What did the Cotton Famine do for Bury?
Susan Browning

Recently some members of the Cottonopolis group visited the Rachel Kay-Shuttleworth Textile Collection at Gawthorpe Hall. For those of us who chose to tour Gawthorpe later we were pleased to discover a connection to the Cotton Famine taking pride of place in the hallway – a large Autotype print (the original oil painting is in Manchester Art Gallery) showing the Central Executive Cotton Famine Relief Committee at its inaugural meeting at Manchester Town Hall in 1861. Each dignitary in that painting is labelled and there, at number 11 was the then current owner of Gawthorpe, Sir James Kay-Shuttleworth the Vice-Chairman of the committee. Other figures connected to Bury in the painting are: John Robinson Kay of Brooksbottom Mill (he was instrumental in the development of the East Lancashire Railway) and the Earl of Derby.

Above: The Central Executive Cotton Famine Relief Committee (based on a design by Frederic James Shields) Albert Goodwin (1845-1932) and Arthur Hughes (1832-1915) Manchester Art Gallery.


Right: Photo of the key to the Autotype shown at Gawthorpe Hall.
The aim of the Relief Committee was to help feed and support cotton operatives who found themselves out of work due to the Cotton Famine. It was a meeting of the great and good and as The Earl of Derby said at the time: ‘such a gathering of rank and wealth and influence as is not often to be witnessed.’¹ Their aim was to manage donations coming in from home and abroad and to distribute relief to the needy. Altogether a total of £1.661,679 was raised by the Central Relief Committee and other charities.²

The Committee stressed that work was important ‘not only for the preservation of public health and order’ but because it provided ‘the right moral guidance’³ for the unemployed cotton operatives.

Robert Rawlinson, an engineer, was appointed to oversee the 1863 Public Works Act whereby Lancashire cotton towns could apply for low cost Government loans to implement their public improvement schemes by employing cotton workers. The Government made available £1,850,000 at 3½% against the rates. In total 13,000 men were employed in public works projects in Lancashire.⁴

Rawlinson mentions in his report that a new cemetery had been built at Bury, and I was interested in why Bury had chosen this particular scheme above others. I found the answer in the 1936 Bury County Borough Directory. The reasoning goes back to the 1840s when Bury and Salford were mentioned in a report on the health of towns:

> It was stated that the town had rapidly increased in population and wealth lately. The situation of the labouring classes appeared to have been much neglected. There was no law to prevent the construction of houses in any form that the builders might choose, and no means of preventing them being so constructed as to be very injurious to health. Want of ventilation and difficulties of cleansing were noted in the alleys and narrow lanes where the poorer classes dwelt. There was neglect of decency, comfort, and cleanliness. The Report recommended a general Building Act, a general Sewage Act, and the creation of a Board of Health in every town.⁵

Following this Sir Robert Peel set up a commission to do the work. The communication which reached Bury in 1845, caused a new committee to be formed which found Bury to be lacking in ‘almost everything that constitutes the comfort and well-being of a well-appointed and well-regulated town.’⁶ In particular the ‘The crowded state of the Parish Churchyard was described as being shocking to decency and propriety, and injurious to health,’⁷ this report cumulated in the Bury Improvement Act of 1845.

In 1863 when the Town Commissioners decided to apply for a loan under the Public Works Act, they were urged to do this by Canon Hornby, the Rector of Bury, who said: ‘they would never again have the opportunity of borrowing money on such easy terms.’ He suggested that as paving and sewering would require skilled men that the town would benefit from a

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¹ Speech by the Earl of Derby quoted in: Shapely, P. (2001), Urban charity, class relations and social cohesion: charitable responses to the Cotton Famine, Urban History, 28, 1, Cambridge University Press p52
² Shapely, P. p53
³ Report of the Executive Committee, September 1862, quoted in Shapely, P.
⁴ Rawlinson, R. (1869) What the Cotton Famine Has Done For Lancashire, Liverpool Daily Post, https://www.gracesguide.co.uk/Robert_Rawlinson:_Cotton_Famine_Relief_WORKS
⁶ The Bury Borough Directory, 1936, XXVII
⁷ The Bury Borough Directory, 1936, XXVI
recreation ground or a cemetery. However, in 1864 the Town Commissioners chose to put two hundred men to work building new drains and sewers, it was after this that the cemetery was started and seventy men worked on its construction. It was finally completed in 1869, some years after the end of the Cotton Famine.

Like many other Lancashire towns Bury indirectly benefited from the cotton famine. Philips Cemetery in Manchester was another built by cotton operatives and the Famine Road in Rochdale is testament to its name. Rawlinson states: ‘between the passing of the Public Works Act and the 28th March, 1868, no less than 703,088 lineal yards or 399½ miles of streets, have been sewered, paved, and provided with flagged side-walks, side-channels, and subsoil drainage. . . public parks have opened in Bolton, Blackburn, Oldham, and Preston; and public cemeteries at Bury, Duckinfield, Manchester, and Macclesfield . . . river improvement . . . notably at Bolton and Bacup.’ Maybe there was some good that came from the Cotton Famine after all.

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8 The Bury Borough Directory, 1936, XXIX
9 Rawlinson, R. (1869) What the Cotton Famine Has Done For Lancashire, Liverpool Daily Post, https://www.gracesguide.co.uk/Robert_Rawlinson:_Cotton_Famine_Relief_Works