Prologue

On the afternoon of Saturday 11 March 1854, the cotton operatives of Preston marched in their thousands through the rolling countryside of the Darwen valley, south-east of the town. At their head were two bands; just behind the musicians, the vanguard were carrying banners. ‘A Fair Day’s Wage For A Fair Day’s Work’, could be read on one; ‘Peace, Law, And Order’, on another. ‘Cursed Is He That Defraudeth The Labourer Of His Wages’, said a third. The key to the procession was found on a banner inscribed ‘Ten Per Cent And No Surrender’. The marchers had been locked out for almost five months, ever since their employers closed down the mills rather than pay a ten per cent increase in wages. The procession reached the railway station at Hoghton, midway between Preston and Blackburn and in sight of the impressive Tudor ruins of Hoghton Tower, a popular picnic site for day-trippers.

The Preston millhands had come here to reaffirm to the world their solidarity and their determination, and to express their gratitude to the factory operatives of Blackburn, who had been their most loyal supporters during the 21 weeks of the lock-out. The landlord of the Railway Hotel had lent them a meadow for the occasion. Laughing and joking, the operatives filed into the field. Proceedings got under way with a song:

You may see of a truth that the people are not dead,
Though ’twas said that they died long ago;
But we’ve risen from our sleep, a holiday to keep,
Determined to work under price no more.

CHORUS
So we’ve put by the reed-hook and the comb,
And hung up the shuttle on the loom;
And we’ll never be content
’Till we get the ten per cent,
In spite of their let well alone.

Then someone climbed onto an overturned cart to address the crowd. This was John Cheetham, an Oldham man, a veteran Chartist and trade unionist whose turbulent radicalism had brought him into contact with the law on more than one occasion. This time he was calm and composed. ‘Friends,’ he began, ‘we are met here today because a portion of the authorities of Preston have thought fit to prohibit our meetings in the borough. But we intend to keep the peace, and
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have no desire to come in collision with any party. Our object in assembling today is to make known the rights and claims of labour, and I believe this meeting will make a great impression on the country.’

Cheetham stepped down. His place was taken by James Young, another Oldham man, a cardroom hand and Chartist. ‘We are here’, he told an attentive audience, ‘to protest against the injustice, the tyranny, and the oppression which the manufacturers of this country have practised upon their operatives for a great number of years. It is my duty to caution the card-room hands among you to be peaceable and orderly. You must throw nothing in the way of the authorities of Preston to enable them to cause an outbreak or riot.’ This brought an immediate response from the turnouts. Their bitter resentment against the authorities, who had made no secret of their sympathy with the millowners, was tempered by fears of provocation and entrapment. Plain-clothes policemen were active in the town, seeking to lead astray the more impressionable of the operatives. So far they had failed. As the murmurings of the crowd died away, Young continued:

The card-room hands have suffered as much injustice and persecution as any branch of industry upon the face of the earth. Considering the labour we have to perform, and the unhealthy atmosphere in which we are employed, we must be united for the protection of our wages from the avaricious and unprincipled aggressions of capital. I have looked into the statement of wages which the manufacturers of Preston have been paying to their card-room hands. I find individuals working for 6s.6d per week. I find men stripping and grading for 8s. and 9s., when in Ashton, Manchester, Bolton and Oldham they receive 16s. or 12s. for the same labour.

All Lancashire believed wages in Preston to be miserably low, and the cotton operatives of the entire county saw Preston’s cause as their own. Each week they raised £3,000 or more to assist in the struggle. ‘I exhort you’, Young exclaimed, ‘show that you are determined to relieve labour from the thraldom of capital, that you know the rights of labour, and are determined to protect those rights, no matter how great may be the amount of persecution the employing classes bring to bear against you.’ He walked away, to thunderous applause.

Next on the impromptu rostrum was James Waddington, a Preston weaver, who had been deeply involved in the campaign since October. He was soon to be arrested for his part in frustrating the millowners’ plans to import blackleg labour. ‘We have been struggling for the ten per cent for 29 weeks’, he declared, ‘and our ardour is not in the least diminished. This vast assembly indicates the firmness of our determination to carry out the object in view.’ The crowd roared its approval. They began the struggle back in the summer of 1853, and it was a rash of small strikes in August which precipitated the lock-out. ‘When I look round upon the thousands and tens of thousands who have walked five or six miles to be present here’, Waddington continued, ‘it tells me that the sooner the manufacturers of Preston give the ten per cent, the better it will be for all parties.’ He was forced to pause until the cheering subsided. ‘During the last week or two, the manufacturers have been trying to dampen the spirits of the
people of Preston. They have been importing people from the south, from Ireland, and from all parts of the country where they could find a union bastille and where they could persuade the guardians to turn the people out.’ Since the end of February the masters had travelled as far afield as Bradford and Belfast recruiting ‘knobsticks’ from the workhouses, those hated symbols of the New Poor Law. ‘The papers tell us that Horrockses have 900 hands at work’, Waddington remarked, to cries of ‘Eh?’ and ‘It’s a lie!’ ‘But I know that Mr Miller is dissatisfied with what he has, but does not know how to get rid of them. All I regret is, that the masters do not have 900 apiece of such hands.’ Thomas Miller was the proprietor of Horrockses and Miller, the largest firm in Preston. He was chairman of the masters’ association, and the operatives’ most bitter enemy. But the knobsticks were inexperienced and incompetent; they presented no threat. ‘While this is going on’, Waddington said, to renewed cheering, ‘our committee have removed a larger number of skilled hands than ever, and five of these are worth more than fifty of such as the associated masters have brought into the town.’

Waddington was unable to go on, for the air was again full of music. The Blackburn operatives were arriving, marching behind their banners and with three bands at their head. They had won the ten per cent back in the summer, and had been at work in the mills all morning. Their arrival was greeted by deafening cheers, which all but drowned the music. Not to be outdone by the newcomers, the Preston bands started up in competition, and a friendly but energetic contest began between the rival musicians. Speakers waiting to address the meeting stood by helplessly, and were forced to rush and seize the instruments before proceedings could continue. By now the crowd was so vast that many were beyond the reach of any speaker’s voice, and turned instead to dancing and other amusements.

One of the Blackburn contingent stood up to compliment the people of Preston on their strict observance of peace, law and order. No great orator, he made way for the young Stockport weaver, Luke Wood. Still in his mid-twenties, Wood was already a seasoned campaigner, having played a prominent role in the successful ten per cent strike in his home town in the previous year. ‘During the Stockport strike,’ he recalled, ‘the people of Blackburn assembled on Rishton Moor. That meeting had its effect in the proper quarter, and I have no doubt this meeting will have its effect in the proper quarter too.’ Wood stepped down, not knowing that he too would be arrested within a fortnight. His place was taken by Robert Worswick of Padiham, who told the enthusiastic crowd:

I regard this monster meeting as a demonstrative proof that the working classes feel that their employers have for years been infringing the rights of labour. That you have walked six miles to be present shows the interest you take in this movement. I believe that if you had had 20 miles to walk instead of six, you would not have stayed away. This shows that the noble-hearted men and women of Preston are not going to act the part of a Judas and sell the interests of the working classes of this country. I believe that you are resolved that, rather than succumb, you will die groaning ‘Ten Per Cent, and No Surrender’.
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The Prestonians roared their approval. Until recently they had been scorned by operatives in other towns as docile and cowardly, willing to accept low wages and drag down the living standards of more militant districts. This time, they had decided, it would be different.

Wallace Beever, from the township of Brooksbottom, near Bury, was the next to speak. ‘I have been informed’, he told them, ‘that the reason the Blackburn people were late in their arrival is that, after leaving work, they stopped to pay in their subscriptions for Preston.’ So they had, to the tune of £660. ‘I admire them for their foresight’, he continued, ‘and I hope the Prestonians will take encouragement from the generous spirit thus manifested towards them. And the people of Blackburn tell me that if you want more money, you have only to ask and you shall have it.’ Great cheering greeted this news, and heralded the final speaker.

This was Mortimer Grimshaw, the Thunderer of Lancashire. The son of a notable radical active in the early years of the century, Grimshaw had once been himself a weaver. He was now a full-time agitator, whose rhetorical skills were renowned throughout the county. He, too, would soon run foul of the law. ‘We are assembled today’, he commenced his powerful harangue, ‘to reinaugurate the labour movement. I believe it is possible now, not only to concentrate the veritable working classes of this country into one mighty union, but to enrol under our banners all who depend on wages for a livelihood.’ This allusion to the Chartist Ernest Jones’s ambitious plans for a great ‘Mass Movement’, co-ordinating strikes across the length and breadth of the kingdom, was endorsed by many in the audience. ‘It has been declared to the world that this is a question of mastership’, Grimshaw said, referring now to the views of the Preston manufacturers. They regarded trade unions as a form of dictation, and considered claims for wage increases to be an unwarranted interference with the conduct of their businesses. ‘This assertion is without foundation’, he declared. ‘We have no desire whatever to manage or control the affairs of the employers. All we want is the right to live by our labour, to be paid that which is our due, to enter the mills free men and women, so long as we are prepared to do our duty as workpeople. What we claim is the right to be masters of ourselves, to resist all petty tyranny and oppression, to hold the right of private judgement, and to speak the free sentiments of our minds. And so far we intend to be masters.’ This brought renewed cheering. ‘Men and women of Lancashire! Now is the time to free yourselves from the iron grasp of your oppressors. I ask the Blackburnians: is Preston to be subdued for want of your money?’ The Blackburn operatives responded at once. ‘No; methinks I hear the whole of Lancashire exclaiming that the operatives of Preston must never be allowed to go in short of the full ten per cent.’

Grimshaw stepped down from the platform, to tumultuous applause. It was now six o’clock. The light was fading fast, and the cold March wind had begun to whistle through the bare branches of the trees. The meeting ended in good heart. Led by their bands, the operatives of Preston and Blackburn set off for
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home. Participants in one of the greatest industrial battles of their generation, they would return to Hoghton in even greater numbers next day, and would continue the struggle for another seven weeks before admitting defeat.¹
1 Industry and Unions

In eighteen forty-seven, my boys
    I am sorry for to say,
They took from us the ten per cent,
    Without so much delay
And now we want it back again,
    Our masters in a pout,
Said they would not grant it us,
    So we’re everyone locked out.

In the 1720s, Defoe described Preston as a fine town. ‘Here’s no manufacture,’ he writes, ‘the town is full of attorneys, proctors and notaries.’¹ Half a century or so later, Preston remained a ‘beautiful town, built of brick . . . with neat streets and fine walks’, but as Rev. William MacRitchie noted, cotton had become the principal industry.² When Eric Svedenstierna, the Swedish industrial spy, visited Preston in 1802–3 he considered it to be one of the ‘most considerable [of] several manufacturing towns in Northern Lancashire’.³ And by 1821 Marmaduke Tulket reckoned it had grown into the second largest ‘emporium for the cotton spinning and manufacturing businesses’.⁴ William Cobbett, who stood as Preston’s radical candidate in the 1826 election,⁵ never visited the town during his northern tours of 1830 and 1832 and although he recollects the ‘pretty girls . . . who spit upon the “individual” of the Derby family’,⁶ he passes no comment on the growth of industry of the town itself. By the early 1840s though, Preston was ‘conspicuous . . . for the prosperity of its trade and manufacture’,⁷ and for the growth of its working population. In 1801 Preston’s population was 12,174. It had more than doubled by 1821 and between 1831 and 1841 grew on average 5% per annum. In 1841 the population stood at 50,887 and by 1851 it had increased a further 37% to 69,542.⁸

This rapid increase in population, in a town which in 1851 measured one and a half miles from east to west and one mile from north to south, predictably created living conditions significantly different from those observed by Defoe a century or more earlier. The spacious and elegant living of the attorneys, proctors and notaries had now largely given way to a town overcrowded with factory operatives, living in appalling conditions. When Engels toured England in the early 1840s, he noted that nearly all Lancashire towns:
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of thirty, fifty, seventy to ninety thousand inhabitants, are almost wholly working-people’s districts, interspersed only with factories, a few thoroughfares lined with shops and a few lanes along which the gardens and houses of the manufacturers are scattered like villas. The towns themselves are badly and irregularly built with foul courts, lanes and back alleys, reeking of coal smoke, and especially dingy from the originally bright red brick, turned black with time . . . Cellar dwellings are general here; wherever it is in any way possible, these subterranean dens are constructed, and a very considerable portion of the population dwells in them.9

That Preston’s death rate at this time was alleged to have been the highest in the United Kingdom10 merely confirms Engels’s view that Preston was one of the most squalid towns he had visited.

The changing conditions within Preston can be explained entirely by the growth of the cotton industry. In the mid eighteenth century cotton products were a mixture of linen warp and cotton weft — known as fustian — and were produced by domestic workers who worked up the material distributed by merchants and fustian manufacturers. At this time a considerable proportion of the population of Lancashire, the West Riding and Cheshire were dependent upon the textile trade, although many were able to supplement earnings — and perhaps the quality of life — by working on the land. Children usually prepared and cleaned the raw cotton whilst the women spun the yarn on a hand-wheel and the men wove the cotton on the loom. The productivity of spinning was generally low and one weaver often required four spinners to be kept regularly employed. With the invention of Kay’s flying shuttle, which had become widely adopted in the 1760s, the unbalance between weaving and spinning became more serious and yarn consequently scarce. This shortage was gradually overcome as the spinning inventions of Hargreaves, Arkwright and Crompton were taken up in the 1770s and 1780s. Unlike the woollen industry, which hitherto had been England’s staple textile trade, cotton was more susceptible to technological change of this kind. Demand for light tough washable fabrics increased with changing tastes and with the growth of markets in warmer parts of the trading world. The supply of raw cotton was also more responsive and it increased rapidly when the invention of the cotton gin encouraged the development of plantations in North America. Compared with wool, cotton was a tough pliable material and less likely to break when twisted and attenuated by the actions of the early machines.11 These technical and market advantages soon made cotton Britain’s premier manufacturing industry and by 1802, in terms of value added, cotton had outpaced the woollen industry. In 1815 cotton exports were valued at £28.3m (40% of British exports) and by 1850 the value of cotton exports reached £71.4m.12

This expansion coincided with several significant changes within the industry: the emergence of factory production; the relocation of production from rural to urban areas; further technological change; and an increasingly large proportion of the labour force divorced from owning the means of production.13
Ten Per Cent and No Surrender

The growth of factories in the late eighteenth century was fairly rapid, although domestic production and mechanical power were not mutually exclusive. Water wheels provided most of the power and the early jennies and hand mules were largely employed in small workshops in rural areas. After the cancellation of Arkwright’s patent in 1785 the water-frame spread through the industry and spinning emerged as a factory process. Of the 900 factories known to exist in 1797, 300 were roller spinning on the Arkwright frame and 600 were mule spinning.\textsuperscript{14} Mule factories were generally smaller, but by 1812 were the most significant in terms of spindles: 4m mule spindles, compared with 300 water-frames and 155,000 jenny spindles. Steam power at this time was still in its infancy, and did not begin to overtake water as the major source of power until the late 1820s, when factories were increasingly located in urban areas.\textsuperscript{15} In the early 1820s a 60hp cotton mill was considered large and, since a Pennine stream could generate up to 400hp,\textsuperscript{16} country mills in Lancashire disappeared slowly.\textsuperscript{17} By 1838, though, 1,819 cotton factories employed some 1,641 steam engines with a total horse-power of 46,826. Sixty-five per cent of these factories were concentrated on the Lancashire coalfields and only 1.1% of the total horse-power was provided by water.

On the weaving side of the industry, the factory system was slow to develop, even though weaving was, in the early nineteenth century, the single largest manufacturing sector in the British economy.\textsuperscript{18} Occasionally, large handloom manufacturers employed more operatives than the factory spinning lords,\textsuperscript{19} and handloom weaving sheds, which represented the transitional stage between the domestic system and power driven weaving, often had upwards of 20 handlooms.\textsuperscript{20} But these relatively large concerns accounted only for a small proportion of the industry’s output. Most output was still organized on the traditional putting out system, where production was largely unmechanized and where weavers worked up the cloth in their own homes. In the 1790s approximately 180,000 were employed in this way, and although Cartwright had invented the power loom in 1795 it was slow to be taken up; labour was abundant and the skills required for weaving plain cloth easily learnt, whilst the capital cost of a pair of looms was as low as £5. Consequently, with technological change in the spinning sector displacing labour, and with the increased demand for cotton goods raising relative wages, labour from agriculture and other textile trades such as wool, linen and sailcloth began to move into weaving. Technological change in the weaving sector was not profitable until the 1820s and even then was adopted by manufacturers only when the economy was in an expansionary phase, as in 1823–5 and 1833–5. In 1819 only 14–15,000 power looms were in operation.\textsuperscript{21} By 1830 the number had increased to 80,000 and although there were still 225,000 handloom weavers,\textsuperscript{22} many of these, especially in urban areas, were increasingly specializing in fancy goods, that part of the trade where power looms had yet to make any impression. Investment in power looms came almost exclusively from spinning masters, who already had power supplies,
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factory space, experienced mechanics and managerial expertise to tend the now more technically developed machines. The relative decline in spinning profits after 1835 also induced spinners to integrate the weaving process and explains why power looms were first located outside of the old weaving districts of northern Lancashire.

The introduction of power loom weaving and the steady, but slow, diffusion of the new self-acting spinning technology in the 1830s brought a change in the structure of the industry. Before the 1820s, spinning factories and weaving sheds were generally quite separate, but once spinning masters began investing in the power loom, firms increasingly combined both processes on the same site. Between 1825 and 1840 integrated firms grew rapidly and were only checked by the inability of power looms to work fine yarn and by the increased export of yarn after 1832. By 1841 approximately one-third of Lancashire cotton factories were of the combined type. Of the 975 firms operating in 1841, 321 combined spinning and weaving; 470 spun coarse yarn; 80 fine yarn; and 104 manufactured cloth on the power loom. By 1850, the zenith of the integrated firm, 38% of Lancashire firms were combined and these employed 81.8% of the total number of looms, 55.7% of the total number of spindles and 62.6% of the industry’s labour force.

This process of vertical integration tended to alter the ratio of fixed and working capital, and increased the absolute level of investment. Combined firms were on average larger than single-process firms and generally employed more labour, machinery and steam power. Estimates for a large mill in the 1780s and 1790s indicated a cost of £5,000, whereas in the 1830s a large combined firm could cost anything up to £80,000. In 1841 the total fixed capital employed in spinning and weaving in Lancashire amounted to £14.6m, an average of £15,000 per firm. But large firms did not dominate the industry, which remained competitive throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. Barriers to entry were low and the small and medium single-process firms retained their numerical dominance in the market. In fact the distribution of assets between small and large firms remained much the same as it had been at the end of the Napoleonic wars. In a period when partnership and family connections ensured that ownership and control went hand in hand, there were obvious managerial and financial limits to growth, and large firms rarely expanded to employ more than 1,000 operatives. Economies of large scale production in the industry were often uncertain, and efficiency depended on the speed with which new technology was adopted, rather than the size of the firm itself. Up to the 1850s, and possibly beyond, small and large combined and single-process firms happily co-existed. In 1850 the representative spinning factory in Lancashire operated 11,800 spindles and employed 108 hands. In weaving the representative firm operated 163 power looms with 100 hands, whilst the representative combined firm operated 330 looms and 17,800 spindles, and employed 310 operatives.
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The changing nature of the cotton industry was reflected in the growth of Preston, which by 1851 was essentially a single-industry town. In the eighteenth century Preston was an important market town comparatively isolated from the growing industrial enclaves of Lancashire. Located at the lowest bridge point on the Ribble, it developed as a centre of communications and as a base for distributing the agricultural products of the Fylde. Linen was the staple manufacture, and although it progressed in the late seventeenth century it never developed into an industry of any importance. In the eighteenth century Preston remained a sleepy administrative and aristocratic town. Nor was this somnolent atmosphere greatly disturbed by the building of the first cotton mill in 1777 by Messrs Collinson and Watson. Preston did not begin to develop as a cotton town until John Horrocks erected his Yard Factory in 1792. According to one local historian this unquestionably ‘gave the chief impetus, which, in little more than half a century, converted the quiet aristocratic town, of about 6,000 or 7,000 inhabitants, into a busy hive of industry’. Indeed, within the next ten years another four spinning mills were erected; two by Horrocks (1796, 1797), one by Messrs Ainsworth & Co. (1796) and one by Messrs Riley & Paley (1802). In 1799 the House of Correction was converted for this purpose.

The Napoleonic wars, which increased demand, and technological change, which progressively reduced the price of cotton goods, clearly explain the increase in the number of cotton mills built in towns such as Ashton, Stockport, Oldham, Burnley and Blackburn, but the growth in Preston was relatively slow. By 1802 only seven mills were in operation. Undoubtedly cotton was a coming trade, but, as Dr Aikin observed in 1795, Preston was mainly ‘a sort of mart for the Lancashire linens, and sheetings are still sold here; but of late the cotton branches have obtained possession’. Most of this change was due to John Horrocks, who by 1811 operated possibly the greatest number of spindles (100–110,000) in the world, and by 1816 the firm employed 7,000 hands. Horrocks, who died in 1804 leaving £150,000, was in fact the cotton industry in Preston.

After the Napoleonic wars the natural geographical advantages of Preston became more important. Situated on the edge of the Fylde, Lancashire’s main agricultural district, local manufacturers were provided with an abundant supply of cheap labour which kept wages down. Since labour costs constituted roughly 30% of total expenses of production, Preston manufacturers gained an unearned competitive advantage. With the onset of the agricultural depression after 1813 and with wheat prices falling almost continuously to 1835, the movement of rural migrants into urban areas intensified. In 1851 70% of Preston’s adult population came from outside its boundaries and 40% of these from places less than ten miles distant. As Preston concentrated on the production of coarse low quality cotton goods, the inflow of an untrained agricultural labour force did not pose serious problems with regard to learning new skills. The ready supply of cheap food also enabled manufacturers to keep money wages down,