HOUSES AS MUSEUMS: THE CASE OF THE YORKSHIRE WOOL TEXTILE INDUSTRY

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ABSTRACT. Oakwell Hall, Birstall, Red House, Gomersal, and Bagshaw Museum, Batley, are three historic properties which lie at the heart of the old Yorkshire woolen manufacturing district, west of Leeds, where factory production emerged out of a dual economy that combined farming and making. Each effectively represents a key stage in that evolution. Here we examine how the real history of such houses, focusing especially on Red House, which epitomises the dynamic era when its owners helped build up domestic manufacturing to global success, could pay dividends in connecting people to the real social and economic history of their area.

Museum collections, by definition, are normally displayed and stored within buildings. Although rarely outstanding in architectural terms, these are often houses with their own histories, and Mark Girouard has showed how the study of country houses can make accessible many different approaches to understanding the past. Other houses can be used just as effectively, but drawing attention to a building, its location and its outbuildings often in practice threatens its function as a simple container, wherein 'mobile' collections can be displayed and interpreted according to their own logic or the curator's perception of it. In a museum setting they are therefore often deliberately neutralised, instead of becoming the prime artefact in the collection. If promoted as historic houses, they are usually treated as part of an abstract architectural movement, or interpreted as symbols of an often ahistorical heritage unless they are truly outstanding.

For two centuries, moreover, scholarly history has relied upon documents to separate itself from myth-making and hero worship, but it is now sophisticated and self-confident enough to embrace a rapidly expanding range of sources, which should include material culture. With documents no longer generating the old certainty, confidence in our overall understanding of the distant past surely increases when

different types of evidence support congruent analyses. Archaeologists have shown that eclectic approaches can produce results that even two decades ago would have seemed like fantasy. Most of these relate to new ways of investigating material remains, and they have shown how effectively past societies can be studied through museum collections.

Natural historians depend heavily upon the examination and classification of specimens held in museums, and concern has been expressed that current neglect of collections will be disastrous for science. Such collections dominate the related study of the fossil past, and a leading geologist once remarked, ‘the best geologist is the one who has seen most rocks’, so here again they are essential, just as art galleries are for art historians.\(^3\)

Unfortunately, social and economic historians often see history museums and historic buildings as the natural terrain of antiquarians, and now perceive added threats from the booming heritage industry, where evidence-based truthfulness gives way to telling simple, popular stories. Since expertise in linking evidence from material culture to analytical history is lacking, works of mainstream history rarely cite a museum or a collection among their sources, even in such object-oriented subjects as technology. A self-reinforcing cycle of mutual incomprehension and missed opportunities thus seems to exist between academics and those who manage historic houses. However, successful television programmes like *House Detectives* show that non-academic people can enjoy fact-based approaches to buildings, even when long-standing beliefs are challenged. Museums and historians could similarly come together without making museums into daunting temples of esoteric knowledge or threatening critical standards. Historians would thereby communicate with a wider audience, including many not actively searching for real history. The elucidation of the potential of houses, their surroundings and their place in the landscape and community, would be an ideal vehicle for starting this process, and conflicts between this potential and their role as functional buildings must be overcome. This paper deals with a case study of three historic properties all now operated by Kirklees Metropolitan Council, based in Huddersfield and separated by only a few miles. It is drawn from my time as a museum curator in West Yorkshire, and illustrates both the difficulties and potential of this approach.

Red House Museum, Gomersal, is the main focus. A twelve-roomed, apparently Georgian house, it was originally purchased and opened to the public because of associations with Charlotte Bronte and her novel *Shirley*.\(^2\) Oakwell Hall, Birstall, is a more architecturally


\(^{3}\) C. Bronte, *Shirley* (1842).
striking, stone gabled house dating from 1598, located a mile away, which has lesser Bronte links. Bagshaw Museum, Batley, is about two miles from both, but was never seen as having anything in common with them. It is based in The Woodlands, a classic Victorian gothic manufacturer’s house built in 1876 by George Sheard, a local industrialist. None was particularly well visited or convincing as educational institutions before Kirklees assumed responsibility for them all in 1974 during local government reorganisation. Significant resources were committed to improve the dilapidated interiors and displays, but the tension between their possibilities as historic houses and as museums was always present, and questions were asked as to why they were open as museums at all, given continuing low attendances. Oakwell Hall’s potential was transformed when the colliery that stood on its front doorstep was closed and cleared away, and the site was transformed into a country park, but this denied the fundamentally industrial character of the area and overshadowed the other two.

Fitting them into a wider museum service, while promoting a truly local, accurate and meaningful history within them, was the goal, but personnel changes led to sudden changes in direction. A general lack of historical insight among both those who took the real decisions and the local public made this a largely heritage-driven, often opportunistic exercise. Local particularism complicated matters, for Kirklees is an uneasy and unnatural amalgamation of fiercely independent and mutually suspicious towns. The name Kirklees, for instance, derives from a locality outside the council’s boundaries, since baffling all residents was preferred to offending many of them by implying the dominance of any one town. It does include, however, a substantial part of the area devoted from the eighteenth century to the production of woollen, as opposed to worsted, yarn and cloth, and almost all the events in Yorkshire Luddism occurred within it. The immediate area around the houses experienced a disproportionate share of the dramatic events which still grip people’s imagination, and Charlotte Bronte had explicitly incorporated Red House and Oakwell into Shirley for this reason.

The question is, can the houses contribute significantly as houses and sites to understanding the past of this distinctive place, and to conveying some aspects of it to the people of today who live there? It is now recognised that modern manufacturing, especially in Britain, began in rural areas like this, not towns, and we need to understand the real dynamics of economic systems which combined living, farming and manufacturing on one site. The proto-industrial model claimed to do this in the 1970s and 80s, but those who examined the key manufacturing districts of northern England directly rather than through
the lens of theory have never accepted its accuracy. It actually describes best those areas that began to develop, but then stalled, or even de-
industrialised. Now, both Oakwell Hall and Red House lay within the early modern township of Gomersal, one of eight which constituted the typically large Pennine parish of Birstall. Birstall was a dynamic part of the woollen industry that as late as 1806 consisted of a mass of self-consciously independent producers and merchants.

Ingenious research has given insight into how the domestic system worked, especially surveys by Dickenson and Gregory, and Hudson’s illuminating analysis of business methods. However, family enterprises answerable to no one but themselves created few business records, and historians have exaggerated by default the contribution of those few who did leave something behind. However, a surprising percentage of both the landscape and physical infrastructure survives from pre-
industrial times, because the hilly terrain encouraged periodic fresh starts rather than a constant redevelopment of key sites, and possession of land and buildings did give typical family enterprises an incentive to preserve documents relating to them. Books like those produced for the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments and Thornes’s survey of West Yorkshire’s industrial archaeology have demonstrated how rich the potential of this approach is, yet they produced few significant effects. These three houses actually symbolise three stages in a very distinctive and globally important historical development path for the woollen industry, which laid down the foundations on which worsted and cotton built, and also remained a vital part of British industrialisation. Oakwell Hall was the head of the sprawling medieval manor of Gomersal. Red House was the home of the Taylor family, who made and traded cloth. The Woodlands is a relic of the factory system that eventually replaced domestic manufacturing.


6 R.G. Wilson, Gentlemen Merchants: The Merchant Community in Leeds, 1770–1830 (Manchester, 1971); J. Smail, The Origins of Middle Class Culture: Halifax, Yorkshire, 1660–1780 (Ithaca, 1985), see especially ch. 3.


Rural industry evolved out of an earlier socio-economic system, and Oakwell Hall and its site illuminate this process. The manor of Gomersal, typically for the Pennines, covered several townships, one of which was named Gomersal. Good arable land, with only a scanty population, lay only a few miles away, beyond Leeds, whereas corn could only be grown in small pockets hereabouts. Settlement, farming and rents all inevitably reflected this, and Gomersal township included three separate townfields associated with hamlets at Birstall (a subsidiary hamlet despite giving its name to the parish), at Great Gomersal (where Red House is located) and at Little Gomersal (another subsidiary hamlet). In between lay pasture, moorland and some long-established, self-contained farmsteads. Manorialism had depended on tenant farmers paying rents and providing labour, thereby enabling lords to support a superior lifestyle. Medieval rent rolls of Pennine manors were inevitably low despite their size, and they usually were combined with others to produce adequate lordly incomes, leading to absenteeism. Archaeology suggests that from the thirteenth century Oakwell declined to become a neglected outstation, without even a house fit for a steward between c. 1400 and 1583.

The confusing, sometimes chaotic, institutional and practical landscape around Oakwell was typical of the textile area, where most people were without ready access to churches, or habituation to deferential attitudes to resident social superiors, and this probably helped create the conditions suited to domestic manufacturing. Yet the manor of Gomersal had mineral resources, for another hamlet was Birstall Smithies, an early centre of coal mining and metal working as its name suggests. Also, it was not really isolated, for the medieval track of the ancient, strategic route from York to Chester passed through it. This made manufacturing for sale a possibility, and since early taxation lists show local people rated almost universally on the lowest level of incomes, they had little reason to idealise a peasant way of life. In nearby Halifax parish, on rougher land, the local historian Watson commented in 1775 that he did not believe a single family then lived entirely by farming. Thus, a new type of tenant emerged, involved in textiles and desiring a modest holding simply as a base for business operations and as insurance against hard times. Absentee lords encouraged such men by making small farms available to them to increase the total rent roll, and milking their right to provide and charge

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9 G. and N. Cookson, *Gomersal: A Window on the Past*, Kirklees Cultural Services (Huddersfield, 1992), is a thorough, rounded and impeccably evidence-based history of the township. See ch. 2 for the manor of Gomersal.


for the fulling mills that were an essential part of making woollen cloth.

Thus, whereas the proto-industrial model of the origins of manufacturing assumed that it was overcrowding and poverty that forced reluctant peasants into becoming weavers, here population growth followed the new order, which really made people’s lives better in the long term, and the houses from the past testify to this. Proto-industrialisation also assumes the dominance of town-based merchants who wished to overthrow the old order. The Yorkshire system in contrast invigorated agrarian life, and the privileged classes profited from joining in rather than resisting.¹² There was a general upwelling of initiative, with the tiny market centres that existed, especially Leeds, becoming co-ordinating centres. Merchants competed with each other, and evidence suggests that they preferred to take no responsibility for manufacturing, since the costs of it then fell upon the clothiers. Some merchants, including the Taylors, resided in manufacturing communities and identified with them.

This process might have been threatened in Gomersal in the late sixteenth century when the Batt family bought the manor. Henry Batt built, probably in 1583, the first version of the venerable, mullioned and partly timbered Oakwell Hall that we see today, and thus reconstituted the manor as a single, if large, administrative unit with a resident lord at its heart.¹³ The Batts were rising local lawyers with a poor reputation for honesty, and their building of the hall consciously presented them as nascent gentry, rather than engaging in conflict with that class. They could not afford simply to play the squire, however, for they had fewer resources than the nearby Armytages of Clifton and the Tempests of Tong, who both did keep manufacturing out of their domains. The Batts stood or fell by the commercial success of their investment in Gomersal manor. They needed to share in the prosperity that manufacturing was bringing, not to stifle it. There even seems to have been a willingness to sell off parts of the manor, and the Taylors were among many who became freeholders as a result.

The Batt’s first version of Oakwell Hall lasted only a short time, for it was substantially altered shortly after 1611 in an apparently retrograde conversion from two storeys throughout into a central, open hall, almost surrounded by a gallery, connecting two-storeyed wings. This must have embodied a conscious decision to reinforce the attempt to obliterate the Batts’ origins, further demonstrating their desire to join the old order, on their own terms, rather than to destroy it. We cannot know

¹³Cookson, Gomersal, 13–14.
if they would ultimately have been successful because their finances were destroyed by their royalist sympathies in a fiercely parliamentarian area in the Civil War, and the manor entered a cycle of neglect and sale soon after the Restoration. By 1750 the manor as a meaningful unit was in terminal decline, though residual rights would still be valuable a century later. So completely did it disintegrate that the actual boundaries are now very unclear, but manufacturing flourished within them.

That brings us to Red House and its part in the rising domestic textile industry. Richard Taylor bought a house with a garden, a croft and other lands in Great Gomersal sometime in the mid-sixteenth century. It is unlikely the family were natives, so they may have moved precisely to further trading and manufacturing instincts. In any event, in 1577 more land was purchased by his son Thomas, a chapman or minor merchant, thereby creating an agricultural holding running up the western slope of the Gomersal ridge, over its crest, which is almost 500 feet above sea level, and down the other side. It is striking how tenaciously the Taylors clung to this stem holding, though many other plots of land passed through their hands. Though split several times in wills, it was always reunited in the next generation, and it was farmed at least to the mid-nineteenth century, long after any economic need to do so had ceased.

The death of William Taylor, who called himself a yeoman, in January 1688/9 creates a window into the family’s situation as they prospered, for his will and inventory survive. Two south-facing houses are described, one old and the other described as new. The latter, which is credibly attributed within the family to a construction date of 1660, formed the basis of the present Red House despite many alterations. Together they created one long building running away from a lane parallel to and below the crest of the ridge. Now the A651 from Heckmondwike to Bradford, it then gave access to fields and moorland to the north, but to the south it connected to the York to Chester highway mentioned earlier, just a quarter of a mile away. The paradox of apparent isolation co-existing with real access to the outside world is thus clear at Red House in the seventeenth century.

The inventory relates to the old house, which centred around a traditional housebody with a chamber above it and also three parlours (two with beds in) and a buttery. Clothmaking gear was scattered round the house, and a range for coal fires reflected the ready availability of this fuel. The ‘house chamber’ contained:

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14 Documents relating to the Taylor family are held by the Yorkshire Archaeological Society (hereafter YAS), MD292 and MD311, and the West Yorkshire Archive Service, KC52 and KX100-49. This is from YAS MD311/11. Copies of some are held at Red House. The most complete study of the family is M. Ferrett, The Taylors of the Red House, Kirklees Cultural Services (Huddersfield, 1987).
One bed and bedding
one chest
one hustlement
Item Oats wheat barleys beanes
Item hay
Loome and material belonging

This bed was of reasonable quality, even though it was the least valuable of the four in the house, and the presence of the hustlement to give privacy and protection from draughts suggests it was in use, so here we see domestic arrangements, the varied produce of the land and the manufacture of cloth, all in intimate contact. Two spinning wheels were in the little parlour, along with furniture appropriate to a yeoman existence. Three bibles were listed, but no other books. Outside there was a tenter (a frame for stretching cloth while it dried) as well as farm equipment, while a little horse suited to a clothier’s needs was valued alongside four cattle. Two fine cloths and two of middling quality were appraised at £20 collectively. Total assets of £78.1.0d, plus a £7 debt owing, show a clothier several steps up from the typical hand-to-mouth man dependent on selling one cloth to buy the materials to make another. However, the family had not distanced itself from manual work, there is nothing to suggest trading on a grand scale, and nothing in the furniture or equipment suggests a man concerned with the cultural norms of anywhere but his place of birth.

In 1713 a second inventory was made on the death of William’s second son John, who inherited the business, and this shows us both the layout of the new house and apparent changes in attitudes. The estate was now valued at £181.10.6d, or £170.16s if debts are deducted. Only one loom was listed, almost certainly outside the house, with a coarse cloth being woven on it, but several pairs of gears suggest the presence of other looms somewhere. Equipment and stores were now kept either in the old house or in outbuildings scattered around a foldstead, a cross between a true farmyard and a clothworking complex. The old house apparently had its own foldstead, and was inhabited by another branch of the family. Two barns are recorded, a ‘swinecote’ or pigsty, workshops, and a newly erected outkitchen whose ground floor was used for brewing beer for the household, while on the first floor fourteen finished cloths were stored with sundry equipment. An old and a new cloth finishing shop provided substantial facilities for shearing and pressing. At the top of the foldstead was a ‘little house’ or toilet, and beyond, in its own garth or enclosure, was the draw well, a very large and deep affair which was rediscovered in 1983. A reliable source of clean water was essential to a business like this, and Gomersal’s location above a natural sandstone aquifer was ideal for this purpose.
The emphasis on finishing indicates merchant status, since ordinary clothiers never undertook it. The types of cloth listed, and the lack of dyeing equipment, suggest that the Taylors traded white broadcloth at the new Leeds White Cloth Hall, a typical activity for the area.

Beyond the well was a croft, probably a vegetable garden and orchard, and then came three long thin fields in a line. The first formed a tentercroft, and so would have been covered with fencelike frames, indicating that clothiers used land for non-agricultural purposes. They all seem to have been arable land that had formed several strips on the extreme southern edge of the former Gomersal townfield, which would explain their odd shape. Much of this field remains in agricultural use today. Moreover, the deeds recording the fields’ acquisition mention that they were ‘to be holden of the Chief lorde of the fle of by services therefore due and of right accustomyd’, demonstrating the dismemberment of the old manorial structures to make way for a newer economy, but also the lack of a clean break. Gomersal’s townfield apparently disappeared rapidly as clothmaking succeeded, leaving clothiers free to allocate their time as they saw fit.

The Taylor’s livestock list only includes one sheep, confirming, along with one or two other records, that wool was bought in from east Yorkshire and Lincolnshire. Sheep suited to this part of the Pennines had fleeces too coarse to make saleable cloth, and this has always really been cattle country. They also had a range of farm gear, from wains to a plough. This, along with the storage of grain in the house, confirms a serious commitment to arable since the practice of gravings, or digging fields with a spade and a mattock, survived well into the nineteenth century locally.

The new house, where John lived and died, is itself a symbol and a record of their rising status, and the attitudes that went with it. All local houses had been timbered, new ones were now stone-built, but Red House was made of bricks (the name was apparently coined only in the 1880s, but it has been used throughout here for convenience). There is brick earth nearby, and the variable colour and texture of the bricks in the oldest surviving walls suggest local manufacture. A handful of other relatively early brick buildings exist nearby, and the inspiration for them all probably lies in the area’s mercantile links with Leeds and lowland Yorkshire.

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15 Cookson, Gomersal, ch. 5, see esp. map on p. 61. This developed initial research into the field patterns done by myself while curator at Red House in the 1980s.
16 YAS MD 311/21.
17 Thus, an acquittance dated 14 June 1596 acknowledges the cancellation of a debt owed to Richard Birkehead, a husbandman of Knioldyngton in the East Riding of Yorkshire, by James Taylor. YAS MD 311.
The utterly plain appearance (lacking even a string course) and uncertain constructional use of the new material indicate an inexperienced local builder, though bricks were generally used in chimney stacks.\textsuperscript{18} The present east wall seems older than the rest, so it may reflect the original appearance of the whole house. Its windows have stone surrounds, a feature seen in another local house built in 1690. The internal walls are mostly as strong as the external ones, something that would prove significant later. At the rear, a very small cellar (well away from the site of the old house) is entered through a trap door, and may predate the house as it extends beyond the present boundary. It has stone walls, while another cellar in front of it has the remains of a mullioned window of a crude type consistent with a date of 1660. No definitive explanation of these features is possible.

Mostly, Red House remained part of local tradition, with three gables each fronting a double-pile cell.\textsuperscript{19} The single-storey housebody was furnished predictably, and cooking equipment stood around a coal-burning range. A ‘pewter dresser’ with drawers held eighteen dishes and twelve plates, and there was a milk house and buttery which, in typical Yorkshire fashion, contained linen, silver plate and the eating utensils, including wooden trenchers, as well as dairy utensils. There was, however, a dining room where the family could opt out of life in the housebody, which cannot have been large. The north parlour was the only room besides the housebody to have a fireplace, and with a mirror and a china cabinet it had some pretensions despite containing two beds. The house had two other mirrors, and a carpet in one chamber. Most chambers contained beds but little else, apart from chests and such workaday items as kneading troughs and a meal ark, with meal in.

The Taylors were thus both steadily prospering and wealthier than average for the area, but still far from gentry status. They seem to have valued education and had a strong religious bent, for on at least two occasions the eldest son actually went into the church, including John’s elder brother James. A picture of a genuinely mixed economy emerges, which supported quite a colony of people on the evidence of the ten beds scattered round the new house in 1713. The majority were probably used by more than one person, so John’s wife and seven children were...
presumably complemented by several servants and apprentices, and
this was something farming alone could never have achieved. There
is evidence of intermittent attempts to operate the holding on some
form of joint basis, with the core holding split by a will and arrange-
ments made for amicable operations. Thus, John’s will shows that
there was a communicating door in 1713 between the two houses, and
he specified which house should have the use of a parlour on one side
of it.  
Among John’s large family were two sons, and again the younger,
Joshua, carried on the family business, to such effect that he seems to
have demolished the old house, and this seems to mark a conscious
transition to merchant status. The front of the new house was also
removed except for its eastern corner, an operation made possible by
the cellular construction. A symmetrical façade with five windows
upstairs, and four and a central door downstairs, replaced it, though
still with extraordinarily plain brickwork of the old thickness. Sash
windows may have been installed. The ridge poles of the gables were
cut back and a continuous, front-facing slope of slates leaned against
them as if there was a hipped roof. This new fashionable front contrasted
sharply with the traditional, gabled rear, where the construction of a
new cell as an extension of the new house over part of the old site
added an extra gable. The house as we see it today was largely created
in this exercise.
Inside, the house body vanished and the central cell became an
imposing but small and unheated entrance hall, and a gallery at first
floor level showed the same desire as at Oakwell Hall to impress
visitors. What must have been a milk-house, with a built-in stone table
at its centre, remained however, cut out from the rear of the hall. In
the western parlour, a symmetrical central fireplace flanked by alcoves
showed a concern for fashion, and the room was heightened at the
expense of the bedroom above. The new extension allowed two
connected service rooms to be isolated at the rear, including a separate
kitchen. Yet outside the front door still lay the yard of a working
establishment, and remains of dye vats quite near the house which may
date from this time have been discovered. Dyeing was a noxious process
and this confirms that visitors would have been in no doubt that this
family earned its living.
Both the separation between life and work and the commitment to
Red House deepened as the family’s status rose, despite the tensions
this created. Another John Taylor and his son, another Joshua, were
both astute, thrusting and successful business men who maintained the
family’s reputation for individuality. John erected a large new mill

*Will of John Taylor, copy held by Kirklees Archives, Huddersfield, and Red House.*
complex around 1785 a mile away at Hunsworth, the nearest available site with water power. This was emphatically not a factory, but a fulling mill open to all for the payment of a standard fee now the manorial monopoly had been broken. It was gradually extended as new machinery was invented, but always for the use of clothiers, thus keeping the domestic system on which the Taylors’ livelihood depended dynamic and competitive. Cloth finishing mostly seems to have moved to Hunsworth, and a small coal mine was sunk to provide fuel for the steam engine installed there soon after they became available. However, a large barn, described as ‘recently erected’ in 1773, appeared at the top of Red House’s grounds, combining a cow house and stable on the ground floor in typical local style with a cloth inspection and packing area upstairs, while various mortgages still show the existence of a smoothing shop, a warehouse, a pressing shop and a drying house. John also built his own, very small and plain dissenting chapel close to the house.

Joshua spoke Italian and French, and had paintings and books from Europe in the house, and yet preferred to speak broad Yorkshire. He despised the gentry and the church of England, but had a strong commitment to community. He lived through the Luddite disturbances, but does not seem to have been actively involved except that Charlotte Bronte, the friend of his daughter, was so impressed by the Taylors that she made the whole family, renamed, symbolically, the Yorkes, central to her version in Shirley. This is why we know so much about Joshua, his wife and children, and the house itself is clearly described. Her version of the great Luddite attack on Rawfolds Mill, actually about a mile south of Red House, was set at Hunsworth since she knew it well. Joshua stood at the heart of an extensive manufacturing network of domestic production of standard heavy woollen cloth and by 1826 his estate, including all realisable assets, was worth an estimated £30,000. His counting house, also the office of a bank that the family had run for a quarter of a century, was probably in the warehouse. A vault underneath served as a safe, and it has also been rediscovered. The close connection between trade and the land thus persisted as the family became more mercantile than manufacturing in orientation. Weaving seems to have ended, though nearby Broadyards, a house and outbuildings erected by yet another John Taylor in the early nineteenth

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This figure should not be taken literally, but indicates that the family were acknowledged to be wealthy by local standards. George Rae, in his authoritative contemporary manual, The Country Banker, 9th edn (1902), 6–9, states that such figures are usually exaggerated.
century, had a small purpose-built weaving shop which employed twelve hands in 1851.

By the mid-century, however, the family was in decline. The bank collapsed during the financial storm of 1825–6, and though Joshua’s creditors told him to continue trading and so pay them back gradually, the business was never the same again. The domestic system was becoming a backwater and the factories seem to have been started by a different type of individual. Hunsworth became a dye-works, and was allowed to get completely out-dated. The Taylors inherited and were able to use a spurious title of ‘lords of the manor of Great Gomersal’, supported the Conservative party and aped the gentry, and in this they were again typical of their class as the nineteenth century progressed. No real physical changes occurred at Red House, but farming ended and the foldsteads became an ornamental garden, which is how visitors see it today. A cartshed with open-fronted bays replaced the warehouse at some date, removing most of the remaining connections with the cloth trade at Red House. By 1893 an almost free-standing, stone-built mock-gothic tower had been added to the east end, for no clear reason. Dr Richard Waring Taylor became the last of the family to reside and work at Red House, as a doctor, since he sold the whole property in 1920, ending Taylor connections with Gomersal. Two years later, both the sitting and dining rooms were extended, with extremely large windows inserted in the new end walls. The final stages in development and change have come under public ownership, when various minor internal adaptations have been made, unmade and remade, including the recent rebuilding of the back wall to stop it collapsing, perhaps under the strain of so many visitors’ feet. Thus, the house we see when we visit Red House Museum has changed and developed continuously since its first erection, and to try to point to any one phase as definitive is both impossible and misleading. In this, it reflects the dynamic nature of the family that built and altered it, and the sense of change made clear to visitors.

This brings us to The Woodlands, the house that sprang from the factory system. Batley was the last of the woollen towns to cohere and industrialise, because its poor water supply prevented powered operations until steam power became practical. It became a very poor, heavily polluted town reliant on the shoddy trade, which recycled worn out wool garments for mixing with fresh wool for spinning. The Woodlands was quite unlike Oakwell Hall and Red House since there was no human history at all to the site, and there was no hint of a connection with industry except through any planning and paperwork.

The rocks of the area form aquifers that absorb much of the rainfall, making wells like those at Red House very reliable, but militating against stream formation.
that Sheard, a woollen manufacturer of a very different type from the Taylors, may have done at home. Although only a mile from the centre of the town, the site was so isolated that he cut himself off from his work. Its mock-gothic design owes nothing to vernacular styling, while its internal layout and decoration show aspirations to an approved middle-class lifestyle whose basics were determined in the metropolitan south. However, the style was so prevalent locally that it effectively became a quasi-vernacular for his class, and here the owner apparently made his own interpretation rather than relying on architects and interior designers. After Sheard’s death it was sold at auction for £5 in 1902 to Batley Council, who wanted to add the grounds to a new public park. No one else would buy it. Another wealthy local manufacturer, Walter Bagshaw, decided to turn it into a miniature British Museum for the town at his own expense, and it opened as such in 1909. It has suffered most from the clash between its inherent nature and its new functions.

It could be presented as a symbol of the success of local capitalism, where the millowner took the place of the squire as the wealthy leader of local society, drawing his income from the labour of others if not from agricultural rents. However, if that is accurate, it was a partial, short-lived victory, and many of the comparisons implicit within it are actually superficial and misleading. Sheard was certainly not the master of the local community, and while his elite lasted longer than his house, it was not by much, for Batley today is not run by their descendants, and textiles have almost vanished. A lord of the manor apparently had no choice but to draw his rents and dues from a fixed area, but the essence of real capitalism is that money can be transferred anywhere and to any activity. In practice Oakwell’s lords had not been resident until the Batts, and they mostly encouraged change. Sheard could indeed be seen as one of the last of the clothiers, still operating within an industry he did not and could not influence much, dependent on merchants for his connections with global markets. However, his house does show a very different attitude to community from that of the Taylors. Trying to show how complex history is is a worthy goal, and a house like this provides a chance to do so.

Over the past two decades these three houses have been displayed much more sensitively, and linked more firmly to their own pasts than ever before, which have been progressively recovered through a combination of work by staff and outsiders. At Red House, this has the added dimension of cutting back the sense that Charlotte Bronte’s limited connection with the house was more important than anything the Taylors did themselves, without giving up the power of the Bronte connection to draw people. The opening up of the outbuildings as exhibition space has been a great success, and publications by Ferrett
and the Cooksons have made Gomersal’s real past accessible as never before. Yet more could still be done within the museum to relate the house itself to the family, and to show that it dates from many periods, all of which it still reflects. The actual presentation of the house as a pocket country house still subliminally contradicts the messages about the Taylor family business, and belies the facts of the majority of the family’s existence. Similarly, Oakwell is largely allowed to function simply as one of the many stone-built seventeenth-century houses of that part of the Pennines rather than given its real context. The Woodlands has spent much of its time as a museum covered up internally so as not to draw attention away from very conventional displays, though in recent years more has been done to make it visible in its own right to visitors. All of them, and the landscape of which they are part, have much to offer the researcher in search of real understanding of a key period, as this essay demonstrates.

In this special case there is the additional dimension that linking them together can create, for many opportunities are lost when they are presented as three separate houses. This is not meant to be combative, for until recently the history that would have justified this approach was unknown. It is now available, however, and visitors are much more used to looking at historic properties. All houses are artefacts, products and mirrors of circumstances as well as aesthetics, and parts of human landscapes which are complex and interconnected. Bringing this out adds extra dimensions to most museums which possess such assets. When the available documents, and Shirley, are used in conjunction with this physical record, instead of considered separately, the houses acquire a status they could never have otherwise. The landscape surrounding these three is full of fossil elements but is not fossilised, and it certainly played a key part in developing my own understanding of the way the woollen industry really worked. Properly presented and understood, these houses and this landscape, in conjunction with other local places representative of the transition from domestic to factory production, have serious claims to world heritage site status, if that is not dependent upon size, grandeur and the obvious.