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**WOMEN TEXTILE WORKERS IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY:  
AN ORAL HISTORY OF THE HUDDERSFIELD WOOLLEN  
DISTRICT 1930-1990**

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## **Abstract**

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Huddersfield Woollen District 1930-1990

Women, woollen textiles, oral history, Huddersfield, twentieth century.

By using oral history as the primary research method, the aim of this thesis is to document and analyse the experiences of women woollen textile workers in the mid-twentieth century. The thesis contains a critique of oral history as a research method in general and the feminist practice of oral history in particular. In order to locate the women in the study in a particular place, there is description of the development and eventual collapse of the woollen textile industry in the Huddersfield area of West Yorkshire.

Tape recorded interviews were carried out with 17 women. The key findings from their experiences fall into two main areas. The first relates to the experiences the women describe about the daily routine within the woollen mill, especially for new recruits and the tasks they had which were unconnected with their job. The second relates to the descriptions of the actions the women took during the collapse of the industry.

This thesis contributes to the wider body of work on working class women and offers original insights into the experiences of women who worked in an industry which has all but disappeared.

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## **Introduction**

The woollen textile industry, which was prevalent in the West Riding of Yorkshire until the 1970s and with which I grew up, has all but disappeared. The textile mills have been demolished or converted into residential, office or retail accommodation. In its heyday the textile industry employed thousands of women. The aim of this study is to ask 'What was it like to be a woman working in the woollen textile industry in Huddersfield during the mid-twentieth century?' The study will look at both their working and domestic lives and how the two impacted on each other.

This study describes the experiences of women who worked in the textile industry in West Yorkshire between 1930 and the 1990s. It encompasses both good and bad times for the industry and crucially covers the transition between the times of full employment in the 1960s to the collapse of the industry in the 1970s. It explores the fate of the women following the collapse of the textile industry and the strategies they implemented to continue working in textiles and to use their skills.

The study will document and analyse the experiences of women textile workers which will be contextualised in three key ways. Firstly, within a historiography of the industry in the Huddersfield area and the gendering of jobs in textiles, secondly, a critique of the genre of oral history and thirdly, a discussion of the

feminist practice of oral history. The study will locate the experiences of the women interviewed in a specific time and place.

The findings from my interviews with the women are shown in Chapter 3 along with my analysis and contextualisation with the work of other commentators. I believe there are two main areas in this study which demonstrate original findings. The first relates to the experiences the women describe about the daily routine within the woollen mill, especially for new recruits, and the tasks they had to perform which were unconnected with their job. The second relates to the descriptions of the actions the women took during the collapse of the industry. The women's agency in capitalising on their skills and making the most of any opportunities which arose in this time of uncertainty is a testament to their resourcefulness and resilience, traits highlighted by Chinn (1988) in his study urban poor women. Chinn found that the majority of women in his study, no matter how downtrodden by poverty, pregnancies, childbirth and hard work, refused to be rejected, defeated or dispirited.

This study contributes to the wider body of work on working class women and offers original insights into the experiences of women who worked in a textile industry which has all but disappeared. Their contribution should not go unrecorded and unacknowledged and I believe this thesis plays a small part in that acknowledgement.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Background to the Study**

There are two key drivers for researching and writing this thesis. The first is that it is culturally important to me to record something which was such a large part of my heritage before all trace of it is gone. The second is that tens of thousands of women worked in the woollen textile industry during the period covered in this study and they made a massive contribution to both the local and national economy and I wanted to document and honour the lives and experiences of those women whose work contributed to its success for many years. As part of this process, I wanted to record the women's individual stories. Even though they are bound together by working in the same industry at the same time, the women's lives have still been unique. By using oral testimony for my primary research, I was able to ask the questions I wanted the answers to, and also to experience a connection to the past through the interviews. An extensive literature search has revealed that there is very little published work on this particular group of workers in this industry at this time and I believe the original findings in this thesis provide a valuable addition to the existing work on women industrial workers. The gaps in the existing literature informed the questions I wanted to ask the women interviewed. These questions focused on eliciting their individual experiences in starting work in the textile industry, the day to day routine of the job and also managing homes and childcare whilst working.

Oral testimony was chosen as the primary research method for this study as I wanted to give the women an individual voice. Using oral testimony has several strengths. Firstly, it offers access to material not available in any other form. As stated previously, there is very little published work on this group of women and in order to complete my research I had to go directly to the primary source. Secondly, this group are mainly 'hidden from history', (Rowbotham, 1989) working class women who are not particularly well represented individually in documented records. As I was interested in not only the women's working lives but also their domestic lives, by using oral testimony and asking specific questions during the interviews, I was able to find out about both and also how the two spheres impacted on each other. Thirdly, written sources have traditionally combined the experiences of groups such as women and the individual voice is lost. By using oral testimony their individual experiences could be heard. Fourthly, oral testimony is particularly well suited to conveying sensory experiences. The textile industry and particularly textile mills are alive with very specific sounds, smells, textures and actions. Some of the women conveyed complicated procedures to me using hand gestures as well as words. The very nature of mending relies on touch as well as sight and by using oral testimony I was able to get a clearer sense of what it was like to work in the industry. I believe that the central research question of 'What was it like to be a woman working in the woollen textile industry in Huddersfield during the mid-twentieth century?' exploits the strengths of oral testimony which is why it is the most appropriate method to use for this thesis. The gathering and interpretation of oral

testimony is, however, not without its pitfalls and these are discussed and reflected on in Chapter 2.

To contextualise my original research, the academic literature in the field of oral history of working class women in the twentieth century has been reviewed. This includes work by Elizabeth Roberts, Joanna Bornat and Claire Langhamer. Alongside this I reviewed oral testimony about working class life in the early to mid-twentieth century published by community history groups such as the Shipley Community History Group (no date) and Holmfirth Friend to Friend group (no date). I looked at the written transcripts of women textile workers who were interviewed as part of the Bradford Heritage Recording Unit project which are kept in the Bradford City Library. The Bradford Heritage Recording Unit (BHRU) was set up in 1983 by Bradford Metropolitan District Council and the Manpower Services Commission. Its main aim was to capture, by tape recorded interviews and photographs, the memories, reflections, contemporary attitudes and experiences of Bradford people of all ages, classes and ethnic origin. The original project was to concentrate on an oral history of textiles and ethnic diversity in the city, before its scope was broadened to include a wider area of Bradford life and work. Another resource was *Huddersfield Mill Memories* (2004) by Vivian Teasdale . This book contains the oral testimony of men and women who worked in the textile industry in Huddersfield in the same time period covering this study. Teasdale does not, however, contextualise, reference or analyse the testimony and it is therefore a similar resource to that of the BHRU.

Elizabeth Roberts has written two oral histories of working class women, covering the period 1890 to 1970, *A Woman's Place*, (1984) and *Women and Families*, (1995a). Both focus on the lives and experiences of women who lived and worked in urban North Lancashire. Of the women interviewed, the ones who worked were mainly employed as factory hands in the cotton mills or engineering. There were similarities and differences between the findings in this study and Roberts'. As an example of a similarity, the women in both our studies had little choice about where they would work on leaving school. This decision was taken by their parents. One of the major differences between our findings was that the women in my study claim to have enjoyed working in the textile industry, whereas the women in Roberts' study did not.

Joanna Bornat's work covers two areas of relevance to this study. The first is oral history testimony gathered from women in the same geographical area of Huddersfield from women a generation earlier than those in this study. The second is about the practice of oral history itself and the effect it has on both the interviewer and interviewee. In 'Home and Work: A New Context for Trade Union History' (1977), Bornat describes the practice of 'tipping up' – handing over all wages to the family purse – which I found in my study. Her reflection on the effect 'doing' oral history has on both participants in 'Remembering and Reworking Emotions: The Reanalysis of Emotion in an Interview' (2010) resonated with my experiences. I too felt recognition that there was more going on for both of us than just questions and answers. On occasions I could see a

woman analysing and reflecting on what had happened in the past during our interview.

Claire Langhamer's book *Women's Leisure in England 1920-1960* (2000) offers a feminist perspective on what women did in their leisure time as well as what women understood to be 'leisure' and draws on oral sources for this work. Again there were similarities and differences between our findings. In her study Langhamer found that the majority of young women identified going to the pictures as their favoured leisure activity. In contrast the women in mine favoured dancing. One area of similarity was that women in this period did not really frequent public houses.

To inform my primary research, I reviewed the literature on the practice of oral history in general and the feminist approach to oral history in particular. *The Oral History Reader* (1998) by Perks and Thomson is a key text and through contributions from the prominent practitioners of the genre, describes the development of oral history and the impact it had during the second half of the twentieth century and discusses how oral history challenges existing orthodoxies about historical sources. In addition, work by Peniston-Bird (2009), Quinlan (2011) and Armitage (2011) expands on the main debates about the approach and practice of gathering and the interpretation of oral testimony are laid out. Another important text is Paul Thompson's *Voice of the Past* (2000). This work confronts the question of the reliability of oral testimony head on by comparing it

with documentary evidence. Thompson discusses the problem of subjectivity and the unreliability of memory and gives advice on interpreting oral testimony. In Gluck and Patai's book *Women's Words, The Feminist Practice of Oral History* (1991), the contributors provide the ideology behind a feminist approach to taking oral testimony from other women. Abrams (2010) provides a sense of the continuing debates about the feminist practice of oral history, as well as the solutions which have been devised by different practitioners to confront the problems they encountered during the collection and interpretation of women's oral testimony. A critique of the theory and practice of oral history and how my approach to gathering the testimony for this study was formed is found in Chapter 2.

In order to locate the women in my study within the wider context of textile history, this thesis begins with a description of the development of the woollen textile industry in the Huddersfield area and the role of women within it. This historiography continues up to the collapse of the industry in the 1970s, a time when some of the women in this study were employed in the industry. Work by Pinchbeck (1977), Haigh (1992) and Heaton (1965), shows how the industry developed and how the method of production moved from a domestic setting to the factory. Whilst Busfield (1988) explains how women, who were equal partners during domestic production, were side-lined and subordinated when the textile industry moved to factory production. An overview of Huddersfield's radical past is provided and the development of trade unions within the textile

industry and women's contribution is charted. Key texts by Laybourn (1977) and Lewenhak (1977) on trade unions were consulted but provided no specific insights on the period and geographical area under consideration for this study. Commentators such as Davis (1993), Bornat (1986) and Drake (1984) increased my understanding of the textile trade unions and women textile workers.

The findings from my interviews with the women are shown in Chapter 3 along with my analysis and contextualisation with the work of other commentators. I believe there are two main areas in this study which demonstrate original findings. The first relates to the experiences the women describe about the daily routine within the woollen mill, especially for new recruits and the tasks they had which were unconnected with their job. The second relates to the descriptions of the actions the women took during the collapse of the industry.

### **The Role of Women in the Development of the Woollen Textile Industry in Huddersfield**

This section charts the rise and decline of the woollen textile industry in Huddersfield and details the current position. It provides the essential context for my findings through the interviews with women in my primary research. It examines the jobs women carried out in textiles and how they were gendered.

It is recorded as far back as the Middle Ages, but is probably the case even before then, that women have been part of the production process in textile manufacture, and that within the textile industry their contribution was of greater importance than in any other trade. (Pinchbeck, 1977, p.111.) They performed heavy manual labour as well as highly skilled and complicated tasks. They were employed not only as part of a family unit, but as apprentices to master clothiers. (Busfield, 1988, p.61.) However, in West Yorkshire as early as the 15<sup>th</sup> century, male-dominated guilds began to exclude women who they regarded as competition (Busfield, 1988, p.61).

The textile industry in West Yorkshire began in cottages where it was carried out alongside other occupations such as farming. According to Heaton (1965, p.118) as early as the 16<sup>th</sup> century raw wool was bought in from counties such as Lincolnshire , each family buying in small quantities at a time. The entire production of cloth, from procuring the raw wool to the final piece of cloth, was carried out at home and all members of the clothier's family would participate (Pinchbeck, 1977, p.121). Women would spin the wool using a distaff which meant the work could be picked up and put down during the day so they could care for small children, cook meals and work in the fields (Busfield, 1988, p.70). The processes for the production of yarn and cloth by hand changed little from the 14<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries (Brook, 1968, p.39). According to Haigh (1992, p.642) in the Huddersfield area of West Yorkshire as late as the 1880s it was common for the women to weave during the day and do baking and washing in the

evening when the men took over the weaving after being on the land during the day.

By the 1770s there had emerged a complex system of domestic manufacture (Jenkins and Ponting, 1982, p.8), with some parts of the trade being carried out by clothiers in their own homes and some being organised by merchant entrepreneurs. The merchants would buy the wool and either house hand workers in premises to carry out the different processes or 'put out' the wool to workers in their own homes who would spin the wool into yarn; other workers would then be given the yarn to weave.

A distinction must be made here between the production of woollen and worsted cloth. The essential difference is that woollen cloth is made from short fibre wools and worsted from long fibres that are combed straight. The cloth produced by the clothier in his own home would have been woollen cloth, the finish of which is felted and is not patterned. Worsted cloth, for which the West Riding of Yorkshire is famed, is a cloth where the warp and the weft are visible and there is often a pattern.

The progression from domestic production to mill production was not linear or universal, and as late as 1840 'weavers' cottages' were still being constructed in the Huddersfield area. This means that domestic production was still of great importance (Giles, 1992, p.286). However, by the mid to late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the

textile industry had become fully mechanised and domestic production was in terminal decline.

Why did Huddersfield and its outlying villages become such an important centre for woollen and worsted textile production? Huddersfield is the meeting point for several valleys. The valley sides are very steep and offer few areas for arable use or even good grazing for cattle. The valley tops are covered in rough moorland and heather which are only suitable for grazing sheep. The predominant geology of the area is millstone grit which contains no limestone, making the water running off the hills soft and ideal for washing wool. The streams and the rivers in the valleys provided water power for the first mills and later nearby mines provided coal for the steam powered mills (Giles, 1992, p.4). A basic infrastructure, a workforce who were skilled in the processes of textile manufacture, along with the natural resources were taken advantage of by the speculative entrepreneurs who constructed the first mills. They capitalised on the opportunities presented by the development of new technologies and soaring demand (Jenkins and Ponting, 1982, p.27). These entrepreneurs did not necessarily have a background in the textile industry but spotted an opportunity and also became early adopters of steam power, giving the Huddersfield area a competitive edge from the start. Landowners such as Lord Dartmouth also provided capital for the construction of textile mills. By 1805 he had built 23 on his estates in Yorkshire. He used materials found on his land and harnessed the power of its rivers and streams (Jenkins and Ponting, 1982, p.41). By 1835

almost half of the textile mills operating in Britain were based in Yorkshire, accounting for 57% of mill workers (Jenkins and Ponting, 1982, p.37).

Throughout the 1850s and 1860s, British manufacturers attended many international trade exhibitions and became aware of improvements in textile manufacture and design by their foreign competitors. This led to calls for the provision of technical education institutions to develop expertise in the home textile industry in order that it could keep pace with the competition. As a consequence textile colleges and classes were introduced in the West Riding from 1878 (Jenkins and Ponting, 1982, p.285). Another development which helped keep the West Riding at the forefront of the industry was the expansion of the production of cheaper woollen cloth. This met the demand for cheaper articles which were affordable for a larger percentage of the population, along with the skill of worsted designers in response to changing demands which were a hallmark of excellence (Jenkins and Ponting, 1982, p.289). These developments helped the West Riding to maintain its pre-eminent position even during the difficult years of the later twentieth century.

One of the earliest examples of a private mill in the Huddersfield area was one owned by the Brook family. They constructed a mill in Armitage Bridge, Huddersfield in the 1820s and, as well as having the mechanised processes there, they also had rooms for the hand-powered processes such as weaving and spinning. There were a number of reasons for including the hand powered processes within the mill. One was to maintain a high level of quality control by

being able to supervise all aspects of the production process. Having all the production on the same type of loom and using standard spinning processes would also ensure consistency in the finished product. Secondly, time and money would be saved by not having the goods moved around the local area and thirdly to stop the embezzlement of goods by outworkers. (Giles, 1992, p.290). The Brooks also built two rows of cottages near the mill for workers to rent (Giles and Goodall, 1992, p.219). This provided good quality housing for the workers, tied them even closer to the mill and encouraged and engendered a sense of community between the workers.

The paternalism of some mill owners extended into many areas of their workers' lives. Schools, libraries and meeting rooms for educational activities were constructed by philanthropic mill owners for the benefit of their workers. There is evidence that transport was provided to and from the mill for workers who did not live in the immediate vicinity (Jowitt, 1986, p.94). Jowitt describes how in 1836 workers travelled to a mill in Meltham, on the outskirts of Huddersfield, on special trains on a purpose built branch line and one of the women interviewed for this study remembers catching a special 'workers' bus' which just went to one mill in the 1960s (Lilian). The women I interviewed talk about day trips to coastal resorts such as Scarborough and Blackpool being organised and paid for by the mill owners. One woman describes large numbers of trains leaving Huddersfield railway station and being provided with lunch and spending money (Enid). Celebrations to mark the coming of age of the heir were marked. The women

talk about sports clubs for crown green bowling and cricket being attached to the mill.

Whilst the development of a thriving and profitable woollen textile industry in the Huddersfield area was taking place, Huddersfield itself was gaining a reputation within the country for its political radicalism. Hargreaves (1992), notes that in 1813 Huddersfield was notorious as a 'hotbed of disaffection and a metropolis of discontent' (p.189). There had been food rioting in 1780 and again in 1790, a decade of industrial protest between 1800 and 1810 by woollen cloth handfinishers and in 1812 Huddersfield was the epicentre of Yorkshire Luddite activities. Following a short period of calm, there were struggles for parliamentary reform between 1829 and 1832 with further protests in the town and surrounding areas for tenant rights in the 1850s.

According to Brooke (1992) this radicalism extended to trade union activities. Despite in 1832 the neighbouring Leeds Trades' Union declaring that 'any interference in politics is positively prohibited', its Huddersfield members were openly involved in political activity (p.227). During Huddersfield's first parliamentary election, the radical factory reformer candidate Captain Wood's supporters were accused of intimidating the electorate by one of his opponents and rioting took place on election day (p.227). In 1900 the Trades Union Congress was held in Huddersfield. This provided a platform for many socialist speakers who offered a 'constructive message for social reform' (Perks, 1992,

p.517). This led not only to an increase in local trade union membership but the mobilisation of support to run a labour candidate in the next election. Socialism grew in the town together with popular enthusiasm for the labour movement. Manifestations of this were seen in the form of meetings, socialist speakers coming to the town and speaking in halls, street corners and other public spaces and massively well attended May Day parades. The first Labour candidate from Huddersfield was returned to Westminster in 1923.

### **Gendering of labour**

In domestic production a family unit would divide the tasks between them, women and children being responsible for cleaning, carding and spinning the wool. The men combed and wove as well as doing the dyeing and most of the finishing processes. However, where the need arose, women could easily take over any of the processes. As the textile industry moved from domestic to factory production, the roles of weaving and spinning were reversed and women did the weaving (Busfield, 1988, p.61). Most of the new opportunities opened up to women were 'unskilled or semi-skilled'. In the domestic system women would be able to perform most, if not all, of the processes. In the mills, however, there was a clear demarcation between men's and women's work (Busfield, 1988, p.63). Women were mainly confined to three processes – spinning, weaving and mending. Even so they made up a large proportion of the workforce in the mills. According to Pinchbeck (1977, p.317) textiles and domestic service were the two main areas of mass employment for women. The census of 1841 gives a total of

almost 200,000 women working across all the textile industry. Pinchbeck states that women working in textile factories were much better off at this time than their counterparts in domestic service, or those who worked in agriculture, as the pay was better and the hours shorter (p.315). In the Huddersfield area, the proportion of women involved in factory-based textile production rose from 27% in 1851 to 63% in 1911 (Jenkins, 1992, p.241 and p.265). In 1881 70% of mill employees were women (Busfield, 1988, p.64). It is probable that at this time a significant number of women would also be working at home on tasks related to the textile industry such as hand-spinning.

The demarcation of tasks within the mills appears to be a purely social construction, rather than related to supposed physical strength. Evidence found in Pinchbeck and Busfield, as well as other commentators, shows that when all the processes were carried out in the domestic arena, women were capable of performing all the jobs which were now allocated to men. The tasks allocated to women were deemed to be unskilled or semi-skilled and of course paid as such (Busfield, 1988, p.61). There are a number of reasons which contributed to women being allocated the tasks they were and how this demarcation continued through to the decline of the textile industry in the late 1970s and 1980s. These reasons are rooted in nineteenth century ideals of men's and women's roles in society; men being in the public sphere as the breadwinner, with women occupying the private sphere, being responsible for running the home and caring for children. This notion of what men and women's public and private roles

should be is still prevalent in Bornat's research on textile workers in the early twentieth century (1986, p.154) and my own on women who began work in the mid-twentieth century.

The decision about what was considered to be a skilled, semi-skilled or unskilled task was taken by men and it would appear that the main criterion was if a man did the job then it was skilled (Busfield, 1988, p.65). There seems to have been no actual analysis of the tasks in order to come to a conclusion of how complex or how much training or experience was necessary to complete tasks in order to arrive at the different categories. Once the categories had been decided and the tasks allocated to either men or women, it became almost impossible for women to encroach into 'men's work' even if they wanted to. The strength of the unions for each trade guarded both the status of the trade and the non-admittance of women (Busfield, 1988, p.67). The unions were able to do both by constructing long periods of apprenticeship. For example in wool combing the apprenticeship was seven years and for fettling it was two years (Busfield, 1988, p.69 and p.67). However, commentators such as Heaton concluded that neither needed such long apprenticeships and that combing could be learned in a few months (Busfield, 1988, p.69).

Another way of gendering tasks was to suggest that a process required great physical strength which women were not considered to possess, as in the case

of the operation of the mule spinning machine. This was further evidence of social construction as during this period women and girls were considered strong enough to work in coal mines, performing very physical jobs underground (Busfield, 1988, p.71).

Not only did this demarcation of tasks construct divisions between men's work and women's work, it also created a hierarchy between the skilled trades where spinners and wool sorters considered themselves superior to a weaver or a fettler (Busfield, 1988, p.74). In tasks where both men and women were employed such as weaving, men still managed to justify being paid higher wages by claiming that their work was 'heavier' or more complicated (Busfield, 1988, p.74). This was probably the case because men were given the more complicated weaving by the managers so they could be paid higher wages, not because they were better at it than women (Busfield, 1988, p.75). Both men and women were involved in wool combing and after mechanisation of the process some specialist mills ran the machines day and night and as a consequence men were paid more than women for the same job by virtue of the fact that they worked nights (Busfield, 1998, p.76).

Another way of getting a task described as skilled was to surround the process with an air of mystery, claiming what they did was so skilled it could not be clearly explained. The early scourers and fullers did this and created such an enigmatic culture around these tasks it caused one contemporary commentator

to note that 'they went about their jobs as if they were dispensing the hidden mysteries of the Elect, as a very great favour to the employer who stood by in absolute awe of these high priests of ignorance and pretence' (Busfield, 1988, p.76).

The gendering of roles in the processes of textile manufacture was supported by Factory Acts between 1830 and 1860. Grey (1993), states that ambiguities in the legislation enabled male workers and mill owners to validate job segregation (p.57). There were campaigns by male workers to preserve or restore their monopoly in trade unions. The background agenda of improving working conditions generally was exploited by men by insisting that the safety provision put in place for children should also apply to women. Some legislation even referred to women's 'innate carelessness and her clothing' making factories unsafe places for women to work (p.57). Weaving and spinning overlookers were all men despite a call from Factory Inspectors for women overlookers. Unfortunately this was not because they considered women were being unfairly treated by not being allowed to be overlookers or that women were capable of doing the job, but because they felt that women should act as moral guardians in mills where large numbers of women were employed (Busfield, 1988, p.75).

The social constructions which were based on assumptions on women's lesser economic needs as she would be supported by a male 'breadwinner' and a woman's lower productive potential informed social controls on women in the

workplace (Bornat, 1986, p.208). The belief that managing a home and bringing up children was a woman's 'career' made it impossible for them to get skilled roles and be taken seriously (Bornat, 1986, p.209). Bornat further argues that there is evidence that where women did the same job as men, for example weaving, they earned a lesser rate (p.210).

One area, however, which did employ exclusively women, and which was considered to be a skilled job was mending. But this was again based on gender stereotypes. It was considered that girls were better at sewing and had more nimble fingers and so mending was more suited to them, although at this time most tailors and shoemakers were men (Busfield, 1988, p.77). However, because the job was done sitting down, was relatively clean and the women could talk to each other, it was very popular. This meant there was competition to get into mending and in the early days families actually paid a mender to teach a girl to do it. Due to this popularity wages could be kept artificially low despite the skill involved (Busfield, 1988, p.77). Most of the women in this study were either menders or weavers.

Further evidence of using socially constructed reasons to pay women low wages is cited by Pinchbeck (p.194) where one of the Factory Sub-commissioners, a Dr Mitchell, said in 1833 that low pay for women was a 'policy of nature'. Wages for women were low so as not to tempt married women out of the home and 'abandon the care of her own children'. In 1841 some of the Short Time

Committees, who represented male workers, started demanding the gradual withdrawal of women from factories on the grounds that 'the home is a woman's natural sphere' and that work in factories for women was an 'inversion of the order of nature'. (Pinchbeck, 1977, p.200).

As we have seen, the unions for each trade managed to protect the position of men within the trade and barred the admission of women into the union.

However, in 1874 the Women Trade Union League was set up to encourage more women to join trade unions (Bornat, 1986) and in 1881 the General Union of Textile Workers (GUTW) was founded which covered all the trades within the textile industry. This development should have addressed the issue of gendering of roles and unequal pay but there is little evidence that it did. According to Boston (1987) the textile unions, beginning with the cotton industry, were the pioneers of mixed trade unions. Boston claims that within the GUTW women were well represented at Board level and were as active as male members (p.74). Drake (1984) states that men and women were admitted to the GUTW on equal terms, paying the same subscriptions and obtaining equal benefits and that a third of the women in the union were married (p.126). Drake and Bornat, in contrast to Boston, found that women were not particularly active within the GUTW or well represented at the higher levels of the organisation. Drake found that women only attended meetings at times of 'excitement' (Drake, 1984, p.198). Both Drake and Bornat attribute this to women being difficult to organise due to home and family constraints, part time work, low wages, tradition and

general disenchantment with the efficacy of the GUTW (Drake, 1984, p.198). Despite this Boston (1987) claims that at the end of the nineteenth century there is little evidence to show that women textile workers were any less militant than men (p.74). This is supported by Brooke (1992) who describes 50 women and girls striking against a reduction in wages in 1835 and in 1857 400 female workers striking against a wage cut in the Huddersfield textile industry (p.233). Bornat (1986) found that the women she interviewed had little positive to say about trade union membership (p.145). These findings are similar to my own where a general apathy towards the union and a belief that it was ineffective in supporting the members, particularly through the collapse of the industry during the 1970s, was voiced. Roberts (1984, p147) found that many of the women in her study belonged to a trade union but were only concerned with wages. They paid their subscription as a 'kind of insurance against the day they might find themselves in dispute'. Roberts posits that this lack of militancy amongst the women may have helped keep wages of cotton textile workers at a depressed level.

According to Davis (1993), whilst women's trade union membership more than doubled during the Second World War, the interwar and post Second World War years were bleak for working women in all industries (p.208). Once again the ideology of a woman's place being in the home dominated. The hard won rights and equalities gained when women were needed to support the war effort by doing the jobs left vacant by men in the forces were eroded in peace time.

Despite a labour shortage, nurseries and other government support for working women were withdrawn (p.208). Despite support from the Trades Union Congress (TUC) for equal pay for women doing men's jobs during the war, the women's agenda was not mentioned again after 1940 as it was assumed that they would retreat back into the home once the war ended (p.211). In fact in 1948 the TUC annual report supported this by stating that keeping women in work would 'harm the nation' (p.211). Women were marginalised into taking part time jobs and working in women only fields so as not to compete with men. This is exactly the same position women were in over a century earlier when the unions were established. Once again due to the part time nature of their work, low pay and disenchantment there was a decrease in the number of women joining trade unions, and once again the unions regarded women themselves as the problem (p.212).

With advances in technology, and as jobs within the textile industry became more complicated, new skills had to be learned to keep pace and to ensure high quality goods. Men were able to capitalise under these circumstances by going to the newly set up Technical Colleges in the evening or by obtaining apprenticeships. For many women no such opportunities existed. However, in Huddersfield a Female Institute was established in 1847. According to Purvis (1989) the majority of women who attended were working class who would pay a weekly fee to attend (p.108). The subjects offered at the Female Institute were not the same as those offered to men at the Huddersfield Institute at the same

time. Women's subjects included reading, writing, arithmetic, geography, history, singing, sewing, cookery and domestic economy; subjects that were mostly useful in their home life but would not necessarily equip them to compete in the world of work. The men on the other hand were offered a choice of 52 different classes which included languages and architectural and mechanical drawing (p.143). The Huddersfield Female Institute, along with a similar women only institute in Bradford, did not link up with any examination boards, so women attending were excluded from taking examinations and gaining recognised qualifications (p.150). The division between male and female knowledge became even more pronounced after the 1870 Education Act when many institutes moved away from elementary to technical knowledge (p.150). Purvis concludes that the institutes 'legitimised gender divisions within the working class curriculum' and that working class women were unable to fully participate in and share the expansion of scientific and technical 'male' subjects (p.151).

Even after the First World War, when there were large numbers of unmarried women, who would never marry, there were no opportunities for the advancement of women and some of them did the same job in the mill for 50 or 60 years. According to Chinn (1988, p.166) even with the changes to society brought about by the First World War, economic necessity meant that most working class women lived their lives much as their mothers and grandmothers had prior to 1914.

By a combination of a male perception of what was 'natural' work for women; a social construction of what constituted men's work and women's work; the strength of the unions who managed to shroud some tasks in mystery; and the collusion of mill owners and managers, women were consigned to low paid, low status tasks right from the outset of the industrialisation of the textile industry. This was in the face of all the evidence of the past where women had proved they could perform any of the tasks.

### **The decline of the woollen textile industry in the Huddersfield area**

In the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century Huddersfield was almost exclusively a textile town, with a third of the labour force involved directly in the production of cloth (Brook, 1968, p.210). In 1822 there were 102 textile manufacturers regularly attending the Huddersfield textile market. In 1913 the textile business in the Huddersfield district was greater in volume and value than at any previous time (Haigh, 1992, p.257). In 1911 40% of women workers in Huddersfield were employed in the woollen and worsted trade (Haigh, 1992, p.265). In 1966 there was full employment in Huddersfield, with over 30,000 people employed in the textile industry. This number would include people employed in services allied to textile production such as dyeing and the manufacture of textile machinery. Those directly involved in textile manufacture were producing high quality worsted cloth and highly skilled. However these skills were non-transferrable. The mills may have been outdated and small but they had full order books. There is evidence that some owners had started to adapt to modern trends, to produce original

designs for fashion houses and to start to use synthetic fibres with the wool and a high proportion of the fabric produced was exported (Brook, 1968, p.237). It is in this period of high and full employment in textiles that the women in this study worked. The women talk about how their parents expected them to get a job in textiles and how easy it was to get a job in a mill on leaving school with little in the way of a selection or interview process (Enid). They describe how easy it was to move from one mill to another if they wanted a change. One woman (Maureen) describes getting 'fed up' at one mill, leaving on the Friday and starting a new job in another mill the following Monday.

This state of affairs did not last. The Textile Directory of 1911 lists 52 textile mills in the Holme Valley district of Huddersfield. In 1970 the number was still 46, but by 1988, the Kendal Textile Directory lists only 13 for the same area. The collapse of a textile industry which had supported thousands of people over hundreds of years and shaped the landscape happened in the space of a few years.

Many commentators have attributed the collapse of the textile industry to a number of factors. Hardill (1982) states the main reasons to be connected to recession, changes in fashion and imports. The oil crisis and resulting recession of the 1970s led to a decrease in worldwide consumer demand for cloth due to lower disposable income. The strong pound meant that UK exports were expensive and less attractive to purchasers during a recession. Allied to this

were cheap foreign imports. In 1979 a third of woollen cloth consumption in the UK was derived from imports. There was an increased use of synthetic fibres in all aspects of the textile trade and changes in fashions, methods of production and technological advances but the high cost of borrowing meant that West Yorkshire mill owners found it difficult to fund modernisations to machinery or to diversify to capitalise on these developments. The changes in fashion, the fact that suits were disappearing and everyone was wearing denim was referred to by one of the women interviewed (Kathleen). Hardhill also cites the poor calibre of management, resistance to change and the industry being production rather than management orientated, as well as unfair trading practices.

Some commentators see decline as setting in at an earlier date. According to Wild, (1972, p.227), for example, 1924 was the final peak year for textile production in the West Riding. There had been a steady decline in exports prior to this which had been covered by an increase in the home market. The decline did not affect all areas but mainly the heavier, coarser textile production. However, in contrast the high quality fine worsted cloths, for which the Huddersfield area is famed, continued to sell well and there was even an increase in the production of these cloths which was as a result of investment in new equipment and modernisation of working practices as described previously (Wild, 1972, p.228). However, new methods meant fewer numbers of people were needed for the production of increased amounts of cloth. This is borne out from the women interviewed for this study. They describe contraction in the

industry but the creation of very high quality, niche products such as 'superfine' cloth (Nancy and Celia). One woman also comments that the number of pieces turned round by 40 menders in 1976 was the same as seven menders in 2008 (Nancy).

According to Wild (1972), during the Second World War, the industry was deliberately run down by the Government to release labour to the armed forces and munitions industries. By 1944 the labour force in the national wool textile industry was as low as 126,200 (p.228). This is in contrast to the First World War when despite the textile industry losing the European trade, capacity in the industry was maintained at pre-war levels due to production of serge, khaki and blankets for the armed forces as well as production of cloth for French, Serbian and Russian uniforms (Bornat, 1986, p.251). After the Second World War the shortage of labour and sharp rise in wool prices meant that the industry in West Yorkshire was not able to capitalise on the worldwide increase in demand. As other countries rose to the challenge, the industry became even more reliant on the home market. The surviving textile industry now had to compete with cheaper foreign imports as British wages were considerably higher than those abroad. The Government of the day provided no support either in the way of subsidies or by levying any additional tariffs on imports (Wild, 1972, p.229).

In the 1970s and 1980s as a consequence of the oil crisis, the strong pound and high cost of borrowing, the economic situation worsened further. Even those

mills which had not been complacent, had re-tooled, kept abreast of technological advances and been alive to the needs of their customers, were not immune from closure. Some family run mills had been sold to large corporations and although they were still manufacturing and making a profit, the returns were not high enough and they were shut down. Despite the use of immigrant labour from Pakistan and Bangladesh in the late 1960s and early 1970s, some mills ceased trading due to an inability to recruit suitably skilled operatives. The gradual run down of the industry had meant that no new recruits had been taken on and once the workers reached pensionable age there was no one to replace them.

The textile industry has not completely disappeared. Those companies which have survived have adapted to synthetic fibre production or have developed a niche or specialist product. Many have returned to specialising in one part of the textile process such as dyeing, weaving or finishing. There is a strong design industry in the area with the fabric being manufactured elsewhere. Some mills specialise in very high quality cloths or have the ability to produce short runs of bespoke fabric for designer fashion houses which is uneconomical for larger organisations to do. Two of the women interviewed for this study worked up to their retirement as menders of high quality 'superfine' cloth, one (Enid) retiring in the 1990s and the other (Nancy) retiring in 2003.

This study describes the experiences of women who worked in the textile industry in West Yorkshire between 1930 and the 1990s. It encompasses both good and bad times for the industry and crucially covers the transition between the times of full employment in the 1960s to the collapse of the industry in the 1970s. It explores the fate of the women following the collapse of the textile industry and the strategies they implemented to continue working in textiles and to use their skills.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Methodology**

As stated in the introduction, the decision to use oral testimony as the primary research method for this study was made for the following reasons. There is very little existing published work on this group of women at this period of history; I wanted to give the women an individual voice and oral testimony is particularly suited to conveying sensory experiences.

This chapter aims to chart the development of oral history in modern times and the key critical debates which surrounded that development. The first section of the chapter contains a critique of oral history and a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of using oral sources for historical research. Areas covered are the unreliability of memory, rationalisation, self-justification, power relationships, the influence of hindsight and telescoping of time. The second section explores the symbiosis of oral history and women's history and the feminist practice of oral history. This section will show how oral history is particularly suited to recording women's history and in particular experiences and sensory memories of smell and sound which are prevalent in the group of women I interviewed. In the final section my approach to obtaining interviews from women textile workers and how they were conducted and the methodology applied for analysis of the interviews are described. The effect the process both intellectually and emotionally had on me is discussed.

## **Critique of oral history**

Paul Thompson in *The Voice of the Past* posits that 'oral history is as old as history itself; it was the first kind of history' (2000, p.25). He cites evidence from pre-literate societies, where there was no other form of historical evidence, documented by historians such as Jan Vansina, who studied African oral tradition, that oral testimony is reliable and that information has been passed down through the generations. Thompson suggests that into the eighteenth century historical research was achieved through a combination of documented and oral resources (p.31) and that this was accepted practice. From this time, in contrast, inclusion of oral testimony as a credible historical source begins to decline as the position of the historian moves from that of antiquarian to professional. Historians begin to be trained in universities, using teaching methods developed by Leopold von Ranke, to stick to the facts and work with documents only (p.57).

The revival of oral history and the formation of the 'oral history movement' in the United Kingdom really began after the Second World War, when there began to be an interest in the working classes and history from below driven by political change, along with a convergence of sociology and history. Sociologists began to look not just at poverty, but at working class culture and community (p.57).

The convergence of sociology and history developed as sociologists increasingly used an historical dimension in their analysis and was further encouraged through funding of interdisciplinary research projects in universities in the 1960s

(p.73). At the same time, historians began to make use of social science methodologies and theories.

The Oral History Society was formed in 1973 in response to the growing use and importance of oral sources in historical research. One of the biggest contributions of oral history is that it allows the voice of those 'hidden from history' (Rowbotham, 1989) to be heard. Prior to this the main focus of history had been political. The working classes, women, indigenous peoples and members of cultural minorities, people who were probably illiterate, could now put forward their perspective. Oral history offers an alternative perspective on individuals in those areas of life not always investigated or, if researched, had their experiences lumped together, for example as victims of industrialisation or inhabitants of slums. By talking to people about their work, domestic and family lives, it is possible to find out the impact the actions of the elite – politicians and industrialists – had on ordinary people and therefore adds to the sum of our knowledge and also brings another dimension to history. John Tosh (2009) refers to this bringing together of all aspects of daily life as giving social history a human face (p.316). By leaving out of history the testimony of those 'hidden from history' (Rowbotham, 1989) we are left with an incomplete and distorted version of history. According to Tosh, oral history provides evidence of how the past continues to evolve in the minds of the living and that the voice of the past is 'inescapably the voice of the present too' (p.321). Thomson (2007) refers to a 'renaissance' in the use of memory for historical research and that this opens up

new areas for enquiry, challenges assumptions and gives recognition to people who have previously been ignored (p.52).

In its early development there was considerable opposition to, and scepticism towards, the value of oral history. At the extreme, the historian A J P Taylor referred to it as “old men drooling about their youth” (Burke, 2001, p.120).

According to some commentators, traditional historians, such as Marx, were sceptical about the value of oral historical sources and claimed that societies with no documentary evidence have no proper history. The reason for this scepticism, Thompson suggests, is that traditional historians dislike the way oral history challenges and undermines their scholarly authority. A different type of reason for scepticism is the unreliability of memory over time. This is a reasonable concern and the effect of time on memory is discussed later in this chapter. However, most documentary evidence is not produced at the exact time of an event and is not necessarily recorded by the person or people who are directly affected. The people doing the recording have their own prejudices and points of view and as a consequence these documents too could be subjective. Abrams (2010) agrees with this point and argues that ‘every documentary source will contain a fallibility as to accuracy and bias’ (p.23). Tosh (p.314) argues that because oral sources have hindsight attached to them, some historians object to their lack of contemporaneity and the fact that they are sharing in the creation of, and not just the interpretation of, new evidence. Prins (2008, p.150) states that there is evidence that written official records are written for that purpose alone

and do not contain all the facts. Prins also puts forward a further suggestion as to why oral history might not be taken seriously and that is that historians live in literate societies and hold the spoken word in contempt (p.122).

Tosh (2009) argues that what people remember is not just a matter of psychology, but is informed by their changing circumstances and the cultural influences to which they are exposed. He acknowledges that there are pitfalls in oral testimony, including the fact that the interviewer selects the subjects and has his or her own areas of interest to pursue. This could mean that the testimony is taken out of context and factors affecting what is remembered and recounted remain unknown to the interviewer. He further acknowledges that the past is filtered through the subject's 'subsequent life experience, contaminated by the media and overlaid by nostalgia' (p.320). Peniston-Bird (2010) claims that this selectivity in oral history is identical to that confronted by historians investigating a subject where there is limited material, not using a source in its entirety or using sources which are not accessible to all (p.106). Summerfield (1998) states that the oral history interview is a set of relationships which are pervaded by gender and that the interviewee engages in an internal dialogue between the present and the past, what is personal and what is public and between memory and culture (p.2).

The debate regarding the value and uses of oral history continues, especially between supporters of the genre, such as Paul Thompson, Grele, Frisch,

Passerini and Bornat, all of whom are cited in this chapter. All are agreed that an oral historian needs to develop special skills to interview subjects and to interpret the results and that a different intellectual discipline is required to understand the 'narrative of memory'. Tosh argues that oral history testimony requires critical evaluation and contextualisation with other available sources (p.322). This can be achieved by both the historian and the interviewee in three ways. Firstly, the time which has elapsed between the events happening and the story being told means that the interviewee has had the opportunity to reflect upon and analyse them. This version of events with the benefit of hindsight and life experience is contained in the narrative. The story might have been very different if told at the time or very close to the event. The constraints and ideologies at the time of the event, or the influence of experience, could prevent the interviewee revealing the true picture. For example, during times of conflict and immediately after, the real feelings and experiences of people could be suppressed, with a more honest version only emerging after time has elapsed. This could be due to people not wanting to undermine morale, 'rock the boat', or thinking that their experiences and feelings were unusual, went against the grain and therefore would not be heard. It is only after the passage of time, when perhaps the official version has been challenged by historical research and revision, or if the cultural norms of the present day allow an alternative voice, that participants in an event feel able to give their story. This has been explored and documented by Alistair Thomson, who in the 1980s interviewed Australian and New Zealand Army Corp (Anzacs) troops who took part in the poorly planned

and executed allied landings at Gallipoli in Turkey during the First World War. The interviews show how the former soldiers suppressed personal feelings of fear, trauma and inadequacy to conform to the accepted narrative of bravery (Tosh, 2010, p.324). Thompson (2000) claims that it is common to find a conflict between what were accepted views of the past and states this 'contradiction can be highly revealing for it may represent one of the dynamics of social change' (p.273).

Having this time lapse is valuable in my opinion. It means that the things which the women I interviewed told me are things which are significant enough to remember and therefore important to them. The events and experiences they remember have been reflected upon and in turn have informed the way they have lived their lives. When I did my interviews I worried when some of the women said they could not remember when I asked a particular question. I now know that it doesn't matter because it wasn't important to them and so doesn't form part of their story. Peniston-Bird (2009) discusses an experiment carried out by the historian Alice M Hoffman. She interviewed her husband in 1978, 1982 and 1986 about his experiences as a mortar crewman in the Second World War. Hoffman's findings showed that whilst his memory of dates and physical conditions was unreliable, most of his narrative remained consistent over the passage of time (p.108). Peniston-Bird cites this as an example that memories related to recurrent processes such as daily routines, work patterns and leisure activities appear to be 'resistant to mutation' (p.109).

Secondly, as the interviewees are relating their story during the interview and being asked questions by the historian, they are reflecting and analysing again as they revisit that place in their memory. Specific evidence of this is shown in one of my interviews. During the interview with one woman there were silences where it was obvious she was thinking about the past. She said 'stuff comes into my head. Sitting here thinking about all the mills there used to be'. (Enid).

Another woman had clearly thought about what I might be going to ask and had remembered, or checked on, the dates she left school and started work at various mills. What she had not considered was whether or not she enjoyed her time in textiles. When I asked this question it was the first time she had thought about it and I felt privileged to be the first person to hear what she said on this subject. She said that she must have enjoyed it to go back into textiles after having trained and worked as a hairdresser. She said she liked the working environment with other women (Alice). This 'composure' on the part of the interviewee is discussed by many commentators including Abrams (2010) and Peniston-Bird (2009). The term 'composure' in the context of oral testimony was first coined by Graham Dawson in 1994. The interviewee described above is presenting a version of herself which she believes is appropriate to the interview and with which she feels comfortable. Composure can cover both the process of composing the story and the way it is presented. Peniston-Bird refers to this as 'the process of being that is constantly under revision, never finally achieved and always time specific' (p.108). Further evidence of this took place during another one of my interviews where regardless of the questions I asked, the interviewee

just told me what she had rehearsed based on the conversation I had had with her over the telephone prior to our meeting.

Thirdly, there is the critical evaluation by the historian which takes into account the above as well as primary research with other interviewees, research on work done by their peers and their own life experience. Bornat (2010) discusses both 'active theorising' of the interviewee and how the life experiences of the historian inform the interpretation of the data. In revisiting oral history interviews she did 30 years ago, she acknowledges that the interviews could have been conducted better, her notes could have been more complete and that some of the conclusions she reached lacked the insight she has gained through experience over the intervening years. Bornat says that at the time she did the interviews it did not occur to her that more than the collection of data was going on. Her experience in oral history since then has shown that there is and that the emotions attached to the memory are a vital part of the story and the facts and the feelings should not be separated out. She concludes that without emotional sensations individuals are not able to recall events and experiences. Peniston-Bird (2009) also argues that one of the factors relevant to the ability to remember something is the amount of emotion attached to the event at the time (p.108), particularly events which are a 'first time' or represent a 'turning point'. This would explain why all of the women I interviewed could remember their first day in the mill. They could not necessarily remember how they got their job, but they could remember their first day at work.

Stuart (1993) discusses the importance of self-analysis of the oral historian as an individual and understanding that this identity will impact on the interpretation of the testimony. She argues that the dynamics of the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee are 'influential in determining the quality and richness of its outcomes' (p.81). She discusses how she shared common experiences with interviewees when conducting research into women who had lived in a convent for most of their lives and argues that by doing so her interviewee felt able to share more memories (p.82). I too found the women I could connect with on a more personal level felt more comfortable and relaxed which resulted in better and deeper interviews. The whole interview experience was more fulfilling for both of us. The interview process is a 'dynamic interaction of subjectivities' according to Abrams (2010). She argues that both the interviewer and the interviewee draw on their pasts to create and project their 'selves' for this particular occasion (p.58). Abrams calls this interaction and personal dynamism between the two subjectivities of the interviewer and the interviewee 'intersubjectivity'. This intersubjectivity is what creates a shared narrative, a narrative which is particular to those two people at that time and in that space. Abrams and Thomson (2007) both claim that subjectivity on the part of the interviewer in the creation of oral history is a positive force. Abrams (2010) states that 'stories are manufactured in an interview environment pulsating with influences' (p.55). These influences come from within the interviewee, the reactions of the interviewer and the agenda of both. Thomson (2007) states that oral historians have become increasingly aware of how they

themselves are affected by the interviews they take part in, as well as how they as interviewer can affect what is shared by the interviewee (p.61). Abrams posits that intersubjective dynamics should be acknowledged honestly and oral historians should be mindful that the interview is shaped by 'perception on both sides' (p.62). The debate about subjectivity and intersubjectivity and power originated with the development of feminist oral history which is discussed later in this chapter.

Grele's very influential contribution to the debate is around the methods and politics of oral history. He raises concerns about the reliability of memory, representations of individual memory, and the research standards used for interviewing. He identified that the oral history practitioner should consider the linguistic and performative aspects of interviews and should attempt to understand the interviewee and their 'historical point of view' (1998, p.40)

Thompson (2000) states that to carry out successful interviews requires skill along with the essential qualities of an interest and respect for people as individuals, flexibility, understanding, empathy and listening skills (p.222).

Thompson argues that careful preparation should be carried out and background knowledge on the subject to be investigated obtained before embarking on any oral history interviews and this will be beneficial to the results. He states that carefully constructed questions will help get to detailed memories and crafting and phrasing good questions is one of the basic skills and opportunities of oral history (p.229). Quinlan (2011) supports this view but offers a note of caution

stating that by being fully prepared interviewers 'walk a fine line' between earning the respect of the interviewee by demonstrating that they have done their preparation and 'evoking enmity by showing off about how much they know' (p.30). Quinlan also states that an interviewer who has a clear plan, carefully thought out and informed questions and a respectful attitude will put the interviewee at ease and increase the possibility of an open and illuminating response (p.31).

Oral history is not a 'one way street'. Those being interviewed can be empowered by remembering and reinterpreting the past. Bornat describes a retired textile worker thanking her for asking her to talk about her life as a young factory worker (1998, p.191). This happened to me on many occasions during my primary research. At the end of one interview, one woman said that she was going to ring me to ask me not to come as she wasn't feeling well, but she was glad that she hadn't as talking to me about the past 'had done her good' (Gladys). As Frisch says, participating in an oral history interview 'is a powerful tool for discovering, explaining and evaluating the nature of the process of historical memory – how people make sense of their past .... how people use it to interpret their lives and the world around them' (1990, p.188). Bornat quotes Coleman (2010) where he says that 'ageing itself is characterised by a search to find a personally meaningful way of life which connects the past to the present'.

Luisa Passerini has investigated subjectivity in oral history and conscious and unconscious meanings remembered. She shows how culture and ideology influence what people reveal in her interviews with workers in Italy at the time of Mussolini. Passerini considers that subjectivity in oral testimony is important and that 'silences and false memories can be illuminating forms of evidence' (1998, p.268). She states that oral history sources have more to offer than just the facts or an individual's truth. They are loaded with that individual's world view, cultural ideology and subconscious desires. Passerini accepts and acknowledges the limitations and shortcomings of oral testimony but instead of seeing them as negative, embraces them and uses them to move the debate further into the arena of psychology. Similarly, Portelli sees unreliable memories and subjectivity as strengths of the genre, not weaknesses. He argues that oral testimony is 'never the same twice' (1991,p.55) that what is disclosed in each interview is unique to that day at that time. Variations in the narrative could be the result of a previous interview awakening memories or the interviewee trying to work out what the interviewer wants to hear and adapting the version accordingly. Portelli also acknowledges and champions the fact that the historian's voice will be included in the final result of the interview. He says that 'when the researcher's voice is cut out, the narrator's voice is distorted' (p.55). Thomson (2007) draws together the main themes and concerns relating to oral history discussed here. He discusses how the practice of oral history was defended against its critics by Paul Thompson and how the value and legitimacy has now been proved, particularly in providing a voice to those who have

previously been ignored (p.52). He shows that by acknowledging and understanding that memory can be unreliable, that subjectivity exists on the part of both interviewer and interviewee, oral historians have turned these perceived pitfalls into strengths (p.53). The concern by critics of the genre that oral historians were 'creating and unduly influencing' their sources has similarly been addressed head on by practitioners in that we are now aware how the interviewer and interviewee are collaborative in the process and each can affect the other (p.61). Not only does Thomson look at how oral history has transformed and gained currency since the First World War, he also looks forward to the exciting opportunities and challenges which will have to be faced with developments in digital technology (p.68). For example, the use of sound and image to record interviews which will challenge the dominance of transcripts and the way they are stored will give researchers access to many interviews. The downside of this could be that interviewees could be less forthcoming or candid if their interviews could be viewed and used for purposes they did not consent to.

### **Feminist practice of oral history**

Oral history and women's history have developed 'hand in hand', two genres whose time came at the same moment. According to Bornat and Diamond (2007, p.19) each developed 'from a commitment to reveal and reverse, to challenge and to contest' the dominant narrative of history which was that of the elite and male. Commentators such as Sangster (1994), say the reasons why feminist history and oral history are so symbiotic is that traditional historical

sources often neglected women's lives and oral history provided a way of allowing women's voices to be heard. They offered an alternative view and put forward perspectives important to women. The feminist practice of oral history allows areas overlooked in the past, such as the family, child rearing and home making, areas in which women played a pivotal role, to be explored. Sangster states that women remember the past in different ways in comparison to men (1994, p.7) and they are likely to play down their contribution and accomplishments. This is evident from my interviews. I asked the women what they were most proud of and most were taken aback by the question and some had to be really encouraged to answer. Some of the women could not understand why I wanted to interview them as they felt they were not interesting in any way. Abrams (2010) also raises this point. She states that women tend to downplay their experiences because they often do not conform to what is presented and perceived as important or of interest in mainstream history (p.71). I did not necessarily find this reason for downplaying their experiences in the women I interviewed. Their rationale for not feeling that their experiences were important or worthy of record, was that everyone did what they did.

When Armitage (2011) began her research in the early 1970s, she found it difficult to find women who were willing to share their experiences. She too heard 'I don't know why you want to interview me. I haven't done anything' (p.170).

By using the oral history method, it is possible to learn how women view their experiences and what informed the choices they made. This premise has informed my choice of using oral sources as the research method for this study and the findings are described in Chapter 3.

According to Scott (2001), women's history 'emerged as a definable field in the 1970's'. Prior to this there were two main political foci for feminist academics. One was to locate oppressed women in history to inspire agency in the current generation and the second to find examples of roles women had played in the established historical picture and demonstrate the importance of their contribution. This was the start of demonstrating that women's history was an integral element of 'mainstream' history (Tosh, 2010). Despite the latter, the audience for women's historical research was still limited usually to not just women, but feminist women. Women's history in the 1980s and 1990s began to move away from this political agenda and to start to examine and document all aspects of women's lives, changing the terms on which the study of women's history was pursued (Tosh, 2010). Since its inception as a genre, the practice of oral history has drawn upon the experiences of working class women. Studies on working class women by Roberts, Bornat and Langhamer have utilised oral history as the primary research method. Women's lives, which could be mundane as well as heroic, were explored and added another dimension to the understanding of the past. It could be argued that exploring the lives of ordinary women is as powerful in promoting the feminist agenda as looking for individual

heroines. The experiences of ordinary women over the ages in trying to raise children, hold down jobs and keep homes, with varying degrees of support from their husbands and no recognition from the state, is an effective driver to keep up the momentum of change. Indeed, as one man described her to me, his mother was a 'hero' who brought up three children on her own during the 1960's.

Leydersdorff (Bornat and Diamond. 2007, p.23), suggests that oral history and feminist history were 'mutually supportive' in trying 'to establish the legitimacy of personal experience' in the discourse of history. According to Perks and Thomson, for many oral historians recording the experiences of ignored groups and allowing them to explore and construct their own history is a primary justification for the use of oral history (1998, p.2). The democratising of historical research and production, where the personal experiences and feelings of individuals are recorded, adds another dimension to the interpretation of history. It facilitates either the reinforcement of the accepted story or can contest the past by throwing up challenges.

Gluck and Patai (1991, p.4) argue that telling their story can be 'empowering and validate the importance of the speaker's life experience', which is one of the reasons why oral history work with women is considered to be feminist. The current preference with oral history practitioners is to speak of 'advocacy' rather than empowerment (Abrams, 2010, p.169). In this way oral historians regard

oral history narratives as a means for the participants to empower themselves, not in terms of ambition but context (p.174).

Validating the importance of the interviewee's life is particularly valuable in older people. Developments in the 1970s and 1980s into the psychology of old age suggested that instead of being something distressing and therefore to be avoided, structured remembering could have therapeutic benefits and strengthen personal and cultural loyalties. Bornat recognises the therapeutic role the oral history interview can have and adopts an approach which aims 'to do no harm' (2010, p.48).

As the two movements developed, a more academic and theoretical rigour began to be applied. The subjectivity and reliability of memory discussed earlier and how these affected the narrative of oral history started to be considered. Of major concern was, were the feminist historians applying their feminist values to the interpretation of oral testimonies provided by women who were not feminists? Feminists such as Stacey and Patai recognise that it is 'currently impossible to create an ideal feminist methodology that negates power differences' (Perks and Thomson, p.93). Other concerns were the use of established sociological research methods which were viewed as white, male and middle-class defined. The response to this was the development of a feminist 'ethnography' which rejected the accepted stance of interviewing which had to be separate, neutral

and distant from the subject of the research, emphasising instead commonality, empathy and sisterhood (Gluck and Patai, 1991, p.109).

The process of oral history and the feminist practice of oral history have been re-examined, debated and reframed over the course of the last fifty years.

Armitage (2011) states that the 'most important use of women's oral history is what it was from the beginning; uncovering and documenting women's overlooked activities in history' and to give a voice to women who have not been heard (p.179). This is exactly my belief and why oral history is the most appropriate method for this thesis.

My interpretation of the current position taken from the literature and where I stand, is that the women interviewed are not purely the 'subject' of the interview. The interviews are shared experiences. The process of participating in the interview and the subsequent reflection and interpretation will affect both parties. To illustrate this I cite examples from my primary research. During the interviews, some of the women talked about experiences and memories which were unconnected with their work in the textile industry but which had happened around the time we were discussing. Some of these stories were deeply moving and affected me at the time of the interview and on reflection since. Thinking about that time in their lives had brought these important memories and feelings back to the women and they were able to explore them again. This would not have happened if we had not been having the conversation. I felt privileged to

hear these memories. I frequently compared my own life to the ones the women I interviewed described, particularly around the practicalities of managing work, child care and running a home. I emerged from the interviews with a different viewpoint and increased appreciation and admiration for the women I spoke to. I believe my feelings are more powerful because I heard the women first hand rather than read about their experiences in a book or a journal.

Joan Sangster (1994, p.11), discusses the ethical problems around the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee. Even if both are women there is still an 'unequal' relationship. The interviewer is a historian, a professional not a friend, who has gained access to the woman's narrative to produce an academic piece of work which may further their career. The interviewee has no say in the finished article, as the interpretation of the information given by the interviewee is made by the historian whose perception is informed by her own life experiences. The interviewee may not agree with the interpretation of the information given. Sangster gives an example which is very pertinent to the content of this study when she asks would the women she interviewed agree with her description of their workplace and working practices as being paternalistic? (p.8) Would the women in my study agree with my interpretation that the textile mills the women I interviewed worked in showed evidence of a paternalist style of management? The concerns raised about interpretation and analysis of oral sources also apply to written ones, but because in oral testimony the historian has an albeit brief but still personal

connection with the interviewee, a certain sensitivity about judging them arises. Sangster states that the oral historian should honour feminist ethical obligations by maintaining confidentiality and respect for the interviewees and not to distort or ridicule their testimony. She feels it is currently impossible to create an ideal feminist methodology which negates the power differences between the two parties but encourages women interviewing women to be ever aware of the question of power imbalance and to evaluate their own ethical obligations as feminists (p.22). In the continuing debate, Sangster offers a note of caution on the dangers of the emphasis of 'form over context' and posits that pursuing and recording oral testimony is a valuable exercise despite the pitfalls.

### ***Approach to interviews***

Armed with the theory of oral history and mindful of the pitfalls and short comings described above and confident that using oral testimony was the most appropriate approach for this thesis, I embarked on my primary research. This section examines the process of identifying subjects for the study, before going on to discuss and evaluate the methods employed.

The women interviewed for this study were found through family and friendship networks or by contacting local historical societies and asking for volunteers. This produced a snowball effect, in which one interviewee would tell me about a friend or relative who might be interested in taking part. All of the women worked in the textile industry in the Huddersfield area of West Yorkshire. Some of the

women worked in textiles until they retired, some only for a few years, but all of them worked within the mid twentieth century. Pen portraits of the women interviewed are provided on page 135. Before starting the interviews, the practicalities of setting up the meetings and capturing the testimony was researched. The Oral History Society website and the Open University handbook *Using the Past* (1995) provided valuable information which I was able to implement in my research. I also attended a four-day course run by the Institute of Historical Research in London. This programme was aimed at postgraduate students and looked at different historical sources available to historians. It included a day at the British Library working with a group of other oral history researchers and lectures by Rob Perks.

In order to ensure that my research was conducted ethically, I obtained informed consent from the women. The purpose of the research and how it would be used was explained to the women before they agreed to being interviewed.

My research commenced before new arrangements for ethical approval for postgraduate research were implemented by the University of Bradford. The arrangements I made for obtaining informed consent for my interviews from the interviewees were approved by my supervisors, in line with practice at the time, and I sought advice from them on the wording of the consent form which the women signed before I interviewed them. The consent form is appended (Appendix One).

According to Richards (2006), the only safe answer to how many people should be interviewed is 'I'll know when I have the data needed to answer my research question' (p.25). Nineteen women were approached to be interviewed for this thesis. One woman declined and another woman's interview was not recorded due to a technical problem with the machine. I did not ask to interview her again, the reasons for this decision was two-fold. Firstly I did not wish to impose on her again and secondly, the interview was particularly good with the interviewee signing and laughing a lot and I did not think I could capture the same spontaneity and joyfulness again.

The majority of the women interviewed were menders and this was due to how they were recruited through family and friendship networks. The nature of this type of 'snowball' sampling means that women I had been put in contact with would suggest other women they had worked with and they would usually have worked in the same area as themselves. As the focus of the thesis was to record individual women's experiences which were not just about their particular role within textiles, I did not believe it would be detrimental to the study to have unequal numbers of menders, weavers or warpers. My goal was to talk to them and to give them an individual voice regardless of what job they did. All of the women interviewed were white and British. I considered interviewing migrant women workers who would have mainly originated from Bangladesh, Pakistan and India. The reasons I decided not to were as follows: as discussed previously, most of my interviewees came via family and friendship networks and

none of the women put me in touch with migrant workers. This could be due to either there not being any working with them at that time or that they did not keep in contact. A further reason I did not actively seek out participants from this group was that I believed that the dynamics of the relationships between the two groups of workers and an understanding of the politics and race relations warranted a much wider discussion which could not have been properly explored within the scope and word count of this thesis. This is an area in which this thesis could be taken forward, particularly as there is now a new influx of migrant women workers from Eastern Europe entering the textile industry and a comparison of their experiences would be a very interesting area to explore.

The decision to interview around 20 women whose working lives spanned most of the twentieth century was made to ensure that I was still able to give them an individual voice. I wanted to conduct in depth interviews and obtain their personal histories, perspectives and experiences. A larger sample could have led to their discrete experiences being lost by them being grouped together. However, a larger sample with a broader, more generic remit is another area in which this thesis could be expanded. Peniston-Bird (2009) highlights the problem faced by oral historians in recruiting a representative sample. The sample can only include those who wish to share their memories (p.106). However, ensuring representation in research is a problem encountered by anyone researching a subject where resources are scarce or unavailable to all researchers.

The design of the project was considered and planned with my supervisor before commencing to ensure it was feasible and ethical. The questions we considered were; what was the purpose, the goal and the outcome. The purpose of the research is to add to the current understanding of the experiences of women textile workers during the mid-twentieth century. The goal to ensure I used the most appropriate approach to research the subject and the outcome is a thesis which not only meets the learning outcomes for a Master of Philosophy but is also a resource for others.

Once the research question, 'what was it like to be a woman textile worker in Huddersfield in the mid-twentieth century?' crystallised from our discussions which fitted with my overall aim, I began to develop a methodology to ensure the question was answered.

According to Richards (2006) the methodology is the vehicle which will carry the study forward in the direction needed to answer the question well (p.22). I decided to use oral interviews as my primary research as I am confident that this approach offers the best fit between the research question and the kind of data needed for the answer. Other possible approaches were considered including analysis of autobiographies and use of parliamentary enquiries. I also considered the use of questionnaires instead of one to one interviews. These options for a primary research method were rejected on the following grounds: firstly, if the purpose of the research was to add to the current understanding of

the experiences of this group of women I needed to find new information not just look at the limited amount which is currently available. Secondly, as there are women still alive who belong to the group I was interested in, it would be a great opportunity to talk to them and record their experiences. Thirdly, personal interaction with people plays to my personal skill set and the interaction I have had with the women I subsequently interviewed for this study has proved to be the most rewarding element of this thesis.

Once someone expressed an interest in being interviewed, I telephoned them to arrange a convenient time. During the initial telephone conversation I explained who I was, who had given me their number and that the interview was for a dissertation for the University of Bradford. I told them that I would be tape recording the interview and checked that they were happy with that. The tape recordings are in my possession, labelled with just the reference number and stored in a secure place. I pointed out to them that they could withdraw at any point without giving a reason. I explained that I would be asking them to sign a consent form (Appendix One). I gave them an idea of the areas I was interested in. There are strengths and weakness to this approach. One advantage is that it gave the women time to reflect and a chance to remember things around these areas. An example of a disadvantage is that one interviewee appeared to get the subject areas fixed in her mind and went through them regardless of what question I had asked. A further disadvantage could be that it allowed the interviewees to prepare what they considered to be acceptable responses

instead of my obtaining a spontaneous reaction by asking the question without notice. The subject of composure has been discussed previously in this thesis. My object was to collect experiences, not to 'catch them out', or to be judgemental in any way. I decided on balance the advantages of giving advance notice outweighed the disadvantages for the following reason. It gave the interviewees some ownership of the process. If I was going to discuss an area they really did not want to pursue, they had the opportunity to either say they did not want to talk about it before we started or to have time to consider a response they were comfortable with. The interview would run more smoothly with fewer pauses if the interviewees knew roughly how they were going to respond.

All the women I approached agreed to be interviewed but one subsequently changed her mind. She did not give the reason for this and I did not ask. I used the same list of questions for each interview (Appendix Two). The choice of questions was important and was driven by the research question 'what was it like to be a woman textile worker in the Huddersfield area in the mid-twentieth century' and the literature search. My aim was to record the experiences of the women and, as stated previously, there is very little literature on this group of women. As I was going to be in the very fortunate position of interviewing women who had worked in this industry, I wanted to get as broad a range of experiences from them as possible. I was also interested in how their work and home lives impacted on each other and in particular how they managed work and childcare. Although I had the list of questions, they were really more areas

to be covered and in practice I did not always have to ask them as the conversation flowed and one subject merged into another. This is not an unusual occurrence as Abrams (2010) refers to few interviews sticking to the script the interviewer has set (p.29). I did veer from the list of questions to explore further if something interesting emerged during the conversation or to allow the conversation to flow more naturally. The interviews lasted between one and two hours and occasionally once the tape machine was switched off the interviewees would tell me other things. The things disclosed after the tape machine was turned off have not been included in this study. Peniston-Bird (2009) refers to this phenomenon. She states that it is a 'sad but frequent truth that the most fascinating or valuable parts of interviews often take place unrecorded – either before the tape is started or after it is switched off' (p.115). One of the challenges for the historian when conducting and interpreting interviews includes the interaction between the parties and the possibility of a perception of an unequal relationship between the two as discussed earlier in this chapter. I addressed this by telling the women I interviewed that my interest in the subject stemmed from the fact that both of my parents worked in the textile industry and my mother was a mender. I had also usually been put in touch with them via a mutual friend so I had some 'provenance'. However, according to Abrams (2010) the interviewer cannot control the way in which they will be perceived by the interviewee (p.60). The perception of an unequal relationship could affect the narrative. I may be told things which the interviewee thinks I want to hear, she may omit parts that do not show her in a favourable light. Quinlan

(2012) in her discussion on the dynamics of interviewing, emphasises the need to create a rapport with the interviewee and build up a level of trust to facilitate openness (p.32). This can be achieved by being well prepared, using open ended questions and using open body language.

On two occasions, despite asking the questions it became clear that there were subjects the women wanted to talk about which did not have anything to do with working in textiles. It was as though thinking about the past had triggered other memories and they wanted to tell me. One woman talked about her sister dying from injuries sustained at a fire in her work place when she was in her teens. Another talked about a Sunday afternoon when her neighbour came round to say that she could not waken her husband after his nap and could she try. The man was dead and this was the first time my interviewee had seen a dead body. In order to put the women at their ease and to make the interview as natural as possible, all of the interviews were conducted in the women's own home and at a time of their choosing. For the majority of the interviews just I and the interviewee were present. However, on four occasions someone else was present. The first interview I did was with Joyce and her niece was present. This did not present any problems as she did not interrupt and was making her own tape recording for the family archive. The interview with Irene had her granddaughter present. The granddaughter had recently completed a PhD and had conducted her own research and appreciated the importance of not interrupting and allowing her grandmother to speak for herself. Although these

two interviews went well, the fact that another family member was present could have affected what the interviewees said and may not have been as candid as they would have been had we been on our own. Abrams (2010) refers to having someone else in the room leading to less openness and more guarded responses (p.63).

The two other occasions (one of the interviews was lost as I did not press the correct button on the tape recorder and the tape was silent when I came to listen to it) had the women's husbands present. Both these men had been involved in textiles themselves and could not resist interrupting, clarifying and correcting what their wife was saying. During the interview with Kathleen she challenged her husband and said 'she's asking me love, not you'. This struck me as a clear example of what I was trying to achieve, to give the women a voice, to be heard in their own words.

The more interviews I conducted the more relaxed and confident I became. This helped the interviewees be more relaxed and led to better interviews. The interviews I conducted with women I knew were the most revealing of all, which proves that the closer the relationship between the interviewer and interviewee and the greater the trust which is built up the better the interview.

Once the interviews had taken place and been recorded, using a thematic analysis tool developed by Braun and Clarke in 2006 (Flick, 2009, p.421), I

began to analyse the data. I had gathered a large amount of information on the tapes, some of the interviews had taken over two hours and all of them lasted more than 45 minutes. Braun and Clarke propose a number of steps to ensure that all the data is analysed systematically and themes identified. Firstly I familiarised myself with the data by listening carefully to all the tapes and gave all the women an anonymised identifier. I then transcribed nine of the interviews. This proved to be very time consuming but did provide me with the basis on which to identify topics and emerging themes. All the women had been asked the same questions so my first task was to identify topics within each of these subject areas. Each topic was given a separate sheet of paper. I then listened to the remaining tapes and recorded from each of the interviews comments which corresponded to the identified topics, noting who had made the comment. Once this had been completed, I had a number of sheets of paper and the transcripts from which to work on the analysis and findings from the interviews. One advantage of listening frequently to the tapes and not relying entirely on transcripts was that I was still very connected to the women and their narrative. Abrams (2010) discusses 'orality' and the fact that this element of the oral history interview can be forgotten owing to the 'dominance of transcription' (p.19) and the ease of working with transcripts. By not transcribing all the tapes I was able to hear each woman's individual, distinctive voice and the shape and rhythm of their speech as well as her local dialect. This made it feel more authentic and put me back in the interview space. I became more aware of silences and was able to notice the different emotions conveyed through the tone of voice and

choice of language attached to different memories. Abrams (2010) also argues that the element of performance in oral interviews 'adds an exciting dimension' (p.151) to the interview and that the interviewee finds status, meaning and significance and the act becomes part of their contemporary identity. I agree with this argument and as stated previously, when listening to the tapes I often became aware of a growing sense of confidence and openness, something I was not alive to during the recording. I believe this is a further justification for using the tapes and not just transcripts listened to once for the analysis.

I did not identify any differences in either the topics or the themes identified between the two methods of analysing the interviews. It is of course easier to go back to the transcripts to find a specific quote, but I had made detailed notes as described previously which enabled me to identify examples easily. However, one theme emerged which I was not expecting and that was dress and clothing which many of the women talked about. They were not asked specifically about clothes but many remembered wearing, buying or having garments bought for them for an occasion, such as their first day at work or a mill outing, which I did ask about. My findings and limited analysis of this theme are included in Chapter 3. I believe this subject is a further area in which this thesis could be expanded.

Using the transcripts and my detailed notes, I began to write up the findings. Findings from other published research were included and this enhanced the findings and drove debate where what I had discovered in my research was in

contrast to the findings of other commentators. Richards (2010), comments that major contributions to writer's block are becoming overwhelmed by the richness and complexity of the data and the fear that resulting analysis will not do the interviewees justice (p.211). This is certainly something I can identify with and the findings chapter took a number of drafts and re-writes to complete.

Qualitative data obtained through in-depth, one to one interviews cannot be handled and analysed in the same way a quantitative data. This is especially true when considering deviant themes. The framework developed by Braun and Clarke (Flick, 2009, p.422) does suggest omitting subjects which are not common to all interviewees. The aim of this study is to record the individual experiences of the women interviewed. Leaving out what someone experienced or felt because none of the other women mentioned it is not appropriate here and would devalue the findings. I was unable to find any specific theoretical data analysis models discussed in the oral history literature. However, when presenting the findings I was mindful of the issues particular to oral history research discussed previously, especially around the topics of subjectivity and intersubjectivity and the part that I play in creating the women's histories.

I have since received comments from relatives of some of the women I have interviewed, that thinking and talking about their experiences in textiles did not end once I had left. Many talked about things they had recalled during our

interview to members of the family – it was as if they had got permission to talk about it.

## Chapter 3

### Women and Work Findings

#### Introduction

This section will cover the findings from the interviews undertaken with 17 women who had spent all or part of their working life in the textile industry in the Huddersfield area during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. They share a number of experiences but their interpretation and feelings attached to them are individual. The initial part of the interviews covered how the women got their job in textiles, training they received and the daily routine. What the workplace was like, attitudes to management and friendships were discussed as well as any social or sporting activities attached to the mill. Marriage, childcare and continuing employment following the collapse of the industry were discussed. At the end of each interview the women were asked the same question – ‘What are you most proud of during your time in textiles?’

Sidel in *Urban Survival* a study of working class women in the USA published in 1978, states in the introduction how struck she was by how generous the women she interviewed were in sharing their lives. She talks about how they vividly described the events that shaped who they are and the difficulties they encountered in combining work and family (p.vii). This resonates very clearly with my experiences interviewing the women for this study. They were all

generous with their time and their experiences and modest and unassuming about their achievements.

### **Starting work**

The majority of the women interviewed did not make the decision about where they would work and what job they would do in the mill. This was done by their parents. 'You had no choice' and 'that was all there was to do', feature a lot in their interviews. One woman had really thought about how she had been pushed by her parents into a 'proper job' at the expense of where her passion lay.

At school I was always interested in English. I was very good at English and writing. My main love that I really wanted to do was go into theatre. But in those days you were told, it isn't like today were you can do performing arts, there was just nothing and you were told 'no you've got to have a proper job'. I think your parents pushed you into things that was the right thing to do and they forgot about the feelings of the individual. Although your parents were good, you weren't allowed to follow what you really wanted to do and I think that is what was wrong with our time in life.

(Lilian)

Another woman was told she had to learn to be a mender for financial reasons:

'My mum said I had to go into mending because my dad had died and you earned more money there than any other job.' (Doreen)

This type of control by parents over their children even in such an important area of their lives was also seen by Roberts (1984). She describes young people in her study as a 'conforming and conformist generation' and that their own wills and desires were subordinated to those of the parents (p.11). Lilian compared how things were then and how they are today in that parents listen to their children and let them make up their own mind about a career. To other women, even though they might have entertained ideas of a different path in life such as staying on at school or doing a job they were interested in, due to the prevalence of jobs for women in the textile industry and the good rates of pay, they did not really expect to do anything else. One woman said:

I wanted to be a hairdresser, but in those days your father just thought that when you got to 20 or 21 you'd get married and stay at home. You didn't really have a career. My mother had been a mender so I went into the mill. (Alice)

Roberts (1984) found this in her research amongst cotton textile workers in Lancashire. She found that young workers were dominated by their parents in

many aspects of their lives (p.10) and that the choice of job was influenced by 'parental advice, example or string pulling' (p.45).

Other women I spoke to had not given any thought to any other career options. It was just assumed she would follow her friends and family members into the mill.

I don't actually know how I got into textiles. I think because like my friends were leaving to do and work in a mill, that was just what you did, that was the normal thing like, you just went to be with your friends.

(Freda)

Further evidence from Roberts (1995a) supports the point that young women drifted into a job without much thought or conscious choice (p.52). Roberts also found that the women in her study had not thought about developing a career or taking a job with prospects for advancement, family and home being the dominant concerns in their lives (p.239).

There were three notable exceptions among my interviewees for whom working in textiles was a positive decision. One went against her parents wish for her to be a tailoress and went into textiles because all her friends were going and she wanted to be with them (Irene). She was an only child and family finances permitted her to have a choice. This course of action was very unusual for a

child, male or female, to disobey their parents. Roberts (1995a) states that it was 'virtually unheard of for an adolescent to act in defiance of their parents' wishes' (p.51). Another did not want to stay on at school and thought working in a mill sounded interesting:

I just wanted to start working. I left school when I was 15. I honestly can't tell you why I went into textiles, why I thought about it, but I'd heard about it and just decided it sounded interesting you know? (Maureen)

Her main motivation was that she wanted to earn her own money and the pay was good in textiles. A third could not remember why she went to work in a mill (Freda). She started work in 1962 when there were more opportunities for girls but she chose to go with her friends. The mill she went to work in was close to where she lived.

The rest of the women interviewed describe being told where they would work. None of the women interviewed remember any kind of career advice and all of them left school at the first opportunity. Two of the women describe enjoying school, being good at their lessons and expressed a desire to stay on but were unable to because their income was necessary to assist the family finances. The women nearly all went to work in a mill where members of their family were already employed. They describe aunts, uncles, cousins and siblings, as well as their parents, all working at the same place. All the women describe how easy it

was to get a job in textiles. They started their working lives in the years between 1930 and 1962 when the textile industry, whilst not exactly booming, was still the largest employer in the area with plenty of jobs available.

Two women (Celia and Alice) describe leaving school on a Friday and starting work the following Monday in jobs chosen for them by their parents.

Two women both went to work where they could earn the most in order to make the maximum financial contribution. One (Doreen) had to learn to be a mender aged 15 because her father had just died and her mother needed the money and the other started work as a weaver aged 14 to supplement the family income:

Dad said I could go hairdressing – I wanted to be a hairdresser, but we hadn't a lot of money and I knew we wanted money, there wasn't a lot of money in those days, so I decided I'd go in the mill.(Gladys)

As can be seen, some of the women had aspirations to pursue other careers such as hairdressing, work in a flower shop or be a kennel maid. One woman (Joyce) wanted to work in the chemist shop as she liked the idea of a clean, white overall. These jobs were not perceived by their parents to pay well enough so were unacceptable. One woman (Nancy) wanted to train as a nurse but because it meant living away from home her father would not let her. Another wanted to be a dressmaker (Olive) but the cost of the training was prohibitive. Two of the women moved into textiles after doing another job straight after

school. Lilian worked in a warehouse in the town centre where she was unhappy and the pay was poor. Another worked in a firework factory which was close to her home but which she hated. This woman disliked her job in the firework factory so much that she cycled to a mill three miles away from where she lived to get another job:

I hated this firework job so one morning I pedalled past and went to Milnsbridge. I stood outside John Crowther's, I was 15 then and they had a big commissionaire, uniformed you know, and he said what are you wanting. I said I'm wanting a job. (Enid)

She describes the commissionaire on the mill gates saying she looked like a mender and he took her inside to meet the 'Mrs Mender' who offered her a job on the spot. It took several days to pluck up the courage to tell her parents what she had done and that she had handed in her notice at the firework factory. Her mother was extremely unhappy at first because of the distance she would have to travel each day. However as the starting date for the new job approached, she recalls that her mother 'softened' and said that menders were 'dressed up people' and bought her a new coat and beret to wear for her new job, as well as overalls to wear when she got there. Her mother eventually seemed proud that she had got a job as mender.

Many of the women can remember the amount of their first wage. In 1920 (Joyce) earned 10/- (50p) a week as a trainee mender. In 1953 (Doreen) earned £1.11/7 (£1.60) for the same job. Initially all the women were paid the same amount every week whilst they were training; once trained they moved on to piece rate. Piece rate meant they were paid a set amount for each of the pieces they mended. The faster they worked the more money they earned.

Despite earning their wages, some of the new workers found that they did not have any control over how it was spent and they had to hand it over to their mother: this was known as 'tipping up'. Four of the women describe 'tipping up' all of their wages to the family purse and being given a small amount of spending money in return. The practice of 'tipping up' is referred to by both Roberts (1984) and Bornat (1977). Despite their studies looking at women working in the textile industry a generation earlier than some of the women in this study, the practice clearly continued. Handing over all their earnings meant that although they were working the women still had no financial independence. None of the women in this study who describe 'tipping up' argued against the practice, they just did it without question. The spending money allocated back to the women doesn't appear to have been calculated on what they might actually need. Celia remembers her mother keeping the pounds and getting the shillings and pence back. There were ways to recoup some of the money however:

'There was a canteen which we went to but sometimes I just used to take a sandwich and then keep the money that I'd been given. Because I had to pay, you know in those days you didn't really pay board, you gave all your money.' (Kathleen).

None of the women can recall any kind of formal interview process. To obtain a job as a mender was a bit more difficult as these jobs were most prized because it was fairly clean, quiet and was done sitting down. Some of the women describe a system where their name was put down at a mill by a relative who already worked there and then being sent for when they left school. It was usual for the girls going into mending to either have a relative or close friend already working in the mending room. Roberts (1984) found in her study that most of the women she interviewed found themselves working directly under a relative or someone known to the family (p.45). This ensured that a similar level of control was exerted at work as at home.

During this period the women describe being able to leave a job and find another almost immediately:

But then if you got tired of working in once place, you see, in those days you could give your notice in, you could go round and find another mill that you thought was a better option, with better money schemes, and you

could literally in a week find another job and move on. Which was good.

(Lilian)

Both Roberts (1995a) and Bornat (1977) describe frequent and easy changes of jobs within the textile industry. Some employers were aware that it was easy for their workers to find other jobs and did want to hold on to good workers. One mender describes the occasion when she was getting married and was going to leave the mill as her married home was a lot further away. The management of the mill offered to pay her bus fares and give her a fixed wage, which she said was at a good rate, if she would stay (Kathleen). She did not take them up on their offer which was a shame because within a year she was back after her marriage broke down.

A change in job happened for a number of reasons. Some like Maureen moved for more money and less travelling. Another got married and moved away from the village and was able to find another job doing the same thing at a mill much closer to her new home. One woman, who would have been about 14 or 15 at the time, was sacked for being cheeky to a foreman:

'I lost my job for cheeking a foreman but went straight down to Slawit (Slaithwaite) and got another at Globe 'cos I daren't go home and tell me dad. But he already knew when I got there because he was friends with the manager and he'd seen my dad in between. (Gladys)

The manager had been up to the house expecting her to find her at home to say she could have her job back. Her father told her that she should not cheek her elders, but as she pointed out: 'We were only kids then – 14 or 15 weren't we and full of devilment.' She worked a week at the new job and then went back to the original one as it was nearer home.

The fact that everyone knew each other or was related could lead to tensions as described above. These girls were only 14 or 15 years old and it would have been difficult for them to understand the nuances of the differences between a social and working relationship if one of her relatives or a close family friend was also her superior at work. Joyce describes an occasion where she was told off about the way she spoke to the foreman who was a family friend. She wasn't rude or abusive but not deferential and he took objection to being spoken to as an equal. He said he would tell her father, who also worked in the same mill. Luckily her father was very supportive and backed her up. Gladys describes another incident involving her sister Hilda. Hilda was a pattern warper and need to speak to someone in the office regarding a work related problem. She asked at the door for 'John'. When he came out he said 'it's Mr Smith to you'. The exchange continued with Hilda telling him he was John when they were in the same class at school, so it was still John. Although the women had respect for authority and appeared to do what they were told, they were not without spirit

and would challenge when the need arose. Roberts (1984) found evidence of this in her study (p.47).

The tensions due to working with and being supervised by close family members or members of extended family as described above were also identified by Bornat. In her study of women textile workers, two of the women felt that they were treated more harshly than others by a male relative in charge so that he could not be accused of favouritism (Bornat, 1986, p.90). The fact that the women were surrounded by family members at work meant that parental control of their behaviour extended into the workplace and that anything they did would be reported back. Whilst there may have been a physical distinction between the private and public sphere, there was no real mental one. The women were expected to behave in the same way at work as they did at home and there would seem to be little opportunity to develop any individuality. For a shy, quiet or timid individual being surrounded by supportive and familiar people would have its benefits, but for others never being able to get away from their family could have been stifling, although none of the women in my study gave that impression.

Most of the women went to work in mills either in the village where they lived or in the next village. Even though it might be the nearest mill, the journey could involve a long walk or two buses. As described previously, Enid lived three miles away from where she worked and her journey to work by bus and tram took an

hour. As the working day started at 7.30, this meant a very early start. The distance she lived from work impacted on the friendships she made as it was too far to socialise with the people she worked with on an evening or a weekend as they lived local to the mill. Alice cycled a distance of eight miles a day. Celia walked to work as there was no other form of transport available from the village where she lived to the village where the mill was. Her journey took 45 minutes and she did it in all weathers.

Some employers put on special transport for the workers who lived further afield. John Crowther's, a mill in Milnsbridge in Huddersfield, was very large and the workforce could not all be sourced from the immediate area. Lilian describes getting the workers' bus from the village where she lived. One woman remembers an occasion when the buses stopped running because of snow. The snow had fallen whilst they were at work so she and her friends had to walk home, a distance of three miles:

It snowed once and they stopped the buses and we walked up from Slaithwaite to Marsden, above our knees in snow. We sang all the way home and it was in the paper a week after. It said 'young ladies left the Globe Worsted Company and their lusty voices filled the air'. I can remember that all these years! (Gladys)

She describes this as a happy time and something good to look back on and remember.

### **Working married women**

The majority of the women interviewed for this study worked in their role in textiles from leaving school to retiring or being made redundant, with most of them working after they were married whilst having small children to take care of. The women describe working practices to cope with this which today are thought of as innovative but were in fact in existence decades ago.

The driver once again for continuing to work after having a family was financial. Even if their husband was working full time, many found that they needed to work to keep the family going. This is supported by evidence from Roberts (1995b). She found that women in the textile industry who continued to work after the birth of their children did so due to financial necessity (p.64). As stated previously the pay in textiles was very good. One example of how good the pay was is given by Betty. At the time she left her job as a mender to have her first baby in the mid 1960s, she was earning three times the amount her husband earned as a trainee engineer; her wage was paying the mortgage.

One woman who did not go back to work for extra income but because she wanted to was Irene. This woman had gone against her parents' wishes to work in a mill when they wanted her to be a tailoress. She had started work

aged 14 in 1928 as a hank winder and had left when she got married. She had three children and her husband had a well-paid job. When her youngest child went to school, she got a part time job as a shader in a local mill without telling her husband. He did not want her to work – this would be the early 1950s. She describes him being cross when he discovered what she had done but he was not able to stop her working.

Although the women were juggling work around childcare and all the other tasks involved in running a home, none of them mention receiving any support around the house from their husbands. Roberts (1995b, p.6) refers to this as the ‘double burden’ which women carried, combining paid work with running a home and caring for a family. How the women in this study achieved this is described later.

One woman (Nancy) describes how, when her daughter was a few months old, her husband decided that as all she had to do all day was look after the baby she could do some mending at home. He arranged for her to have pieces brought from the mill where he worked. She did the mending on the kitchen table in front of the sitting room window where the light was best. This arrangement required that she moved the piece, which weighed between 13kg and 30kg depending on the type of cloth, and the kitchen table backwards and forwards twice a day.

Doreen also recalls mending at home. She was lucky enough to have a proper mending table. This was the correct width for the piece so none of the cloth hung over the edge of the table and she was able to move herself across the

cloth instead of having to move the cloth from side to side as well as down. A mending table also had a sloping top so she was able to look across at the cloth instead of down which was less wearing on the shoulders and neck. However, it was very large and took all the space in the kitchen so it had to be folded down and propped up against the wall every day. The pieces themselves had to be stored and in a small house the only place was up the stairs. Both Doreen and Nancy recall there sometimes being more than one piece laid on the stairs for the whole family to negotiate round. Both remember the smell of the cloth permeating the whole house and working late into the night to get the work done if the pieces were going to be collected the next day. Doreen remembers being worried when a 'finish piece' arrived in its special cotton cover. This meant putting a dust sheet down on the kitchen floor and making sure the children did not go anywhere near it or touch it. Celia also did mending at home when her children were small. The family lived with her mother who was ill so she was looking after her mother, her children and mending during the evening at the kitchen table. Although this was from choice, as it meant she could carry on working, it was still very difficult:

I used to tackle it when I'd done my ordinary jobs, when the children had gone to bed at night. Sometimes I used to mend whilst midnight. Depending on how urgent job was. They would bring here on a Friday night and want it back on Monday morning.' (Celia)

To cope with childcare for school age children, the women who worked in a mill or in a mending room worked part time school hours. Again the proximity of the mill to home and the local school made it convenient. During the school holidays a number of different arrangements for childcare were described. Pollert (1981) in her study of women workers in a tobacco factory in the UK in the 1980s describes the women with children having complex systems for dealing with childcare, shopping and housework (p.111). These systems relied upon help from relatives and everything running to a strict timetable. The transcript of oral testimony from A0036 in the Bradford Heritage Recording Unit Collection, describes how difficult it was for some of the women she worked with who had children to manage. The mill they worked in had allowed flexible working arrangements but this had been stopped even though it worked well and everyone affected in the workforce was happy with it. The change meant an increased burden on grandmothers.

Olive, who was a weaver, described getting help from neighbours and family for the Christmas, Easter and half term holidays but effectively resigning from her job for the six week summer holiday. She would then be re-employed and return to the same job when the children went back to school in September. This worked but she had no pay during the time she was off. Irene was told that she could take her children to work with her during the school holidays as there was sufficient space. But she declined as she wanted the children to be playing

outside not cooped up in a mill all their holiday. The neighbour she went to work with also had children so they took it in turns to go to work, the one at home looking after all the children. This meant they had at least half a wage each and the firm had one full time person during the holidays, a solution which pleased everybody. Only one woman mentioned her husband assisting with childcare:

So I went there on the evening shift. Ken was on shifts. He would come in and put the kids to bed, they're bathed you know, and I would go off on my 6.00 to 10.00 I think it was, mending. And that was good, yes it was good and it was good money. (Joyce)

Kathleen describes how she and a friend approached the management of a mill in 1975 to suggest a job share, which they accepted. She worked the afternoon shift and her friend did the morning one. It was the first time this had been done at that mill and became very popular as it helped women out with childcare and also 'the bosses got two of us for the price of one'.

### **First impressions and training**

Most of the women interviewed could remember their first impressions of the textile mill. All referred to the particular smell of the wool which pervaded all areas of the workplace. This smell, which clung to the pieces, permeated the houses of those who did mending at home. The women who were weavers remembered the noise. The noise of the looms was so loud that they learned to

communicate with signs and to lip read. None of the weavers I spoke to had been given ear protection; as a consequence they were now suffering from work related hearing loss in their later years. Even women who were not weavers referred to the noise of the looms, Hilda remembers the looms being on the floor below where she worked as a pattern warper and the noise coming through the floor.

The training the women received for what was going to be a skilled and specialised job, varied in length and process from mill to mill. Some of the women describe a quite formal, structured approach to training and others worked alongside more experienced workers who taught them the basic skills. The length of the training described by the women varied from a few weeks to three years depending on the system adopted in individual mills.

Gladys was a weaver and describes working alongside another weaver who taught her how to do it. She says she made lots of mistakes to start with. Gladys clearly remembers the weaving process and where and how mistakes could happen within it. Olive was also a weaver and in 1928 she paid a friend 5\ (25p) a week to teach her to weave. She thinks it only took two weeks to learn after which she was given her own loom. Hilda, who is Gladys's sister, worked as a pattern warper. She too learned her trade by working alongside someone else and watching how it was done. She then did it herself under supervision until she was competent on her own.

The women who went on to be menders describe being taught by another experienced mender. They all started by being given small pieces of cloth to practice on. The training on the small pieces of cloth took a long time. The length of time it took to become a qualified mender and be able to do pieces alone seems to vary either in reality or in the women's memory. The timescales they describe are between 18 months and three years.

Peggy worked in a mill where there was a dedicated 'mending school'. This was housed in a room with desks and a blackboard where no actual mending took place. In addition to working on small pieces of cloth, the trainee menders had to work from graphs and there was a teacher writing things on the blackboard. The regime was very strict with no talking allowed and homework to be completed in the evening. She remembers having to pass an exam at the end of the training and the feeling of pride when her work was pinned on the notice board as an example of excellence. Several women describe the mending room 'nursery'. This was where the new starters were put to learn and was next to the mending room. There would be girls at varying stages of expertise in here depending on when they had started their training. Lilian gives a very graphic description of how the training to be a mender progressed. The first 'shock to the system' being the realisation that she would be spending most of her day with a needle in her hand when she did not like sewing. She describes a 'rickety row' of wooden benches in front of the mending tables, with girls sitting there with cloth right in front of their faces:

Now it wasn't bad for a beginning because they gave you a piece of cloth which was like darning, and pulled a thread out which was very easy, you went over one stitch and under the other. But it was learning to hold your needle because it was, with 'em being longer you had to put them against your fingers in a different sort of way than holding an ordinary sewing needle. So that wasn't too bad, so you got these little pieces of cloth, you were going under and over, under and over and then you graduated, they pulled two threads out. So this was how you went on and it was alright, you learned to do different patterns until you graduated on to birdseye. And after you learned your patterns then you got to graduate onto pieces which were 70 yards long. I hated it, 70 yards long and they used to bring them up and unroll it and throw it over this table and they said 'right, you're going to learn how to knot'. Well it was these threads that the weavers had broken in the weaving shed and they'd knotted them together and before any piece went anywhere you'd to pull all these knots up for 70 yards with these burling irons. Until you got used to it you used to wear a groove in your finger, you know, you'd to put a plaster round. An you were at it from half past seven in a morning and you might have ten minutes break in the middle of the morning, half an hour at lunchtime, ten minutes again in the afternoon and that was our day.

(Lilian)

Alice describes the room where she learned to mend as being 'grotty' at the top of the building up a lot of stone steps: 'I always remember the smell, the grease and the cloth.'

The practice of the older women workers sharing their knowledge and experience with the younger ones did not just apply to working techniques. One woman (Kathleen) describes how working with all age groups 'really opened my eyes'. She was 15 and describes herself as 'very green' and listening to her fellow workers talking about their husbands and what married life actually entailed taught her more about real life than she learned from her mother at home.

As well as learning to be a mender, the new recruits had other duties, some of which had nothing to do with mending. These ranged from numbering up the pieces as they came off the loom to shopping and cleaning. All the trainee menders describe extra jobs, some they enjoyed such as shopping as it got them out of the mill and created extra income, other jobs, such as cleaning, were not so popular.

Several women describe being 'numberers' as well as learning to mend. This entailed sewing a number on to a small piece of fabric, either by sewing machine or by hand, and attaching it to each piece as it came off the loom. The number was recorded in a ledger with a description of the cloth and who had woven it.

Other work related tasks trainee menders might be expected to perform included running errands for the menders such as getting yarn from the weaving sheds, helping lifting the pieces or 'cuttling up' (See Appendix Three).

Tasks given to the trainee menders which were not work related differed from mill to mill. Betty, Freda and Maureen all recall shopping for the menders on a regular basis. There would be a rota so the trainees took it in turns. They would go round the mending room in pairs with a notebook and get everyone's list and the money. They might have been getting sandwiches or fish and chips for lunch or more likely grocery shopping for the menders' family evening meal. A0005 recalls doing errands when she first started work. She got breakfast for the rest of the menders and their shopping. She liked doing this as she got paid.

Another woman interviewed by the BHRU (A0018) who was a weaver, recalls getting commission from the shopkeeper when she bulk bought everyone's sandwiches. She also enjoyed getting out of the mill and the noise to run the errands. Many of the women working in the mending room were married and working full time so shopping was difficult. Having someone to do this for them would have been a great help. Freda did not like having to do the shopping :

You had to be a shopper for the menders in the mending room. I didn't like that at all. You had to go round with a little notepad and take the money and go to the shops in Linthwaite. We had to take it in turns. Everybody in the nursery had to go and do that. I didn't like that at all.  
(Freda)

Others such as Maureen quite enjoyed it as it meant getting out of the mill and had its perks: 'Sometimes if there were a penny or twopence in the change they'd say to you, you keep it, you can have it for going.'

Nancy used to sell biscuits to the menders every morning before they started work. Kathleen remembers making tea for all the menders:

You had to brew up for everybody in the room. So you'd to go round, collect all the pots, brew up for them and bring it back and you did that about four times a day. Which you got 6d (2 ½ p) a week for that off everybody, so quite a lot.'

Nancy and Doreen recall having to clean the mending room on a Friday afternoon:

On a Friday if it was your turn, it went in rotation, you had to sweep the whole of the mending room, put sand down and do the stone steps.

Sometimes you had to wash the stone steps. (Doreen)

When they washed the stairs, they scrubbed half way up and half way down from the mending room floor. The most junior members of the workforce from the floor below and the floor above would be doing the same so all the steps were cleaned. Nancy remembers having to clean the ladies toilets.

Doreen and Nancy did not do any shopping for the menders as once all the workers were in the mill no-one was allowed out until lunch time. This meant other more ingenious ways of getting shopping were devised by the menders and the local shopkeepers. Several women remember baskets containing a list and money being lowered out of the mending room window on a string to a waiting shopkeeper and being pulled back up with the goods:

There was a man used to come round with buns and things and we used to lower a basket out of the window and shout down what we wanted and this man used to put it in and we used to hoik the basket up. (Nancy)

### **The working day routine**

The working day typically started at 7.30 am. The time was strictly kept and the gates to the mill were locked at 7.30 so if the workers were late they were locked out for at least 15 minutes. This time was docked from the women's pay. There was the added shame of having to walk in late in front of all the other workers. Some of the women describe having a break for breakfast at about 9.00 am. The lunch break was only half an hour which gave very little opportunity to do anything other than have something to eat and drink and possibly a cigarette before going back to work. There was certainly no time to venture very far from the mill. Most of the women took their own sandwiches for lunch as only the larger mills had canteen facilities. The women who worked in textiles before World War Two describe going home for lunch (dinner) as most canteen facilities

were introduced during the war. One mender remembers taking soup and pies and warming them up on 'the pipes' (Maureen). These were the heating pipes which carried hot water around the mill and which were of a much larger bore than central heating pipes are today. Fridays were the universal fish and chip day, with either a junior member of staff being despatched to pick up the order for everyone or an enterprising fish and chip shop owner making the delivery himself. There would be a break in the afternoon for tea and then finish at 4.30 pm or 5.00 pm. Some of the women interviewed who worked in the 1930s and 1940s remember having to work Saturday mornings until 12.00 as mandatory whilst those who worked later said that Saturday working was optional overtime and used if they were saving up for a holiday or needed extra money for another reason.

As can be seen, the days were long and, to some of the women who did not want to be there at all, very boring. To pass the time many of the menders describe the radio playing in the mending room and them singing along to Workers' Playtime. One mender (Lilian) said it was a 'good job she had an imagination' as to get her through the monotonous days she would make up stories to tell to the rest of the menders. Her description of the mending room and the menders sitting in rows at the mending tables as being like 'battery hens'. This woman also describes singing to pass the time:

Then one day, we used to get so bored and we all used to sing, and me and Christine, we used to go in partners, Christine and I were singing 'Throw open wide your window dear' and hopping and skipping and Mrs Mender came in and she flung the door open and said 'You'll go out of the bloody window if you don't sit down and get on with your work. (Lilian)

As well as listening to the radio and telling stories in the mending room, Lilian recalls one of the older menders who had been a dancer in her youth, bringing in her tap shoes. She would treat them all to a bit of tap dancing during the day and sit down quickly when they heard the boss coming. Not that they were fooling anyone because they were told to stop 'jigging and jogging' by 'Arthur' the boss who sat in his office down the corridor. Another occasion she recalls one of the menders having a special birthday. This woman was a big fan of the Red Arrows. The menders trimmed her mending table up with foliage from the wood and had a party for her in work's time. The party included the rest of the menders charging up and down the mending room in formation pretending to be the Red Arrows. A further escape she recalls is when she dressed up and pretended to be the wife of an Arab who was interested in buying the mill. This was to relieve the boredom and tedium of the working day as well as to amuse her work colleagues. A0018 was a weaver and her experiences support those described by the women in this study in that she felt she 'had to do something' to

get through the working day. She describes how they would sing in the weaving shed all day, the rhythm of the machinery starting up another song.

### **Pay and conditions**

The pay structure for all the women interviewed was two tiered. They were paid a fixed wage whilst learning which was quite low. Some of the weavers describe having to pay someone to teach them at the beginning. The amount paid was quite small and for only a short period of time. One weaver said she paid a friend 5/- (25p) a week for two weeks to be taught (Olive). Bornat (1977) describes how due to family and kin networks within a mill it was possible to bypass payment for teaching by keeping it within the family unit (p.111). If there was no family member able to do the teaching then a reciprocal arrangement could be made with a family friend. This small outlay for training was considered acceptable to their parents in comparison to the larger amounts over a much longer period of time required to be paid for other training such as for dressmaker or tailoress as mentioned previously. The menders similarly describe being paid a wage whilst learning and when deemed sufficiently skilled to work on their own, were paid 'for what they did' (piece work). This meant the faster they worked the more they were paid.

A number of the women menders interviewed describe tensions within this system of payment. Responsibility for distributing the different pieces fell to 'Mrs Mender'. Mrs Mender was the name given to the woman who ran the mending

room. She would be an experienced mender herself and as well as being an expert resource to support the menders, she had the task of keeping order amongst the women in the mending room. The pieces were graded as they came off the loom taking into account how complicated the pattern was and the amount of faults requiring mending. Each piece was numbered and the information recorded in a ledger. Some weavers were much better than others and the name of the weaver was included in the ledger. Armed with this information Mrs Mender distributed the pieces to the menders. One mender (Doreen) said that Mrs Mender had her favourites and would give the easier pieces to them so they earned more and it was easier work. Another (Nancy) said you did not want to upset Mrs Mender but she did acknowledge that she had a hard job dealing with all those women. The menders all wanted to avoid doing pieces woven by poor weavers. One mender (Freda) still remembered the name of a bad weaver at the mill she worked at, describing her as the most 'shocking weaver she'd ever come across'.

It wasn't just Mrs Mender who knew who the bad weavers were, the menders who had worked longest knew who they were and that their pieces would be more time consuming to do and therefore came up with strategies to avoid getting them. One young mender (Lilian) remembers getting lots of pieces from the same poor weaver when she first moved into the mending room from the nursery and not realising for some time why she ended up with the worst pieces.

This is an example of how the female solidarity described by most of the women was not always the case.

At one mill the pieces were valued at between £3 and £5 each to mend (Alice). The mender here recalls being paid about £10 a week which meant she was doing three or four pieces a week. This rate of pay was very good in the late 1950s when according to a Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development report of February 2012, the average weekly wage was £7.50. She says it was about twice the pay of secretaries or shop workers. All the menders say the potential to earn a good wage was there, as long as you weren't late or did not go out for a cigarette every five minutes. Another woman (Nancy) earned £3 a week as a learner in 1958. Once she was trained she took home between £7 and £14 a week depending on the type of piece she got. One mender (Betty) recalls how a difficult piece could take up to three days to complete, whereas if she had easy ones she could do two a day. The fact that the pieces had different amounts attached to them meant that the menders did not get the same pay every week and had to keep track themselves of what they were earning. The disparity in pieces and the amount which could be earned meant it was crucial for Mrs Mender to get the distribution of easy/difficult pieces fairly throughout the menders to ensure good industrial relations. Whilst some menders, as previously mentioned, felt that the Mrs Mender abused her position, others thought that what piece you got came down to luck and wasn't based on a properly calculated decision.

Despite the fact that the women were on piece rates and their take home pay depended on working as fast as they could, both menders and weavers describe how they all helped each other out. This sense of solidarity and helpfulness comes across in all the interviews. If a mender was struggling either because the piece was extremely badly woven or if the pattern was challenging and making the mending very time consuming, her colleagues would help out with either time or expertise:

Sometimes it took us days because if there was a wrong end from one end to the other – you're talking about 300 yards. If it was urgently wanted, that piece would be spread all round the room on so many yards for each mender. (Joyce)

Mending pieces properly was a very skilled and time consuming job. In an effort to increase the speed at which the pieces were turned around in one mending room the bosses encouraged what one mender described as 'bodging' (Lilian). This meant not doing the job properly but just doing sufficient to make the piece look acceptable:

This girl had an idea, she was what we called a bodger. She used to pluck the fluff off. So this was a very bodged up job. But we were finding that this was going through. She couldn't mend, she couldn't mend like the girls who'd been taught to mend properly but she got away with it.

Then time and motion came in where you got paid by the inch not the piece. Now if you were a bodger this was very good and she developed her skill very well. But for the rest of us it was hard so we weren't earning the money we should have done. So you had to learn to bodge. You lost the art of mending properly which was a shame really. (Lilian)

One weaver (Gladys) described how she was taught by another weaver who pointed out all the potential areas for a new weaver to make mistakes. She had only one loom and had to watch it constantly to ensure it was running properly and the pattern was forming correctly. One thing which could go wrong was the thread breaking in the weft. If this happened the loom would have to be stopped. She describes how all the other weavers around would come to help, either with needles to repair the damage or to help pull it back to before the damage occurred. This weaver talks about a 'fussy' mender who would complain about the slightest fault in the cloth. It was interesting to hear her point of view as a weaver to compare with the views of the menders I interviewed who complained about bad weavers.

All the women I interviewed describe in one way or another how they were expected to take personal responsibility for their work and if it wasn't good enough, to rectify it themselves. This would also incur a financial penalty as earning stopped whilst fixing a mistake. The menders would have all the pieces they did checked and if mistakes had been made or faults missed they would be

called to put it right. This created a culture where attention to detail was key and the menders had to 'make sure everything was right before it left you' (Betty, Doreen, Freda):

If you missed anything in the mending room when it got down into the finishing they used to fetch you down and you had to put it right, but they also knocked it off your wage as well. So you made sure, or tried to make sure, that everything was right before it left the mending. (Freda)

The weavers' work was checked as it came off the loom and if really poor quality they would not be paid (Gladys). The weavers could also be called to the mending room (Joyce). This would only be to point out the mistake and to take more care in the future as it wasn't possible to take it back and do it again at that point.

### **Employer and employee relations**

All the women interviewed were prepared to take responsibility for their mistakes and put them right, they were not, however, prepared to accept the blame for someone else's and would stand up to the 'bosses' on these occasions. Two women described situations where they had been called to the office to explain their work. One's job was to check the finished pieces before they went out to the cloth merchant (Irene). She said that the reputation of the firm was in her hands and it was her responsibility to ensure that only the best quality cloth was

sent out and to report any faults she found. She reported one piece as being substandard to the mill owner's son, the traveller and the head weaver. They all agreed that it was acceptable to go out. When it was returned from the merchant, the mill owner was extremely angry and she, along with others, was called into a meeting with him. She describes how the men stood around looking at the cloth not saying anything. So she spoke up and told the owner what had gone on before the cloth went out, as she did not see why she should have been blamed for someone else's decisions and it was clear they weren't going to own up. Another woman, who was only about 18 or 19 years old at the time, remembers standing up to the mill owner's son when he tried to blame her for some poor work (Joyce).

We'd some really good times. Lovely times when I think back and we all stuck together and I don't know why but they made me like, it would have been the shop steward or whatever it was. I forget what they called me now. So if anything went wrong or if we didn't think we were having fair play it was me that to go down into the office, you know, to look. (Joyce)

Many of the women recall there being a trade union in the mill they worked in. At some it was a closed shop and they had to join (Doreen). This mender believed that joining the union conferred no benefits as the textile union was not as good at looking after their workers' rights in comparison to the engineers' union for example. One mender recalls all the menders joining the union and then

requesting backing from the union to resolve a work related issued only to have the support refused:

We decided to join this union and we paid our money in and then we wanted something doing. What happened was they had put some bins at the side of us. I was next to the back row, and they put these bins like big dustbins. We thought, we don't want these at the side of us. So we said right, we don't want these at the side of us and they said well you'll have to have them. So we said we're going to the union. And the union wouldn't do anything about it, so we decided to come out of the union and that were it! (Freda)

Another mender recalled the menders going on strike over pay in around 1961:

I mean we did go on strike once. It didn't last very long, it was for pay. They had put everything up, it was when everything had to go up and for each piece you got X amount, it was only pennies more. But what they'd done, they'd made the pieces longer. So you were no better off. So we all went on strike and it was when Mr Burhouse were main man. So he came down and he said right, he says you can please yourself, he says you can go home and I can fill this room in 10 minutes. So we didn't go home and that were end of that. It were different then. (Kathleen)

The fact that the mill owners could change the length of the piece resulting in the menders being financially disadvantaged without the textile workers union being involved in any kind of negotiation, does support the view that Doreen stated previously that the union was not that effective.

It would appear from most of the interviews that industrial relations were good and that either disputes were settled quickly or there were no disputes the women could recall. Roberts (1984) also noted that the women in her study did not go on strike or become involved in organised disputes with employers. She attributed this to 'hierarchical deference, paternalism and co-operation' (p.46). One of my interviewees claimed the reason for such good working relationships was that they all had to get on as they all lived in the same village (Kathleen). Roberts (1984, p147) found the majority of women in her study did not go on strike or become involved in disputes or conflicts with their employers.

All of the women interviewed describe an industry and working conditions based on patriarchy. though they didn't describe it in that word. The mill owner and the mill owner sons are mentioned as being the 'bosses' and in charge of the running of the mill. One mender said that the mill owner visited all the departments in the mill every day and said good morning to everyone (Nancy). A0036 (from the BHRU collection) worked for the Foster family at Black Dyke Mills in Bradford. In the transcript of her oral testimony she states that she loved her time working there and had fond memories of the Foster family. She could

remember the type of car the owner drove and the celebrations which were held at the mill for Mr Lawrence Foster's marriage to an American.

As mentioned previously, two of the women interviewed in my study had altercations with the mill owner's son (Irene and Joyce). Whilst there may have been a degree of respect for the mill owner by both of these women, his son doesn't seem to have been conferred with any. There seemed to have been a feeling in these two instances that the son was arrogant and did not actually know the job.

More evidence of patriarchal authority is the works' outings which were organised and paid for by the mill owner and were common to most of the mills the women interviewed worked in during the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. Several of the women describe these days out in colourful detail and with a great deal of affection. For some it was the first time they had seen the sea or been to London:

In 1951 they had a right big do and we went to the Festival of Britain in London by train from Huddersfield. And when we got into London we went on a barge up the river Thames to Kew Gardens and we had a meal going up and then we came back and got off the boat into the Festival of Britain. It was brilliant that, I'll never forget it. I'd never been to London.  
(Celia)

This woman said she could have taken a friend if she wanted to but that person would have to pay for themselves. Many of the workers paid for their spouse to go. Doreen, a mender remembers going to London on a trip organised and paid for by the mill owner. She went to see a West End show, *Can Can*. She also recalls two of her colleagues missing the train back to Huddersfield because they had gone dancing at Hammersmith Palais.

The most common works outing destination however was Blackpool. One mender who worked at John Crowther's mill in Milnsbridge remembers the whole mill going on a trip to Blackpool during the working week:

There were 70 some buses went to Blackpool. Men and women were in separate buses, even though they were married they couldn't sit on the same bus, funny days then when you think back. Yes, we took Blackpool over for the day. It was strange because I'd never seen the sea. It was the first time you see. But I didn't tell anybody that I hadn't seen it. I was thrilled. We had free tickets to go on everything on the South Shore, all paid for, free meals. It was a real day that. (Enid)

Two others (Hilda and Kathleen) recall going to Blackpool on a specially commissioned train and having lunch and 'what you would call dinner' provided at the Winter Gardens. Another woman recalls how there would be a celebration

in the form of a party for all the workers to mark the coming of age of the mill owner's sons (Enid).

### ***Rituals and traditions***

Many of the women describe traditions such as those which were carried out by the mill owners to mark occasions in their family life, whilst other rituals were performed by the workers for themselves. Many of the women describe what happened in the mending room when one of them got married. The bride to be would arrive at work the day before the wedding to find her mending table all 'trimmed up' with bows usually made from toilet roll:

When you got married like they used to like dress you up and dress all your table up. That was a bit awful (laughing). At that time you really did used to go to work on trolley bus and you had to come home on trolley bus, so like when you got married you'd got all these fancy clothes on, they used to dress you up and make you up and put bows and balloons on your coat. (Freda)

It was humiliating to have to go home on the bus dressed up, but it was a rite of passage and a tradition which made you part of the group and something which your mother and aunties had gone through before you. Bornat noted that a weaver who was getting married would find a chamber pot tied on to their loom by a ribbon (1986, p.108). Another woman (Alice) recalls pushing a mender who

was getting married around the mill yard in a 'skip'. She said that nothing else happened to mark the occasion because the bosses did not want anyone to be wasting work's time. She said that they might let you get a 'bit silly' after 3.00 pm if someone was getting married but that they weren't allowed to make a big thing as it would stop the job getting done.

At Christmas many of the women describe the mending room being decorated with crepe paper festoons and balloons. There would be a Christmas outing which was organised and paid for by the menders themselves and not provided by the mill owners. Who attended this seemed to differ in different mills. In some all the menders, including Mrs Mender (the boss), would go. In others Mrs Mender was excluded from the festivities. No one mentioned getting a Christmas bonus, one woman describing the owners as being 'a bit tight fisted in that way' (Kathleen). This mender was working in the late 1960s when the wonderful whole mill outings seemed to have stopped as well.

Another woman (Lilian) recalls a mill dance being held every year at a night club in the centre of Huddersfield. It wasn't clear who funded this. She described it as the 'highlight of the year'. The dance generated a lot of excitement amongst the young women. They talked about it for weeks before and spent hours deciding what to wear and then getting dressed up to attend.

As well as fish and chips on Friday lunchtime, another tradition was described by a number of the women which took place during the 1960s:

We always used to go to on a Friday to work with us rollers in, you know. You'd been to bed in them at night, you'd put a headscarf on and you'd go to work and then perhaps a dinner time somebody would comb it out for you, somebody, you know, who could do it and that. Older ladies, you know, were just so helpful, and you know, just looked after you.

(Maureen)

Another woman (Gladys), a weaver, remembers doing her workmates' hair at lunchtime. She had wanted to be a hairdresser and had a 'bit of a flair' for it and was able to use this skill to benefit her colleagues.

This is another example of the camaraderie which existed in the mills which comes across clearly in the interviews. The willingness to help and support each other, not just with the work but in other ways, is a common thread.

There are many examples of such instances where the women helped each other, from sorting out problems on the weaving loom or in mending a difficult piece, to doing each other's shopping and hair. Several women talk about their 'partner' – the woman they worked alongside either as a weaver or a mender. The menders would work in pairs to 'cuttle up' the pieces as it was not possible to do this on their own. This would inevitably mean that one of the women would have to break off what she was doing to help. As we have seen, time was

money and breaking off would lead to a loss in wages, but none of the women resented this.

Another tradition which was mentioned by a number of the women was the Huddersfield 'Miss Textiles' competition. This competition began in 1949, according to the *Huddersfield Daily Examiner*, newspaper and continued into the 1960s which was when most of the women who mentioned it were involved. Anyone who worked in a textile mill could enter. There was a similar competition held in Huddersfield for a 'Miss Engineering' which was open to women who worked for engineering firms in the area. The 'Miss Textiles' competition involved heats being held in each mill with the winner going forward to a grand final in Huddersfield Town Hall. None of the women I spoke to had won the competition so they did not know what the prize was or what 'Miss Textiles' duties were.

The competition itself seemed to have been very popular and caused a great deal of excitement. One woman (Lilian) came first in her mill heat and won a suit length. She clearly recalls buying her outfit for the final from a very smart shop in Huddersfield and can still describe it in great detail. It was green, with a pleated top complete with a rosette. The skirt was very tight. She also recalls the black shoes she bought to go with it which featured a fur pompom on the front and which were too high to walk in properly. She also remembers a celebrity judge who was the actor who played Mr Archer in the radio series 'The Archers'.

Another woman (Betty) recalls not being able to enter the 'Miss Textiles' competition because her uncle was one of the judges. She said she wasn't bothered about this as she wasn't that kind of a girl who wanted to get all dressed up and be in the spotlight. Another woman (Maureen) entered the competition but did not go through to the final but the girl who did go through from her mill won the competition.

### ***Clothing***

Clearly recalling and describing items of clothing which the women wore for significant occasions in their lives was a theme which came up a number of times in the interviews for this study. I did not ask questions about clothing and the information was provided as supporting detail about something they had been questioned about. I did not notice this until I listened to all the tapes together.

The example above (Lilian) shows that remembering the clothes triggers sensory memories and the feelings attached to wearing them. The woman above describes the fur pom-poms, the tightness of the skirt and the pain of walking in the too high shoes. Another example is a woman who recalled her mother providing her with the necessary overalls for her first day as a mender, as well as buying her a smart navy blue coat and a beret (Enid). Her mother said she needed the new coat and hat because 'menders were dressed up people'. This is the woman whose mother was initially angry that she had left the firework

factory to find herself a job as a mender. The purchase of the clothes represents her mother's forgiveness and approval as much as wanting her daughter to look smart in her new job. According to Roach-Higgins (1995) dress confers identities on individuals as it communicates their position within social structures (p.13). In addition individuals learn to depend on dress to declare their identity to themselves and others and to maintain positive feelings of belonging (p.99).

Another mender (Joyce) recalls in great detail the outfit she wore for her wedding in 1940. Whilst it is not unusual for a woman to remember her wedding dress, what was more important here was the memories it brought back of her mother's opposition to her marriage and how her father provided the money and helped her complete the outfit. She was getting married by special licence as her husband to be was being sent overseas. She describes a turquoise coloured dress and a 'coatee' trimmed with Persian lamb. She also wore a wine-coloured velvet hat and suede shoes. Her father helped by having a pair of gloves dyed the exact same shade as the hat and shoes because 'you didn't get married without gloves in those days'. This woman was widowed later in the war and went on to remarry. She did not tell me what she wore for the second ceremony, she just described the cake which was covered in chocolate because there was no sugar to make white icing. This same woman remembered a taffeta gown she wore for a ball provided by the mill owners. She said she must have looked 'a right duck' but thought at the time that it was the 'bees knees'. There is evidence of women remembering clothing in the Bradford Heritage Recording Unit transcripts. One woman (A0018) recalled buying some silk stockings with her

first wages. Another (A0005) would 'tip up' all her wage and her mother would give a bit of spending money and provide her with clothes. She describes in detail one brown and cream outfit and how she felt wearing it. This is an extreme example of control being exerted by parents over their children. This woman was working full time and earning her own wage but was still not permitted to choose and buy her own clothes. Not only is she still being treated as child, but is not able to express her personality or individuality through what she wears. This same woman who was a mender describes that in a good week she could earn more than her father who was a weaver at the same mill.

### ***Leisure activities***

The women interviewed describe leisure activities which were organised or available through the mills. There were women and men's cricket teams (Freda) and crown green bowling teams. At one mill there were tennis courts (Peggy) and the woman who worked at this mill also remembers swimming in the mill dam.

When not working, the women recall a number of different leisure activities which they enjoyed. Roberts (1984) describes the women in her study participating in activities attached to the church and walking, which were free, as well as dancing (p.68). Roberts found that dancing was not only enjoyed but taken quite seriously, with women taking dancing lessons (p.68). Although not organised by the mill the women would usually socialise with their workmates. The main

activity was dancing. This activity features more often in the interviews than going to pictures. Most of the women I spoke to went dancing several times a week before they got married. Dances were held everywhere, in the town centre and all the villages around Huddersfield. One woman describes dances being held every week in the local mechanics hall in addition to those in neighbouring villages which were easily accessible by bus:

We went dancing every week and we used to go to Blackpool for half a crown (12 ½ p) on a Saturday night and we came back same night. We went by train. We danced all the big bands at the Tower you know. We used to have smashing times there. There used to be a load of dances on Saturday. There used to be through nights while 4.00 in the morning – we used to go home at 4.00. We used to go all over. (Gladys)

This woman loved dancing and still enjoys dancing whenever she can. The women remember dances being held at the Town Hall in Huddersfield and at Cambridge Road Swimming Baths. To create a dance floor at Cambridge Road baths, the full swimming pool was boarded over. Roberts also found that the women she interviewed found many opportunities to go dancing and they often went at least twice a week. She too found that dances were held in whatever premises were available such as dance halls, clubs and church halls (1984, p.69).

All the dances had live bands and one woman (Gladys) describes how her and her friends followed their favourite band. They would find out the different venues around the town where they were playing and turn up there. She recalls one occasion where they stayed too long and had to run about a mile for the last bus only to miss it. This resulted in a five mile walk home. Another (Rose) remembers going dancing three times a week when she first started work. It cost 6d (2½ p) on a Monday and a Thursday and 9d (4p) on a Saturday. The band leader of the venue they went to wore a tail suit. Langhamer's (2000) research supports this evidence of dancing being an extremely popular leisure activity amongst women. One woman said that dancing was 'our biggest pleasure, everybody danced' (p.58). According to Langhamer (2000) in 1951 there were 450 dance halls in the UK admitting three million dancers a week (p.64). It is not clear if this number included village halls and other venues which are mentioned by the women in my research. She noticed that dancing was not as popular with girls as the cinema which is in contrast to my findings (p.64).

One woman (Celia) had very strict religious parents and even when she was working, her social life involved church related activities. She had to attend church three times a day on Sunday and went to the church run youth club on evenings during the week. Here they put on plays and concerts which she enjoyed participating in. Leisure pursuits and activities organised by the church feature in Langhamer's research but again in contrast to my findings, her

research suggests that girls stopped participating in church activities once they started work.

When not dancing, most of the other leisure activities the women recall involved other physical activity. One woman (Enid) went to the swimming baths every day on her way home from work and at the weekend was in a cycling club. Another (Peggy) was a member of a running club and also went swimming a lot. All of the women I talked to walked a lot of miles each day either to get to the mill and back or to get to the bus stop. A0018 also describes walking everywhere, she said 'you just didn't ride'. This exercise on top of the dancing, swimming and cycling must have made them extremely fit, much fitter than their counterparts of today. Sport and physical exercise is discussed by Langhamer (p.77) and she cites organised cycling, rambling and swimming clubs which resonates with the experiences of the women in my research, although some participated in these activities in a non-organised way.

Some women describe reading and listening to the radio at home in their spare time but most of them said that they did not want to knit or sew once away from work. One woman (Joyce) said 'You don't find many menders wanting to have a needle in their hand after they've been there'. One of the women I spoke to (Betty) did have an unusual hobby – she used to go to the speedway in Manchester with boys.

None of the women mentioned going to pubs or drinking alcohol as a leisure activity, in a further contrast with today. Langhamer's research supports my findings that young women did not frequent pubs (p.71) as a leisure activity and research in 1959 stated that less than 10% of young women admitted to drinking alcohol as least once a week (p.73). Going to the pub was only referred to in my research as something the women I interviewed did not do (Celia and Maureen). These two women had very strict parents who did not allow them to drink and as they lived at home they had to abide by the house rules. The fact that the other women did not mention going to the pub doesn't necessarily mean they did not go, just that dancing was more important to them. Once married, the women in my study did not go dancing as often and describe going to each other's houses for supper and to play cards.

### **Collapse of the textile industry**

As discussed in Chapter 1, the textile industry in West Yorkshire effectively collapsed in the mid-1970s. The women in this study were highly trained and highly skilled in their craft, but these skills were not readily transferable into other areas of work. As previously demonstrated, none of them stayed on at school longer than the minimum leaving age and consequently did not have any academic qualifications to fall back on. The next section explores how they dealt with these changes and the strategies they employed to continue in employment.

During the good times in the 1960s the women moved from mill to mill for better rates of pay or conditions or to be closer to where they lived or to be with friends and family. During the 1970s moving from mill to mill now became a matter of following the work and possibly having poorer pay, less favourable working conditions and further to travel. Most of the women who continued to work in textiles describe how they moved on as mills closed down. One mender (Nancy) worked in a mill which had been family run since it started but was taken over and then finally closed down in 1976. She moved on to another mill which had the same model of production as the first one, having all the textile processes from the raw wool to finished cloth under one roof. She worked here for five years before, after celebrating 150 years in business, this mill too closed down. Her next move was to another mill close to her home. She worked here for two years but the working conditions were bad and she was forced to work weekends. Finally in 1983, she moved to a mill which had been taken over by a Belgian firm and only the weaving and mending processes were carried out there. At the day of our interview in 2008 she was still there although she has since retired. This woman had managed to negotiate her way through the changes and maintain and even improve her skills. The last place she worked produced 'superfine' cloth which retailed at £1,000 a suit length. She reflected on how times had changed from when she first started mending. In 1976 when the firm she worked for closed down, there were 40 menders in the mending room. They were mending worsted cloth, which is not as difficult to mend as superfine cloth. These 40 menders were mending 125 pieces a week which was

the same number of pieces as the seven menders in her final mending room were getting through in the same time.

Celia, describes being made redundant at least three times and moving from place to place wherever there was mending to be done. She went from a mill where all the processes were carried out to working in a mending room where pieces were brought in from all around the area. Mending here meant having to get used to a great variety of cloth and the working conditions were not very good. The variety meant that some of the younger menders struggled with the more complicated designs as they were not used to working on them. This made them slower and the work wasn't being turned round fast enough for the owners. As she was a very skilled and experienced mender she was asked to help out the ones who were struggling. She would not get an enhanced rate for doing this which effectively meant a reduction in her wages. She refused. The ensuing row led to another change of work place but she ended up in a better run establishment where she stayed until her retirement when she was 65 in 1986. Although this had taken place a long time ago she said it still 'rankled' that they would not pay her more and had threatened to 'suspend' her (Celia). The owners were clearly playing on the fact that work was scarce and thought that she would have no option but to do what they said. Luckily she had connections from the mills she had worked in before and an old boss had offered her a job on the spot when she rang to see if he knew of any openings for menders. Celia also describes working on very high quality fancy cloth towards the end of her

working life, which a lot of younger menders could not cope with. She also recalls mending some cashmere cloth with real gold thread running through it during the 1970s:

Before I finished I was doing cashmeres and gold thread at Moxtons. It was £1,000 a suit length. Frank Sinatra had one. And we made one for Jimmy Carter in America. James Callaghan had same initial and this gold stripe were the letters of their names. It was fabulous at Moxtons, that's where your cashmere and gold stripes were. It was brilliant. (Celia)

The gold thread used to cut into the finer cashmere thread so she had to be very careful doing the mending. At the end of each working day, all the spare bits of gold thread had to be handed back to be stored away carefully.

Another mender (Alice) who finished her working life aged 63 in 1999, also ended up mending in a mending room rather than a mill. She had a number of moves around as the mills closed down and the work dried up but managed to keep finding places to mend. She describes a similar situation to Celia in that she did not know what kind of cloth was going to turn up in the mending room or where it might come from. Sometimes it would be heavy woollen cloth and another day worsted. The quality of the manufacture of the cloth was variable too with some of it being very poorly woven which meant it took a lot of work to put right. She did not like the woollen mending as she was used to fine, fancy

worsted. She remembers the woollen pieces being really heavy to roll up and move about and that it took three of them to do it. She was poorly paid as the mending room owner took a big profit. She said she did not enjoy working in a mending room but had no choice as nearly all the mills had gone by this time. By the time she retired she was mending upholstery fabric which was a 'real come down' (Alice) and she did not like it at all. This seems to have been a really sad end to her career, to have her skills and expertise underutilised in this way.

As well as moving around to keep working in textiles, some of the women stayed in textiles but diversified slightly. One woman who had been a mender stayed at the mill she worked at when it changed from producing cloth to producing fibre for carpets by changing her role to that of a winder. She describes the firm having to move into carpets from cloth as 'suits were going out of fashion as jeans had come in' (Kathleen).

Another woman trained as a mender and worked in a mill from leaving school at 15 in 1962 to her son being born in 1970. In 1975 when her son went to school, she worked part time in a mending room but the work dried up and the mending room closed. She then took a 'temporary' job as a mender over the Pennines. At the time of our interview she was still there 27 years later but her role had changed from being a mender to being a mending teacher. In the 1960s she learned to be a mender in the 'nursery' by sitting alongside an older, more

experienced worker. To train menders in the twenty-first century requires an accredited qualification such as an NVQ as the women she trains will also get a recognised qualification:

I've done an NVQ in training, so I'm training. There's such a shortage of menders, people have gone out of it you know or just don't want to do it any more. (Freda)

Being flexible about where they worked and what jobs they did meant that those women who wanted to stay in textiles did manage to do so following the collapse of the industry and the closing down of the mills. Rouverol (2000) describes the experience of a woman who was made redundant in the 1980s following the closure of a poultry processing factory in a rural area of the USA which was the main employer in the district. The woman in this study was hampered in her search for another job by her lack of transferable skills and not having any higher educational qualifications in much the same way as the women in my sample. (p.70). When she does finally find another job she too experiences instability and inferior long term benefits in the same way the women in my study (p.76). Rouverol also makes the valid point which is applicable to my sample, that 'women, single parents especially, cannot easily pick up and move to another area in search of work' (p.71). Rouverol states that other factors motivate and influence women's choices beyond the concern of the individual (p.72) and when the employment options are limited, this woman as well as the women in my

study had to make the best of what was available in order to fulfil their family commitments. The woman describes being 'content but not content' by her new job. She did not really like it but it paid well and allowed her to live close to her family and stay within the community in which she played an active role (p.76).

Some of the women who did not want to stay in textiles took the opportunity of the mills closing down to change careers. One example of this is Doreen who had hated mending from the start. She had been forced to continue mending even after her children were born as the family needed the money and she could not do anything else. She describes this as being 'stuck'. In the mid 1970s she was divorced and the children were grown up so for the first time she had a choice about the work she did. The lack of formal qualifications did restrict her choice of occupation but she moved on to working in shops and restaurants which meant she met different people and she wasn't sitting behind a mending table all day. The recession of the 1970s and the decimation of the textile industry was a disaster for most people working in the industry but proved liberating for her.

### ***What the women were proud of***

At the end of each of the interviews I asked the women the same question – 'what are you most proud of during your time in textiles'?

The reaction to this question was usually a stunned silence as it was something none of them had really thought about before. They seemed to consider their

time in textiles as just a job of work. Once they had thought about the question, the responses fell into two areas. One was their pride in their skill in whatever branch of textiles they worked in. The other area was the pride in the friendships and working relationships they had built and maintained. This is supported by Roberts (1995a) as she states that the women in her study talked of two major sources of enjoyment from work. These were social contacts and friendships with other women and a pride in the skills they achieved (p.53). Sangster (1994, p.7) cites studies which found that women's narratives were liable to contain understatements and rarely mention personal achievements. This resonates with my findings in that most of the women were surprised to be asked to take credit for their achievements by stating what they were proud of and I sometimes got the impression that they felt a bit uncomfortable doing so. For example, in one of the tapes there is a really long silence whilst the question is considered by Maureen who was a mender:

Yes you did get satisfaction from doing a piece and getting to the end of it, especially if you had taken a long time and it was complicated. I don't think I ever thought about it as anything that stuck out, to be proud. I just enjoyed it and thought I'd always done a good job. That I'd been and done a good day's work, you know. But I wouldn't have thought at the time that it was brilliant or anything it was just I enjoyed everything about it, you know. (Maureen)

Finally she conceded that she got great satisfaction from completing a complicated or difficult piece but was still unwilling to take any personal credit but said she always felt she did a good job.

Some of the women would only acknowledge being proud of something they had achieved as a result of affirmation of their work from another source. For two of the women it was the fact that the boss where they worked had asked them to train others. This was proof to them that they were good at their job (Freda and Hilda). Another woman (Irene) was asked to come out of retirement to help out so she felt this was recognition of her ability. One woman said even though she was 'that sort who was always in bother' (Kathleen) 'they' asked her to stay when she said she was leaving to go to another mill because she was getting married and moving house. This made her proud that she had a skill that they wanted to keep. Another woman who also ended her career in mending - teaching young girls to mend, said she took a lot of pride in her work and teaching the young ones was a big responsibility (Celia). To make a decent wage they had to learn to 'quicken up' and this had on occasions proved difficult for them. She had had to sack one girl as she was never going to get the hang of it and be able to earn enough. Another mender said she was proud of what she achieved. She recalls wanting to get everything right the first time when she did a piece as if there was a problem she would be called into the finishing room to sort it out and she did not want to have to do that. One mender said that when she looked back she realised that she was good at her job, that she could help out others to sort out 'a

mess' (Alice). She said that it made her feel good to be able to do that and make something that was a mess right and look good.

Many of the women describe still being friends with the people they met and worked with in textiles, some of them from being 15 years old:

The friendships. I'm still friends with girls. And we were proud of turning good work out. That is, it learned us discipline. I didn't really like it, but it was a skill and I'm glad I've had that skill. And I'm glad I've known what it's like being like to be part of a team really and I've made a lot of good friends. (Lilian)

Roberts (1984) also describes the women in her study speaking 'warmly' about friendships they made at work (p.62). One woman said that although she did not have a choice about training to be a mender in the same mending room as her mother, she'd do it all again:

I would do it all again if I'd to go back to 15 again I would do it all again. Because you had a lot of fun. You had, I mean it sounds as if we hadn't much freedom but we, like I said we didn't know any different going from school to there .' (Kathleen)

Another woman (Maureen) who had had a number of different jobs in her life, said that mending was the one she thought about and talked about the most.

She said 'I really enjoyed it, it was great'. This woman and her two cousins who were also menders had discussed whether or not they still had the skills to do a piece. This woman and a weaver (Gladys) both expressed a wish to have another go – just to see if they could still do it.

The sense of friendship, camaraderie and mutual support comes across really strongly in the interviews. The majority of the women refer to the great atmosphere and lots of laughs. They talk about helping each other out and being one big happy family. These findings of happy memories and enjoyment in their work are in contrast to Roberts' (1984) findings. She says that the women's happy memories were outweighed by unhappy ones (p.62) and that more women disliked their time in textiles in general than liked it (p.59). The reasons given for disliking textile work by the women in Roberts's study were that they would have preferred to stay on at school or wanted to work at a different job such as embroidery. One describes being terrified of the woman she worked with and another could not bear the clattering noise of the looms (p.62). Pollert (1981) found in her study of women factory workers that the women talked about putting a brave face on things and making a virtue out of necessity (p.122). I did not get this impression from the women in this study. Although mainly not there by choice, I got the feeling that all of the women, apart from one (see below), generally enjoyed their time in textiles. One reason for the difference in findings between Pollert's sample and mine, could be that the women I spoke to were looking back and hers were still working in their jobs.

However, as a counterpoint to all the positive memories, there was one woman who did not like her time in textiles at all and even the passage of time had not softened her attitude towards it. She hated being a mender and did not like the atmosphere in the mending room:

It was a bit bitchy in the mending room. They'd talk about you and fall out with you and you know play heck about the woman in charge but they were all friendly with her really. So you just chose the people you thought were ok.

I didn't like the job, I didn't like the way you were confined in a room all day, sat at a table – I just didn't like it at all. I just hated it. But you go and you're there and you do it. And then it gets to be the only thing you know how to do.(Doreen)

This woman felt that she would have liked it better in another part of the mill where she could have moved around more. The only good thing was the friends, but she had known them from school anyway. When asked if there was anything she was proud of she replied flatly 'no', but did say she liked the feel of the cloth. She also said she liked to see the cloth in shop windows if she went anywhere with the name of the mill and Huddersfield woven into the selvedge. She said she did not feel part of the process of production of a world renowned product or take any pride in that. Her comments and way she spoke conveyed the

resentment that she had been forced to spend so much of her life doing something she disliked so much.

On reflection, was 'proud' the right word to use for this final question? I am sure that all the women felt that their contribution was valuable and valued. They all said they wanted to do a good job and knew they would be held to account if they did not. Roberts (1984) argues that the women in her study didn't undervalue their contribution and gained satisfaction from their achievements and acknowledged that they had a critical economic role (p.1). The women in this study reflect similar findings. Whilst not undervaluing their achievements to themselves, actually acknowledging them to someone else sometimes proved difficult and not something they were used to doing. In some cases they had to be encouraged to do so. At the start of some the interviews, or even when the first approach to talk about their work was made, many of the women expressed surprise that anyone would be interested in what they had to say. This was also experienced by Roberts in her interviews (p.8). At the end of the interviews the usefulness of their memories was brought into question again. When I said 'thank you very much, that was great' to one woman she replied 'was it really?' (Maureen). This scepticism about whether or not what they had to say was relevant or interesting was also found in the Bradford Heritage Recording Unit interviews. In one transcript, the woman textile worker says at the end of her interview 'I only hope I've been of some use' (A0005).

## **Chapter 4**

### **Discussion**

This chapter summarises the findings from the interviews and will include a discussion of the themes which emerged and how they compare or contrast with the findings of other commentators. I will also reflect on my experiences in the practice of oral history and how they compare with the theories described in Chapter 2. Crucially this chapter will show that I have answered the research question ‘what was it like to be a female textile worker in the Huddersfield area in the mid-twentieth century’.

My aim in completing this thesis was to find out what it was like to be a woman working in the textile industry in Huddersfield during the last century. The women I interviewed worked in different mills, in different roles and at different time periods. They all had individual experiences but analysis of their testimony did reveal a number of common threads. As the findings in Chapter 3 show, the most striking themes are solidarity, sense of community and fun, personal responsibility and satisfaction with their lives.

Many of the women recalled instances of them helping each other out – whether it is with a difficult piece, pulling back and repairing cloth on the loom during the weaving process or doing each other’s hair on a Friday during their dinner break. Most of the women had childcare and commitments to the home whilst working

full or part time. They describe a support system which enabled them to carry this 'double burden' which relied on family members, neighbours and each other. They recalled participating in community traditions such as trimming up the coat and mending table of a bride to be or the mill outing to the seaside. Many told of how they had to get their work right the first time or they would be called to account, lose earnings and how they did not want to let themselves down. The most surprising theme, bearing in mind that most of the women did not chose to work in textiles but were told they had to by their parents, was that most of them enjoyed their job. Time and time again I would hear that they had lots of fun and were one big happy family. The tape recordings feature lots of laughter as the women recounted their experiences.

The following quote from Joyce typifies the feeling I got from most of the interviewees: 'Oh they were good times. Your work was also your good times, you know. We'd life, we had'.

My findings on satisfaction and fun in the women I interviewed contrasts with those of Roberts (1984 and 1995a) who found that the women in her study did not enjoy working in the textile industry.

The reasons the women in this study gave for why they enjoyed their work differed, some liked working with other women as part of a group and others were proud of their skills and expertise. These findings are similar to those of

Bornat (1984) who also records this sense of solidarity and community in her study. She has quotes from women who state that their co-workers were friendly and helped each other out (p.107). Bornat also found that friendships continued outside the mill and that this mutual support was particularly important in times of hardship (p.108). However, whilst working relations within individual trades, such as weaving and mending, were supportive, Bornat did find that there was some antagonism between the two groups. She reports a system where weavers were fined for poor work and the fines then paid to the menders (p.110). In my study one weaver referred to a 'picky' mender (Gladys) and a mender recalled 'the most shocking weaver I'd ever come across' (Joyce). Apart from these two comments, I found no evidence of animosity between weavers and menders.

The Huddersfield area has a history of activism and radicalism and the textile industry has experienced turbulent industrial relations over the years. Bornat (1984) found that relationships between workers and management could at sometimes be strained. She states that 'none of those I interviewed presented an account from which conflict was absent' (p.99). This is in contrast with my findings. The women in my study describe only minor disputes which were quickly resolved. I found that the women were either not interested in joining a trade union or felt that there was no point as the union was ineffectual. These findings are similar to those Roberts found in both of her studies of women who worked in the cotton textile industry.

The women who were employed in textiles in the 1970s describe what it was like as the industry collapsed. Some were made redundant several times as they moved from to mill. They describe how at each place they went the pay and conditions deteriorated, as did the quality of the cloth they worked on in some cases. As they had no transferable skills and no qualifications, they had to stay within the contracting industry or take low paid jobs in other areas. These findings are similar those Rouverol (2000) describes in her study of a woman facing redundancy from a poultry processing factory in the 1980s in the USA.

I chose oral testimony for my primary research as there is very little documented evidence available and to give the women an individual voice. There is a large and growing body of literature on the practice of oral history and the main themes are discussed in Chapter 2. Carrying out the interviews and listening to the women's testimony has been the most rewarding element of producing this thesis. I was prepared for the possibility that during the interviews time scales would be confused, major events skirted over or largely forgotten, whilst seemingly minor points would be recalled with great clarity and there is evidence of this in my findings in Chapter 3. What I was not prepared for was the effect it had on me. On some occasions I had to fight back tears or resist the urge to hug a woman as she spoke to me. What the women told me stayed with me for days after each interview. Every one of the women I interviewed impressed me with her down to earth, stoical but not self-pitying attitude. Having considered the theory and the issues of composure, subjectivity and intersubjectivity on the

resulting interviews, I had two major concerns approaching the interviews and then analysing the findings, both of them based on my abilities. These were, ensuring I was able to put the women at their ease and creating a rapport in order to elicit the best possible narrative, and when analysing the recordings, making sure that I conveyed what they had to say in all its richness and did not distort their meanings in any way. As the methodology debate continues, particularly in the realm of feminist oral history, the observations of two major commentators helped me address the above. Firstly, Bornat (2010) who suggests an approach 'to do no harm'. This is an approach which I interpret as supportive, non-challenging and genuine and one which I hope I embraced. Secondly, Sangster (1994) who expresses concern about endless soul searching and theorising and wonders if this is self-indulgent (p.12). I was in danger of overanalysing and becoming paralysed by the potential pitfalls attached to writing up and presenting my findings. Reading her thoughts on this helped me move on and reinforced my commitment to oral history as the alternative – not recording and analysing the women's narratives – would mean valuable experiences and histories would be lost.

I believe that taking part in this study has had a beneficial effect on the women as well. Being able to talk about their lives and being listened to both recognised and validated their experiences. One woman said she felt it had done her 'good' to talk about the past. Others said they had talked to friends and family about their work in textiles for the first time in years. Thompson (2000, p.180) refers to

the therapeutic process of recalling memories and says that participating in oral history projects sometimes gives a person a new sense of importance and something to look forward to. Gluck and Patai (1991) argue that one of the reasons oral history work with women is considered to be feminist is due to the 'empowering' of women and the validation of their life experiences. Whilst I agree that participating in this study has given the women I interviewed a voice and enabled their experiences to be recorded, I do not believe that they would have considered the process empowering. For me the word empower is loaded with negative connotations – to be empowered you must have been powerless before. I do not believe that the women in this study considered themselves powerless, they were merely hidden. I prefer the word 'advocacy' in the context that they have been given the means and opportunity through participating in this research, to share their experiences with a wider audience and make their views and feelings known. Abrams (2010) discusses advocacy in a wider context of giving participants, such as refugees and disaster survivors, the means to transform their lives (p.170). I do not believe that the women I interviewed want to change anything but they do want to say; I was here, this is what I did, this is what my life was like and this is what I achieved.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Conclusion**

This chapter explores what I might have done differently in my research, the contribution this thesis makes to the existing knowledge about this group of women and ideas on areas in which the research could be taken forward.

Before starting on the interviews I had read a lot about oral history theory and the feminist practice of oral history. Once I had finished the interviews, I reviewed the literature again and found I had a better understanding of the research and also my own feelings and findings. At this point I questioned my approach to the interviews. Would it have been better to have not read anything about the pitfalls or limitations of the genre and not got embroiled in the question of power between the interviewer and interviewee before starting my interviews? Or should I have been even better prepared? Would either approach have produced a better result? The experience of performing interviews improves technique and the more I did the more comfortable I felt and I believe this had a positive effect on the interviewee and consequently the quality of the narrative.

The main area for improvement is around my interviewing technique. I would ask more specific, focused questions and be clearer to myself what I hoped to get from the interview. For example, I asked about relationships between the

workers and management but I did not ask about relationships between different groups working at the same level. I would probe more and explore feelings around situations. 'How did you feel about that?' is a very powerful and revealing question. Another thing I have learned is to let a silence be, rather than pushing on to the next question. I noticed as I listened back to the tapes that as soon as the interviewee stopped talking I asked the next question. It might have been helpful to wait a couple of seconds to see if the interviewee wanted to add anything else. I also think following the interest of the interviewee more rather than pursuing with my questions could have resulted in further insights. I would take more time for the interviews and request follow up interviews to clarify or expand on points.

I believe this study has added to the existing knowledge about this group of working women in two main areas. The first is the daily routine of new recruits to the mills and the detail of how they were trained and the extra jobs they had to do which were not related to learning their trade. Almost all of the women describe having to make tea, clean floors and do the other women's shopping. Doing the shopping for everyone in the mending room was seen as either a perk or an annoyance. Some of the women enjoyed getting out of the mill and obtaining extra income from the shopping, others found it stressful and a distraction from the job. The second area is what the women who were working in textiles at the time did during the collapse of the industry in the 1970s. A number of the women in this study were employed in textiles during this time and

were able to describe what effect it had on them. Many of the women describe having to move from mill to mill, or in the case of the menders, from mill to mending room, to keep working. They tell of poorer rates of pay, shoddily made cloth and not knowing what they would be expected to work on from one day to the next. One woman, however, used this time of upheaval to finally leave the job she'd hated from the start and change careers. Whichever course they took, the women demonstrated great resourcefulness and resilience. I believe this is an area which could be explored in more detail and could be part of a larger study of the female workforce during the recession of the 1970s.

The sample of women I interviewed was small and I believe there is still a pool of women (which is sadly getting smaller) who worked in the woollen textile industry who could be interviewed to create a more complete record. With a larger sample more comparisons between the different trades within textiles could be explored. A further area which I have not touched on is that of immigrant women workers who came to the UK from the Asian Sub-continent for the reasons I outline in Chapter 3. A comparison of the experiences of the two groups of women working in the same industry at the same time would be very interesting to research. There is also a group of immigrant women workers who have come from Eastern Europe in the last few years and who are just starting out in the contracted textile industry. Recording their experiences at the start of the twenty-first century may make the basis of an appealing project for someone to revisit in 20 or 30 years' time. One of the unexpected themes from my research

was that of clothing. This subject could also be taken forward, possibly in the context of a study of women's attitude to clothing in different industries, timescales or in comparison to men.

The aim of this study was to find out and record what it was like for women who worked in the woollen textile industry in the Huddersfield area in the mid-twentieth century. Whilst this has been achieved, I have discovered a lot more than just what went on in the mill and I have an even greater admiration for the women who worked there.

The importance of the woollen textile industry to the past economic prosperity of the UK cannot be disputed, nor can the contribution of the women who worked in the industry. The reason I wanted to undertake this study was that I have watched the industry and the mills which were so dominant in the landscape disappear and I did not want every trace of the enormous part women have played in that industry to disappear as well. To use a textile analogy, this small study is a thread in the magnificent tapestry that is the role of women in textile history.

## **Pen Portraits**

The interviews took place between January and August 2008

### **Alice**

A mender who was 72 years old and married at the time of the interview. She started work in 1951 aged 15 at a mill in Huddersfield. Worked in textiles up until retiring apart from when children were small and a short foray into a different line of work.

### **Betty**

A mender who was 71 years old and widowed at the time of the interview. She started work in 1952 aged 15 at a mill in the Colne Valley in Huddersfield. Left textiles in the late 1950s when her first child was born.

### **Celia**

A mender and mending teacher who was 77 and widowed at the time of the interview. She started work in 1945 aged 14 at a mill in Huddersfield. She worked in textiles until retiring at age 65. .

### **Doreen**

A mender and percher who was 70 and divorced at the time of the interview. Started work at a mill in the Holme Valley of Huddersfield aged 15. Left textiles in 1980 to pursue a completely different career.

### **Enid**

A mender and weaver who was 89 and widowed at the time of the interview. Started work at a mill in the Colne Valley in Huddersfield aged 15. Started as a

mender but learned to be a weaver during World War Two. Worked in textiles until 1960s.

### **Freda**

A mender and mending teacher who was 61, married and still working as a mending teacher at the time of interview. She started work at a mill in the Colne Valley in Huddersfield aged 15.

### **Gladys**

A weaver who was 86 and widowed at the time of the interview. She started work at a mill in the Colne Valley in Huddersfield aged 14. Worked as a weaver until the birth of her first child during World War Two.

### **Hilda**

A pattern warper who was 93 and widowed at the time of the interview. She started work aged 14 at a mill in the Colne Valley in Huddersfield where she worked until she retired aged 60.

### **Irene**

A weaver who was 94 and widowed at the time of the interview. She started work aged 14 at a mill in the Colne Valley in Huddersfield. Worked in textile industry until retiring – couldn't remember what age she retired.

### **Joyce**

A mender who was 92 and widowed at the time of the interview. She started work aged 14 at a mill in Huddersfield. Was widowed during World War Two and returned to textiles following her second marriage. She worked in textiles until

giving up work due to ill health but couldn't remember how old she was when she stopped work.

### **Kathleen**

A mender and winder who was 62 and married at the time of the interview. She started work in 1955 aged 15 at a mill in the Colne Valley of Huddersfield. Stayed in textiles until being made redundant.

### **Lilian**

A mender who was 70 and divorced at the time of the interview. Started work at a mill in Huddersfield aged 16 . She spent all her working life in textiles until ill health forced her to retire.

### **Maureen**

A mender who was 62 and married at the time of the interview. She started work aged 15 at a mill in the Colne Valley of Huddersfield. She worked in textiles until the birth of her first child.

### **Nancy**

A mender who was 65 and divorced at the time of the interview. She started work aged 15 at a mill in the Holme Valley of Huddersfield. She spent all her working life as a mender until her retirement. She worked at a number of different mills in the area as well as mending at home whilst her daughter was small.

**Olive**

A weaver who was 96 and widowed at the time of the interview. She started work as a weaver aged 16 at a mill in the Colne Valley. She had worked from age 14 until she was 60 and the mill closed down.

**Peggy**

A mender who was 86 and married at the time of the interview. She started work aged 14 at a mill in Huddersfield. She worked as a fine worsted mender from 1936 to 1975 when she was made redundant. She worked in mills and also at home when her children were small.

**Rose**

A weaver who was 82 and widowed at the time of the interview. She started work aged 14 at a mill in the Halifax area. She worked in textiles until the mill she worked was destroyed by fire.

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## **Appendix One**

### **Consent form**

#### **Consent for Participation in a Research Interview or Study**

**School of Lifelong Education and Development**

**University of Bradford**

Thank you for agreeing to take part in this research.

Please read the following statements. Please ask for clarification if any of them are unclear.

- I have volunteered to take part in this study or interview
- I may withdraw at any time, without giving reasons
- I have been told about the probably duration of the interview or study
- I have been told about the purpose of the interview and/or study, unless such information might affect the results obtained
  
- My data may be published in scholarly academic journals in accordance with section 33 of the Data Protection Act 1998. I will not be identified in any publications.
  
- For these purposes only I agree to waive my rights to copyright in the content of the interview.

If you understand and agree to all these statements, sign your name, write the date and print your name in the space provided.

Signed:

Print name:

Date:

## **Appendix Two**

### **List of Questions**

What is your date of birth and what job did you do in textiles?

What was your experience at school, was there any career advice and when did you leave school?

How did you get your job in the mill?

Can you describe your first day?

What was the daily routine?

What training did you have for your job?

What was the workplace like?

Were there any outings or excursions?

Was there any social life attached to the mill?

Did you work after you got married and had children?

If yes how did you manage that?

What are you most proud of?

## Appendix Three

### Glossary of terms used

Bobbin winder	A woman who wound the spun yarn on to bobbins for use on the looms.
Burling irons	Metal tweezers used by menders to pick bits off the cloth and also to pull up knots before unpicking them and sewing in the ends.
Cuttle up	Fold up the piece in a zig zag, the final few yards would be wrapped round the piece to keep it together.
Finish piece	The final checking of a piece which has previously been mended and washed.
Mender	A woman who invisibly rectifies mistakes in the woven cloth.
Mrs Mender	Woman in charge of the mending room and menders.
Numberer	A woman who numbered up the pieces as they came off the loom. Details of the piece and who wove it were written in a ledger next to the number.
Pattern warper	A woman who winds yarn on to a frame to go on to the loom to form the warp of the cloth. This is a highly skilled job as the different threads have to be the correct length, and the different colours laid in the correct order for the pattern.
Piece	A piece of cloth 30m long and 150 cm wide and weighing between 13kg and 30kg depending on the type yarn used.

Shader	A woman who coloured in the weft which was not the same colour as the rest of the piece.
Weaver	A woman who operates a weaving loom.
Weaver's cottage	A house consisting of several stories where the top story has windows along the full frontage. The top room was where the loom was situated when textile manufacture was performed in the domestic setting. The extra windows permitted the maximum amount of light. In the Huddersfield area, these cottages were often built into the hillside which meant that the top floor would be at ground level from one side with it's own door giving easy access for the finished piece to moved without being carried down several flights of stairs. This door often being referred to as the 'taking in' door.