

Connecting the threads: From Altiplano to Airedale

1. Introduction



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Introduction

Although I used to live little more than a hop skip and a jump from Saltaire village for just over 20 years it was not until I moved to the Spanish region of Extremadura in 2013 that I got the idea to research the alpaca connection. Not far from where I live in Cáceres is the small town of Trujillo, the home of the conquistador Francisco Pizarro who led the conquest of the Inca Empire. By an accident of residence, I now had two connections to Peru and the altiplano region high in the Andes Mountains.

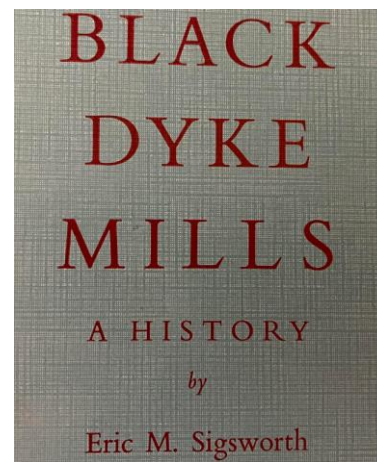
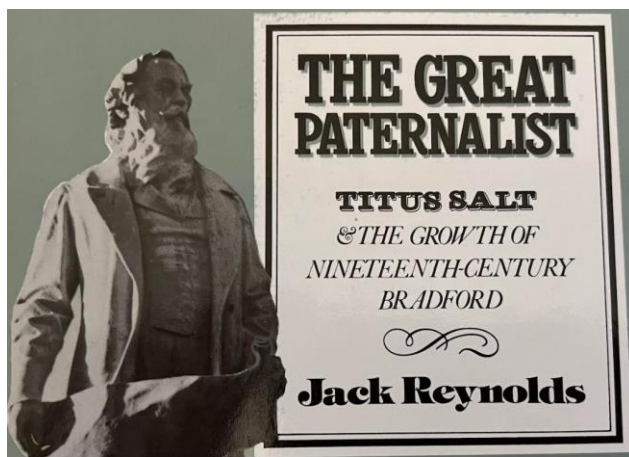
Thanks to the work of previous scholars, the efforts of the Saltaire History Club members and volunteers of Saltaire Collections we already have a comprehensive knowledge of Saltaire and its founder Sir Titus Salt. It is not my intention to try to add to the sum of knowledge about Saltaire's history in the locality but to add a global dimension to the story. Saltaire is, after all, a World Heritage Site so the aim here is to place Saltaire in a wider global setting.

That being said I have limited my focus to the alpaca trade. For a fully global perspective, we might have included the Donskoi wool trade with what is now Turkey. According to Reynolds, Bradford first successfully combined wool with cotton to produce worsted cloth in 1837 (Reynolds, Jack 1983, 50). Famously, Titus made his successful breakthrough with alpaca wool by combining it with cotton. To date I have not been able to establish the precise source of the cotton used at the mill but in all probability it came from the slave plantations of the USA, prior to the Civil War in that country, or possibly India or Egypt. In the case of the former, this would be ironic given the motivation on the part of Titus to improve the lot of his mill workers and families in the village. We should celebrate Titus' contribution to improving the work conditions and welfare of his workers. He set an example that earned global reach. However, as we will come to see, the conditions under which the indigenous population in the Andes produced the alpaca wool under the hands of local merchants were less than ideal. Life on board for the merchant seamen who carried the alpaca wool left much to be desired too.

The purpose of this contribution then is to tell the story of the journey of the alpaca wool from its origins in the altiplano of Peru to Airedale in Yorkshire. It is an account of a commodity chain and the unsung workers who made it possible. From the indigenous peasants high up in the Andes tending the alpacas to those transporting the cargo across rugged terrain to the Peruvian coast. In the early days of the trade that was on the backs of llamas and mules and then, several years later, by rail. Facilitating the progress of the epic journey over land and then sea by sail were the merchants and brokers on either side of the Atlantic, albeit the journey began on the Pacific Ocean. Of course, the wool would not have arrived in Liverpool, or London, without the toiling of the merchant seamen braving the stormy waters of Cape Horn. After arriving in Liverpool, the final stage of the journey would originally have been along the Leeds-Liverpool Canal and was then most likely superseded by rail. Although to date, I have not been able to locate any direct evidence to be more precise on that matter.

The Sources

That was the problem. Where to start? Apart from the book I already had by Jack Reynolds (1983) on Titus Salt and the enterprise of Saltaire, a couple of introductions to Saltaire by Gary Firth (2001, 2010) and short guides published for tourists that I'd collected over the years, there was only the slightest of nods to the journey followed by the alpaca wool. Various email enquiries nearly all led me to members of the Saltaire History Club who were generous with their help and encouragement. Indeed, thanks are also due to the club for inviting me to make this contribution. In fact, I should stress at the outset that I wouldn't have got this far had it not been for the generosity of many people, including published university academics, who gave freely of their time and advice and also directed me to valuable sources and archives. I would not have got this far either without the encouragement and gentle nudging of my nominated supervisor and good friend Professor Graham Roberts. However, as is customary to declare, any errors belong to me.

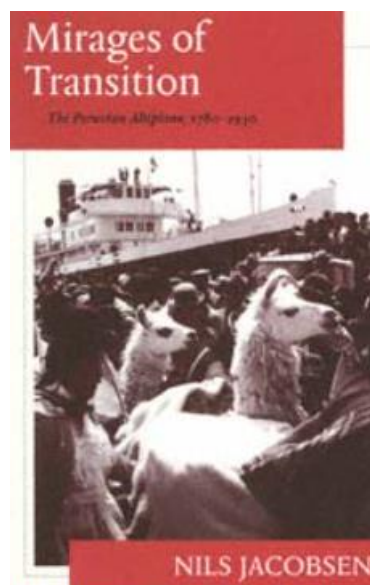


For an outline of this alpaca journey, we could turn to Eric Sigsworth's 1950s study of Fosters' Black Dyke Mills in Queensbury. In his study of the great rival to Salt and his enterprise in Bradford (Sigsworth, Eric M, 1958) Sigsworth includes a brief account of the alpaca trade in Peru. Unfortunately, no archives from Salts Mill have survived. Sigsworth informs us in the introduction to his study that business archives had disappeared at an alarming rate. Many disappeared during World War 2 when companies cleared out their old records in response to an appeal for scrap paper in order to help with the war effort. Whether that is what happened to the paperwork from Salts will probably never be known. However, the archives of Black Dyke Mills are still safely stored at the Special Collections of the Brotherton Library at Leeds University where I was able to make several visits during trips to see friends and family. Not surprisingly, there are many documents related to Titus and the mill and the co-operation and rivalry between the two enterprises.

What Sigsworth didn't have access to, or possibly not the time, were any business records from Peru. Thanks to the internet I came across the work of business historian Rory Miller, of Liverpool University, who has published widely on the history of Peruvian business and economy. During a meeting with Rory I learnt the names of British merchants based in Arequipa, to the south of Peru, during the 19th century. That led to a second hand copy of a book about the Jack family, originally from Scotland, but more importantly also to the London Metropolitan Archive, which, Rory informed me, held the surviving archive of Gibbs and Co., a major company of the time with global reach. The letters from Arequipa offices of Gibbs and Co., sent to the head office in Lima by a Mr Harrison, give us a unique first hand insight into the work of these merchants in general, and specifically into the Peruvian alpaca trade itself. I was also advised to visit the British Library where it was possible to access the

consular reports from the Port of Islay, from where the alpaca wool and other products were despatched. These reports were submitted annually by British Consuls from across the world to Westminster, and are contained in the British Parliamentary Papers.

One further indispensable source online is the book by Nils Jacobsen, *Mirages of Transition: The Peruvian Altiplano 1780-1932* published by University of California Press (1993). <https://publishing.cdlib.org/ucpressebooks/view?docId=ft3v19n95h;query=:brand=ucpress> The book is freely available online with a fully functioning hyperlinked index and references section. It is a scholarly academic work not designed especially for a general readership. However, it is readable and includes a couple of references to Titus (Jacobsen, N. 1993, 60, 163). Just go to Salt, Titus in the index and click on the page numbers. I will be drawing on this text for my future account on the production and transportation of alpaca wool from the altiplano to the coast, and the role of the peasants, muleteers, middlemen and merchants involved in this process.



There are many other sources to draw on both primary and secondary. Colin Coates, of the Saltire History Club, drew my attention to the marvellous and extensive online British Newspaper Archive. (<https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/>). It is not free but it is an excellent resource that can be easily searched and has enough rabbit holes to keep any would be Alice entertained for a lifetime. In some of the letters from the Arequipa office of Gibbs and Co. I discovered the names of some ships carrying the alpaca wool back to Liverpool. By searching through Liverpool newspapers of the era in the British Newspaper Archive I was able to find short reports concerning the arrival of those ships to the port. Connecting the various threads to try to tell a coherent story has been a fascinating experience.

Another valuable resource online is the google book project through which anyone can access the accounts of 19th century travellers in Peru. One such book is by Clements Markham that records his trip through Peru and India. The expedition's objective was to source saplings of the Chinchona tree, which were then smuggled out to create plantations in India. The tree bark was the source of quinine that was vital to the fight against malaria. It's an important part of the story of the British Empire but for our purposes Markham's account gives us some first hand observations of what it was like to travel through Peru in the mid-19th century relying only on mules for your transport. (Markham, Clements R. 1862).

<https://ia800307.us.archive.org/26/items/travelsinperuan02markgoog/travelsinperuan02markgoog.pdf>. Many other sources can be drawn on, such as works of fiction. One such example by a Peruvian writer Clorinda Matto de Turner, is 'Torn from the Nest', a work that examines the exploitative relationship between merchants descended from the original Spanish colonialists and the indigenous peasants involved in the production of alpaca wool. We don't get descriptions of shepherds out in the fields but the reader is given a perspective on the social relations in mid-19th century Peruvian Andes. It has a sympathetic take on the plight of the indigenous populace albeit from the perspective of an educated liberal writer.

A Rationale

Telling the story of this long distance journey by connecting the many threads I have located is my intention, but not to be spinning any yarns. For this is a remarkable story of moving alpaca wool from high up on the Altiplano to Airedale. A journey of thousands of miles that, certainly in the earliest stages, relied on transportation by llama and mules and then the power of wind in the sail. Next from Liverpool on horse drawn barges, we must assume, before this mode of transport gave way to the rail system. The journey takes us from the high Andes to the city of Arequipa. From there across a desert to the coast and then on round Cape Horn to Liverpool. Remember, this is during the 'Industrial Revolution'. There were no railways and no telegraph to begin with, and only an ad hoc trans-oceanic postal service. There was no Panama Canal until 1914. My aim is to tell the story up until the end of the 1870s. I decided upon this arbitrary date since this is when the letters from Mr Harrison in Arequipa come to a halt just before the outbreak of The Pacific War in 1879. It is also not long after the death of Titus himself in 1876 and the subsequent decline of the fortunes of the mill. This was a world in transition. Our story begins with goods being moved overland at the speed at which a human could comfortably walk alongside pack animals and ends with goods hurtling along rails in steam powered trains.



Taken from: William Walton, Peruvian Sheep 1811 (Google books)

However, I would also like to think that with this story we are beginning to put the 'world' into our World Heritage site. For it is partly thanks to global adventurers like the Scottish

merchant James Jack and his family that the alpaca wool arrived on these shores. The Leeds-Liverpool Canal connected Saltaire to the Atlantic System and beyond to the Pacific. We hear much talk of the upheavals caused by globalization in the 21st century yet here is a story of globalization in the making. Is it too much to suggest that Saltaire was not just the product of but also a *maker* of globalization? For example, Reynolds states that Salts, Black Dyke Mills and Turners between took most of the alpaca wool imported from Peru for their own use (1983, 57). Given that nearly all of the exported alpaca coming to the UK arrived in Bradford the impact on lives in the altiplano made by just these three companies must have been considerable.

A Sense of Place: From the Local to the Global

This then, is also a tentative step to explore how local history might be presented in a global context. How does it help give us a sense of place not only locally but also globally? My first serious steps with this project began in the summer of 2016 when I was visiting the UK and first met with members of the Saltaire History Club and later with the academic Rory Miller. My initial intention was simply to tell the story of how the wool got from A to B. In the midst of my visit Brexit happened and the debate about being a citizen of nowhere or being rooted in a place began to emerge. The idea that in a cosmopolitan world we are losing the latter.

This reminded me of a book I had read about walking called 'The Old Ways' by Robert MacFarlane. Towards the end, he plays with the idea of the tension between 'homing' and 'roaming'. The desire to be rooted – like a tree by the wayside – and the urge to roam – to follow the path and leave the tree behind. (2013, 322-23). This made me think about Saltaire. A classic working class community rooted around the mill. Now that community has gone, changed as a result of globalisation. Many of the residents are on the platform every morning on their way to work in Leeds or beyond. However, perhaps the local history the Club produces can help to give us a sense of place. To feel rooted here, even though locals might work somewhere else.

In his essay 'Local History: A Way to Place and Home' (also covered in his book about local history called 'Rethinking Home') the American historian Joe Amato (2002) stresses this importance of local history in creating a sense of place, or belonging. However, he also suggests that the local can be connected to the global. Local history can help us reflect on our place in a globalised world. So while we might think of the combers, spinners, weavers and dyers who lived and worked in this village; who over a period of years became rooted here, the 'homers' if you like; should we not also think of the 'roamers' who also helped make Saltaire possible. The people like the Jacks and Harrisons who left their homes for Arequipa. All the sailors who plied their trade back and forth across the oceans carrying the alpaca wool. The itinerant barge workers too, who shuttled up and down the canal delivering the raw materials to the mills. It is not one or the other. We needed then, and still do, both the homers and the roamers.

Let us not forget those other homers though. The indigenous peoples of the Altiplano, represented in the painting above now on display in Salts Mill, without whom there would have been no alpaca wool to export in the first place. We begin the journey high up in the Andes and begin to connect the threads that will take us from the altiplano to Airedale.

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