

Faith in an Industrial Age:

Locating Ethical Blind Spots

David Parish asks whether 19th Century factory owners who professed an active faith in God behaved or acted differently from their peers. Did faith matter in practice? He then considers three well-documented examples, and concludes that it did, but that there were 'blind spots'. Examples are the employment of child labour in dangerous conditions, unawareness of pollution and other health hazards to the workers, and disregard for the supply chain, where slavery and poor conditions were probably known.

Beginning around 1750, England went through a profound series of technological changes that triggered the Industrial Revolution. Prominent among these were the invention of the steam engine and the power loom. Smaller advances also had a major impact.

As early as 900 AD there were thousands of waterwheels in England using wooden cogs and gear teeth but by 1784 John Smeaton had invented a way of casting iron gears.¹ The number and size of the mills then increased. At first used mainly for milling grain, other industrialists began to explore ways to use this power to produce woven cotton and woollen fabrics. Every town and even some villages that had a fast-running stream had one or more mills. The echoes of their

existence are still in street names like Mill Street or Millers Way. A few still survive as working mills, particularly in Wales and Scotland, but they are now powered by electric motors with the old iron gear preserved as a tourist attraction. Others are owned by heritage organisations and kept in working condition with staff trained to operate the machinery and according to Trip Advisor, nine are restaurants, with the millwheel and machinery often encased in glass as a feature.

Mechanisation of production, particularly in the cloth weaving industry, brought new challenges both to the owners and workers. Work that had been largely “out work”, done by families in their own cottage, now needed to be housed in large buildings by the water source. Now people began

to “go to work” and the relationships based on work and place started to erode rapidly. A gradual erosion of the concept of home and work being in the same place occurred. In contrast the Tudor merchant, as can be seen from surviving examples, lived literally above the workshop.

These changes required capital on a large scale to construct the mills and buy the machinery. The level of funding required was beyond the means even of a wealthy individual so extended partnerships and joint stock companies were used to supply the capital which, especially after joint stock companies were permitted limited liability in the mid-nineteenth century, resulted in ownership becoming increasingly remote from the workplace.² The owners and investors were then inclined



Tudor merchant House
Photo: English Heritage

to see the return on capital to them as the prime reason for the business. In the UK and USA company legislation still actively enshrines the principle that the primary duty of the directors of a company is the financial benefit of the shareholders.

Conditions in Industrial Britain

The result of industrialisation was that the workers had to seek work where they could, at the rates employers were willing to pay and with workplace conditions at the minimum safety level. One estimate was that by the early 1800s 81% of the industrial workforce was in the cotton mills of the North of England. Manchester gained the nickname Cottonopolis.³

Children between the ages of 11 and 14 comprised around 10% of the workforce. Note this eyewitness report from Robert Collyer, writing of his experience as a child in 1831:

It is told of the Younger Pitt that, in looking to meet the demands for more money the great statesman said, 'We must yoke up the children'. I cannot vouch for the story but between the age of 7 and 8 I found myself stood by a loom with many children of about my age and working five days a week.⁴

While conditions in nineteenth-century mills and factories were arduous, it would be wrong to assume that all employers of that era were hard-faced, exploitative and uncaring. The change in corporate legislation does not mean that they necessarily saw themselves as lacking responsibility to what we could call stakeholders – notably their employees and customers. Some owner-employers practised higher moral standards than others.

For a number of years I have been trying to establish if factory owners who professed an active faith in God behaved or acted differently from their peers. Did faith matter in practice? This is not easy to establish, as secular biographers rarely focus on the spiritual aspects of their subjects' life. However, thanks to the many heritage groups it is possible to visit the homes of the factory owners and look at their bookshelves and also see the historical records of their employment practices. The lives of several nineteenth-century Christian businessmen are also well documented.⁵

For this article I have taken a look at three businessmen from different backgrounds and trades. I shall describe various ways in which their faith had a positive impact and then suggest certain "blind spots".

Samuel Greg

Samuel Greg, the owner of a cotton weaving mill in Styal, a village near Manchester, was the son of a wealthy Belfast businessman and merchant and he was educated at Harrow School. With the help of his uncle, he built the Quarry Bank mill on the banks of the fast-flowing river Bollin in 1784. An overshot mill wheel like those at Quarry could deliver 120 hp which was almost as much as the later steam engines could deliver. Greg was raised in the Presbyterian church and became an active member in Manchester where he lived with his uncle before building the mill.

His marriage to Hannah Lightbody brought changes to his faith and fortune. She was also from a wealthy family and he used her dowry of £10,000 (worth about £2m today) to help build the mill. She was a Unitarian and Samuel adopted his wife's faith and became part of a wealthy network of Unitarian dissenting businessmen.⁶

Unitarianism was an expression of faith that was open to social reform. Hannah was particularly concerned about the way workers were treated, and her attitudes rubbed off on her husband. This was to be important for the mill as the site was then in a quite remote Cheshire valley, about 15 miles from Manchester with poor roads. Greg



"Cottonopolis"
Photo: Getty Images



Quarry Bank Mill
Photo: Knutsford.net

realised there was no local source of skilled machine operators, unlike the mills on the Irwell in central Manchester, and so decided to build a model village for the workers. He also built an apprentice house as he recruited about 30% of his workforce from poor families or orphanages. These were typically children between the ages of 7 and 13 who were used in cleaning the threads of cotton that fell under the spinning machines and looms. This was hard and dangerous work as the machines were running just above their bent bodies as they scrambled along the floor.⁷

Samuel Greg was well read theologically and had a good library which contained some of the classic works. Urged on by Hannah, he was – by the standards of the day – an enlightened and good employer. His faith and that of his wife ensured that the children were well fed and housed and had some limited schooling. Nevertheless, the work regime was demanding. There were strict rules about attendance on time and bad language was a dismissible offence. The apprentices were paid 9 old pence a week. The skilled male workers were paid 250 pence a week for a six-day week working 12 hours a day, which would be about £200 a week

today. In the cities house rents were around 100 pence a week so half their wage went on rent, whereas at Quarry Bank Mill, housing was provided for the workers and they retained more of their earnings.

Geoffrey Mander

Another interesting case study is Geoffrey Mander who took over his family's paint and varnish firm in the 1930s. From 1929–45 he was the MP for Wolverhampton East and a member of the Liberal Party. He was also an active member of the Congregational church, which was then more evangelical than most of its United Reformed Church successors today.

In Parliament he was a strong opponent of the appeasement of foreign dictators, and campaigned against the internment of German Jews and others who had fled from Hitler's persecution. He was a local philanthropist for various causes and nationally offered to buy the Red House, the home of William Morris, for the nation. He also donated his home Wightwick Hall in Wolverhampton to the National Trust.

The family firm Manders Paint had been founded in 1733 and operated

from several sites across Dudley and Wolverhampton. Between the wars Mander developed enlightened workplace practices such as having medical care on site and improved production safety. He made history by agreeing the first 40-hour work week with Ernest Bevin, the General Secretary of the Transport & General Workers' Union. He also introduced a works council that brought management and the union together.

George Cadbury

My third entrepreneur is better known. Chronologically he fits between Greg and Mander. George Cadbury took over the Birmingham family grocery business with his brother Richard in 1861. The company was already selling cocoa as a popular health drink in an age when alternatives to alcohol were sought by those promoting temperance.

The Cadburys were Quakers, who faced a dilemma in business, in that they had a philosophy of trade similar to the Moravian Brethren: this stipulated that those who chose business as a way of living should only provide products and services that benefited the public and caused no harm to the user. The Quakers became involved in transport, food

trades of all kinds and banking. Banking was an area that involved renting out money at interest which had been frowned upon by Luther but accepted by Calvin. Lloyds and Barclays were originally Quaker banks.

George Cadbury was very astute and noted the growing demand for bars of chocolate in Europe, where both the Dutch and the Swiss had introduced technology that took the bitterness out of the cocoa solids and improved the grinding of the cocoa paste to make it smoother. He met with Coenraad Van Houten in Amsterdam, licenced his process and acquired the technology used by Rudolf Lindt in Switzerland. This improved the smoothness of the chocolate and used emulsifiers to blend cream with the chocolate paste to give the smoothness of taste.

Cadbury was an astute businessman who embraced marketing and distribution techniques which are still used today. In addition, despite the Quaker rule of living at peace with all, he made sure his company competed with the other so-called Chocolate Quakers: Fry, Rowntree and Macintosh. But he was very concerned for his workforce. He once wrote in a letter to the Bishop of Birmingham that 'Nearly all my money is invested in businesses in which I can truly say the first thought is the welfare of the people employed'.⁸ He was

concerned that his workers lived well and acquired land outside Birmingham to build the model village of Bournville and a 'state of the art' factory. The factory, now owned by the international firm Mondelez, is still producing chocolate, while the Cadbury World Museum contains much fascinating information about life and work for George's employees.

Blind Spots

These examples indicate that Christian faith was a positive factor in leading some businessmen to act differently from their secular peers. That said, historical hindsight offers a critical perspective on some of their practice.

We have seen that Samuel Greg was a humane employer. He did however have a major blind spot. In 1790 when the mill began production, 80% of the cotton produced on slave plantations in America went to Manchester through Liverpool as part of the dreadful triangle trade of trade: goods shipped to Africa and sold to buy slaves who were then shipped to the Americas and cotton sent on the return trip.

Jonathan Aitken's biography of John Newton⁹ has a graphic description of the trade. Since Greg's family owned a sugar plantation in Dominica, which

used slave labour, he should have been well aware of the hardship of those workers. In addition he, like the medical profession at the time, did not understand the impact of working with machinery operating at noise levels of 80 decibels. When I was last at Quarry Bank one of the visitors had worked in the last operating mill in Manchester in her teens and now in her 70s had severe hearing loss. My own tinnitus probably stems from working beside running jet engines in the 1960s before legislation mandated the use of ear defenders.

Likewise Geoffrey Mander was a considerate and caring employer. However, pictures taken in the 1930s show workers near the paint vats with only limited protective equipment and in particular no face masks with particle filters.¹⁰

What is now known is that the volatile organic compounds in paint cause lung and kidney damage.

As for Cadbury, like Greg there are questions about whether he showed sufficient awareness about or attention to his supply chain. As early as the 1900s, there were rumours of child labour and even slave labour by the cocoa growers in Africa. Allegations emerged that workers at the São Tomé plantation off Angola (then a Portuguese colony from which



Cadbury's imported many of their cocoa beans) were effectively working as slaves. Eventually, in the face of damaging allegations in the London newspaper *The Standard*, Cadbury's stopped using São Tomé and started importing cocoa from West Africa.

Lessons for Today

These examples show that even Christian employers who strove hard to be ethical had their blind spots. They were caring in a paternalistic sort of way, but were insensitive to some of the deeper systemic issues involved in their business. What are today's lessons for managers in the workplace?

I think the main consideration is to try and take a helicopter view of the business. Seek an outside vantage-point and ask some of the bigger questions.

In manufacturing today, clothing retailers and major chocolate makers have to make significant efforts to control their supply chain and ensure that every producer complies with their ethical code. Abuses of labour can all too easily creep in.¹¹ The 19th century employers may not have regarded their supply chain as their responsibility, but today we do.

Where and what are the wider societal issues outside the legislative framework? What might any impact look like in 20 years' time? I was not

a fan of social media from the outset and remain a strong critic and have no profile on "the socials". While social media is used extensively in business, it brings a variety of issues in terms of negative impact on social relations and mental health, questionable information accuracy and spread of misinformation, and pushing undesirable content. I think that in five years' time social media will be much more strictly regulated. New legislation in Australia and India will bring in major controls on content and distribution, because by using algorithms the platform providers are in effect becoming editors of content.

Similarly, AI will bring immense benefits in terms of managing data and speeding processes up. The question that needs to be asked now is: what are the future risks? I have spent 40 years working in transport and I am still active in research. In the next five to ten years we will see the growth of the "dark warehouse" as the robots will do all the stacking and picking in almost total darkness. There will be a core technical staff operating the machinery and software. However, the question employers and government are not asking is: how do you replace 500,000 semi-skilled warehouse jobs with meaningful work in the same time span?

Another area of impact will be the general clerical worker. Roles like drafting legal documents are an ideal

area of work for AI processing. Here the numbers of workers are even higher. The insurance sector alone employs 300,000 people. Our improved communications should mean that we can engineer cooperation between industries shedding employees and new industries providing employment, the aim being that replacement of jobs takes place in the same locality.

Also low wages are not a thing of the past. The BBC have recently carried out an investigation into the fashion garment industry in Leicester and found sewing machine operators working for £3 an hour and employers issuing bogus pay role statements.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation report issued in January 2024 found that poverty levels are at a 20-year high. Another government study found that 17% of children and adults living poverty are in families where both adults work. They are often in poorly paid "zero hour" and casual pay jobs with high levels of wage insecurity.

As Christians we should be active in asking such hard questions of employers and government. It took a long time before Christian conscience promoted the Factory Acts and banned the slave trade. And if we ourselves are employers or in government, we need to be asking the hard questions of ourselves, and to be active in finding the solutions, as our forebears sought to be. 🇬🇧

1. See <https://new.millsarchive.org/2021/09/27/into-the-industrial-age-developments-in-wind-and-water-power-1750-1850/>.
2. In a process of gradual development, the Acts of 1844, 1856 and 1862 established joint stock companies and the principle of limited liability.
3. HM Boot, *Economic History Review* XLVIII, Issue 2, p289 ff.
4. Jane Humphries, *Childhood and Child Labour in the British Industrial Revolution*, CUP, Introduction.
5. See especially Ian Bradley, *Enlightened Entrepreneurs: Business Ethics in Victorian Britain*, Lion, 2007. He has chapters on Holloway, Salt, Morley, Palmer, Colman, Carnegie, Cadbury, Rowntree, Boot and Lever.
6. Unitarianism was regarded in the nineteenth century as one of the main Nonconformist Christian denominations, though it is – as its name suggests – non-trinitarian. It sees Jesus Christ as inspired by God and the saviour of humanity but not equal to God.
7. Clark Nardinelli, *Journal of Economic History*, Vol 40 Issue 4, p175.
8. Cited in James Walvin, *The Quakers: Money and Morals*, John Murray, 1997.
9. Jonathan Aitken, *John Newton: From Disgrace to Amazing Grace*, Bloomsbury Continuum, 2023.
10. <http://www.historywebsite.co.uk/Museum/Manders/Memories/Manders.htm>
11. See <https://theconversation.com/child-slavery-in-west-africa-understanding-cocoa-farming-is-key-to-ending-the-practice-170315>.



David Parish is a retired BA manager. He is a Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport. He writes on the intersection of faith and work and is on the volunteer staff of the Kirby Laing Centre for Public Theology in Cambridge.