MARSHALLS OF LEEDS
FLAX-SPINNERS
1788–1886
JOHN MARSHALL

Portrait by John Russell, 1802, in the University of Leeds.
MARSHALLS OF LEEDS
FLAX-SPINNERS
1788-1886

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TO THE MEMORY OF MY FATHER
# CONTENTS

*List of Illustrations*  
*Preface*  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>John Marshall’s Inheritance</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>Making a Fortune, 1788–1815</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>Gentleman Flax-Spinner, 1815–1826</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td>Wet Spinning, 1826–1846</td>
<td>162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td>The Final Phase, 1846–1886</td>
<td>228</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Appendix  Production and Capital: Tables and Figures*  

*Genealogical Table of Marshall of Leeds*  

*This table is available for download from www.cambridge.org/9780521168328*

*Bibliography*  

*Index*
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

PLATES

(Portrait by John Russell, 1802, in the University of Leeds)

I Jane Marshall. facing page 68
(Portrait by John Russell, 1802, in the University of Leeds)

II Hallsteads and Derwent Island. facing page 99
(Photograph of Hallsteads by G. P. Abraham Ltd, Keswick)

FIGURES

1 Diagram of Marshall’s mills in Water Lane, Leeds page 35
2 North and south views of the mills in Marshall Street, c. 1850 204
3 Cartoon: the mill-owners of Derwent Island seizing the profits of the Water Lane and Castle Foregate mills 283
4 Water Lane mills: output of yarn, 1806–84 307
5 Water Lane mills: spindles and looms, 1793–1884 307
6 Water Lane mills: consumption of flax, 1806–83 308
7 Water Lane mills: labour-force, 1806–46 308
8 Water Lane mills: (a) average profit or loss per bundle of yarn and thread, 1806–83, (b) total trading-profit or loss, 1794–1886 309
9 Water Lane mills: average price and cost per bundle of yarn, 1810–83 309
10 Water Lane mills: average cost of flax, labour and overheads per bundle of yarn, 1810–83 310
11 Water Lane mills: fixed and circulating capital, 1793–1870 310
12 Water Lane mills: annual spending on fabric and plant, 1806–85 311
PREFACE

Less than twenty years after the erection of the first cotton-mills, efforts were being made to spin flax by similar machinery. Foremost amongst these pioneers was John Marshall of Leeds, a young man of twenty-three. When he died at the age of eighty in 1845, an obituary writer described him as ‘one of those men to whom England owes so much of its commercial pre-eminence’. Since the outbreak of the French war in 1793, Marshall and Co. had been the largest spinners in the trade and the founder himself became a millionaire. This achievement places Marshall alongside other outstanding businessmen of that age, and in many respects he overshadows a fellow-townsman, Benjamin Gott, who pioneered the factory production of woollen cloth.

Recent business histories, particularly those relating to textile firms, have dealt with large concerns which outlive the nineteenth century and adapt themselves to the different conditions of the twentieth century. Anyone who has sampled directories knows that such firms are a rarity. Consequently a view of industrial development derived from such exceptional cases often appears to differ from assessments based on a wider analysis of the industry or economy. Because so many studies at the particular level of the firm do not reflect general trends, it is time that business historians restored the balance by examining firms which decayed and passed out of existence. Marshall and Co. provides such a case-study. Forty years after the founder’s death, his grandsons closed the great flax mills and retired from business. And, although its size and position in the trade prevents Marshall and Co. from qualifying as a representative firm, its demise provides an opportunity to find out why one big firm fell by the wayside, an industrial dinosaur of the Darwinian Age.

This account of the business activities of a Yorkshire family over three generations is based on a dozen private ledgers and stock books, a few score letters, and a bundle of notebooks. Much of this material has been severely mutilated, probably by a member of the family who set about the task of writing the firm’s history at the close of the
Preface

nineteenth century with a pair of scissors. None of the routine records generated in running a large business—order-books, wage-books, journals, day-books—survive; and, because the family’s numerous houses have passed into other hands, not many domestic records have been discovered, though more may yet come to light.

With such evidence relating chiefly to the family as businessmen, and covering for the most part the years 1806–46, it did not seem possible to attempt anything more than an analysis of various facets of the firm in turn—its markets, finance, machinery, mills and partnership arrangements. This proved a convenient way of arranging the material. But the result—a loosely connected set of essays—was disappointing. It was not only discontinuous, but such an arrangement also skirted many problems central to the understanding of a firm. Finance, machinery, labour were not important in themselves but assumed significance only when related together over time and viewed as the result of a businessman’s effort or lack of it. Continuity lay not in the firm’s buildings or products (some of which still survive in other hands), but in the activity of its owners who had a great deal of power to control what happened. The firm’s history thus appeared to consist of a description of the interaction between the businessmen involved and their environment—their workpeople, the townsfolk of Leeds, customers, landowners of the Lake District and politicians at Westminster. By narrating such relationships, concentrating on those which seemed important at particular times, one tries to understand and perhaps convey something of a businessman’s search for betterment and advantage in the nineteenth century.

Despite the shortcomings of the records, my aim was to write a narrative account of Marshall and Co. What may sometimes seem a preoccupation with certain episodes will often reflect the distribution of the evidence. Beyond that, two specific limitations require explaining. An account of Marshall’s mill at Castle Foregate, Shrewsbury appears in the Transactions of the Shropshire Archaeological Society, volume lvi, and only passing reference is made to it here. Second, John Marshall’s political activities have not been dealt with at length despite their relevance because Mr H. Fairhurst has already studied them in detail on the basis of newspaper sources and
Preface

will, I trust, soon make his findings available. Revision at this stage might improve some details and perhaps lead to a change of emphasis at certain points. But it would be more rewarding to investigate flax-spinning in centres other than Leeds in greater detail and examine the social adjustments of many more mill-owners. However, such a task is beyond my immediate purpose and would require a different type of book.

I am indebted to many people for assistance. The late Mr D. Marshall deposited records relating to his great-grandfather’s mills in the Brotherton Library at Leeds University; the Editors of the Thoresby Society encouraged me to undertake this task; Mr and Mrs G. Ferrier kindly allowed me to consult material at Derwent Island, Keswick; and I was fortunate in being able to draw on the memories of Miss C. Marshall and Professor T. H. Marshall. I wish to thank those who read all or part of the text, and suggested improvements: Mr D. M. Joslin, Mr P. M. Sheard, Mr D. Sargan at an early stage, and later Mr C. H. Wilson and Professor Asa Briggs. The graphs were carefully drawn by two members of the Thoresby Society, Mr W. H. Connett and Mr M. S. Dougill; Mr F. Smith compiled the index; and I am grateful to Mrs B. Bardgett and Mrs E. Smith for typing the text. Professor A. J. Brown generously helped towards the inevitable and sometimes daunting burden of costs. And finally, I must thank my wife and Mr H. J. Hagedorn: the former for considerable indulgence in allowing the ghosts of past Marshalls to live with us and for helping with the more tedious tasks; the latter for stimulating criticism and warm friendship.

The University of Leeds
14 June 1957

W. G. R.