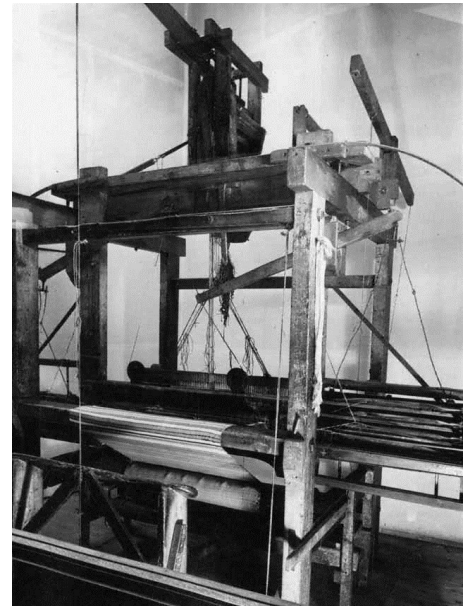


## Linen-Weaving in the 1830s and 1840s

During this period, most linen-weaving was still done by hand in weavers' cottages (see fig2). Weavers were usually paid for what they produced, rather than being paid an hourly rate. Households usually had a 'master weaver', who would take what the household produced to a warehouse (see fig.3) to sell it. A master weaver would have had to buy yarn for weaving and pay his household's rent out of the money he received at the warehouse.

Weavers usually rented their accommodation. The looms which they used (see fig.1) tended to be included in their rent, meaning that weavers rented their equipment as well as their living space.



**Fig1. A handloom**  
([www.cottontown.org](http://www.cottontown.org))



**Fig. 2 Weavers' cottages, Taylor Row, Barnsley (Barnsley Archives)**

Many weavers' cottages had more than one loom, meaning that several weavers could work in the house at the same time. It was quite common for a household to have four looms. The master-weaver would have operated one loom. Others would have been operated by members of the master-weavers' family and/or temporary workers. The children of weaving families often became apprentices, working at home. Younger children often helped out with tasks such as preparing yarn for weaving.

The weavers cottages used in Barnsley in this period had two floors for living rooms and bedrooms, and a cellar. Looms were usually located in the cottages' cellars, as these were much damper than the rooms above and this helped to prevent the linen yarn from breaking. Cellars usually had small windows at street level to allow some light in. Sanitation in these cottages was basic. Sometimes cellars had water draining through them, often contaminated with sewage. Cellars did not usually have fire places in them, so in winter they would have been cold, damp places to work. Weavers had to work for long hours to earn enough money to survive. A 72 hour working week was common.



**Fig. 3 The Warehouse in St Mary's Place, Barnsley, built by Samuel Cooper in 1820 (Aliott, 1999)**

Because weavers were paid for what they earned and payment levels varied according to prices, it is difficult to know what weavers earned and it is likely that the income of most households varied from week to week. It was quite common for weavers to have no work at all for one in eight weeks, so weavers had to budget carefully.

In some parts of Britain, a handloom weaver could expect to earn around 6 shillings per week in the late 1830s. The cost of living was high in relation to weavers' incomes, which explains why households needed to run several looms at once to make enough money to get by.

Rents will have varied from place to place, but renting a small cottage could cost up to 3 shillings per week.

Food was expensive - 1 shilling would have bought approximately 1 large loaf of bread, 1 pint of milk, 1 pound (about 600g) of bacon and ½ pound (about 300g) of butter.

Coal needed for heating could cost around 1s 3d (1 shilling and 3 pennies) per bag and 1lb of candles (needed for lighting) could cost around 6d.

This meant that weavers could generally only afford essential items and had to work very hard to survive.

Educational opportunities for the children of linen weavers were limited. By the 1830s, there were some charity schools in England, but these were not available in all areas. There were some schools which parents could pay for their children to attend. These generally charged a few pennies per week for teaching children to read, a few pennies for teaching them to write, a few pennies for teaching them basic arithmetic and so on. Many weaving families would not have been able to afford to send their children to these schools and, those children who were sent to school, may only have attended for a few years. It is estimated that only one third of children in Barnsley had any kind of day schooling in 1840.

It is likely that some families needed their children to work at home. Children may well have helped with household chores and caring for younger siblings as well as with preparing yarn for weaving. Boys would



**Fig. 5. Children at Sunday school in the 1830s**  
([resoucecentre.crca.org.au](http://resoucecentre.crca.org.au))



**Fig. 4. A linen shirt made in c.1840**  
([www.metmuseum.org](http://www.metmuseum.org))

probably have become apprentices at an early age.

Nevertheless, by 1840, it was quite common for better off weaving families to employ a nurse to help look after their young children. This may have enabled the wives of master-weavers to work alongside their husbands.

Many children attended Sunday Schools, where they learned about Christianity as well as how to read and do basic arithmetic. Children would often spend a full day at Sunday school, sometimes from 9am until 6pm.

By 1833, several laws had been introduced to limit the

working hours of children who worked in the cotton mills which were growing in number at this time.

These laws would not have affected children who worked with their families in cottage industries as these would not have been inspected. It is therefore difficult to know exactly what work children growing up in weaving households did and how many hours they worked.