

'YOU CAN'T MAKE OWT FROM NOWT':
OFFICIAL RESPONSES TO THE IMPACT OF UNEMPLOYMENT
UPON THE COMMUNITY IN THE LANCASHIRE WEAVING AREA
IN THE EARLY 1930s

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Table of Contents

TITLE PAGE	i
TABLE OF CONTENTS	ii
LIST OF TABLES	v
LIST OF FIGURES	vii
ABBREVIATIONS	viii
ABSTRACT	ix
DECLARATION	x
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	xi
SETTING THE SCENE	xii
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER ONE: RESPONSES TO ADULT UNEMPLOYMENT AND THE EFFECTS ON THE COMMUNITY	19
1.1 Unemployment in the cotton industry 1930-1932	27
1.2 Employment and unemployment among women in the cotton textile industry	37
1.3 Psychological effects of unemployment	42
1.4 Responses to unemployment	45

CHAPTER TWO: OFFICIAL RESPONSES TO JUVENILE UNEMPLOYMENT	49
2.1 Juvenile unemployment in Blackburn 1929-1935: an analysis	66
2.2 What employment was available?	72
CHAPTER THREE: REACTIONS TO POVERTY	79
CHAPTER FOUR: SOMEWHERE TO LIVE	102
4.1 The evolution of housing in North East Lancashire	103
4.2 Housing Legislation	108
4.3 Local government and housing conditions in North East Lancashire in the 1930s	112
4.4 The effects on children	130
CHAPTER FIVE: WELFARE AND WELL-BEING IN THE COMMUNITY	133
5.1 Maternity and Child Welfare Clinics	135
5.2 The Local Government Act 1929, and the Poor Law Act, 1930, Blackburn as a case study	141
5.3 Boarded-Out Children	143
5.4 Case Studies	145
5.5 The Poor Law Act	147
5.6 Uncertainties for children under the Poor Law Act	150
5.7 Special Schools	154
5.8 Local Hospitals	157
5.9 Local Authority Clinics	158

CHAPTER SIX: SOCIAL FUNCTION OF EDUCATION DEPARTMENT IN A CRISIS	166
6.1 The development of compulsory education	167
6.2 School supply and improvement	170
6.3 Education and special schools	178
6.4 Secondary and Tertiary education: Grants and scholarships	182
6.5 The role of the Education Department in a crisis: The School Medical Service	185
6.6 The School Meals Service	189
CHAPTER SEVEN: THE HEALTH OF THE COMMUNITY.	195
CONCLUSION	230
BIBLIOGRAPHY	235

Tables

Table Number	Page
1. Persons on Unemployment Register in principal towns.	26
2. Unemployment and short-time working.	37
3. Unemployed juveniles aged 14 to 17 years of age.	53
4. a. Juveniles aged fourteen and under eighteen on register at 27 January 1930.	55
b. Juveniles placed in employment in the four weeks ending January 1930.	55
5. a. Numbers of juveniles aged fourteen and under eighteen on register at Unemployment Exchanges at 16 December 1935.	55
b. Juveniles aged less than eighteen placed in employment in the weeks ending 23 December 1935.	56
6. Numbers of Juveniles aged fourteen and under eighteen on the unemployment registers and the percentage of unemployed.	57
7. Estimated numbers of juveniles reaching the ages of 14, 15, 16 and 17 during the years specified.	59
8. Estimated numbers of juveniles likely to be available for employment in the years specified.	60
9. Unemployment books issued up to 29 September 1934, to boys and girls under the age of sixteen years.	62
10. Junior Instruction Centres in North East Lancashire.	65
11. Juvenile unemployment figures for Blackburn for December in the years 1929-1935.	67
12. Juvenile unemployment insurance figures for December in the years 1929-1935.	67

13. Employment of schoolchildren for December in the years 1929-1935.	67
14. Number of registered unemployed and the number of vacancies in Blackburn 1929-1935.	70
15. Unemployment Insurance. Ten percent reductions.	82
16. Wages, Benefits and Unemployment rates for Great Britain 1930-35.	88
17. Mean Numbers on Out-relief. April 1930-March 1933.	89
18. Percentage increases in the cost of living 1929-1935.	96
19. Relief tables for Blackburn and Burnley 1930-1935.	99
20. Clearance and improvement plan Burnley 1933.	122
21. Average rents for Council Houses. 1930.	123
22. Sub-Committees for Public Assistance Committee in the County Borough Blackburn.	142
23. Local Authorities providing treatment in England and Wales by 1936.	159
24. Fees for Secondary Schools and Ranges of Income.	184
25. Figures for Mayor's Clog Fund. Blackburn 1929-1935.	192
26. Figures for free school meals. 1930-1934.	192
27. Infant Mortality Rates for Blackburn, Burnley, England and Wales 1930-1933.	204
28. Maternal Mortality Rates for Blackburn, Burnley England and Wales 1930-1935.	205
29. Percentage of children showing normal nutrition.	216
30. Children with malnutrition in Burnley 1930-1934.	217
31. Blackburn children with rickets.	218
32. Burnley children with rickets.	218

Figures

	Page
1. Materials woven in Lancashire before cotton	xiii
2. The North East Lancashire Weaving Area	xix
3. Mill Chimneys in Blackburn 1930	22
4. Gandhi in Darwen 1932.	25
5. Air Pollution Early 20 th Century Blackburn.	103
6. Back Mary Ann Street.	104
7. Map. Back Mary Ann Street, showing shared lavatories.	105
8. Backyards and alleyways. Late 19 th Century.	107
9. Serried ranks of terraced houses.	113
10. LJ's house after renovation.	118
11. Nab Lane	120
12. Biddulph Grange Orthopaedic Hospital 1940.	160
13. Roe Lee School. 1933.	172
14. Blakey Moor and Bangor Street Central Schools. Late 1920s.	174
15. St. Peter's RC School, Blackburn.	178
16. Open Air School Blackburn. 1935.	180

Abbreviations

IMR	Infant Mortality Rate
JIC	Juvenile Instruction Centre
MMR	Maternal Mortality Rate
MOH	Medical Officer of Health
PAC	Public Assistance Committee
SMO	School Medical Officer

Abstract.

This thesis argues that the official responses at the national level to the impact high unemployment had upon the community in the North East Lancashire weaving area in the early 1930s were barely adequate. The Lancashire cotton industry had been in depression since the early 1920s, long before the Great Depression affected the rest of the world, and the high unemployment and the low wages paid in the cotton industry had a disastrous effect on an area almost totally dependent upon that industry. Financial conservatism during the Great Depression meant low benefits, and these low benefits resulted in widespread poverty.

I argue that in contrast to the national government's response, local authorities in North East Lancashire set a reasonably high standard of care in their area. They cared for those in need: children, the elderly and the sick and made medical care and education available for children with disabilities. They provided maternal and child welfare clinics, a school medical service and a school meals service. They were also vigorous in housing inspections according to Housing Acts and Public Health Acts.

Based on a closely detailed study of local authority records and National Government Education and Health records, this thesis demonstrates that poverty was widespread; the national government was dilatory in recognising regional variations of long-term structural unemployment which in the Lancashire weaving area was slow to diminish, and that local authorities' responses, while ample, could not address the problem of poverty in the area adequately without further funding from central government.

This work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being available for loan and photocopying.

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SETTING THE SCENE

North East Lancashire has been noted for textile weaving from Elizabethan times; originally woollen cloth was woven, then linen, then fustian, a thick hard-wearing twilled cloth with a short nap. Poor farming land in the North East Lancashire area meant farmers needed to supplement their income, and from as early as the thirteenth century they had woven to earn a second income. Because the North East Lancashire towns were not controlled by guilds, as many towns were, anyone could establish a trade, and towns like Blackburn, Burnley, Darwen, Accrington, Nelson and Colne began to specialise in textiles, particularly weaving.¹ Textile manufacturing expanded rapidly from the mid-eighteenth century. The domestic production of textiles was replaced by factory production and the area grew swiftly, as *The Times* noted in 1862:

For years cotton merchants flourished so exceedingly in Blackburn, and such fabulous fortunes were amassed in a short time, there was a rush to get into it....The trade in a very short time not only absorbed the whole town but spread out into the country districts around, and the banks of the Blakewater are covered with great mills right up the valley to Accrington.²

From the middle of the eighteenth century until the early part of the twentieth century the Lancashire cotton industry was influential. Alan Fowler wrote, in 2003 that:

The Lancashire cotton industry began to rise to prominence in the mid-eighteenth century and continued to be influential until the middle of the twentieth century. In terms of world history this is a brief period and yet the changes in the Lancashire economy in the second half of the eighteenth century were to change the world economy.³

The Lancashire cotton industry had been central to the industrial revolution in Britain, and the process of industrialization extended to the rest of the world. By the end of the nineteenth century Blackburn had become the greatest weaving centre in the world.

Derek Beattie wrote 'Even in a county of cotton towns, Blackburn was singularly a

¹ Derek Beattie, *Blackburn: The Development of a Cotton Town*, (Halifax, 1992), p.13.

² *The Times* September 1862, Quoted in Beattie, *Blackburn*, p.15.

³ Alan Fowler, *Lancashire Cotton Operatives* p.1

cotton town'.⁴ There were other industries, but most supported the cotton industry and when the industry struggled, so did the supporting industries. The cotton industry reached its peak in 1914 when foreign competition began to affect its exports and thereupon, wrote Beattie, 'The collapse of the cotton industry was spectacular'. In the interwar years the industry felt that competition deeply. Many mills closed never to reopen, while others stumbled on for a few more decades until the industry was no more.

NOTE:

This figure is included on page xiii of the print copy of the thesis held in the University of Adelaide Library.

Figure 1. Materials woven in Lancashire before cotton.

Source: *The Lancashire Cotton Industry*, ed. Mary B Rose, (Preston, 1996), map 1.

⁴ Beattie, *Cotton Town*, p.19.

A Brief Political and Economic Overview of Britain 1918-1939.

Between the end of the First World War and the beginning of the Second World War there were seven different governments in Britain, one Liberal coalition government, two minority Labour governments, one National Labour government, two Conservative governments and two Conservative National governments.

The election on 14 December 1918, following the war was won by a coalition of Liberal, Conservative and Labour politicians led by David Lloyd George, with a majority of 238 seats. It was a government which faced economic and social problems mainly caused by the war. 745,000 Britons had been killed in the war (9% of all men under 45) with an additional 150,000 dying in the influenza epidemic of 1918-1919. A further 1.6 million had been wounded, some so severely they would be unable to work again. This meant that 3.5 million Britons, including widows and orphans received a pension or an allowance.⁵ The impact of the war on British finance was significant. Britain had lost many markets during the war, and had accrued debt, particularly to the United States. Other countries owed Britain more than Britain owed the US, in particular Russia, but the change of regime in Moscow meant that the Russian Government did not pay what they saw as the Tsar's debts.⁶ The war had created an over-investment in the staple industries, in iron, steel and coal for armaments manufacture, in shipbuilding and in textiles for uniforms. When the war ended demand was reduced and after a short trade boom, there was rising inflation. Interest rates were raised and the boom turned into recession. The recession in the cotton industry in the Lancashire weaving area was to last until the Second World War. By June 1921, unemployment had risen to over two million and Ministers were ordered to cut their budgets. Although deemed to have been a failure, the coalition government of Lloyd George introduced the *Unemployment Insurance Act*, which extended the existing scheme to cover almost all workers earning

⁵ Robert Pearce, *Britain: Domestic Policies 1918-1939* (London, 2005), p.21.

⁶ Rex Pope, *The British Economy Since 1914, A Study in Decline?* (London, 1998), p.21.

less than £250 a year.⁷ Lloyd George resigned in October 1922 and an election was called for 15 November 1922.

The election of 1922 was won by the Conservative party led by Bonar Law with a majority of 74 seats. In May 1923 he resigned because of ill-health and Stanley Baldwin became Prime Minister and called an election to be held on 6 December 1923. The Conservatives won 258 seats, Labour won 191 seats and the Liberals won 159 seats. Although the Conservatives held the most seats, they did not have a majority and Baldwin declined to form a government. The King called for the leader of the second largest party to form an administration. Thus, Labour led by James Ramsay MacDonald, formed a minority government with 98 less seats than the Conservatives and Liberals combined. It was the first Labour government in Great Britain and was to last for nine months until another election was held on 29 October 1924.

The 1924 election was won by the Conservative party led again by Stanley Baldwin, who made Winston Churchill Chancellor of the Exchequer. In the 1925 budget, Churchill returned sterling to the Gold Standard after advice from the Treasury. From 1816 until the outbreak of the First World War the gold standard was the means by which leading countries had regulated international finance. The value of the pound, under the gold standard was fixed against other currencies on the basis of its value in gold.⁸ One main drawback for the return to the gold standard was overvaluing of the currency which meant that British goods would be over-priced and uncompetitive abroad, hampering economic growth, and, as a consequence, employment. The main reforms of this government were contributory old age pensions, widows' pensions, unemployment insurance reform and the Local Government Act, 1929, which was to give local authorities far more control than they had hitherto, with power over public health, housing and maternity and child welfare. However, because they received more

⁷ Pearce, *Domestic Policies*, p. 22.

⁸ Juliet Gardiner, Neil Wenborn, eds., *The History Today Companion to British History* (London, 1995), p. 346.

revenue from Westminster than ratepayers, they became, in effect, agencies of the national government.

The General Election in May 1929 was won by the Labour party led by Ramsay MacDonald, but it would be a minority government. Labour won 288 seats, the Conservatives 260 and the Liberals 59. In many ways it was not a good election to win because the Wall Street Crash, in October 1929, was to introduce the most severe phase of the Depression. Exports declined and unemployment rose making the cost of unemployment benefit rise from £12 million in 1928 to £125 million in 1931.⁹ The Labour Chancellor of the Exchequer was Philip Snowden, Blackburn's MP from 1906-1918, and MP for Colne from 1924-1931. He was a rigid, orthodox financial thinker who insisted that balancing the budget was most important, and that retrenchment was vital, which meant cuts in social services, including unemployment benefits, which was unacceptable to many in the Labour Cabinet. The Labour Government resigned on 24 August 1931, after a failure to agree on cuts. A National Government was formed in August 1931 which would be led by Ramsay MacDonald, Britain abandoned the gold standard and the government undertook an emergency package of cuts and introduced a Means Test for benefits.

In the General Election of 1931, a National Coalition government was elected by a landslide. Expenditure was cut by ten per cent, and the pound was devalued making exports cheaper. Interest rates were lowered and Britain slowly emerged from the Depression. Unemployment fell except in the areas of the staple industries, some of which were declared Special Areas, which achieved little. In November 1935, Stanley Baldwin replaced Ramsay MacDonald as Prime Minister. Baldwin led a Conservative National Government to victory in the 1935 election. This was followed by a Churchill-led coalition government (1940-5) which was in power until the end of the Second World War.

⁹ Pearce, *Domestic Politics*, p. 52.

Brief overview of social legislation examined in this thesis.

There are various pieces of legislation I will study in this thesis, bills which shaped the official responses to the unemployment crisis in the 1930s. They are: Unemployment Insurance Acts between 1911 and 1934; Housing Acts between 1919 and 1935; the Local Government Act, 1929 and The Poor Law Act, 1930.

The National Insurance Act, 1911, provided for a National Insurance scheme with provision for time-limited unemployment and medical benefits. It was funded by the worker, the employer and the government. The Act was not intended to maintain an unemployed worker and his family over a long period but to provide short-term help while finding work. Longer unemployment meant the worker was required to apply to the Poor Law for assistance. Subsequent Acts in 1920, 1921, 1926, 1929 and 1931 extended entitlement. The rise in the unemployment rate after the First World War meant that too many workers who were unemployed had to resort to the Poor Law and the time for eligibility was extended. By 1931, the Unemployment Fund became insolvent needing Treasury assistance to meet its commitments, turning the scheme into a system of public relief. The Unemployment Insurance Act in 1934 required those who were receiving 'transitional payments' to be subject to a household means test.¹⁰

Housing Acts between 1919 and 1935 were enacted to reduce the housing shortage by granting subsidies and encouraging local authorities to build more public housing and providing them with the capacity to demolish or improve unsanitary houses. Later Acts gave local authorities the power to declare clearance areas and compulsorily purchase property in order to demolish it.

The Local Government Act, 1929, and the Poor Law Act, 1930, changed the way the poor, the old and the sick were cared for in Britain. The Local Government Act changed the structure of Poor Law institutions in England and Wales by abolishing the

¹⁰ GDH and MI Cole, *The Condition of Britain* (London, 1937), pp.191-205.

Poor Law Unions and their Boards of Guardians and passing their powers to County Councils, County Borough Councils or Municipal Borough Councils, which were also given responsibility for Public Assistance. The Poor Law Act transferred Poor Law hospitals to local authorities making obtaining medical treatment easier, while Workhouses became Public Assistance Institutions.

The National Economy Act, 1931, enacted because of the economic crisis stipulated that those who had used up their entitlements from Unemployment Insurance would instead receive 'Transitional Payments' through a local Public Assistance Committee (PAC) after being subjected to a household means test. Because the cotton textile area of North East Lancashire had been in depression since the First World War, cotton workers used up their entitlements quickly making them dependent upon the local PAC and how they administered the regulations. We will see that Blackburn's PAC was considered to be more generous than Burnley's PAC. These two PACs and the Lancashire PAC No.7 were responsible for the Lancashire weaving area.

NOTE:

This figure is included on page xix of the print copy of the thesis held in the University of Adelaide Library.

Figure2. The North East Lancashire Weaving Area.

(© *Lancashire Cotton Operatives and Work 1900-1950*, Fowler, Alan, 2003, Ashgate Publishing)