

Spence, Bryson & Co. Ltd.

Linen Weaving Factory, Markethill

By Dr. Pamela Marshall

My tale begins, and ends, with a portion of vacant ground in the village of Markethill. The time span extends well over 100 years and a lot happened in that plot of ground during those years, which shaped successive generations in the locality. It would appear that the linen weaving factory was the first industrial enterprise in this small town, built at a time when linen manufacture was the major source of employment and wealth in Ulster.

LINEN WEAVING HISTORY

Though linen is an ancient fabric in Ireland, the arrival of Louis Crommelin and some hundreds of French Huguenots in the late 1600's brought in new skills. Before their arrival, records show that in the period 1610-1670 handloom weaving was widely practised. Many smallholders grew their own flax as part of their annual crops. This flax was spun into yarn and then woven into linen on basic handlooms. In rural areas it is recorded that men and boys usually did the weaving, whereas in the towns it was more a female occupation.

The industrial revolution affected this home-based industry and mechanisation spelt the demise of the handloom. As early as 1733 John Kay of Bury, Lancashire, invented the flying shuttle. When it was introduced to Ireland in 1776 a web of cloth could be produced in half the time taken by handloom weavers. In 1785 Cartwright invented the power loom and the first of those innovations reached Ireland in 1812. By 1870 there were 15,000 looms driven by steam in the province of Ulster. Northrop in the USA developed the automatic loom and his name was to become well known to the weavers in Markethill.

Weaving of any fabric is the interlacing of two sets of threads placed at right angles. Longitudinal threads are called the 'warp' and cross threads are the 'weft'. The procedure was that bundles of yarn arriving from the spinning mill were untied and sort-

ed into warp or weft threads. Warp threads were treated with a paste coating to protect them during the weaving process.

Two well-known linen fabric terms are:

Cambric - a fine white linen and

Damask weave - a figured pattern against a satin or twill background.

WEAVING IN MARKETHILL

The Belfast and Ulster Directory of 1904 described Markethill as incorporating 45 acres with a population of 739. There is mention of a weaving factory built by D.H.Sinton which,

"has done a great deal of good to the town, giving employment to 80 persons"

David Henry Sinton, a Quaker, grew up at Ballinteggart, Portadown. He built the original factory in Markethill about 1888. He and his family of four daughters and a son lived at Paxton House, Markethill until his death in 1909. The Gosford Papers (1882-1894) in the Public Record Office relating to the Armagh Union Electoral District show that in the townland of Edenkennedy, Mr.Sinton had a Linen Weaving Mill consisting of:

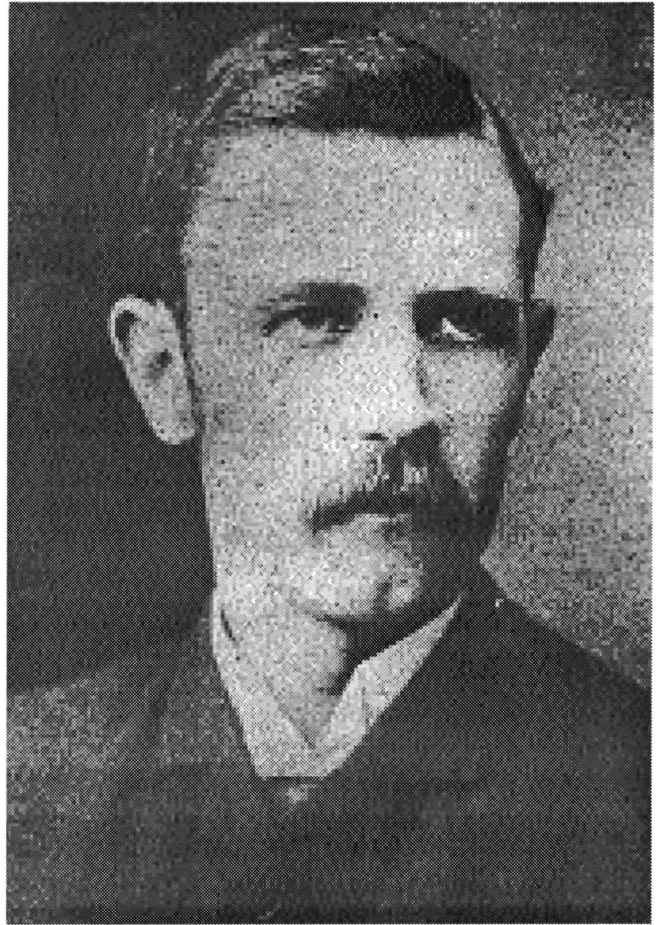
'A MILL 21 yards by 24 yards and two sheds, one 18 yards by 4 yards, and the other 17 yards by 6 yards.'

The Papers also record that Mr. Sinton leased a Mill Pond in the townland of Carricklane from the Earl of Gosford and that, with a 16 h.p. engine, there were 35 looms of which 30 were working in the factory.

Following the death of D.H.Sinton, Thomas Henry Spence and John Bell Bryson, both natives of Portadown and owners of the Clonavon Weaving Factory, purchased the Markethill concern for £1500 in October 1909. This ensured the future develop-



Thomas Henry Spence,



John Bell Bryson.

ment of the factory with the gradual introduction of modern technology and Spence Bryson's network of overseas outlets for the products.

SPENCE BRYSON Co. Ltd.

The Company of Spence Bryson had been registered in 1904 and the first meeting of Directors was held on September 12th 1904. An extract from the minutes reads:

The first meeting of Directors was held this evening at Portmore Street, Portadown, the chair being occupied by Mr. T. H. Spence. Directors present included, Mr. John Bell Bryson, Mr. James Bryson, and Mr. Samuel Lutton. A report was given confirming registration of the company.

With a capital of £60,000 the company flourished between its inauguration and 1908.

In that year the company was in a position to sell directly, through their buying offices, within the United Kingdom and to the great American compa-

nies such as Marshall Field, Acheson Hardy and others who paid promptly and received good discount.

The two partners were at that time living in Edenderry on the outskirts of Portadown in adjacent houses. Already in 1909 T.H.Spence, then in his 57th year, announced his intention of taking a less active role in factory affairs. Towards the end of 1909 ideas relating to the establishment of a Benevolent Fund were being aired, - a forerunner of many welfare schemes to be set afoot by the company. In July 1910 the capital was increased to £100,000, indicating the steady advance which the new company was making.

FACTORY WORK

Power driven looms were installed in a single storey building with a saw-edged roof to capture the north light. This area was called the weaving shed where banks of power looms were housed. The noise in this area was deafening when all looms were in action, being belt driven with overhead shafting. The shuttles were made of hickory wood with point-



1925. Back row: L to R, Isaac Jamieson, Wm. Brown. Middle: J. Rowland, J. Allen, Girvan Courtney, Tom Topley. Front row: Thomas Whiteside, Bob Hughes, Sam Wilson (Snr), Nathaniel Boyce.

ed metal ends and a metal spring tongue. They were propelled across the 'sley' - the area between the weft threads - at speeds often at a rate of 160 times a minute. There was a constant danger of the shuttle causing injuries to the eyes. Steam was released in the weaving shed to create the correct humidity for the yarn but this had unwanted side effects on the workers causing pains in the shoulders. Other areas in the factory were the winding shed, warping shed, dressing shop, bobbin office, mechanics shop, drawing-in shop, cloth office and the inspection area. All these indicate the different processes that were carried out in the production of cloth. Amongst the output of the factory was linen sheeting, white dress suiting, handkerchiefs, artist's canvas and industrial fabrics such as aero linen. This was proofed and used for the wings of planes because even if a hole was put in it, it did not tear.

VARIOUS TRADES WITHIN THE FACTORY

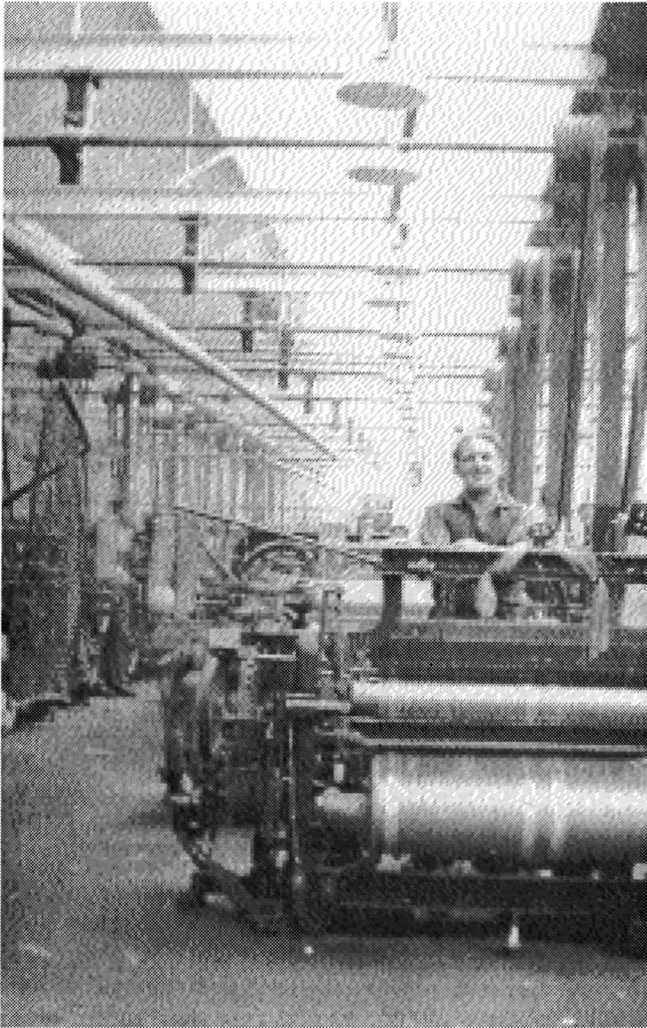
Looking through the Belfast & Ulster Directory of 1904 a list of Markethill residents includes the following: -

GREAT NORTHERN RAILWAY:
T.TurleyStationmaster

James West.....Head Porter
MAIN STREET
Frank TopleyTenter
Thomas Topley.....Mechanic
NEWRY STREET
J. Beggs.....Dresser
Sara Beattie, Kate Burns, M. Byrans, A. Jackson,
Joseph Mount, Susan McGarrity, Maria Shields,
Eliza J. Sleith, all mill workers.
BUNKERS HILL
Margaret Ringland.....Mill worker

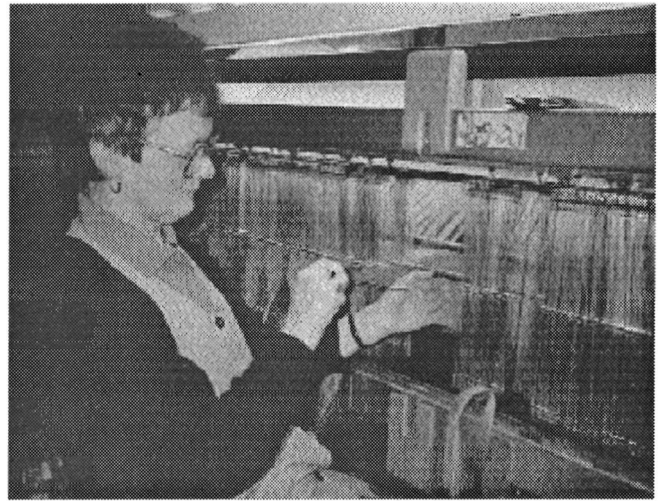
In later times tradesmen were:

Winder Masters: M. Brown, Joe Lowry
Tenters: (skilled in setting up the looms for the weaver to weave the finest or sheerest cloth)
Tom Freeburn, Nathaniel Boyce, Bobby Cochran
Mechanics: J.Allen, T.Topley, J.Taylor, J.Hooks.
Oilers: J.Rowland, B.Murphy
Dressers: J. Beggs
Carpenters: B.Hughes, Jim & John Giffin,
Leslie Marshall
Labourers: A.Pickering, Topley Mathers,
Isaac Jamieson.
Weavers: J.O'Neill, B.Spence



Billy Spence at weaving loom.

The two above-mentioned weavers first started in the factory aged 14, straight from school. Mrs.O'Neill, the mother of one of the boys, as she was an employee already, asked Mr.Dawson, the manager, to consider giving her son a start. For their first year they were made to fill batteries for seven shillings (35p) per week and their hours were 8 - 12.30 and 1.30 - 5.00 Monday to Friday, plus 8 - 12 on Saturdays. In 1930 a weaver was paid 21 shillings a week. In 1936, with 175-200 employees, a 24-hour working day was introduced. Women worked the day shift 8a.m. to 6p.m. and men from 6p.m. till 3.45.a.m. This system continued through the Second World War for 11 years. In the early 1940's for a 49-hour week pay was £3 for tradesmen and £1.10 shillings for labourers. In the early days of the company, holidays were the statutory days only, but this was improved to holidays with pay for two weeks in July and one at Easter along with Christmas Day and Boxing Day. There was no standard retirement age and some employees worked until they were 78 years old.



Working on a loom in Spence Brysons

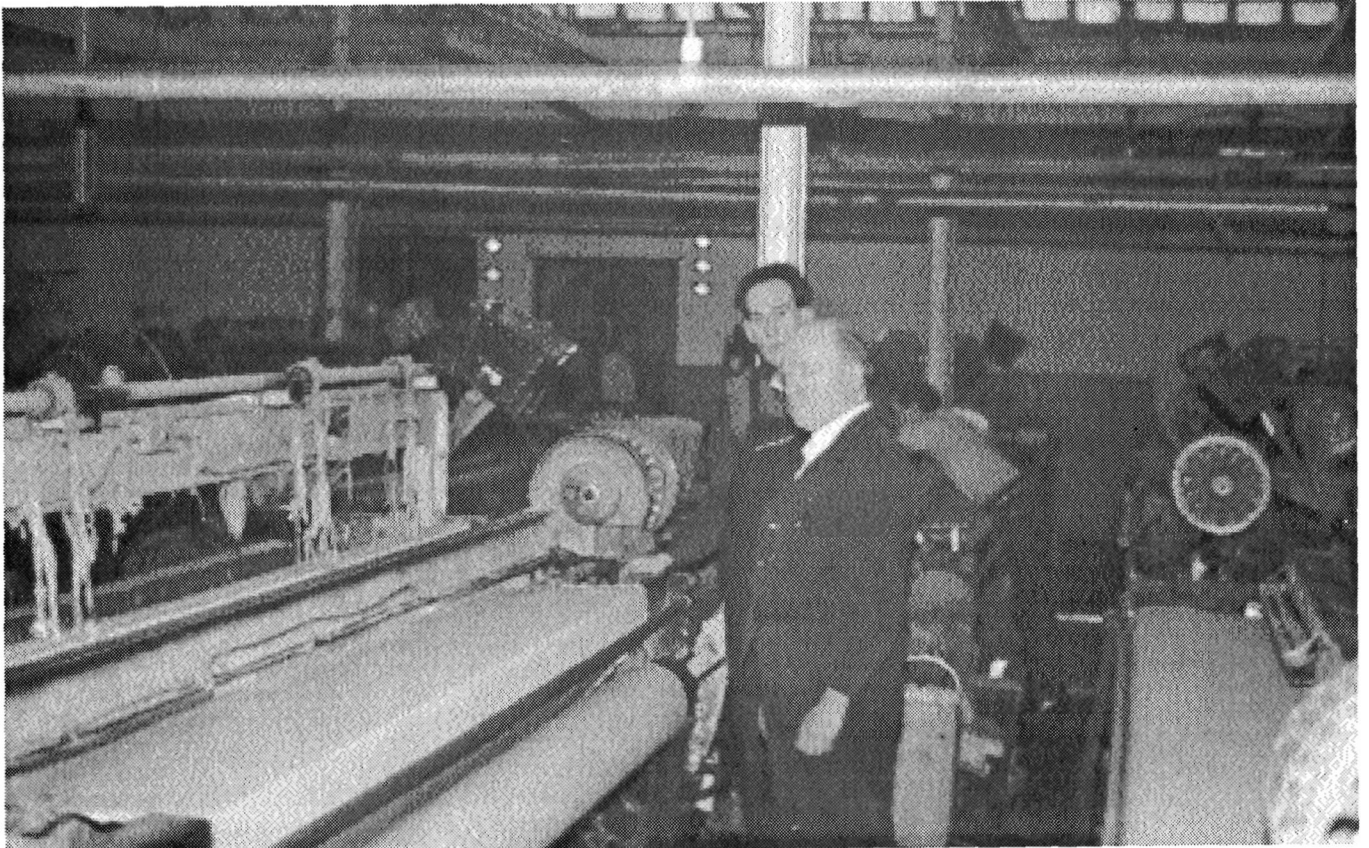
An Insurance Company Sickness scheme was in operation called the 'Down and Connor' or, as it popularly called, the 'Down and Out'.

Until the 1950's only dry toilets were provided. In 1960 a canteen was opened in the premises.

Several of the retired employees who spent their entire working lives in the weaving factory, often close to 50 years each, gave their recollections for inclusion in my text. Their undoubted pride in their skills, machinery and end product is for all to see. It was no mean achievement to produce the finest Irish linen.

MEMORIES OF EMPLOYEES

John Dawson was appointed manager of the Markethill factory. He worked with the company for over 50 years and in 1972, in his 81st year, he recalled his first days at the weaving factory. He explained that when Spence Bryson took over the Sinton premises, the factory conditions were primitive. There was no form of heating and the only lighting was by oil lamps suspended over the looms. These lamps were attended to daily by a young lad whose duty it was to maintain them. The fire hazards were described as 'fearful', yet not a single instance of fire damage is recorded to either persons or to machinery. As the factory began work at six o'clock in the morning, young mothers with young children had to leave them with grandparents in order to be at work on time. In winter the shawled women and girls came into that dismal, lamp-lit weaving shed to commence the long day's work with cold fingers. Nonetheless, if the surroundings were



'Big Bertha' 140 inch Reedspace automatic Atherton Loom. Photo taken last day loom was running - 25th November 1977. Jim Hooks - Mechanic and James O'Neill - Weaver.

at first lacking in cheer, it was said that the relations were so good between management and workers that the more sporting weavers could bring their greyhounds into the works and tether them to the looms. Later steam heat was devised and electricity was installed. Thomas Henry Spence regularly arrived from Portadown in pony and trap to see that progress was to his satisfaction. Factories were often situated beside a water source and a railway. Coal, then costing about 14 shillings per ton, was brought to Markethill in wagons. A delivery of four wagons of coal (100 tons) for the boilers would be drawn from the nearby railway station by Mr. Tierney using his horse and cart. He got paid by the ton for the carriage.

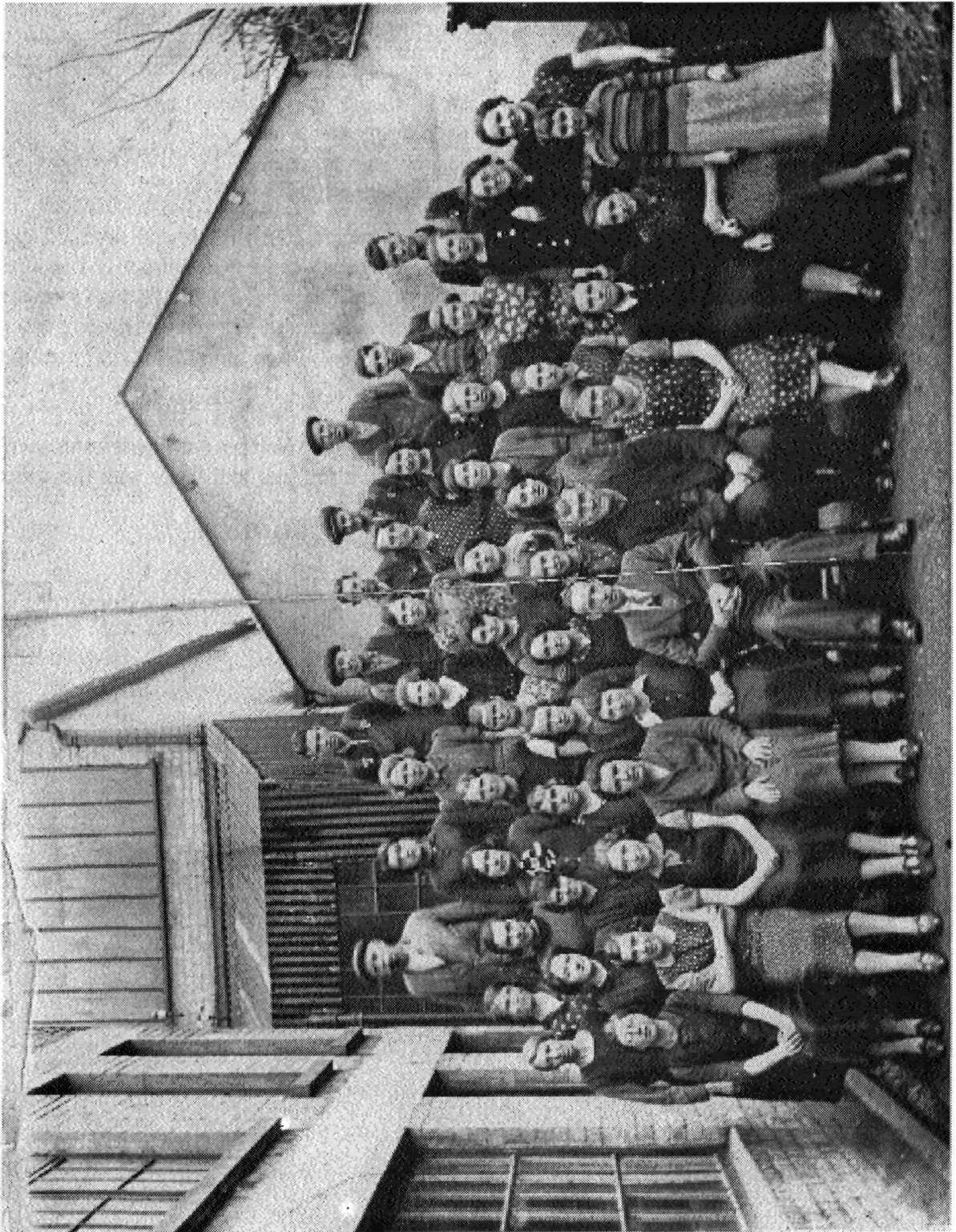
MEMORIES OF A BOILERMAN

The Wilson family, a father and two sons, served the firm for a total of 130 years, - they were boilermen. Sam Wilson, Senior, worked there for 47 years and David, his eldest son, for 53 years. Sharing a lifetime of memories, David Wilson could recall his father's times in the factory. In those days he started at 6 a.m. and continued till 6p.m. with a break at

8 a.m. On Saturdays he worked till midday. At that time there were 30-40 looms with one dressing machine and one winding machine. David Wilson started in the factory aged 14, straight from school. For a 49-hour week his take-home pay was 8 shillings(40p). Later, as boilerman, he started work at 7 a.m. getting the boiler ready with a correct head of steam. The steam was generated by a Lancashire coal-fired twin boiler system with approximately 400 gallons capacity. The firebox was 8 feet long and 12 feet high. Each day he transferred one or two tons of coal from the factory yard using an iron-wheeled barrow so as to keep the fire well primed. It's no wonder he remained as lean as a whippet.

Another of the boilerman's duties was to look after the factory whistle, which summoned the workers and was a clock of sorts for the town. At 7.30.a.m. the long whistle rang out for one minutes duration. At 7.45.a.m. there were two bursts of 15 seconds and at 8.00a.m. the final whistle sounded for the workers' starting time.

The chimney stack was 80 feet high and was built by Peter McLarnon of Belfast assisted by Patrick Joe



Spence Bryson Employees 1940. Front row centre Mr Dawson (manager) and J. Lowry (Winding Master).

Cordner, labourer. It is said that they left an ounce of tobacco for anyone to retrieve from the top of the stack if they choose to climb it. No one took up the challenge. The building of the stack was such an event that a poem was composed about it but no trace of this local verse survives. During the July holidays one day was set aside for sooting out the chimney, not an enjoyable task. A lorry load of soot was obtained and then disposed of by various means. David Wilson was paid £5 for this job annually. Steeplejacks were engaged, perhaps every ten years, to prime the chimney. An inspector from Belfast came regularly to ensure that the interior of the boilers was free from corrosion and scaling. In 1968 the factory switched to oil burning furnaces. This meant less manual work but the boilerman was responsible for testing the water at fortnightly intervals to keep the pH level correct and so prevent scaling.

I hope that I have given a true representation and done justice to the skilled trade of weaving. Here is an old rhyme once sung in Markethill:

*We are the boys of Markethill
We've always worked and always will
We'll weave and wind
For Sinton's coin
We will, we will.*

On 28th August 1991 the life and times of Spence Bryson, Markethill came to an abrupt end as a result of a terrorist van bomb. Within two days looms were installed in a factory in Armagh and production continued with only one order lost. A remarkable achievement!

I am indebted to former employees and staff of Spence Bryson for their assistance with this article.



Poyntzpass Conservative Flute Band in William Street Poyntzpass