

A tailor of Hebden Bridge: Joseph Spencer and family

It began with a gravestone, my mother's, in Woodford, Cheshire, which she shared with her mother and father. She was Phyllis Mary Spencer. She died young, aged 41. Her father, Thomas Walton Spencer, also died in his forties, in 1922.

Thomas was born in Hebden Bridge in 1878, the son of Joseph and Emily Spencer. Joseph was the son of Thomas Spencer, a fustian cutter, and Emily, daughter of Thomas Walton, listed in the 1871 census as 'manager and manufacturer' at Foster Mill. Joseph had a successful business as an 'outfitter and tailor' of Market Street, which from 1889 he based around a shop he'd had built himself, at no. 25. Ten years later he moved the family to a smart new house on Birchcliffe Road.

But – and this much we'd always known – the family moved away abruptly in 1901, to Bramhall in Cheshire, where I grew up. Why move when his business appeared to be prospering?

Joseph had been born in 1855. In the 1871 census he was listed as a tailor, working I believe as an apprentice for John Kershaw and Sons, a long-established firm of tailors. His father had remarried, to a Sarah Kershaw, after his wife's death. The Spencers were strong Wesleyans, worshipping at Salem chapel, and so too, we believe, the Kershaws, and certainly the Waltons, Emily's family. Thomas Walton has a fine grave adjacent to the chapel in Heptonstall, and he's on record as a preacher.

Another family connection came about through Joseph's sister, Mary Ellen. She married Virgil Greenwood, eldest son of Joseph Greenwood of Nutclough. In the 1890s Virgil managed Joseph's Burnley shop.

Hebden Bridge in the heyday of fustian after 1870 was a town not only of mill and manufacturers and millworkers, but also of wholesale clothiers. They were the businesses that sold the fustian, either as cloth or 'ready-mades' to the wide world, with Manchester a primary focus, as it was for Joseph. But he was not selling goods to traders in Manchester, but buying. His focus was retail: Market Street in Hebden Bridge, and Yorkshire Street in Burnley. His advertisements in the local press promoted fashion items alongside everyday clothing. He had his own workrooms above the shop, with the roof windows letting in light for the seamstresses still visible. He also produced fustian clothing for local workers: there's a record of him supplying coats for the local lamplighters.

It was probably about forty minutes by train to Manchester Victoria from Hebden Bridge. I've used a little licence in investigating how Joseph might have experienced Manchester, the most extraordinary city in the world at that time. What was it like to walk through the 'old' city, and the new warehouses and civic buildings. Bump into people from all over Britain, and the world. And who did he buy from? How did the items he purchase get packed and shipped?

I've also investigated how he, and his wife, and his parents, and his children, were educated, with the focus before 1870 on the Wesleyan Sunday school, and possible the school at Foster Mill, and after 1876 on the new Board schools. The Sunday school was an integral part of the

highly successful Salem chapel, where the Spencers remained closely involved, with Overseas Missions a particular focus of Joseph's.

I've also explored how they lived their lives: Emily's brother, Robert Spence Walton, was the local doctor, so they'd have got good medical treatment. Where did they shop? Take holidays? Which newspapers, which books did they read? What might they have sung, beyond the hymns of Charles Wesley? I do have one book – Thomas's form prize from 1892, a book on astronomy, when he was a boarder at Woodhouse Grove School.

The wind was set fair. So why did they move? Thomas had a younger sister, Lilian, born in 1880. She had an illegitimate child in a Salvation Army hostel in London in 1901. The father was probably a Hebden Bridge lad. How much was known of this locally? Enough, we assume, for Joseph and Emily to decide they had to move away. The Manchester and Wesleyan connections were invaluable. They moved to Bramhall, a village with a strong Wesleyan community, in 1901. Thomas, Joseph's son, stayed on in Hebden Bridge to manage the shop, but spent enough time in Bramhall to first court and then marry my grandmother, Lily, in 1906.

Lilian's child was brought up by Thomas and Emily, as their youngest. Lilian married a week after her brother, also in Bramhall, and prospered. But Joseph's business didn't. He had, latterly, branches in Accrington and Oldham as well as Hebden Bridge and Burnley, and premises on Deansgate in Manchester. Maybe he'd expanded too far, too fast. He'd always relied on big mortgages to finance his business, and his house purchase. The business went into liquidation in 1907. And that was the final severing of the link with Hebden Bridge. Joseph continued to work as a tailor, with a Manchester base, though we've no evidence he had his own shop, and the family – there were four younger children – all lived comfortably.

Joseph's ambitions and Hebden Bridge's late 19th century heyday were a good match. A newly prosperous community, and a new middle class needed clothes that met their aspirations, and that was the opportunity Joseph seized.

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