

Cotton

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Introduction

RAMM's collection includes a specimen of raw cotton¹ collected by JR Jackson for the Museums of Economic Botany at Kew Gardens. In his 1875 guide to the collection, Jackson describes cotton as:

No 25 Fruit of the Cotton Plant (*Gossypium herbaceum* L *G. barbadense* L etc) Showing Cotton enveloping the seeds in their capsule Cotton consists of the delicate tubular hair like cells which clothe the seeds its commercial value depends on the length and tenacity of these hairs

Jackson goes on to explain the contemporary commercial value of cotton around the world.

Case 7 is devoted almost entirely to the different sorts of commercial Cotton grown in the United States, South America. India, Africa and the warmer parts of Europe also specimens of cotton cloths in various stages of

¹ [Collections Explorer record for a cotton pod specimen from RAMM's collection](#)

manufacture etc both by civilized and barbarous nations. The use of Cotton dates from a very early period Sanscrit records carry it back at least 2600 years while in Peruvian sepulchres Cotton cloth and seeds have been found No 28 is a piece of Cotton cloth from a Peruvian mummy.

The import of Raw Cotton into the United Kingdom in 1860 exceeded twelve million cwts² in 1862 owing to the American War less than five million cwts were imported of these upwards of three millions and a half were from the British East Indies In 1874 the total imports were 14,062,075 cwts.

Jackson's use of the term 'barbarous nations' is telling in that he makes no reference to the source of the American cotton crops. Specifically that in 1860, over 80% of the annual supply of raw cotton into the UK was picked by the hands of enslaved people in the United States³ and a further 1% was supplied by slaves on the plantations of Brasil.

In 1860, the UK cotton industry employed 440,000 people at 2650 factories which had a production value, at the time of £76,000,000. Adjusted to today's figures, and we see that the

² A 'cwt' is a hundredweight or 112lb. So this is about 609,000 metric tonnes. During the Civil War we can see that there was a reduction from 12 to 7million cwt annually. Suggesting that as late as 1862, Britain's industry was being fuelled by slave labour.

³ [Arthur Arnold, The History of the Cotton Famine, page 38](#)

cotton industry was valued at over £9,000,000,000, and 80% of it doesn't happen without slavery.

Britain was so dependent upon cotton sourced from institutionalised slavery, that when the American Civil War broke out in 1861, the industry nearly collapsed. As the largest cotton processing area, Lancashire experienced a 'Cotton Famine' between 1861 and 1864. People moved out of the area, there were riots and industry national relief fund was taken up for industry workers. During this time the workers showed solidarity with this final push for abolition stating that:

.. the vast progress which you have made in the short space of twenty months fills us with hope that every stain on your freedom will shortly be removed, and that the erasure of that foul blot on civilisation and Christianity – chattel slavery – during your presidency, will cause the name of Abraham Lincoln to be honoured and revered by posterity. We are certain that such a glorious consummation will cement Great Britain and the United States in close and enduring regards.

— Public Meeting, Free Trade Hall, Manchester, 31 December 1862.

Cotton products in the UK

By 1860, the annual domestic cotton supply had a contemporary worth of approximately £24,000,00.⁴ This was the value of the thread, yarn, and hosiery that was sold within the UK at places like [Rachel Bowditch's](#) Taunton shop and potentially at shops like Mrs. Treadwin's Lace shop.⁵ And since bobbin lace became made of cotton as early as 1822, it is highly likely that much of the Honiton lace produced between the 1830s and 1860s was made from slavery sourced cotton as well.

Cotton production in Devon

There was a cotton Mill opened by Robert Tripping in Exeter at Trews Weir in 1793 called 'Weir Field' which employed 300 people.⁶ Sometimes referred to as a 'cotton factory' sometimes as 'Weirfield Mill' sometimes as 'Trews Weir Mill'. Like the larger cotton mills of the North, Trews Weir Mill used a water wheel to drive operations, supported by a network of spinning jennies, workers and horses. Through many changes in ownership, the mill processed cotton intermittently until the 1820s before switching to paper.

At this time it seems that there was not a regular supply route for raw cotton from slave labour in Exeter, however there are

⁴ [Arthur Arnold, The History of the Cotton Famine, page 36](#)

⁵ [The Project Gutenberg EBook of History of Lace, by Bury Palliser](#)

⁶ [Exeter Memories page about Trews Weir Mill](#)

regular advertisements in the local paper for bales of cotton sold alongside other spoils of slave labour like cocoa and coffee. These adverts often reference ships that brought them and the port from which they departed, in a kind of seal of authenticity. Though the quantities tended to be small, one such advert offered as much as 398 bales of Brazilian cotton.⁷

One of the only cotton mills in the South West⁸, the business struggled for many years. By 1801, the business was run by John Thullier and a partner. But by 1807 John Thullier files for bankruptcy and tries to sell the factory. And in 1822, it is said that the 'large cotton factory in the Wearfield' has been 'discontinued'⁹ though it is unclear as to how long it was dormant. By 1835 the location was converted to a paper mill¹⁰ after which time it remained a paper mill, run by many different owners, until the 1980s.

⁷ [Cotton advert on the British newspaper archive](#)

⁸ There was a large mill in Bristol and also a cotton mill in Tiverton at Heathcoats.

⁹ Daniel Lysons and Samuel Lysons, 'The city of Exeter', in *Magna Britannia: Volume 6, Devonshire* (London, 1822), pp. 177-234. [British History Online](#) [accessed 9 October 2019].

¹⁰ [Mike Bone & Peter Stanier, A Guide to the Industrial Archaeology of Devon \(PDF\)](#)

RAMM Objects



40/1923/2/3: Honiton (East Devon) lace sprig
<https://rammcollections.org.uk/object/40-1923-3-3>



73/1921/9/PRIORIS: Cotton

<https://rammcollections.org.uk/object/73-1921-9-prioris/>



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71/1927: Portrait of Mrs Bowditch of Taunton
<https://rammcollections.org.uk/object/71-1927/>



118/1934/241: Magic Lantern Slide: Hand Spinning (1750) - this is part of a cotton lecture set with multiple slides
<https://rammcollections.org.uk/object/118-1934-241/>

Additional reading

- ▶ [Heavitree Quarry Trails page about Trews Weir Mill](#)
- ▶ [Historic England listing for Trews Weir Mill](#)
- ▶ Miller John Underhill was bankrupt by 1841: [Insolvent Debtors for 1841 from the London Gazette](#)
- ▶ [Trews Weir Mill referred to as a 'cotton factory' in 1833](#)
- ▶ [Cotton factory for sale in 1837 by auction](#)
- ▶ ['Free labour cotton' referred to in the British newspaper archive](#)

[Trews Weir Mill was still a cotton factory in 1838](#)