Getting into a Spin

A child's curiosity may have set the wheels of industry going, says BRIAN CURZON, who believes spinning has not only got a fascinating past, but may also have plenty to offer for the future.

Perhaps it was a child in the Stone Age, wrapped in a warm sheepskin, who found that by pulling and twisting the wool he could make a long thread. Perhaps later someone found that the best way of keeping such a thread was by wrapping it around a stick and later someone would have stumbled on the idea of using the stick with a weight on the bottom to spin the yarn. The discovery of spinning seems to have taken place at different times in different parts of the world, but in each case it is one of the points which mark the difference between an "Old Stone Age" (Palaeolithic) hunting and a "New Stone Age" (Neolithic) agricultural way of life. The changes should be considered as stages of development, not as exact dates for there are still some parts of the World with a Stone Age way of life.

That spinning was invented at different times is evident by the variety of spindle types. All use a weighted stick, but while most of the European and Asian examples were used hanging freely with the spinner standing up (the "drop spindle") Central American Indians sit down and spin theirs like a top on the ground. The North American Indians use spindles four or five times the size of anyone else and they roll them along the ground. The Ancient Egyptians spun upside down with the weight at the top.

Phil Bennett

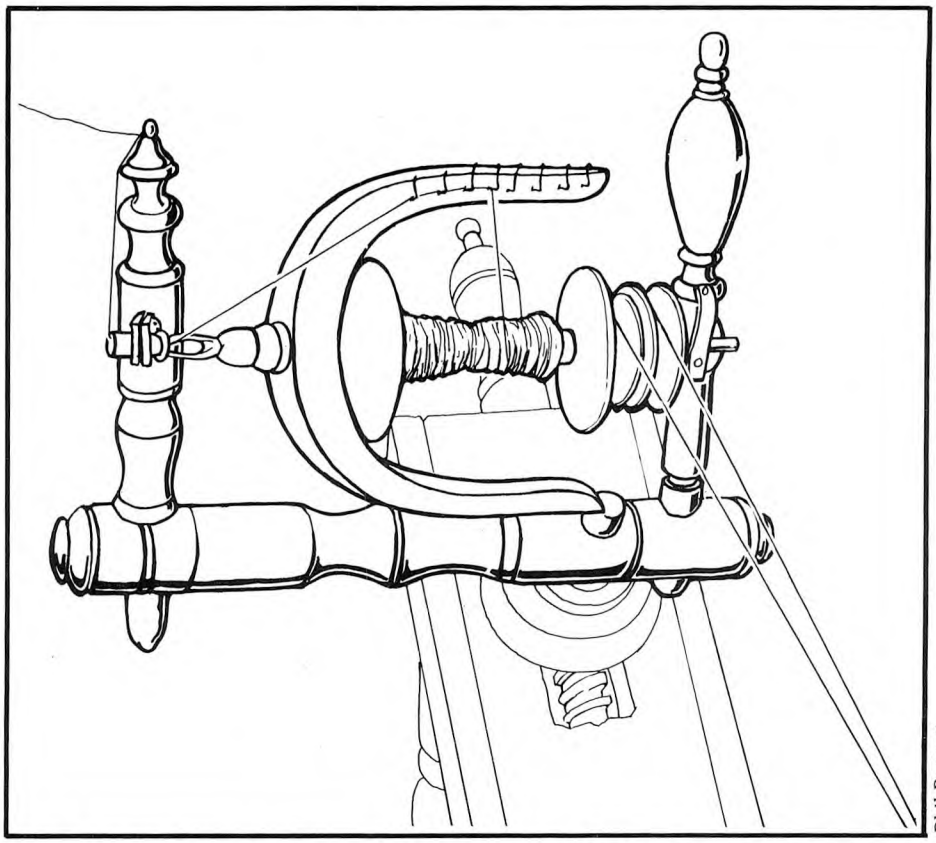
A "spinster" and her "Great Wheel". It is sometimes called the "Walking Wheel" as she walks away from it as the yarn is spun and must then wind the yarn onto the spindle. The old woman is winding the "cops" of spun yarn from the basket around her niddy noddy to form skeins ready for dyeing. "Cards" for brushing the wool to remove tangles and impurities are on the floor.

Cover pic: Brian Curzon spinning on a Saxony Wheel in the costume of a textile worker of the domestic phase of the industry around 1700 outside the "Toll House Museum" Burnley.

In all cases the hand motion is the same: one hand pulls the wool out until the desired thickness is achieved, then lets the spin from the yarn run along to turn the loose wool into yarn. The other hand holds the loose wool and controls the amount released to be spun. The weights at the bottom of the spindle are called "whorls", and spindle whorls in a wide variety of materials have been found including lead, amber, jet and stone. Roman housewives in Manchester used the base of best quality samian ware dishes when they broke. The weights were often given as presents. I have seen cast lead ones decorated with hearts which must have been love tokens. The weight would be removed when spinning was completed and a fresh spindle started, the yarn could be stored on the wooden spindle until it was needed for use.

Around the middle of the 13th Century a new type of spinning machine arrived in Europe from the East following the increased trade that took place after the Crusades had given the English and French a taste for the exotic spice and fabrics of the Arabs. This was "The Great Wheel". "Great" in this context can be taken as meaning "large" rather than "important". This was merely a spindle mounted on a vertical piece of wood. The whorl was turned by a string which was rotated by a large wheel turned by hand. No doubt a child would have been pressed into service whenever possible to provide the turning motion leaving the spinner with both hands free. It is possible, with skill, to turn the wheel with one hand and to spin with the other. Such wheels were in common use up to the 19th Century.

It was a wheel of this sort on which the "Sleeping Beauty" pricked her finger, though you will always see the "Saxony Wheel" which is the most common wheel used today, illustrated in the story-books and in pantomimes, and that has no sharp parts at all. There may, perhaps, be some truth in the story. The wool that she would be using may have come from a dirty old sheep that had been "up hill and down dale" for the last year and would have been full of bits of twigs, sheep ticks and sheep droppings etc. No wonder she ended up in a coma!



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The "Bobbin and Flier" of a "Saxony Wheel" in Towneley Hall. The device allowed the spinner to produce a yarn without having to stop at intervals to wind the yarn onto a spindle. The two drive chords turn the bobbin slightly faster than the "U" shaped flier thus winding the spun yarn on. The yarn is moved at intervals from one of the hooks (called "hecks") to the next one to ensure an evenly wound bobbin. The two uprights are called the "maidens" while the handle at the end of the wheel to adjust the tension by means of a screw thread is called the "Mother Of All". When not in use the yarn is looped around the top of a "maiden" to prevent it unwinding.

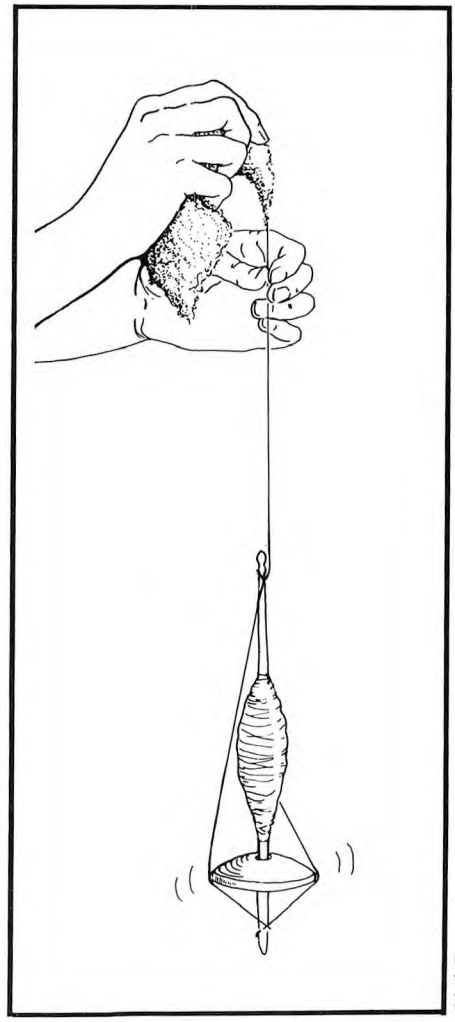
The "Great Wheel" was the inspiration behind the invention of the Spinning Jenny, which is in effect a wheel on its back with several spindles. It is said that James Hargreaves of Oswaldtwistle saw one knocked over in a family argument and noticed that the wheel and spindle continued to spin even though the wheel was flat. From this he conceived the idea of the Jenny having several strings turning several spindles. I rather think that the family argument came about because he presented his wife with the Jenny and asked her to spin with it. I have tried to spin on a reconstructed replica of a Jenny and managed, with difficulty, to spin a single yarn. The strings fall off the wheel, or off the spindles, or the yarn snaps. To overcome these problems, improvements were made to the original 1764 invention, the most important being to mount the drive wheel in a vertical position to prevent the drive strings from falling off. They were so successful, however, that rioters who feared that they would be put out of work, attacked the inventor's home in 1768 and smashed twenty of the machines. Hargreaves left shortly afterwards for Nottingham where Jennies were employed in the hosiery trade.

The later Jennies were quite sophisticated things with many spindles — there is a huge one in the textile museum at Helmshore. Samuel Crompton, who lived in the "Hall i'th Wood" at Bolton was always being scolded by his mother, so the story goes, for the poor quality yarn he produced on his Jenny and so he set to and devised a better machine, the "Spinning Mule".

The Jenny gets its name from the shortened version of engine — nothing to do with Mrs Hargreaves' name. The Mule took its name from the fact that it was a cross between the Jenny and the other great invention of the time, the Water Frame of Arkwright — originally from Preston — which was a water wheel-powered machine.

The Great Wheel continued in use in domestic industry in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland until the 20th Century and there are still one or two left built into the walls of crofters cottages. But for the most part the Jenny replaced the wheel in the Pennine hand loom weaving industry towards the end of the 18th Century. The invention of the Jenny following the flying shuttle of John Kay of Bury in the 1730s doubled and trebled the speed at which a weaver could work. The coming of the mills in the late 18th Century spelled doom for hand spinning in our area, and yet one type of wheel still survived. The so called "Saxony Wheel" mounted on a three legged table — to be stable on uneven floors — and worked with a foot treadle, made use of a clever device called a "bobbin and flier" to spin and wind the thread onto a bobbin at the same time. It was once thought to have been invented by Leonardo da Vinci, but drawings of it earlier than his have now been found indicating that he was merely sketching an item which was then in fairly common use.

Such wheels, where they survive, are finely made, beautifully-turned and delicate pieces of furniture. Those people like myself, who learned how to spin on modern robust wheels designed for hard work are surprised by their delicate and dainty wheels and the fact that they are only three quarters the size of modern versions. 18th Century stools were lower than our chairs, but these wheels were not intended for peasant spinsters. They were for the middle and upper class ladies to use in their chambers, they would spin linen, or even silk, and the possession of such a wheel was a badge of status.



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Spinning on a simple "Drop Spindle". The oldest method of spinning which is still in common use in many parts of the world.

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That is why so many of this type survive while the more simple "Great Wheels", with very few exceptions in museums, were allowed to rot. The "Saxony Wheel" was a piece of furniture for the best room in the house while the "Great Wheel" would have been the wheel which was in everyone's main room. Every humble household would have one by the fire. Whoever had some time on their hands would spin. The lady of the house would spin while cooking the meal over the open fire, children would sort the wool and the old folk would wind the wool into skeins so that it could be dyed. It was all part of the day's work.

The "Saxony Wheel" on the other hand was used to impress visitors with the feminine qualities of the lady of the house who would spin a fine thread and sew a fine seam with it. There were even wheels with two bobbins and fliers for two spinsters to work together. They are called "Gossip Wheels" because, when a neighbour visited the lady of the house, both would sit and spin together.

When the wool was spun for the first time it would not be suitable for weaving or knitting as it would tangle itself in an attempt to untwist. To prevent this it must be "plied"; that is wrapping two or more threads together in the opposite direction to the way they are spun. It is usual to spin clockwise, then to wind two or more threads anti-clockwise onto the wheel. The bobbins are often held on a device called a "Lazy Kate". The wool must then be wound around a device shaped rather like a letter "H" with the two uprights twisted to form a cross like pattern when seen from the end. This forms a skein and at this point the wool is washed for the first time to remove the lanolin and dirt. Lanolin is needed for the lubrication of the fibres when spinning and leaves an oily feel to the spinner's hands. The old time spinsters would rub around their eyes with this to prevent wrinkles and even today the best lanolin for skin creams comes from the woollen mills of Yorkshire.

When washed the water was extracted by swinging the skeins in a bag suspended from a stick. The process was called "Wuzzin" and, in many parts of the Pennines, cottages can be found with "Wuzzin-holes" in the walls where the stick was held to spin-dry the skeins. There are some good ones at Wycoller, where you can also find a "lant trough". Lant was human urine used to bleach the cloth or the yarn because of its ammonia content. The lant was collected at intervals from the farms and used along with fuller's earth to provide a good finish. Walk Mill near Burnley takes its name from the process of fulling — that is walking on the cloth to push the lant and fuller's earth into it. It is from this activity that we get the name Walker.

Spinning today is a craft enjoying a widespread revival. All sorts of natural ingredients are tried to make vegetable dyes. Spinning courses such as those at Gawthorpe Hall, near Padiham, or at Styal, near Wilmslow, attract many students from all parts of the country. Wheels are imported from New Zealand — antique wheels are too precious and too delicate for the continued use of students. Natural wool absorbs moisture and in so doing uses energy and produces heat. Hand-spun and hand knitted or woven clothes with natural dyes are popular and hard wearing, and bring back a reminder of those 17th and 18th Century spinners and weavers who lived their lives in places like Wycoller using local wool and local ingredients to produce the famous Pennine cloth which prompted the Industrial Revolution and which clothed the world when the textile industry moved into the mills. ■