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**THE COURTAULD SILK MILLS IN NORTH ESSEX AND THEIR EFFECTS  
ON THE LOCAL POPULATION 1841-1901**

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## ABSTRACT

The Courtauld family first established themselves in the silk industry at the end of the eighteenth century and by 1841 they had grown their business to become the dominant industrial employer in north Essex, a position they were to maintain for several decades.

Previous studies of industrialisation have tended to concentrate on highly urbanised parts of the north and midlands and have neglected its effects on agricultural regions such as East Anglia. This study redirects the focus onto the impact upon rural communities.

Current literature describes the Courtauld company as a philanthropic employer which looked after its workforce. There are however criticisms of its intolerance of dissenters and of its treatment of women employees who had almost no opportunities for advancement. Some of these criticisms are made from a modern perspective and do not take into account the prevailing attitudes of the period. This study uses both primary and secondary sources to determine what life was really like for their employees and concludes that they fared relatively well compared to many of their contemporaries in other industries and in other regions.

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## PERSONAL STATEMENT

No part of this dissertation has previously been submitted for a degree or other qualification of any other university or institution. Parts of this dissertation are built on work I submitted for assessment as part of A825.

I confirm that this dissertation is entirely my own work.

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## 1 – Introduction

The Courtauld family established their first silk mill in Pebmarsh, a small village in north Essex, in 1799.<sup>1</sup> Within thirty years they had come to dominate the textile industry in the area and continued to do so for the remainder of the nineteenth century. This study concentrates on the time span from 1841 to 1901, a period of great change and for which a good deal of primary source material is available. The Courtauld company deposited most of its nineteenth century archive with the Essex Record Office in 1964, and this includes extensive and detailed employment records. Census records are much more detailed from 1841 onwards with individual names, ages and occupations recorded. This has allowed for easier cross-referencing with the company's employment registers. The time period in question saw considerable variations in the fortunes of the Courtauld company with inevitable consequences for its employees. By the end of the 1840s the company had grown enormously under the leadership of Samuel Courtauld (1793-1881) and had power-driven factories operating in Braintree, Bocking and Halstead employing some 2,000 people either directly or indirectly, the vast majority being women.<sup>2</sup> Figure 1-1 shows the locations of these mills in north Essex together with some of East Anglia's major towns.

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<sup>1</sup> Donald Coleman, *Courtaulds: An Economic and Social History, Volume I: The Nineteenth Century, Silk and Crape* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969), p.37.

<sup>2</sup> Coleman, p.74.

**\*IMAGE REMOVED FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS\***

**Figure 1-1 Map of East Anglia showing places named in text**

The aim of this dissertation is to fill the gaps in the existing literature which is surprisingly limited given the size and importance of the company to both the local and national economy at the time. It will also challenge the interpretations made by the small number of studies which have addressed this particular industry to date. The effects of economic cycles upon the industry will be discussed in detail together with their effects upon the workforce. The wages and conditions of the workers, both male and female, will be compared to those working in textile industries in other parts of the country. Changes to the local population will be investigated to see whether there were any significant migrations to or from the area over the period of interest. This will also aim to determine just how far people had to move in order to seek employment and what sort of alternative employment was available. Archive material will be used to assess the wider effects of the industry upon the community, for example the provision by the Courtauld company of workers' cottages, reading rooms, schools, hospitals and even a creche. The extent to which this philanthropy was balanced by intolerance of dissent will be investigated. The effects of this paternalistic approach upon the workers' attitudes and agency will be considered in detail.

The area of north Essex in common with the wider East Anglia region had a long tradition of textile manufacturing dating back to the sixteenth century.<sup>3</sup> However it had long been in decline before the arrival of Courtaulds at the beginning of the nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> The area was sparsely populated and was to be largely left behind by the industrial revolution for most of the nineteenth century at a time when local agricultural wages were amongst the lowest in the country.<sup>5</sup> This led to outward migration to other regions where more and better paid work was available. Consequently, population growth in the region was considerably lower than that recorded nationally. The average amount of poor relief doled out per head of population in East Anglia was much higher than the national average for the first half of the nineteenth century.<sup>6</sup> Apart from textiles, the only realistic

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<sup>3</sup> Alec Betterton and David Dymond, *Lavenham Industrial Town* (Lavenham: Terence Dalton, 1989), pp.52-53.

<sup>4</sup> Betterton and Dymond, pp.57-73.

<sup>5</sup> William Ashworth, *An Economic History of England, 1870-1939* (Oxford: Routledge, 1960), pp.62-68.

<sup>6</sup> Coleman, p.62.

alternative employment sectors for working-class locals were agriculture, which had also been in long term decline, and domestic service, which grew in size from the 1870s onwards.<sup>7</sup>

Much has been written about the dramatic effects of industrialisation in other regions but the effects on East Anglia are less well documented. However, there are a number of works which address the history of the textile industry in the nineteenth century and the lives of its employees. Pat Hudson in *The Industrial Revolution* discussed the influences which caused the growth of the textile industries in the West Riding and Lancashire as proto-industrialisation developed into full scale industrialisation in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and how this contributed to the decline of textiles in other regions such as East Anglia.<sup>8</sup> Maxine Berg's article *What Difference did Women's Work make to the Industrial Revolution* emphasised the continuing importance of women in textiles during the shift away from wool to cotton in the early nineteenth century. She also addressed the early years of the silk industry in London in the eighteenth century and stated that it remained a 'women's industry' as it spread across the country to fifty different towns by the beginning of the nineteenth century.<sup>9</sup> There are several other works which emphasise the role of women workers who made up the vast majority of the workforce in this particular industry. Nigel Goose's edited volume *Women's Work in Industrial England: Regional and Local Perspectives* addresses important aspects of women's employment experiences in various local industries as well as in domestic service and agriculture. It uses nineteenth century census returns to show the effect of marital status upon their employment opportunities and in common with other studies questions the accuracy of the census enumerations. In her 1930 work *Women Workers and the Industrial Revolution 1750-1850* Ivy Pinchbeck took an optimistic view of the effect of industrialisation on women's freedoms. She claimed that despite its monotony, factory work

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<sup>7</sup> Judy Low, *Women and Industrialisation: Gender at Work in Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), p.48.

<sup>8</sup> Pat Hudson, *The Industrial Revolution* (London: Arnold, 1992), p.101.

<sup>9</sup> Maxine Berg, 'What Difference Did Women's Work Make to the Industrial Revolution', *History Workshop*, 35 (1993), 22-44 (p.27).



offered several advantages for women compared to the old domestic system in terms of comradeship and social development. It also meant their homes were no longer functioning as workshops and she said that this led to improvements in the home environment which greatly benefitted their children. Pinchbeck acknowledged however that the factory environment was unhealthy and involved employees working long hours under constant supervision and subject to the discipline of their employers.<sup>10</sup> Carl Chinn took a less optimistic view of the quality of life for the poorest women working in industrial Britain in his book *They Worked all their Lives: Women of the Urban Poor, 1880-1939*. Although this work covers only the latter part of the period of interest here, it vividly illustrates the lengths that the least well-off working women went to in order to provide for their families and maintain their households against all the odds.

The subject of philanthropic employers in the Victorian age has also been widely addressed. In *Paternalism as an Employer Strategy*, Bob Morris and Jim Smyth examined examples of paternalistic employers in both an urban industrial setting and in a company village situation.<sup>11</sup> The effects of their philanthropy upon the workers' agency were described, in particular the consequences of subsidised housing provision. Frank Prochaska's short work *The Voluntary Impulse: Philanthropy in Modern Britain* described the long tradition of philanthropic employers beginning in the Victorian age and continuing until the creation of the welfare state after the Second World War.<sup>12</sup> Prochaska also argued in his chapter *Philanthropy* in the *Cambridge History of Britain* that philanthropy represented a huge redistribution of wealth which was actually impossible to calculate as a proportion of national income.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ivy Pinchbeck, *Women Workers and the Industrial Revolution 1750-1850* (Abingdon: Cass, 1930), pp.307-308.

<sup>11</sup> Bob Morris and Jim Smyth, 'Paternalism as an Employer Strategy', in *Employer Strategy and the Labour Market*, ed. by Jill Rubery and Frank Wilkinson (Oxford: OUP, 1994), pp. 195-225.

<sup>12</sup> Frank Prochaska, *The Voluntary Impulse: Philanthropy in Modern Britain*, (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1988), pp.83-84.

<sup>13</sup> Frank Prochaska, 'Philanthropy', in *The Cambridge Social History of Britain 1750-1950, Volume 3*, ed. by F.M.L. Thompson (Cambridge: CUP, 1990), pp. 357-358.

Chapter two of this dissertation will utilise both primary and secondary sources to address the origins of the Courtauld company and explore how its ambitions developed over the years to include a sense of a philanthropic mission towards its workforce and their families. A detailed review of the existing literature relating to the company and its operations over the period of interest will be presented.

Chapter three will use mainly primary sources to research the lives of the workers and demonstrate how they fared at the hands of their employer. It will look at examples of Courtaulds' philanthropy but will also address the limits of their benevolence. Issues such as agency, migration and industrial disputes will be addressed together with disparities in the treatment of male and female employees.

Chapter four will use both primary and secondary sources to compare the standard of living of the mill workers to those working in similar industries in other regions. This will take into account the non-wage benefits provided by Courtaulds and will also look at the alternative employment opportunities in the area.

The fifth and final chapter will summarise the findings of the research and indicate how they address the main theme and subsidiary questions spelt out in the introduction of this dissertation, aiming clearly to demonstrate how the population of north Essex was affected by the dominance of the Courtauld company and how their lives changed over the years 1841 to 1901.

## **2 – The Courtauld Company in the Nineteenth Century**

### *2.1 – The Origins of the Courtauld Silk Mills and their Development*

The Courtauld family were descended from wealthy protestant Huguenot refugees who had fled France following the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 which had led to widespread persecution of protestants. Augustine Courtauld the first was known to have taken up residence in London by 1689. His descendants initially prospered as goldsmiths and silversmiths.<sup>1</sup> However in a break with this tradition in 1775 his great-grandson George Courtauld the first was apprenticed to a silk-throwster in Spitalfields at the age of fourteen.<sup>2</sup> Seven years later, having served his full apprenticeship, George established his own business in Spitalfields with the help of a £500 legacy from his father.<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately he was unable to make a good living at a time when throwsters were struggling in London and in 1785 he emigrated for the newly-independent United States where he took up farming. He returned to England in 1794, possibly at the behest of his wife who wanted a more comfortable lifestyle. He resumed his career in the silk industry, initially as a mill assistant in Kent before establishing his own water-powered throwing mill in the village of Pebmarsh in north Essex in 1799. In 1809, George signed an agreement with Joseph Wilson, a silk manufacturer, with a view to manufacturing crape. This involved converting a disused flour mill in Braintree twelve miles south of Pebmarsh. George was to carry out the conversion and then manage the mill for which he would receive a salary and a rent-free house together with some land.<sup>4</sup> Despite some initial success the venture became victim to an acrimonious dispute between the two men by 1814, and the

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<sup>1</sup> Cyril Ward-Jackson, *A History of Courtaulds* (London: Curwen Press, 1941), pp.1-7.

<sup>2</sup> Donald Coleman, *Courtaulds: An Economic and Social History, Volume I: The Nineteenth Century, Silk and Crape* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969), p.8.

<sup>3</sup> Coleman, p.33.

<sup>4</sup> Coleman, pp.36-38.

partnership was eventually dissolved by the Chancery in 1817. George was awarded £5,000 and relieved of responsibility for his apprentices.<sup>5</sup>

As part of the settlement with Wilson, George agreed not to engage in silk manufacture within a ten mile radius of Braintree until 1829.<sup>6</sup> However, his son Samuel Courtauld the third, born in 1793, had already established his own silk business in nearby Bocking in 1816.<sup>7</sup> This was probably motivated out of family loyalty given his father's dispute with Wilson and the subsequent restrictions placed on his operations. Samuel soon became the foremost member of the family and in 1828 he created the partnership to be known as Courtauld, Taylor and Courtauld.<sup>8</sup> The origins of this alliance between the Courtauld and Taylor families can be traced back to 1783 when George's sister Catherine married William Taylor who had been George's fellow apprentice. Of their fourteen children, two also married Courtaulds, thus establishing a dynasty whose offspring were to become the partners and directors of the Courtauld business for almost a century.<sup>9</sup>

Increasing economic liberalism from the 1820s onwards had a profound effect on the silk industry. Tariffs on imported raw silk were reduced, and the prohibition on imported silk manufactures was removed in 1826. Whilst British manufacturers were alarmed by the latter, the former led to a dramatic increase in the number of silk mills, mainly in the north-west and many of these were steam-powered.<sup>10</sup> In contrast the Courtauld mills in north Essex still utilised outdated technology such as man-power or horse-power. This was in part a reflection of the economic situation in the area with its low wages and lack of competition for work. This provided a ready supply of cheap labour, mainly women and children, to operate the outdated machinery.<sup>11</sup> In 1828 the partnership purchased Town Mill in Halstead and opened a warehouse in London.<sup>12</sup> This was in addition to its

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<sup>5</sup> Ward-Jackson, p.18.

<sup>6</sup> Coleman, p.40.

<sup>7</sup> Coleman, pp.48-49.

<sup>8</sup> Coleman, p.53.

<sup>9</sup> Coleman, p.34.

<sup>10</sup> Coleman, pp.65-67.

<sup>11</sup> Coleman, pp.60-63.

<sup>12</sup> Ward-Jackson, p.32.

two mills in Bocking and one in Braintree. Steam power was finally adopted, and the new power looms helped to generate a dramatic increase in profits. Their business doubled over the next five years and the 1831 census report showed a considerable increase in the populations of the towns of Braintree, Bocking and Halstead and this was attributed to the growth in local silk and crape manufacture.<sup>13</sup> The partners enjoyed an average annual rate of return on capital of 26.5 percent over the years 1830 to 1848.<sup>14</sup> Much of the growth arose from supplying the demand for mourning crape and output increased tenfold over that time period. By 1850 there were 570 power looms at the Halstead factory.<sup>15</sup> Figure 2-1 shows a recent photograph of Town Mill (also known as Townsford Mill) in Halstead, which survives as an antiques centre. It was used by Courtaulds from 1828 until 1982.

**\*IMAGE REMOVED FOR COPYRIGHT REASONS\***

**Figure 2-1 Town Mill in Halstead as it stands today**

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<sup>13</sup> Ward-Jackson, p.33.

<sup>14</sup> Coleman, p.74.

<sup>15</sup> Coleman, pp.83-87.

The Courtauld and Taylor families became adherents of Unitarianism with its radical outlook on the moral and political issues of the day.<sup>16</sup> This greatly influenced the company's attitudes towards its workforce. On the one hand, there was a strong belief that the wealthy had a moral responsibility to look after the welfare of those less fortunate. This manifested itself in the provision of subsidised housing and healthcare for the workers, as well as offering various means of self-improvement such as schools, evening classes and a mechanics' institute. On the other hand, the company firmly believed in the virtue of hard work, expecting its workforce to demonstrate total loyalty and obedience. Perhaps as a result of this philanthropy, the workforce appears to have been well-disposed towards their employer, at least in the middle of the nineteenth century. In 1846, 1,600 workers provided a dinner for the partners in the grounds of Samuel Courtauld's residence at High Garrett, roughly half-way between Halstead and Braintree. It was estimated that between 5,000 and 6,000 people attended the 'factory festival' as all the tradesmen in Braintree, Bocking and Halstead closed their shops and declared a general holiday. There were processions led by the local band and the company even struck a commemorative medal to mark the occasion.<sup>17</sup> However, industrial disputes did occasionally arise from 1860 onwards. The first strike occurred in 1860 when the company decided to speed-up the machinery.<sup>18</sup> It felt that the increased production justified a reduction in the piece rates paid to the workers. The power loom weavers walked out and the whole plant came to a standstill. A deeply offended Samuel Courtauld sent a telegram to the manager telling him to 'report to me the names of from 20 to 50 of those who have been foremost in this shameful disorder, for immediate and absolute discharge'.<sup>19</sup> The majority of the strikers immediately returned to work but some of the ringleaders were indeed dismissed. This

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<sup>16</sup> Coleman, p.203.

<sup>17</sup> Frank Warner, *The Silk Industry of the United Kingdom: its Origin and Development* (London, Drane, 1921), p.300; Ward-Jackson, pp.40-42.

<sup>18</sup> Judy Lown, *Women and Industrialisation: Gender at Work in Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), pp.116-118.

<sup>19</sup> Essex Record Office (ERO), D/F 3/2/103, Print of letters from Samuel Courtauld to William Davidson (mill manager) upon the strike of power loom weavers, 21 May 1860.

demonstrated the otherwise philanthropic employer's complete intolerance of any form of rebellion.

The partnership of Courtauld, Taylor and Courtauld was terminated in 1849 and the firm re-grouped as Samuel Courtauld and Company.<sup>20</sup> Steady growth continued for the next twenty-five years and the directors' return on capital continued to be exceptionally good, peaking at an annual average of nearly fifty percent over the years 1870 to 1874.<sup>21</sup> However there was a large decline in profits in the late 1870s which was followed by regular cycles of boom and bust. This period has been referred to as the 'Great Depression of 1873 to 1896' by some economists and it has been stated that whereas the booms were short-lived the slumps were prolonged.<sup>22</sup> Whilst others have disputed the term, the effect of these economic fluctuations could not be avoided by the silk industry. Overall employment in the silk industry in England and Wales fell by two-thirds over the period 1851 to 1901, although this was in part due to the advent of new machinery with a near-doubling in the number of power looms deployed over the same period.<sup>23</sup> There were more than a dozen silk manufacturers in Essex in 1860 but only three remained at the end of the century.<sup>24</sup> The future for Courtaulds appeared uncertain in the early 1890s as changing fashions resulted in a huge drop in demand for mourning crape.<sup>25</sup> At the same time the silk industries of other countries such as Germany and the United States grew rapidly as their home markets became more protectionist. This resulted in a serious loss of export potential for the company's products which also now faced increased competition for the lucrative French market.<sup>26</sup> It was clear that the company needed to diversify into new fabrics. Having concentrated on the manufacture of just one material for many decades, the directors realised that they needed to bring in outside expertise in order to widen their

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<sup>20</sup> Ward-Jackson, p.47.

<sup>21</sup> Coleman, p.133.

<sup>22</sup> A.E.Musson, 'The Great Depression in Britain, 1873-1896: a Reappraisal', *The Journal of Economic History*, 19 (1959), 199-228 (p.200).

<sup>23</sup> Coleman, pp.163-164.

<sup>24</sup> Warner, p.306.

<sup>25</sup> Ward-Jackson, p.63.

<sup>26</sup> Coleman, pp.160-162.

product range. They turned to experienced hands from Yorkshire and Lancashire to progress the development of new materials such as chiffons, coloured gauzes and crepe-de-Chine, a fashionable non-mourning form of crape. The factories were reorganised and extended, with electric arc lighting installed at the Halstead site.<sup>27</sup> There was a large recovery in sales over the years 1893 to 1901 driven mainly by the new coloured fabrics.<sup>28</sup> Total employment at the Halstead factory, having almost halved to just 851 over the years 1886 to 1895, recovered to 1,061 by 1899.<sup>29</sup> The company also became interested in the potential for man-made fibres and at the turn of the century they invested in the manufacture of viscose, or 'artificial silk' as it had been known.<sup>30</sup> It was to become their staple material for the next forty years. The period covered by this study however had indisputably been the era of silk and crape.

## 2.2 – Review of Existing Literature

Only two detailed histories of the Courtauld company in the nineteenth century have been produced. The first of these was Cyril Ward-Jackson's work *A History of Courtaulds* which was published in 1941 for private distribution only. It addressed the origins of the family and the founding of their silk-throwing businesses in Essex at the turn of the nineteenth century and has been referenced in the preceding paragraphs herein. Ward-Jackson described the rapid growth of the silk and crape business in north Essex over the subsequent fifty years. He went on to describe the changing fashions and materials over the remainder of the nineteenth century and beyond. Donald Coleman later produced a series of three volumes covering the history of the company. The first of these *Courtaulds: An Economic and Social History, Volume I: The Nineteenth Century, Silk and Crape* dating from 1969 is the main secondary source that has been referenced in this study.

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<sup>27</sup> Ward-Jackson, pp.66-69.

<sup>28</sup> Coleman, p.192.

<sup>29</sup> Coleman, p.231.

<sup>30</sup> Ward-Jackson, pp.73-81.



Coleman went on to write two further volumes addressing the company's twentieth century history, which is beyond the scope of this study. Coleman's first volume made full use of the Courtauld company archives which at the time had been recently deposited with the Essex Record Office. The result is a highly detailed quantitative study of the company's labour force, wages, assets and profits as well as commodity prices at various times throughout the nineteenth century. The philanthropic nature of the employer, rooted in the family's radical Unitarianism, was also demonstrated with much statistical analysis. However, Coleman emphasised that this was tempered by a firm belief in self-help and a no-nonsense attitude to any sort of dissent, noting that the company's approach could be referred to as 'benevolent despotism'.<sup>31</sup> Coleman also looked at wider macroeconomic data including silk import duties and the fortunes of the silk industry nationally. The history of Britain's wider silk industry was recorded in detail in Frank Warner's 1921 work *The Silk Industry of the United Kingdom: its Origin and Development*, a substantial volume of over 600 pages which addressed the industry's origins and described its development on a region-by-region basis, with particular emphasis on the nineteenth century.

Judy Lown based the research for her book *Women and Industrialisation: Gender at Work in Nineteenth-Century England* on the experiences of women and girls working in the Courtauld silk mills. She studied employment and family patterns to argue that the paternalistic practices of employers helped to establish male dominance in the workplace and beyond. Her analysis showed that female labour mobility at Courtaulds was extremely limited. The majority of women in 1861 had only had two jobs in their entire career, typically winding and weaving. A handful of women were promoted to be gauze examiners or assistant overseers but that represented the absolute limit of their career opportunities. Clearly the glass ceiling was very low indeed. There was however considerable scope for male employees to advance and their wages increased progressively with age and experience. Lown stated that male wages compared favourably with those paid to textile

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<sup>31</sup> Coleman, pp.247-254.

workers in other parts of the country.<sup>32</sup> Lown also described the system of rewards and punishments operated by the philanthropic employer, including the awards of pensions to retiring employees. These were not based on a contribution system but were purely arbitrary and at the behest of the directors. The beneficiaries were mostly if not all male employees and mostly senior ones.<sup>33</sup>

Lown also contributed to a co-authored pamphlet entitled *Under Control: Life in a Nineteenth-century Silk Factory* which described the lives of the workers of the Halstead mill workers at home and in the factory and looked at their social lives. It told how the company used its paternalistic zeal to exert complete control over their community through the provision of schools, a library, a literary institute, adult education classes, a nursery, a lodging house, an amusement society and a sick fund. Apart from the literary institute all were intended for the 'betterment' of the women workers. By such means the town of Halstead was completely dominated by the company which regulated every aspect of life for its workers and was therefore able quickly to suppress any form of dissent. The women workers in effect had to balance two full-time jobs, one at the mill and the other at home, looking after their families and maintaining a house which was invariably provided by their employer.

Lown's works built on her doctoral thesis *Gender and Class during Industrialisation: a study of the Halstead Silk Industry in Essex, 1825-1900* in which she had asserted that Samuel Courtauld's choices and decisions, whether conscious or unconscious, acted against the interests of women in the local community.<sup>34</sup> Whilst there is undoubtedly truth in this statement, in order to be fair to Samuel Courtauld it needs to be seen in the context of the economic situation in the area and prevailing social attitudes towards women at the time. Lown's assertions will be evaluated in greater detail in Chapter Three through the examination of primary sources.

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<sup>32</sup> Lown, *Women*, pp.45-59.

<sup>33</sup> Lown, *Women*, p.109.

<sup>34</sup> Judy Lown, 'Gender and Class during Industrialisation: a study of the Halstead Silk Industry in Essex, 1825-1900' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Essex, 1983), p.11.

Another doctoral thesis which addressed Courtaulds in Halstead in the nineteenth century was Patrick Crouch's *Entrepreneurs, Manufactories and Small Industrial Communities, 1850-1914*. He also looked at three other small rural towns in East Anglia which were each dominated by one industrial employer. These were all family firms, namely Gurteen and Sons in Haverhill, Richard Garrett and Company in Leiston, and Robert Hunt and Company in Earls Colne. Crouch recorded that all four companies were to exert great influence over their local communities, establishing institutions for their 'improvement' and generally dominating civic life. He paid particular attention to the provision of company housing in each case and his conclusion was that compared to the other employers, Courtaulds provided very little housing for its employees, in fact just two percent of the overall housing stock in Halstead in 1890 was owned by the company.<sup>35</sup> In his conclusion, Crouch spoke of how these small industrial towns have previously been neglected by scholars despite their importance to the economy.<sup>36</sup> He also discussed Lown's depiction of Samuel Courtauld as a patriarch who controlled his workforce, with particular reference to his establishment of a hostel for female employees. The hostel was unsuccessful, and Crouch commented that whilst Courtauld thought he was doing the right thing for his workforce, his paternalism was not always appreciated and it ultimately led to conflict.<sup>37</sup>

There exists a contemporary account of employment in the Halstead mill in the form of Mary Merryweather's study *Experience of Factory Life: Being a Record of Fourteen Years' Work at Mr. Courtauld's Silk Mill in Halstead, in Essex* which was written in 1862 and therefore covers much of the early part of the period addressed by this dissertation. Merryweather was a Quaker and also a qualified nurse who was engaged by the Courtauld family to set up a day nursery and night school for women working in their factories.<sup>38</sup> The preface to the book began by stating that a woman mill

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<sup>35</sup> Crouch, Patrick, 'Entrepreneurs, Manufactories and Small Industrial Communities, 1850-1914' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Leicester, 2010), pp.160-165.

<sup>36</sup> Crouch, p.206.

<sup>37</sup> Crouch, pp.211-212.

<sup>38</sup> Women's Suffrage – Mary Merryweather  
< <https://www.suffrageresources.org.uk/database/936/mary-merryweather> > [accessed 29 June 2020]

worker could earn more than a male agricultural worker. However, it lamented the fact the 'these girls are not getting even the ordinary training of home life' with concerns that they needed to be taught how to use their money wisely.<sup>39</sup> The town of Halstead was described in the following glowing terms 'very different from our northern and midland manufacturing towns. It is situated amongst the luxuriant cornfields of Essex, in the pretty valley of the Colne'.<sup>40</sup>

Merryweather recalled being shown round the Halstead mill by the owners and 'witnessing 500 looms at work by steam-power, with a woman tending each'. The factory was described as 'clean, airy and well arranged' although she also noticed the constant noise from the machinery. Most of the women were described as clean and neatly dressed but some appeared very dirty and ill-dressed.<sup>41</sup> Merryweather also mentioned the 'doctor's club' at the factory which provided basic healthcare in return for a payment of one penny per week. She went on to describe the company's contribution to the education of their workers, which included support for local schools, and the establishment of a Literary Institute although that was initially for the benefit of male employees only.<sup>42</sup> She also recorded the establishment of the hostel or 'Factory House' in 1849 to house 'unmarried work-women of good character' who came from outlying rural districts and could not be expected to travel in daily from their family homes. The residents were charged one shilling a week for lodging, inclusive of washing, and had to adhere to a very strict set of rules regarding their conduct.<sup>43</sup> Merryweather also described her role in the setting up of the 'Infant Nursery' by the company in response to concerns about infants being neglected by working mothers during working hours. It charged fourpence per child per day and all children had to have been vaccinated and be in good health in order to be admitted. She however described a number of difficulties experienced in its operation including a lack of suitably qualified nurses and this led to its closure after just three

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<sup>39</sup> Mary Merryweather, *Experience of Factory Life: Being a Record of Fourteen Years' Work at Mr. Courtauld's Silk Mill in Halstead, in Essex* (London: Victoria Press, 1862), pp.viii-ix.

<sup>40</sup> Merryweather, p.6.

<sup>41</sup> Merryweather, p.9.

<sup>42</sup> Merryweather, p.35.

<sup>43</sup> Merryweather, pp.43-50.

years.<sup>44</sup> The same want of nurses amongst the poor was mentioned with regard to the high prevalence of infectious diseases in Halstead at the time. Naturally no-one wanted to enter an infectious house and risk catching a potentially deadly disease. She also lamented the lack of sanitation in the town and the level of ignorance among some locals regarding vaccinations:

Besides the fever, we have twice in ten years had small-pox in the town, owing, in some degree, no doubt, to the neglect of vaccination, as so many of the poor have a strong conviction that other diseases and taints of the blood are often conveyed to their children through that means.<sup>45</sup>

Merryweather concluded with something of a diatribe against women working in factories despite acknowledging the financial advantages it yielded for them. From her presumably middle-class perspective she extolled the virtues of domesticity and criticised the women for neglecting their children by going out to work.<sup>46</sup>

Finally, the accuracy of census records in relation to women working in the Courtauld silk mills in the latter half of the nineteenth century has been investigated by Amanda Wilkinson in her article *The Census Enumeration of Women Working in the Courtauld Silk Mills, 1851-1901*. Comparison of census returns with employment records has shown that there was under and mis-enumeration of women's employment in the censuses.<sup>47</sup> The 1891 census for England and Wales recorded an overall employment rate of thirty-five percent for females aged over ten years of age.<sup>48</sup> However, Wilkinson's research has suggested that the rate of female employment in the towns of Halstead, Braintree and Bocking was significantly higher than the national average, due in large part to the numbers employed by Courtaulds. Census under-representation might well have arisen as a result

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<sup>44</sup> Merryweather, pp.50-59.

<sup>45</sup> Merryweather, p.70.

<sup>46</sup> Merryweather, pp.76-79.

<sup>47</sup> Amanda Wilkinson, 'The Census Enumeration of Women Working in the Courtauld Silk Mills, 1851-1901', *Local Population Studies*, 85 (2010), 64-71 (p.71).

<sup>48</sup> *Census of England and Wales 1891, Volume 4: General Reports with Summary, Tables and Appendices*, C.7222 (London: HMSO, 1893), p.56.

of the prevailing Victorian ideal of domesticity and its inherent bias against working women. The occupational descriptions recorded were at the behest of the person completing the form, usually the head of household. Census reports also allude to the problem of vague and inaccurate job titles and the fact that there might be several different descriptions for what in effect is the same occupation. Therefore, caution will be exercised when collating census data and employment records in Chapters Three and Four.

### *2.3 – Summary*

The development of the silk industry in north Essex by the Courtauld company led to an economic revival in an otherwise depressed area from the 1830s onwards. The wages offered to the workers were not spectacular but compared favourably to the few other alternative opportunities available for working class men and women in the area. The company also provided its employees with housing, education and healthcare of a standard that few of their contemporaries would have experienced. This philanthropic approach was double-edged as it effectively made the workforce totally beholden to the company. The literature shows that any form of dissent was ruthlessly suppressed. Resignation or dismissal would have condemned the employee to a world of insecurity and a substandard existence. However, the company offered relative security to its workforce despite an increasingly volatile economic situation from the late 1870s onwards. The experiences of the workers will be examined in greater detail in the next chapter.

### **3 – The two sides of the ‘Philanthropic’ Employer**

#### *3.1 – The Carrot*

In keeping with their Unitarian principles, the Courtauld family felt they had a duty to help those in need but always with the proviso that the recipients were deserving of such generosity. The company was often willing to give a second chance to women weavers who had previously been dismissed. For example, Jessie Diss was discharged in October 1897 on the grounds of being a ‘bad weaver’.<sup>1</sup> However, the 1901 census records her as still living in Halstead aged twenty-three with her occupation listed as a ‘Redrawer (Silk Factory)’.<sup>2</sup> Examination of the company’s employment registers confirms that she was taken back as a redrawer in March 1899, confirming that they were willing to give her a second chance, this time working in a new role.<sup>3</sup> It is also notable that the census describes her as a ‘single’ household head having a one year old son, presumably illegitimate, living with her. There was only one other member of the household, a seventeen-year old female lodger who also worked in the silk factory. This suggests that her employer was willing to overlook Jessie’s ‘transgression’ and allow her to continue working at the mill, having already re-employed her following her dismissal for poor workmanship as a weaver. This philanthropic behaviour is in stark contrast to the attitudes of many employers at the time. However, it seems unlikely that Jessie would have been afforded any more chances, and she would need quickly to repay her employer’s goodwill by performing diligently in her new occupation.

The company was keen to improve the minds of its workforce and in furtherance of this aim they founded a Literary and Mechanics’ Institute in 1843 with the objective of instructing ‘mechanics and

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<sup>1</sup> Essex Record Office (ERO), D/F 3/3/28, Monthly Tables of Weavers Left or Dismissed from Power Looms (Halstead), October 1897.

<sup>2</sup> Census of England and Wales 1901: Halstead, TNA, RG13/1719, folio 77, p.14.

<sup>3</sup> ERO, D/F 3/3/5, Register of Winders and Redrawers Employed, March 1899.

others' aged twelve and above in the 'various branches of science and useful knowledge'.<sup>4</sup> Originally located in a room above the Halstead factory kitchen, it moved to an impressive new building on Market Hill and ran a lending library and reading room, and by 1849 held 875 volumes as well as periodicals and newspapers. Lectures, debates, entertainments and excursions were also organised. Membership subscriptions were dependent upon rank with master tradesmen paying ten shillings per annum whilst 'journeymen, mechanics, weavers, apprentices, labourers and servants' paid a reduced rate of four shillings and fourpence. A special rate of six shillings was introduced for 'ladies, not being of the working classes' and family membership was also introduced.<sup>5</sup> Annual general meetings were held to appoint committee members, but women were not allowed to stand for office. There was a strict set of rules regarding members' behaviour. Rule 19 stated that any member 'using profane or immoral language shall be fined one penny [for] each offence' and rule 20 forbade smoking and intoxicating drinks.<sup>6</sup> The first President was Samuel Courtauld who made a personal donation to clear the Institute's debt when he stood down in 1846. Membership peaked at 264 in 1858 but fell rapidly in the 1870s due to increased competition from the Halstead Working Men's Club.<sup>7</sup> Lown described the Institute as having in part an atmosphere that resembled middle-class gentlemen's clubs of the day.<sup>8</sup> If it was indeed a paternalistic attempt to impose middle-class values upon the male workers then ultimately it did not really succeed as many of them preferred an environment where they could drink and smoke rather than read books. In 1884 the Institute faced

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<sup>4</sup> ERO, D/Z 468, Halstead Literary and Mechanics' Institute Records, volume 1 (1846-1859), minute of December 1852.

<sup>5</sup> ERO, D/Z 468, volume 1, minute of February 1858.

<sup>6</sup> Mary Merryweather, *Experience of Factory Life: Being a Record of Fourteen Years' Work at Mr. Courtauld's Silk Mill in Halstead, in Essex* (London: Victoria Press, 1862), pp.36-37.

<sup>7</sup> ERO, D/Z 468/2, Minutes of Annual General Meeting and of Committee 1853-1859, Half-yearly Report of June 1858; ERO, D/Z 468/3, Minutes of Annual General Meeting and of committee 1871-1887, Annual Report for 1873.

<sup>8</sup> Judy Lown, *Women and Industrialisation: Gender at Work in Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), p.152.



closure but was saved by another donation from its then President, George Courtauld, Member of Parliament for Maldon and nephew of Samuel Courtauld.<sup>9</sup>

Members of the Courtauld family were prominent benefactors of the local towns. In 1862 a new building was opened at Manor Street School in Braintree by the same George Courtauld.<sup>10</sup> It had been paid for by his late father, also called George. The building was described as 'handsome, of red brick with dressings of Bath stone' and incorporated modern fittings such as a water heater, gas burners and ventilators. There was a tablet on one of the gables which bore the inscription 'This School, Erected and Endowed by George Courtauld of Bocking, is by him given for the use of the Children of the Poorer Classes of this Town and Neighbourhood, 1861'. The school had 210 children on its books with an average attendance of 182. Income was £190 per annum, paid by a combination of funding from charities, subscriptions, government grants and an annuity from the late George Courtauld's estate.

The same branch of the family also founded a cottage hospital in Braintree in 1871. It was described as being in a 'very healthy and cheerful position, and has been fitted with every requirement for the purpose for which it is intended at Mr. Courtauld's sole expense'.<sup>11</sup> Anyone wishing to be admitted was required to obtain a doctor's certificate and then take it to Mrs. George Courtauld who was solely responsible for granting cards of admission. However, in emergencies the procedure could be bypassed and immediate admission granted. Patients were required to pay from three shillings and sixpence per week upwards according to their means. The patients' families or friends were required to collect their linen from the hospital, wash it and return it clean. Whilst the hospital was established mainly for the benefit of the residents of Braintree and Bocking it was stated that admission would not be refused to those from neighbouring parishes provided there was room. A

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<sup>9</sup> ERO, D/Z 468, Halstead Literary and Mechanics' Institute Records, volume 2 (1871-1897), minute of January 1885.

<sup>10</sup> *The Essex Standard and General Advertiser for the Eastern Counties* (Colchester, England), 16 April 1862, p.2.

<sup>11</sup> *The Essex Standard and General Advertiser for the Eastern Counties* (Colchester, England), 11 August 1871, p.2.

cottage hospital was also built in Halstead in 1884 with the land and buildings gifted by George Courtauld.<sup>12</sup> The building, said to have cost £1,300, was built in the neo-Gothic style, much favoured by successful Victorians keen to enhance their standing. The interior was described as ‘very homely-looking’ and included a female ward for six beds and a male ward for four beds. The grounds were laid out in an ornamental manner. At the opening ceremony Mr. Courtauld stated that cottage hospitals were much better for local patients than general hospitals in that they allowed them to remain near to family and friends rather than being ‘put into a ward where there were perhaps twenty other patients, and where he would lose his individuality, and become a nonentity’. This suggests that he exhibited genuine concern for the welfare of the local population, many of whom would have worked for the family firm.

The Courtauld company and the wider family set out to improve the welfare and the minds of their workforce, and also to enhance the amenities of the local towns. Whilst there was certainly a philanthropic motivation for this behaviour, backed by their Unitarian beliefs, it also helped to secure the long-term prosperity of their enterprise by creating the sort of environment where future generations of workers would want to live. Their success in achieving these ends can be seen in the longevity of the company which remained in operation locally until the 1980s, and also in the fine Victorian civic buildings which still grace those towns.

### 3.2 – *The Stick*

Many were to experience the limits of their employer’s benevolence. Some of the entries in the register of Halstead weavers who left or were dismissed have a cross appended against their names. This appears to imply that they were not to be re-employed under any circumstances. For example,

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<sup>12</sup> *The Essex Standard and General Advertiser for the Eastern Counties* (Colchester, England), 20 September 1884, p.6.

Celia Parmenter, dismissed in December 1896, was described as a 'very indifferent' weaver and had a cross placed next to her name.<sup>13</sup> Similarly, Eliza Playford, aged fifty-two, was dismissed in June 1897 for 'refusing work', and her name was also appended with a cross.<sup>14</sup> Her entry in the 1901 census records no occupation, although she had a daughter and lodger living with her who were both silk winders.<sup>15</sup>

There were a number of dismissals for 'immoral behaviour' and pilfering. In the case of the former, women were much more likely to be sacked than men, reflecting the double standards of the time. Laura Spurgeon, aged twenty-five, was dismissed in August 1897 for having a second illegitimate child.<sup>16</sup> Whilst she was described as a 'bad character', there was no cross appended against her name suggesting that re-employment might have been considered at a future date. However, there appears to be no record of her name in the subsequent employment registers or local censuses, so it is to be assumed that she either married or moved to a different area, or both. The company's behaviour in this instance, when compared to the leniency shown towards Jessie Diss, tends to confirm Coleman's comment that having one child out of wedlock would be tolerated but having a second one led to dismissal.<sup>17</sup>

Instances of theft by employees were treated most severely, resulting in prosecution as well as dismissal. In 1861 a thirty-five year old silk weaver named Matilda Rutland was indicted for stealing seven pounds and six ounces of silk from the Braintree mill.<sup>18</sup> A police sergeant had spotted her acting strangely on a train from Braintree to Witham and noticed that she had a pair of gallon bottles which both contained silk. George Courtauld, nephew of Samuel, was called to examine the silk and he confirmed that it was the company's property having an estimated value of £8, equivalent to

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<sup>13</sup> ERO, D/F 3/3/28, December 1896.

<sup>14</sup> ERO, D/F 3/3/28, June 1897.

<sup>15</sup> Census of England and Wales 1901: Halstead, TNA, RG13/1719, folio 14, p.20.

<sup>16</sup> ERO, D/F 3/3/28, August 1897.

<sup>17</sup> Donald Coleman, *Courtaulds: An Economic and Social History, Volume I: The Nineteenth Century, Silk and Crape* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969), p.240.

<sup>18</sup> *The Essex Standard and General Advertiser for the Eastern Counties* (Colchester, England), 22 May 1861, p.2.

about £950 in today's money. Rutland was found guilty by a jury at the Essex Quarter Sessions. The chairman said that 'property so subject to depredation must be protected and in consequence a severe punishment must be inflicted'. Rutland was sentenced to twelve months' imprisonment with hard labour. It was not surprising that the court was determined to set an example in this case in order to deter other would-be pilferers. The Courtaulds were prominent and influential members of Essex civic society and the judiciary was bound to be supportive of their interests.

Not all dismissed employees fell upon hard times. For example, Fanny Amey, an eighteen year old winder, was dismissed from the Halstead factory in 1882 for having 'taken to drinking'.<sup>19</sup> The Courtaulds, in common with many Unitarians, were sympathetic to the temperance movement and would not tolerate insobriety amongst their workforce. However, Fanny married local baker Charles Cook in 1888 and by 1891 they had a 'boarder servant' living with them who was also employed as an apprentice baker.<sup>20</sup> It is therefore likely that she went on to live a much better lifestyle than if she had remained working at the mill.

Men were most likely to be dismissed for drunkenness and violent behaviour. Alfred Beadle worked as a clerk at the Halstead mill where his wife was also employed as a silk winder.<sup>21</sup> He was dismissed in 1888 after twenty years' service for 'repeated insobriety'.<sup>22</sup> Three years later he had found alternative employment locally as a 'fitter's labourer'. His wife continued to work at the mill.<sup>23</sup> Joseph Scott, a forty-seven year old mechanic at the Halstead mill, was dismissed for 'abusive and violent' conduct in 1876 and the records made clear that he was not to be re-employed.<sup>24</sup> It is not known whether his behaviour was linked to alcohol consumption, but it is perhaps ironic to note that by 1891 he was the landlord of the Nag's Head public house in Halstead.<sup>25</sup> Sometimes a second

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<sup>19</sup> ERO, D/F 3/3/28, June 1882.

<sup>20</sup> England and Wales Marriage Register 1888, Volume 4A, p.649; Census of England and Wales 1891: Halstead, TNA, RG12/1419, folio 34, p.19.

<sup>21</sup> Census of England and Wales 1881: Halstead, TNA, RG11/1802, folio 52, p.7.

<sup>22</sup> ERO, D/F 3/3/26, Rough Diary of Carey Clements, Halstead Mill Manager, entry for 17 July 1888.

<sup>23</sup> Census of England and Wales 1891: Halstead, TNA, RG12/1419, folio 7, p.5.

<sup>24</sup> ERO, D/F 3/3/27, Wage Book 1852-1876, p.7.

<sup>25</sup> Census of England and Wales 1891: Halstead, TNA, RG12/1419, folio 8, p.7.

chance was forthcoming, provided contrition was shown by the miscreant. Pay would often be cut as a punishment. William Finch started working at the Halstead mill as a silk winder in 1861 aged thirteen. He was the sixth of ten children, his father and five elder siblings also worked at the mill as silk weavers.<sup>26</sup> His career initially progressed very well and his starting salary of seven shillings per week had increased to eighteen shillings per week by 1871.<sup>27</sup> However, by October of that year he had become unreliable as a result of 'insobriety'. He was demoted to be a general labourer and his weekly wage was reduced to fourteen shillings. Finch was still employed in that capacity in 1881 although by 1891 he had been promoted to be a foreman.<sup>28</sup> It seems that he was eventually able to redeem himself although it took some time to recover his standing within the company.

As mentioned in Chapter Two, the management also exhibited a zero-tolerance attitude towards industrial disputes. The power loom weavers strike of 1860 was the first significant instance of industrial unrest at Courtaulds.<sup>29</sup> The local newspaper reported that some 600 power-loom weavers had gone on strike in protest at having their piece rates reduced as a result of the power looms being speeded up to increase production rates. The report referred to a 'few disreputable characters in this large body of work-people' stirring up unrest but noted that most of the strikers 'have behaved themselves most orderly'.<sup>30</sup> The management did not yield, and the strikers returned to work. Some of the ringleaders were dismissed but others were given second chances. Disputes occurred with increasing frequency towards the end of the century. Interestingly, a strike by 250 women weavers at the Braintree mill in 1886 in protest at new regulations was described by the local newspaper as 'the first occurrence of the kind which has ever taken place at any of Messers. Courtauld and Co.'s establishments, and it is hoped it may be the last'.<sup>31</sup> It seems like a good

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<sup>26</sup> Census of England and Wales 1861: Halstead, TNA, RG09/1110, folio 27, p.15.

<sup>27</sup> ERO, D/F 3/3/27, p.12.

<sup>28</sup> Census of England and Wales 1881: Halstead, TNA, RG11/1802, folio 56, p.15; Census of England and Wales 1891: Halstead, TNA, RG12/1419, folio 9, p.10.

<sup>29</sup> Judy Lown, 'Gender and Class during Industrialisation: a study of the Halstead Silk Industry in Essex, 1825-1900' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Essex, 1983), pp.383-384.

<sup>30</sup> *The Essex Standard and General Advertiser for the Eastern Counties* (Colchester, England), 25 May 1860, p.2.

<sup>31</sup> *The Essex Standard and General Advertiser for the Eastern Counties* (Colchester, England), 3 April 1886, p.2.

example of biased reporting from the local press in favour of the company. By the 1890s several disputes arose due to resentment caused by the recruitment of senior male employees from northern textile districts on significantly higher wages than the incumbent locals. The greater demand for labour by this time gave the management little choice but to increase the wages of the locals.<sup>32</sup> The employer's hold on its workforce had lessened due to the laws of supply and demand. Wages will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.

### *3.3 – Summary*

The motives of Courtaulds and other contemporary philanthropic employers need to be considered. During the early phase of the industrial revolution, from 1770 to 1850, many new industries were established in sparsely populated areas in order to utilise water-power. They therefore had no choice but to provide housing and other facilities in order to establish their workforces. Whilst the employers may have had philanthropic motives towards their workers' welfare, there was a considerable degree of self-interest. The educational facilities that were made available to workers might well have been seen as a means of improving their productivity. The provision of good quality housing helped improve the health of the employees and therefore benefitted the employer in terms of reduced absenteeism. It also meant that the workforce was located near to their workplace and could therefore be expected to turn up on time. Additionally it enabled employers to closely monitor the behaviour of their workers. In all it led to a 'captive' workforce who had to behave well towards their employer or face the threat of eviction as well as losing their livelihoods. This was especially true of Courtaulds given the lack of alternative industrial employment in their local area for most of the nineteenth century. The situation had changed slightly in the workers' favour by the end of the century due to increased competition for labour in the area. Some of those who had been dismissed were re-employed by the company at a later date. However, the company

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<sup>32</sup> Coleman, pp.243-244.

continued to expect absolute loyalty in return for its philanthropy, and the trust shown in its employees had to be repaid, particularly in the cases of those errant workers who had been given a 'second chance'. Other employees who failed to meet the required standards were shown no mercy by their employer, and in addition to dismissal, prosecutions were ruthlessly pursued in cases of theft which could ultimately lead to imprisonment. Women were more likely to be on the receiving end of these harsh treatments. Nonetheless, many of the male workers who were permanently blacklisted found alternative employment locally and therefore avoided having to move to new localities.

The towns of Halstead, Braintree and Bocking were already well established having developed around cottage industries. Therefore, there was no call for large-scale provision of new housing. However, some company housing was built, and a factory hostel was established for single women employees. As well as providing accommodation, healthcare and educational facilities for its workers, the Courtauld company and their extended family were major benefactors when it came to enhancing the amenities of Halstead, Braintree and Bocking. They provided water fountains, public parks and hospitals, and also donated money to local schools and charities. This was intended to benefit the entire population of the towns, not just the company's employees. Ultimately it also greatly benefitted the civic standing of the Courtauld family.

## **4 – The Relative Standard of Living of the Courtauld Silk Workers**

### *4.1 – Wages and Occupations in the United Kingdom 1841-1901*

Simple comparisons between wages paid at different times in history can be of limited usefulness if based merely on general price inflation. For example, such indices often fail accurately to reflect increases in housing costs. Food prices have fluctuated in real terms, particularly during the latter part of the nineteenth century. There is an added complication in that wage data typically references base pay only and does not always take into account what would now be referred to as 'benefits-in-kind' provided by some employers such as subsidised housing and childcare. The government developed an increasing obsession with gathering wage statistics as the nineteenth century progressed, but their reports sometimes excluded the additional benefits provided by employers. For example a survey into the wages of domestic servants in 1899 asked respondents about allowances such as those paid for beer and washing but the ensuing report stated that 'no use has been made of the answers in the tabulation of wages' and went on to say 'no questions were asked as to conditions of employment and working arrangements'.<sup>1</sup> The report quoted an average weekly wage of just over six shillings for indoor female domestic servants working in England and Wales outside of London, exclusive of allowances or money gifts.<sup>2</sup> There was no regional breakdown of the data.

Despite these potential shortcomings, parliamentary reports provide a comprehensive source of nineteenth century wage data and many of them address regional differences in remuneration. They are used as the main primary source for the wage analyses in this section. A report produced in 1900 covering agricultural pay rates acknowledged that there was a large difference between

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<sup>1</sup> House of Commons Sessional Paper (HCSP), *Return on the Money Wages of Indoor Domestic Servants*, C.9346, XCII.1 (London: HMSO, 1899), pp.28-29.

<sup>2</sup> HCSP, C.9346, XCII.1, p.7.



weekly cash wages and actual earnings, the latter including overtime and extra payments for corn harvests. It also listed examples of allowances in kind and subsidised or free housing.<sup>3</sup> The extensive tabulated data, presented on a county by county basis, distinguished between basic cash wages and the value of allowances in kind. The report shows that at the end of the nineteenth century the wages paid to ordinary agricultural labourers were lowest in the eastern counties, with the predominant rate in Essex just twelve shillings per week. This was due to the region's dependence on arable crops, the value of which had fallen dramatically due to increasing levels of grain imports from North America. Rates were significantly higher in all other regions with the highest rates paid in the northern counties where there was greater emphasis on dairy and livestock farming which had fared better. The predominant rate in Lancashire was nineteen shillings per week. This was also a reflection of the increased competition for labour in the more heavily industrialised areas. However, the report shows that the difference between these two regions was slightly less stark when the value of allowances was taken into account. These were estimated at an additional two shillings and eleven pence in Essex, more than twice the value of the allowances paid in Lancashire.<sup>4</sup> Nonetheless total earnings in Lancashire were still twenty-five percent higher than those in Essex in 1898. Base agricultural wages in Essex were at almost exactly the same level in 1899 as they had been forty years earlier.<sup>5</sup> In contrast those in the north rose by about a third over that time period.<sup>6</sup>

In order to assess the relevance of this data in real terms, changes in the cost of living need to be considered. There was no official index of consumer prices before 1914.<sup>7</sup> Estimates of price inflation before this date are typically based on records of commodity prices paid by institutions over

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<sup>3</sup> House of Commons Sessional Paper, *Return on the Wages and Earnings of Agricultural Labour in the United Kingdom*, Cd.346, LXXXII.557 (London: HMSO, 1900), pp.18-24.

<sup>4</sup> HCSP, Cd.346, LXXXII.557, pp.25-29.

<sup>5</sup> HCSP, Cd.346, LXXXII.557, pp.238.

<sup>6</sup> HCSP, Cd.346, LXXXII.557, pp.209-218.

<sup>7</sup> Office for National Statistics

<<http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/cpi/consumer-price-indices/history-of-and-differences-between-the-consumer-prices-index-and-retail-prices-index/history-of-and-differences-between-the-consumer-price-index-and-retail-price-index---article.pdf>> [accessed 13 August 2020], pp.1-2.

the years. B.R.Mitchell, with the collaboration of Phyllis Deane, used a number of indices to calculate the changes in the cost of food, cereals, coal, textiles and other raw materials. Of these, the indices relating to food prices are the most relevant here. Their tables suggest that food prices fell by a third in cash terms between 1860 and 1898 so this might indicate that static wages over that period actually represented a substantial improvement in living standards.<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, this does not give any indication of the changes in the costs of housing, clothing or fuel, all of which represented a considerable burden to the poorest paid workers. Mitchell and Deane did however calculate a standard of living index based on both wages and prices starting in 1850. This shows that nationally wages had increased by eighty-three percent in real terms by the end of the century.<sup>9</sup> This would suggest that agricultural workers fared badly compared to other industries over that time span. Further analysis by Mitchell and Deane confirms that much larger wage increases were recorded in building, engineering, cotton and coal mining.<sup>10</sup> Their findings are corroborated by a government report into wages paid in heavy industries in 1886. It shows that industrial workers were much better paid than agricultural labourers. Table 4-1 summarises some of the rates recorded for male industrial workers in Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex in 1885. At that time weekly agricultural wages were around eleven shillings per week in Norfolk and Suffolk, and thirteen shillings per week in Essex.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> B.R.Mitchell and Phyllis Deane, *Abstract of British Historical Statistics* (Cambridge: CUP, 1962), p.474.

<sup>9</sup> Mitchell and Deane, p.344.

<sup>10</sup> Mitchell and Deane, pp.349-350.

<sup>11</sup> HCSP, Cd.346, LXXXII.557, pp.234-238.

Occupation	Average Weekly Rate of Wages in shillings (s.) and pence (d.)
Senior Foremen	50s. 0d.
Pattern Makers	28s. 7d.
Platers and Riveters	25s. 4d.
Turners	25s. 3d.
Fitters	24s. 10d.
Carpenters and Joiners	24s. 1d.
Iron Moulders	23s. 8d.
Timekeepers	23s. 5d.
Smiths	22s. 8d.
Stationary Enginemen	18s. 8d.
Warehouse Hands and Storekeepers	18s. 4d.
Cupola Men	18s. 3d.
Painters	18s. 1d.
Carters	16s. 5d.
Fettlers or Dressers	16s. 4d.
Drillers and Screwers	16s. 3d.
Labourers	15s. 7d.

**Table 4-1 Return of Wages for Men Employed in Norfolk, Suffolk and Essex in 1885<sup>12</sup>**

In the case of the textile industries, wages varied considerably between trades and regions. Government reports into the wages paid in the principal and minor textile trades provide a comparison. The national average weekly wages paid in various branches of the textile industry in 1885 are summarised in Table 4-2.

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<sup>12</sup> House of Commons Sessional Paper, *General Report on Wages of Manual Labour Classes in the United Kingdom, 1886 and 1891*, C.6889 (London: HMSO, 1893), p.51.

Trade	Average Weekly Rate of Wages in shillings (s.) and pence (d.)
Carpet	15s. 9d.
Wool	15s. 8d.
Cotton	15s. 3d.
Hosiery	15s. 3d.
Flock and Shoddy	14s. 9d.
Hemp, Manilla and Cocoa Fibre	13s. 3d.
Worsted	12s. 2d.
Silk	11s. 9d.
Smallwares	11s. 5d.
Jute	10s. 1d.
Linen	9s. 11d.

**Table 4-2 Average Weekly Wages paid in various Textile Trades in 1885<sup>13</sup>**

The silk industry appears to have been one of the lowest paid textile trades. It should be noted that the rates quoted are the average paid to all employees regardless of age or gender. Women and children were paid considerably less than men, even when they were performing the same tasks.

The only jobs at Courtaulds performed by both men and women were spindle-weaving and winding.<sup>14</sup> The better paid jobs such as crimping and finishing were reserved exclusively for men.<sup>15</sup>

The vast majority of employees working in the textile industries were women, as shown in Table 4-3, which lists occupations where female employees outnumbered males in 1891.

Occupation	Females	Males	Occupation	Females	Males
Nun, sister of charity	4,678	—	Lace manufacture	21,716	13,030
Sick nurse, midwife, invalid attendant	53,057	601	Fustian manufacture	4,962	3,220
School teacher, professor, lecturer	144,393	50,628	Tape manufacture	1,542	943
Actor	3,696	3,625	Thread manufacture	2,053	615
Domestic - indoor servant	1,386,167	58,527	Hemp, jute and cocoa fibre manufacture	2,333	1,198

<sup>13</sup> House of Commons Sessional Paper, *Return of the Rates of Wages in the Minor Textile Trades of the United Kingdom*, C.6161, LXVIII.689 (London: HMSO, 1890), p.xiii-xxvii; House of Commons Sessional Paper, *Return of the Rates of Wages in the Principal Textile Trades of the United Kingdom*, C.5807, LXX.843, pp.xxvii-xxxiv.

<sup>14</sup> Judy Lown, 'Gender and Class during Industrialisation: a study of the Halstead Silk Industry in Essex, 1825-1900' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Essex, 1983), p.234.

<sup>15</sup> Donald Coleman, *Courtaulds: An Economic and Social History, Volume I: The Nineteenth Century, Silk and Crape* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969), p.242.

Occupation	Females	Males	Occupation	Females	Males
Office keeper, caretaker (not Government)	10,223	7,196	Net maker	1,392	235
Cook (not domestic)	9,222	4,910	Canvas, sailcloth and sacking manufacture	1,752	1,015
Charwoman	104,808	—	Weaver (undefined)	1,323	768
Washing and bathing service	185,246	6,912	Factory hand textile (undefined)	4,365	2,879
Hospital and institution service	15,501	6,952	Fancy goods (textile) manufacture - worker, dealer	7,714	2,476
Bookbinder	14,249	11,487	Trimming maker, embroiderer	7,659	1,281
Pin maker	605	292	Straw-hat, bonnet and plait manufacture	14,959	3,425
Steel pen maker	3,000	296	Milliner, dressmaker, staymaker	415,961	4,470
Artificial flower maker	4,436	722	Shawl manufacture	654	227
Fireworks, explosive article manufacture	3,313	1,748	Shirt maker, seamstress	52,943	2,153
Tobacco manufacturer, tobacconist	15,880	13,090	Machinist, machine worker (undefined)	21,478	8,769
Lodging/Boarding house-keeper	45,174	6,004	Hosiery manufacture	30,887	18,200
Confectioner, pastrycook	28,875	17,691	Hosier, haberdasher	6,804	5,677
Worsted manufacture	69,629	40,482	Glover, glove maker	9,199	2,756
Flannel and blanket manufacture	2,969	2,375	Button maker	3,107	1,949
Silk, satin, velvet and ribbon manufacture	31,811	16,071	Quill, feather-dresser, dealer	2,368	460
Crape and gauze manufacture	751	164	Japanner	1,685	1,146
Cotton and cotton goods manufacture	332,784	213,231	Envelope maker	2,458	289
Flax and linen manufacture	5,592	2,574	Paper box, paper bag-maker	17,178	2,121
			Ticket, label-writer	1,306	1,110

**Table 4-3 Occupations where Females outnumbered Males, 1891<sup>16</sup>**

<sup>16</sup> *Census of England and Wales 1891, Volume 4: General Reports with Summary, Tables and Appendices*, C.7222 (London: HMSO, 1893), pp.56-57. (This census report recorded that 4,016,230 females aged ten years and older were in employment in England and Wales, about thirty-five percent of their total population).

The high proportion of women working in silk and other textile industries is further confirmed in Table 4-4 which lists the number of female employees per every 100 male employees in various occupations, based on census returns for England and Wales for various years.

Occupation	Number of Women to 100 Men			
	1861	1871	1881	1891
Commercial clerk	0.5	2	3	8
Bookbinder	82	95	111	124
Woollen cloth manufacture	60	79	102	100
Worsted manufacture	161	178	180	172
Flannel and blanket manufacture	38	48	94	125
Silk, crape, gauze, manufacture	180	208	224	201
Cotton manufacture	131	149	163	156
Flax and linen manufacture	137	144	186	217
Lace manufacture	508	476	289	167
Hemp, jute and cocoa fibre manufacture	27	67	194	195
Felt manufacture	4	7	10	16
Carpet and rug manufacture	24	47	59	80
Hosiery manufacture	88	88	114	170
Glove manufacture	636	745	586	334
Shoe, boot and clog manufacture	18	13	20	23
Paper manufacture	72	65	80	67
China and earthenware manufacture	46	55	62	63
Tobacconist and tobacco manufacture	28	42	77	121

**Table 4-4 Number of Women Employed for every 100 Men by Occupation<sup>17</sup>**

<sup>17</sup> *Census of England and Wales 1891, Volume 4: General Reports, C.7222, p.58.*

Another government report gave a breakdown of average wages for men, lads and boys, women and girls working in various industries including textile trades. Its findings are summarised in Table 4-5, showing clearly the very large differential between male and female earnings.

Name of Trade	Average Weekly Wage			
	Men	Lads and Boys	Women	Girls
Cotton	25s. 3d.	9s. 4d.	15s. 3d.	6s. 10d.
Wool	23s. 2d.	8s. 6d.	13s. 3d.	7s. 5d.
Worsted	23s. 4d.	6s. 6d.	11s. 11d.	6s. 2d.
Linen	19s. 9d.	6s. 3d.	8s. 11d.	4s. 11d.
Jute	19s. 4d.	6s. 8d.	9s. 7d.	4s. 8d.
Hemp	23s. 6d.	6s. 0d.	9s. 8d.	5s. 1d.
Silk	22s. 3d.	7s. 2d.	10s. 1d.	5s. 8d.
Carpet	26s. 7d.	8s. 4d.	11s. 1d.	6s. 11d.
Hosiery	24s. 5d.	9s. 6d.	11s. 6d.	8s. 3d.
Lace	27s. 3d.	9s. 4d.	12s. 8d.	6s. 2d.
Smallwares	20s. 2d.	6s. 9d.	10s. 9d.	5s. 9d.
Flock and Shoddy	21s. 2d.	10s. 5d.	9s. 9d.	4s. 6d.
Elastic Web	25s. 10d.	9s. 7d.	10s. 7d.	6s. 6d.

**Table 4-5 Weekly Wages paid to Men, Lads and Boys, Women, and Girls in various Textile Trades in 1886<sup>18</sup>**

The report into the minor textile trades also compared wages paid in different regions of the United Kingdom in 1885 and differentiated between men, women and girls. Table 4-6 shows the average weekly wages paid to various occupations within the silk industry on a region by region basis. In this instance, the 'midlands' consists of the counties of Cheshire, Staffordshire, Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire and Warwickshire.

<sup>18</sup> House of Commons Sessional Paper, *Return of Rates of Wages paid by Local Authorities and Private Companies to Police, and to Workpeople employed on Roads, and at Gas and Water Works*, C.6715, LXVIII.719 (London: HMSO, 1892), p.xlvi.

Occupation	Average Weekly Wage			
	Lancashire and West Riding	Midlands	Other Regions of England	Glasgow and suburbs
MEN				
Overlookers	29s. 3d.	23s. 3d.	27s. 0d.	34s. 10d.
WOMEN				
Winders	9s. 10d.	8s. 0d.	7s. 4d.	10s. 7d.
Doublers	10s. 6d.	9s. 0d.	8s. 8d.	-
Weavers	12s. 6d.	13s. 3d.	9s. 0d.	11s. 5d.
GIRLS				
Winders	6s. 8d.	5s. 7d.	5s. 5d.	-

**Table 4-6 Average Weekly Wages paid in the Silk Industry by Region in 1885<sup>19</sup>**

It can be seen that the ‘other regions of England’ were generally less well paid than the north, the midlands and Glasgow. This would appear to be in line with the relatively depressed state of the less industrialised regions such as East Anglia and the consequent lack of competition for labour. As already discussed, agriculture was very poorly paid in the eastern region. This challenging economic outlook provides the backdrop to the circumstances in which Courtaulds were to operate in north Essex, which will be examined in the next subsection.

#### *4.2 – Wages in the Courtauld Silk Mills*

Courtaulds, as a benevolent employer provided a lot of additional benefits for its employees as discussed elsewhere in this dissertation. However, on first inspection the wages on offer appear unimpressive. A parliamentary report noted that 260 power-loom weavers working in the Halstead factory, nearly all female, had an average wage of just five to six shillings a week in 1838.<sup>20</sup> These rates were slightly better than those paid in John Hall’s silk mill in nearby Coggeshall where women’s average weekly wages were between four shillings and sixpence and five shillings. The men’s

<sup>19</sup> HCSP, C.6161, LXVIII.689 (London: HMSO, 1890), pp. 26-32.

<sup>20</sup> House of Commons Sessional Paper, *Reports from Assistant Hand-Loom Weavers Commissioners*, Part 2, XXIII.49 (London: HMSO, 1840), p.293.



average earnings were between eight shillings and eight shillings and sixpence per week.<sup>21</sup> There were several silk mills operating in the Essex area at that time and wages generally seem to have been at about these levels. Labourers and agricultural workers could earn slightly more, perhaps ten shillings per week plus free beer, but there was no great competition for labour in the area and hence no inflationary pressure on wages.<sup>22</sup> Hand-loom weavers working in their own homes were poorly paid and their work was irregular. Therefore, mill owners were able to entice home weavers to take up regular employment in their factories without having to offer significantly higher rates of pay.<sup>23</sup>

Wages paid in textile industries in other regions could be much better than Courtaulds could offer. Male carpet weavers in Wilton in Wiltshire could earn between twelve and eighteen shillings per week at that time.<sup>24</sup> Another government report quotes an average weekly wage of eighteen shillings for weavers working in the Manchester area in 1839, but does not differentiate between male and female earnings.<sup>25</sup> The Manchester wage rates remained unchanged ten years later although the working week had been reduced from sixty-six hours to sixty hours. This reflected the national picture where wages stagnated in the years leading up to 1850.<sup>26</sup> The situation improved markedly between 1850 and 1875 with a national average increase in wages of fifty-four percent, based on Mitchell and Deane's data.<sup>27</sup> The Manchester silk industry wage rates increased by approximately twenty percent between 1849 and 1859.<sup>28</sup>

However, analysis of the Courtauld Wage Book shows that their wages remained largely unchanged for some of its employees at that time. John Wyatt, a principal overseer in the warping department,

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<sup>21</sup> HCSP, XXIII.49, p.288-289.

<sup>22</sup> HCSP, XXIII.49, p.292.

<sup>23</sup> Coleman, p.239.

<sup>24</sup> HCSP, XXIII.49, p.411.

<sup>25</sup> HCSP, C.5172, LXXXIX.273, p.123.

<sup>26</sup> Mitchell and Deane, p.343.

<sup>27</sup> Mitchell and Deane, p.344.

<sup>28</sup> David Chadwick, 'On the Rate of Wages in Manchester and Salford, and the Manufacturing districts of Lancashire, 1839-1859', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, 23 (1860), 1-35 (p.11).

was paid a weekly wage of twenty-five shillings in 1853. This increased slightly to twenty-seven shillings and sixpence by 1860, but thereafter remained unchanged until he retired in 1869.<sup>29</sup>

However, the reduction in the working week over that period must be considered. Hours worked at Courtaulds were reduced progressively from seventy hours per week in the 1850s to fifty-six hours in 1874 so the effective increase in the hourly rate was appreciable.<sup>30</sup> Substantial rises were forthcoming for promotions. George Amey received a rise in weekly pay from seventeen shillings and sixpence to thirty shillings in 1872 when he was promoted from assistant overseer to principal overseer.<sup>31</sup> At that time the average weekly wage paid to overlookers working in the Bradford worsted industry was thirty-four shillings.<sup>32</sup> Whilst promotions were often forthcoming for long serving male employees, the scope for advancement for women was much more limited. Their wages compared poorly with those paid in other textile industries elsewhere in the country. However, there was no alternative women's employment in the local area which could compete with the wages paid by Courtaulds.<sup>33</sup>

The Courtauld wage book shows that the general level of wages paid did finally undergo a significant increase from the early 1870s onwards by which time the company's profits were growing rapidly. For example, James Burton, a clerk, who had been on a salary of seventeen shillings per week for a number of years finally received an increase of one shilling in 1871 followed by a similar increase in 1872.<sup>34</sup> This period also coincided with the arrival of new industries in the eastern counties, the continuing expansion of the railways and rapid growth in the demand for domestic servants. These factors, coupled with the relatively static populations of the local towns, led to an increase in the demand for labour which inevitably resulted in an increase in the wage rates paid. In stark contrast

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<sup>29</sup> Essex Record Office (ERO), D/F 3/3/27, Wage Book 1852-1876, p.3.

<sup>30</sup> Coleman, p.234.

<sup>31</sup> ERO, D/F 3/3/27, p.16.

<sup>32</sup> A.L. Bowley, 'The Statistics of Wages in the United Kingdom During the Last Hundred Years, (Part IX) Wages in the Worsted and Woollen Manufactures of the West Riding of Yorkshire', *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, 65 (1902), 102-126 (p.105).

<sup>33</sup> Judy Low, *Women and Industrialisation: Gender at Work in Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990), pp.47-49.

<sup>34</sup> ERO, D/F 3/3/27, p.10.

to the rest of the country, the population of Halstead actually decreased in the latter half of the nineteenth century, suggesting that there was net outward migration from the area.<sup>35</sup> Table 4-7 shows the population change on a per decade basis, compared to that for England and Wales as a whole.

Decade	Percentage Change in Population	
	Halstead	England and Wales
1840-1850	+9.0%	+11.8%
1850-1860	+3.9%	+12.2%
1860-1870	-1.9%	+13.6%
1870-1880	-7.2%	+14.5%
1880-1890	-1.5%	+11.9%
1890-1900	-3.3%	+12.0%

**Table 4-7 Percentage Population Changes per decade<sup>36</sup>**

The limited supply of labour did not appear to impact the company. The boom years lasted until 1885 with Courtaulds recording a profit of over £100,000 in that year. However an era of depression was to follow and annual profits fell to just £3,000 by 1894.<sup>37</sup> Despite this decline, the wages paid by the company did not fall significantly even though employment levels fell and short-time working was introduced.<sup>38</sup> Retail prices fell by as much as nine per cent over that period.<sup>39</sup> Consequently the relative standard of living of the firm's employees fared well compared to those in certain other industries which were badly affected by the economic depression.

The company decided that modernisation of machinery and development of new materials was needed to remain competitive in the 1890s and this included the recruitment of experienced male workers from the northern textile districts, mainly foremen and loom workers. They were offered higher rates of pay than the incumbent workers who were doing similar jobs. The differential was

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<sup>35</sup> Crouch, Patrick, 'Entrepreneurs, Manufactories and Small Industrial Communities, 1850-1914' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Leicester, 2010), pp.156-157.

<sup>36</sup> A vision of Britain Through Time  
[www.visionofbritain.org.uk/unit/10112187/rate/POP\\_CH\\_10](http://www.visionofbritain.org.uk/unit/10112187/rate/POP_CH_10) [accessed 10 December 2020]

<sup>37</sup> Donald Coleman, *Courtaulds: An Economic and Social History, Volume I: The Nineteenth Century, Silk and Crape* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969), p.151.

<sup>38</sup> Coleman, p.247.

<sup>39</sup> Mitchell and Deane, p.344.

typically between twenty and forty percent and this led to simmering resentment from the locals. This contributed to a number of industrial disputes and trades unions finally arrived at Courtaulds, the local branch ironically being established by the newly arrived northerners. The wage gap between the northerners and the locals eventually narrowed as the century came to an end, partly as a result of the increased productivity and profits arising from the modernisation programme.<sup>40</sup> There was also much greater competition for male labour by this time in north Essex with the arrival of an ironworks in Halstead, an iron foundry in nearby Earls Colne, woodworks and brickworks in other surrounding villages and perhaps most significantly, in 1893, the window manufacturer Crittalls established a factory in Braintree.<sup>41</sup> Coleman was of the opinion that the wages paid by Courtaulds to both men and women had improved by the end of the nineteenth century to the extent that they were at least on a par with the national average for the silk industry, despite having lagged behind in earlier decades. He noted however that the rates of increase for both men and women were lower in the silk industry than in the other textile trades.<sup>42</sup>

#### *4.3 – Non-Wage Benefits provided by Courtaulds*

The Courtauld company was always keen to reward loyalty amongst its workforce. This served both to further its own faith in the principles of self-help as well as sending out a message to those who might not show the required degree of commitment to their employer. Unusually for an industrial employer at the time, pensions for life were awarded to certain long serving employees upon their retirement. However, this was based purely on the whim of the management. There was no contribution system and no guarantees. For example, Seth Scott, a loom overseer with over thirty years' service, was granted a pension of ten shillings per week upon his retirement in 1857.<sup>43</sup> His

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<sup>40</sup> Coleman, pp.258-260.

<sup>41</sup> Lown, 'Gender', p.170.

<sup>42</sup> Coleman, pp.243-244.

<sup>43</sup> ERO, D/F 3/3/27, p.2.

salary had been forty shillings per week since at least 1853, suggesting that he was one of the best paid workers and no doubt therefore held in the highest regard by the management. However, the wage book suggests that most employees left or retired without a pension. This appears to be the case for all female employees. In fact, many workers were unable to retire at all and simply carried on working until they died. The 1881 census records seventy-eight year-old widower Joseph Rayner still working as a 'Silk Weaver'.<sup>44</sup> He lived in Halstead with his two unmarried daughters who worked in the factory. Presumably he could not afford to stop working or perhaps did not want to impose a financial burden on his daughters. It seems likely that he was working as a hand-loom weaver at home rather than in the factory. Nonetheless, research by Judy Lown showed that over half of the male workers at the Halstead factory worked there until they died.<sup>45</sup> Of course this has to be seen in the context of much lower life expectancy at that time. In 1881 life expectancy at birth in England and Wales was just 43.7 years for males and 47.2 years for females.<sup>46</sup> These figures are however skewed to a considerable degree by the very high rates of infant mortality at the time. In reality, even as far back as 1841, a man who had already reached the age of fifty could on average expect to live for another twenty years.

The most highly skilled and senior male employees tended to be favoured when it came to receiving perks and it is not surprising that they have been referred to as the 'labour aristocracy' of the firm.<sup>47</sup> Twenty-three senior male employees were even sent on paid holidays to Paris in the 1870s and 1880s.<sup>48</sup> Some of the skilled workers and their families were also to benefit from the provision of housing in Halstead, Bocking and Gosfield. Most of these houses were constructed in a somewhat

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<sup>44</sup> Census of England and Wales 1881: Halstead, TNA, RG11/1802, folio 52, p.8 (The censuses appear to record a number of men as 'silk weavers' even though the employment registers show that this description was only used for female employees. This could be a case of census mis-enumeration but most of them were probably working at home as hand-loom weavers).

<sup>45</sup> Lown, 'Gender', p.251.

<sup>46</sup> Office for National Statistics

<<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/lifeexpectancies/articles/howhaslifeexpectancychangedovertime/2015-09-09>> [accessed 20 October 2020]

<sup>47</sup> Coleman, p.242.

<sup>48</sup> ERO, D/F 3/2/72, Business Records, 1862-1903, pp.138-139.

grand style befitting the more senior workers who benefitted from subsidised rents. However, there was no model village. In total only fifty-eight houses had been built by the company by 1900, providing for just a very small proportion of the workforce, a surprisingly low number perhaps for a supposedly benevolent employer.<sup>49</sup> The rest of the workforce had to take their chance renting in the open market, often living in inferior conditions even by the standards of the time.

Given the dominance of the company in the local towns, it was quite normal for them to employ several members of the same family. It was often the case that inter-generational members of the same household worked together in the mills. For example, the company's register of 'old hands' returned lists Mary Cooper as returning to work as a weaver in December 1874 at the age of 29.<sup>50</sup> The next available census in 1881 records her as a thirty-five year old widow working as a 'crepe weaver' whilst her eldest daughter Alice, aged fourteen, is recorded as a 'silk winder'.<sup>51</sup> Mary had three other children aged between four and ten, and no doubt Alice's wage, however small, was vital to the household's survival. These straitened circumstances were not unusual. The Layzell family found themselves in an almost identical situation in 1881. The household head, Eliza, aged forty-six, was also a widow, and both she and her eldest daughter were working as 'silk weavers' whilst looking after three school-aged children.<sup>52</sup> The family wage was clearly important to many in the mills, especially widowed mothers, although in reality there would have been little or no agency available to those in such circumstances. They simply had to carry on working for their employer, benevolent or otherwise.

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<sup>49</sup> Lown, *Women*, pp.158-159.

<sup>50</sup> ERO, D/F 3/3/9, Register of 'Old Hands' Returned, 1871-1900, entry for December 1874.

<sup>51</sup> Census of England and Wales 1881: Halstead, TNA, RG11/1802, folio 64, p.31.

<sup>52</sup> Census of England and Wales 1881: Halstead, TNA, RG11/1801, folio 68, p.31.

#### *4.4 – Summary*

The silk industry which dominated the textile trade in the north Essex area in the 1840s was already a poor relation when compared to textile trades nationally and this trend continued for most of the remainder of the nineteenth century. The Courtauld company was able to retain its workforce at the necessary level due to the unique circumstances in which it operated. There was little competition for labour due to the depressed state of grain farming in the area and alternative industrial employment opportunities did not arrive until later in the century. The local population was largely sedentary with very little inward or outward migration even at times of boom and bust. The non-wage benefits offered by the company, together with the extent of family employment, enabled it to succeed whilst paying wage rates which were below the national average for the industry. Wages did finally improve by the end of the nineteenth century thanks both to the arrival of new manufacturing industries in the area, which created increased competition for labour, and also the introduction of new technologies and working practices which led to improved productivity. However, it was the senior male workers who were to benefit the most in terms of wages and benefits. Women continued to be paid considerably less than their male colleagues, reflecting the situation nationally in the textile industries and elsewhere.

## **5 – Conclusion**

This study of the Courtauld silk mills set out to determine how the company's dominance of the local towns and employment market affected the lives of its workers. Chapter One introduced the rationale for this study and set out the questions that it aimed to answer, namely how the workers' agency was affected by having a philanthropic employer, and how their wages and conditions compared to their contemporaries in other regions and other industries. It provided some background information regarding the area of north Essex and its somewhat depressed economic situation in the nineteenth century. A review of some of the available literature relating to the textile industry nationwide was presented and this included some examples of philanthropic employers. However, it was noted that the north Essex area, together with the wider East Anglian region, has been very much neglected in terms of its industrial history and the lives of its communities.

Chapter Two looked at the history of the Courtauld family, from their Huguenot origins to their success in growing a substantial silk business in north Essex in the nineteenth century. It looked at the driving forces behind their paternalistic attitudes which were in large part formed by their Unitarian beliefs. It reviewed the existing secondary literature, consisting mainly of the works of Donald Coleman and Judy Lown, together with a contemporary account of life in the Halstead silk mill.

Chapter Three used primary sources to demonstrate the effects of Courtaulds' philanthropy upon the lives of the mill workers. It detailed some instances of the leniency shown towards certain wayward employees and also gave examples of the ways in which the wider Courtauld family were benefactors to the local towns. However, the research also showed that the workers' agency was very restricted due to the employer's intolerance of dissent or 'bad' behaviour and the lack of well-paid alternative employment in the area for most of the period covered by the study. Dismissals



were not uncommon, and prosecutions were sometimes pursued in situations where there had been a serious breach of trust. Women were treated less favourably than men in these circumstances.

Chapter Four compared the standard of living of the workers to those working in other industries and regions. By taking into account the non-wage benefits, such as family employment and relative job security at times of economic depression, it concluded that the Courtauld workers were relatively well-off, especially by the end of the nineteenth century. However, it noted that the firm's 'labour aristocracy' of senior male employees fared best in terms of improvements in living standards. It also recorded the large discrepancy between male and female earnings in the textile industries nationally in the latter part of the nineteenth century.

Ultimately, it was the unusual circumstances of the north Essex area which enabled the Courtauld company to perform successfully for most of the nineteenth century. The limited nature of alternative employment opportunities for working-class locals enabled the company to maintain its workforce at the required level without having to compete with the wages paid in other regions. Regional migration was not an attractive or realistic proposition for most of the workers who had strong family ties to the area. It is also true that there was virtually no inward migration to the area and so the local population did not grow unlike in other parts of the country. This meant that the company had a limited supply of labour and so could not depress wages and conditions. In many cases several members of the same families worked for Courtaulds. This, coupled with the philanthropic nature of the company, provided sufficient incentive for the vast majority of the workers to remain in their employment for life. The Courtauld family were also the foremost players in the civic lives of the local towns. Their motivations were driven by their strong Unitarian faith and they showed genuine benevolence towards their workforce and the less well-off generally. They were eager to reward hard work and believed in self-help, but at the same time would not tolerate any sense of disloyalty or what they deemed to be bad behaviour. Thus, it can be said in conclusion that the Courtauld company dominated the lives of those living in the towns of Halstead, Braintree

and Bocking during the period from 1841 to 1901. Whilst this greatly limited the locals' agency, the overall standard of living of the workers and their families compared favourably with that of many of their contemporaries.

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