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## How important was cotton to Blackburn?

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**When cotton was king, Blackburn was the weaving capital of the world. Cotton accounted for the town's dramatic physical growth. By 1912, the peak year for Lancashire cotton cloth production, Blackburn's skyline bristled with over 200 tall chimneys.**



Kirk and Co., Blackburn shuttle and shuttle trip manufacturers, 1900s

It is almost impossible to exaggerate the importance of cotton to Blackburn's working population. Blackburn employed more weavers than any other town in the world – about 29,000 in 1920. Their lives were

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dominated by the mill; they lived close to their work, often in houses rented from the mill owner. When a worker complained that their house wasn't fit to live in, they were told they weren't for living in; they were for sleeping in. The mill was where you lived.

Often whole families were employed in the same mill. The family was an important economic unit. Because one adult did not earn enough in their own right to constitute a 'living wage', households were dependant on the income of several members of the family, rather than just one 'breadwinner'. Children were encouraged to work as 'half-timers' and give up school as soon as possible.

Cotton's influence extended to other areas of commerce. Many people worked in businesses which relied on the cotton industry. For instance, the 1912 Blackburn trade directory lists ten firms making shuttles, nineteen making reeds and healds for power looms, and numerous engineering companies producing textile machines, steam engines and boilers for the mills.

In addition, butchers, bakers, grocers hardware dealers, public houses and chip shops all counted on cotton workers as their regular customers. When the cotton industry suffered a depression, almost everyone in the town felt the pinch. Therefore, the slow decline of Lancashire cotton from the 1920s onwards posed a serious threat to Blackburn and its textile-tied population.

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