

IX *The Zenith of Platt Brothers & Company Limited*

The period spanning the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the years of the twentieth century preceding the first world war was the time when Platt Brothers & Company Limited was at the zenith of its importance in the life of Oldham and passed several landmarks. The total workforce, including the collieries, rose to 15 000. Hartford Works, at Werneth, came to occupy an area of some sixty-five acres and East Works, at Greenacres moor, some twenty acres. The numbers employed amounted to more than ten per cent of the eighteenth-century population of Oldham and with their dependents (based on two per employee) meant that just about one third of the local population looked to Platt Brothers for its daily bread. How large a textile machinery maker the Company had become can be gauged from a comparison with the long standing rival – Dobson & Barlow – which company's records show that in its centenary year, of 1890, its workforce had reached slightly over 4 000 and in the year 1900 the area occupied by its principal works had reached nine acres. The landmarks passed by Platt Brothers, in this era, were: in 1879 the peak production of looms was achieved, in 1896 the greatest amount of spinning machinery was exported, in 1906 the absolute level of production occurred and in 1908 the highest value of total sales was booked. However, the last apart, these landmark figures should be seen in the clear perspective that, subsequent to their occurrence, research and development led to an increase in the productive capacity of individual types of machine and to the telescoping of the sequences of the textile processes so that the sheer quantities of machines, which had set these landmarks, would never again be required, even for mills of a higher level of production than those for which the record breaking quantities of machines had been supplied. It did not follow that a drop in the quantity of machines sold inevitably led to a proportionate drop in the value of sales made and the Company's profitability because the more productive and sophisticated machines individually commanded a higher price.

The continued and extraordinary expansion of Platt Brothers' business emanated from three sources. First, the buoyant UK cotton

industry – some mills were now being built in south-west Scotland. In Oldham and district, where booms occurred in the eighteen-seventies and nineteen-hundreds, the Company particularly benefited from the circumstance, peculiar to the district, whereby many of its workmen constituted a sizable body of shareholders in the new limited liability mill companies and used their influence to have the orders for the machinery, these mills were to contain, to be placed on Platt Brothers. Second, the demand from Yorkshire and elsewhere for woollen and worsted machinery. The Carding Sets – much bigger than the cotton Card, they could include as many as thirteen principal cylinders as against the cotton Card's three – were made at the East Works, whereas the lighter preparatory machinery for worsted and the actual spinning machines were made at Hartford Works, in keeping with the pattern which, earlier, had been adopted for the cotton machinery. A sequence of machines – kindred to that used for woollen manufacture – to process waste fibres (short fibres extracted in the main processes or fibres reclaimed from old rags) had found a ready market in Oldham, Rochdale and the Rossendale Valley where that branch of the textile industry tended to be concentrated. The woollen and waste systems are of a much shorter sequence than the cotton and worsted systems. Woollen and waste carding machines, by way of the Condenser, prepare, directly, the strands (slubbings) which are fed to the spinning machines from, horizontally placed, condenser bobbins. The worsted carding machine delivers a strand (siver) into a cylindrical can and a series of preparatory machines, equal in their purpose to those used in the cotton system, is interposed before the actual spinning machine. Third, and most significantly, orders came from the Continent and places as far afield as India, Japan and Brazil where new cotton mills, comparable to those in Lancashire (sometimes designed by the expert Lancashire architects), were being built on an ever accelerating scale. Platt Brothers set-up a department to plan the disposition of the machinery in these mills and to advise on and arrange for the supply of the ancillary equipment needed to work in conjunction with the machinery (testing laboratory instruments, sliver cans, bobbins etc). Teams of fitters – the celebrated Platt's outworkers – were assembled to erect and commission the machinery in the mills and agents were appointed in all those countries where a textile industry was in being or showed every likelihood of coming into being.

To meet the business with which it was blessed the Company was obliged to expand, still further, its production capacity with the corollary the works premises, principally at Werneth, extended to the areas already mentioned. To ensure the supply of wrought iron and steel was guaranteed, the forge was introduced, between the main line