ARKWRIGHT, SIR RICHARD, one of those extraordinary men whose ingenuity has exerted a most powerful influence upon the condition of civilized society, was born at Preston, in Lancashire, on the 23rd of December, 1732. His parents moved in a humble walk of life; and as he was the youngest of thirteen children, we may suppose that the amount of school learning which he received was exceedingly scanty. About the year 1760 he quitted business as a barber, which he had previously carried on in the town of Bolton, and became an itinerant dealer in hair. The profits of this business were increased by means of a secret which he possessed for dyeing hair and preparing it for the use of wig-makers. In reference to Arkwright’s pursuits at this period of his history, Thomas Carlyle in his characteristical manner says, “Nevertheless in stropping of razors, in shaving of dirty beards, and the contradictions and confusions attendant thence, the man had notions in that rough head of his! Spindles, shuttles, wheels, and contrivances, plying ideally within the same; rather hopeless looking, which however he did at last bring to bear. Not without difficulty.”

His first effort in mechanics has been supposed to be an attempt to discover the perpetual motion, but Dr. Ure conjectures that Arkwright, alive to the importance of his cotton spinning apparatus, may have during his earlier experiments disguised the real character of his mechanism under that name.

Up to the time we have mentioned, the cloths of English manufacture called calicoes, from Calico, the place of their original production, were formed by a mixture of linen and cotton; the warp was composed of linen and the weft of cotton, it being found impossible, by any means then known, to spin the fibres of cotton into a thread sufficiently strong to be used as warp. The demand for the cloth soon became so great, that the females in the weaver’s family by whom the carding and spinning processes were performed, could not prepare sufficient weft to keep the looms employed, and the weaver was obliged to engage additional hands for preparing the cotton. The limit to which this species of employment could be carried was soon reached, and if some more productive mode of spinning than that by the one-thread wheel, then the only machine known, had not been discovered, the progress of the cotton manufacture must have been stopped, or at best would have been extremely slow. Mr. Guest, in his “History of the Cotton Manufacture,” tells us, that at this time “it was no uncommon thing for a weaver to walk three or four miles in a morning, and call on from five to six spinners, before he could collect the weft to serve him for the remainder of the day.”

Some have called in question the talents of Arkwright, and his merits as an inventor; and he has sometimes been considered as a plagiarist or pirate of other men’s ideas. If however the evidence is carefully weighed, this charge will be seen to rest on very slight grounds, while the proofs which he exhibited of possessing talents of the very highest order in the management of the vast concerns in which he was afterwards engaged, are unquestionable. A patent for spinning by means of rollers was taken out in the year 1735, by Mr.
Charles Wyatt, of Birmingham, in the name of Louis Paul, a foreigner, with whom Wyatt had formed a partnership. The specification of Wyatt's invention has been published, and there can be no doubt that it contains the principle of Arkwright's patent to which he was entitled. Wyatt's contrivance was tried in Birmingham and at Northampton in 1741, but was so far from being successful, that the machinery was destroyed. Although it is not known what became of the "Gee" which Arkwright drew up to be presented to Parliament in 1782, he makes mention of the fact in these words:—"About forty or fifty years ago, one Paul and others of London invented an engine for spinning cotton, and obtained a patent for such machines. The said Paul and the others named as assignees had, for some time, a good fortune. The said engine was afterwards employed for spinning in various parts of this country, and was extensively used."

The effect of this paupers' patent was to impress the members of the legislature with the propriety of interfering for his protection.

In the year 1746, in the beginning of 1755, obtained the testimony of several competent persons in favor of the sufficiency of the said invention, Arkwright then commenced a new action, which was tried in December of that year, and decided in his favor, thereby reinstating him in the possession of his monopoly. The Lancashire manufacturers, in a panic, formed an association for the purpose of contesting the point, and the validity of the patent. They also engaged scientific gentlemen to discover the technical defects of the patent and to arrange the evidence for its protection. On this occasion, Arkwright was drawn up at a time when his patent was being constantly invoked, and it is incredible, that, if he had possessed a knowledge of the particulars of Wyatt's patent, he should have thus drawn public attention to it, since he must, at that case, have known that the production of the specification would at once have deprived him of every ground upon which he attempted to establish his own rights as an inventor.

To assist him in the most important improvements for his first projected machine, Arkwright employed a clockmaker, named Kay, first at Preston and afterwards at Nottingham. From the year 1767, Arkwright gauged himself up completely to the subject of inventions for spinning cotton. In 1768, he established his first machinery at Preston, and at this time Arkwright's poverty was such, that, being a Burgess of Preston, he could not appear to vote during a contested election, till the year 1773, when he voted gave him a decent suit of clothes. Shortly after, apprehensive of meeting with the same kind of hostility which had a short time previously been shown to a man named Hargreaves, who also had invented a machine for abridging labour in spinning cotton, in Manchester with two others, and had associated with them, on the introduction of Arkwright's machinery, to work with the spinning-frame invented by Mr. Lee. Several improvements suggested by Strutt were adopted by Arkwright, and in 1769 he obtained his license for spinning by rollers. The validity of this license was contested in 1773, on the ground of Arkwright not having been the original inventor of the process, but a verdict was given in favour of the patent, which no one afterwards attempted to disturb.

The year 1774 was a year of success before any profit was realized, but after that time wealth continued to flow in abundantly to the proprietors. The establishments were greatly extended, several new ones were formed, and, in many cases, Arkwright took a share with other persons in the erection and working of cotton-mills. This prosperity continued, notwithstanding the adverse decision of the courts in regard to his patent. For several years, the market prices of cotton twist were fixed by Arkwright, all other spinners having to conform to his scale. His partnership with Mr. Strutt terminated in 1759, after which he continued the works at Cromford, which were subsequently carried on by his son, while Mr. Strutt continued the works at Belper, which were afterwards the subject of great improvement, but extended by Arkwright's improvements may be conceived from the fact that the imports of cotton-wool, which averaged less than 5,000,000 lbs. per annum in the years from 1771 to 1775, rose to an average of 5,800,000 lbs. per annum in 1784. As an additional proof, in 1845 the imports of cotton-wool from all parts amounted to 712,026,161 lbs.; in 1849 to 755,469,012; and in 1850, the year preceding the civil war in August, to 762,792 lbs.

Arkwright was a very early riser; devoted himself most assiduously to business; was a severe economist of time; was exceedingly sagacious in his disposition; and entertained an unbounded confidence in the manufacturing powers of machinery and manufacturers. To his credit it is recorded that when upwards of fifty years of age he made strenuous efforts to recover the deficiencies of his early education; redeeming time from the hours usually devoted to sleep in order to study grammar, and later, to improve his reading and orthography. In 1786, on occasion of presenting an address to George III. after the attack on his life by Margaret Nicholson, he received the honour of knighthood; and in the following year he served as high sheriff of Derbyshire.

Notwithstanding the increasing inconvenience which he experienced from a severe asthma, with which he had been occasionally afflicted from an early life, Sir Richard continued to pay the most intimate attention to business, and superintended the daily operations of his large establishments, adding to time to time such improvements to the machinery as were suggested by experience and observation. He sunk at length under the pressure of his concerns and his vigils, and died at his house at Cromford, on the 3rd of August, 1792, in the sixteenth year of his marriage, leaving behind him a fortune estimated at little short of half a million sterling.

Considering the difficulties in which he was placed by the deficiency of his early education and the unfavourable tendency of his early employment, Arkwright must be acknowledged to have been a very
extraordinary man. Even without claiming for him the honour of having been an original inventor,—an honour which, upon the best consideration we can give to the conflicting evidence brought forward, we are still inclined to award him,—we may certainly ascribe to him the possession of a clear and comprehensive mind, as well as the most unerring judgment. His plans were laid with skill, and pursued with energy; he displayed the most unwearied perseverance in pursuit of his object under difficulties which would have borne down most men; and he forms one among the bright instances afforded by the annals of this country, that talent, when allied with patient energy and persevering industry, will not fail to ensure ultimate success to its possessor.

Our information concerning Arkwright's private or personal history is of limited extent. In early life he married Patience Holt, of Bolton, who, in December, 1755, became the mother of his only son Richard. After her death he married again, either in 1760 or 1761, his second wife being Margaret Biggins, of Pennington, in the parish of Leigh; and from this wife, who is the only one mentioned by most biographers, he separated, but when or under what circumstances, is not very certain, although according to some accounts it would appear to have been in consequence of some disagreement arising from his adventurous and scheming disposition. By his second wife he had one daughter, who married Charles Hart, Esq., and inherited part of his property. He left directions to his son, the late Richard Arkwright, Esq., for the completion of a church which he was erecting at Cromford, and also of Wittersley Castle, which he was building as a family mansion. That gentleman inherited his father's sagacity and aptitude for business, and became, it has been asserted, the wealthiest commoner in England. He died on the 22nd of April, 1843, in his eighty-eighth year, leaving a large family; and his property was sworn, on the provoking of his will, to exceed 1,000,000L, that being however merely a nominal sum, taken because the scale of stamp duties goes no higher. The probate bore a stamp of 15,740L. Further information respecting the controverted points in the history of Arkwright and his inventions, may be found in the works of Baines, Guest, and Dr. Ure, on the "History of the Cotton-Manufacture," and in a copious memoir in the "Biographical Dictionary of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge."