Reports*, II., 359. Recollections of a person who was "very young" at the time. He must have been *very* young.

respective areas. All accounts agree as to how they did it. If committees of masters and men had not first discussed the piece-rates separately and then jointly, the Justices instructed them to do so. In the early days they generally managed to fix matters up. The "magistrates of three jurisdictions always agreed to the same thing"¹ and the collective bargain was made binding. It became a punishable offence to give or receive less or more than the duly sanctioned piece-rates.

If the parties did not agree, the magistrates took evidence and heard counsel. On the very technical points involved they were hardly competent to decide. "It is stated that they confined themselves to inquiring as to the price of provisions and what the weaver could earn, and decided accordingly."² It is also stated that they generally favoured the men. As most of their decisions were made in times of dear food, this is not unnatural. There is no need to endorse the solemn pronouncement of the critic of 1840: "It is in the nature of things that magistrates should decide on the popular side, and be prone to exercise a liberality which is not at their own expense." One manufacturer asserted, in 1823, that "the last time we appealed to the magistrates they were with us. The period I allude to was . . . at the time of the Peace of Amiens."³ About that time the whole system began to ossify. The magistrates' decisions had at first been published in the papers. In 1874 they were collected into a book of fabrics and prices. The last version of this book appeared in 1806. "I have assisted," said a witness in 1818, "in forming all the list prices that have been made since 1784, a general one in 1795 [this was to meet the high prices of that year]; another in 1800; another in 1802; another in 1804; an explanatory one in 1805; and the last in 1806, a general one; and then by the desire of the masters and men I compiled the present book."⁴

Two clauses in the Act, which have nothing to do with wages, are of considerable interest in relation to the industrial organisation of the trade. By one of these, masters resident within the statutory areas were not allowed to employ persons resident outside those areas. This, as will appear, became a special masters' grievance in the nineteenth century. By another clause, no weaver was to have more than two apprentices at a time. This "mediæval" clause would indeed prevent the exploita-

¹ *Handloom Weavers' Commission*, 1840. *Assistant Commissioners' Reports*, II., 259. See also the account of Thos. Gibson in 1818 (*Ribbon Weavers*, p. 141) and Wm. Hale in 1823 (*Lords' Committee*, 1823, p. 7).

² *Handloom Weavers*, II., 360.

³ *Lords' Committee* of 1823, p. 7. But see below.

⁴ *Ribbon Weavers*, p. 188.

tion of apprentice labour by the master weaver; but it could not work in an "anti-capitalistic" sense, as the mediæval rules of this type were meant to work, since the weaver in this case was not the ultimate employer. It might even tend to check rises from the ranks of weavers to those of manufacturers; for so long as a man was himself engaged in weaving he could not hope to employ many hands. It also checked the expansion of the London industry, or was alleged to have done so.¹

Between 1780 and 1812 the Act was once imitated and twice extended. By 19 and 20 Geo. IV. (I) it was imitated by the Irish Parliament for Dublin. By 32 Geo. III., c. 44, it was extended, for the London area, to include fabrics of silk mixed with other materials, such as bombazines and poplins. This was, no doubt, one cause of the active revisions of the book between 1795 and 1806. After the book ossified a most interesting extension was made. By 51 Geo. III., c. 11, journeywomen were brought within the Act. There were a large number of journeywomen in London, many of whom had served regular apprenticeships for five or seven years.²

In the early nineteenth century the industry was spreading far beyond Spitalfields. The statement made by an employer in 1821, that "a few years ago the silk manufacture was hardly known beyond London,"³ was no doubt exaggerated; but there was certainly in these years an extension of the weaving industry in such places as Braintree, Bocking, and Coggeshall; Sudbury, Lavenham, and Haverhill; Reading, Newbury, Andover, and Whitchurch. The practice in these districts was to pay only two-thirds of the Spitalfields prices.⁴ Further afield were Coventry, with its ribbons; Norwich, which did a large trade in mixed goods of wool and silk, especially bombazines; Macclesfield, whose original trade was in silk handkerchiefs; and other Northern districts, now including that of Manchester, which was competing with London in various lines. As the law stood, a London manufacturer was not allowed to put work out in the neighbouring counties; but, certainly after the peace and perhaps before, this rule was evaded. If the capitalist could himself move, say, into Essex, there was nothing to prevent his still giving out work in Spitalfields; but many of them managed to give work out in Essex without deserting

¹ *Lords' Committee*, 1823, p. 124. Thos. Gibson, a manufacturer.

² *Ribbon Weavers*, 1818, p. 44. Evidence of a Spitalfields master.

³ *Lords' Second Report on Foreign Trade*, 1821, p. 26. It was true only of the broad silk manufacture. *Lords' Committee*, 1823, p. 123.

⁴ *Handloom Weavers*, II. 285. Dr. Cunningham (*Growth of English Industry and Commerce*, 1912, II., 519, n.) says "the Essex district . . . fell within the Spitalfields Act." I find no evidence of this.

London, "of course conducting" their country businesses "under other names."¹ There were some convictions for this breach of the Act, but not enough or decisive enough to stop the practice.²

No doubt this country competition made some employers, during the second decade of the nineteenth century, increasingly impatient of the Acts. Their impatience was stimulated by rapid changes of fashion, especially the introduction of new French fabrics after the peace, and the difficulty of creating or adjusting legal piece-rates in time to catch or retain new lines of trade. One result of this was that piece-rates for many new fabrics were made between individuals without any legal decision at all,³ but this, of course, was a risky proceeding so long as the Acts were alive. There had been some negotiations for a collective bargain dealing with various new classes of goods in 1814, but they fell through, and most of the fabrics remained unregulated.⁴ Another result was that the country manufacturers, having got a footing in a new line of business, often could not be ousted. The bombazine trade, for instance, had for some time been established at Norwich; quite naturally, for bombazines had a worsted warp and so were as appropriate to Norfolk as to Spitalfields. London men, finding their business slipping away, tried in 1816 to get the bombazine piece-rates reduced. They failed, and within a few years the trade had left London altogether.⁵

It is significant that in the previous year an old unofficial "book" of piece-rates, resembling the Spitalfields books of the days before the Act, broke down at Macclesfield under the pressure of Manchester competition.⁶ Those London masters who knew about this, and whose businesses lay open to country rivals, would naturally argue towards the abolition of the Acts, the more so as Parliament had just repealed the wage-fixing clauses of the Elizabethan Labour Code.

But the men, in London and out of it, together with far more masters than one might expect, clung to "the method of legal enactment." They even managed to convince a Committee of the Commons. In 1818 the weavers of Coventry, whose special

¹ J. Ballance, a master, before the *Lords' Committee*, 1823, p. 105.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 166-7. Evidence of Ambrose Moore. A leading master, Stephen Wilson, said it was "not fair" to press him to give information on this matter, p. 157.

³ Thos. Gibson, master. *Lords' Committee*, 1823, pp. 129, 144.

⁴ Stephen Wilson, *ibid.*, p. 171.

⁵ Stephen Wilson, *ibid.*, p. 170. Wilson made bombazines himself, and so was not unbiassed; there is no doubt that they did leave London, but whether this was all due to the piece-rates or not one cannot definitely say.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

troubles do not concern us, sought salvation in an extension of the Spitalfields Acts to their trade. And the Committee to which their petitions were referred reported that this was desirable, at least as an experiment "for a period of a few years."¹ This recommendation was no doubt in great part due to the strong support of the Act at this time by the rank and file of the Spitalfields manufacturers proper. Nearly ninety employers signed a petition in its favour.² It prevented disputes, they said. Men could not drive wages up unduly in good times, nor masters drive them down unduly in bad. Clever men were not discouraged, as was often asserted, for they worked faster than fools. The poor rates were kept down. The district lived "in a state of quietude and repose." Weavers in London were not overpaid, and the best cure for the undoubted difficulties of the trade was the extension of the Silk Acts to the country at large. One of the signatories of this petition pointed out that disputes and hostility to the Acts were due mainly to the fact that some masters were not themselves operative weavers.³ Here the cleavage of opinion between large and small masters is very apparent. The fact was that the big men in the silk industry, who were fast becoming hostile to the Acts, were often City men, not Spitalfields men. They were the capitalists whose eyes saw beyond the old local manufacture of fine, plain, broad silks and beyond the old modest profits, "quietude and repose." They sold goods and bought silk in a wholesale way, whereas the majority of these signatories were "wholly unknown" to a leading silk broker, because most of them were in too small a way of business to buy so much as a whole bale of raw silk.⁴ The small men thought in Spitalfields terms, clung to the Acts as the bulwark of their district against pauperism,⁵ and—being mainly in the staple trade—did not worry much about outside competition. The big men, who made experiments and had knowledge of the new commercial and industrial world, thought the Acts a relic of barbarism, an interference with capital and political economy, and a nursery of combination.

For combination was now reckoned a horrid thing, whereas in the eighteenth century, combination, at least among the Spitalfields weavers, had evidently been taken for granted by all parties. The Acts encouraged a "spirit of combination," Stephen Wilson told the Committee of 1818, as a strong point against them. To back his statement he put in evidence a set of rules "To be observed

¹ *Ribbon Weavers' Report.*

² *Ibid.*, p. 196.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 180.

⁴ E. Durant before the *Lords' Committee*, 1823, p. 202.

⁵ There is a great deal of evidence on this point in the various inquiries.

by a few friends called the *Good Intent*." Article 3 of these rules provided for out-of-work pay to a man refused work "that demands his legal price."¹ Another master, one Ambrose Moore, said "it was notorious"² that the men had a permanent paid committee. "He apprehended there was constantly a committee." "They indeed absolutely levied taxes on all weavers residing in Spitalfields." The weavers, the Combination Laws being still unrepealed, were rather evasive about this committee. Their subscription, called "the penny ticket," was entirely optional, they said. They needed money to protect the Act. They never struck. "There was no committee at all in existence." Well, "there were a few men who received the money what were called the Finance." In case of dispute they did appoint "what you might call a committee, if you thought fit." Yes, "there was a secretary to the trade."³ A manufacturer favourable to the men, who had himself risen from the ranks, declared that "for such a thing as a standing committee there is no such thing, nor has been one for thirty-four years; they are made choice of for a temporary time, and as soon as the business is over . . . they are discharged, and a new set of people are chosen."⁴ From all of which it is pretty clear that there was a managing group among the weavers, "which you might call a committee if you thought fit." Anyhow, there was "the Finance," who perhaps were paid.

It was not, however, suggested that the silk weavers as a class were revolutionaries or enemies of order. In later years those who had known them in the days of their prosperity testified freely to their social virtues and their intellectual vigour. "It may appear strange," said Mr. Edward Church, who had resided as a solicitor in Spital Square for thirty years, from 1810 to 1840, "it may appear strange, but I believe the origin of many of our most flourishing societies may be traced to Spitalfields. The Spitalfields Mathematical Society is second in point of time to the Royal Society, and still exists. There was an Historical Society which was merged in the Mathematical Society. There was a Floricultural Society, very numerous attended, but now extinct. The weavers were almost the only botanists of their day in the Metropolis. . . . There was an Entomological Society, and they were the first entomologists in the Kingdom. The society is gone. They had a Recitation Society for Shakespearean readings. They had a Musical Society. . . . There was a Columbarian Society.

¹ *Ribbon Weavers' Report*, p. 59.

² *Ibid.*, p. 158.

³ *Ibid.* Evidence of John Baker, a weaver, p. 195.

⁴ *Ibid.* Evidence of Mr. Buckeridge, p. 189.

. . . They were great bird-fanciers and breeders of canaries, many of whom now cheer their quiet hours when at the loom. . . . Many of the houses in Spitalfields had porticos, with seats at their doors, where the weavers might be seen on summer evenings enjoying their pipes. The porticos have given way to improvements in the pavements,"¹ and so on. Without accepting every touch from this amiable Pickwickian *laudator temporis acti*, one does get an attractive impression. One must not forget the "person of the name of Clark," pelted to death in a pond; but that was before Mr. Church's day, even before the Act. And England had civilised a good deal between 1770 and 1818. No one in 1818 accused the weavers of rioting, only of combining.

Not all those who criticised the Acts in 1818 were hostile to any and every form of official regulation. Thomas Gibson, for instance, put forward the suggestion that only what he called the penal part of the law should be abolished. If master and man found it to their interest to diverge from official rates one way or the other, they should be free to do so without risk of punishment, official rates only coming into operation when the parties could not agree.² Gibson was not biassed, for his criticism of the Acts on the technical side was trenchant. The Justices, being ignorant of the business, had merely recorded trade agreements, and could not really interpret them in case of dispute, or do anything effective when no agreement was reached. As things were, it was no defence in the Courts for the weaver to testify that he had agreed to a non-legal rate; so special agreements for special fabrics were ruled out, so far, he might have added, as the Acts were really operative. It was impossible to reward exceptional men. It was difficult to give work to the aged and infirm, or to give work at low rates to keep men employed in slack times. (One recognises the familiar criticism of Trade Union rates in later years.) Finally, the technical basis of the piece-rates in the book was all wrong: they were based on the number of shoots per inch, whereas the quality of the silk was really far more important. Another witness, Stephen Wilson,³ a thoroughgoing enemy of the Acts, pointed out how they hindered mechanical improvement. Masters had to pay the same rates whether labour-saving appliances were used or not. This "the magistrates affixed in p. 10 of their book of prices." So, of course, labour was not saved. Such a law in the cotton trade, said Wilson, would have ruined Arkwright.

¹ *Handloom Weavers*, II., 216.

² *Ribbon Weavers*, p. 141 *sqq.*

³ *Ribbon Weavers*, p. 51 *sqq.*

Some of these criticisms were clearly valid; but there were those who thought that many of them might have been obviated had the masters shown more willingness to meet the men and bring "the book" up to date. One of the stock complaints against the Acts was that their rigid rates were driving trade out of London, which was no doubt to some extent the case. "They had driven away crape, gauze, bandanna handkerchiefs, and bombazine in turn," said Stephen Wilson. Bandannas had gone to Macclesfield, bombazines to Kidderminster and Norwich, crapes and gauzes into Essex and elsewhere. Three years later he added to his schedule of lost fabrics "all small fancy works."¹ This loss of fabrics became the regular epitaph on the Acts after their decease. "It has never been disputed," wrote the ingenious Dionysius Lardner, LL.D., in his *Cabinet Cyclopædia*.² But it was pointed out to the Lords in 1823 that this was no necessary consequence of the Acts themselves, but only of an unwillingness to work them. "I submit," said a certain John Ballance, "that the . . . Act would have been a perfect nullity, abstractedly speaking, if this book of prices had been, which it might have been, revised by both masters and men; so that the schedules adopted at Manchester and Macclesfield might have been a foundation upon which the revision might have proceeded, the Act authorising such a revision. I have never found any unwillingness in the men to meet the masters, but the reverse."³ Of course, if they had met oftener in these years revision might have failed, as it did in 1814; but there is a good deal of evidence which suggests that the big masters were determined not to bargain collectively in any event.

Nothing came of the recommendation of 1818. Three years later the Acts were again under discussion when a Committee of the Lords was examining the silk trade. As the matter in hand was one of tariffs, small folk were not consulted. The report denounced the Acts, especially that part of them which prevented a master from employing "in what part of the country he thought most advantageous any portion of his capital." Their Lordships were of opinion that the Acts tended to banish trade from Spitalfields.⁴ The end was now drawing near.

On May 9th, 1823, a petition against the Acts was presented to the House of Commons. The petitioners, Spitalfields manu-

¹ *Lords' Report on Foreign Trade*, 1821, p. 40.

² *Lardner's Cabinet Cyclopædia. Silk Manufacture*, 1831, p. 79.

³ *Lords' Committee*, 1823, p. 59.

⁴ *Lords' Second Report on Foreign Trade (Silk and Wine)*, 1821, VII. 421, p. 6.

facturers, stated that the silk-working population in London was declining; that fancy silk goods in imitation of the French could not be made there; that they who lived there might not employ country weavers; that some of the Justices' rules as to fabrics were vexatious and ignorant; that improvements in machinery were hindered—that, in short, they were losing trade every day.¹ On hearing this, David Ricardo “could not help expressing his astonishment” that the Acts were still on the Statute Book. Wallace thought they disgraced it, and Huskisson concurred. He had long had his eye on them, he said, “but wished to convince the manufacturers first of the necessity of an alteration,” which suggests some preliminary work with a view to conversions among manufacturers—work whose records have escaped us. Three days later he rejected a suggestion that a committee should inquire into the Acts. It was superfluous, he believed. On the 21st there came a petition in favour of the Acts from weavers at Sudbury. This drew Ricardo again. He thought “that this petition, coming from a district which was free and praying that a restriction might be continued in another district,” was a most powerful argument against the Acts. Perhaps he was right. Perhaps, as he implied, the Sudbury weavers did want to draw trade from Spitalfields by underbidding it. But it is at least as likely that they feared, wisely or unwisely, for their own standard rate, which, it will be recalled, was by custom two-thirds that of Spitalfields. Ricardo's intervention led to a short debate, in which a few speakers pleaded for delay.

On June 9th Fowell Buxton, disclaiming all expert knowledge of political economy to which Ricardo had appealed, stating even that Dr. Smith had corrected his predecessors, and Mr. Ricardo had convinced him (Fowell Buxton) that Dr. Smith sometimes nodded, and that there might arise a man to correct Mr. Ricardo—Fowell Buxton took his stand on the facts, Sir. Spitalfields men were paid better than Coventry men. They said they would be ruined, and they ought to know. To which Ricardo retorted that if the Acts were so good as all that, why, they ought to be applied to every trade indiscriminately. But in spite of this clincher, the motion for a committee was only rejected by 68 to 60. Two days later the third reading of Huskisson's short Bill “to repeal four Acts of his late Majesty relating to the wages of persons employed in the manufacture of silk and of silk mixed with other materials” went through by 53 to 40. One of the minority pointed out that “the committee on the silk trade in the Lords, so far from recom-

¹ *Hansard*, IX., 143 *sqq.*

mending the repeal of the existing laws, recommended an extension of them," but this did not save the four Acts of George the Third. Nor is it quite clear to what committee of the Lords he referred.

The Lords had been bombarded with petitions against Huskisson's Bill. The weavers petitioned, of course. So did the local Overseers of the Poor and some of the masters.¹ Their petitions were referred to a committee, whose evidence—there was no report—is the last and best and least known account of the Acts and their working.² The very first witness, William Hale, a supporter of the Acts,³ who had known the trade for forty years, made it clear why Huskisson and his backers had found the times ripe for repeal. Hale allowed that the trade had grown more in the country than in London, but, while admitting that the fancy trade had declined, claimed that London had many more looms than in his early days—this no later witness denied—and that trade had never been better than in September, 1822. There had, however, been definitely bad trade for nine months since. Obviously such a short period fluctuation could not be due primarily to a long period cause like the Acts. But bad trade made men ready, as it always does, to try alleged cures, quack or otherwise. One witness had only become a convert to repeal since the autumn of 1822, and no less than twenty-three of those who had signed the petition in support of the Acts in 1818 now prayed for repeal.⁴

Besides bad trade, there had been further trouble with the men, at any rate in the fancy business, since 1818. In 1819 the masters had tried to get the piece-rates cut down for an article called "Florets" in order to assist competition with outside districts. They met the men, but failed to convince the Justices. Their spokesman, Stephen Wilson, had declared that after this he would never go into court again.⁵ Hale, who as a "plain" master had not been concerned in this award, had made an attempt, some time between 1819 and 1823, to bring the parties together. He himself had always found the journeymen, "after a little talking to, very tractable." He approached the masters, but "from most of them the answers were: 'We will never meet the journeymen again; we think that we should do away with the Bill

¹ *Lords' Journal*, LV., 782 sqq.

² There is a very full account, of which some use has been made above, in Part II. of the *Assistant Commissioners' Reports on Handloom Weavers*, 1840; but much of its best material comes from the evidence taken in 1823. I have never seen this evidence quoted in any other place.

³ And author of *A Defence of the Spitalfields Acts*, 1824.

⁴ *Lords' Committee*, 1823, p. 204, p. 117.

⁵ Wilson's evidence, p. 171.

entirely; we think that the disposition of the Government is with us, and that the eyes of the country are open to better principles of political economy, and that we shall be able to accomplish the repeal of the Spitalfields Acts altogether.'"¹ Hale was in a considerable way of business; he employed from three to four hundred looms; but, as he admitted, there was far more capital on the repealers' side than on his. So that when his last attempt to make the Acts work had failed he was not very hopeful.

One last decision under the Acts was made within a year or two of repeal. "Narrow" goods, such things as ribbons, trimmings, and galloons, had never been the subject of an award. They were not a large business in London, so no special grievance had arisen. In 1821 or 1822² the masters agreed to regulation; committees met and orders were made by the Justices, to the great satisfaction of the men. This case suggests that goodwill on the part of the masters might have settled the "fancies" difficulty. But the big masters meant the Acts to go, as we have seen. They disliked the collective bargain. With more reason they disliked the rather wooden decisions of the Justices on technical points—widths and counts and numbers of shoots per inch.³ Those of them who saw farthest were concerned most about the question of mechanical improvements. Stephen Wilson put in evidence a long list of mechanical devices known in different parts of the country, but never used in Spitalfields. He spoke with enthusiasm of a French loom—his descriptions suggest a Jacquard loom—which he had introduced, but which could with difficulty be fitted into the Spitalfields scheme of things.⁴ Probably on this point he was right. Perhaps the men might have been induced to accept special rates when time-saving appliances were used, had the masters condescended to go into the matter with them; but the experience of to-day, after a century of the machine age, hardly suggests that, in its infancy, all the goodwill in the world would have sufficed in dealing with workpeople entrenched behind an Act of Parliament and supported by Justices who seem to have been as a rule friendly to the men's cause and always unfamiliar with technical considerations.

The Lords listened to all this conflicting evidence and had it printed.⁵ More petitions came in against Huskisson's Bill; one from the Essex area, which was backed by certain of the clergy

¹ Hale's evidence, pp. 25-9.

² The accounts vary. Ed. Jones, p. 37, and T. Holt (a weaver), pp. 94-8.

³ John Ballance, a "plain" master, who apparently found the rules too wooden even in his branch, p. 128.

⁴ P. 173 *sqq.*

⁵ June, 1823.

and gentry ; others from Coventry, Nuneaton, and Macclesfield, whose weavers were concerned for the principle of the standard rate. But the Bill got its third reading without much discussion and with no amendments in principle. It did not become an Act that year, however. Reintroduced in its amended form in May of 1824, it went rapidly through all stages in both Houses, in spite of yet more petitions, and received the Royal Assent in June.

It is no doubt conceivable, had a score of things not happened before 1824 which actually did happen, that the Spitalfields rules, modified, might have become part of a national system for ensuring industrial peace. Speculation on such a matter is idle. As things were Ricardo's argument was decisive. You could not have one locality, or even one whole industry, controlled in this way and all others left to free and open competition. There was not governmental machinery or administrative ability available to regulate all industries, even—a large assumption—had such regulation been desirable. So Spitalfields was left to the laws of political economy as understood by Ricardo, and the history of the Acts remains a curious and untimely record of the difficulties which beset trade agreements, wage boards, and compulsory arbitrators in times of rapid economic change.

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