



William Cockerill 1759-1832

Mechanical Missionary

ALAN HITCH tells the remarkable story of a Rossendale man who helped bring the Industrial Revolution to Europe.

William Cockerill was born about the year 1759. For reasons unknown no record of his baptism can be found in either Haslingden, Goodshaw or the surrounding parishes. He was the second son and sixth child of William Cockerill, of Cribdenside, who died in 1773. Very little is known about his early life except that he was brought up surrounded by men who were stonemasons and joiners by trade.

In December 1779, he married at Bury Parish Church a girl called Betty Charles. They set up home in Higher Lane, Haslingden, where from 1780 to 1784 three children were born. In 1785 they moved house, coming down into Haslingden town centre, where another five children were born. From 1780 to February 1786, William is described variously as a joiner or labourer. On November 22nd 1785, the

baptism of his daughter Alice describes him of "Haslingden Green" but in later years he is of "Town". It was probably at this time that he turned his hand, and his mind, to the textile business and commenced making "roving billies".

By April 1791, he is described as a "maker of Jennies". Two separate traditions say that he learnt the trade of a blacksmith at a smithy in Whitworth run by his cousin James Cockerill and that he invented a "sheeting shuttle, run by pulleys". He certainly did learn the trade of a blacksmith for that was the description given of him in later years and, by the time he left England, he was extremely proficient in making machinery.

Sometime about 1796, tradition says, he decided to improve his circumstances by going abroad. Catherine the

Great, Empress of Russia, had been encouraging workmen from Britain to visit Russia and impart their expertise to her own subjects. William Cockerill, in the company of others of like mind, travelled to St Petersburg, then capital of Russia. Catherine died in November 1796, and with her the policies of developing an industrially-trained workforce. Her successor, the Tsar Paul, who was known as a lunatic, caused William Cockerill to work on a Commission for some public works. When it wasn't completed within his time limit, Paul determined to imprison Cockerill in the famous Fortress of St Peter and Paul. Fortunately, William was forewarned and managed to escape from Russia.

Where exactly he went to next is uncertain. He may have returned to England, or made his escape from Russia by sailing to Sweden. By 1797 he was definitely working in Sweden making machinery for a woollen mill on the outskirts of Stockhlm. In the same year his two eldest sons, William and Charles James, left England to join him there. About a year later he left Sweden after failing to make a success of machinery making, or the timber trade, and travelled to Hamburg. It was there that he met a Belgian named Mali from a woollen firm in Verviers, Belgium. In 1799 he moved to Verviers and began to make machines for the firm of Simons and Biolley. In 1800 he delivered twelve machines to the firm which proved so successful that more and more were ordered. He began to have the monopoly of the trade.

In 1802, he returned to England to bring his wife and other children over to Belgium. His son-in-law James Hodson entered into business near Verviers on his own account and both families rapidly began their rise to business prosperity. In 1807, William Cockerill moved to Liege where he set up new engineering workshops at the Pont des Arches, and later at the Pont des Jesuits. Two years later there was an attempt by the government to put him under police surveillance, but Cockerill's integrity and the obvious benefit which his business was bringing the community, won the day.

He himself wrote a report to the government on his business developments. In 1810, he was granted French citizenship and by 1813 was financially so secure that he retired, handing the business over to his sons John, James and William. For the rest of his life he lived as a gentleman in Brussels, dying in 1832 aged 73.


John Cockerill, his youngest son, born in Haslingden in 1790, began working for the "firm" when only a teenager, and by the time his father retired was very ambitious, full of ideas and the obvious choice for future manager. Under his leadership the firm of Cockerill developed into one of the largest enterprises in Europe. In 1812 they already employed about two thousand workers and by 1815 they were making machinery for firms throughout Belgium and parts of France, including steam engines and hydraulic presses. In 1814 John Cockerill founded a woollen factory and machinery works in Berlin. In 1820 they produced the first steamship in Belgium which was launched on the Meuse, where the works was situated. In 1824, 1825 and 1827 three more ships were produced, the "Seetander", "Atlas" and "Ludwig". In 1825 King William the First of the Netherlands invested a million francs in the Seraing works, becoming a partner in the firm.

Ten years later, the Cockerill business produced its first railway engine, named "Le Belge", the first in Belgium, and rails and rolling stock for a twelve mile state railway from Brussels to Maline. Around the same year a new factory was opened for producing locomotive boilers. In 1834, John Cockerill agreed to buy out the state's share in his works by paying 3,500,000 francs in twenty instalments.

In addition to steamships, railways and textile machinery, the Cockerill brothers financed enterprises in cloth factories, cotton mills, calico-printing mills and even had a sugar plantation in Dutch Guinea. By 1837, the assets of the company were valued at twenty-six million francs.

John and James Cockerill married two sisters in 1813, John marrying Joanne Frederique Pastor, and James Caroline Frederique Pastor. John had no children whilst James had seven, six of whom survived to bear future descendants. William, the eldest son, lived most of his life near Guben in Germany. He married twice, firstly to Ernestine H von Scheible, who was blind and bore him one son who was drowned when four years old, and secondly to Wilhelmine von Marsen who also had one child who died when young. It isn't known when William died, but he was alive in 1840, the year of John's death. In that year John submitted plans to the Czar of Russia for the construction of railways. On his return journey he died of typhoid fever on June 19th, in Warsaw. Although buried at Warsaw, his remains were removed to Seraing, his home, in June 1867, and a statue was erected to him there. ■

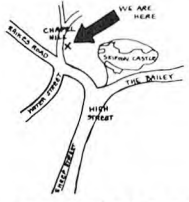




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