

## **Industrial Lyme - Paper 10: Lace Manufacture**

© Richard Bull & Lyme Regis Museum

This paper is about the contribution which lace manufacturing gave to the employment and social history of Lyme Regis, rather than about types, techniques or garments of lace which may have been undertaken here. We would be pleased to see any old photographs or samples of lace manufactured in Lyme.

### **Summary**

The records of lace making in Lyme are sparse and confined to the writings of two authoritative and contemporary historians, one evidently posed postcard photograph and census returns and trade directory entries.

It appears that lace had been made in Lyme from about 1650, but suffered from competition from smuggled imports from Belgium, made competitive by taxed levied by Charles I on luxury goods lace. The local trade died out in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, but was revived again soon after, with royal support.

The ill wind of competition from machine made lace soon appeared, with John Heathcoat setting up a bobbin net machine in Leicester as early as 1808 and moving the factory to Tiverton in 1816 to escape Luddite machine-breakers. Lyme lace making all but died out, apart from a small boon peaking in the 1860s. It had disappeared again by the 1890s.

Consequently, it appears that whilst lace manufacturing was never a major player in the Lyme mix of manufactures, unlike Honiton and the coastal villages of Beer, Branscombe and Axmouth, but it was a useful employer of several skilled women and teenage girls, mostly of East Devon origin, in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century lace manufacturing by hand was overtaken by improvements in machine-made lace, changes in fashion and by compulsory elementary education and with it the successive raising of the school leaving age, which tended to prevent the skills being passed on. In effect it was priced out of the market yet again.

The skills have been kept alive in Lyme Regis, but not in a commercial manufacturing sense.

### **Background**

According to the Oxford English Dictionary lace is a slender, openwork fabric made of threads used either to form whole, usually very special, garments, or adornments such as cuffs or collars. It can be made from any thread, but silk and linen were normally used until cheaper mercerised cotton (that is, cotton treated to give it the lustrous sheen of silk) became available. Metal threads, such as gold and silver can be used for special garments. Lace workers often refer to their threads as silks whatever they may be made of. There are many types of lace, often known by their place of origin or practice.

In our area Branscombe Point and Honiton are particular methods of hand-made lace work which may have been imported to Lyme by migration of workers from East Devon and through orders from Honiton, the principal lace centre in the south west. From here dealers travelled the area supplying silks and buying articles for onward distribution via the stage coaches which called there.

**Honiton Lace** is formed from a braid made by the worker on a lace pillow by weaving the threads by moving bobbins onto which the lace thread has been wound, back and forth in complex movements to produce the work, which is held down by pins. Bobbins are usually of turned wood in different colours or patterns or with differently coloured adornments to distinguish each thread. Honiton lace was certainly made here as several of the lace workers describe themselves as Honiton lace manufacturers or makers. What type of lace the majority of lace workers who simply called themselves “lace makers” cannot be speculated.

That some Lyme workers came from Branscombe suggests that **Branscombe Point Lace** may have been another style. This is a lace which can be made more quickly than Honiton, as it incorporates machine-made elements and therefore was more able to meet the industrial competition which appeared towards the end of commercial hand-made lace manufacture. Branscombe Point is needlework overcast on machine-made cotton braid obtained from Nottingham or Paris, which is formed into looping patterns and the work filled with the particular Branscombe point stitches (Trivett 1991). Nottingham specialised in machine-made lace, hence the manufacture of lace braids there, and in Branscombe these were obtained by mail order from catalogues.

It is quite possible to combine methods in any piece of work, or to produce other types of lace altogether, but it is more than likely that the local styles would have been followed. There is a modern lace pillow, with a set of coloured bobbins on a piece of work pinned as if in progress, and a modern bobbin winder in the museum.

The third item made here was webs, which might be connected with lace braid making or nothing to do with lace whatsoever - see later.

### **The history of lace making in Lyme 1750-1890**

Not a great deal is known about the history of lace making here, but Wanklyn (1927) said that the 1750s were the lowest depths of Lyme’s recession, when the population had shrunk to less than a thousand. One effort undertaken to alleviate the problem was the encouragement of lace making. Wanklyn considered that it had been carried on for a hundred years before, shown by apprentice’s indentures, but that the significance and prominence of lace making to the local economy was obscured by the importance of cloth making. By the 1750s the weaving trade was already in trouble from north-country competition and lace, which its different gender demographics, could only supplement rather than replace the loss of income in families.

The contemporary writer George Roberts (1834) says that Broad Street was the centre of the trade, where the women made lace at their doors in summer and took in work from Honiton and Colyton. He describes them as makers of Lyme lace, which he says rivalled that of Brussels for quality, durability and elegance and was of great repute: Lyme lace, says Roberts, was worth 4-5 guineas per yard (£4.20-£5.25); although out of this the workers only received 4d per day. About one inch of bobbin lace could be made per day, which puts the wage cost for this work as £1.44 per yard.

Lyme lace appears to be a type of Honiton lace, rather than anything particular pattern or style. Lyme women had made a lace dress for Queen Charlotte (Queen Consort of George III from 1761 until her death in 1818), which “gave great satisfaction at Court”. Wanklyn (1927) elaborates that this lace dress was ordered by the Royal Household of George III specifically to encourage the industry in Lyme Regis.

Evidently there was a dip in lace making after this period of fame, to only one maker in 1841, although on the contrary Brown (1857) suggests that the stagnation in Lyme’s economy that occurred after William IV reign (1765-1837) left people principally engaged in lace and serge making. From then a small expansion took place rising to 15 in 1861, but the rise was transient and by 1881 it had gone. In that year in nearby lace centres, Axmouth recorded 78 and Musbury 45 lace workers. By 1881 there were just two makers in Lyme and in 1891, none. The trade appears to have died out in Lyme, apart from amateur lace makers who treat lace as a hobby.

Dunster (1890) records that:

*even Honiton Lace which used to be so much in demand that most of the women of Lyme were engaged in making it, is now so much superceded by French and manufactured laces that there is little to be gained from making it.*

That Dunster said “most of the women of Lyme were engaged in making it” suggests that census data may under-records the scale of the activity on a large scale.

### **The evidence for the size and distribution of the industry**

The only hard facts about lace making in Lyme come from census returns, trade directories and a single, undated postcard (1870-80?) on display in the Museum showing two women in Sherborne Lane working on their doorstep. One of the women appears to be working on a lace pillow on her lap, and on the ground in the front of the women sits a lace bobbin winder. At least from that we know that this lady was making bobbin lace, but is the picture is likely to have been posed rather than a spontaneous example of much similar activity?

Census returns give detailed information for Lyme from 1841; earlier census returns lump data and lace makers might be lumped with other textile workers. Women and girls describe themselves to the enumerator as either as Honiton

Lace Makers or Lace Manufacturers. Although this may not have marked any distinction, it shows the dominance of Honiton in the trade. It suggests that they were out-workers either casually or formally, ie that the trade was organised from East Devon and that they were probably sold silks by the same person that collected and paid for their pieces. Studies of apprentice's indentures may help unravel the type and scale of activity. Maybe some lace was sold to tourists directly or from local draper's shops.

**Table 1 LACE WORKERS IN NEARBY TOWNS AND VILLAGES AND LYME REGIS COMPARED – 1861**

Uplyme	5
Lyme Regis	15
Musbury	45
Combpyne	0
Axmouh	78
Axminster	19

Table 2 at the end shows that several of the Lyme workers were actually born in Axmouth or Beer, suggesting that they brought the considerable skills needed from there. Honiton was the main trading centre, from which parcels of lace would be sent to London on the stage coaches which called there.

Contrary to Robert's assertion above, no census shows any lace makers living on Broad Street. This is strange, because George Roberts himself lived on Broad Street at the time he was writing: he must have known. The same discrepancy can be levelled at Wanklyn (1927). He states that the Cockmoile Square area, where the Museum is now, had been another centre at the end of the trade, where it finally died out in the 1880s. Wanklyn was writing only 40 years later, so he must have had good reason for that assertion and yet there is no census data to support it. This suggests under recording in the somewhat later census returns, perhaps to a marked degree. Maybe only key professional lace makers returned themselves as Lace Manufacturers or Lace Makers and there were other women may who made lace on a more part-time basis.

Another problem with census data is that is rare to be able to trace the same worker from one ten-year census period to the next, although clearly marriage and the limited selection of Christian names used then would make tracing difficult in any case. Birth village should be a guide, be it the lace making centres of Axmouth, Branscombe or Beer, but although these places crop up frequently in lace maker's birthplaces, it doesn't seem to help except with a few individuals.

Sherborne Lane was also regarded as a centre of lace manufacture, and maybe the photograph mentioned above is responsible for that, as few lace makers are returned in that street. However, right at the end of the lace making period two men appear, Isaac and Harry Webb in 1889 and 1903, as Web Manufacturers trading in that street. The definition of "web" is very broad: it could mean that they wove tapes for lace, but it could mean any textile,

paper or metal gauze which is made in continuous form and sold on rolls. It is likely to mean hemp webbing such as used in soldier's uniforms and upholstery.

### **The Census and other Data for Lyme Regis (see Table 2)**

In 1841 there was just one lace maker, Harriet Leaske, aged 25, in Lyme, living in Monmouth Street.

In 1851 the number of lace makers increases to 10, two of whom call themselves Honiton Lace Makers, living at the Cobb (1), Silver Street (1), Colway (2), Mill Lane (3) and Horse Street (upper Combe Street) (3). Three were born in Lyme, 3 in Axmouth and one each in Uplyme, Newhaven, Charmouth and Beer.

In 1861 there were 15 lace makers in Lyme.

In 1871 there were 12 lace makers in Lyme, four of which are Honiton Lace Makers. The spread of workers is similar, but with some in the Gosling Bridge, Millgreen and Church Street, but only one appears in Sherborne Lane, that reputed hive of lace activity. Their birth places have a similar spread, but with Sidmouth and Otterton appearing and the Newhaven lady disappearing.

In 1881 the number had declined to only 2, both in Church Street, making Honiton lace and born in Axminster and Beer. One of these ladies, Mrs Sarah Rugg, is recorded in the trade directories for 1875-85 working or selling at the Cobb.

### **The age of lace makers**

The ages of workers ranges from 10 to 63, with the average in the twenties when eyesight would be best for such delicate work in the gas light available towards the end of the industry.

### **What other influences were there?**

It is hard to say what alternative employment there was for women in Lyme, other than working in service. But it should be possible to link rises and falls in the trade with the ups and downs of the textile factories. The critical dates are that of the end of cloth making in 1847 and the rise in 1857 of silk throwing and its demise in the 1870s. The only caveats would be that cloth making employed many skilled men as weavers with women in the other trades such as spinning and finishing, arguably less skilled. None of the skills in cloth making would be transferable to lace making and the main requirements of lace making, those of good eyesight and nimble fingers, would have found redundant women too old to change to it.

Silk throwing was different from cloth making; it required good eyesight and nimble fingers, but not high skills, which are reasons why it employed so many young children and teenagers. Maybe, like school, this stopped young girls from learning the lace trade by taking up their time, so that when they became redundant, they too could not take up lace. Conversion to lace was not a thing

that could be done quickly nor easily: the best professional lace makers would be apprenticed and would be expected to have a Royal Warrant.

Maybe in view of the above, the numbers of lace makers did not increase after the closure of the cloth and silk factories, although the numbers of paupers did, possibly reflecting difficulty in acquiring the necessary skills quickly, particularly for older people with inherently poorer eyesight or those who could not afford good gas light. However, when the factories were in full swing, few lace makers could be found in the streets around them, whereas at other times those same streets had a sprinkling of makers. Axminster workhouse does not return many women claiming to be “former lace makers”, but perhaps that is because lace making was either an adjunct to other employment or it required skills of self-reliance and ability that would transfer into other employment.

### **Acknowledgements**

Thanks are due to the Allhallows Museum, Honiton in the preparation of this paper, but the conclusions are entirely my own.

### **References**

- Brown, R 1857 *Beauties of Lyme*, Dunster & Co, Lyme Regis  
Dunster, D 1890 *Our Town* Dunster & Co, Lyme  
Roberts, George 1834 *A history of Lyme Regis*  
Trivett, Lille 1991 *The Techniques of Branscombe Point Lace* Batsford  
London  
Wanklyn, Cyril 1927 *Lyme Regis: a retrospect* Hatchards, London

Revised December 2010

**Table 2 LACE WORKERS IN CENSUS RETURNS AND TRADE DIRECTORIES**

HLM = Honiton Lace Manufacturer LM = Lace Manufacturer or Maker

<b>1841</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Work Type</b>	<b>Place of birth</b>
<b>Monmouth Street</b>			
Harriet Leaske	25	LM	
Total 1			
<b>1851</b>			
<b>Cobb</b>			
Frances May	23	LM	Uplyme
Adelaide Southcombe	17	LM	Lyme
<b>Silver St</b>			
Anne Preston	22	LM	Colyton
<b>Sherborne Lane</b>			
Martha Cox	85	(former LM)	Lyme
Mary Blacksmore	30	LM	Beer
Susan Palmer	67	LM	Sidbury
Mary Purvis	22	Fancy LM	Stocklinch (Som)
<b>Millgreen</b>			
Amelia Perry	11	HLM	Beer
<b>Colway Tything</b>			
Eliza Cross	18	HLM	Axmouth
Sarah Cross	14	HLM	Axmouth
<b>Mill Lane</b>			
Priscilla Lane	44	LM	Axmouth
Mary James	38	LM	Beer
Mary James	10	LM	Lyme
<b>Horse St (Upper Coombe St)</b>			
Margan Clack	11	LM	Lyme
Sarah Potter	19	LM	Uplyme
Martha Ware	18	LM	Newhaven Sx
<b>Total 16</b>			
<b>1861</b>			
<b>Cobb</b>			
Eliza Berry	36	LM	Beer
Sarah Rowe	16	LM	Beer
Elizabeth Rowe	9	LM	Beer
<b>Behind Cobb</b>			
Sarah A Rowe	16	LM	Beer
Elizabeth Rowe	9	LM	Lyme
Sarah Rowe	21	LM	Branscombe
<b>Church Street, Alms Houses</b>			
Elizabeth Stocker	40	HLM	Seaton
Phoebe Miller	45	HLM	Beer
<b>Charmouth Lane</b>			
Sarah Ann Sellers	25	HLM	Axmouth

**Dennings Court**

Mary ?Balch	35	LM	Beer
Mary ?Balch	13	LM	Beer

**Mill Lane**

Mary Ann James	37	LM	Beer
----------------	----	----	------

**Total 12**

NB This is a year in which the silk throwstery was in full swing, employing 64 workers, mostly women and children. No lace makers are recorded in any of the streets right by the factories. Note also that all the lace makers except one were born in East Devon.

**1867**

Mrs Berry Williams HLM in Trade Directory

**1871****Cobb**

Sarah Gush	32	LM	Branscombe
Selina Staunton	29	LM	Sidmouth

**Sherborne Lane**

?Hammet Hallet	35	LM	Lyme
----------------	----	----	------

**Silver Street**

Anne Hill	24	LM	Lyme
Lydia Goldsworthy	31	HLM	Lyme

**Church St**

? Hallet	27	LM	Lyme
Eliza House	25	LM	Axmouth

**Millgreen**

Sarah Irish	28	HLM	Axmouth
-------------	----	-----	---------

**Gosling Bridge**

Mary Ann Jefferd	24	HLM	Uplyme
------------------	----	-----	--------

**Horse Street**

Jessica ?Jacklyn	28	LM	
Mary Anne Melhuish	30	LM	Lyme
EJ Longman	34	HLM	Otterton

**Total 12**

**1875 & 1880** Mrs Sarah Gush is included in the Trade Directory as a HLM at the Cobb

**1881****Church Street**

Phoebe Miller	63	HLM	Beer
(Phoebe Miller was also recorded at <i>George Ct</i> )			
Ann Long	40	HLM	Axminster

**Total 2**

**1885** Mrs Sarah Rugg (? neé Gush) is included in the Trade Directory as a HLM at the Cobb.