

## A short history of manchester the rise and fall of cottonopolis

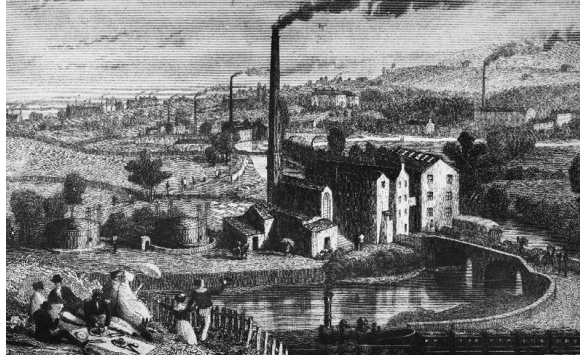


Illustration of a cotton mill in Summarseat, Bury (1850) Manchester Local Image Collection

A wet, humid climate ideal for spinning yarn and more importantly south-east Lancashire has steep streams which could provide power for the mills and give soft water for the washing and bleaching of cotton, there is a coalfield to fire steam engines, salt supplies for developing chemicals and easy access to the west coast for importing the raw material and exporting the finished product. Crucially Lancashire's industrial organisation was fluid. Manchester was **unhampered** by **guilds** and **trade restrictions**. Entrepreneurs were encouraged.

It was with the manufacture of pure cottons in the mid 18th century that Manchester became significant. When cotton is picked from the plant it grows on, the weak fibres break and pull apart easily. To make cotton strong enough to be woven into cloth, it first needs to be spun. Spinning is the process of twisting together drawn-out fibres of cotton into a strong, single strand, called yarn. The process of production was run on the 'domestic system'. Merchants 'putting out' raw cotton to spinners, weavers, cutters, bleachers, etc... who worked from home.

Technological advance gradually swept this method away and the factory system took over. Kay invented the Fly Shuttle in 1733 (which allowed to have only one weaver to weave fabrics of any **width** when two were needed before and even more quickly than two could), between 1760 and 1790, Hargreaves invented the Spinning Jenny, Arkwright, the Water Frame and Crompton, the Spinning Mule which allowed a significant improvement of production. Meanwhile good turnpike roads were improving communications, cheap coal arrived with the Bridgewater Canal in 1761 and the first steam mill fired up in 1783. Cotton was being imported at a rate of 1000 tonnes a year by 1751, and stood at 45.2 thousand tonnes by 1816.

By 1841 imports of raw cotton had risen to 205 thousand tonnes and they would peak in 1914 at almost a billion tonnes. The character of Manchester changed. The cotton mills employed less in the city as the century wore on, by 1840 only 18% of the work force worked in cotton manufacture. Manchester became the commercial centre of the industry and was the town of the Royal Exchange, where thousands of traders would meet on Tuesdays and Fridays to do business. Production became concentrated in the outer town

But reliance on a distant raw material made the trade vulnerable. The American Civil War showed this, when the supply from the Confederate States had been blockaded by the Union North. Sourcing raw cotton from India and Egypt and the growth of trade with the British Empire maintained the industry until after WWI. But business declined as production rose in countries close to the raw material and with cheaper labour or with more up-to-date methods. It was too late, a reluctance to develop new business practices and to invest in new machines. What remains of the wealth created by the cotton industry is evident in its public buildings.



Palazzo warehouses on Princess Street