

THE MEMOIR OF
SIR JACOB BEHRENS

PUBLISHED IN 1925

CONTAINED A BRIEF ACCOUNT OF HIS WORK FOR
THE BRADFORD CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

THIS ADDITIONAL NOTE
ON THE SAME SUBJECT IS BASED ON
THE OFFICIAL RECORDS OF THE CHAMBER

1936

At the time of the foundation of the Chamber in 1851, Bradford business men were extremely individualistic in their outlook; they guarded the secrets of their affairs jealously and were reluctant to disclose to one another even such information as was necessary for common action. The records of the Chamber show that its activities were largely confined to enquiries into wool supplies, a matter of general interest, to arbitration of trade disputes, which avoided the more public and more costly method of legal proceedings, and to similar matters. Any proposal to extend the functions of the Chamber was looked upon with suspicion by the members. In such an atmosphere it is not too much to say that the infectious enthusiasm and unwearied activity of Jacob Behrens alone preserved the Chamber against the difficulties of its early years.

At the first annual meeting of the Chamber the President was able to boast that the membership of the Chamber was larger than that of any similar institution in the country; yet it was only two hundred, and there was no increase during the first ten years. The annual revenue seldom exceeded £200, of which £100 was paid to the Secretary, a local solicitor, who provided the office accommodation. In such circumstances, the functions of the Secretary were inevitably limited to the calling of meetings and to formal incidental duties. The Council consisted of twenty-four members; they were men of ability, whose names are still honoured in Bradford, but their attendances at Council meetings were intermittent and business was often postponed or neglected for want of a quorum. The records show

that none was so regular in attendance or so zealous in his activity as Jacob Behrens. Usually he had some new suggestion to make; he might urge the Chamber to protest to the Post Office against delays in the delivery of letters or against excessive postage rates to foreign countries, or he might propose that the Chamber should approach the Foreign Office on some Tariff question. There was no lack of grievances to be remedied. He did not always persuade the Chamber to act, but he succeeded more often than he failed, because he never brought forward a proposal that was not both worth attention and ripe for discussion, and because he was always familiar with his case and able to explain it. When the Council accepted his proposals, the procedure was almost invariably the same; the Council, realising that he was the most competent, would ask him to prepare the memorandum required; he would present it at the next meeting of the Council; the Council would accept it and express their gratitude to him.

It was by this ceaseless activity that the Chamber's influence was established. The amount of work he did for the Chamber in those early years was prodigious; the functions of the Secretary being limited to formal business, Behrens undertook much of the statistical work which nowadays is part of the routine of the Secretariat.

As time went on, other members of the Council, inspired by his example, began to show initiative and to take a share in the work. But he was assisted, not supplanted. He devoted himself more especially to the work of the Tariff Committee, of which he was

chairman for nearly forty years. His memoranda on tariff questions, recorded in the Minutes of the Chamber, are remarkable for their analytical skill. He could always show clearly where the interests of Bradford were mainly affected, and he could usually offer good reasons for the view that the foreign country concerned would gain rather than lose by the changes proposed.

He was always in advance of his time, and his zeal for reform did not diminish with age. In 1885, in his eightieth year he drafted a memorandum urging the Government to issue the Board of Trade Journal regularly every week, and he presented to the Foreign Office a plan for a series of commercial reports to be made by British Consuls abroad. As usual, his proposal had been carefully prepared and was worked out in detail, and it is a remarkable fact that it covered nearly all the points that are included in the reports now made by Commercial Secretaries abroad and issued by the Department of Overseas Trade.

Since his day the Bradford Chamber of Commerce has had many Presidents who have worthily upheld the honour of that office, but none of them stands out so vividly in the records as Jacob Behrens. He may be said to have created a tradition and to have inspired both his colleagues and his successors to work with devotion for the Chamber he had so faithfully served.