University of Huddersfield Repository

Hargreaves, John A. and Haigh, E. A. Hilary

Slavery in Yorkshire: Richard Oastler and the campaign against child labour in the Industrial Revolution

Original Citation


This version is available at http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/16216/

The University Repository is a digital collection of the research output of the University, available on Open Access. Copyright and Moral Rights for the items on this site are retained by the individual author and/or other copyright owners. Users may access full items free of charge; copies of full text items generally can be reproduced, displayed or performed and given to third parties in any format or medium for personal research or study, educational or not-for-profit purposes without prior permission or charge, provided:

• The authors, title and full bibliographic details is credited in any copy;
• A hyperlink and/or URL is included for the original metadata page; and
• The content is not changed in any way.

For more information, including our policy and submission procedure, please contact the Repository Team at: E.mailbox@hud.ac.uk.

http://eprints.hud.ac.uk/
In his celebrated open letter to the *Leeds Mercury* of 29 September 1830 on ‘Yorkshire Slavery’, Richard Oastler alerted the readers of Yorkshire’s highest circulation provincial newspaper to the desperate plight of those ‘victims of slavery even on the threshold of our own homes’, the child workers in the worsted spinning mills around Bradford. His letter was penned, perhaps surprisingly, not from the industrial heartland of Bradford, but, somewhat incongruously, from the arcadian fastnesses of Fixby Hall, an elegant Georgian, country house on the rural periphery of Huddersfield, where its author had served for a decade as land agent for the estate’s owners, an absentee gentry family since 1809. Indeed, Oastler had come to be regarded by many of his contemporaries as the surrogate squire of Fixby on account of the prolonged absences of his employer, Thomas W. Thornhill (1780–1844). However his more mundane and onerous responsibilities included the management of his employer’s vast estates extending across a large swathe of West Yorkshire, with a rent roll of £20,000 in

---

1. D. Read, *Press and People 1790–1850*, (London: Edward Arnold, 1961), appendix, pp. 209–18 reveals that the *Leeds Mercury* had a weekly circulation of 5,200 in c.1830 significantly higher than its nearest rivals the *Leeds Intelligencer* (1,500) and the *Leeds Patriot* (c. 1,200), and over ten times greater than the *Sheffield Independent* (c. 500). I am grateful to Professor Edward Royle and Professor Keith Laybourn for their comments on a preliminary draft of this chapter.
1830, encompassing some thousand tenancies, including cottages, farms, four collieries, some two dozen quarries and numerous turnpike investments. Moreover, many of them were poised to produce higher revenues for the estate as the urban and industrial centres of Halifax, Huddersfield, Leeds and Bradford and their hinterlands began to expand with the acceleration of industrialisation.\(^2\)

Hand-delivered by Oastler on horseback, his sensational letter was eventually published on 16 October 1830, after an agonising delay whilst the editor, Edward Baines, had pondered its potential impact on the paper’s predominantly dissenting, middle-class readership and added an accompanying editorial explicitly critical of Oastler’s belligerent prose. The letter appeared on the back page of the pioneering,  

SLAVERY IN YORKSHIRE

progressive, Whig-Liberal, Leeds newspaper, whose commercial readership was already well acquainted with the long running campaign to end colonial slavery. It was the first of four persistent letters to the *Leeds

3. I am indebted to Professor Malcolm Chase of the University of Leeds for this information.
CHAPTER 1

*Mercu*ry written by Oastler highlighting the problem of child labour in West Yorkshire’s mills and it came to be regarded as one of the most momentous letters ever published in a Yorkshire newspaper on account of its far-reaching impact.\(^4\)

Indeed, with the deft stroke of his quill pen, possibly that later depicted emblemsmatically resting on Oastler’s desk in the engraving of the factory reformer by James Posselwhite, based on Benjamin Garside’s oil portrait, it associated the faltering movement to regulate the employment of young children in factories with the extraordinarily successful campaign to end transatlantic slavery, championed by Yorkshire’s Tory Member of Parliament, William Wilberforce.\(^5\)

Moreover, as Cecil Driver observed in his monumental biography of Oastler published in 1946, it not only launched Oastler’s career as a factory reformer, which ultimately was to earn him the soubriquet of ‘Factory King’, but it also proved to be a major turning point in British social and economic history. By reinvigorating the languishing factory movement it helped to secure a series of legislative enactments between 1833 and 1853 which, together with the establishment of a factory inspectorate, resulted in a more effective and wide-ranging regulatory system of factory employment than had existed before 1830.\(^6\)

Oastler’s widely publicised letter followed his Damascene conversion to the cause of factory reform during an illuminating, overnight visit to the now demolished Horton Hall, Bradford, formerly the home of John Wood, Bradford’s largest worsted spinner, an evangelical Tory and enlightened, paternalistic employer. Wood’s sprawling industrial premises employing 527 workers, covering seven acres in Goodman’s End between Bridge Street and Bowling Beck, became one of the leading worsted spinning enterprises in Britain during the first quarter

---


\(^5\) Before the emergence of Oastler’s ten-hour movement in the 1830s, Short Time Committees had been widely established in both Lancashire and Yorkshire in the late 1820s to support the radical M.P. Sir John Cam Hobhouse’s efforts to limit the working day for children and young persons, which succeeded only in obtaining minor improvements to existing legislation in 1825 and 1829 in the cotton industry, see G.B.A.M. Finlayson, *England in the 1830s*, (London: Edward Arnold, 1969), pp. 38–39 and D.G. Wright, *Popular Radicalism. The Working-Class Experience 1780–1880*, (London: Longman, 1988), p. 100.

of the nineteenth century. Deeply frustrated by the lack of enthusiasm of his fellow Bradford mill owners for any form of self-imposed regulation of child labour, Wood had urged Oastler to launch a campaign for a statutory ten-hour day on the grounds that since adult workers were dependent on the assistance of child workers, the restriction of adult working hours would necessitate the reduction of the working hours of children. Indeed, Wood shared his concerns with Oastler long into the night of 28 September 1830 and again in the early hours of the following morning before Oastler departed at dawn, henceforward resolutely determined to champion the plight of the child workers.7

Cryptically headed ‘Slavery in Yorkshire’ it appeared in print three weeks later. Oastler’s controversial letter deliberately appropriated the evocative analogy of transatlantic slavery to revive the hitherto faltering factory movement. Moreover, some of its most memorable and evocative

---

phrases such as ‘doomed to labour from morning to night’ have passed into everyday discourse and are still heard today nearly 200 years after they first appeared in print. Other highly charged phrases, notably references to child workers as ‘victims at the accursed shrine of avarice’ in ‘those magazines of British infantile slavery’ in that ‘horrid and abominable system on which the worsted mills in and near Bradford is conducted’ became the war cries of Oastler’s platform oratory and the campaign slogans of the revived ten-hour movement. They reverberated throughout its intense campaign which continued intermittently even beyond the enactment of the Ten Hours Act of 1847 until adequate safeguards were introduced in 1853 to ensure the effective statutory regulation of conditions of work for children in textile factories.

Oastler’s professed justification for his emotive letter had been to challenge the complacency of the Revd R.W. Hamilton, the formidable
dissenting ministerial incumbent of the pulpits at the Albion and Belgrave Independent Chapels in Leeds between 1814 and 1848. He had claimed in a speech at a recent public meeting at the Leeds Cloth Hall Yard on 22 September 1830 that ‘it is the pride of Britain that a slave cannot exist’ on British soil. Oastler declared that, on the contrary, ‘thousands of our fellow-creatures and fellow-subjects, both male and female, the miserable inhabitants of a Yorkshire town … are this very moment existing in a state of slavery, more horrid than are the victims of that hellish system “colonial slavery”’. Moreover, Oastler contended that this situation was even more intolerable given that ‘Yorkshire was currently represented in Parliament by none other than William Wilberforce, that “giant of anti-slavery principles”. It was also unacceptable, he insisted, since Bradford, the town in question, was ‘a place famed for its profession of religious zeal, whose inhabitants are ever foremost in professing “temperance” and “reformation” and are striving to outrun their neighbours in missionary exertions’ where ‘anti-slavery fever rages most furiously.’ Exposing the hypocrisy of Bradford’s millocracy and that of Yorkshire’s current anti-slavery Members of Parliament, Duncombe, Morpeth, Bethell and Brougham, Oastler declared that the pious and able champions of negro liberty and colonial rights’ should ‘before they had travelled so far as the West Indies’ have ‘sojourned in our own immediate neighbourhood, and have directed the attention of the meeting to scenes of misery, acts of oppression, and victims of slavery, even on the threshold of our homes’.9


SLAVERY IN YORKSHIRE

TO THE EDITORS OF THE LEEDS MERCURY

“It is the pride of Britain that a slave cannot exist on her soil; and if I read the genius of her constitution aright, I find that slavery is most abhorrent to it – that the air which Britons breath is free – the ground on which they tread is sacred to liberty” – Rev. R.W. HAMILTON’s Speech at the Meeting held in the Cloth-hall Yard, Sept. 22d, 1830.

GENTLEMEN, – No heart responded with truer accents to the sounds of liberty which were heard in the Leeds Cloth-hall yard, on the 22d inst. than did mine, and from none could more sincere and earnest prayers arise to the throne of Heaven, that hereafter Slavery might only be known to Britain in the pages of her history. One shade alone obscured my pleasure, arising not from any difference in principle, but from the want of application of the general principle to the whole Empire. The pious and able champions of Negro liberty and Colonial rights should, if I mistake not, have gone farther than they did; or perhaps, to speak more correctly, before they had travelled so far as the West Indies, should, at least for a few moments, have sojourned in our own immediate neighbourhood, and have directed the attention of the meeting to scenes of misery, acts of oppression, and victims of slavery, even on the threshold of our homes!

Let truth speak out, appalling as the statement may appear. The fact is true. Thousands of our fellow-creatures and fellow-subjects, both male and female, the miserable inhabitants of a Yorkshire town; (Yorkshire now represented in Parliament by the giant of anti-slavery principles,) are this very moment existing in a state of Slavery more horrid than are victims of that hellish system – “Colonial Slavery.” These innocent creatures drawl out unpitied, their short but miserable existence, in a place famed for its profession of religious zeal, whose inhabitants are ever foremost in professing “Temperance” and “Reformation,” and are striving to outrun their neighbours in Missionary exertions, and would fain send the Bible to the farthest corner of the globe – aye in the very place where the anti-slavery fever rages most furiously, her apparent charity, is not more admired on earth, than her real cruelty is abhorred in heaven. The very streets which receive the droppings of an “Anti-Slavery Society” are every morning wet by the tears of innocent victims at the accursed shrine of avarice, who are compelled (not by the cart-whip of the negro slave-driver) but by the dread of the equally appalling thong or strap of the overseer, to hasten, half-dressed, but not half-fed, to those magazines

of British Infantile Slavery – the Worsted Mills in the town and neighbourhood of Bradford!!!

Would that I had Brougham’s eloquence, that I might rouse the hearts of the nation, and make every Briton swear “These innocents shall be free!”

Thousands of little children, both male and female, but principally female, from SEVEN to fourteen years of age, are daily compelled to labour from six o’clock in the morning to seven in the evening, with only – Britons, blush while you read it! – with only thirty minutes allowed for eating and recreation! – Poor infants! ye are indeed sacrificed at the shrine of avarice, without even the solace of the negro slave: ye are no more than he is, free agents – ye are compelled to work as long as the necessity of your needy parents may require, or the cold-blooded avarice of your worse than barbarian masters may demand! Ye live in the boasted land of freedom, and feel and mourn that ye are Slaves, and slaves without the only comfort which the Negro has. He knows it is his sordid mercenary master’s INTEREST that he should live, be strong and healthy. Not so with you. Ye are doomed to labour from morn till night for one who cares not how soon your weak and tender frames are stretched to breaking! You are not mercifully valued at so much per head; this would assure you at least (even with the worst and most cruel masters), of the mercy shown to their own labouring beasts. No, not your soft and delicate limbs are tired, and fagged, and jaded at only so much per week; and when your joints can act no longer, your emaciated frames are cast aside, the boards on which you lately toiled and wasted life away, are instantly supplied with other victims, who in this boasted land of liberty are HIRED – not sold – as Slaves, and daily forced to hear that they are free. Oh! Duncombe! Thou hatest Slavery – I know thou dost resolve that “Yorkshire children shall no more be slaves.” And Morpeth! Who justly gloriest in Christian faith – Oh Morpeth listen to the cries and count the tears of these poor babes and let St. Stephen’s hear thee swear – “they shall no longer groan in Slavery!” And Bethell too! who swears eternal hatred to the name of Slave, whene’er thy manly voice is heard in Britain’s senate, assert the rights and liberty of Yorkshire Youths. And Brougham! Thou who art the chosen champion of liberty in every clime! Oh bend thy giant’s mind, and listen to the sorrowing accents of these poor Yorkshire little ones, and note their tears; then let thy voice rehearse their woes, and touch the chord thou only holdest – the chord that sounds above the silvery notes in praise of heavenly liberty, and down descending at thy will, groans in the horrid caverns of the deep in muttering sounds of misery accursed to hellish bondage; and as thou soundst these notes, let Yorkshire hear, thee swear “Her children shall be free!” Yes, all ye four protectors of our rights, chosen by freemen to destroy oppression’s rod,
CHAPTER I

"Vow one by one, vow altogether, vow
"With heart and voice, eternal enmity
"Against oppression by your brethren’s hands;
"Till man nor woman under Britain's laws,
"Nor son nor daughter born within her empire,
"Shall buy or see, or HIRE, or BE A SLAVE!"

The nation is now most resolutely determined that Negroes shall be free. Let them, however, not forget that Briton’s have common rights with Afric[a]’s sons.

The blacks may be fairly compared to beasts of burden, kept for their master’s use. The whites to those which others keep and let for hire! If I have succeeded in calling the attention of your readers to the horrid and abominable system on which the worsted mills in and near Bradford are conducted, I have done some good. Why should not children working in them be protected by legislative enactments, as well as those who work in cotton mills? Christians should feel and act for those whom Christ so eminently loved, and declared that “of such is the kingdom of heaven.”

Your insertion of the above in the Leeds Mercury, at your earliest convenience, will oblige, Gentlemen,

Your most obedient servant,

RICHARD OASTLER.

Fixby-Hall, near Huddersfield, Sept. 29th, 1830.

This volume of essays is based on a conference held at the University of Huddersfield on Saturday 17 November 2007 to commemorate the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade in 1807 and to celebrate Huddersfield’s heritage as the historic springboard for the launch of the ten-hour movement in Yorkshire under Oastler’s leadership in 1830.10 It explores the links between the anti-slavery movement in

10. The conference on the theme of ‘Yorkshire Slavery; the campaign for the release of the oppressed’, supported by a ‘Your Heritage’ grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund, was hosted by the University of Huddersfield and supported by the West Yorkshire Branch of the Historical Association. Chaired by Professor Tim Thornton, the speakers included Dr Fiona Spiers, Mr D. Colin Dews, Professor Edward Royle, Dr John A. Hargreaves and Mr Jonathan Blagbrough of Anti-Slavery International.
Yorkshire and the re-invigorated campaign for factory regulation, which emerged in the county following the publication of Richard Oastler’s sensational letter exposing the evils of child slavery in Bradford’s worsted mills in the *Leeds Mercury* in October 1830. It provides an opportunity to revisit a theme first explored in depth in twentieth-century historiography in the United States of America by Cecil Driver at Yale University in 1946 in a monumental biographical study of Richard Oastler and in the United Kingdom by the Leeds-born historian, Professor J.T. Ward, in his seminal study of the factory movement published in 1962, based on his Cambridge doctoral thesis, and supplemented by a series of related articles in regional publications in Bradford and Leeds.¹¹

These trailblazing studies have stimulated a wide-ranging debate around the issue of child labour in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries mainly in academic journals and monographs and increasingly within the context of an emerging international concern for the global welfare of children. This has been evidenced in comparative studies of childhood exemplified by the work of the American historian Professor Peter N. Stearns, reflecting that ‘for many children’ in the world today ‘still in the labour force, rather than primarily focused on schooling, key experiences resemble what children in Western Europe, the United States and Japan encountered a century or a century and a half ago.’¹² However, media reports continue to provide shocking reminders that there can be no room for complacency even in western societies about the problem of child labour and the abuse of children more generally. For example, one British newspaper in October 2010, reporting under the headline ‘Child “slaves” found working on a farm’, revealed that a group of Romanian children, some as young as nine, had been taken into police protection after having been found working as ‘slave labourers’ picking spring onions in a field


in Worcestershire following an international trafficking operation. Moreover, the most notable recent historian of childhood and child labour in the British industrial revolution, Jane Humphries, Professor of Economic History at Oxford University, reminds her readers in her groundbreaking study lamenting the invisibility in modern economic history of ‘the children who toiled in the early mills [and] mines’ that ‘as the dismal catalogue of recent cases of appalling abuse makes clear’, even ‘rich economies with well-developed welfare states’ have not yet gained immunity from the global problem of child neglect and abuse. This remains a challenging and disturbing indictment almost two centuries after Oastler penned his controversial letter.\(^\text{13}\)

Other issues, which have emerged in the historical debate about child labour during this period, have been gender related. Although Oastler’s letter expressed a particular concern about the employment of young girls in Bradford factories, the late Katrina Honeyman, Professor of Social and Economic History at Leeds University, maintained that ‘women played a low-key role in the factory campaigns of the early 1830s’ where their participation in demonstrations for shorter hours was motivated ‘primarily by a desire to protect their children’. Indeed, she has contended that the factory movement in the West Riding continued to be male dominated at least until the passage of the 1844 Factory Act restricted the labour of women to twelve hours. Thereafter, she recognised that female support became more evident especially in the ‘relatively gender-unified weaving districts’ where women’s ‘perception of their rights as workers evolved through their employment as power-loom operatives’. Moreover, Honeyman has insisted that, notwithstanding Oastler’s primary concern to eradicate the exploitation of children within the factory system, his aim ‘to enhance the welfare of the working-class family was founded on a commitment to re-establish “traditional” gender roles, especially female domesticity’ since Oastler had declared:

\[
\text{We want to see woman in her right place … on her own hearth-stone making it ready to be comfortable for her industrious husband when he returns to his house to meals, and to his bed at night.}\quad ^{14}\]

---

However, Honeyman acknowledged that by 1844 a different emphasis was emerging, characterised by the description of the ten-hour movement as ‘this arduous and important struggle for the liberty of our sex, and the protection of our children’.

Indeed, there is even earlier evidence of attempts by the ten-hour movement to engage directly with women across the social spectrum in 1833 when George Crabtree, the Huddersfield mill operative entrusted by Oastler to collect evidence of conditions in the mills of the Calder Valley, addressed both the ‘Ladies of Halifax’, who though ‘alive to the emancipation of the Negro … ‘forget, or else turn a deaf ear to the wretched condition of the Factory Children’ and then concluded:

Mothers of Halifax and its neighbourhood, rouse yourselves in your children’s cause; if the RICH ladies won’t use their influence to emancipate your infants, you as mothers ought to be alive to the amelioration of their condition.\(^\text{15}\)

Moreover, women were strongly in evidence in contemporary prints in the vast crowds welcoming Oastler home to Huddersfield on 12 July 1832 after giving evidence to Sadler’s Committee in July 1832. Women in shawls also appear to be listening attentively to Oastler when he addressed a crowded open-air meeting in Huddersfield after his release from prison on 20 February 1844, when *The Times* also reported ‘ladies in private carriages’ accompanying his procession into the town. Many women were impressed by Oastler for his role in the anti-Poor Law movement and showed their disapproval of his dismissal from his stewardship at Fixby Hall in August 1838, ‘waving a flag condemning the bastardy clause of the Poor Law’ and they organised Oastler festivals in 1841 to support him during his imprisonment, suggesting that Oastler’s views on female domesticity may have

---

appeared distinctly less controversial to contemporaries than some later feminist historians and historical sociologists have recognised.\footnote{Times, 22 February 1844, Leeds Mercury, 1 September 1838, Leeds Intelligencer, 30 January 1838, 17 April 1838; M.I. Thomis and Jennifer Grimmett, Women in Protest 1800–1850, (London: Croom Helm, 1982), p. 61.}

Contemporary observers of Yorkshire society were well aware of the phenomenon of child labour under both the domestic and factory systems of production. Daniel Defoe’s classic account of the proto-industrial landscape of the Calder Valley and its tributaries in the early eighteenth century as he approached Halifax from Blackstone Edge commented positively on the ‘spectacle of the most exemplary industry’ with ‘no hand being unemployed … even from the youngest to the ancient’. Indeed, Defoe invariably wrote approvingly of child labour even commenting enthusiastically on children usefully employed scarcely ‘above four years old’.\footnote{Daniel Defoe, A Tour Through the Whole Island of Great Britain, ed. by P.N. Furbank, W.R. Owens and A.J. Coulson, (London: Yale University Press, 1991), pp. x-xi.} A century later, George Walker (1781-
1856) the artist of Killingbeck Hall, Leeds, included in his collection of coloured drawings of Yorkshire costume a sketch of two rather forlorn looking children with pallid complexions. Wearing brats and carrying lunch baskets, they were depicted against a backcloth of a recently constructed factory filling the atmosphere with clouds of thick black smoke. Published in 1814, when, the artist commented, ‘a great part of the West Riding of Yorkshire abounds with cotton mills, cloth manufactories and other large buildings appropriated to trade’

THE FACTORY GIRL.
DEDICATED TO JOHN WOOD, ESQ.,
BY ROBERT DIBB, DEWSBURY.

Who is she with pallid face?
That slowly moves with languid pace,
Her limbs bespeak her wearied frame
She seems in suffering, grief, and pain!
“A little child”—with list'ning ear,
Approach'd me with a falling tear.
And said—’tis Jane the Factory Girl!

I took her by her little hand—
Though from fatigue, she scarce could stand,
I tried to soothe her tender grief,
By friendship's pow'r to give relief;
And ask'd in accents most sincere
What cause'd the anguish so severe?
Of Jane—the Village Factory Girl!

She answer'd I—near that little wood,
Once liv'd my mother—kind—and good:
My father died upon that morn,
When I unhappily was born:
And now one only sister dear
Is left—the broken heart to cheer:
Of Jane—the Orphan Factory Girl!

Oh! Sir! we work from morning's light,
Till darkness settles at the night:
No rest we know—as parents come
To welcome our return to home,
We call on Heaven to bless our cot
For earthly friends have all forgot
The poor neglected Factory Girl!

The overlooker—many a time,
Without a fault—without a crime,
Has beat me with such savage might
That scarce could I reach home at night:
Oh! then I've wept in anguish deep,
And blest those parents now asleep
Who lov'd poor Jane, the Factory Girl!

Oh! ye! upon their lowly bier,
Oft have I shed a mournful tear!
And wish'd that I alas could sleep
No more to suffer, nor to weep:
But soon I feel that welcome death
Will claim the last—the parting breath
Of Jane, the wretched Factory Girl!

She cast her eyes with wildness round,
Then sunk exhausted on the ground:
I clas'd the sufferer to my breast,
But she—poor girl—was now at rest!!
No cruel tyrant now could place
A tear upon the snowy face
Of Jane, the lifeless Factory Girl!

Ye! who alone on Gold are bent,
Blush! at the Murder'd Innocent,
Let not Old England's glorious pride
Be stain'd by black Infanticide!!
But let Humanity's bright Ray
Protect from greedy Tyrant's way
The poor defenceless Factory Girl!

Price 1d.—The profits arising therefrom to go towards forwarding the TENTH HOURS BILL!!!

E. WILLAN, PRINTED, DEWSBURY.

furnishing ‘employment, food and raiment to thousands of poor industrious individuals’, Walker maintained that the ‘little blue dirty group’ depicted alongside a stunted tree stump was an authentic representation. Moreover, he enquired pessimistically ‘where in their complexions would the painter discover the blooming carnations of youth?’. However, he declined to condemn the manufacturers as a class, commending the ‘many proprietors of factories’ who had remedied ‘these evils by a strict attention to the morals, behaviour and cleanliness of the children’.  

By contrast, George Crabtree, albeit a committed ten-hour movement propagandist, concluded his report of his tour of the Calder Valley with the observation:

during our perambulation in the parish of Halifax, we found that the master manufacturers were dead to every feeling but of interest – the ‘cursed lust of gold’ has so engrossed their minds, and absorbed their whole hearts, that they view their work people as part of those inanimate machines by which they amass that wealth which is their pride and boast, even the infant portion of their slaves shares not their protection and regard!

Moreover, the evidence provided by Joseph Habergam, a crippled seventeen-year old operative, of his employment since the age of seven in a succession of factories in Huddersfield to the Select Committee on Factories chaired by Oastler’s friend, Michael Sadler, which was published in 1833, revealed a catalogue of harrowing abuse. It referred to some fifty children of his age who had often been ‘sick and poorly as a result of excessive labour’ at Bradley Mill and ‘about a dozen of the children who had died shortly after leaving work’. Habergam was later regarded as an ‘unimpeachable’ witness when the effects of his employment were made evident by the treatment he received at the Huddersfield Infirmary from Dr Walker and at the Leeds Infirmary which he attended following the personal intervention of Richard

Oastler. Habergam remarked that when he had heard the condition of West Indies slaves described, he had reflected ‘that there could not be worse slaves than those who worked in factories’ in Huddersfield.20

It is revealing that even the Benthamite, Edwin Chadwick, author of the Royal Commission Report on Factories which followed the publication of Sadler’s Report, whilst critical of Sadler’s evidence and clearly favouring the economic arguments of the manufacturers, accepted, nonetheless, that children needed protection from employers who overworked them. He also confirmed that the problem of factory children was ‘rapidly increasing’ and comprehended ‘a very considerable proportion of the infant population’. In 1833 Lord Althorp’s Factory Act, secured by parliamentary pressure under the leadership of Lord Ashley (1801–85), later the seventh Earl of Shaftesbury, extended an earlier ban in 1819 on the employment of children under nine in cotton mills to all textile factories and limited the hours of work of children aged between nine and thirteen to nine hours a day and between twelve and eighteen to twelve a day. It also imposed a daily requirement of two hours schooling on factory children and created an inspectorate to enforce the regulations.21

The practice of child labour which had long been a characteristic of the domestic system of cloth manufacture in the West Riding appears to have become well-established in the emerging factory system in the half-century before it became the focus of Oastler’s campaign in the 1830s. Katrina Honeyman has shown how the employment of pauper apprentices helped to meet a growing demand for juveniles to augment the workforces of many early textile mills.22

---


and Samuel Haigh of Marsden near Huddersfield, for example, employed pauper apprentices from the parishes of St Margaret and St John, Westminster and St Mary, Lambeth in their Marsden cotton mills between 1792 and 1803. They were generally between the ages of nine and fourteen, but also included at least two six-year-old boys. Indeed, ‘having lost so many of his London apprentices’ after they had evidently absconded from the factories, John Haigh approached the overseers of Halstead in Essex for replacements to maintain his labour supply. A surviving indenture for Sarah Stock, ‘a poor child of the parish of Halstead’ aged about fourteen, reveals that she was required to serve John Haigh as an apprentice until she attained the age of twenty-one and that, for his part, Haigh was required to ensure that she was ‘taught and instructed in the best way and manner that he can’ and to ‘provide sufficient meat, drink, apparel, lodging and washing and other things necessary and fit for an apprentice’.  In remote mills the maturation of the apprentice labour force contributed to a gradual decline in the demand for pauper apprentices over the early decades of the nineteenth century, reinforced by amending legislation in 1816 restricting the distance over which apprentices could be indentured.

Recent analysis of the structure of the textile labour force from government inquiries and other contemporary surveys has led economic historians such as Carolyn Tuttle to suggest extremely high relative employment levels of children and young people, comprising between one third and two-thirds of all workers in many textile mills by 1833, when the reinvigorated ten-hour movement under Oastler’s leadership was seeking to raise awareness of the problem. Moreover, Jane Humphries’ pioneering prosopographical analysis of no fewer than 617 working-class autobiographies has also identified astonishingly high levels of child labour throughout this early period of industrialisation, underlining, as one reviewer of her study was quick to point out, that Britain’s industrial revolution – the first in the world – might ‘never have happened without child labour’.  Professor

Humphries, whilst emphasizing the continuing significance of mechanisation and division of labour as other key factors driving change, has nevertheless demonstrated that, whereas for most of the eighteenth century only around thirty-five per cent of ten year-old working-class boys were in the labour force, the figure rose dramatically to fifty-five per cent between 1791 and 1820 and almost sixty per cent between 1821 and 1850, challenging the claims of Peter Kirby that very young child working was ‘never widespread’ in Britain, though Kirby recognised the problems associated with the sparsity of reliable quantitative data.26

However, it has also become increasingly clear that factory reform did not command universal support among factory workers, as the American neo-classical economic historian Clark Nardinelli recognised, arguing controversially but influentially that since child workers and their families apparently opted for employment by choice, child labour must have been a preferred option for significant numbers of families, though his views have been criticised as presenting ‘an over optimistic view of work in the mills’ by the British social historian Pamela Horn.27 Nardinelli has also criticised Oastler rather churlishly for allegedly subordinating other welfare issues such as educational, sanitary and health provisions to his preoccupation with the single-issue campaign to secure a reduction of working hours, which Oastler clearly regarded as intrinsically linked with child welfare, whilst Peter Kirby has concluded somewhat tendentiously that ‘humanitarian campaigns against child labour … should be viewed realistically as the product of a convergence of political interests rather than an attempt to improve the long-term welfare of most working children’.28 Nardinelli’s emphasis on the importance of technical change as a significant driving factor in the decline of child employment has, however, attracted more widespread support even from those historians like Humphries who

seek to re-emphasize the role of children in bearing ‘many of the social and economic costs of the industrial revolution’.  

The essays in this volume aim to inform both those with an interest in regional, local and family history and research students interested in exploring broader themes of British social and economic history within a global context. They utilise a wide range of sources and illustrations, many drawn from local and regional archive collections and offer fresh interpretations of the role of Richard Oastler, who remains a relatively neglected figure in British social and economic history, described by his twentieth-century biographer as England’s forgotten ‘Factory King’. This collection of essays seeks to re-assess the significance of this extraordinary provincial figure, whose identification of the campaign for factory regulation with the astonishingly successful anti-slavery movement had such a far-reaching impact on the social history of nineteenth century Britain. These essays also endeavour to explore the relationship of the factory movement to the trailblazing anti-slavery campaign; its associations with Evangelicalism both in its paternalistic expressions within Anglicanism and its more radical expressions within Nonconformity, and its connections with embryonic trade unionism and Owenite socialism, particularly in Huddersfield and its vicinity. They also assess the significance of the regional media campaign and of well-publicised, carefully-planned demonstrations and processions in contributing to the success of the movement.

Chronologically, the book spans the period from the emergence of the anti-slavery movement in Yorkshire in 1787 until the death of the last veteran of Oastler’s campaign in 1876. However the volume focuses predominantly on the four decades between 1807 and 1847, from the abolition of the slave trade in 1807 to the introduction of the Ten Hours Act for factory workers in 1847. Geographically, Huddersfield, which became the springboard for the re-launch of the ten-hour movement under Oastler’s leadership in the 1830s, assumes centre stage for a significant proportion of the book, but the social and economic context in which the factory movement re-emerged during this decade in many other localities across the West Yorkshire textile

belt is also explored. Its links are recognised with a radical tradition dating from the American and French Revolutions, which embraced Yorkshire Luddism and the years of radical protest following the wars with Revolutionary and Napoleonic France and the later struggle for parliamentary reform between 1829 to 1832.\textsuperscript{31} The impact of this extraordinarily passionate campaign on the post-reform politics of the 1830s and its significance in the development of legislative factory regulation restricting the working hours of children, requiring educational provision and the establishment of a factory inspectorate to ensure compliance with the law, is analysed and glimpses of its contribution to other contemporary extra-parliamentary protests, notably the anti-Poor Law movement and Chartism, are revealed, though not fully explored in this volume.

The history of this movement has a distinctively Yorkshire ambience. Richard Oastler, has frequently been characterised as an archetypal Yorkshireman: blunt, forthright and rarely reluctant to invoke his Yorkshire identity in the furtherance of his campaigning objectives. Moreover, he developed strong personal connections with an unusually broad spectrum of Yorkshire society in a variety of sharply contrasting communities within the county of his birth. The yeomen-farming, Anglican, paternal ancestry of his father, Robert Oastler (1748–1820), connected him with the secluded Swaledale village of Kirby Wiske, until his father’s adolescent conversion to Wesleyanism obliged him to leave the family home and seek refuge in the bustling market town of Thirsk in North Yorkshire with his two uncles, John and Samson Oastler, prosperous Wesleyan Methodists. They had built the new chapel in Thirsk opened by John Wesley in April 1766, thereby introducing Robert and ultimately his son Richard to a vibrant North Riding Wesleyanism and a close relationship with its founder, who reputedly later took the young Richard in his arms and blessed him during a visit to the family home.\textsuperscript{32}

Richard’s maternal ancestry connected him with the West Riding town of Leeds, an emerging industrial centre, where his father had commenced cloth trading in the late 1780s and where a blue plaque


\textsuperscript{32} Driver, Tory Radical, pp. 4–5.
located close to the nucleus of the BBC’s regional television and radio network in St Peter’s Square, commemorates his birth to Sarah Oastler, daughter of Joseph Scurr of Leeds.\textsuperscript{33} Richard’s education connected him with the nearby Moravian settlement of Fulneck at Pudsey, which he attended between 1798 and 1806 and to which he made frequent return visits in later life, for example, his unexpected arrival at a centenary jubilee celebration in 1855 ‘grey-haired and stooping with age’. On this occasion he recounted how the religious teaching of the school especially that provided by his ‘learned tutor, kind monitor and faithful friend’, Henry Steinhauer, had ‘often supplied him with support amid the conflicts of life’.\textsuperscript{34} After a failed attempt to enter the legal profession and an abortive apprenticeship to a distinguished architect, Charles Watson, in Wakefield, curtailed because of problems with eyestrain, Oastler briefly entered the business world as a commission agent, liaising between Leeds wholesalers and retailers in towns and villages across the West Riding, and engaging in a variety of business activities as a ‘drysalter, oilman, general dealer and chapman’ until he was declared bankrupt in 1820. During these tumultuous years in Leeds, Oastler developed a close personal friendship with Michael Sadler, a Leeds linen merchant and energetic Church Methodist, who helped shape the young Oastler’s emerging evangelical humanitarianism, Tory radicalism and commitment to the anti-slavery movement. Oastler’s lifelong association with Leeds, where he was buried at St Stephen’s Kirkstall in 1861, was recognised at the opening of the new Leeds Infirmary on 19 May 1868 in a commemorative booklet which listed Oastler among the most eminent figures in the history of Leeds and contained a rare extant photograph of Oastler in his later years.\textsuperscript{35} A rectangular brass mural tablet, financed

\begin{flushleft}
34. J.P. Libby, \textit{Celebration of the Centenary Jubilee of the Congregation of the United Brethren in Wyke, Mirfield, Gomersal and Fulneck}, April 1855, pp. 89–90, Fulneck School Archives, PC 533. Earlier references to his schooldays appear in entries of the Fulneck Elders’ Conference, for 3 April 1802, where reference is made to a letter from his father testifying to the ‘progress he finds his sons have made while they have attended the Fulneck Schools’. I am grateful to Ruth Strong for arranging for me to consult material in the archives relating to Richard Oastler.
\end{flushleft}
by public subscriptions in remembrance of Richard Oastler, ‘The Factory King’, was unveiled in Leeds Parish Church many years later in 1925.36 Today the Oastler Centre in New Market Street, Leeds, recognised by the West Yorkshire Ecumenical Council in 2006 ‘as an ecumenical instrument to foster and forward the mission of the

Church as it relates to the workplace and to the economic life of Leeds,' commemorates Oastler’s historic links with the city.\textsuperscript{37}

After his father’s death and the failure of his own business in Leeds in 1820, employment opportunities drew Richard Oastler to Fixby near Huddersfield. After paying his creditors in full, he succeeded his father as land steward to the absentee Thornhill family at Fixby Hall. However, his management of the more distant Thornhill West Riding estates at Calverley bordering both Leeds and Bradford, enabled him to maintain his Leeds contacts and also develop close relationships with other key figures in the factory movement as it emerged under his leadership, not least the Revd George Stringer Bull, a former West African missionary, now Vicar of Bierley, and his protégé, the Bradford schoolmaster, Matthew Balme.\textsuperscript{38}

In his new employment at Fixby he soon cut his teeth as a radical agitator by leading a highly effective, if deeply acrimonious, tithe war on behalf of his new employer, Thomas Thornhill, against the new Vicar of Halifax, the Revd Charles Musgrave, in whose parish Fixby was located, succeeding in resisting his attempt to double his tithe income.\textsuperscript{39} In the process he established his first campaigning organisation, published his first substantial polemical tract and consequently received many invitations to speak on the factory question in the ancient parish of Halifax. Here he encountered some of his fiercest opposition from the millowners in Halifax led by the Akroyds and in the Calder Valley led by Messrs Edmondson, Walker and Hinchliffe of Cragg Vale, whom Oastler described as ‘more Tyrannical and more Hypocritical than the Slave Drivers in the West Indies’. In retaliation, a vituperative poster dubbed Oastler ‘that great Mountebank’ and the Revd G.S. Bull of Bierley ‘the noted

\textsuperscript{37} Philip Bee, The Oastler Centre for Faith in Economic Life, (Leeds: n.d.).


Mountebank Parson’ in advance of a meeting they were scheduled to address at Hebden Bridge in August 1833 for ‘seeking to shorten the hours of labour’.

Fixby, despite its historic links with the parish of Halifax, overlooked the emerging industrial townscape of Huddersfield and its hinterland, and is today the home of the Huddersfield Golf Club. It was with the working men of Huddersfield on Sunday 19 June 1831 that Oastler established with six leading local radicals the famous Fixby Hall compact, which committed both parties to setting aside their sectarian and political differences to work together for the common cause of factory reform. Oastler was often personally identified with the Huddersfield radical protesters, arriving at both the Easter pilgrimage to York in April 1833 and at a demonstration at Wilsley Moor on 1 July 1833 with ‘Oastler’s Own’ Huddersfield contingent, incorporating supporters from Holmfirth, Honley, Deighton and Brighouse. He twice stood for election to the post-reform Parliament at Huddersfield and came within an ace of securing victory as a Tory Radical in what has been described as a Whig pocket borough under the control of the Ramsden family. When he was obliged to leave Fixby Hall after Thornhill dismissed him for his financial mismanagement in 1838, Richard and Sarah Oastler were accompanied by a procession of sympathetic tenantry, and ten-hour and anti-Poor Law movement protesters organised by the Huddersfield Short Time Committee. Scarcely a month after his subsequent imprisonment in


the metropolitan Fleet debtor’s prison, his ‘Huddersfield Boys’ held an Oastler festival in the Philosophical Hall at Huddersfield attended by over 600 supporters, followed by music and dancing which resulted in a cheque for £23 being forwarded to Oastler for sustenance.\footnote{Driver, \textit{Tory Radical}, pp. 420–21.}
Indeed, he regularly received hampers of food sent from Huddersfield during his incarceration, commenting in his weekly *Fleet Papers* which he edited from his prison cell that ‘a Huddersfield friend sent me a box of preserves. The fruit was grown in his Fixby gardens!’ 45


prior to his release from prison in 1844 Oastler informed his close friend and supporter, Lawrence Pitkethly that he had declined an invitation to attend a public dinner and subsequently recuperate in ‘the North Riding’, insisting that he must return to ‘Huddersfield first’. Unsurprisingly, he received a rapturous welcome on his return to Huddersfield following his release. Whilst residing at Fixby Hall from 1820 to 1838, he worshipped at nearby Christ Church, Woodhouse, where his association was later commemorated by a monument, financed by contributions from Huddersfield factory operatives, which bore an inscription proclaiming that Richard Oastler, ‘the Factory King … lives in the hearts of thousands’.

Oastler’s dramatic conversion at the age of forty to the cause of factory reform at Horton Hall, the home of the worsted manufacturer John Wood, connected him to Bradford, which for most of the factory movement’s history became the Yorkshire headquarters of the campaign since his famous letter on Yorkshire Slavery had explicitly

46. Letter from Richard Oastler to Lawrence Pitkethly, 1 February 1844, WYAS Kirklees, KC 1040, 5/4-5/5.

47. See below, chapter 6.

criticised conditions in Bradford’s worsted mills.\textsuperscript{49} Indeed subsequent criticism of Oastler in 1834 by the liberal \textit{Bradford Observer} provoked one of the most stinging rebukes Oastler ever delivered in a vitriolic pamphlet accusing the dissenting manufacturing shareholders of the \textit{Bradford Observer}, ‘Messrs. Get-all, Keep-all, Grasp-all’, of the most outrageous hypocrisy, professing piety in their chapels while maintaining appalling conditions in their mills.\textsuperscript{50} However, later an Oastler festival was also organised entirely by operatives in Bradford to support the leader of the movement during his imprisonment.\textsuperscript{51} Moreover, after his death an imposing bronze statue by John Birnie Phillips, depicting Oastler with two factory children on a plinth of polished granite, was unveiled in his memory by the Earl of Shaftesbury on 15 May 1869 in Forster Square opposite the railway station, after an overwhelming majority of 1,472 subscribers to the memorial fund had favoured a Bradford location for the statue.\textsuperscript{52}

The initiative for the memorial, one of the earliest provincial statues depicting children in the public realm, had come from the trade unions and Short Time Committees of Yorkshire and Lancashire and an estimated hundred thousand people gathered for the ceremony, prompting Shaftesbury to record in his diary that ‘the throng was immense … their enthusiasm knew no bounds’.\textsuperscript{53}

Oastler was also associated with the county city of York, the location for the Easter pilgrimage in support of factory reform at the culmination of his most famous, county-wide campaign in April 1833; and Wakefield, where he led one of the largest protests by anti-Poor Law protesters from all parts of the West Riding ever held in the town.

\textsuperscript{50} Driver, \textit{Tory Radical}, pp. 298-99.
\textsuperscript{51} Driver, \textit{Tory Radical}, p. 421.
\textsuperscript{52} The Memorial Committee had originally proposed that the monument be erected in Leeds but a ballot of subscribers resulted in a decisive vote in favour of Bradford (1,472) considerably ahead of Leeds (119), Huddersfield (88) and Halifax (5), see A. Porritt, ‘Richard Oastler’, \textit{Transactions of the Halifax Antiquarian Society}, 1965, pp. 42–43. The statue was subsequently moved to Rawson Square in 1920 to facilitate the development of the tramway terminus and to its present location off Northgate in 1968.
The occasion for the latter demonstration was the hustings for the West Riding constituency, the largest in England, for the county election on Monday 31 July in 1837, called following the dissolution of Parliament on the accession of Queen Victoria. Although narrowly defeated in the recently held Huddersfield borough election of that year, Oastler’s appeal for opposition to ‘this horrible Bastille law’ resulted in some 30,000 supporters and their opponents descending on Wakefield to hear Oastler and others address the crowds. In the ensuing riot there were two fatalities and Oastler himself suffered personal injury.  

Oastler’s marriage to Mary Tatham, a woman of delicate health hailing from a wealthy Nottingham Wesleyan family of lace makers, had produced two children, Sarah and Robert, both of whom had died shortly after birth in 1819. After his wife’s death in 1845, Richard Oastler spent his declining years in rural Surrey living in a small cottage outside Guildford, cared for by his niece, collating records of the factory movement for posterity. However, he died in the county of his birth at a hotel in Harrogate after collapsing with a heart attack as his train approached Harrogate station on 22 August 1861. His old adversary, the young Edward Baines, drew on a host of superlatives to extol Oastler’s passing, proclaiming that ‘he has died without an enemy.

55. Driver, Tory Radical, p. 23.
and that the news of his death will be received with tears in many a poor man’s dwelling.’ He concluded that ‘there can be no doubt that the factory operatives’ condition is now vastly superior to what it was in 1830’. Indeed, Oastler himself had lived to witness from the gallery of the House of Commons the debates that had led to legislation in 1853 which ensured the demise of the relay system by which employers had been able to circumvent the implementation of the Ten Hours Act of 1847. The surviving Huddersfield working men who had made the Fixby Hall compact with Richard Oastler three decades earlier carried the most persistent champion of their cause to his grave at St Stephen’s Church, Kirkstall, eight years later and a memorial sermon was subsequently preached at Huddersfield Parish Church in the presence of a vast congregation, by the Revd G.S. Bull of Bierley who had also conducted Oastler’s funeral, when the churchyard of St Stephen’s at Kirkstall and the roads leading to it had been thronged with thousands of mourners.

Although he had spent much of his retirement in Surrey, Richard Oastler’s commitment to the twin campaigns to abolish colonial slavery and end the abuses to children in factories linked him irrevocably with West Yorkshire, and especially with Huddersfield’s hinterland from where he had penned his celebrated ‘Slavery in Yorkshire’ letter to the Leeds Mercury three decades previously. Appropriately a suburban street

57. Driver, _Tory Radical_, p. 520.
(Oastler Avenue), a former teacher training college (Oastler College) and a children’s playground in the town’s Greenhead Park were named in his honour in Huddersfield, where he was remembered affectionately by Huddersfield politicians from across the political spectrum. Indeed, Arthur Gardiner (1889–1971), the Huddersfield wool and cotton dyer, a founder member of the Huddersfield Socialist Party in 1910, a conscientious objector during the First World War and member of the Labour Party from 1918, who served subsequently as Huddersfield councillor (1927–30, 1933–67), alderman (1935) and mayor (1941–42), receiving the Freedom of the Borough in 1960, commented in his study of *The Industrial Revolution and Child Labour* in 1948:

There is one monument in Huddersfield that I never pass without a warm glow of affection and respect. It is the small memorial, erected outside the Children’s Playground in Greenhead Park (what a delightfully appropriate place) to the memory of Richard Oastler, ‘The Factory King’. Oastler sacrificed his health and his fortune in fighting the battle of the child-slaves. May his memory remain green in the hearts and minds of those who love their fellow-man.\(^{58}\)

The Rastrick flag which was carried by ‘Oastler’s Own’ Huddersfield contingent on the Easter pilgrimage to York in 1833 hangs proudly in a gallery of the Tolson Museum at Ravensknowle Park, Huddersfield, which also exhibits commemorative medals struck by Oastler’s friends to help pay off his debts, a commemorative ceramic blue and white jug dedicated to Oastler the ‘Friend of the Poor’ and other memorabilia associated with ‘the Factory King’, including a receipt bearing his distinctive florid signature.

This book focusing on Richard Oastler, Yorkshire Slavery and the campaign against child labour in Britain continues the commemorative

---

tradition, exploring the cross-fertilisation between the trans-Atlantic anti-slavery movement whose parliamentary campaign was led by William Wilberforce and the campaign against child labour whose extra-parliamentary campaign was led by Richard Oastler, both natives of Yorkshire. James Walvin, a leading contributor to the commemoration of the bi-centenary of the ending of the trans-Atlantic slave trade, provides an overview of the anti-slavery movement. He discusses the dependence of Yorkshire’s economy and its landed estates, not least the Lascelles estate at Harewood, on the notorious triangular slave trade. He then traces the emergence of the anti-slavery movement in Yorkshire in 1787 and its impact within the county, before considering the continuing campaign to end the institution of slavery in the British Empire and the controversial system of colonial apprenticeship which continued until 1840, seven years after Wilberforce’s death. He emphasizes the significance of humanitarian and evangelical support for the anti-slavery cause, which Wilberforce received from Tory Evangelicals like Richard Oastler, who on one occasion heroically defended Wilberforce from brickbats hurled at him at the hustings at Wakefield in the West Riding election of 1807. He identifies some

of the key sources available for the study of the movement, its historiography and central interpretative issues and indicates areas which need further research particularly at regional and local level.

Colin Dews of the Wesley Historical Society (Yorkshire) explains the Methodist influences in Yorkshire which helped shape Oastler’s evangelical Toryism. He focuses upon the significance of the relatively neglected radical Methodist New Connexion influences as well as the more familiar formative Wesleyan Methodist influences deriving from his family background and strengthened by his friendship with Michael Sadler, a Leeds linen merchant and devout Methodist, which helped to shape Oastler’s emergence as a radical campaigner and social philanthropist. Utilising sources unavailable to Oastler’s biographer Cecil Driver in 1946, Dews explains Oastler’s father Robert’s instrumental role in the establishment of the Methodist New Connexion in Leeds. He notes how during this period he developed a friendship with the dissenting editor of the *Leeds Mercury*, Edward Baines, and how he emerged as a supporter of the radical secessionist
New Connexion Methodists following the traumatic experience of the loss of a sibling in a horrifying factory fire at Marshall’s flax spinning mill in Holbeck, Leeds, on 13 February 1796. The ‘dreadful conflagration’, which caused the collapse of a wall injuring some twenty workers and killing seven others including Richard’s twelve-year-old brother, Robert, opened a rift between the Oastler family and the Wesleyan superintendent minister the Revd Joseph Benson (1748–1821), who advised burial in the parochial churchyard, which was becoming an increasingly acceptable practice for Nonconformists by the late eighteenth century. In the event the chapel trustees overruled their minister and the young Robert Oastler’s funeral was conducted by a Baptist minister in the Old Boggard chapel burial ground, the first interment at the chapel which defected to the Methodist New Connexion in 1797 thereby undoubtedly strengthening support for the Kilhamite secession in Leeds.

Fires continued to occur with disturbing frequency in textile factories into the nineteenth century, adding to the toll of juvenile casualties. The fire at Thomas Atkinson’s cotton factory at Colne Bridge Mills, Huddersfield, before dawn on the morning of 14 February 1818 was described in the Leeds Mercury as ‘a most destructive and calamitous fire … in which the lives of seventeen female children were lost’. Cotton and carded laps appear to have been ignited from the naked flame of a candle by a young boy sent down to the card room for rovings. Desperate attempts to reach the stranded girls by a ladder to a small upstairs window proved unsuccessful when the roof and floors collapsed and within half an hour ‘the entire building, all the machinery and every article of stock was destroyed’. Of the twenty-six employees at the mill, only nine escaped and the ages of those who perished in the inferno ranged from nine to eighteen. Curiously, Richard Oastler does not appear to have alluded publicly to this terrifying inferno, which must have remained strong in the popular memory of the town when he took up the cause of factory reform. Was this because of the painful memory of his own

personal loss of his brother in the disastrous fire at Holbeck or was it that this fire in a cotton factory fell outside the remit of his current campaign, namely the ending of child labour in the still unregulated worsted mills? The Colne Bridge fire was instrumental in securing the 1819 Factory Act, but this legislation applied only to cotton factories and not the worsted factories of the West Riding. Oastler’s campaign was designed to rectify that omission.

John Halstead of the University of Sheffield provides an in-depth analysis of the factory movement from the grass roots focusing upon the membership, influence and significance of the Huddersfield Short Time Committee until the death of its last surviving member in 1876. Utilising a wide range of sources and employing painstaking detective work he identifies many of the less well-known figures in the movement. Focus on high politics and the drama of the parliamentary campaign has often consigned the Short Time Committees a peripheral role in the movement, but in Halstead’s analysis the Huddersfield Short Time Committee occupies centre stage. Analysis of its composition by age and occupation reveals that a remarkably high proportion of members of the committee were in-comers, illustrating the rapid migration of population into Huddersfield and its hinterland in the first three decades of the nineteenth century. However, relatively fewer of its members than those of the Leeds Short Time Committee were employed in factories since Huddersfield was still more a marketing than a manufacturing centre.

Edward Royle of the University of York in a chapter entitled ‘Press and People: Oastler’s Yorkshire Slavery Campaign, 1830–32’ offers an evaluation of the significance of the campaign which Oastler waged through the Leeds press, in the movement to secure improved factory regulation. He demonstrates how Oastler was able to exploit the rivalries of the Leeds newspaper editors to become one of the most successful newspaper propagandists of his day in both the factory and anti-Poor Law movements. He also reveals how Joshua Hobson, one of the Huddersfield working men who had met Oastler at Fixby Hall in June 1831 to seek his support for the factory movement, became a leading figure in the campaign for the unstamped press through The Voice of the West Riding between the reform struggle of 1830–32 and the rise of Chartism when he published the Northern Star and Leeds General Advertiser, which became the mouthpiece of Feargus O’Connor and the emerging campaign for the People’s Charter after
1837. He records the vivid childhood recollections of the Honley postmistress and local historian, Mary Jagger, of stories of Oastler’s memorable campaign, linking concerns which continued beyond her own day into the twenty-first century ‘with its own experience of child exploitation on a global scale and the continued subjection of the weak to the power of the strong’.  

Janette Martin of the University of Huddersfield focuses upon Richard Oastler’s triumphal entry into Huddersfield in 1844 following his release from prison, which she argues was an event skilfully orchestrated to re-invigorate support for the languishing factory movement not only in its Huddersfield heartland but also much further afield, since reports of the event were widely disseminated. She examines the detailed planning of the carefully staged event and examines its significance within the context of radical demonstrations after Peterloo. She explores Oastler’s reception in his adopted town of Huddersfield, evaluates his use of oratory in gaining public support and examines the significance of the reporting of this later episode both within and beyond Huddersfield. She argues that the demonstration of support for Richard Oastler vindicated his public career as an outspoken critic of factory exploitation and the New Poor Law, given the politically motivated nature of his imprisonment as a result of deteriorating relations with his former employer, Thomas Thornhill.

A concluding chapter by John A. Hargreaves of the University of Huddersfield re-assesses the historical significance of Richard Oastler and challenges the portrayal of Oastler as a quasi-revolutionary demagogue by his twenty-first century biographer, Stewart Angas Weaver. It argues that although Oastler’s oratory was often intemperate in highlighting the injustices of child labour in factories and the inhumane operation of the New Poor Law, occasionally inviting misrepresentation of his motives by his opponents when he appeared to advocate or condone criminality and violence, in reality his rhetoric hardly amounted to a sustained challenge to the state in which ‘he trod


the edges of revolution’ for ‘ten turbulent years’. Indeed, it concludes that he is more aptly characterised as a Tory Radical than as a Revolutionary Tory or even as a Tory humanitarian in his devotion to the preservation of ‘altar, throne and cottage’ and in his opposition to aspects of the new industrial society which he deemed oppressive and of the new political economy of laissez-faire and utilitarianism which he viewed as inhumane.64 This placed him well to the right on the ideological spectrum re-defined by the Jacobinism of the era of the French Revolution, which began to resonate across Europe, and indeed beyond, in the year of Richard Oastler’s birth, stimulating a slave insurrection in the French colony of St Domingue by 1791. It was this Haitian revolt, ignited by the ‘contagion of equality’ released by the French Revolution, James Walvin has argued, which had such a catalytic effect on the embryonic campaign against colonial slavery in Britain.65 This volume of essays offers fresh perspectives on both the anti-slavery movement and the campaign for factory regulation which Oastler insisted was no less relevant to his Yorkshire contemporaries since ‘victims of slavery’ were evident ‘even on the threshold of our homes’.
