



Bingley's Four or Five Thousand, and Other Fortunes from the North

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“I HOPE, MY DEAR,” said Mr. Bennet to his wife, as they were at breakfast the next morning, “that you have ordered a good dinner to-day, because I have reason to expect an addition to our family party. . . . The person of whom I speak, is a gentleman and a stranger.” Mrs. Bennet’s eyes sparkled. “A gentleman and a stranger! It is Mr. Bingley I am sure.” (68)

The dinner guest is not Mr. Bingley, as it turns out, but Mrs. Bennet’s confident assumption is revealing. Mr. Bingley is a stranger to the community centered on the town of Meryton, and all signs—his leasing of Netherfield Park, his coach-and-four, and (not least) his income—point to his being a gentleman. Yet, as more is learned about Mr. Bingley, certain facts make his status debatable: the fortune that supports him and his two sisters was “acquired by trade,” and, although he is newly established as the tenant of a fine house, he lacks property of his own (16–17).

Bingley’s social status deserves a closer look. Austen’s original readers, picking up on clues in the narrative and considering Bingley and his sisters in the context of the real world, would likely have made inferences about their background that differ from the unquestioning acceptance shown by the people of Meryton. The ambiguity built into the novel adds nuance to Austen’s exploration of individual worth, the mutability of social status, and *seeming* versus *being*.

The Bingley siblings are rich; the sisters have inherited £20,000 each,

and Charles's legacy from his father amounts to nearly £100,000. He probably holds investments in stocks or government funds, yielding the £4,000 to £5,000 a year that Mrs. Bennet reports as his income. Nothing suggests his involvement in an ongoing enterprise: Bingley writes no letters of business, has no apparent responsibilities, and has no ties to any geographical area.

The Bingleys' wealth is new money, acquired so recently that their father "had intended to purchase an estate, but did not live to do it" (16). Nor do the Bingleys have a London house. Adding to the impression of newness are hints that they seem to be relatively recent arrivals in Darcy's circle: Bingley has been around long enough for Darcy to have seen him in love several times, but the people who associated with Darcy in his younger days, Colonel Fitzwilliam and Mr. Wickham, know Bingley slightly or not at all.

Austen gives readers a clue to how the Bingleys grew so rich so quickly: they are "from the north of England" (3). While to some modern readers this might sound conveniently vague and distant, to Austen's contemporaries, the reference to the North would make the Bingleys' situation seem more realistic, not less, and a likely backstory for them could be inferred based on what was happening in the North of England at the time. The North was associated with mining, shipbuilding, shipping (notably the slavery-based Triangular Trade, for which Liverpool was the leading port in the late eighteenth century), and the processing and sale of imported products, including Lancaster's furniture-making and Whitehaven's domination of the rum trade. More than these, however, one other northern trade was particularly prominent in Austen's lifetime and was associated with getting rich quickly: the manufacture of cotton textiles. While there is not enough specificity in *Pride and Prejudice* to constitute proof, there are several reasons why the cotton trade makes sense as the source of the Bingleys' wealth.

Many scholars have associated the Bingleys with the industrialization of the North, and some of those have identified the cotton trade specifically. Joan Ray writes that "Austen's contemporary readers would immediately pick up that the Bingleys come from a manufacturing city up north" and "that the Senior Bingley had grown rich in textile manufacturing," while Pamela Whalan names "the cotton industry" as the source of the Bingley wealth. The cotton trade was initially almost exclusive to the North of England, and its innovations and unprecedented scale, as well as the fame of its primary practitioners, garnered considerable attention from contemporary writers and observers. From the perspective of Austen as a novelist, the North's cotton industry would provide a readily understood and plausible means for the

LOCATION	NUMBER OF COTTON SPINNING MILLS, 1788
North of the River Trent (i.e., Lancashire, Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire, Yorkshire, Cheshire, Staffordshire, Cumberland, Westmoreland)	112
Remainder of England	7
Scotland	19
Wales	4

Data from "Extracts from Papers Circulated on the Part of the British Manufacturers in Cotton," The Scots Magazine (1788).

Bingleys to have acquired the wealth they display. Just as a modern novelist might allude to a character making a fortune in Silicon Valley without having to provide too many details about how that was done, so Austen might have relied on her readers' general knowledge of the big-money industry of her day.

The North's association with textiles was of long standing. In the sixteenth century, laws distinguished "Northern Cloths" (i.e., those made north of the River Trent¹) from textiles produced elsewhere (Pickering 164). Although woolen cloth production occurred throughout England, it was especially prominent in the North; wool from southern and midland counties was carried north to be processed, and much of the finished cloth was exported. Cotton began to arrive in quantity in the seventeenth century. In the late eighteenth century, cotton became preeminent due to a convergence of fashion, availability of the raw material, and the emergence of the technology to produce all-cotton fabrics rapidly and cheaply (Hewart 26–31).

Cotton was a high-growth industry, propelled by a series of inventions: the flying shuttle (1733), carding machine (1748), spinning jenny (1764), water frame for spinning (1769), spinning mule (1779), and power loom (1785). The factory system relocated and standardized work processes, and steam power vastly increased production capacity. All of these innovations took root in the North, building on that region's transportation and commercial infrastructure, the presence of associated trades such as dyeing and printing, the relatively low value of land, and a population familiar with textile work.

The effects of the new machinery and processes were well established when Austen wrote *First Impressions* in 1796–1797 and greater still when she



Cotton and Tourism in Derbyshire: Locations mentioned in Pride and Prejudice are marked with black circles. North to south: the Peak (in oval), Chatsworth, Bakewell, Matlock, Dovedale (in oval). Squares denote cotton mills extant ca. 1810. Background map courtesy of Derbyshire Local Studies Libraries and www.picturethepast.org.uk.

revised the novel around 1812. A sampling of contemporary remarks on the changes in the North is revealing. From 1788: “The cotton manufactory has burst forth, as it were, upon the country, in a moment” (“Extracts” 157). From 1791: “There is scarcely a stream that will turn a wheel through the north of England that has not a cotton mill upon it” (“Observations” 140).

The first cotton mills were built in isolated locations for optimal access to water, but when steam power became viable on a large scale in the early nineteenth century, mills began to be crowded together in cities. The squalor of Manchester’s mills and slums is the setting for Elizabeth Gaskell’s industrial novels of the 1840s and later—but the cradle of the cotton trade was Derbyshire, exactly where Jane Austen sends Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*.

Austen recuses herself, in the voice of the narrator, from having to provide extensive geographical details of Elizabeth’s tour to Derbyshire with the Gardiners. Nonetheless, she does name some places, all standard stops on the tourist trail. As the map shows, in visiting these places and traveling between them, Austen’s travelers could not help but see cotton mills. These structures were not consolidated in districts avoided by the well-to-do; instead, constrained by topography and technological requirements, they were scattered throughout Derbyshire and, coincidentally, located near the picturesque spots tourists wanted to see. Indeed, contemporary travel narratives and guidebooks indicate that mills were themselves sites of interest. Whether writers preferred to “see barren hills and vallies laugh and sing under the influence of an auspicious trade” (“Observations” 216) or felt that the cotton mills “considerably injured the natural beauty” (Pilkington 312), few ignored them.

When Austen researched Derbyshire—and, given her characteristic concern about getting geographical details right, it is difficult to imagine that she would not have done so—she would have read about the cotton industry. Whether she consulted Davies’s *New Historical and Descriptive View of Derbyshire*, Bray’s *Sketch of a Tour into Derbyshire and Yorkshire*, Warner’s *A Tour Through the Northern Counties of England*, Spencer’s *The Complete English Traveler*, Mavor’s *The British Tourists*, or Carey’s *The Balnea: An Impartial Description of All the Popular Watering Places in England*, descriptions of the mills, their owners, and their operations were readily at hand.²

Even as the trade altered the landscape of the North, it transformed the national economy. In 1789, one observer asked rhetorically “whether there ever was an invention or improvement of equal consequence to the manufactures of this kingdom” as the water-powered spinning frame (Pilkington 308). In 1802, cotton cloth production was called “this most important branch of British manufactories” (Warner, *Tour* 144). In 1810, it was “one of the chief sources

of English wealth and prosperity” (Mortimer). By 1812, Britain’s centuries-old woolen trade had been definitively surpassed, with cotton manufacturing contributing £23 million in that year to the nation’s wealth, compared to £13 million for wool (Colquhoun 91).

The cotton industry generated personal as well as national wealth. Little initial capital was required to set up a cotton-spinning business, and many of those who made fortunes had humble beginnings (Edwards 182). In 1802, a clergyman who took a northern tour reported that “[s]everal instances were pointed out to us of successful industry in persons who, from journeymen, had arisen to princely independence; a proof at once of the profits and extent of the cloth trade in these parts” (Warner, *Tour* 238). Among those he might have learned about were James M’Connel and John Kennedy, who left poor farms in Scotland to learn the cotton trade; they became prominent Manchester mill owners and machine-makers (Lee 10). There was Robert Owen, son of a saddler, who started out with £100 borrowed from his brother, became a mill manager at twenty-one, and ended up owning the largest cotton-spinning enterprise in Scotland; with his profits, he bought 30,000 acres of land in Indiana and founded a utopian community (Lee 13). The preeminent example, however—the one that inspired Owen, M’Connel, Kennedy, and others—was Sir Richard Arkwright.

Arkwright, son of a tailor, worked as a barber, wig-maker, and pub landlord before, in 1769, securing a patent for the water-powered spinning frame.³ This machine ignited the industrial revolution in textiles by increasing the speed of spinning and for the first time producing cotton thread strong enough to serve as both warp and weft in a loom. Arkwright built the world’s first water-powered cotton mill at Cromford in Derbyshire in 1771 and ran it night and day while his patent was in force. Through licensing his invention to others and operating his own mills, he was a major economic force, estimated in 1785 to be responsible for economic activity worth £40,000 per day (“Affairs” 306). He became enormously rich and was one of the celebrities of the age. Just as today’s media report on the lifestyles of Internet billionaires without dwelling on their technical achievements, so Georgian magazines printed tales of Arkwright’s marital disagreements, witty sayings, and spending habits (Houseman 282; “On the Utility” 14; “Anecdote” 306). Biographers, economists, and political reporters also devoted considerable attention to him.

The contrasts between Sir Richard Arkwright and his son (also Richard) provide an interesting basis from which to contemplate the late Mr. Bingley and his son Charles. Their history shows modern readers what Austen and her contemporaries knew well: that under the right circumstances, a family could



Arkwright's Masson Mill on the bank of the Derwent, with wooded cliffs behind. Courtesy of Miss Frances Webb and www.picturethepast.org.uk.

rise very far, very fast. First-generation money-makers often lived in an uneasy compromise between their hardworking habits and the opportunities that success and wealth brought them. In the second generation, the rough edges were smoothed out and entrepreneurs' children took their place among the gentry, but their quick rise sometimes left gaps in possessions, manners, and confidence.

Sir Richard Arkwright wavered between his old and new identities. On the day he was to appear before the King and court to receive his knighthood (for making a loyal address, as Sir William Lucas did), he first dressed in a plain brown coat and boots, commenting, "They were but men—and so was he."⁴ He encouraged his daughter to write journals and sent her to an elegant school while he worked alone at night to improve his own severely deficient

Sir Richard Arkwright,
*engraved by H. Meyer
after Joseph Wright of
Derby. Courtesy of Derby
City Council and [www.
picturethepast.org.uk](http://www.picturethepast.org.uk).*



spelling and handwriting. Most revealing are his domestic aspirations: he acquired both a London house and a country estate, building at the latter not just a house but a castle, complete with turrets and crenellations. John Byng (later Viscount Torrington) visited and recorded in his diary that Arkwright's Willersley Castle "is the house of an overseer surveying the works, not of a gentleman." Byng expressed particular scorn for the library, complaining that it was too small and resembled a "counting house"—again suggesting that Arkwright's attempts to act the gentleman were doomed to fail. Despite such criticism, pictures of the house appeared in *The Beauties of England and Wales* (Britton and Brayley 512) and were painted onto Derby porcelain (Bamford). Arkwright mused about hosting boating-parties on a canal in front of the house, but his workdays left no time for recreation, and he died before the castle was finished. In his will, he left £100,000 to his daughter; the Willersley estate, the mills, and other property went to his son.

Richard Arkwright, Jr., aged thirty-seven when his father died in 1792, found himself rich by his own efforts as a cotton-spinning magnate and those of his father. He sold most of the mills and concentrated on land-owning and banking, which would ultimately make him the wealthiest commoner in Britain. A very different personality from his father, he did not mind being mistaken for a gardener by tourists visiting Willersley Castle, but he had the education and self-assurance to deal effectively with all social classes, as shown by his genteel yet insistent dunning letters to Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, to



Willersley Castle in Cromford, Derbyshire.

whom he had loaned £5,000. When he died in 1843, *The Gentleman's Magazine* eulogized him as “a perfect gentleman” (“Obituary—Richard Arkwright, Esq.” 656); the same publication, fifty years earlier, had expressed fainter praise for his father, calling Sir Richard “if not a great, a very useful man” (“Obituary of Considerable Persons” 770).

Additional insights into the aspirations and challenges of the newly rich can be gained from the life of Jedediah Strutt, Sir Richard Arkwright’s business partner for many years and an inventor in his own right. The son of a farmer, he had no formal schooling. His first wife was a servant, and his second apparently of low origin, too (he was sad to discover that his children regarded this marriage as a “humiliating circumstance”). He urgently wanted his children to fit in among the gentry. Sounding surprisingly like Caroline Bingley, Strutt urged his son to acquire “the Manners, the Air, the genteel address & polite behaviour of a gentleman”; to speak French; and to master dancing, dress, and graceful movement. He allowed his daughters to socialize at the assembly rooms in Matlock Bath but urged them to pursue the acquaintance



LEFT: *Arkwright's Willersley Castle pictured on Bloor Derby mug (ca. 1820). Courtesy of Bamford's Auctions.*

BELOW: *Arkwright coat of arms, displaying cotton plants, the bee of industry, and a motto translating to "I have endured and achieved much."*

of people from whom they could learn. His efforts succeeded, perhaps better than he had envisioned. A letter he wrote to his adult daughter reveals the gulf between the father and his elegant offspring:

[F]rom having but little pride & no ostintation of my own, not being fond of finery & dress, not thrusting myself into what is called Genteel Company, not frequenting Assemblies, Ball[s], concerts plays & shews, not going every summer at no little expence to see and be seen as the fashion is to some or other of the polite Watering places, . . . I am but little known & little regarded. Few people imagine that the house at Derby belongs to me or that you are my children. When I am there strangers view me as a stranger also, & acquaintances seem not to be acquainted. (qtd. in Fitton and Wadsworth 164–66)

Many of the comments made by and about the Bingley siblings in *Pride and Prejudice* take on new significance if we imagine that their father



was a smaller-scale entrepreneur cast in the mold of Sir Richard Arkwright or Jedediah Strutt. This is not to suggest that Austen intended to portray these specific individuals under another name; rather, she would have relied on her readers' awareness of them and their peers as exemplars of a certain type of success and class mobility.

If the late Mr. Bingley, like many northern entrepreneurs, was of humble origins, then Charles Bingley's pleasure in the informality of the Meryton assembly might come as much from his familiarity with mixed classes of people as from his easy temperament. If, like Arkwright's and Strutt's wives, the never-mentioned Mrs. Bingley was not a refined lady and was more concerned with making ends meet than practicing feminine accomplishments, then Charles's amazement at young ladies who "paint tables, cover skreens and net purses" (42) would be all the more understandable.

Caroline and Louisa Bingley are the product of London schools and the imitation of people of rank. Where their brother's manners are easy, theirs are an unsuccessful performance: they appear less well-bred than Georgiana's guardian Mrs. Annesley, and their expressions of enthusiasm (for reading, for Jane Bennet, for Georgiana) are contradicted by their actions. They perceive that the family's job of social transformation is not yet complete, urging their brother to quell their anxieties by acquiring the right house and making the right marriage. Their horror of Mr. Gardiner, who sees no need to distance himself from his business, speaks to their own desperate eagerness to do exactly that with respect to their family's onetime trade.

Darcy seems to acknowledge that his friends are a few rungs lower on the social ladder than himself. Caroline Bingley supplies the information that her father possessed few books. When she attempts to flatter Darcy by praising the library at Pemberley, his response—"It ought to be good, . . . it has been the work of many generations" (41)—seems a candid observation that "many generations" of wealth and gentility are precisely what the Bingleys lack. In his letter to Elizabeth, the unreformed Darcy again points out the inferiority of his friend: "the [Bennets'] want of connection could not be so great an evil to my friend as to me" (220). Darcy may accept Bingley as his friend and perhaps even imagine him as his sister's suitor, but he, like his aunt, is not blind to "distinction[*s*] of rank" (166).

In an examination of the historical North-South divide in Britain, Mark Billinge states that during Austen's lifetime, stereotypes and social constructions led to the perception of two coexistent cultures: a southern culture that represented "the passing of Georgian society" and another in the North, presaging "the coming of Victorian economy." He characterizes the ideology of

the South, in part, as resting on “privilege, paternalism, patronage” and that of the North as valuing “meritocracy, . . . ambition, . . . achievement” (Billings 105–06). While Austen, who sited Pemberley in Derbyshire, does not explicitly set North and South in opposition, it is clear that she knew herself to be living at a time of significant change. *Pride and Prejudice* reflects this change and suggests that, while class mobility is not inherently bad, there are right and wrong ways to pursue it.

The novel presents several characters who are rising, but whose aspirations and behaviors are portrayed negatively: Sir William Lucas, Mr. Wickham, and Mr. Collins, son of “an illiterate and miserly” father (78). Mr. Gardiner, though financially well-off and possessing irreproachable manners and intellect, is not a model of successful upward mobility either, as he continues to live in an unfashionable district and seldom goes out socially. Unlike these characters, Charles Bingley has managed his transformation effectively. He is comfortable living like (and among) long-established gentry, but he does not overvalue signifiers of rank and privilege. He is in no hurry to acquire an estate, and he mocks the idea of deferring to his betters, claiming to show deference to Darcy only because his friend is “such a great tall fellow” (55). He plays the proper role in the community, attending the assembly and hosting a ball at Netherfield. Of course, he does later capitulate to Darcy and abandon Netherfield, but during his first residence there, he *seems* the perfect gentleman.

Susannah Fullerton observes that *Pride and Prejudice* is about “what is real and what only appears to be real” (34). Bingley is twice described as “gentlemanlike” and although he is weak, he is never shown to be ungentlemanly. “Gentlemanlike” is also applied to Mr. Gardiner, Mr. Wickham, Colonel Fitzwilliam, and the officers of the —shire militia; in other novels, Austen applies it to such favored characters as Henry Tilney and Edward Ferrars. The word signifies a standard of behavior, the importance of which is shown most clearly by Darcy’s reaction to Elizabeth’s response to his first proposal: “Your reproof, so well applied, I shall never forget: ‘had you behaved in a more gentlemanlike manner.’ Those were your words. You know not, you can scarcely conceive, how they have tortured me” (408).

While gentlemanlike conduct was expected, traditionally, birth (i.e., to a parent who owned land) was the *sine qua non* of gentry status, as reflected in Elizabeth Bennet’s comparison of Darcy and herself: “He is a gentleman; I am a gentleman’s daughter; so far we are equal” (395). Bingley is a gentleman if judged by his behavior, habits, and possessions—as the people of Meryton do judge him—but is he, strictly speaking, a gentleman’s son, the equal by birth of Jane Bennet?

Regarding Bingley's manners and ease, the narrator says, "Such amiable qualities must speak for themselves"—an aphoristic assertion that, like the novel's opening sentence, presents an opinion as fact. To what extent do manners (and money) make the man? By merely alluding to fortunes made in the North by trade, Austen invites her readers, like the people of Meryton, to decide for themselves.

NOTES

1. Today Derbyshire is assigned to the Midlands, but in Austen's time there was no universally recognized dividing line. The River Trent had served as the North-South boundary for civil and ecclesiastical administration during the medieval period (Bush 172) and continued to be used as a notional dividing line much later; for example, Scottish economist Patrick Colquhoun used the Trent in this way. In writing of "the North" in this paper, I mean the counties north of the Trent.

2. The industry's effects were felt in the South, as well. In Kent, Canterbury's silk industry was devastated by the popularity of cotton, so in 1787 Peter Callaway adapted northern cotton technology to produce a silk and cotton blend fabric and was lauded for restoring lost jobs (Gostling 28). Employment was also the motivation for several southern "artificers in machinery" to visit a Leeds cotton mill in 1792; the *Hampshire Chronicle* predicted that "the cotton manufacture, which seems capable of an extension beyond all others, would prove highly advantageous as a means of employment when the woolen branch happens to fail" ("Winchester"). Some woolen manufacturers survived by modernizing and adapting cotton machinery and processes to wool. One of these was New Mills at Wotton-under-Edge near Bath, which Humphrey Austin (believed by Jane Austen and her family to be a distant relation) rebuilt in 1807–1810, at a time when nearby woolen mills were closing down (Warner, *Excursions* 332; Gilson 445–46; Verey and Brooks 562).

3. Biographical information about the Arkwrights and Strutts is drawn from Robert Fitton's *The Arkwrights: Spinners of Fortune*, except where a different work is cited. I am also indebted to the Arkwright Society and to the Christian Guild, owners of Willersley Castle, for information and access provided during my visit to Cromford.

4. This anecdote shows the predicament of the parvenu: Arkwright was ridiculed both for his naiveté and then for trying to appear "a beau" after he changed into fashionable attire.

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