Cotton Mills of Greater Manchester

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In 1985 the Royal Commission of the Historical Monuments of England (RCHME) started a survey to assess the historical importance and serious threats that northern textile mills faced in the modern world. Three surveys were published in 1992 and I possess two of them: Greater Manchester and Yorkshire. Although I grew up in Middleton in Manchester, my parents moved to Milnrow on the outskirts of Rochdale, and before that we had spent time walking in the Pennines. So I knew some of the mills referred to in both books. However, to make things easier, this article is about Lancashire cotton mills.

The industry began in the 1780s (yes, it was the industrial revolution!) and rapidly expanded from water-powered sites in the humid atmosphere of the Pennines to huge steam-powered edifices surrounded by a dense urban sprawl of workers housing.

The presence of abundant coal reserves and canals lining the Manchester area to Liverpool allowed the easy import of American cotton in the early 19th century. However, this ceased suddenly during the cotton famine caused by the American Civil War in the 1860s, and Egypt and India became important sources of the raw material.

Some of the oldest existing cotton-spinning mills are in the **Ancoats** area of Manchester, for instance Brownsfield of 1825 and Murrays Old Mill and Decker of 1798-1802, both of which were on the banks of the Rochdale Canal, which provided cooling water for their steam power as well as transport for their raw materials and finished goods. The whole of Ancoats, which has been called *the world's first industrial suburb* is now a conservation area, and the mill buildings have been refurbished. When I was young it was definitely a no-go area.

Brownsfield was built as a 'room and power' mill, where space was leased to individual operators. By the end of the 19th century it was used by a large number of small firms in a wide range of trades. The heavy timber flooring was not fireproof. It had an internal engine house with power transmission via upright drive shafts and line shafts attached to columns. It also had an external combined chimney and stair tower, which is now Manchester's oldest surviving mill chimney.

The **Murrays Mills** complex comprised four multi-storeyed blocks erected in phases between 1798 and 1806. It had 84000 mule spindles and 1300 operatives. The whole complex was also of non-fireproof construction with joisted timber floors supported on slender cast iron crucifix section columns, supporting line shafting from the upright drive shafts. Externally all these early mills had very little embellishment.

The view from the canal shows, right to left, Decker Mill (1802), Old Mill (1798) – a continuous row – Sedgwick Mill (1818-20), and Royal Mill (1912). In the picture below left, they are seem from the other end. On the right below is the back of Decker Mill and Old Mill, with the separate engine house and the remains of the canal basin.

To accommodate the many hundreds of workers, very dense shoddily built cramped back-to-back houses were built, with a very limited number of shared outside privies and water pumps. The whole area became a squalid and insanitary slum. In the 1870s the area was cleared and replaced by terraces of 2- and 3-storey houses with indoor facilities. To celebrate this new found cleanliness, the city council proudly named one of them Sanitary Street (*pictured*). By the 1960s, the residents hated the name and so they suggested that it could be easily fixed by some white paint, which was agreed: so **SANITARY STREET** became **ANITA STREET** !

A free book with more information about the regeneration of the Ancoats area can be downloaded from https://historicengland.org.uk/images-books/publications/ancoats

By the 1880s most new mills were being built in towns such as Oldham where integrated spinning and weaving mills were being replaced by specialised firms who commissioned architects such as Stott & Sons. The mills were often red brick, with ornamental features, which gave them a distinctive appearance. Stair towers often contained a large iron water tank for the mills' sprinkler system. Improvements in floor construction allowed for wide mills which required larger windows and could accommodate wider spinning mules.

Anchor Mill (1881) in Oldham was designed by Joseph Stott. It had an integrated engine house (behind the arched window on the left), an external boiler house next to it, and a freestanding chimney with an anchor motif. It also had a cellar for conditioning finished yarn, and the ground floor included a preparation room at the back of the mill for bale opening and breaking, and carding. This extended beyond the upper floors which housed the spinning mules.

Chadderton Mill (1885) was the first mill designed by Sidney Stott after he left the Stott partnership. Like Anchor Mill, it has very large windows; these were made possible because of the improved fireproof brick arch system for supporting the floors.

All of these were spinning mills; weaving took place either in an adjacent building (as at Facit Mill – *see page 14*) or at another location. A distinctive architecture of single-storey weaving sheds with northern light roofs developed. Looms were much heavier than spinning mules and caused more vibration, so they were usually located at ground level.

Mutual Mills in Heywood is a group of three cotton mills dating from 1884 to 1914 which were built for the Mutual Spinning Co with additional weaving sheds added in 1927 to 1937. They had steel framing and concrete flat roofs, which meant that conversion to residential apartments was a more practical proposition. Such a development by Knight Knox is now under way, as shown in their promotional picture below.

Ellenroad Ring Mill was a cotton spinning mill in Newhey near Rochdale, built as a mule spinning mill in 1890 by Stott and Sons and extended in 1899, but it was destroyed by fire in 1916. When it was rebuilt, it was designed and equipped as a ring spinning mill; the original 4-cylinder triple-expansion horizontal engine by J & W McNaught was rebuilt as a twin tandem which would deliver the extra power required by the increased number of spindles. The flywheel had 44 grooves for ropes which drove the mill through a magnificent rope race 100ft deep and 120ft high, which extended the full length of the mill. It was only a mile from my parents' house in Milnrow and I used to be woken by its steam whistle announcing shift changes!

I deeply regret that I never photographed it as it was demolished in 1982. However, the engine house complete with steam engine and the boiler house and chimney were retained; it is the last complete large spinning mill power plant left intact. Ownership passed to the Ellenroad Trust who restored the steam engine and created a museum; the engine is steamed once a month.