

Tariffs or Free Trade, A precious gift for protectionism

By Dorothea Burstyn



*“This snuffbox was presented to
Thomas Grimsditch, Esqu.
By the members of the Silk Trade of Macclesfield
As a mark of consideration
In which they held his services
On various occasions
And especially for the attention
Paid by him in their interests on the repeal
Of the duties on Silk
And Alteration of prohibitory Laws
In MARCH 1824”*

This is an inscription on the inside of a heavy silver-gilt table snuff box made by William Snooke Hall, London 1818.

Silk throwing, spinning and weaving had a long tradition in Macclesfield going back to the 17th century. Since the French revolution the import of French silk was forbidden, which led to an enormous upswing of the English silk industry. Macclesfield was an important center for the English silk manufacturing and trade.

Healthy profits, cheap labor and protective laws characterizes the English silk industry first quarter of the 19th century. In Macclesfield almost everybody worked for the silk mills, including children as young as 6. Factory hours were from 6am to 6pm. Workers put in 69 hours per week, night shifts for children were discouraged. The silk industry also managed to be mostly

1. Stephen Barnes: *The Survival of the Macclesfield Silk Industry 1825-1865*, Dissertation for Open University, January 2021

exempt from later labor laws. Trade for luxury goods is volatile, in good times working hours in silk mills would be extended to 10pm, in bad times wages were cut and many silk workers had to rely on charity.¹

After the Napoleonic wars a lot of English politicians influenced by Adam Smith's economic theory² saw free trade as a path to prosperity. It is no wonder that the Macclesfield silk industry fought for its privileged conditions and were strictly opposed to the repeal of existing tariffs and restrictions of foreign manufactured silk. March 1824 saw extensive debates in parliament re the introduction of new regulations for the silk trade. Parliament was flooded with letters and petitions from manufacturers and silk workers demanding the status quo. Since Thomas Grimsditch,³ a Macclesfield solicitor, is not listed in the Hansard reports in 1824, the nature of "his services on various occasions" remains unknown. William Huskisson,⁴ since 1823 president of the Board of trade, and often called the architect of free trade, suggested a step response. In 1826, duties on raw silk imports were to be cut by 95%, and restrictions on foreign manufactured silk were abolished, replaced by a 30% import duty on these goods.



2. Adam Smith: *Wealth of Nations*, 1776
3. Thomas Grimsditch (1786-1864) was elected as conservative MP in 1837, and then again in 1847.
4. William Huskisson (1770 - 1830) also reduced duties on cotton, sugar, glass, paper, bottles, copper, zinc and lead.

The immediate result of these new regulations was a dramatic drop in demand for English silk products in expectation of superior French imports in 1826. Many silk mills went bankrupt or locked their doors. In these difficult times there was substantial immigration of Macclesfield silk workers to New Jersey who helped to build an American silk industry. It took many years until the silk industry had sufficiently shrunk to a sustainable competitive level.

The lid of the box is decorated with a cast scene of an often-used subject in visual art: Caractacus and wife before Claudius. Caractacus was the chieftain of the powerful Catuvellauni tribe in the first century AD. He resisted the Roman invasion of Britain with guerilla warfare for about a decade before he was captured, sentenced to death and brought to Rome. After parading him through the streets he was brought in front of Emperor Claudius. His compelling speech led Claudius to spare Caractacus' life. This subject seems to be a particularly well chosen topic for the lid of the snuffbox as Caractacus is celebrated as a symbol of British resistance.

