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Lost Mills Ghost Mansions

1961 John Foster, Queensbury – Box Minder, Combing Department – 9 years

I came to England in 1961 on the 24th of April. I stayed at home, with 35 other men in a four-bedroom terrace, for four weeks. Then a relative got me a job at John Foster in place of a man who left.

John Foster was a huge mill and they did everything, from washing the wool, to making the thread and finishing the cloth ready to be made into garments. I was in department one where it all started and then the clean wool was sent to the spinning department. The majority of the people in the team were elderly white ladies. There was one Hindu man and one South African Muslim when I started. It was a slow-paced environment, you watched the machines

I worked six days a week from 8am to 10.30pm Monday to Friday and on Saturday's I worked 8-4 and for that I earnt £10.

1970 Thomas Burnley, Winding – 13 years

I moved here to do nightshifts and for a better salary. I worked six days a week and now earnt £20. Thomas Burnley didn't make cloth themselves. They had automatic winding machines and the pace here was much faster. The machines never stopped. There were three people to two machines here. One was called the helper, who took over when you had your fifteen-minute break or dinner. There was no fixed time for dinner here, like the previous mill. There we use to turn the machines off at 12 and take a 45-minute lunch break throughout the department. Here, the machines never stopped.

First salary

In those days until you found work the other housemates covered your rent and food. From my first salary I gave £1 rent, which included all the bill and we called the food budget BC and I gave around £1.50 towards that. The rest I sent to my family in Pakistan.

I went to Pakistan in December 1975 and returned in 1977 and started working at Thomas Burnley again. In 1979 the work in mills started to reduce. Thatcher came can changed things. Work was sent abroad as labour was cheaper there to places like India and Korea. We were told that a week's salary for a worker in England was covering a month's salary of a manager there.

I was made redundant in 1985 at age 45.

The jobcentre would push us to look for work, but all we knew was working in the mills and the new service sector asked for O' Levels and A' Levels and we didn't have any of those. Anyway, there were no jobs for the younger one's who did have them, not much chance for us older ones. Some people moved into driving taxis and working in restaurants. The supermarkets didn't exist then, it was mostly corner shops. Some school-leavers found jobs there.

Unions

In the 1970's unions demanded an increase of 15-20% in salaries and in 1974 the salaries went up

From £20-25 to £70-75. In 1979 Thatcher got rid of the unions. She said higher salaries were causing inflation and that the maximum wage increase could be 5%.

Holidays

It wasn't like now when kids are off this month and then in another two. We had one week, actually three or four days off for Christmas and if it fell on a weekend we were back at work by Wednesday. Around Easter there were two or three days and then in July we had two weeks off.

At Christmas in the mill, they offered alcohol and there were some biscuits which you could bring back from the canteen and eat with your tea if you wanted to.

Managers and supervisors

The managers and supervisors were just like people anywhere, a mix bag. At John Foster, the manager left and our Overlooker became the manager. He was a good person and nice to everyone. If a manager came from another factory, then he was strict as he had something to prove.

Funny tale

At John Foster's we had a steady and relaxed atmosphere. Everyone did their job; the machines were slow and there wasn't much pressure. I would take a novel, start the machine and sit by it reading away, keeping an eye on work and changing things around when needed. One day I was sat reading as our manager walked past with another man. He tried to give me a hint to stop reading and focus on the machine, but I just looked at him and said, 'the machine's running'. The next day he told me that was the owner John Foster, all the way from Australia doing a mill tour. I didn't get into bother, we just laughed about it.

Incidents

At Thomas Burnley there was a room where the workers would start the machines and would go off and go to sleep in. I didn't sleep at night and always stayed by my machine. One night the department manager paid a surprise visit and found I was alone stood at my machine. He reported it to the overlookers. The next morning the overlooker swore at all of them.

Miscellaneous

A lot of the ladies who worked with us were in their 60s and 70s and in eight hours produced about 40 bobbins. We produced around 200. The manager said to me if you know other Pakistani men, bring them, I'll give them a job and we did. By the end there was about 80 of us. The truth is the elderly white ladies were not afraid of losing their jobs, other than retirement. We were terrified they would kick us out so we worked extremely hard.

In England there wasn't much work in the mills till Wilson gave mills grants in 1963 and then the work increased.

It was a peaceful time. People worked, came home and rested. There was no trouble. At the weekend the elders sat and told stories of what they had left behind and us youngsters headed for the cinema. At midnight we would visit each other's houses, there was no fear.

In the 1970's the families came and kids grew up here and issues started. One would open a particular shop and the rest would copy.

I'm not a photo person, so don't have any from the mill days either.

Rehmat, Bashir's Wife (came in 1969) and Bashir:

'I kept his tiffin and wage slips for a long time, but got rid of them eventually. In those days there were no thefts, the white folk were good and helpful. If you asked for directions, they'd drop you off at your doorstep.'

'He worked at nights, but I was never afraid. I lived with my sister-in-law and my dad was here too and even if I didn't, it wouldn't have bothered me. His salary was enough. Things were not so expensive and we made do with what we had and sent it back to our family in Pakistan too. Families had a lot of care for each other in those days.'

Bashir: 'We have increased our expenses ourselves now. Look at our floorboards, we now keep changing our décor every few years. In those days we had lino, we mopped it and it lasted years. We ate home cooked meals. Nowadays kids spend on one takeaway meal what they could eat for a week if they cooked themselves.'