

## **Mohammed Ashraf**

### **Interviewed for Lost Mills Ghost Mansions project on the 14<sup>th</sup> of September 2023 by Nabeela Ahmed**

I am now 87 years old. I came to England in 1959 at age 22. I was born in Dadyal, but spent most of my time in Karachi. My elder brother was there in the Navy and took me under his wings. He's the one who arranged for me to come to England too.

The first place I came to in England was Bradford. I had had my heart set on Birmingham, but my other brother was here, so I stayed with him.

I didn't get any grace period or rest when I arrived. My brother arranged a job for me and I started straight away. In those days there was so much work, you could arrive one day and start a job the next.

#### **1959 Charles Stone, Shipley in the Combing and Finishing Department**

It was an Australian company and I worked as a wool comber. I worked from 7pm to 7am. The overlookers were mainly uneducated English men, but they were very strict, so we were afraid of the machine getting stuck, as they were the ones who repaired it. If we made a mistake, such as giving the machine too much cotton, it would get stuck and they shouted at us. It was very hard work. I always worked nights, until I called my wife over. Then I worked days.

My impression of mills was feeling frightened. I had lived a village life and you had to see those machines, even their parts were massive and were so noisy.

The majority of the people were Asians at night, but there were English people too, including ladies who worked with us. There were no Asian women here at that point.

The people were good to us in the factory, but outside the young people hated us. Now, the environment here is like Pakistan, but in those days if they someone alone, they would beat us up. I never even went to Manningham Park on my own, my older brother would go with me. The Teddy Boys to build their reputation would beat Asians to appear cool.

#### **First salary**

I received £1 for one night's work. £6 for six nights. There used to be Guinea for a pound. It was pure gold, but we didn't used to take that, because if you lost it, people would say you've lost 21 shillings! £1 was 20 shillings, but the Guinea was worth 21 shillings. (PS: A guinea contained approximately one quarter of an ounce of gold and was minted in Britain between 1663 and 1814. Wikipedia). The pound had a note.

#### **Union**

There was no union then, that's why people could mistreat you. After the unions began then everyone got many rights. With the union people got some protection, like a father protects their children.

**Strike** – If anyone got beaten and we thought of a strike, the foreman used to say, don't turn up to work tomorrow, so we couldn't even dare think about striking. They were very strict, but there was a lot of strict. There was the foreman and the overlooker and the manager, who visited occasionally, you never needed them. The foreman managed the whole mill. The overlookers would complain to them if they were not happy with a worker and they verbally abused you a lot.

I stayed there for five years and left to go to Pakistan in 1966. (This does make it 7 years, but the gentleman was confused and said 5 years and then 1966. It seems that 1966 is what he was sure of)

My elder brother supported me a little too and I built a home for us. I stayed for one and a half year. That is the only time I have stayed there. After that I never did. I called my wife and children here too.

I went in March 1966 and returned in September 1967. My two eldest children were born there.

#### **1967 Baildon Combing Company for two years, Finish mender**

When I returned, I started in a new mill. Charles Stone had closed down by then. I worked her for two years and then they closed down too. They had another mill on Leeds Road, where there is the cash and carry now, Green Lane. It was called Green Lane mill.

My salary was more here, it was £13. The time was the same, in most mills it was the same, twelve-hour shifts from 7pm to 7am six days a week, running twenty-four hours.

#### **Green Lane, Leeds Road for Finish mender**

£17 salary

#### **1969 Charles & Son in Keighley, where the Tesco is now. For one year as a weaver**

The mills have finished everywhere now. Those building were very old, there was not point in saving them. Plus, they had glass on the ceiling, metal bars and then glass. Occasionally if the glass broke. In those days it was very cold, the machines were hot, but there was not system for heating.

My wife and children came then and my wife said she was too afraid to stay home alone at nights, so I left this job and then I began doing day shifts.

#### **1969 Thomas Henry Shaw, Otley Road for the two years**

They have pulled that down too; I think they have made other building on top of that. They had three shifts here, but the foreman was an old acquaintance since the Baildon Combing company days so he let me have two shifts. I started in the morning at 6am till 2pm and then from 2 till 10 pm. I worked 6-10 each day, but this was an easy job. I was the 'spare man'. I

wasn't the finish mender here. I was the spare man for the entire factory. Wherever there was a person needed, the foreman would send me there. I got plenty of rest too.

I had learnt all the roles, so could cover them all. Let me tell you about the roles: combing department, finishing department, weaving department. I did weaving in Keighley. I earned £22 for the two shifts. The salaries weren't much. But in those the pound had a lot of value! I bought a house for £50. I bought the second house for £190.

I bought the first house in 1960 and the second after six months for £190 and three years later, I bought the third house in 1964 for £300, but that had no electric in it or wiring.

You probably won't know but in olden days, the houses had gas pipes, which you lit with a match. Now people have become modern and plastered their houses and removed them. They were gas lights in each room. I have destroyed them myself and replaced them with electric. It was gas made from coal.

The sui gas started in 1971, when they discovered it in Scarborough.

### **1971 – 1972 West Bowling Mill on Manchester Road for one year**

### **1972- 1978 Foundry on Wakefield Road for six years**

I then began metal work in Hepworth Grant/Appworth Grand?. I use to make metal/iron pistons. I moved to working in a foundry as you got paid £70! A good wage and the shift were less hours too, from 8-3pm. It was a lovely shift, just seven hours. The mills were still giving £23-24. A big difference.

It was incredibly hard work though, but my job was good. My mate (job title, not friend) would finish the pistons. My role was just to pile them for him, that was it. I would pile them on the table and he would check and then pass/approve them. I wasn't working near the fire, just making piles on the table for him to check. He was really good to me. He used to say if you need to go somewhere, you can. I use to come home and have my lunch and go back. I passed my driving whilst working there, I would go for my lesson from work. It was a very good job.

When I left that job and opened my own shop, I cried in front of my wife, 'why have I left such a good job to become a shopkeeper, this is such difficult work'.

### **June 1978 set up own newsagents**

I had an interest in business as there was more money. After I left, I regretted it as this was so much hard work. Then my wife advised me that they will have replaced your job, so you may as continue with this now. I purchased my shop for £12k and was straight away offered £18k for it. But that was my fault to regret it. I earned so much more from the shop. In the first year, I managed to save £70k, because the shop made a lot of profit. I have no fears of saying this. I have always paid my taxes. God has blessed me with much, but I have always paid my taxes, never committed fraud or wronged anyone.

### **Mill days**

Working in mills was difficult work with strictness, but they had their own atmosphere. When it was time to come home and rest, I didn't want to leave and wanted to stay there, chatting away, it had a certain freedom. You didn't want to come home.

The mills had sports too. They had their own grounds and they gave you time to play cricket and football. They gave us an hour of leisure time. It was nearly in all the mills. It was at dinner time (lunchtime). You could eat and also enjoy some sport. Nearly all the young people played. This was only during the day shifts; at night it was dark. There was a sports room, with all the equipment.

### **Food**

We close and open our fast in the mills. The shifts were long and were the fasts. I would take curry and chapatti. The machines were hot and we heated it on them. There were no other facilities. When the unions arrived, then we got kitchens.

### **Supervisors and managers and foremen**

The foremen were usually good, but the overlookers were mostly cruel. They would be stood chatting away amongst themselves and if your machine broke, you felt embarrassed that it wasn't working and had to report it, they would then verbally abuse you. Also, to tell you those overlookers were usually uneducated men (trying to explain their rude behaviour). They use to sign with a cross, they couldn't even write their own names.

Some of them were in the military and when they returned, they were given overlooker jobs. My dad was in the military, but he was an educated (sophisticated) man. My dad got his education in the military. He was a brilliant narrator and read the Quran beautifully.

### **Fun and leisure**

We used to wait for Saturday or Sunday, so we could watch a film. There were no TVs or any other facilities other than to watch a film. The cinemas used to place posters up, which our people would hire from the English folk and would put Asian films on. We kept an eye out for the posters, choosing who were the better actors and deciding on which film to watch.

There were five cinemas in Bradford:

1. Royal Cinema
2. Asolo Cinema, both on Mannighma Lane (Osolo is now markets, but Royal is still there.)
3. Marlborough Cinema – that's now converted into a market too
4. Toller Lane, Light Cinema – that's now a masjid
5. Majestic Cinema on Morley Street – first they turned that into Winston Court baths, but now I think that is something else
6. Western Cinema, Park Road, next to St Luke's. They made huge flats on there. It belonged to Sikhs. They showed films for 24 hours.

If you were unemployed, you showed your labour exchange card and could watch for free nonstop. They continued all the time. Those Sikhs were good people. They put on a new reel when the first one finished. The reels are this big.

The ticket was some shillings, not a pound, that would be too much. They invited Dillip Kumar and other actors too. That was the only entertainment. There was nothing else.

**In summary** it was a good time, there was a sense of community. On weekends people gathered and came from far away like Birmingham, paying train fares, staying the weekend to see people and would then go back. I really liked that as relatives would come from far away and we all got together, you can write this or not, but we use to joke that we better spread the 'Mohammady beds' today as it would end up being too many people.

Then we just spread sheets on the floor. That's what we called Mohammady beds, as the guests were too many. No mattresses, just a sheet on the floor and we managed to have enough duvets. They were good times.

We got 72kg bags. They have reduced the quantity now. That lasted us the week, as there was a lot of hospitality involved. Chicken you could commonly buy alive. Once where the Morrisons has opened now, there used to be a market that was called Nangi Market, in town where John Street market is, they held stalls during the day and packed up and took everything home at night. John Street market burnt once, they had to rebuild it.