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On this fifteenth day of September 1791

My dear friend Charlotte:

Please forgive me for not writing sooner, the busyness of life has interfered with my desire to do so. I am happy to relate in this letter recent circumstances that have advanced our good fortune, whilst others, regrettably, such as the Blackburn riots and the “patent wars,” have transpired against it.

Samuel is well. He continues to create and build, and I am thankful for his curious mind and resolute nature. These qualities first drew me to him, along with our shared upbringing as spinners in cottages of loom weavers. Samuel did confess to me that he was determined to marry the fastest spinstress in the country. How lucky for me that I am swift with the spindle!

I find my household duties have increased of late with the birth of our fifth son, John. George, now ten, and Samuel, who is nine, go with Samuel to work every day to learn the trade. Betty is seven and a good little helper, she dotes on her younger brother William, just turned five. At this time, much of our wellbeing is dependant upon Samuel’s invention, the Spinning Mule.

Having been a spinstress yourself, I expect you would have heard of Samuel’s machine. I was sworn to silence on the subject by Samuel, and I hope, after reading this letter, you will better understand why. Enough time has passed now that I may write freely about it.

Directly after we were married on 16th of February 1780, I joined Samuel and his mother at Hall i’ th’ Wood, a manor in Bolton that housed families engaged in industry. Five separate dwellings were there, of which Samuel’s family rented three rooms after moving from Firwood Fold.

I must admit that Hall i’ th’ Wood, with its dark and timbered rooms, wandering passageways, and creaky oak staircases made an unfavourable impression on me, and I would not be surprised if it were haunted as the locals claim. Though, I suspect many of these rumours were caused, in part, by Samuel’s hammering and banging in the wee hours of the morning, as he worked away in secret to perfect his spinning machine.

Like you and I, Samuel grew up spinning yarn every day. He was but five years old when his father died and his mother, a stern woman with a short temper, set her children to earn their bread at the loom, saying they must do so as long as their little legs could work the treadles. She would cuff and curse him with zeal when the Spinning Jenny broke its yarn. Samuel did not have an easy time of it, but this frustration gave rise to his obsession with improving the Jenny.

As a result, Samuel devoted all of his time (and shillings) to building the Spinning Mule. During the day, he performed as a fiddler (on his homemade violin) at the Bolton Theatre and his nights were spent inventing. Before we were married, Samuel would watch me spin for hours in the small study above the porch, called his “Conjuring Room.” It was here that he first conceived of the spindle-carriage, a device he designed to mimic the fingers and hands when spinning. He combined the spindle-carriage with Hargreaves’ Jenny and the rollers of Arkwright’s Water Frame in his Spinning Mule, so named because it is a hybrid of sorts, like the mule is a cross between a donkey and a horse.

Do you remember when Hargreaves' Jenny was introduced? How we rejoiced that it spun yarn from eight spindles instead of one, doing the work of several spinners at once. Well, Samuel's first model of the Spinning Mule made use of forty-eight spindles, six times the number on Hargreaves' Jenny. Truly a marvel, in just twelve hours the Mule could spin one pound of 60s count yarn!

As a skilled spinstress, you will appreciate the Spinning Mule's value. The spindle-carriage allows for the stretching and drawing out of fibers, which in the end, yields a much finer thread than either the Water Frame or the Jenny. Its fineness makes it suitable for weaving muslin. The yarn is strong and smooth and does not break. With his machine, Samuel has thus addressed the problems that so vexed Samuel (and his mother) when he spun with the Jenny as a little boy.

Samuel finished building the Mule after his twenty-seventh birthday, right before we were married. He had only just shown the wondrous machine to me when the Blackburn riots broke out. I'm sure you recall the destructive spirit of unrest that was abroad at the time, Charlotte. Many believed a great evil had arisen in the cotton industry in the form of patent machines and engines.

Indeed, the machines were blamed for taking the bread right out of the loom weavers' mouths. An unskilled child could yield as much as ten grownups using Arkwright's Water Wheel. Jennies were fitted with hundreds of spindles, all going at once, with only one person needed to run them. Bigger machines were being built and they had to be close to their power source. So, factories were built close to fast-flowing rivers as the industry moved out of the loom weaver's cottage.

One evening, Samuel and I walked to town and saw the children coming out of one Mr. Arkwright's mills. They had been at work from seven o'clock in the morning, and it was now near seven o'clock at night. I asked what time they were allowed to rest, and they replied they had three short breaks, when they were fed oatmeal, and then at 8:30 at night, after finishing their shift, they got a supper of bread or broth.

Samuel said this mill was the first factory of its kind. Never before had people been put to work in such an organized manner, coming in at a fixed time in the morning and working all day long at one task. Men worked the machines, whilst women and children were carding and piercing. They made a long day of spinning thousands of yards of cotton for shillings a week. Samuel told me this made Arkwright a rich man. Once worth a mere £5, he had recently purchased an estate of £20,000.

Spinning had hitherto taken place within the home. I remember the contented little cottages scattered throughout east Lancashire. In the early morning, fathers and sons farmed the land, whilst the wives and daughters attended the churning, cheese-making, and household work. When these chores were finished, they busied themselves with carding and spinning wool or cotton. Once farm labour did not call them, the fathers and sons set to weaving. Often, there were three or four looms in one cottage, and enough employment there for the entire family.

Looking into these cottages in the early evening, one could see each member of the household at work by firelight. The grandmother with the easy work of carding the wool into fleecy rolls. The mother spinning the rolls into yarn on the spinning wheel. The eldest daughter sat at the clock-reel to wind a skein of wool, its steady buzz and click mixing with the humming rise and fall of the spinning wheel. Children would help with carding, while the younger boys whittled loom spools, and the elder sons

helped the father weave the yarn into cloth with the handloom. All were busy with no hands being idle, from the youngest to the oldest.

This is how we learned the skills to provide for our families. Growing flax and hemp to harvest, spinning it into yarn or thread, dyeing it, warping the loom, and sewing, knitting, and mending clothes, bedsheets, ticking, blankets, towels, and coverlets—items we would need in our future homes. My mother, bless her heart, used to say that women determined the condition of men by means of their spinning wheels.

But the simple spinning wheel could no longer support the growing wants of new markets. Fearing for their very livelihood, the farmers and weavers of Lancashire gathered in protest, believing their only option was to smash the machines that replaced their work. They set out from Blackburn on a rampage, breaking hundreds of looms and destroying the mills that housed them.

If my recollection serves me right, the mob advanced through Bolton, Manchester, Stockport, and reached as far as Cromford, with plans to cover the entire area known as “Cottonopolis” and its many cotton mills in Lancashire. They set their hammers to the machinery at a mill in Chorley owned by Mr. Arkwright himself. There were similar machine-breaking attacks at the Peel factory, and also on the mansion of Mr. Adam Dugdale, who owned a large mill. Mr. Hargreaves was forced to relocate to Nottingham to protect his invention. Fearing a dreaded attack on his own machine, Samuel dismantled his Spinning Mule and concealed its pieces in the attic at Hall i’ th’ Wood.

In the end, Blackburn fortified itself with 500 constables, numbers enough to ensure peace but the damage was done. Every machine within miles of Blackburn had been destroyed. Though it took less than a day, it was not only machines that were wrecked. Many lives would never be the same again.

Such destruction made me wonder what the world was coming to. Wrack and ruin like as not, but Samuel said the riots were a sign of the times, for they marked the end of the age of the handloom weaver. He was right to keep his machine well hid, not only to protect it from the rioters, but also because there were spies all around us.

After the riots calmed, Samuel put his Mule back together and we set to testing the machine. As Samuel’s wife and helpmate, I spun yarn at Hall-i’-th’-Wood. “The market is hungry for fine cotton, Mary,” Samuel said to me, “If only the English looms could weave them a fortune was there to be made.”

And so, we took the yarn to market. Being so very fine a fabric but strong, a great demand rose for the muslin yarn spun at Hall-i’-th’-Wood. Everyone was keen to know how we were making it. With their curiosity excited, we were beset on every side by people from a distance as wide as 60 miles. Fortune seekers and manufacturers alike would climb ladders and peer through the first-floor window, hoping to catch a glimpse of the mule. We had to spin behind a screen. Mr. Arkwright himself sought to break into Samuel’s workshop once when we were away. All because Samuel’s Mule produced a finer thread faster than any machine before it.

Such dogged pursuit drove poor Samuel to distraction. A few months of it reduced him to the cruel necessity of either destroying his machine or giving it up to the public. He could not bear the thought of destroying something he had laboured so long to build. Having no patent and no means to purchase one, Samuel approached a local merchant, John Pilkington, for his advice.

Mr. Pilkington was a member of the Manchester Council of Manufacturers, and according to Samuel, he objected to “the strangling of the developing textile industry by the patent rights held by Arkwright for roller drawing in spinning machines.” Arkwright’s patent worked against Samuel, preventing Manufacturers from installing the Mule until it expired in 1785. Pilkington persuaded Samuel not to apply for a patent, but instead to display The Mule to other Council members at the Exchange in Manchester.

It was here that the principal men in the Cotton Manufacturing made a proposal to Samuel. Eighty Firms and Manufactures agreed to pay him a subscription in exchange for showing his Mule to the public. Convinced by Pilkington, Samuel agreed. He received a one-time subscription of £60 to build a new mule with more spindles. Our expectations were much disappointed, Charlotte, considering that £200 was the usual payment made to inventors for displaying their machines on the Exchange floor.

Wishing to leave the patent issues behind him, Samuel moved us to Oldham’s farm in Sharples, but 20 miles from Hall-i'-th'-Wood as the crow flies. Here, we kept to a busy routine of farming and weaving. Samuel believed that more money could be made selling our yarn. He installed two Mules in the farmhouse and became an employer of labour. In no time, we were yielding cotton of 40 count and much better quality than anyone else. We sold it for £2 a pound and earned five times what other weavers were making.

All the while, Samuel was hunted and watched as though he were the most notorious villain in the land. He once told me that “if he were to go to a smithy to get a custom nail made, if opportunity offered the bystanders, they would examine it most minutely to see if it were anything but a nail.”

Rival Manufacturers lured his workers away, offering greater pay. Feeling as though he must employ none or quit the county, Samuel returned to having his family work the Mules. He was tired of “teaching green hands” so eagerly sought by those who desired to learn his craft. By now, copies of the Mule were turning up in factories across Lancashire, some constructed in cast iron instead of wood and housing many more spindles. Since Samuel had no patent, he could make no claims to these machines. In a mood of deep frustration, he destroyed a carding-machine of his own invention, claiming, “they shall not have this too.”

Despite these trials, we enjoyed a fairly easy circumstances for some time. For himself, Samuel was able to purchase a silver pocket made by George Hodson of Bolton for £5.25, and for his “Dear Wife,” some three printed and one black gown, two red-flannel under petticoats, five muslin aprons, and a silk and satin bonnet with feathers.

But Samuel still worried about the future circumstances of his growing family, so just this year, we vacated the farm and took up residence in Bolton at number 15 on King Street, just off Deansgate. Despite our setbacks, we are hopeful about our future prospects here as Samuel has newly acquired attic space at the mill in Back King Street and installed two mules there of 360 and 220 spindles.

You would find Bolton much changed, Charlotte. Its sparsely populated countryside is now the heart of the cotton industry in England. Samuel tells me there are presently one-and-twenty firms engaged, working almost seven and a half million spindles over twenty-four thousand looms. Here, Samuel has set his sights to succeed as an independent spinner and weaver, refusing offers of partnership from both Sir Robert Peel and Mr. W. McAlpine.

Whatever is said of him, Samuel is a fair-minded and honest man who wishes to receive more than payment for his Spinning Mule, in the rightful acknowledgement of his claim to the invention. For it well known by those in the industry that the Spinning Mule has given birth to new manufacture of cambric and muslins of a much softer texture than any before ever spun in Great Britain. The injustice of the patent issue has only served to deepen his regret and may have even, I fear, stalled the exercise of his inventive genius.

The unfairness of it is heartbreaking, considering the long hours of labour and contemplation that Samuel invested in his Spinning Mule. But Lady Fortune spins her wheel randomly and fortunes rise and fall at her whim. We make do with our lot, though Samuel strives to better it. But the time is late, and having apprised you of our dealings, I must bid you farewell my dear friend. If it pleases you to write back, be sure to direct you letter to our new address on King Street in Bolton, where I will wait for it with much eagerness.

Your devoted friend,

Mary Pimlott



Giacomo Ceruti, *The Spinner* (between 1730 and 1734)



Pieter Nys, *Woman Spinning*, 1652



Photograph of Weaver and Spinner in Wales.



Hall i' th' Wood, Bolton, Manchester: Visitors to the manor house have reported seeing two ghostly men; one dressed in green and the other dressed in black. The ghostly figure of an old

woman has been seen in Hall i' th' Wood's kitchen. The spirit of a woman called Betty is said to shout at children to leave the house.



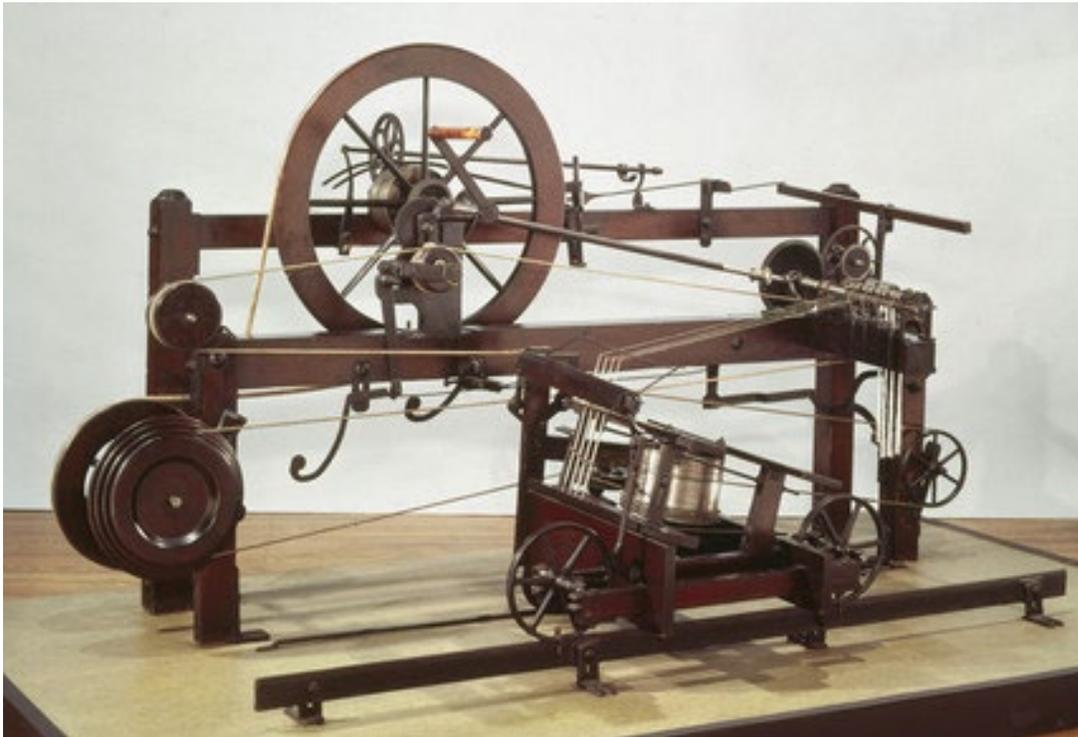
Painting of Hall i' th' Wood



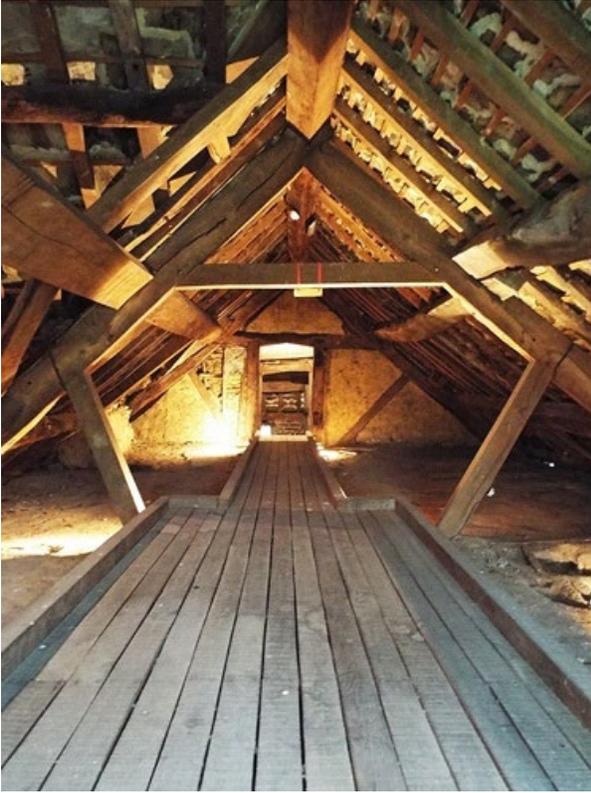
Staircase at Hall i' th' Wood



The "Conjuring Room" at Hall i' th' Wood



Crompton's Spinning Mule



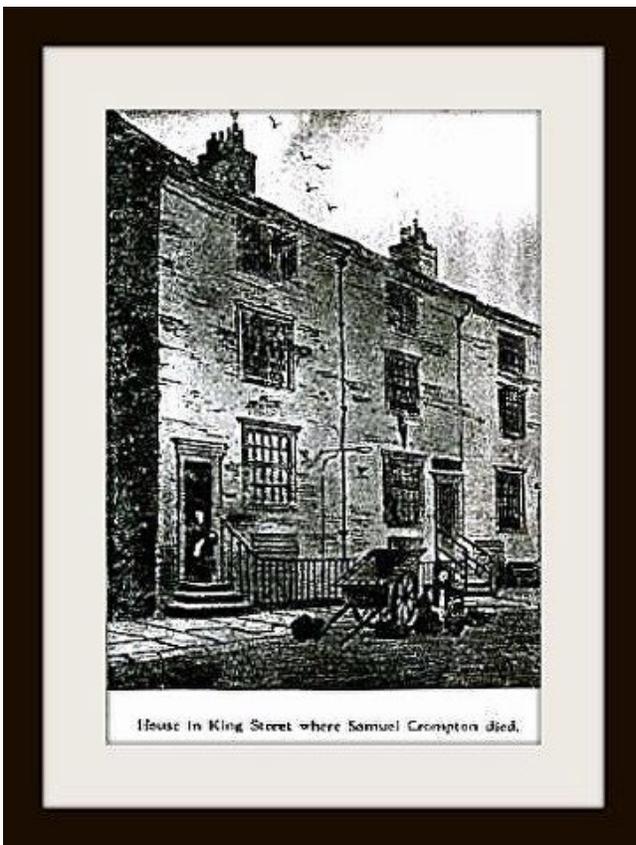
The Walkway to where Crompton Hid the Spinning Mule during the Blackburn Riots



The Underfloor Compartment where the Mule was Hidden



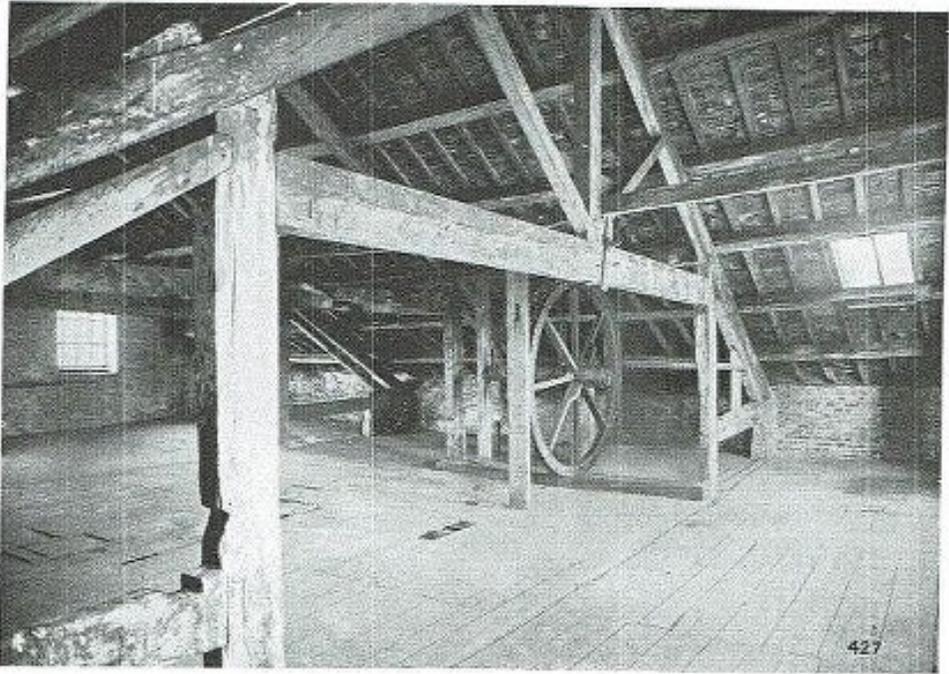
Crompton's Self-built Violin



King Street, off Deansgate, Bolton



The Back King Street Mill



The Attic in the Back King Street Mill where Crompton Worked his Spinning Mule

Background

Very little is known about Crompton's wife (there is even some argument about whether her maiden name was Pimlott or Pimbley). She was a spinstress, and the daughter of a West Indies trader and could have been middle class, so I've given her an education (assuming she could at least read and write). Samuel knew Mary before they married, though I've embellished on her inspiration of his invention. At the time women were subordinate to men in marriage, though people did marry for love. Samuel and Mary appear to have been in love based on notes he wrote about his "Dear Wife," and how devastated he was when she died in 1796. This letter covers the period just before their marriage, when he hid the Mule due to the Blackburn riots, and the subsequent release of the Mule to the public without a patent. Mary is writing to her friend who is also a spinstress.

Process of Spinning Cotton into Thread

Old Method: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uslx0Mxn-E8>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KBpEc6F6Frs>

Modern Method: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=orKBbm9IJ1s>.

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