

CLOTHIERS BILL.

In the Right Honourable the House of Lords.

CASE OF THE WOOLLEN WEAVERS,

In the Counties of GLOUCESTER, SOMERSET, and WILTS.

THE WOOLLEN MANUFACTURE carried on in the above Counties, from time immemorial, under the protecting regulations of different statutes, and amongst others of the 2d and 3d P. and M. c. 11. restraining the number of Looms in one House; and 5th Eliz. c. 4. respecting Apprentices, has deservedly obtained the first degree of reputation and established the credit of the Manufacture, at home and abroad, to the almost intire exclusion of the foreign Manufactures.

These statutes it is now the object, not to amend, but totally to repeal, and the whole process of a Trade which the wisdom of our ancestors from the earliest period, considered as the staple Commodity of the County, requiring skill in the exercise of it, and Legislative regulations from time to time to prevent frauds, is now brought forward as the only one in which no education is deemed necessary and every regulation improper.

This is supported by some few opulent Clothiers, and opposed not only by the general Body of the Weavers, but also by many of large and most if not all of the Clothiers of moderate or small Capitals, as tending to introduce monopolies to destroy the morals and comfort of the Workmen, and to lessen the value and credit of the commodity, flouding as an old Statute * expresses it, “rather to make many “than to make good Clothes, having more respect to their private gain than “continuance of the Commodity in Estimation.”

But though the Weavers oppose the total repeal, they admit that some amendments may be proper, and they are ready and have offered to join in procuring such as the variations produced by time and alteration of Circumstances have tendered necessary.

The proposed repeal will allow the Clothiers to establish Factories for Weaving, in preference to the present mode of employing the Weavers at their own Houses, and to employ persons not regularly brought up in the trade. The Weavers are

* 5 and 6 Edw. 6. c. 6.

well aware that the establishment of Factories is an object not avowed, nay more, that it is denied, but they know that Factories are erected, and if their establishment is not desired the Statute 2 and 3, P. and M. remaining in force will quiet the minds of the Weavers, and do no injury to the promoters of the present Bill, whilst if that Statute is repealed the Weavers have no security against the measure.

Under the present Laws and mode of Employment, the regular weaver works at home at his own Loom, in the midst of his Family, and employs his Wife and Children, who at a very early age, gain something towards their maintenance; and from their early introduction to the business, are usually masters of it, by the time they are of age to work for themselves.

This, which it seems to have been the policy of our Ancestors to encourage, enables the Parent and Master to superintend the morals and conduct of his Family, to bring them up in habits of Industry; it affords him no temptation to dissipation; and it is a well known fact, that an industrious Weaver will be so employed sixteen Hours in the Day, whilst the Sobriety, regularity and good conduct of the Weavers is on all hands admitted. That factories, where a number of persons are crowded together, are Detrimental to the morals and health of those employed in them, is a fact too universally known to be disputed; and the Weavers humbly submit, that no case is or can be made out to justify through necessity the introduction of such an evil.

It has however been said, that the state of the Trade renders an alteration necessary to procure hands to carry it on—This the Weavers deny.

It is admitted that their Wages have remained the same for near Fifty years, and though some attempts have been made to reduce the wages, none have been made by the Weavers to increase them; yet at these wages the Weavers have not employ; for though during a few months this Spring, the Broad Cloth weaving was rather brisk, owing to orders from abroad, and the exertions made by the promoters of the Bill to keep the Weavers employed; yet since the Bill has been depending the Trade has again declined, and numbers of good Workmen have been discharged for want of work. These must again come on the parish, as they have been for many years past, during which the poor rates have frequently been 16s. in the pound on the rack rents.

But it is said, that if the Statute of Elizabeth is enforced, many of those at present employed must be turned out of work, and that Prosecutions to a great amount are depending. The latter assertion is totally unfounded; not one prosecution is depending, not one in Agitation, one Action only was commenced, viz. against Mr. Webb, which came on for Trial at the last Summer Assizes at Gloucester, when the Plaintiff anxious for peace and good neighbourhood, consented to withdraw a Juror, on the hope and assurance that the Defendant would in future employ only the Legal Weavers. To avoid the necessity of such Prosecutions, the Weavers gave notice to such as they knew were not duly qualified, that unless they desisted in a month, Prosecutions would be commenced; most of them have since desisted, waiting probably the issue of this Bill, and unless they resume the Trade, no Prosecution is intended. And when it is recollected, that most of the Children in these Counties begin the Business at Eight or Nine, that serving Seven Years,

intitles any Person to work at the Trade; and that many are enabled to carry it on from Service in the Army, Militia, and Fencibles, which extends to their Wives and Children; the Weavers are confident that very few will at present be found in the Trade not intitled to work at it, except Children of tender years, who are better Apprenticed and put under the care of a Master than left to get work where they can, liable to be discharged whenever Business is dull, and under no restraint as to their Morals or Conduct at any time,

It is easy to bind Apprentice any who have not served Seven Years, it is beneficial to themselves and the public that they should be so.

The introduction of Persons not brought up as Weavers, and employing them in Factories, have both been tried in the Kerfeymere Weaving, but it is remarkable, that even last Spring, when Broad Cloth Weavers had full employ for a short time, those who had been so introduced into the Kerfeymere line were starving for want of work, a convincing proof that Weaving is not so easily learnt as is suggested, or that the Trade is more over stocked with hands than the promoters of the Bill are willing to allow, and the Factories proved of no benefit to the Clothiers, and have been given up.

The Weavers with very great humility submit their Case to the Wisdom of the Legislature, in the fullest confidence that they shall meet an attentive Consideration, and such Relief, as they have no doubt they shall prove themselves well entitled to.

CASE
 OF THE
WOOLLEN WEAVERS,
 in the Counties of
GLOUCESTER, SOMERSET, & WILTS.

Printed for Boyle, Lovibond, and Bagley, Great Shire Lane,
 by W. Smith, King Street, Seven Dials.