

# Sweated industries: “almost ceaseless toil, hard and unlovely to the last degree”

*Chetham's Library, June 8, 2018*

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SLIPPER BINDING AND CLOSING. 10d. and 1/- per dozen pairs (Manchester).

‘... earnings barely sufficient to sustain an existence; hours of labour such as to make the lives of the workers periods of almost ceaseless toil hard and unlovely to the last degree; sanitary conditions injurious to the health of the persons employed and dangerous to the public.’

*House of Lords Select Committee definition of ‘sweated’ labour, 1890*

At the beginning of the twentieth century the survival of poor families often depended on women working. Unfortunately most of the work open to them was low-paid “sweated labour”: working long hours in dreadful conditions for very low pay, either in factories or earning a pittance at home in repetitive work. The occupations included making umbrella tassels, beaded bows for ladies shoes, matchboxes, paper bags or mouse traps; military beading, button hole sewing, shirt finishing, folding bible pages, beading shoes (‘vamps’), hemming pocket handkerchiefs and carding buttons. Production workers were hugely exploited, as manufacturers aimed to produce goods as cheaply as possible to meet consumer demand.

Campaigners to improve pay and conditions organised events such as the Manchester Sweated Industries Exhibition in 1906, which aimed to highlight the terrible conditions endured by “sweated” workers. The library is fortunate to have a copy of the exhibition handbook which was published in Manchester by the William Morris Press. The handbook contains information about the organisers, articles, a list of the lectures to take place at the exhibition and details of the industry stalls – painting a graphic picture of the grim work that poor people had to do to get by.

*The Manchester*  
**SWEATED  
INDUSTRIES**  
*Exhibition.*



AT THE  
**Co-operative Hall**  
(Kindly lent by the Manchester Co-operative Society),  
**Downing St., Manchester.**

Manchester:  
THE WILLIAM MORRIS PRESS, 14, QUEEN STREET.  
1906.

*Produced entirely by*  
**"TRADE UNION LABOUR."**

One of the main organisers was the Manchester, Salford, and District Women's Trades Union Council, which campaigned to improve pay and conditions for sweated labourers, supported by a large committee of representatives from campaigning organisations. The

committee raised £401 8s 6d from Guarantors and Subscribers, who included Julia Gaskell, the younger daughter of the novelist Elizabeth Gaskell. The event was promoted by *The Daily News*, a paper which campaigned against sweated labour.

2-48

# HANDBOOK

OF THE

# Manchester Sweated Industries Exhibition,

PROMOTED BY

“THE DAILY NEWS” and the MANCHESTER, SALFORD, AND  
DISTRICT WOMEN’S TRADES UNION COUNCIL,

AND ORGANISED BY REPRESENTATIVES OF  
THE FOLLOWING SOCIETIES :

CHRISTIAN SOCIAL UNION (Manchester).  
MANCHESTER AND SALFORD CO-OPERATIVE SOCIETY.  
MANCHESTER CO-OPERATIVE WHOLESALE SOCIETY.  
FABIAN SOCIETY (Manchester).  
LANCASHIRE COLLEGE SETTLEMENT.  
MANCHESTER AND SALFORD SANITARY ASSOCIATION.  
SOCIAL DEMOCRATIC FEDERATION (South-West Manchester Branch).  
SOCIAL QUESTIONS COMMITTEE.  
SOCIOLOGICAL SOCIETY, Manchester University.  
MANCHESTER AND SALFORD TRADES AND LABOUR COUNCIL.  
NATIONAL UNION OF WOMEN WORKERS (Manchester).  
UNIVERSITY SETTLEMENT (Ancoats).  
WESLEYAN METHODIST UNION FOR SOCIAL SERVICE.  
WOMEN’S CO-OPERATIVE GUILD (North-Western Section).  
WOMEN’S CO-OPERATIVE GUILD (Manchester).  
WOMEN’S TRADES UNION COUNCIL (Manchester, Salford, and District).

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OCTOBER, 1906.

Afternoon and evening lectures, mainly by women, addressed different aspects of "sweating".

## LIST OF LECTURES.

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- Oct. 9th, at 3 p.m.—Mr. A. A. PURCELL (Chairman, Manchester and Salford Trades and Labour), "Sweating in the Furnishing Trades."
- Oct. 9th, at 7-30 p.m.—Miss A. AMY BULLEY (Chairman, Manchester and Salford Women's Trades Union Council).
- Oct. 10th, at 3 p.m.—Mr. D. J. SHACKLETON, M.P.
- Oct. 11th, at 3 p.m.—Mr. JOHN HARKER, J.P., "The Shirt and Under-clothing Trades."
- Oct. 12th, at 7-30 p.m.—Mr. W. H. LEVER, M.P., "Prosperity Sharing" (Lantern).
- Oct. 13th, at 3 p.m.—Mrs. KATHARINE GLASIER, "Our Responsibility for Sweating."
- Oct. 15th, at 3 and 7-30 p.m.—Miss GERTRUDE TUCKWELL (Women's Trade Union League), "Sweating v. A Minimum Wage."
- Oct. 16th, at 3 p.m.—Mrs. BURY (arranged by Manchester Women's Co-operative Guild).
- Oct. 16th, at 7-30 p.m.—Mrs. E. PANKHURST, "Legislation and Sweated Industries."
- Oct. 17th, at 7-30 p.m.—Mr. EDWARD CARPENTER, "Sweated Industries and Socialism."
- Oct. 18th, at 3 p.m.—Mrs. H. J. TENNANT, "Some Remedies."
- Oct. 19th, at 3 and 7-30 p.m.—Miss CLEMENTINA BLACK, "Labour as a Commodity."
- Oct. 20th, at 7-30 p.m.—Mr. P. RYAN, "Co-operators as Employers" (Lantern).
- Oct. 22nd, at 3 and 7-30 p.m.—Miss MARGARET H. IRWIN, "The Problem of Home Work."
- Oct. 23rd, at 3 and 7-30 p.m.—Miss MARGARET Mc.MILLAN, "Effect of Low Paid Industries on Child Life."
- Oct. 25th, at 7-30 p.m.—COUNCILLOR JAMES JOHNSTON, J.P. "Guise Co-operative Iron Works" (Lantern).
- Oct. 29th, at 3 p.m.—Miss MARGARET BONDFIELD (National Union of Shop Assistants).

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Other Lectures are under arrangement.

The handbook also describes some of the sweated industries. We learn that, in Birmingham, hook and eye carding is done by married women, widows or elderly spinsters and that 384 hooks and eyes linked together and stitched on a card earned 'the munificent wage of one penny.' This would only buy half a loaf of bread at the time and is the equivalent of 33p today. Child labour was common and children as young as 5 were brought to work. One mother set out the stark choice she faced: 'You must either make the children work or let them starve.'



VAMP BEADERS. (Reproduced by permission of the "Daily News.")



MILITARY EMBROIDERY. (Reproduced by permission of the "Daily News.")

**Stall II.****Worker 1.**

<b>Description of Work</b>	... ..	<b>Book Folding</b> —mostly Bibles and Prayer Books.
<i>Rates paid</i>	... ..	1d. per 100 sheets—on some Bibles 1½d. for 100 sheets.
<i>Worker's outlay for sundries</i>	... ..	.....
<i>Time lost in fetching and returning work</i>	... ..	1 to 1½ hour.
<i>Average working day</i> ...	... ..	12 hours.
<i>Average earnings</i>	... ..	9/- to 10/- weekly.
<i>Regular or intermittent work</i>	... ..	6 months in the year only.
<i>Retail price of article</i> ...	... ..	.....

**Process.**—The sheets have to be first cut, then folded, and put into the right order.

**Stall II.****Worker 2.**

<b>Description of Work</b>	... ..	<b>Shawl Fringeing.</b>
<i>Rates paid</i>	... ..	See "Earnings" and "Remarks."
<i>Worker's outlay for thread, &amp;c.</i>	... ..	.....
<i>Time lost in fetching and returning work</i>	... ..	An hour daily.
<i>Average working day</i> ...	... ..	.....
<i>Average earnings</i>	... ..	Average over the year 5/-. May rise occasionally to 8/- or 9/-
<i>Regular or intermittent work</i>	... ..	Often idle for a month at a time.
<i>Value of material</i>	... ..	.....
<i>Retail price of article</i>	... ..	.....

**Process.**—Worker plaits the fringe and knots it. She was engaged on a large black shawl, which she had to go round twice, being 16 yards of fringeing, for 10d.

**Remarks.**—Complains of falling rates of pay: used to get 5/- for work, which now only produces 2/-.

The handbook also describes unbearable hardship at home, as whole families struggle to eke out an existence by carding hooks and eyes: the husband 'has been out looking for work from 5am till dark every day during the past 3 weeks', one page of the handbook reports, 'He looks very ill'.

In the preface to the handbook, Mrs Sidney Web makes clear that consumers demanding cheap goods have some responsibility for the exploitation of the workers who make them:

*We may ourselves never pay wages which we know to be miserably inadequate to the needs of life, but every day we use the articles for which such wages have been paid. We make use of matches and match-boxes, of buttons and hooks and eyes, of paper bags, and a thousand and one of the unconsidered manufactured trifles of daily life, with a faint wonder that things should be so cheap; while even for the things for which we pay heavily, the probability is that at one stage or another of manufacture sweating will have crept in.*

Unfortunately we are still familiar with the term 'sweatshop' and the idea that the production work for goods we buy in the UK might be outsourced to countries where people work long hours in dangerous and unsanitary conditions for less than a living wage; but closer to home, could we even compare the sweated labour of Manchester in 1906 with the gig economy and zero hours contracts of 2018?

Articles in the handbook discuss remedies for sweated labour, including legislation and worker organisation. One writer sees hope in the growth of a public conscience which could lead to consumer action, although they also warn this is unlikely to happen in the near future. Reading the handbook, it's impossible not to reflect on how far we've come, and how far we've still got to go.