

‘A rough lot...’

Nottingham in 1862 - lace finishing
employed thousands of young women
and girls. This is the story of their life
and work, as told to the Royal
Commission of that year...

Alan Brown

'A rough lot...'

The story of the young women and girls who worked
in the Nottingham lace finishing industry, as told to
John White M.A. for the 1862 Royal Commission

By Alan Brown

With grateful thanks, once again, to Kate and Ron

Sawbridgeworth, 2001

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Alterations to the original text have been kept to a minimum, only being made where the change from Mr White's words to those of his interviewees, or vice-versa, could lead to confusion. Where the archaic L was used to indicate a pound sterling, this has been altered to the modern £. All temperatures should be read as in fahrenheit.. Definitions of words are from the 1993 edition of the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary (SOED). Author's comments are placed in [] if necessary for clarity.

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‘A rough lot...’

In November 1862 Mr John E. White was studying Nottingham’s lace finishing industry for the Royal Commission into the working conditions of children and young people not covered by the Factory Acts. Among scores of visits he went to Mr J. B. Carter’s, a lace dresser of Wilford Road, one of 30 such places where the ‘dress’ - a liquid mixture mainly of starch - was applied to the cotton or silk before it went to the next of several stages of ‘finishing’ into bonnets, lappets, falls, collars, etc. Hours of work were 8 am to 6.30 pm – in busy times 6 am to 9 pm. These are Mr White’s introductory remarks:

‘This is one large room running along one floor of a new factory of 258 feet in length. The room was very hot, about 90° I was told, but it felt much hotter; a little girl said: “It’s often a deal hotter than now.” The perspiration was standing in large drops on the foreheads of several not at work but waiting for a piece. The faces of all were bloodless and waxen. The appearance of the women and girls, as usual in dressing rooms, was much below that of the warehouse class in dress and cleanliness. This is owing in part to the dirty nature of the work. They were described by the master as “a rough lot,” who he believed could not read or write.’

These children and young women lived and worked in a society which was swift-moving and often brutal, where ‘a quick man who knows the business will make money very fast’. From their words, and those of masters, mistresses and other local people, Mr White set down a story which, gathering dust now for nearly a century and a half, can still move us - a story of youngsters who were part of the living material which Dickens drew on for his novels about Victorian society.

Many apart from Mr Carter may have looked upon them as ‘a rough lot’, and perhaps they were, but their lot in life was far worse than they deserved. This booklet is written in tribute to their will to survive, and in the hope that they got more fun out of life than was possible to record in the parameters of an official enquiry.

Introduction

As midnight struck on December 31, 1799, all the ingredients were simmering under the surface of Nottingham society for the creation of an industry which, a few decades later, would change the face of the city and the lives of its citizens. The Nottingham lace industry was about to be born.

England at that time was a harsh environment for those at the lower end of the social scale. Mr W. Gore Allen, in his book *John Heathcoat and His Heritage* *, wrote the following:

‘As for public opinion - this, generally speaking, was on the side of laissez-faire. In other words, most people tended to believe that today England might have to go on sweating labour and even ruining the health of children, but that tomorrow she would be rewarded by a golden age, in which every one would enjoy the maximum of prosperity and leisure.’

Meanwhile, steam power was transforming old industries and helping create new ones; speed was of the essence and the human being had to keep up with the machine; smoke and fumes filled vast areas and slum housing covered the fields of previous times; populations increased to feed the factories and workshops of labour-intensive industries - industries such as lace finishing.

As the 19th century arrived, the hosiery industry still had deep roots among Nottingham's 29,000 population, with some 149 hosiers recorded as carrying on their trade, as against a mere six lace manufacturers. But inventive minds were searching for ways in which the stocking frame - the basis of the hosiery trade for well over a century - could spread its wings and provide a means for manufacturing lace. For centuries, hand-made bobbin and needle laces had held pride of place as the most sought-after means of adorning women and decorating both male and female clothing. They were among the most beautiful of luxuries, serving to set the well-to-do apart from those beneath them.

Bobbin lace had long been made in village lace schools and cottages in two broadly agricultural areas: Honiton, in Devon, and the East Midlands. Honiton, Buckinghamshire, Bedfordshire, Northants and Torchon laces were - as they are today - wonderful both in their own right and for what they can add to the finest of dress.

Those who sensed the potential of the stocking frame saw that the bobbin lace industry transformed very simple, basic materials - mainly cotton and silk - into finished items worth vastly more than their components. They were quick to see that producing lace by machine rather than hand, thus speeding up the process, would reduce its price to one which would appeal to a vastly increased clientele. England was a pyramidal society and those who could bring finery - or even the appearance of it - into the pockets of the less affluent in society would make their fortunes.

The first major step was taken when the frame was modified to allow it to fashion simple lace net, with the advantages of cheapness and a greater width of the net than was produced by hand on a pillow. But this was only the first of many changes which eventually saw the introduction of power into the production process. The Industrial Revolution had caught up with the lace bobbin. Nottingham entrepreneurs, including John Heathcoat who in 1816 had moved to Tiverton in Devon, developed machines which could create, at a fraction of the price, lace which without close inspection had the appearance of that made in the lace villages.

The effect on Nottingham itself was immense. Large areas of the inner city were built on or redeveloped. In 1832, the first edition of William White's "History, Gazetteer and Directory of

*Christopher Johnson, London 1958.

Nottinghamshire” recorded that there were no fewer than 186 lace manufacturers and 70 hosiery manufacturers. The Lace Market came into being - a landmark of the City to this day.

And this is where our story begins. As the production of machine lace increased in quantity, diversity and fineness, large numbers of workers - mainly young women and girls - were needed to begin the transformation of the product coming straight from the machine, known as ‘brown net’, into lace articles which the public would buy. These were the lace finishers, the largely poverty-stricken, unschooled children who trod the early morning pavements to the dressing rooms, warehouses and private homes where for long hours they would ply their many skills to change ‘brown net’ into the bonnet fronts and trimmings, lappets, collars and frills that 1860s’ fashion decreed.

In 1862, Mr John White went to Nottingham to gather evidence for the Royal Commission. The 1861 Lace Factories Act had given some protection to the children in the factories themselves, but ‘lace finishers’ were a different matter, mostly casually employed in conditions dictated by a harsh and competitive industry growing at a furious pace. These pages, fashioned from the Commission report which gave voice to Mr Carter’s ‘rough lot’, tells the story of some who spent their lives in it.

The author is indebted to Geoffrey Oldfield, from whose booklet *The Lace Market, Nottingham* - published by the Nottingham Civic Society - the statistics used above have been taken.

‘An excess of females...’

Before we follow the finishing girls into the warehouses, dressing rooms and ‘second-hand mistresses’ houses’- so-called because they in turn worked to supply masters and mistresses in the warehouses - let us look for a moment at where they and their families stood in the scheme of things in early Victorian Nottingham.

Poverty, coupled with lack of both education and steady employment, would have formed the family background of most of the children who made up the lace finishers, drawn into an industry which grew from a trickle to a torrent in the early 19th century. Set to work sometimes as young as four*, they often assumed a family role hardly imaginable before the machine lace industry burgeoned and took over the city, throwing up the need for finishing trades eminently suitable for the nimble fingers of young women and girls. In many families they were a mainstay, in some the only breadwinner standing between parents, brothers and sisters, and the workhouse.

Many views were expressed as to why the children were sent to work, often for crippling long hours, in shocking conditions and for very little money.

Leonard Cresswell, general manager of Heymann and Alexander’s lace manufacturers, in Stoney Street, commented: ‘From my experience, and inquiries which I have made when parents have brought their children, though quite young, to beg for work, often piteously, I believe the want of regular employment for the parents to be the great cause which leads to children being taken so early from school and sent to work.’

Mrs Reddish, of Fletcher Gate, employed two or three girls in her home. Mr White recorded: ‘She has lived six years in London and six in Manchester, and seen a good deal of different kinds of people, but she thinks there is no place where the children work so hard for the parents, and the parents live so

*The instructions from the Commissioners to the assistant commissioners stated that the term “children” signified those under 13 years of age and that “young persons” were those who were above 13 and under 18.

much on their children doing little or nothing themselves, as here, though of course many parents are an exception to this, and are very industrious.' She then pointed to another twist to the story: 'There are now so many women here who cannot get work because such a large number of children are employed, and for what work these women do get the wages are sunk in proportion for the same reason.'

Usually the children's wages were handed over to the parents, who sometimes gave back the few pennies earned from overtime, working into the late evening. 'The wages which they take home are often drunk away by their parents by Saturday night,' said *Mrs Jacobs*, of Bellargate, who had been in lace all her life. 'Though when their fathers are out of work the children's wages are sometimes all they have to live on.' On the same point, *Mr Grundy*, a lace master of Rutland Street, believed that 'The children's earnings are badly spent by their parents. Knows a case where three little sisters working for him, aged 9, 12 and 14, took home between them 14s a week, and the mother spent 7s on gin. Traced this out because he has a great dislike of drink shops.'

The *Rev. William Milton* had been the incumbent of New Radford parish for 17 years and in evidence said that 'The whole of my population, 6,000, is very poor. For instance, out of the whole number I do not believe that there are more than half a dozen families that can afford to keep a domestic servant.* Nearly all are employed in the hosiery and lace manufactures.' Young female labour was in such demand, he said, that he found it impossible to set up a girls' school larger than 20 or 30, most of whom came from a cotton factory where they were obliged to attend a school. 'The eldest girl who attends is not more than 13, the youngest are about 7, the age when they leave the infant school. Owing to the low state of trade comparatively few children were employed in small private houses, and this number is, I think, gradually diminishing. The lace warehouses now have a large part of the children's work, drawing, clipping, and scolloping, carried on on the premises. This must be very beneficial for the children, because in a large warehouse they are not employed at such tender ages, there is more order, and public opinion can be brought to bear more on their condition. But at the present time there is probably but little excessive work. That occurs only when business is brisk.'

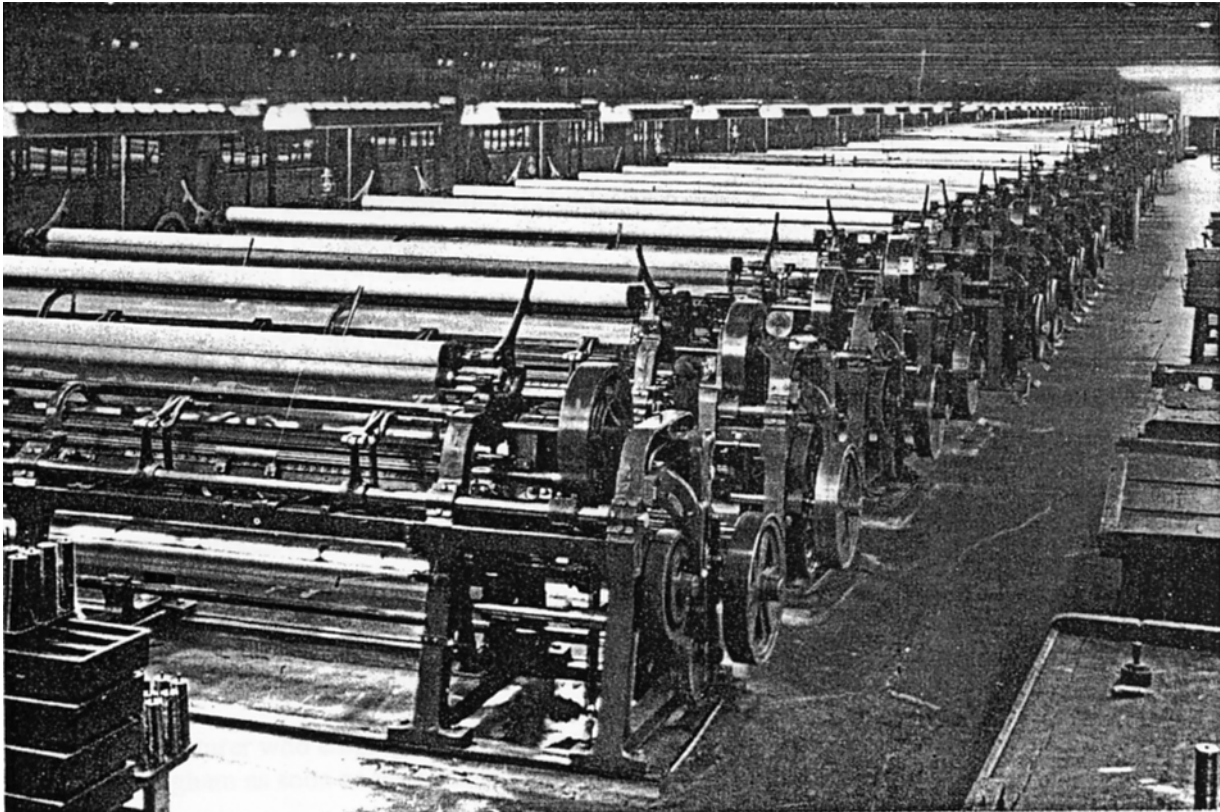
Mr Pratt, of Messrs Pratt, Hurst and Minett's lace warehouse, Stoney St, had a different slant on the situation:

'The condition of girls and children employed upon lace greatly needs improvement, and I wish that something could be done towards it. We take all the care we can, but the girls are open to very great temptation even in warehouses, and still more so from the streets and dancing rooms, and as they grow up as a rule with no training in household management, the choice of a suitable or even a virtuous wife so far becomes more difficult. It is of great importance that they should know better how to make home comfortable, and the men would not then seek for their comfort in public houses and elsewhere as they do. The only way that I can see to improve the condition of the working classes generally is to raise the females by education, as they have to bring up the next generation.'

He went on to say, however, that the law should lay down 'some broad principle' for the good of children: 'It must be broad, for any law interfering with the management of trade if too strict would be very mischievous and defeat its own end.' Another partner, *Mr Hurst*, declared that 'If they gave the girls more room for improving themselves we should ultimately get the benefit of this in their greater intelligence. At the same time it is only the youngest who most need this protection; and looking at the great proportion of our hands under the age of 18, I think that we should find it a more serious matter if the regulations applied to any over the age of 15, at which age they become at this work in many ways almost equal to women.' Progress, yes, but perhaps not at their expense or inconvenience.

One of their hands, *Elizabeth Crofts*, aged 14, whom Mr White described as 'a very pale, weakly girl', worked at a 'trapping machine' and said that her 'head aches very often, sometimes every day.' She

* Middle class families frequently employed maids for cooking, cleaning and other housework.



THE MACHINE TAKES OVER: The sheer number and width of these plain net machines illustrate the distance travelled from the time when lace net was made by hand, in strips of perhaps 4" or 5" width. The machine net could be used for appliquéing on Honiton motifs or to make other types of lace - e.g. needlerun.

worked from 8 am to 7.30 pm and sometimes 9.30. Mr White commented about her pay: 'Is very uncertain what she will get; the least is 4s 6d; most is about 6s 9d; 6s is about proper work. Gives it all to mother, because there are seven of them, and father does not live with them.'

At *Mrs Hall's*, a lace clipping house in Pennyfoot Street, where there was 'a place for boiling down refuse animal matter' whose smell had forced neighbours to leave, a boy and six girls worked at a clipping frame. Mr White said that he was 'interrupted' throughout his visit and eventually had to leave. 'I was told,' he wrote, 'that two sisters, aged 11 and 9, were the chief support of their mother, a widow and several young children. The younger one looked very wan and sickly.'

The desperation of many families is glimpsed in the way mothers and fathers would bring their children and plead with masters or mistresses to take them on. *Mrs Brandreth*, lace mistress of Hollow Stone, employed two children, six older girls and 25 women. She said that 'Last week a man (a glazier) asked her to take his child, "a sharp little girl, 5 last Friday"'. In the same week a woman brought her child, so little that she could not be above 5. It was the fifth or sixth time she had brought her. The mother said she had been out at work before, and that, no doubt, was true, for she took up the scissors and cut away in such a manner that she must, in witness's opinion, have been at it for at least six months.' Mrs Brandreth stated that 'To her knowledge there are very many poor parents who send their children to school, and others, who earn much better wages, who send them to work very young and drink all their earnings.' Mrs Brandreth gives more evidence on page 38.

In Halifax Place, Mr White spoke at length to *Mrs Gillesthorpe*, an overlooker for W. Marriott and Co, from whom we shall hear again. She explained that she employed about 20 to 30 women and girls, and never kept 'the young children, i.e. under about 12' past 9.30 in the evening, and 'if she can possibly spare them, she lets them go as much earlier as she can.' But, she went on, 'Sometimes the children themselves ask, "Please, may I stay," and then she lets them.' Mr White recorded:

‘Does not like taking children so young, but there are so many parents often out of work themselves in Nottingham that the earnings of the children are a great help, and mothers beg so for their children to be taken, and in busy times she is sometimes obliged to take whom she can get, and does not like to get rid of them afterwards.’

Masters and mistresses generally considered child labour essential to their businesses and put all manner of arguments to Mr White for continuing it, and for not introducing legislation which would make their employment less profitable. Many, though, made the point that if regulations applied to all they would be more acceptable. *Thomas Herbert*, who had a lace warehouse at Houndsgate, said that their hours were moderate and only rarely exceeded, and that in other houses long hours were ‘so rare as to render them practically harmless’; further, that restrictions over here would drive work to France. We shall look at this and other arguments in more depth later, but it is interesting that he finishes by saying that:

‘Restrictions on the labour of children would affect the business of lace finishing in only a slight degree as compared with any on that of young persons; but as regards the children themselves, any serious diminution or entire loss of their earnings might make the difference whether their families were able to support themselves or were thrown upon relief. We advance these objections not from an unqualified objection to any legislation, but from a feeling that things are very well as they are, and that any interference might involve an unknown and perhaps serious risk.’

A lace manufacturer who employed no children, *George Goodwin*, said that ‘Children begin to work at lace in Nottingham as soon as they can use their fingers’:

‘This morning, just at 8 o’clock, saw a little girl of apparently from 4 to 5 years old going to work with a little bag for her dinner, and often sees them as young as this in flocks in the same way going to and from their work.’

The children’s wages, Mr Goodwin said, were very low - from 1s to 2s 6d a week - and ‘Their employment and way of life make them very forward, and as soon as they get about 7s a week, they often make themselves quite independent of their parents.’ He thought it would be impossible ‘to learn all the facts in this employment by any inquiry, however full.’ One thing that many did make clear about the trade, though, as *Mr Milner* of Milner & Co’s lace warehouse, Stoney Street, put it: ‘Those who give orders will always be satisfied at once, at however short a notice, as Nottingham has always been an overproducing place, and there is always a supply ready to answer any demand, when it sets in, without forcing customers to wait.’

A manufacturer whose name Mr White omitted by request, and who with a partner were ‘finishers of fancy lace articles, such as shawls, falls, lappets, etc’ worked previously for many years in a large fancy lace warehouse. He said that ‘It would be a good thing if children were obliged to go to school, but we could not spare them during any part of the days.’ If there were legislation, they would give up employing children and get the work done in houses. ‘The work must be done somehow.’ He was nothing if not forthright in his views: ‘I think there is no right to limit the labour of girls above 12 or 14. Much more money is made in Nottingham on lace by girls between the ages of 12 and 20 than by all the women put together.’

A Plumtree Street lace manufacturer, *John Nicholson*, thought that ‘All matters of trade ought to be left as far as possible to themselves... Thinks however that no child ought to be allowed to be employed till a certain age, say 10 or 12... both in order to secure a certain amount of education and to allow of the limbs and strength being developed, as early work prevents both these results.’ As it was, a manufacturer ‘must employ young children’ or be disadvantaged. ‘For a like reason he must employ them for unduly long hours when trade requires it, and the wholesale houses in London and elsewhere push for orders, though long hours are in themselves very undesirable and leave no time for any

education except on Sundays, and possibly night schools, and children even then are tired and sleepy and unable to profit by it.'

Mr J.F. Squire, a Park Street bonnet front manufacturer, did not want regulations requiring children to be sent to school. For parts of the work, he said, 'children are quite as suitable as elder hands, and cost less. However, they are more troublesome...' He believed that the treatment of children in private houses depended on the disposition of the mistress; he had often heard some spoken of as very kind, but 'in other cases as very severe, and their work like slavery.'

We shall later visit some mistresses' houses but for the present let us hear from *Mrs Newton*, overlooker at Mrs Carver's, Brunswick Place, Kingston Street, composed of a house and yard 'with what appears to be a privy and ash pit, common to all the houses, with a gutter containing stagnant water and refuse running from it to the street'. Mr White comments that 'much care and kindness seemed to be bestowed on the children by the mistress and her daughter, who overlook them.' Mr White recorded of Mrs Newton: 'Has noticed that the children suffer very much from indigestion and improper clothing. Their parents do not manage well with them. They... let them have supper with themselves off hard pork, herrings, pickled cabbage, or other unsuitable food. Then they will dress them out in a large crinoline and smart summer frock, with perhaps hardly any bonnet, cloak or even shoes. Has had to buy flannel for one little girl who is clothed in this way even now (November), and suffers very much from rheumatism in consequence.' She added that 'Parents will buy two or three useless periodicals like Reynolds, etc, instead of paying 1d or 2d to have useful books from a library as they might. Often lets the children have books from a library, but they will not take care of them.'

Almost nothing is said in the evidence - which runs to over 50,000 words - about the children's recreational activities. Their main activity on their one day off, Sunday, appears to have been a visit to church or chapel. The three-day Goose Fair, dating back to the 13th century, is mentioned obliquely, such as when 10-year-old *Henrietta Spencer*, speaking of her health, said that she 'cannot stand a crowd, and kept out of it at the fair.' An 11-year-old at Ordynot & Oxpring's of Woolpack Lane, *Sarah Ency*, had been taught at day school to write: 'Larks in a nest.' Asked by Mr White about this, she said that larks were 'games in the street.' She had not heard of larks singing 'and has never been out in the country.' A lion 'walks in the carts at the show' - and Mr White explains that 'It is Fair time.'

However, an account of lace and hosiery manufactures running to some 5,000 words was furnished to Mr White by *W. Felkin*, still well-known for his book '*The History of the Machine-wrought Lace and Hosiery Manufactures*' (1867), who had been a Nottingham lace manufacturer with an input into the industry for over 50 years. He said, as regards recreation at that time:

'The established holidays in Nottingham and its suburbs are, in warehouses, Christmas Day, wholly, and two half-days following besides; half-day on Shrove Tuesday; whole day on Good Friday; at Easter two half-days; at Whitsuntide three half-days; at the Races, two half-days; and at Goose Fair, three half-days.'

However he goes on to say that: 'Probably these times of recreation are in the main allowed by those who labour at home.' So it is not certain how widely they were taken advantage of. The word 'holiday' is in itself a rarity in the report, occasionally used when talking about firms experimenting with half-day working on Saturday. One overlooker, however, simply identified as 'E.F.' at Adams in Stoney Street, said that 'The children often used to like working overtime as their mothers would allow them this money. They often brought me this to save for them to buy clothes or to spend on a holiday.' So they must have had some time off from their labours.

Another indication of the social position of the lace girls came from *Mr William Jarman*, actuary and manager of the Savings Bank, Nottingham, who explained:

'The depositors are the pick of the labouring classes in the country as well as the town. Would say from his experience that but very few of them are of the warehouse girl class. Most of the young women who save are servants. Finds that some of the lace manufacturers who have started penny banks in their warehouses do not seem inclined to keep them on. During the last year the Savings Bank closed 700 accounts, 350 of them under £5. The amounts were small, because the depositors generally had not saved till late in life, and so when a bad time came the whole savings were quickly used up.'

With disarming honesty, Mr Jarman, according to Mr White, 'Is of opinion that the plan of entirely closing factories*, as manufacturers have taken to doing, has had a wonderful effect during the last five year in inducing men to save more, as they have seen others just in their own position who had some savings able to hold on without breaking till work began again.' Mr White looked at the bank's books and said they confirmed the fact of 'few savings being made by the warehouse young women. In nearly all cases April, May, and June, the season when their highest earnings are usually made, showed smaller number of depositors than any other month, except perhaps November.'

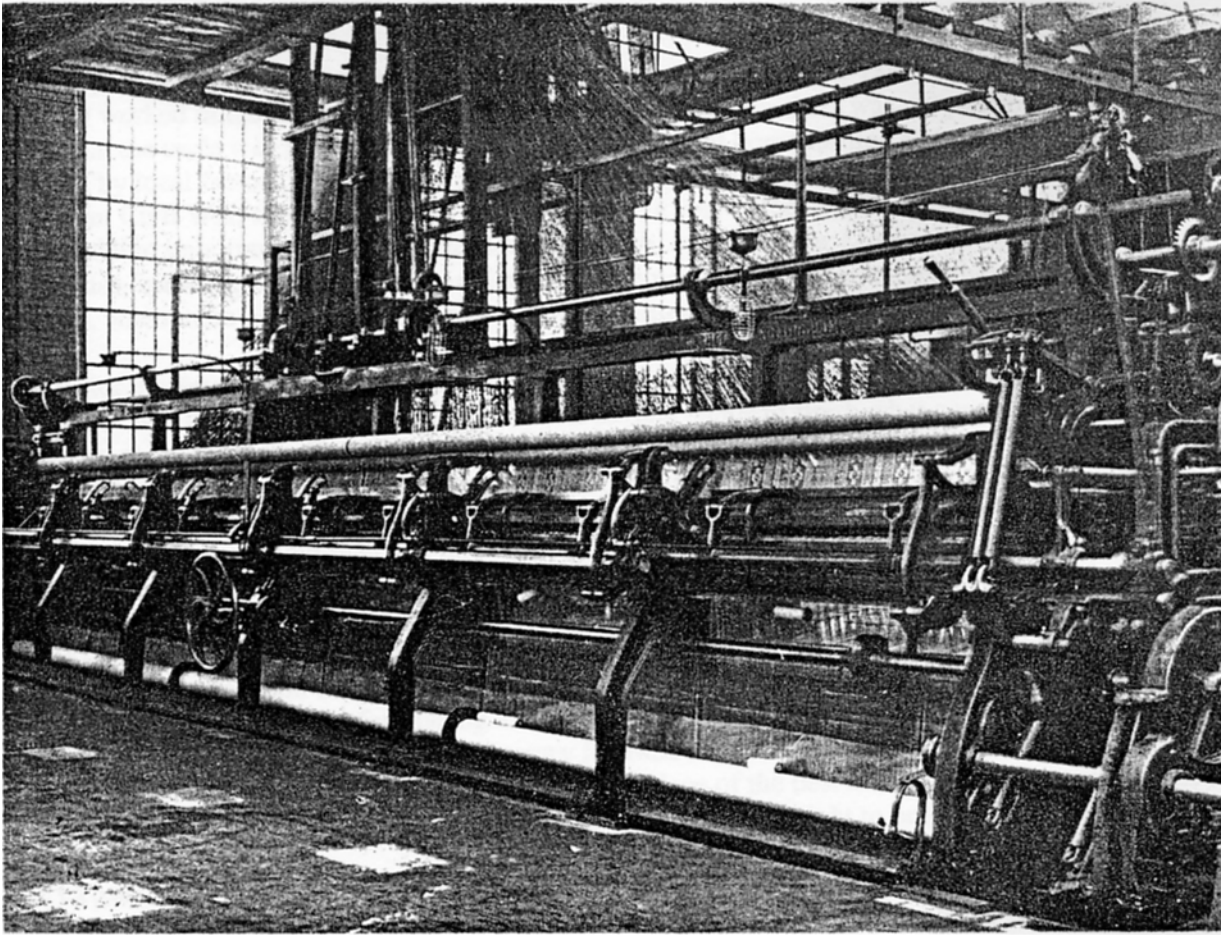
Mr E.R.Dann, with a lace warehouse in Stoney Street, said: 'A great evil in the business is that there is no regularity of employment, but the girls change about as they please, as they are taken at most places without any character [i.e. references]. Believes that as a class they do not save money. The fluctuation of their work prevents it, and the character of the work itself gives them a taste for dress. They sometimes buy dress beforehand by discount, and there are shops that do this business. Is speaking on these questions of labour not with regard to interest but from conviction, having thought on these points for many years.'

This point was underlined by an established overlooker, in the trade for 14 or 15 years and simply referred to as A.B., who said that 'sometimes the wages never come into the girls' hands at all, but are taken straight to the shop in the girls' names by the overlooker, who gets a commission from the shopkeeper. The girls then choose what they will have, unless the money be required for debts.' A.B. had been in the trade for 14 or 15 years, but had left because 'my health entirely gave way from the long hours and hard work... For a time I quite believed I was sinking, but rest is bringing me round.' She spoke about the terrible conditions of warehouses in which she had worked. The most common complaint among lace girls, she said, was 'fainting and hysterical fits... I have often seen the women and girls drop off their stools all in a moment in a faint. I have known a girl faint two or three times a day, and be badly in the same way for a week... Consumption, which is very common amongst them, and other illnesses, are I believe brought on in this way.' The hours were nominally 8 am to 7 pm, but they never finished before 8, mostly 9, often 10 and 'as late as 12, but not later. There are, however, warehouses where they work all night still in busy times for pressing orders. I have been told by girls that it is so where they work.'

But, A.B. went on:

'The high wages earned by these long hours do no good because they are so irregular. There is more drive in the business than there used to be, and a quick man who knows the business will make money very fast, but the workpeople suffer for it. It is hardly possible for the girls to form any system of laying by money. They never know what they will have beforehand. If they have money to spare, they nearly all spend it in dress, but it too often happens that their earnings are gone beforehand, being wanted to pay for dress and even for their living, which they could not pay for when work was slack. At those times they are often in great distress. But at any time they will, as is commonly said here, starve their inside to make their outside smart. For growing girls in particular this is very bad. I used to tell the girls they ought to live within their means, and put by something for growing old. But it was no good.'

* Presumably for limited periods during spells of poor trading.



EVERY PICTURE TELLS A STORY... and these two illustrate a key point about the lace finishing industry. As is shown on page 10, the number of workers needed in the finishing trades was three or four times that in manufacture. The output of machines was phenomenal, using very small amounts of labour. But once out of the factory the lace required far more workers to see it through the various stages needed to prepare it for sale. Above is a curtain lace machine producing vast lengths of curtaining of great width; below an engraving from the May, 1884 edition of the English Illustrated Magazine, showing how many girls and young women were needed to mend the lace - then 'in the brown' straight from the machine - and to reduce it to the required widths by drawing the threads separating the individual patterned lengths. The photograph, from the works of William Hooton Ltd, Nottingham lace machine machine builders, is from The Lace Makers' Society, by Norman H Cuthbert, published by the Amalgamated Society of Operative Lace makers and auxiliary Workers in 1960.



It is not possible to gauge accurately the number of lace finishers. In the 1860s it was estimated that 150,000 worked in the trade as a whole, but separating out the finishers was not possible, one problem being that the trade was seasonal, depending much on current home fashion and on orders from abroad affected by local factors. The numbers employed, therefore, would change from day to day. The American Civil War, for example, had started in 1861, a year before Mr White's work, and had disrupted that important market. *Samuel Merrick Sands*, of Copestake, Moore and Crampton's warehouse, speaking of the traditional quietness of the winter trade, commented that 'An American demand, when there is one, which of course now unfortunately there is not, helps to fill up this time'.

One factor, however, common across the field was, in the words of *James Hartshorn*, whose lace warehouse was in Mansfield Road, that: 'It takes several hands to finish what one can make.' *Joseph Richards*, manager of the Hartshorn finishing department, knew of this breakdown at first hand, since they manufactured lace from the winding of the original thread onto the bobbins, to the completion of the finishing. He explained that to make and finish 'an average piece of good fancy lace 30 racks in length' took five girls, four men and three lads a total of 20 days' work, whereas when it came to finishing the same quantity it took 42 girls some 37 days' work. So on this reckoning it took nearly double the number of days' work to finish the lace than to make it. However, some functions included on the making side were hand operations, with no power applied (i.e. drafting the patterns, punching the pattern cards, etc) and did not come under the Factories Act. Putting these into the equation, the final breakdown was 12 days for making as against 45 for finishing. Thus, on a rough estimate, between three and four finishers were necessary for each one working in manufacture. As *Henry Barnett*, of Barnett, Maltby & Co - who make 'a fancy lace of the best kind' - said: 'The greater cost of finishing is often in the proportion of pounds to half crowns' - i.e. eight to one.

The Census figures (tabled in the report) give a further insight, showing a large and growing excess of females over males. The 1861 figures for Nottingham District show a population of 118,429, with an excess of females of 9,885 - a figure which had grown over the previous ten years by 3,841. Apparently a pool of employment for young girls and children in lace finishing brought a steady influx to the metropolis from the outlying areas. Mr Felkin spoke of the youngsters being 'at a great distance from all their relatives, having come from the adjoining counties of Derby, Lincoln, Huntingdon, Cambridge, etc.' He estimated that in December 1862 'there are in the borough, suburbs, and out-parishes about 10,500 females in excess of males.' How the youngsters coped with what must have been traumatic changes in their way of life, and being away from their families, one can only guess. Only minute indications of a rural background appear in the report, such as when Mr White asked a six-year-old how long she had been with her present mistress, and recorded: 'Cannot tell how long she has been here. She came in apple time...' This mite lived half a mile off, mostly came by herself and 'does not lose her way. Comes at 8 and leaves at 8, or often 7... earns 9d a week for mother and ½d for herself to spend.'

Nor did the lacemakers as a group go unnoticed in the city. *Mrs Brown*, a lace mistress of Carrington Street, said that lace was 'nice work' but 'bad for the eyes.' She 'has travelled a great deal and knows foreign lace towns, but thinks there is not a town anywhere where there are so many short sighted girls as in Nottingham. Most are so. They go along the street blinking in a way that shows what they are.' The overlooker A.B. made the same point: 'Lace work is very "dree"* and causes a great deal of sick headache, and strains the eyes. At first the girls find it tire the eye very much, then they get used to it, but after some years, according to the difference of each person, most of them become shortsighted, often before 30 or 40.'

The finishing girls held a very lowly position in Nottingham society, but on their work depended a great deal of the city's prosperity. Before we have a closer look at what that work entailed, let us quickly look at the pounds, shillings and pence of their lives.

*The word 'dree' crops up often in the report. The girls used it to describe work which was tiring, monotonous or hard on the eyes, and also as meaning 'for a long time'

What was a penny worth?

To know that an 1860s lace finisher earned x shillings a week does not mean a great deal unless we know something of the background: what it would have bought in the prices of the time, and how far it would have gone towards providing the necessities of life. Decimalisation does not come into the problem - it is simply necessary to count the shillings and pennies earned and lay them off against the provisions bought. Of course, far fewer items made up the 'necessities of life' than today. There were, for example, no cars, radios, TV or cinema, no telephones or electrical appliances; shops would have sold the most basic of necessities, and the nearest they would have come to 'convenience foods' might have been a meat pie. Earning and spending was governed by the need to be clothed, fed and sheltered. A new bonnet might be a luxury, or a pint of porter a pleasure, but little else would be added to the basics. We cannot get an absolute, precisely- priced shopping list of the time, but the following example gives a close idea as to how a weekly wage might have been spent. It is only necessary to bear in mind that £1 was divided up into twenty shillings, with each shilling made up of twelve pennies or 24 half-pennies. Prices are expressed from 1s to 19s - i.e. one shilling to 19 shillings - and from 1d to 11d - one penny to eleven pence, with the halfpenny shown simply as $\frac{1}{2}$ d.

According to John Burnett*, a typical budget of a semi-skilled worker earning 15s for a family with three children in 1841- which would have altered little in the next two decades - was:

	s	d
Five 4-lb loaves of bread at $8\frac{1}{2}$ d	3	$6\frac{1}{2}$
5 lb of meat at 5d	2	1
$\frac{1}{2}$ cwt of coal		$9\frac{1}{2}$
40 lb potatoes	1	4
3 oz tea + 1 lb sugar	1	6
1 lb butter		9
$\frac{1}{2}$ lb soap + $\frac{1}{2}$ lb candles		$6\frac{1}{2}$
Rent	2	6
Schooling		4
7 pints of porter at 2d	1	2
Sundries		$5\frac{1}{2}$

	15	0

* *A History of the Cost of Living* John Burnett, Penguin Books 1969,

The journey from 'the brown'

To find the girls and young women responsible for finishing the machine-made lace we have to visit them in mainly three places: first, the dressing rooms; second, the warehouses; and third the so-called private dwelling houses, often a room or two, an attic or cellar.

As the lace came from the machine, in its raw state and said to be 'in the brown', it was first submitted to a process – 'mending in the brown' or 'rough mending' – to repair snags due to threads tangling or breaking in the manufacture. 'This,' said Mr White, 'is a work requiring great skill and very close attention. It is performed by females, some quite young.' The process varied with each type of lace, and from manufacturer to manufacturer, so that no hard and fast description could be given.

When ready to be finished it was sent, if cotton, to be bleached or dyed, white or coloured depending upon its intended final use. If silk, it would undergo a process to boil out the gum and, if necessary, be dyed. Most lengths of lace – both cotton and silk – had then to be 'dressed'* – 'i.e. stiffened by a liquid mixture, chiefly starch, which was spread and dried on it in the dressing rooms.' These were generally large areas where lengths of lace could be fully spread out on frames several feet wide. There were, said Mr White, about 30 sets of dressing rooms in Nottingham (apart from those within the manufacturers' own premises) and lace was sent from other towns to be dressed there, though that made by Heathcoat's in Tiverton was dressed on the premises.

The lace was either dipped in the dressing liquid, or stretched onto frames by the use of pins - a process known as 'straightening' - and the dress then applied at the edges and spread over the surface with brushes ('wetting') and smoothed out with light rollers ('rolling'). Commented Mr White: 'The substance of the lace is much increased by dressing. I have seen a kind the weight of which was trebled by it.' As the lace dried it shrunk if it were silk or stretched if it were cotton, with the sides of the frames moved closer together or wider apart as necessary. Either steam-powered or hand-held fans were then used to dry it. Most of the work in the dressing rooms was carried out 'by females, many quite young, and some of them children', commented Mr White, 'working in temperatures of 80 °F to 100°F, or higher. For 'Paris' dressing on bonnet foundations (according to *Mrs Cooper* of Cooper and Wain, dressers of Island St) 'one, two or three coatings of dressing are required, the first being applied by dipping the lace in the mixture, the others spread by wetting with brushes and rolling out after the piece is on the frame.'

Elizabeth Smith, a 24-year-old at J.L. Bottom's, dressers of Sherwood Hill, explained that 'Learners rack out, and strip off the pieces and "middle turnover," i.e. get under the piece as it is being taken off, if very broad, and support the middle. They have to step over the "rack bars" (which connect the opposite sides of the frame and move them in or out) and if these are high, as many of them are, it tears the clothes very much and besides is not decent.'

The dressing over, the lace was returned to the warehouse where several processes were undertaken by hand, mostly using needle and scissors. These included separating the breadths of lace, generally by drawing out a thread; further, more careful and finer mending; joining lengths together where flaws had been cut out; elaborating the patterns; pearling (presumably sewing on picot edges); grafting, or joining on borders; carding or jennying, which were different modes of folding pieces up, and finally setting off the lace to advantage by putting on facings of coloured paper, called 'specially finishing'.

In the previous few years advances had been made, particularly with the introduction of the jacquard

Linen and other materials are still 'dressed' today, though perhaps in a more refined fashion,. The result can be felt in the stiffness of such items as table and bed linen, and tea cloths.

by which punched cards allowed patterns, previously made by embroidery with a needle, to be produced by the machines. The superfluous threads running between the individual motifs were then removed by the girls and young women with fine scissors to produce a closer imitation of hand work. When done on the surface of the lace this was called 'clipping' and when done at the edges 'scolloping'. The lace was either held in the hand or stretched on a frame, when the finished piece was called 'frame-clipped'. These processes, said Mr White, were a principal branch of lace finishing and employed 'a very large number of young females'.

Many of these operations, though carried out in warehouses, the newer ones of which Mr White described as 'large and handsome buildings', could equally well be done in private houses, either by women singly or with their own children, or more commonly by 'second-hand mistresses' who employed women or girls to do it.

These processes kept thousands of young women, girls or children, employed between the dressing rooms, warehouses and mistresses' houses, with no laws to regulate their employment, either as to their hours of work, the age at which they could be employed, their wages or their physical working conditions.

Let us now stand next to the girls, as it were, while they work.

'Dressing' or 'getting up' rooms

Mr White's succinct commentary can hardly be bettered as an introduction to this section:

'The people much employed in these rooms have almost invariably a pale and bloodless face and skin; are many of them in constant perspiration, or, in the language of one girl, "sweat awful"; become languid and enervated, fainting being very usual; suffer much from exposure to cold air when not at work, especially on leaving, consumption from this cause being said to be common amongst them; and undue stimulus is given to other functions in females, leading to injurious consequences, moral as well as physical. In one dressing room a little girl, apparently not 14, was pointed out to me who had been brought back from cohabiting with a man, and on her return had expressed a wish to be "a bad girl altogether".'

'Dressing' or 'getting up' rooms were places where the stiffening or dressing was applied to the lace. This was the first major process it went through after coming from the machine 'in the brown'. It emerges clearly from the report that these rooms - some of them hundreds of feet long - were in general not only dirty places to work, but had an atmosphere so hot that it had a terrible effect on the health of the young workers.

The first impression Mr White had on going into W. and F. Dobson's lace dressing plant at Finkhill St was that, in contrast to the firm's new one in Great Freeman St, 'the walls of the staircase etc grimed with dirt from long want of cleaning. From my own observation it is clearly not the case that dressing rooms, whether walls, ceiling or floors, are cleaned as often as they need be, as stated by some persons.'

Mr John Webster, owner of a dressing plant in Dakeyne St, said that they 'could not possibly spare either the time or the money for having the place whitewashed or cleaned, even out of the busy times, and considering the space and the healthiness it is not necessary... Once in five or six years is sufficient.' Mr White reported that 'The floors, which are of plaster, are not ever washed, but the starch which drops from the lace is scraped off, unless they are busy, about once a month.'

In Lower Talbot St, *Mr John Lambert* - part owner of J. & W. Lambert's lace dressers - argued that 'Whitewashing these premises would cost £100, and I think that such a burden ought not to be imposed oftener than necessity requires... once in three years would be as much as health or appearance requires.'

The owners generally argued that the employment was healthy because, when the dressing had been applied to the lace, windows had to be opened in order to dry it, thus allowing in fresh air. *Mr Dobson* explained that 'For the silk a heat of about 80° is sufficient; for the thick cottons, about 90° or 95°. While the girls are at work on one side, the windows on the other side are always open. The fresh air dries the work... In my opinion the employment is healthy, which I attribute to the admission of so much fresh air and free perspiration.'

Mr John Thornley - lace dresser of Walker St, Sneinton - explained that 'The temperature required for this branch, which is cotton lace of different kinds, is about 80° or 86°, rarely above 80. For lace for foundations of bonnets, which wants Paris dressing, from 96° to 100°.' At Wright's of Dakeyne St, the temperature for silk quillings was 'not far from 100°; say, perhaps, 96°.' Here, *Jane Smith*, at 21, said that she did not faint, though others did. 'The thing which she is most subject to here is cramp. Has it when at work, and has to give over.' Mr White comments: 'Looks unhealthy and pinched.'

At Cooper & Wain's, dressers of Island St, Mr White found 'small rooms and low ceilings' with steam pipes along the ceiling as well as near the ground, giving great heat 'close to the heads of the workpeople, which is sometimes complained of.' He said that 'The work done in these rooms is all Paris dressing and the usual heat was said to be 85° or 90°, but the thermometer was broken. My own stood in each room at 100°.' He went on to say that the masters did not estimate the heat scientifically 'and great surprise was expressed on my drawing attention to the actual heat.'

Joint owner *Mrs Cooper* said that she had lost a good deal of work the last summer because she would not keep the works going more than 'about 13 hours or so' a day. Now 39, she had started at 9 years old and worked from 5 am till 12 at night 'very often indeed. They thought five hours bed quite a treat if they were busy.' She said that 'All this work never hurt her' and alleged that 'Girls sometimes buy something as, e.g., antimonial wine*, to make themselves poorly if they want a half holiday.' She pointed out a woman who she said had done this. Mr White made no comment.

He was impressed by J.L. Bottom's dressing rooms on Sherwood Hill, which was on high ground and had roof ventilation. He took readings with both a wet and a dry thermometer and stated that 'A difference of only 3° between the two bulbs at this high temperature shows a moisture about as oppressive probably as that on a very close heavy summer day, such as just before a thunderstorm.' The temperature in the room rose by his thermometer to 90° though the women said it was 'middling now' and was commonly from 90° to 95°. 'But,' Mr White observed, 'even here under favourable conditions the effects of the employment were apparent. When I entered the room in the dinner interval many were languidly lying at full length or sitting at half length on the floor, one with the front of her dress entirely thrown open, another sitting on a stool with visible perspiration on her face; and the general whiteness of arm and transparency of complexion were very noticeable.'

Fanny Wildbore, 17, who had been there six months, said they regularly started at 6 am and worked till 10 pm, sometimes 10.30. 'At first she found it very hot and could hardly stand it till after about four or five weeks. Had the headache very bad for a week or two, and for about a week her legs ached but did not swell, nor did she feel faint (Coughs badly.) Has got a very bad cold now. Was very bad two nights ago with pain in her head and her throat so sore, and yesterday trembled all day. Does not know how she caught it, but it may be because her boots are very bad.' This young woman had 5s set wages, increasing each three months.

Mr Bottom said that he had 'found the employment fairly healthy. I attribute this partly to the great

*A concoction which contained antimony, a poison. The SOED refers to antimonial as 'A medicine containing antimony'.

space inside and out and good ventilation. Faintings are not frequent, and are generally traceable to want of care and neglect of early treatment, even though it be offered.' There were facilities there for washing, together with 'a library, chiefly of religious books... much read until they became known. Many were sitting or reclining about reading books, papers, etc, or doing needle work. A group of five were engaged in reading Bibles which they brought with them.'

At his next port of call - F.F. & A. Cleaver, lace dressers of Wilford St - Mr White found that 'Fainting and faintness are common as well as colds. Two of the children cough very frequently. Several of the girls employed are unusually young for such work, and the meals are taken by many in the dressing rooms themselves. I saw some of the children beginning their dinner in one of the dressing rooms before I left it.' The children there were aged between 11 and 13.

Mr Cleaver 'thinks that the work is healthy, because they have a sick fund from which any one can draw after three days' absence from illness, but that seldom happens; perhaps once in three months. Medical men have told him that it is much more healthy than a warehouse, where so many are stewed up together so.' His young hands, however, told a different story. *Catherine Thorpe*, aged 13, said that if they were busy they would work from 6 or 7 am to 8 pm. 'They have their meals in the workroom here, only one or two of them ever going home for them. Sometimes the women sit out on steps (of the stone staircase). Some of them are badly at times. Her sister, 24, had been home sick for a week and a friend, *Bella Walker*, often fainted: 'A many of them do.' Mr White commented of Catherine Thorpe: 'Is very pale and thin; looks ill fed.'

He then recorded the following :

"*Sarah Thorpe*, age 12- Fell down and went into fits here. Often has to go home badly. Often has bad cold and cough. Does not know how she gets it, but sometimes 'we go out of the room without our things on.'

Helen Hayward, age 11- Here a year. Has fainted two or three times.

Alice Wilson, age 13 - Fainted on the steps while going from one room to the other. Many times feels faint without really fainting. Gets a drink of water from the tap then and goes out on the steps. Many of them do the same when they feel very badly. Often has colds.

Edith Gricombe, age 12 - Has had a bad cold and cough for a week or two. Often has it.

Harriet Wright, age 12 - Finds it very hot. It is very cold now (83°). Feels sickly at times.

Emma Brown, aged 12, who has gone to dinner, has very bad fits here 'like as if she was dead.'

Mr White then asked *Bella Walker* (aged 18) directly if she did not faint, recording that she 'was unwilling to answer'. But a colleague - *Mrs Pilkin* - said that Bella 'often faints'. 'Has been very bad all this week, and fainted two or three times. Is sometimes well for a week or so. They have to go outside when they are faint, and when they come in "the nasty feel comes on again".' Witness has often felt very ill herself, but used to be worse than she is now. 'It's a nasty low feel and fainty.' Thinks it is the heat. She believed that Dobson's Finkhill St plant 'is the unhealthiest place in town, because it is so low and the heat so close to you.'

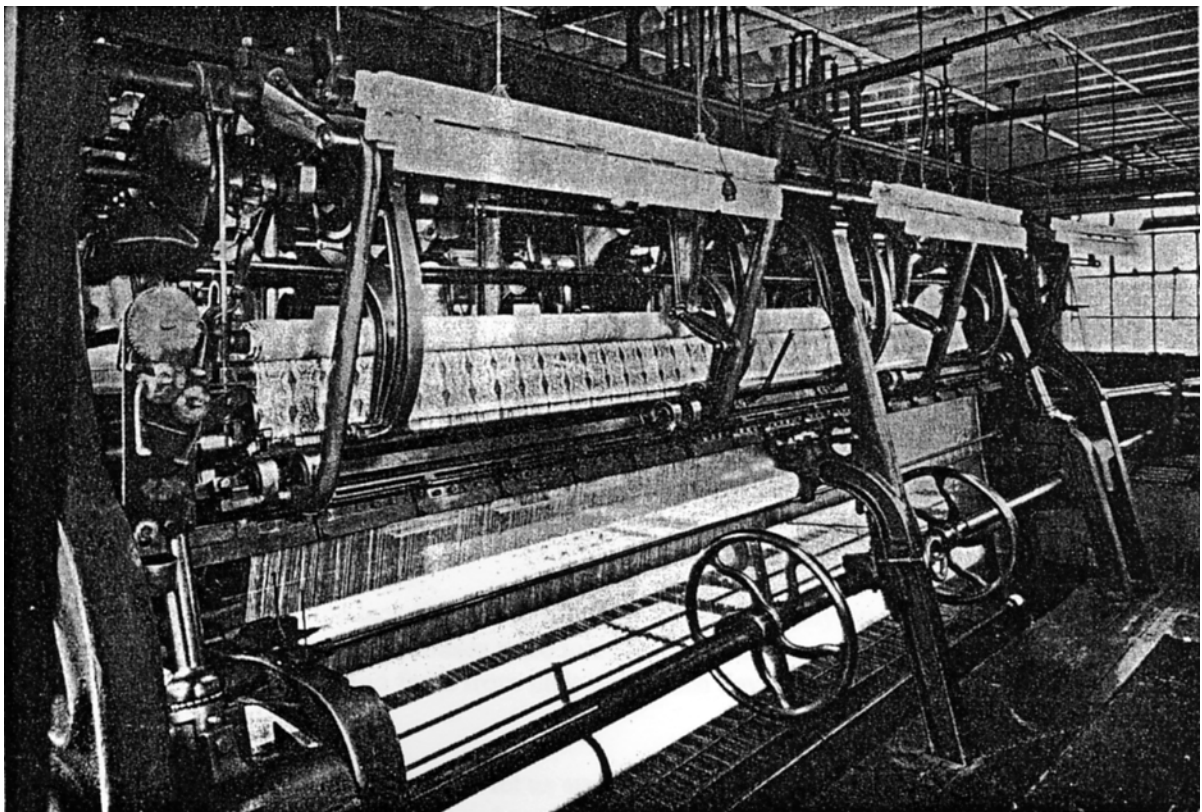
Mr White then put these complaints to Mr Cleaver, who 'thought at first that it could not be so common, but that as regards one of the little ones it might be from cunning, though I could not learn how, and that in the other cases it must be from their not having enough solid food, and that the

witness Bella Walker in particular maintained a great part of her family and probably was in want of food.'

Harriet Shadd - of whom Mr White said: 'This girl has no colour at all in her cheeks' - had been in four dressing rooms and 'many a time been in them as late as 12, especially on Saturday night... Has seen girls faint by the frame side, but never did so herself. It was chiefly the younger ones.' Mr White comments: 'This witness looks worn and thin.' A colleague, 15-year-old *Ann Hart* had seen one or two faint 'at odd times' but not very often. She said that she is 'not very tired. It is when they get old that they get tired. Means by old "getting [on] in years. About 34".'

17-year-old *Sarah Ann Ford* said that at Dobson's the hours were 8 am to 8 pm, with an hour for dinner and half an hour for tea. 'There is no washing place or towels,' she said, 'but they go into the dipping room and wash the black off with vitriol [possibly sulphuric acid] and water.' Previously she had been at Webster's where the work 'made her uncomfortable at first, and she was very ill; was faint, sick, and had headaches... The others were bad... When they fainted they were carried out into the office, and came back next day or in a couple of days perhaps... They had very few breaks in their work, and she never sat down. She used to feel very tired at night.' Mr White comments: 'This girl has no colour at all in her cheeks.'

The heat and humidity were, of course, one aspect of the working conditions. Another was the number of hours worked. 17-year-old *Sarah Ann Marshall*, who worked at J. B. Carter's, said that she was better off dressing than when she did clipping. 'It made her hot at first,' recorded Mr White, 'but it did not make her feel faint or make her back or chest ache; but she has had to go home for a sick head ache, once for a day or two. There are not many that faint now. Has seen "odd ones" faint, but they had left.' She had a set wage of 8s, with 2d an hour overtime. 'When her set wages were 6s 6d she has got 9s 6d with overtime... Has this for herself, and gives all the rest to mother.' But to earn the extra 3s



THE LEVERS MACHINE: This type of machine was noted for its ability to allow the creation of extremely complex patterns. As can be seen, this machine was producing lengths of fancy edgings. The job of the finishers was to separate these into individual strips, by means of drawing out the threads which joined them. Photo by kind permission of Birkin & Co, Nottingham.

(i.e. 36 pence) she would have had to work an extra 18 hours on top of her normal day of 8 am to 6.30 pm – about 72 hours a week in total.

A co-worker, 11-year-old *Catherine Levers* - who carried boxes of 'dress' to the lace racks - earned a flat 3s a week 'and had got 4s 7d' - i.e. the 11-year-old had worked nine and a half hours overtime. She said she had gone to Sunday school 'till she had got no clothes. Father was a stockener and had plenty of work.' Mr White recorded: ' Finds it very hot but is never badly. Some of the "big uns" are. They faint and tumble down. Has seen two or three or four do so. Has not headaches, but it makes her "sweat awful." It did all day at first, and some of the others do very much. It is a deal hotter sometimes than it is today. Only have the windows open when washing the "pins", i.e. the "frames".' He then added: 'This girl after being some time in a cool place with me was wiping the perspiration from her forehead. Small red veins showed over the surface of her skin, a large part of her neck and breast being left bare through her ragged clothes. Her eyes were bloodshot.'

Not all seemed to be affected by the heat and moisture. For example, *Eliza Collins*, working at Bottom's and appearing to be about 27, said that 'When she gets home has to shut the door and keep a good fire to keep herself warm'. Of her Mr White comments: 'This woman attracted my notice by the remarkable fact of her having a healthy complexion. Some perhaps did not want to appear in bad health, such as *Emma Frost*, at Lambert's, who said that some of her colleagues fainted: 'They faint quite away.' But 'This work suits herself a deal better than sitting in a house [i.e. a finishing house] but is thirsty work. Has good health and appetite.' But Mr White adds: 'This witness is not healthy looking, and is wasted and old looking for a woman of 24.'

The warehouses

When the lace had been dressed it was then ready to be fashioned further and eventually put into its final form for selling. These stages were done either in 'warehouses', some of which were quite enormous buildings, or in second-hand mistresses' houses. Many processes were involved, including:

1. Separating the breadths of lace - generally by drawing out threads;
2. Mending snags, etc, which had developed in the manufacture or dressing;
3. More careful and finer mending;
3. Joining lengths together where flaws had been cut out;
4. Completing, or further elaborating, patterns;
5. Pearling, presumably sewing on picot edgings;
6. 'Grafting' or joining on borders;
7. Carding or jennying - folding the lace;
8. Setting off the lace to advantage, by the use of facings of coloured paper;
9. Clipping, or removing surplus threads from the surface of the lace, between the motifs;
10. Scolloping, the same as 9, but at the edges;
11. Bonnet-front making.

The factories which made the lace 'in the brown' were situated largely on the outskirts of the city, where most people lived, but warehouses were mainly in the centre, so that the children had to walk from one to three miles back and forth from their work each day - though, as we shall see, some made provision for longer stays.

To introduce ourselves to the girls' work let us start with a visit to Thom. Adams & Co's warehouse on Stoney St, which Mr White described as 'a remarkable instance of the regard shown by many employers for the welfare and comfort of their people.' The building was 'very large and planned so as to give as large a frontage as possible to the outer air, a point of great importance.' A dining room was

used by about 100 people each day, with 'a woman being employed to prepare and serve their meals, there being a steam oven and all proper appliances for the purpose, teacups, etc, being supplied.' A wash room and a separate closet was provided for each workroom, and 'another tea room for men.' Completing the picture was a chaplain giving a short service before work each day, a book club, a sick club (at 1d a week) and a savings bank.

Mr White then reports: 'Alterations have been made in parts of the building to increase its healthiness, and the bonnet front department, in which a large amount of heat and bad air is unavoidable, placed at the top of the building where the greatest amount of air and ventilation seems obtainable. It appears, however, from the statement of the girls that the windows cannot be, or are not, opened, and that the girls suffer from the heat and bad air. The establishment is commonly spoken of as one in which arrangements of all kinds for the welfare of those employed have been carried to their fullest extent.'

Its general superintendent, *Thomas Cave*, argued against long hours, for when many people were assembled together and gas was used, the rooms became hot and close. 'In many warehouses little children are occasionally kept till 10 or 11 pm, the rooms becoming hotter and closer all the time.' His thinking regarding the girls was as follows: 'From 8 to 6.30 is long enough for them, and they should not be kept later. If they are they have no time to do anything to their clothes, &c at home, and have to throw all this off till Sunday. But if the hours are shortened it will not be necessary or desirable to have a Saturday half holiday. It must of course diminish the wages.' He added at the end of his interview that 'Consumption is very common amongst warehouse girls, and some have died from it here.'

This was also raised by the *Rev. Edward Davies*, chaplain at the firm for seven years, who said that in recent times he had seen an improvement in the 'moral character' of the children. 'Formerly girls often had to leave from being with child, but this is now very uncommon. There is also a good deal of kindness shown by them to one another. Whenever a girl is ill and without friends of her own to nurse her, her companions collect money and will give up their own work in turns to attend her day and night. Unhappily illness is not infrequent. Consumption is unusually common amongst the girls here. In the last month I have attended four cases of this disease amongst them, of which two have ended fatally, and there are two or three other cases of a very like character. Cases of weakness of chest and general debility are very common indeed. These do not, however, generally go to the hospital. A mother lately complained to me that the health of her child, a girl of about 11, who was well and in strong health when she came, was quite undermined, and that she had brought back her dinner uneaten. I attribute this bad health to the girls when young working late in hot rooms, either in warehouses or in private houses in the town, in which lace is finished.'

Annie Lawrence, aged 13, rolls - i.e. turns a roller for pressing lace: 'It is very hard work if the lace is thick and wants a deal of pressing... It tires her more than it used to do. Feels very tired at night when she has rolled all day, and it makes her side ache sometimes. Never was very strong, but "there are a many weaker". Cannot breathe when she is not well, but that is only for a bit.' Annie 'has 5s set wages and 1d a night for working till 8. Mother lets her have her overtime.' Mr White commented: 'Looks very delicate.'

A fellow-worker, 9-year-old *Ada Cooke*, had a simple but quite horrifying tale to tell: 'Has gone out to lace work for 2½ years, and worked before that at drawing for mother at home. Went first to a bonnet front place (*Hill's*), which was very hot. She went one day and came back home with a sick headache for a week. Went back and had to leave in a few days again and go to bed. She had such a sick headache she could hardly stand. She was quite well before she went to this place. Then went to bonnet fronts at *Marriott's*. That was very hot, and she was often bad there; but mother took her away because father said the place had such a bad name. Went to another place and then came here. Is often bad here, but not so often as at the other places. Goes for about a week and is ill. Does not eat much at any time. "Screws" here and finds it less hot. Has set wages, 2s 6d. Saves a 1d or 1½d, and "it will be in the bank" when she has enough; will like to be in it she thinks; would like now.'

Another problem many children had to face was that of being fined. Mr S. Wills, of Broadway, who ran a lace warehouse, said that 'The mistresses, besides paying lower, have a way of putting on forfeits for injuries and stoppages of work beyond what they have to account for themselves.' *Sarah Parnell* pointed out that they were charged for being late: 'Five minutes were allowed, but if they came six minutes late an hour was taken; if an hour late, two hours.'

10-year-old *Sarah Savage* was late for chapel that morning and had to pay ½d fine. Many others were late, too, and Mr White remarks that 'it was during the great fair.' She earned '4s all but a penny' and was 'paid on Friday evening by one of the gentlemen, and gives back any forfeits to the overlooker who is by to count the money.' Next to her, *Harriet Bailey*, aged 11, 'gets from 3s 7d to 4s 2d, but does not put any in the savings bank because "there are so many of us" (12 altogether, eight younger than herself) at home. Father is a stockener. Her "second mother is very good".'

Then comes *Eliza Riley*, aged 14, who is an exception - she goes errands and only sometimes works in the factory. 'This girl,' said Mr White, 'looked much healthier than the others. The warehouse errand girls, as I have observed and heard remarked, generally have some healthy colour, which others who are never out seldom have.' The streets were clearly healthier than the factory.

Paris dressing was seen as a particularly unhealthy area of work. Mr. S. Wills, who ran a lace warehouse at Broadway, said that 'The rooms where this is done are very injurious to health, so much so that many will not work in them at all, and in one case that he knows of young Irish women are brought over yearly for the purpose. Few can stand it more than five years. A dresser has told witness himself that he would not give much for any who had been at it ten years.'

The heat, and as we shall see the gas, were unhealthy - perhaps deadly - aspects of the work. Another was the eyestrain from such operations as mending or clipping. *Elizabeth Barry*, at 17, had been at Barnett, Maltby's warehouse for nearly five years and was a mender, chiefly of black net: 'It is very dree if you come to sit at it a many hours; makes you feel giddy when you get up from it, because you have to stoop over it so. Can see the work by gas light, because the gas is very strongly lighted. Sees black better than white by gas light, because she passes the lace over her finger in mending, and if it is white it looks all white. Is in very poor health. Her heart is very bad, and gives her bad pain, from which she is not often free. But she suffers with headache more than anything else, and is hardly ever a day free from it, but she always keeps on at work. Was delicate as a child at home, but became more so after working here towards a year.'

She said that the room was hot in summer, and that the 'steam heat does not suit her, and the gas light makes the room very hot and her head ache more. A many others complain of it making their heads ache, the elder ones as well. One who sits next to her suffers very much from her head and thinks it is from the steam.' As to hours, she had 'worked from 7 am to 10 pm for a week, and for a month together', with all hours after 7 counting as overtime. 'This witness,' commented Mr White, 'is very pale, with weak voice.'

A co-worker, *Elizabeth Fisher*, also 17, clipped black lace. 'Has to look very closely at it all day or she would cut and spoil it and have to pay for the mending. A number is put on the lace opposite to the piece which each clips. When you have less attention, as when you are tired, you cut it much more. Has very bad sight. At night when the gas has been lighted a bit, can hardly see at all. If she did not take her eyes off sometimes the work "would go all in a piece" and she would not be able to see and would cut it all in pieces. If she looks dree at her work in the day-time she cannot see any more than at night... her eyes have been bad for about four years. She has clipped for seven... Has been troubled very much with the headache, especially lately, and also with the tic (an involuntary twitching of the muscles, accentuated under stress). Thinks the headaches come from her having been knocked down by a horse eight years ago. Her back was not hurt. Scarcely a day passes but what she has her headache.'

'Gaufring' - sweat and gas

The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary gives 'goffer', from the French 'gaufrer', to 'stamp with a patterned tool', and expands this to 'make wavy, flute, or crimp (a lace edge, a frill, etc) by the use of a heated iron or similar instrument.'

Ada Cooke, at Adams, whose experiences we have noted, mentioned going 'to bonnet fronts at Marriott's'. In his report, Mr White spoke of bonnet front making - a recent branch of the lace making industry - as being 'of a peculiarly unhealthy kind,' carried on principally by young girls.

'For this purpose,' he wrote, 'lace quillings are pressed into a sort of frill shape or plaits by being passed over rollers in what is called a "gaufring machine" - a small stove highly heated by gas, over or close to which the girls work, no escape being provided for the gas. On placing my thermometer on the knee of a young girl engaged in this work in the light of the gas, which fell on the whole of her body from the waist downwards, it rose to 148°, and at the opening where the hand is placed to draw out the lace, nearly to 150°, the highest that the thermometer would allow... Other machines or presses also heated by gas or steam pipes, in the proportion often of about three to a common (i.e. single) gaufring machine, are used for "making up" these frills into bonnet fronts, and the latter machines are stated to be more injurious than the former, though the smell and heat are less striking. This employment is believed by all, and admitted by the manufacturers, to be very unhealthy.'

At one of the factories, Mr White had been told that the quantity of gas consumed in a summer quarter of the year by two small gaufring machines and six making-up machines, in a small room of less than 4,500 cubic feet - i.e. perhaps 15 x 30 x 10 feet - was 58,000 cubic feet, or 743 cubic feet flowing into the room each day. On winter days it was 892 cubic feet. His conclusion was that 'the quantity of gas let loose into this room without any means of escape beyond two small holes knocked in the ceiling, which over the gaufring machines is not more than 8 feet high, equals in a winter day nearly a fifth, in a summer day nearly a sixth, of the whole space of the room, and in this room at least 17 persons are employed. I have, however, felt bonnet front rooms much more oppressive than this with gas, and of a higher temperature. At this work complaints of sick headache are very common, and at one place several cases of fainting are stated.'

Some employers were conscious of the problem and took steps to ameliorate its effects on their workers. At Copestake, Moore and Crampton's, in Houndsgate, the manager said that 'In the bonnet front rooms, where an amount of impure air is necessarily produced by the use of so much gas, the work is never allowed to be continued after the regular work hour under any pretext whatever, not even for a special order. That is the rule of the place, and it must be kept to, even if the order go elsewhere.'

At Marriott's, where Ada Cooke had worked, Mr White found five gaufring machines in a 'passage room' and another 29 'trapping and making-up machines, all heated by gas.' If all were in use, he said, 'the amount of heat and bad air must be great.' 14-year-old *Cordelia Tattersall* said: 'It is very hot in here in the summer. Steaming (holding the lace in the steam) is very hot, but gaufring is hotter because it is "always one heat".' It made her feel moist in the summer but she had always 'stood it pretty well'. Some 'odd ones' who were delicate felt poorly from the heat and had to go home 'but they got well if they were away an hour or so.' As for her, she 'seldom has headache or feels sickly.' Cordelia earned 5s 6d set wages, and got 1d an hour for overtime, and the hours varied from six, seven or eight in the morning, till 8 or 8.30 in the evening and 'does not remember working till 9'. Mr White pressed her and she admitted staying 'odd nights' till 9, and 'thinks not until 10.' *Elizabeth Grundy*, aged 10, 'Has a sore throat now, but does not often have cold or headache.' She worked until 9 in the evening if things were busy, and the previous winter once until 10. 'In winter has come sometimes at 7, sometimes at 6, and stayed on the same days till 9.' Her wages were 3s 6d a week, with ½d an hour -

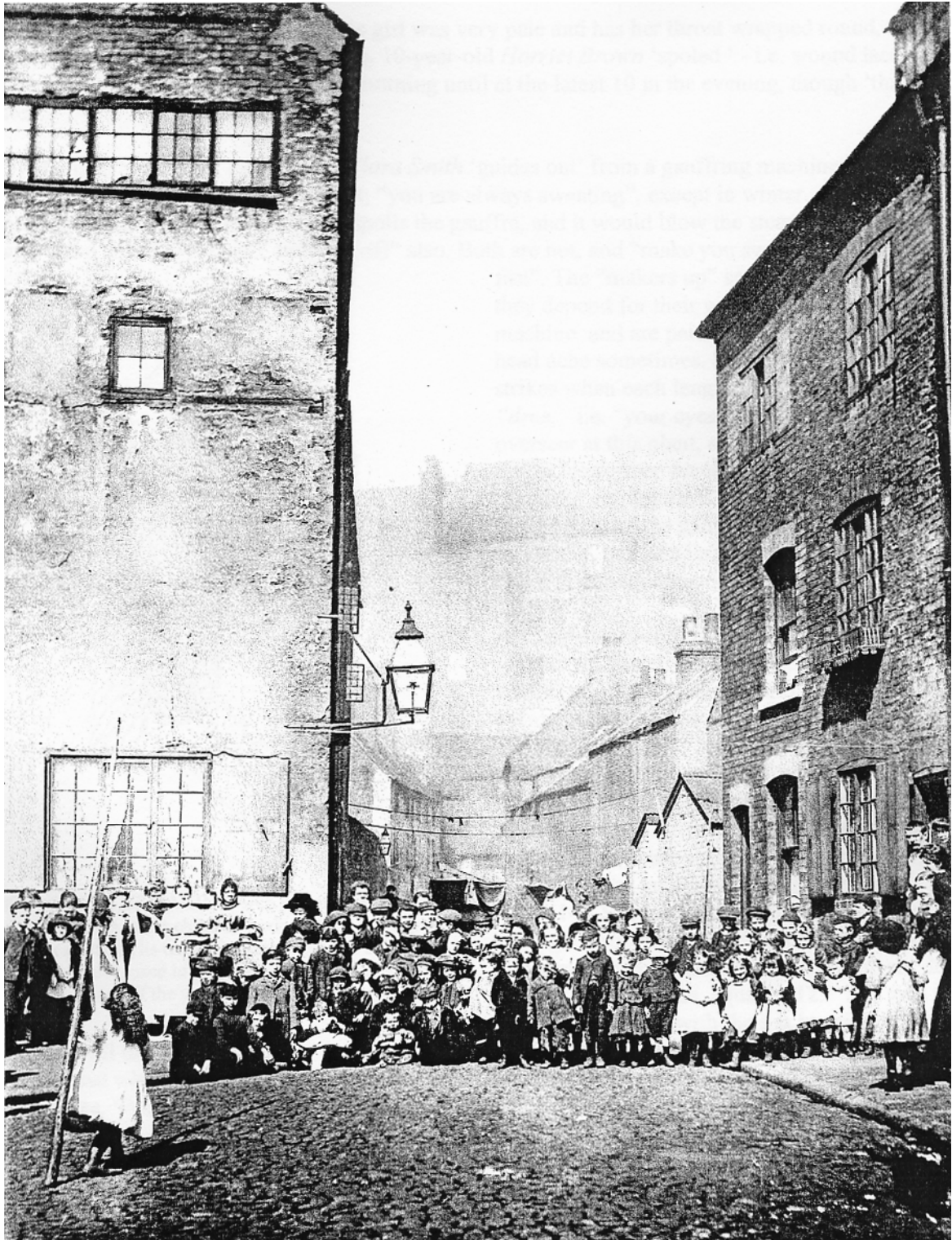


PHOTO-CALL IN KNOTTED ALLEY! 'One of those new-fangled contraptions where the bloke puts a black cloth over his head and looks at you through a camera, and later on you see yourself in a paper!' And so they all turned out, young and not so young. On the left are some of the lace drawers who posed separately outside their homes (see page 27). On the extreme right a husband, replete with moustache, guards his front door with a stern look - unlike the children who thought it was just the best bit of fun they had had for a long while. **Photo by kind permission of City of Nottingham Leisure and Community Services Local Studies library.**

overtime. Mr White commented: 'This girl was very pale and has her throat wrapped round, as had some of the others also.' Her colleague, 10-year-old *Harriet Brown* 'spoiled' - i.e. wound lace on a light frame - from as early as 6 in the morning until at the latest 10 in the evening, though 'that is not often.'

At Adams in Stoney St, 12-year-old *Clara Smith* 'guides out' from a gauffring machine, of which there were seven. 'Guiding out is the hottest; "you are always sweating", except in winter. They cannot open the windows because the damp spoils the gauffre, and it would blow the steam into the "guider out's" face. Used to "screw" and "cut off" also. Both are hot, and "make you sweat if you work at all



BONNET FRONT MAKING, with its harsh effects on the health and lives of the children working on the gauffring machines, had as its end-point the production of fluted materials which, used in the making of fashionable bonnets, such as this, set off the wearer to good advantage.

machines all day.' She worked at "running on" in a room with five girls and with no machines, but she felt the heat when she went into the machine room, and the others complained very much of it and had head aches. 'Believes the work is very injurious to health.'

Also at Castlegate was William Henry Morrison's whose owner was the inventor of the machines then used for 'making up' bonnet fronts. He explained that the 'endless chain gauffring machines' had been invented some 15 years back - 'before which time a machine like a crimping board was used'. The new devices would each supply two, possibly three, making up machines with the necessary bonnet parts: 'All [machines] are heated by gas and much in the same way, i.e. by a row of gas jets beneath the machine; but by introducing air into the gas tube less gas is consumed, and there is less smell, though the air around seems to be made more dry and greater heat can be produced.' A room with gauffring machines, he said, 'feels much hotter and smells much worse than a room with only making up machines in it.' The making up room had more space because several operations had to be carried on there. The gauffring machine rooms needed only 'spoling' and measuring, which were sometimes done in one process. 'To anyone not used to it, it is almost intolerable,' Mr Morrison said, adding that he had tried to keep his rooms cooler by using ventilators 'but the people say they do not like it, and invariably shut the ventilators up.' He said, however, that 'the work which would be supposed likely to be most unhealthy, viz., gauffring, seems least so from his experience.' Most of them in the gauffring

fast". The "makers up" scold if you don't, because they depend for their work upon the gauffring machine and are paid by the piece. It makes her head ache sometimes. Staring at the bell which strikes when each length is to be cut makes you "dree," i.e. "your eyes seems funny".' An overseer at this plant, simply identified as E.F. said that at his former warehouse 'the mothers who asked for employment for their children used often to complain of the gauffring as being so very unhealthy, and that they would sooner keep their children at home than let them go to that.'

At Castlegate Mr White visited James Scott's lace warehouse, which he described as 'merely a house, a small number of hands working in two small rooms, finishing lace edgings.' Here he met *Mary Snowden*, who at 23 had come from London and was 'learning jennying'. In London she had worked at Usher's, Goswell Road, a bonnet front maker. It was a 'private house with two work rooms. There were about 40 women and girls altogether, the youngest about 10, and about 14 under 14.' She went on to tell him that 'there were three gauffring machines, which the youngest children turned by hand, and there were six double making-up machines, equal to 12.' She said that 'it was indeed hot with the gas burning in the

rooms 'have remarkably good appetites, and two girls who have been in very bad health before they came here improved considerably on going into it. One had been given over by the doctor as incurably consumptive, but she is now much stronger and is at work, seldom having to leave it, though at first she rarely could stay more than a couple of days at a time at work. Possibly the great dryness of the air may suit her.'

'But,' Mr Morrison had continued to Mr White, 'he never found anyone, unless they were very strong, able to stand working at a making-up machine for any length of time. Many have knocked up* at it.' Children seemed to suffer less than might be expected, but 'of three young women who have died since leaving here, two did not work at the machines at all, and the third who did died of an abscess, which may have been hastened, but which the doctor said was not originally caused, by her working the treadle of the making up machine with her foot.'

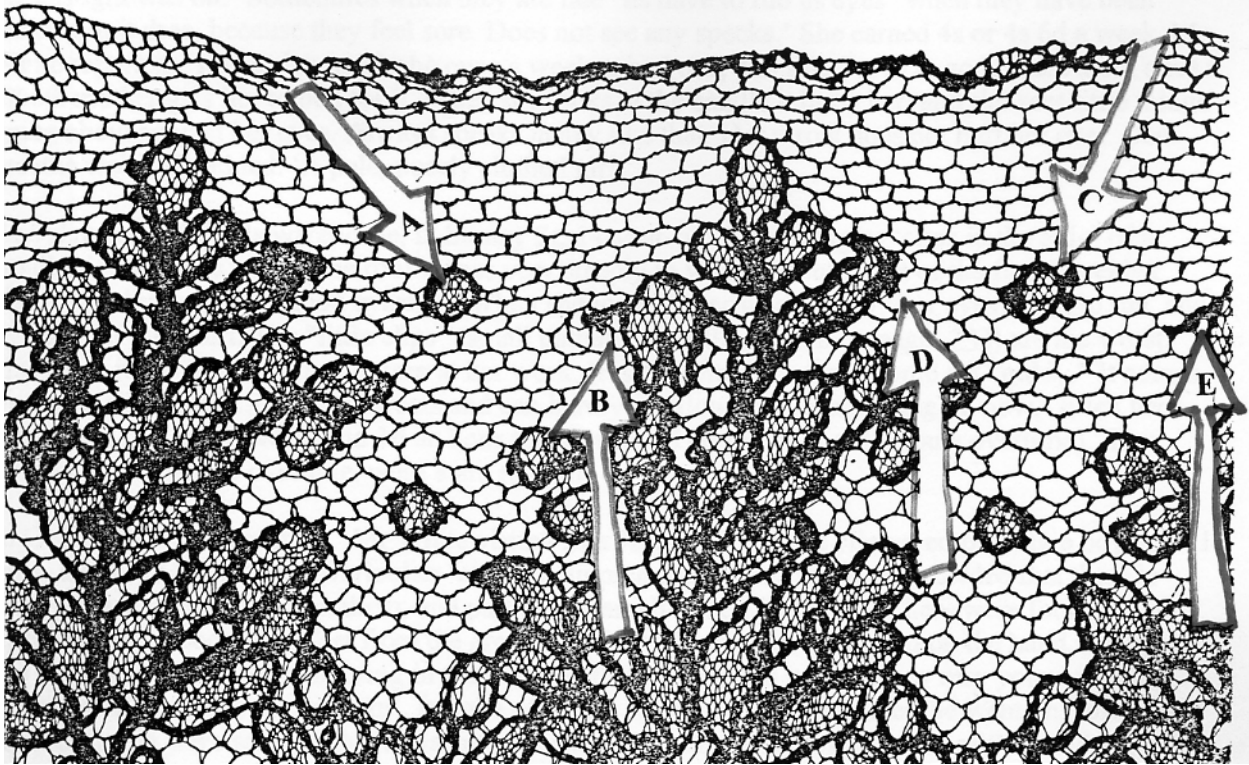
He clearly knew the trade very well, saying that there was nearly as much bonnet front making in London as in Nottingham, and to some extent in several other large towns. He thought there were about a dozen houses in Manchester, one in Liverpool and small numbers in Bristol, Newcastle, Glasgow, three or four in Dublin and a small one in Belfast. Those in Birmingham, he said, had gone. Mr White visited M'Pherson and Vorley's, in Falcon Square, Aldersgate, (now gone) where there were about 200 female workers. Here the gauffring and making-up machines were in separate rooms from each other. 'Also, the making-up is done by means not of gas heated machines, but of presses under which passes a pipe heated by steam. About 75 females closely placed work in this room, but no unpleasant heat or air was noticeable.' In part of the gauffring process, however, 'young women stand with a strong jet of steam close in front of their faces, which must, as one of them told me, make them very hot.' There was, he added a small, separate establishment in the Barbican. Part-owner *John M'Pherson* said that, if the present machines were exchanged for the gas-operated type, the room 'would be unbearable' and the greater part of their best workers would sooner give up. The gauffring machines had been with them for some 15 years and were placed separately from the making up machines because they made them too hot. 'An improvement has also been made by not allowing the steam of the pipe, by which the presses are heated, to escape into the room as it formerly did.' Mr M'Pherson said that there were about 100 bonnet front makers in London, but the smaller plants were dying out.

Clipping & Scolloping

Jacquard: '... an attachment to a loom which enables the pattern in the cloth to be produced automatically by means of punched cards... a loom fitted with this' - S.O.E.D.

When jacquard attachments were applied to lace machines they allowed patterns - or motifs - to be fashioned as part of the lace making process itself rather than, as before, being separately made by hand. However, the liners or outlining threads which went round the motifs then ran from one motif, across the net background, to the next one, making obvious its machine-made origins. These had to be cut away to destroy the evidence of machine manufacture and, in Mr White's words, 'produce a closer imitation of handwork.' When the superfluous threads were cut away by scissors on the surface of the lace it was called 'clipping', and when at the edge it was called 'scolloping'. These processes, Mr White went on, 'now form a principal branch of lace finishing, and give employment to a very large number of females'. They were increasingly carried on in the many large new warehouses, built over the previous 10 years in the city, but much of the work went to women who worked alone or with their children at home, or were 'second-hand mistresses' employing women and girls for the purpose.

*The SOED says: 'become exhausted or ill.'



THE CLIPPERS' WORK: This piece of Victorian machine lace illustrates an aspect of the work of the clipper. When the lace came from the machine, threads would have joined the various motifs between E and C, C and D, and B and A. To hide this give-away sign of machine-made lace and make it appear nearer to hand-made bobbin lace, these would have to be clipped off. The motif at A has been cleanly clipped; at B, C and E, however, small lengths still remain.

At Bellargate, Mr White spoke to a *Mrs Jacob* who had been at lace since she was 14. 'All lace work is very dree, i.e. tedious and bad for the eyes', she said. 'The mending is worst; then clipping and scolloping. Silk is worse than cotton, and requires more care every way, because it is finer and used for more fashionable things, and therefore the patterns change much oftener, which increases the difficulty, the hand and eye not being so used to a new pattern. The finer the pattern the dree-er the work. The children get sick headaches at it, and have to go home. Thinks that is from sitting so long with their heads down. Finds her own eyes weakened, and after heavy work they will ache, and she feels as if she wanted to close them. Cannot see at a distance at all as she used.'

She employed children at clipping and scolloping, believing that they were not much use before 11, but that the best age to begin was 12. One of her charges was *Mary Ann Hazard* who, at 13, had been at lace work for four years. 'Clips, and always black silk,' said Mr White. 'Has to watch very closely or would cut it, and have to pay for mending, a ½d a hole. Can see the work as well at the end of the day as at the beginning, and by gaslight as by daylight. Mistress often has the window up when it is too hot with the gas. Has good health, but often has the headache two or three times a week, and goes home for a day and loses her wages. This is more in summer than winter. It dazzles her eyes then. It is the heat that does this.'

Mary Ann worked a 10-minute walk from home - 5 minutes if she ran - and 'if she is busy sometimes only stays at home a quarter of an hour for dinner.' She did piece work and got 5s a week or 6s if they stayed later and had better work. 'Father is a lace maker, and has been out of work two years.' She told Mr White that her eyes did not water, and that she did not have a cough but coughed a few times in the morning. He wrote that she did have a cough, and added in parentheses at the end of the interview: 'This girl has a short cough and a flush in her cheeks.'

Her co-worker *Elizabeth Large*, 12, also clipped and scolloped, always black lace, from 8 am to 7 pm, except in busy times when it would be 7 am until 8 or 9 in the evening. She said that it was hot when

the gaslight was on: 'Sometimes when they are late "us have to rub us eyes" when they have been looking at it dree, because they feel sore. Does not see any specks.' She earned 4s or 4s 6d a week. Mr White reported: 'Has a sick headache once a week, a bad one, and asks leave to go home. About once a month mother gets her to bed for it. When she looks at the candle it hurts her, and she sees little things going about against her eyes. Always speaks husky like that. Her throat does not hurt her ever. Can breathe well'. He added: 'A pale, poorly clothed girl.'

At Sylvester and Hill's warehouse, in Stoney St, 14-year-old *Ellen Beagles* 'clips in the attic' of a small private house where 'the roof slopes very steeply to within about 2 feet of the floor on either side.' She 'has not very good eyesight. When she looks at her work "dree" her eyes begin to run, and by gaslight they hurt. The "little clips" (small patterns - see illustration on page 23)) are the worst. Has pains in her forehead in summer at her work. It is very hot here then. Some get "giddy." It comes over you all at once... has bad throats and can hardly swallow. Has one coming on now.' Ellen had 'set wages of 4s 6d a week, and 1d an hour for overtime. Has got 6s (i.e. 18 hours overtime).' Her normal hours, before overtime, were 8 am to 7 pm.

In George St, New Bradford, Mr White visited Mrs Jacklin's, a frame clipper employing a boy and 21 girls, all under 13, with an overlooker 'at three clipping frames in a room, so crowded that there is barely space to pass between them, and part of it scarcely seven feet high.' There were four gas lights at the height of about four feet from the ground, and 'When the lace is clipped on the hand, the lights are usually lower. A woman living in the house with an infant and two or three very young children not at work were also in the room'. In spite of all the efforts of the overlooker, he went on, 'the noise and confusion were so great that it was most difficult to take the names and ages of the children, who seemed all of a poor class, and many pale and sickly, one with her face covered with unsightly breakings out.' Later he managed to measure the room - 24 x 10 x 7 feet - allowing 67 cubic feet per person. Mr White had checked during his investigations on the amount of breathing space it was considered necessary per soldier in army barracks and was told by the War Office that it was 500 to 600 cubic feet according to the situation, and 1,200 cubic feet each in hospital.

Mrs Jacklin told Mr White that she had kept girls for 45 years. She had started work when young at 5.30 am and stayed till 10 pm, but there was no regular time. She was very particular to make the children 'sit straight at the frame and not all on one side, and corrects for that sooner than anything. If they sit straight frame clipping is very nice work for them. It is not women's work, as they cannot get a living by it.' The reason for this becomes clear as one reads on. Mrs Jacklin explained:

'The proper price from a warehouse is ½d for 1,000 clips. It is never more, but this piece which she has now from the warehouse is less than the ¼d for the thousand clips. That will scarcely pay for the doing, what with the fire, gas, scissors sharpening, &c., and she cannot take any more at that rate.'

Mrs Gillesthorpe, of Halifax Place, an overlooker employing hands for a warehouse, explained that 'if the clips are bad, i.e. a fine small pattern and difficult, three farthings for a thousand clips, and if it is good, a halfpenny a thousand is fair play, and would satisfy everybody, but generally good and bad together are done for about a halfpenny the thousand, and in some cases it is charged at a farthing a row or some such way, which makes it come to something less than ½d a thousand. Never heard of any being done for a farthing a thousand.'

It was left to a Frenchwoman, born and brought up at Cambrai, Northern France, to point out to Mr White that, when a child was paid ½d or less for making a thousand clips, each 'clip' was in fact two snips with the scissors, so that 2,000 movements were necessary to earn a pittance. This leads us on to what we can only describe as...

A contretemps

In talking to the warehouse owners Mr White came across the argument that, if they were to pay their hands more, their prices would be undercut by the French manufacturers, who paid less to their workers than the English. But he also met the contrary view, that pay – and in some ways conditions of work – were better in France than in England.

Henry Conway Barnett, of Barnett, Maltby and Co, of Stoney St, said he was brought up in the lace business and made ‘entirely a fancy lace of the best kind’, which had received a first class medal at the Paris Exhibition of 1862. ‘The cost of labour,’ he said, ‘is becoming daily a more serious question in reference to the danger of competition from France. In making lace of the kind we do we pay a man wages ranging from £2 to £4 a week, about double what a man usually receives for the same work in France. We pay clippers between 6s and 10s a week, or on the average about 8s or 9s. This average does not include overtime. In France the same work is done for about 3s 6d for a week of about the same number of hours. I know this from my own inquiries in France or from people connected with the manufacture there.’

The difficulty of competing was, he went on, daily increasing ‘and the French trade is growing very rapidly. Any restrictions which would increase the cost of production would be very injurious, and might displace much business that is now done here... a bad time of trade here draws away business to France in those articles in which the French compete with us. It is the busy season alone, principally in Spring, which enables us to make profits, and these scarcely compensate for the general flatness which is spread over the whole fancy trade. Any legislation restricting the labour, even of young persons only, beyond the usual hours at these seasons would prevent the manufacturer realising these profits.’

Again at Hartshorn’s warehouse, Mansfield Road, where Mr White said that ‘Great attention is paid to the comfort of the people in every way, as by a dining room, washing places, separate closets, &c.’, *Mr James Hartshorn* argued that any limitation of the hours of the children and young persons he employed ‘must appreciably diminish the amount of work done... If to make up for this more labour were employed it would increase the cost of production, and make the balance still more in favour of France, where the cost of lace finishing labour, as compared with the English labour of the same kind, is as three to five. I know this from my own inquiries of French manufacturers of my acquaintance.’

Mr White later, however, interviewed a French couple – *Isidore and Fanny Bricquot*. Isidore was a Frenchman formerly employed in the lace trade at Cambrai but had been in Nottingham for 12 years with his wife, also in lace. Finishing in France, he said, was done in much the same way as in Nottingham, both in warehouses and private houses, with hours from 6 to 6 in summer and 8 to 8 in winter ‘and this, so far as he knew, was never exceeded.’ He had frequently visited St Quentin, which had fewer warehouses than Nottingham, to sell lace and take orders. ‘Does not remember seeing any girls under 15 in them except a few errand girls. There are not near so many children employed in France as here. They begin to learn lace work at home or in the houses at 10 or 11 years old perhaps, going to school till then.’

‘In factories in France,’ he went on, ‘all boys and girls under the age of 16 are obliged to go to school every day from 11 o’clock till dinner time, and the law is the same for warehouses. At St Quentin a girl beginning lace work would get half a franc a day, or 2s 6d a week. A girl of 15, 16, or 17 would get about double this, and when she became a really good hand 10 or 12 francs, i.e. from 8s 4d to 10s a week.’ A friend of his had come over from Calais, whose wife took out drawing, clipping and scolloping [i.e. did the work for warehouses], found they could not make as much in Nottingham and went back to Calais. He believed that in France only men and women worked in the dressing rooms, ‘as the work is too much for the young.’

His wife Fanny had done lace work in her native Cambrai. 'Mending, drawing, clipping and scolloping' she said, 'as given out to the women here, are worse paid than in France, and will not make a living unless hands are kept. Here the best work is naturally kept for the hands in the warehouses, who are no doubt better paid. The work given out is generally only of the more tedious and poorer kind. Plain net mending is as difficult as any work, but here it is almost the worst paid.' Mr White adds: 'Has often tried but cannot get more than 2s 6d a week at it. In France she has often got that (3 francs) in a day at it, and could easily get 12 or 14 or 15 francs, i.e. from 10s to 12s 6d a week'. She continued: 'For clipping the rate in Nottingham is ½d a thousand clips, a clip being two snips with the scissors, one at each end of the threads which have to be removed. In France the rate is 7½ centimes, i.e. ¾d for the same number of clips.'

The use of 'lower wages in France' as a reason for keeping hours and conditions as they were cropped up on several occasions. *Thomas Herbert* (whom we heard from earlier) believed that the current hours of work - lengthened according to demand of work - were 'practically harmless', and 'may be of the greatest convenience to the employer, and enable him to retain custom which would otherwise find its way to places where manufacturers are not subject to equal restrictions, as in France...' *George Liberty*, a fancy lace warehouse owner in Stoney St, spoke about suggestions for not employing children under 12, or girls from 12 to 13, and the danger of driving work from warehouses to private houses, and agreed that a 'prohibition of night labour by all under 18 would be desirable'. He concluded, however, that he could not see that any such restrictions 'would advance the price, at any rate so far as to draw trade away from France.'

The German industry was also used as a cautionary tale. *Mr Grundy*, lace master of Rutland St, said that it would be 'very inconvenient to have the hours limited.' If work was held up orders might be late delivered to Hamburg, the Leipzig Fair or America. 'A limit to night work,' he said, 'would do no harm if all were under the same rules; but it might drive work to Germany, where labour is so much cheaper.' Those terrible, mean European employers!

HEALTH: the doctors' evidence

It will be painfully clear from what we have heard so far from youngsters in various aspects of lace finishing that their working conditions were unhealthy – unhealthy for people of any age but disastrously so for children whose bodies were not fully formed and who were prey to pulmonary and other diseases from working long hours in gassy, overheated, cramped and unwholesome conditions. The Royal Commission evidence contains material from various official health sources in the city who were able to pull together material and give some overall estimation of the problems for those working in the lace finishing trades.

In reply to a series of questions, *Joseph White* - who had been Assistant House Surgeon at the city's Dispensary for five years, and Resident Surgeon to the General Hospital for nine years, then a surgeon in private practice at the hospital - said that 'the diseases which I have found to be most prevalent amongst our female lace workers, and which seem to be traceable to their employments, have almost invariably been such as result from debility, amongst which the following have been the chief:

Scrofula, Consumption (phthisis) [pulmonary TB], Amenorrhœa, dysmenorrhœa [abnormal absence of or painful menstruation], Hysteria [tremor, convulsions, etc], Chorea [diseases producing jerky, involuntary movements], Disorders of the digestive organs, Rheumatism, Affections of the eye.'

He divided his findings into four groups, i.e. those working in (a) warehouses, (b) dressing rooms, (c) private houses or (d) their own homes.

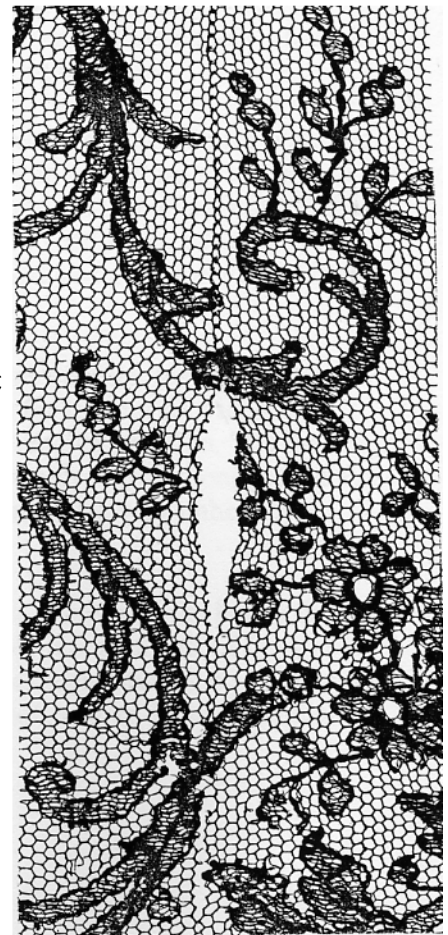


THE YEAR IS 1890 and a group of lace drawers, living in Knotted Alley, Nottingham, pose for a cameraman outside the high-rise tenement block where they lived, above which was a workshop. They are holding a lengthy strip of lace between them, probably a piece they had worked on that day. Their job was to separate patterned lengths of lace by drawing out threads holding them together. For a machine producing such original lace pieces, see page 9. Below is an example of patterned net showing the line along which the drawers would have taken out a thread, thus separating the widths.

Among (a) 'adults from 15 - 30', the majority who, according to Joseph White, worked in 'large airy rooms, well warmed and ventilated, and their occupation is by far the most healthy', he found mainly headaches, colds, rheumatism and hysteria. 'But', he added, 'the majority of the diseases which prevail amongst this class are those ordinarily found amongst a poor population.'

Among (b), mainly 'adults' in dressing rooms, 'the diseases incidental to those exposed to a high temperature are abundantly evident. Here we frequently find girls grown into womanhood at 14 or 15 years of age, and in these the diseases attending rapid and weakly development commonly show themselves, as amenorrhœa, chorea, hysteria, scrofula, and phthisis. Those thus employed commonly stand for many hours a day in a temperature frequently above 100° Fahr. The majority are weakly, and but few, I believe, continue to work in these rooms for any great length of time.'

Those in (c) - private houses - were mainly children 'collected in some small room' belonging to the mistresses who took the lace in from the warehouses to be finished by the children. They were employed in drawing, mending and joining the pieces of net which had come from the machines. He described at some length what he saw as their plight:



‘The work is carried on in rooms usually over-crowded and ill-ventilated, and in prosperous times during the greatest number of hours that children can be got to work; at other times, with much uncertainty and irregularity; but at all times under conditions that tend to the deterioration of the health of all that are engaged in such occupations. Their work is a stooping, unhealthy employment, and they are frequently occupied at it more hours a day than the factory children. It has been at times no uncommon thing in Nottingham to find from 15 to 20 children in a small low room (perhaps not more than 12 feet square), working for 15 hours out of the 24 at an employment in itself exhausting from its tedium and monotony, and, in addition to this, exposed to every cause that can tend to injure permanently the health of those engaged in it. In this manner are frequently sown the seeds of those diseases, from which, in a few years afterwards, so large a proportion of the female population suffer; and it is no difficult matter, in the vast majority of cases, to trace the origin of the more serious diseases of after-life to causes contracted by the injurious occupation of the child.’

In the case of those working in their own homes he concentrated on the ‘great stress upon the eye’ brought on by their work and drew attention to their short-sightedness. He also said that ‘amaurosis’ - partial or total blindness without apparent change in the eye - frequently occurred among them.

A puzzling aspect of Joseph White’s contribution is that he appears not to have caught up with the host of young women and girls working at gauffring machines, with horrifying results, such as we have seen. Certainly many of those in the warehouses worked in better conditions than most in the second-hand mistresses houses, but the widespread occurrence of fainting, headaches, fits and coughing ought to have been noticeable to members of the medical profession who were involved - and were, as we shall see below.

Edward Beckett Truman, resident surgeon at the General Dispensary, Nottingham, was very aware of the effect that gauffring had on the health of young people. He told Mr White that the employment of the dispensary patients was noted, but not necessarily the particular branch. But his attention had been drawn to ‘the great increase of consumptive cases over the last 10 years.’ Of the patients attended at home - an average of nearly 700 a year - the incidence of TB, which had been 1 in 45 cases in 1852, had gradually increased to no less than 1 in 8 by 1861. These were the ten years during which gauffring machines had multiplied throughout the warehouse trade, but without the patient’s branch of the lace industry being identified in each case, no firmer connection could be made.

However: ‘The sudden exposure to cold air after leaving the high temperature which I have observed in the work rooms, is likely to bring on congestion of the lungs, and that in scrofulous subjects is likely to end in phthisis [TB]. The assemblage of a large number of persons and the use of gas must both of them produce a great amount of impure air, which, unless there be good ventilation, which it is very difficult to obtain without draughts, will act primarily upon the lungs, and also produce weakness and headaches.’

‘I am not acquainted with the use of gas in other ways than for light,’ he went on, ‘as I understand is the case in bonnet front making, but any use of gas where a free escape for it is not provided, especially if it be low down, must be extremely injurious, and ought to receive attention. The lower gas is used the more injurious it must be, as being heated it must escape upwards. Sitting long, especially if in a stooping position, is unhealthy, and weakens the chest. Great heat is also very unhealthy, especially if it is moist.’

Mr Truman went on to say that ‘Female complaints are common here. It appears by the books for the last year (1861) that out of 2,566 cases on recommendation, considerably less than half of the whole number of dispensary patients, there were 66 cases of amenorrhœa, 50 of menorrhagia, 63 of anæmia, and 25 of hysteria, all coming under the head of cases of recommendation, and all female complaints, or a proportion of about 1 in 12.’

One of the worst aspects of the trade was its effect on the women's and girls' eyesight, particularly of those involved in the very fine finishing work. *Joseph Ope Brookhouse* told Mr White that he had been one of the surgeons to the Nottingham Eye Dispensary since its establishment in 1859. He had a sad, but not altogether surprising, story to tell concerning the dispensary, in a town which was a centre of lace and hosiery industries which 'had been long known to exert a very hurtful influence upon the sight of the workpeople employed in them.' Statistics taken from eye institutions in 14 other towns had indicated, prior to the Dispensary being built, that in full operation it would have about 1,500 cases annually. Sure enough, in its second year it accepted 1497 patients:

'But from that date, viz., from October 1, 1861, the necessity of imposing a payment of 1s on admission of all patients without recommendation who required medicine, and a further payment of 2d weekly, seems to have checked further growth, and has reduced the cases in the year ending October 31, 1862, to the number of 906, notwithstanding the fact of the place being now far more firmly established, and probably more widely known.

'A large proportion of these cases have been those of people employed upon lace, particularly lace mending; and many patients have complained of the difficulty of seeing their work when black, and others of the white dazzling them. The injury to the eye arises in a great measure from its over-exertion, and in particular from a constant strain upon the muscle (ciliary) by which the eye accommodates itself to the distance of the object by moving or holding the lens forward or backwards as occasion requires. The longer this strain is continued, and the fewer and shorter the intervals of rest or change of employment, the greater is the injury caused. The effect is also likely to be increased by the employment being begun at an early age.'

Further, Mr Brookhouse commented that the injury is made worse 'by employment in heated and impure air, in which, as I have understood, people often work, or by anything which tends to weaken the general health.' In all cases, he added, the use of the eyes by gaslight is likely to be more injurious than the same amount of exertion by daylight.' He then went on to make a most useful observation: 'One cause which tends to prevent the relief which could be obtained by the use of glasses in an earlier stage, is that workpeople, either men or women, are unwilling to take to them for fear of losing their employment, as the employers, from some reason or other, object to people with glasses, perhaps from the idea, not always well founded, that sight so assisted is not likely to be so efficient as that of others.' Similar thinking – that it is better to play down one's afflictions in case the employer might be less inclined to keep up one's employment might explain the frequent attempt by the children to make light of what was wrong with them.

'As a medical man,' Mr Brookhouse went on, 'I have had my attention attracted by the number of consumptive cases amongst women and girls here from gassing and bleaching establishments, where I believe they do not bleach, but only finish indoors; and particularly also amongst those engaged in bonnet front making. The patients have explained this to me as a process in which they work immediately over a very hot gas stove. The sedentary nature of the employment of these and others, and the frequent changes of temperature to which they are exposed, especially in leaving heated workplaces late in the evening, tends to the increase of this disease. I believe that most other medical men in the town have also noticed the prevalence of consumption, but I have no data by which to measure its degree of excess.'

Another physician, *Wm Tindal Robertson*, told Mr White he believed that the larger proportion of preventable diseases occurred in young girls working at home. 'Their work is ill-paid, their nourishment generally insufficient, and their houses unhealthy.' A principal cause of disease, he said, was 'the extreme alternation of heat and cold to which the workpeople are exposed.' Hence a large number 'of this class are phthisical, and instances of acute rheumatism or rheumatic fever are not infrequent.' He did not, he said, 'attribute much importance to the "monotony" of the work or the "posture" of those employed. Nor do I think that any prevention against the straining of sight which the fine character of *some* of the work produces can be suggested.' He urged the 'systematic, complete

and skilled inspection' of all establishments to achieve 'the moral and physical advancement of the rising population of this country.'

William Richards, a Nottingham sanitary inspector, pointed out that, prior to 1851, Nottingham was surrounded by land which was subject to common rights and was 'densely crowded, and the houses improperly built, about 8,000 being back to back dwellings, often in courts having but one entrance, and without drainage.' An Enclosure Act then allowed building on more land and there was a great increase in the number of factories, in the number of trades and of population. The result, he said, was that the town was 'wonderfully improved' from what it had been. 'But,' he went on, 'though many of the warehouse rooms are large I should say that employment even in them is decidedly more injurious to health than that in dressing rooms, where, though the air is hot, it is pure, and the people are in constant motion, instead of sitting still.'

HEALTH: the children's lot

It is understandable that the children would have found it impossible to explain in medical terms to Mr White their own or their friends' ailments. Untaught, unable often to spell words of more than two or three letters, they would have had only the phrases they used between themselves to paint word pictures of the world around them.

Thus, when 15-year-old *Sarah Key*, at Webster's lace dressing rooms, Dakeyne St, said that 'A girl here used to have fits; used to be kickety and knocking about, but did not make much noise,' even after 150 years of language change it does not need an interpreter or medical person to explain the scene further. About herself she told Mr White that she 'has pains in her legs and her feet swell at night at times when she gets home, but they go down again by morning. Has pains in her chest and stomach; cannot breathe easily. Has a very bad cough as soon as she gets into the cold air at night...' A 12-year-old, *Clara Addicott*, at Copeland and Chapman's, said she had just come back from suffering what she described as 'the sore throat fever'.

Another girl, *Elizabeth Chadwick*, 15, who had worked in dressing rooms since she was nine, spoke of those around her at work regularly fainting or having fits and having to stay off work. A girl of 15 or 16, she said, 'had fits, sometimes one in a month, and they sometimes lasted a couple of hours. Witness could hear her scream "so" (imitating it) from the floors below.' But, noted Mr White, though she said she had not felt ill herself, and had eaten a deal more since she had been at dressing - 'Mother says she has got a horse's appetite' - he commented that 'perspiration was standing on this girl's face while with me in a cool room downstairs.'

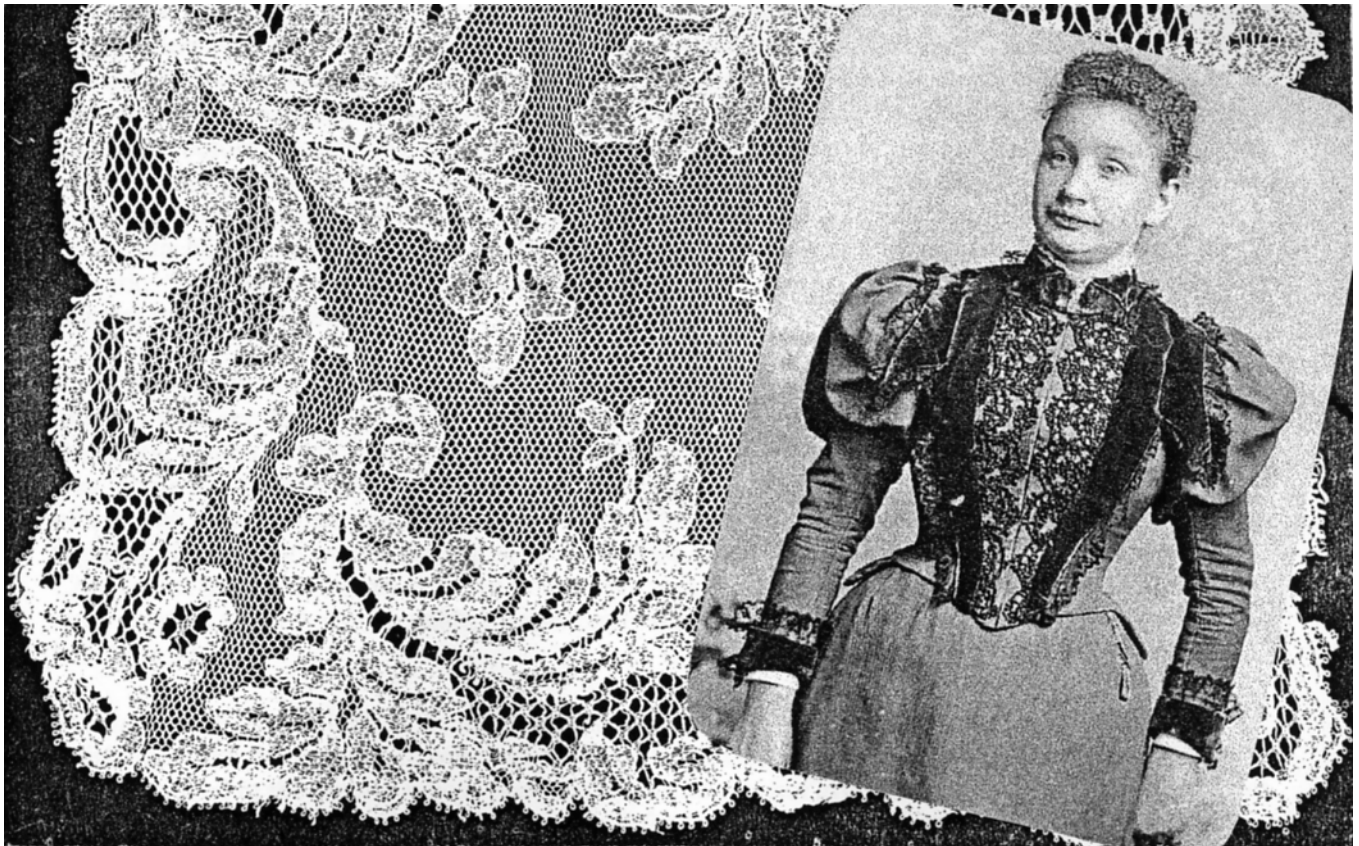
F. Baker, of Sherwood St, who employed only a few children, said that they dressed silk lace and a fabric for gloves, either 'taffeta' (silk) or 'Lille' (cotton) and for that they used steam power for hydraulic pressure. Their hours of work were from 8 to 7 'or rather above that' most of the year because the autumn seasons, the American and German, 'catch one another up.' They employed a cleaning woman, and the walls were whitewashed every two years: 'If any of the women are not healthy it is from their own fault in not eating wholesome food, but living upon slops, and still more from their own irregularity of life after they have left their work at night.'

Mr White commented little on what he heard, leaving the bare interviews to speak for themselves, but would report what the girls or women had to say and then tack a few words on to their statement, such as 'This woman attracted my notice by the remarkable fact of her having a healthy complexion' or 'This witness had colour, but of a flushy kind.' Sometimes he would simply say such things as 'The only young persons were two youths of 15 and 17, with pale faces...' At Ordynot & Oxpring, dressers of Woolpack Lane, he met *Keziah Foster*, 17, who 'had been very bad with tic for 5 or 6

months,' and about her Mr White commented: 'This is a very pale, poverty-stricken looking girl, and seems naturally dull, as appears from an inability to read after a far greater amount of school than usual. I afterwards saw her at a Sunday school in a class for Testament reading set apart for those who come old: *i.e.* about 16 and upwards, unable to read.' Kesiah could not spell and 'Has not heard of France.'

Youngsters would, of course, change jobs if they felt they could improve their lot. *Sarah Parnell*, at 13, had gone to Sanders and Francis's, bonnet front makers, the Christmas before Mr White's visit. The room with 5 or 6 gauffring machines and 30 making-up machines, heated by steam pipes, was 'very hot, much hotter than the gauffring room here [Wm Morrison, Castlegate] usually. She could hardly stand it, it was so hot. There was hardly a day passed but what someone fainted... There were two or three who fainted nearly every day, and about five who were very much given to doing so... When they were working late at night they could hardly work in the room, it was so hot.' Sarah 'used to be very tired, and have the sick headache. A "very great many" had it.' Many had to 'go away' [presumably go home to bed] and were stopped money. 'Was never a fortnight without having to go away herself, sometimes not a week.' So she changed her place of work to Morrison's. Mr White takes up her story: 'Has to go away nearly as often still from here. Has had that cough (a bad one) about a month. It hurts her side very bad. Has had bad colds before, but not to hurt her as this one. Has not had anything for it. Has a mother, but she cannot pay for medicine for her. Has not been to the dispensary. Her sister is very ill, and has a dreadful cough.'

Sarah told Mr White that she had been at another warehouse and three or four mistresses' houses. The regular hours were 8 am to 7 pm, or 9 at the latest. 'At one they worked in a bedroom, with a bed in it, in which someone slept. Her health is not much better here... and she has not been in good health ever since she went out to work. When she was at home she was much better, though not a strong girl.' Mr White comments that 'this girl has what seems a settled cough, and looks weak in the chest'.



RARE BEAUTY: These few inches of an 8-foot long, 19th century narrow stole shows the height to which machine-made lace could reach. Handmade it would have cost a king's ransom but the machine brought it within the reach of the thriving Victorian middle classes. The inset shows a young woman wearing a blouse decorated with many yards of machine lace at the neck, bodice and cuffs.

A co-worker *Alice Rawson*, at 20, had followed Sarah's path from their previous employer, where she also had often to leave work and go home. She told Mr White that she had headaches, but that 'has nothing to do with the heat; she is subject to them,' adding: 'A lady has headaches.' She went on to speak about the hours of work, and how the very young ones would stay behind. 'At Christmas, just before the holiday, they stayed till 12 one night... They (the children) are very hard to drive home, because if they have a father they get their overtime money for themselves, and it is the only money they do get so.' She used to get 25 hours overtime a week and wished she still could, and Mr White comments that 'The answers as to health, hours of work, &c. were got from this witness with great difficulty, and in a tone of opposition, possibly from a fear of their leading to a loss of long work hours.' She was 'very delicate looking' and her employer said she 'had somewhat improved in health since being with him, and as having been before given up by the doctor as incurably consumptive.'

Some of the statements leave one with a sense of bewilderment. 15-year-old *Sarah Ann Mullens* - working for E.R. Dann whom we met previously - came to work from 7.30 am to 7 in the evening, making a normal day of 10 hours, taking off an hour for dinner and 30 minutes for tea. Mr White records: 'Has set wages, 7s, and 2d an hour for overtime. Has made 4s 6d overtime, i.e., 27 hours in a week, and sometimes 20, but not often.' She speaks about her health: 'Cannot get her breath... had very bad sick headaches at "turning out" and had to go home for a day or two every few weeks. Went to a dispensary, Can eat now.' In parenthesis Mr White says: 'This girl looked wretchedly ill and unable to hold herself upright. I was told that every allowance was made by her employers on account of her health.' She had, however, been allowed to work 16½ hours a day for a week and more.

Mr White would indicate the children's conditions by mentioning, for example, that a witness 'has had the tic and been very bad here (pointing to her neck, which is wrapped in flannel)', that a girl 'has a sore throat and cough. (Has her throat tied up)', or simply that 'the air is very close and gassy.' And one wonders whether he had his tongue in his cheek when he made such simplistic comments as 'It was not hard work, but the gas did not agree with her, she thinks.' And on reading that a 9-year-old 'Is often ill. Has headaches so bad, more than every week, but not often the sick headache. Used to have headaches before she came here,' one wonders quite what was the point of the last sentence - hopefully not to excuse her current working conditions. The same applies to his interview with 10-year-old *Eliza Butler*, in which he says that her work 'made her eyes ache a bit, and a little mist come over them. Has less headaches now than when she mended, but has always been subject to them from before she went to work.' He even adds: 'There is not a shade of colour in this girl's face, but she was by her own account weakly as a child.'

The children's hours of work seem inhuman looked at from today's viewpoint, and one wonders how mites of their age found it possible to continue for so long at a stretch. *Emma Collier*, age 12, at Bradbury, Cullen and Fisher's warehouse on Broadway, said she had been to a lace mistress when she was 'going 6' - i.e. was five years old - and 'when busy, which was often, and in two or three seasons of the year, went at 6 am and worked till 9 at night but not later. Had done this for two or three weeks together. Was about 7 when she began to work these hours.' Her colleague, 18-year-old *Harriet Craig*, went to lace at 7 years and 'the hours were reckoned from 8 am to 9 pm, but they worked till 10 quite as often as till 9, and on Saturdays generally till 11, but not always. Does not remember staying later than 11.'

We shall come later to look at the second-hand mistresses, who were at the bottom of the lace-finishing world, but long hours were not confined to their establishments. A boy, G.H. - one of very few mentioned in the report - whose warehouse's name was not given, had regular hours of 8 to 7, but in busy times worked till 9 and sometimes till 10 for three months together. Mr White recorded:

'Last Spring he with some other youths and the pattern girls stayed all night three times, i.e. they worked till 3 am and then lay down on the boards or anywhere and then got up as usual for the next day's work ... During this season he worked on average, he should say, about 18 hours a

day... He was quite done up by such hard work and his father often went to the warehouse to complain of it, but it did no good. At last witness was very ill with the St Vitus dance* and had to leave, and is still under treatment for it.'

In parenthesis, Mr White commented: 'This witness is still suffering visibly from the disease above named. The father stated that account given above is entirely true so far as it can fall within his own knowledge, and that when he went to the foreman to complain he was told that such long hours should not be required for the future. He begged, however, that no name might be mentioned, as it might prevent his son from getting another place.' So a form of blacklist appears to have existed.

Another witness, an overlooker simply designated by request as E.F., from Adams in Stoney St, said that 'At the end of the day they get very tired, especially the younger ones. I think that very little more work is done when they stay till 8 than if they left at half past 6. The children are tired and restless and keep asking what the time is, and I find it very difficult to keep them steady and they cannot get on with their work.'

The wages of her girls averaged from 1s 6d upwards, a few getting 4s or 5s. At a previous warehouse 'when we were busy in this way I used to send out a few of the younger children to fetch the meals of the others, and the meals were eaten in the working room as quickly as could be, the work begun again directly. The smell of the dinners was very unpleasant, but it could not be helped, and I used



JENNIERS AND FINISHERS - These were at the tail end of the process, folding and putting finished lengths of lace onto card, with facings of coloured paper to set it off to best advantage in the haberdasher's window.

to open the windows afterwards.' She believed shorter hours would be better to give time for the girls to get their home jobs done earlier, but said that 'they are generally anxious to work overtime so as to earn more.' Not all parents were happy with the hours their children worked, and Mrs Reddish, of Fletcher Gate, 'hears mothers going along the street with their little one saying, "If you cannot come home earlier you may tell your mistress that you shall not go again"; and she also hears children rushing shouting along the streets when they are let loose at these hours.' [i.e. 10 or 11 pm]

As she said, a great many children and young women wished to work as long as they could. They were said to be almost besotted by the need to buy clothes, perhaps from working in a trade of which that was the end product. Miss Meet, in Carrington St, employed about 12 girls doing 'drawing, clipping and scolloping, joining and other lace work.', and had been a superintendent for 15 years. 'The work, with the hurrying about up and down stairs, and with the anxiety, was so great that it affected "the

*The SOED: St Vitus' Dance - Sydenham's chorea: 'a neurological form of rheumatic fever, affecting motor activities and characterised by involuntary movements'.

nerves of her brain," and she has never had her hearing right since. (Hears with difficulty.) She complained about the irregularity of the work, saying that "This wears them out and makes them old before their time. The work used to be much more regular and she would like to see the day when it could be so again. But the Nottingham girls will do any amount of work, and endure anything. Most of them will half pine themselves for their clothes [i.e. make themselves ill]. They are so fond of dress."

Mr W. Marriott, of Marriott's warehouses, saw the sense of not enforcing too long hours, saying that "There is no profit in the long run in hours longer than that [i.e. 12 hours overall] because you cannot get more than a certain amount of work out of people. Beyond that the girls work without spirit, and you lose more than you gain..." Another overlooker, whose name was given as C.D., said there was no point in earning more: "If you earned more you had to spend more on eating; and the children were so tired that they could not work well."

Dear Sir...

Mr White then printed a letter, 'taken from the *Nottingham Daily Guardian* of March 19, 1863, forwarded to me from Nottingham anonymously.'

Nottingham Warehouse Girls

TO THE EDITOR OF THE NOTTINGHAM DAILY GUARDIAN

SIR,-

I have been a lace warehouse girl about 13 years, and should know a little about the regulations of warehouses. Is there not an Act which compels the masters of factories to let children leave their employment at six o'clock at night? If there is, can anyone tell me why this Act is not applied to lace warehouses, which are heated with steam, for children and young women are kept there at work from eight in the morning till seven, eight, and nine o'clock at night, for about 3s 6d to 8s per week, which, in my opinion, is worse than slavery in South America [presumably she meant the Southern states of the USA - A.B.], for I do not think they work above 12 hours a day; and if they do they are better off than a portion of the warehouse girls of Nottingham, who have to work in cellars not fit for pigstyes, much more for human beings. When I use the word cellar I mean the lowest room of the warehouse, which is eight or nine feet below the foot-road; but to do justice to the lace masters in general, there are only a few who make their girls work in these holes. In rainy weather you can rub the wet off the walls; in dry weather they smell fusty and unhealthy. When the hands complain of the damp, the master or man orders the work to be taken upstairs, where it is dry. He does not think of the constitutions he is ruining; the work is of more consequence than the lives of his work girls. It is a rare specimen of self being first nature. When they have caught the rheumatics or one cold on another, which is the cause of half the consumptions, they have a recommendation for the infirmary given them as a salve. Hoping, for the sake of humanity, you will publish the above, I remain, yours,

A WELL WISHER

P.S. If the Sanitary Inspector was to visit these places he would be of my opinion.

The lower depths

12-year-old Elizabeth Ann Shawe: *'This girl is wretchedly pale and ragged, and seems utterly crushed by her early work, or want, or both. Her words fell as wearily and as lifelessly as if dropped by the strokes of a pendulum.'*

9-year-old Annie Tracey: *'A delicate but unusually intelligent child, spoken of by her mistress as "such a one to work as never was. She works so hard I am sure she will be ill. She works till she has to rest her little head".'*

These two children, among those Mr White found working for second-hand mistresses, were not exceptional, but the poignancy both of his description of Elizabeth and that of the mistress speaking of Annie, brings us close to them - and through them to the many who shared their existence.

Warehouse owners often looked askance at giving work out to the 'second-hand mistresses', preferring to keep it within their own factory walls, partly for fear of it not being returned clean, and partly for 'security' reasons, in that patterns could be stolen if work was let out of their control. When they did put it out it was often because they had a rush of work and needed the finished lace returned very quickly, quite possibly overnight. Their hold over the mistresses was considerable, since they were the sole source of finishing work. Some warehouse owners would pay the mistresses the same amount of money for a job as they would have paid their own workers for doing it, meaning that, after the mistresses' percentage had been deducted, only the residue was left to pay wages for doing the same quantity of work. Thus, in the mistresses' houses the wages were often worse than elsewhere, with hours and conditions tending to follow.

The point was made beyond doubt by *Miss Meet* of Carrington Street, who usually employed about 12 girls between 14 and 20 years old, with hours from 8 am to 7, with an hour for lunch. She told Mr White: 'Has often had pieces for clipping, shawls for grafting, pearling, etc given out to her at 8 o'clock on Saturday to be done by the first thing on Monday morning, as much as two or three days' work for all the hands that she kept. She must do it on pain of losing work for the future... and she has lost work from not being able to finish a piece in time.'

Mrs Reddish, of Fletcher Gate, whom we have already met, took in pearling and drawing for girls aged between 11 and 16, and worked them from 8 am to 7 or 8 pm (in busy times the hours had been from 6 am to 10 pm). She reminisced that, for one year, she 'with two or three of her elder girls, sat up regularly the first three nights in the week every other week, but two young women who were with her would not stay beyond 11 or 12. They began at 12 o'clock on Sunday night, and did not lie down till Thursday night, and during this time only snatched their food. This pressure depended upon the nature of the business, which was foreign. The work had to be done and sent abroad, and the return received before there was money to start a fresh set of goods.'

Public opinion could in no way be brought to bear on the mistresses' houses since an Englishman's home was very much his castle and the law ended at the front doorstep. So, little changed in them. One quite terrible unfolding story, told by *Mrs Simpson* of White Cow Yard, who employed women in her house and at their homes, sets the scene well. She went 'lace drawing' to a mistress at just over five and a half years old and 'has suffered a good deal from the hard work. Is now quite a young woman, only 30, but is in weak health, and can hardly see to work for an hour, and suffers a good deal with her eyes. At 6 she was moved to a second mistress, and six months later to a third, doing 'fancy net mending', which was very 'dree' work. At 8 years she was often kept up at work till 12 or 1, 'and that for two or three nights together when trade was brisk.' There, she 'used to take her victuals for the week with her, and sleep at the mistress's house, only coming home from Saturday evening till Monday morning.' They were supposed to have an hour for dinner, but generally had to be back at

work under the hour 'and sometimes had only just time to swallow their dinner and begin work.' At least, however, the time taken from their meals was reckoned as overtime.

Mrs Simpson 'was very often done up with headaches and weakness, and it made her eyes smart and turn very bloodshot.' Her mother noticed her getting pale and thin, and discovered how she was worked when she was called back on Sunday night 'to have her up at 4 or 2 on Monday morning.' So she was taken away and put into a warehouse. 'She was then only 10, but felt quite a woman, having been out so long and being able to work so. She never got any fresh air, and was so tired that she did not care to move out on Sundays or go to school, though she sometimes did in the afternoon, or to chapel in the evening, but then would fall asleep.'

Her experience at several warehouses was not very happy. In some she was worked till 11 or 12 at night for weeks on end. But she thought that warehouses were better than private houses because the girls did not sit so close together, though they were heated by steam 'and that, with so many breaths [i.e. people] and the quantity of gas burners, perhaps 40, makes them very unwholesome. When you are sitting on late at night it is dreadful.' The heat affected her and the others very much, particularly in the head. 'Several used to faint away quite when it was very hot late at night. Has done so herself. At other times they felt very faint, and used to send out to get a sup of brandy or something to revive them; but this had to be kept secret. In some warehouses the girls "look that pale", but still they like to work such long hours to get more money to get clothes with; they are so fond of dress. The warehouses ought not to be allowed to work so long.'

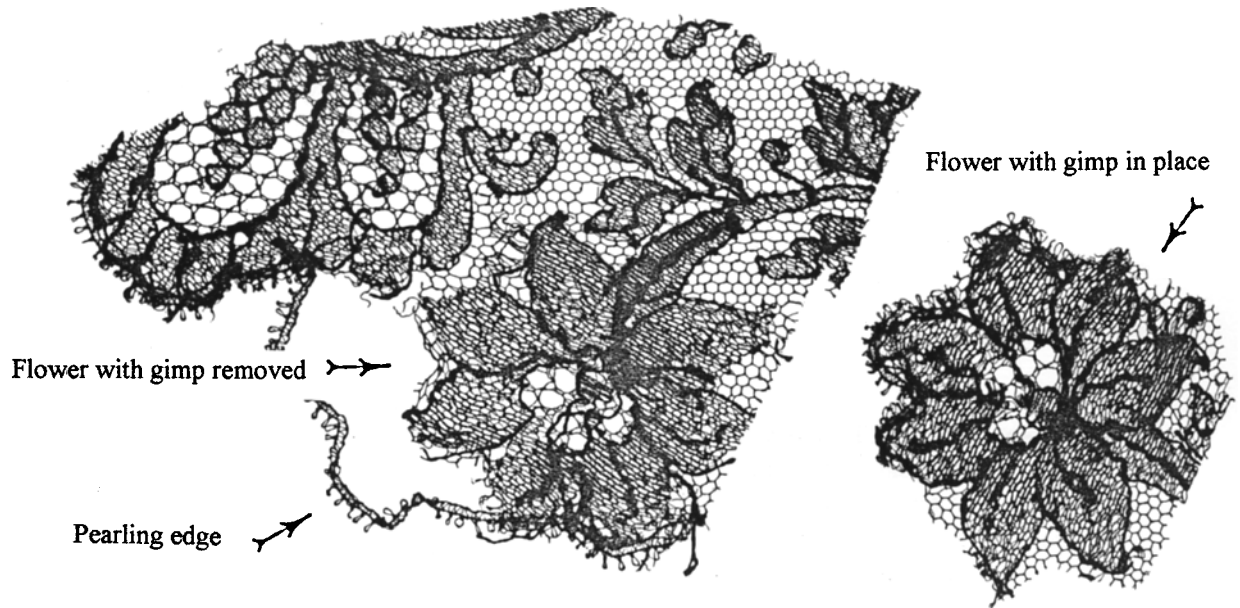
She had been very ill at 16, dreadfully short of breath and had a bad cough. 'The doctor said she wanted rest and fresh air, and plenty of port wine, which she had, and sent her into the country. She got better, and went back to work, but never feels well even now. By 20, when she left warehouse work, she was so short-sighted that she could not tell a person coming in at the other side of the room. She can see nothing now without looking quite close, and even then if she works for an hour her eyes smart so she has to stop. After she has worked a little a person meeting her says, "Oh, what a cold you've got in your eyes." Before she went to work at all she had a very strong eye, and was quite long-sighted. Is quite sure that it was beginning so young and working so hard at such "dree" work which broke her health down and her eyesight too. Has found her eyesight fail her more just in the last year than ever, though she cannot do much now. Employs no children, but often has girls as young as 7 come to ask for work, particularly on Monday mornings.'

Mr White commented: 'The witness's pale face and weak eyes, from which she had more than once to wipe the water, as well as a weak cough, seemed to show the truth of her account of herself, though she spoke without any apparent wish to complain.'

A brief but horrifying case was spoken of by *Mrs Brown*, a mistress of Carrington St, who said she never worked her girls after 11 pm - but heard others leave at 1 or 2 in the morning. 'Knew a youth of 17, who died, as her doctor said, entirely from his long hours at the warehouse (hosiery, but the warehouses are of the same kind as the lace). He had to go at 7 am and stay till 10 and 11 pm, waiting at times two and three hours for his dinner.'

The problem of bad eyesight, referred to in an earlier chapter, afflicted particularly those girls and women who spent a large part of their lives doing very close work, clipping and mending fine materials, and very much of this type of work was handed out by the warehouses to the second-hand mistresses.

Ann Camm began lace work with a mistress at age 11, working with Brussels and fancy net and silk edgings. 'The time was called 60 hours', she said, meaning the basic week. But 'has often made 14 or 15 hours a day regularly, and as much as 85 hours a week. The regular thing was 20 hours a week over, and if it was only 15 they reckoned that quite a bad week.' It was the same story - of eating as fast as possible to get back to the work, taking 10 minutes instead of an hour, and deducting their



WHAT THE EYES HAD TO CONTEND WITH: The gimp thread – the name given to the thicker thread used to outline the flowers, their stems, etc, or form the central veins of the flowers – was run in by hand after the lace had come from the machine, using either a single or double thread. In the left-hand illustration part of this has been removed from the flower, and can be contrasted with that on the right hand where the veins of the flower are still in place. In the left hand sample the pearling edge has been unpicked to make clear its actual make-up. This would also have been sewn on after the lace came from the machine to strengthen its edge.

breakfast time from their paid hours. Then she said: ‘Sometimes their mistress went to bed, setting them so much to finish which kept them to 1 or 2 am. They then went to bed in spare beds which the mistress, who was a widow, had ready for them.’ Her wages had risen from 6d a week after the first month, to 1s 9d after a full year. She left when offered 2s 6d a week and regular hours and meals ‘but she went back after a while to her first place, and had to work in the same irregular way as before. By 15 she had made without overtime as much as 3s 6d a week. At 13 she had had to give over work for a bit, because she could not see any longer. Used to see things like a mist before her eyes. By 14 was quite short-sighted... Works at home now. Would not know me again if she saw me; would “have to come nearer a bit for that”.’

Mr White completes the story: ‘This witness sat during the whole time facing me, at a distance of about seven feet, the light shining full on my face. Though a comparatively young woman (stated to me afterwards to be about 30, though she looked nearly 50), she looked utterly worn out, her face wrinkled as with age, and her eyes glazed and watery. This may be owing no doubt in part to distress arising from want of work or inability to do it well, as from the exhaustion of former overwork.’ There seemed no escape.

The effect on the children’s eyesight was spoken of also by *Mrs S. Swann*, who employed a few girls and about 20 or 25 women at clipping, scolloping and drawing. She had started working at lace mending, aged 9, at Quorn in Leicestershire where she lived, and thought that ‘the flossing black silk shawls is the worst work. Thinks it is that which has injured her eyes so, but clipping and scolloping is almost as bad as any. Her eyes pain her very much but most in the evening. She often has to stop and hold her eyes so (showing) to rest them. Has been very near to “taking to two glasses”, especially at mending, but has held out against it at present . (Looks a young woman of about 30 or less) Glasses are very common with lace workers. The work tires the mind as well as the eyes. It is very anxious.’ Part of the anxiety would have been the fall-off in trade during the slack time. Mrs Swann was then getting 30s for a piece which two months ago would have fetched £2, she said. ‘The price often sinks a third in a slack time. They often remark this fall to one another.’

Another problem the mistresses spoke of was keeping the children’s heads down to their work, particularly with the extreme hours they often had to work. *Mrs Bridgett*, of Broadmarsh, said she let

the younger children 'under their teens' leave work early 'because children get so tired, they do not pay for their overtime. They get "restless as birds".' *Mrs Goodwin*, of Parliament Street, said she employed from 12 to 20 girls from 14 years up to 25. 'Tried children once, but found them too troublesome. At most places they have to be kept in order by a long cane.' That she was not exaggerating was shown by Louisa Taylor, who was at a mistress's house until she was 11 and spoke of them having, if things were busy, to wait until 2, 3 or even 4 o'clock for their dinner which should have been at 1, and having to 'swallow their tea as they could, and get to work again directly. It was seldom that they had half an hour for it. The mistress used to keep a cane then to make the children work, and beat them on the hands till the blood would run down. Has seen that. Believes it is not the custom now.'

Nor was this was an isolated occurrence, as the case of *Mrs Brandreth*, of Hollow Stone – who employed two children, six older girls, and 25 women, never keeping them later than 9 in the evening. – made clear. Her first job was with a mistress before she was five years old and 'could not reach the door' [the door handle perhaps?]. She stayed there eight or nine months and slept in the house to be ready for work. She had been 'called at 4 am and had stayed up often till 1 at night there, soon after she went... twice at least she was kept up all night there and had to work next day... This mistress was very cruel, and used to beat her with the tinned end of a fishing rod and has made her fingers bleed with it. The other girls were beaten with a cane, and one of them, a relation of witness's, had her back all covered black and blue from it. Thinks that this mistress was as bad as any of them, but there were others scarcely better, according to what other girls used to tell her of their being knocked about. There was so much fewer mistresses then to whom girls could go.'

This hold that the mistresses had over the girls naturally extended to the wages they were prepared to pay them. Mr White went to Chard to visit J.B.Payne's, lace manufacturer at the Perry Street Works, and spoke to the managing clerk, who told him that their lace, when mended, went to Nottingham for finishing. He believed that Heathcoat's, Tiverton, was the only place in the west of England at which lace was finished. 'At Nottingham, where he lived many years,' he said, 'the mistresses used to keep the children at work as long as they liked, as they must finish the orders. Some of them made much money out of these children, paying them not more than 7s 6d where they received £1 for doing the work, and one realised enough, from this source only, to build a row of small houses.'

Another of the few instances in the report where the amount paid to a girl could be directly compared with what the employer got for the work came from Mrs Brandreth: 'Witness did four nets a day,' Mr White reported, 'the price paid for each of which by the warehouse was 6d. She got 2s a week for this.' Thus, on a six-day-week basis, she was earning 12s a week for the mistress and getting only a sixth of that amount for herself. 'The conditions there had been damp. Located by a canal, with a fire only in the very coldest weather, and a brick floor. This made their feet very cold, as, so as not to dirty the lace or floor, they had to sit without shoes.' Mr White comments that he had 'often seen this.' There was, therefore, generally something wrong with them. 'One, a strong big girl, became a cripple from sitting so long on a short stool, which made her spread her feet out sideways till they began to grow in that way. She went to the Union [i.e. workhouse] and died, and her sister is now very stunted, owing, as witness thinks, to the hard work. Was at two or three warehouses afterwards, but had moderate hours and no bad treatment.'

And so the story goes on, with individual tragedies combining to make a generally sad picture of a host of mainly girls and young women caught up in an industry which was in reality all that was open to them. Every page of the report, though, is brought to life by the simple, direct language the girls used. Nine-year-old *Laura Cropper*, working at Mrs Bartram's in Kingston St., said that when the gas was on she was tired, her work went 'all of a piece' so that she could not see it. Mr White records: 'Has not always a cough like that, but cannot breathe so well as she "used to could," particularly when she is not well or is walking quick.' And this was from a 9-year-old. Or listen to 10-year-old *Mary Bagster*, who clipped all day, in Mr White's words, 'in a small bedroom, up very steep and narrow stairs, a bed apparently in use, but not made since the morning and very untidy, with clothes hanging about it, and there are heaps of old rubbish from the lace clippings huddled into the corners. The whole

place looks very squalid.' *Laura Cropper* said that 'her eyesight is good. Is always asthmatic in winter. Often has headaches. Was taken very bad when working late one Saturday night. Could not stand while they dressed her next morning, or eat "half a pikelet," * or drink a sup of tea. The doctor did not say what was the matter.' One can only, perhaps, say Amen to that.

'To sleep my child...'

Readers will not be surprised, given the conditions of life in the 1860s, that opiates were widely used. We have already met brandy as an illicit pick-me-up while the girls were at work, and port wine as a doctor's recommended 'get-well- medicine'. But, of course, matters went further than that.

Mr Michael Browne, Coroner of Nottingham for nearly 27 years, told Mr White that 'during that time my attention has been much attracted by the large number of deaths of infants resulting from the administration of opiates.' He added that 'the use of opiates in one form or the other, though less under the name of Godfrey's cordial** than formerly', had not diminished over the past 20 years.

'Only those cases come before me where the dose given has been large enough to cause fatal results very shortly after its administration, when the child generally either sleeps quietly away or falls into convulsions.' A far larger number of infants, he added, 'are seriously injured in health or sicken and dwindle away from the same cause.' Infant mortality was high in the poorer areas, he said, adding - clearly with lace finishing among other occupations in mind - that when trade was good their earnings allowed them 'at an early age to throw off the restraints of a home, and it is common for girls in this position to board out or take a room where two or three live together free from parental control.' He went on to mention 'many temptations' from 'dangerous places of amusement, as dancing rooms, &c.', and from their employment where they were 'much mixed up with men ... often at late and irregular hours.'

Mr Browne said they were unable to make their homes attractive to their husbands, or give proper care to their children. 'Many marry and have children when very young, and being unwilling to give up the employment and wages obtained at the warehouses, are away from home during the day and have little opportunity of affording their infants even the natural nursing. 'The child therefore must either be left at home to be cared for as it may, or put out to someone else, often at a distance, to take care of it. In either case opiates are more likely to be used to lessen the trouble.' In one case where a child had died from opiates 'the mother said "the child was much better as it was, and she was quite reconciled to it," and was astonished that I did not agree.' This mother had had eight healthy children 'to all of whom she had, as she admitted, been in the habit of giving cordial; only one was living. Six had gone off somehow, and one had been run over by a cart and killed.' The Coroner spoke of an inquest on a child of 15 months where Godfrey's cordial was started 'and afterwards regularly continued day by day up to the time of its death.' Cases of deaths of the children of warehouse girls had come before him, 'some of them undoubtedly born alive, found dead in privies, canals, &c.'

'J.K.', a Nottingham druggist, having had 'extensive practice amongst the poorer classes there for a great many years', spoke of 'sleeping mixtures under new names and perhaps rather milder forms, but all having laudanum as their basis, [being] as much in demand as they were 20 years ago. Mothers

* *Pikelet: known in the South of England as a crumpet.*

** *Two years before the evidence was taken, Mrs Beeton, in her 'Book of Household Management', said that Godfrey's Cordial and like substances 'often prove fatal'. She went on: 'The author would most earnestly urge all people caring for their children's lives, never to allow any of these preparations to be given, unless ordered by a surgeon.'*

come and ask for something “to sleep their child”. In different districts different drugs are in favour, Godfrey’s cordial more in the poorest districts, sold by grocers as well as druggists. When the child can run about, i.e. at a year or two old, the drugs are no longer used.’

J.K. had been struck, said Mr White, by the great increase in consumption in young women in about the previous seven years, ‘which he attributes to the nature of their employment in hot crowded places, and exposure to the air and weather afterwards. Complaint of female irregularities are unusually numerous, particularly those who work in dressing rooms. This class of people also suffer much from consumption, and from swelling of the leg, caused by their long continued standing’.

$m + e = me \quad t + o = to$

Early Victorian society was still not fully awake to either the desirability of general education or even the need for an educated workforce. Universal education by law was still some years away. The barest form of tutoring – perhaps one or two only of the ‘Three Rs’ – was the reality, and this was left to a scattering only of day and evening (or night) schools, with attendance totally voluntary, either charity-based or charging one or two pennies a week. Nottingham had a number of schools to which quite young children could be sent, and among those mentioned in the report were the Ragged School (apparently Sundays only), the People’s Hall (a night school), an Independent School, High Pavement (Unitarian), dames’ schools and a day school for those incarcerated in the workhouse (Union). There are mentions of church day schools and church night schools, but how far their teaching extended beyond the strictly religious is not clear.

What is clear is that for the great majority of the children working in the lace finishing industry there was only one avenue for learning anything at all beyond their immediate work tasks - and that was the Church. The Rev. *Edward Davies*, chaplain to Thos. Adams and Co for seven years, explained that he had a short service every morning at 8, in the employer’s time, and there was a fine for not attending which went into the sick fund. In winter evenings he had classes ‘in religion and other matters’ for children and adults. Visiting the warehouse he found that all the children attended Sunday school: ‘It is on this that the parents depend for their education.’ There were many reasons why the children did not attend secular day or evening schools - the most obvious being their long hours of work which left little time or energy for other pursuits, educational or otherwise. Times without number the children Mr White interviewed had the same basic story to tell as 7-year-old *Kate Gregorie*, who told him that she ‘goes to school every Sunday, but never to a night school. Went to a day school when she was very little, but left at six years old to go to a lace mistress. Says she cannot read. (Reads words of two or three letters) Cannot write or sum.’

Two children working for James Hartshorn’s lace warehouse put clothes on the bones of what was a terrible situation: children with the intelligence to learn but prevented from being taught. *Elizabeth Hinton* had been there a few months and ‘was at school till then but had to come to work, as her father died; he was a book-keeper. Can read, write and do addition. Goes to school on Sunday but not at night. Comes to work now at 9 o’clock and stays till 7.30, with an hour for dinner at 1, and half an hour for tea at 5 in the room here.’ Her colleague, 16-year-old *Emma Taylor*, ‘Went to Sunday school for six or seven years, but has left for a year. Has gone to night school twice a week for the three last winters. Left a day school, where she had been for five or six years, to come here. Reads tale books for amusement, and can write. Is “not a very good one” at summing. Did multiplication and division, but has nearly forgotten them.’

Put at its briefest, the case of 15-year old Lucy Brentnall says it all: ‘Cannot write at all. Did almost learn summing, but forgot it by going to work so soon.’

The thought of young children working 10 or more hours a day and then having the interest or energy to sit in a school-room seems unreal. Some of the children said that after six days of work they could find no energy for recreation on Sunday. *Mr Webster*, of Dakeyne Street, said that he had provided a well-lighted and warmed school-room for lessons at 6 pm but the average attendance was not more than four or five: 'The girls wish to be off in the streets; so he was obliged to give the school up.' But



DRAWING ROOM: This photograph was taken in a different age to the one we are glimpsing from the 1862 Royal Commission evidence. It is from the drawing room of Birkin & Co, at the time of a visit in 1914 of King George V and Queen Mary. Without doubt the works would have been cleaned and smartened up for the visit - but the photo still conjures up the atmosphere in which the children worked for so many hours each day.

few masters had that interest in helping their charges towards education. *J.F. Squire*, manufacturer of Park Street, was honest enough to admit that he 'would be very glad to have anything like the factory regulations, with the exception of the children being required to go to school.' And proof of that particular pudding was found when the Bleach Works Act - which made a modicum of children's education compulsory on employers - came into operation. Some lace dressers wrongly believed that it applied to them and got rid of their children. For example, *James Thornley*, of Walker Street, had employed the very young because 'there was some light work wanted which the children could do quite as well as elder people and at less cost. But as the number of children was not great they were nearly all given up at the same time to avoid the trouble of sending them to school, and in some cases young people were given up too.' Then again one found the 'Catch 22' situation, such as at Heymann and Alexander's, manufacturers and merchants in Stoney Street, where - according to the general manager *Leonard Cresswell* - 'before receiving anyone into the warehouse, I have made it a rule to apply the test "Can you read? Can you write?" and if they cannot, reject them. Education is essential for all.' The *Rev. William Milton*, of New Radford, had tried to use the effect of the Bleach Works Act to encourage girls from a nearby cotton factory (where the Act applied) to form the nucleus of a school, but failed because 'young female labour in particular is in such demand that I find it impossible to get up a girls' school of any size.' In other words, his potential young pupils were all in full-time work.

Employers in the trade themselves sometimes appeared shocked by the ignorance they met. *Mr Edwin Clayton*, manager at S. Wills, lace warehouse, Broadway, spoke of a place where he had worked which

obtained a large order and, instead of putting it out to mistresses, brought girls into large rooms rented for the purpose. It turned out, from the accounting, that the girls had been severely under-paid by the mistresses. The upside of the story was that they took a number of them on permanently. But, Mr Clayton went on: 'They were so ignorant that though they had been in the habit of being paid by the piece they could not count what their wages ought to be, and some, even young women of 20, could not read their own numbers put on their work.'

Parents, of course, varied greatly in their attitude toward their working children's need for education. *Annie Burnton*, who at 11 worked at *Miss Black's* of Carlton Road, Sneinton, had been at a day school for a while when she was 'going 5'. She could read, and Mr White commented: 'Father taught her, and is going to teach her to write. He is a blacksmith, but has not had any work for three or four years.' *Harry Reigate*, a boy of 12, was taken away from Cope and Ward's by his father. He worked 12-hour shifts from 2 pm to 2 am and his mother said 'she took this boy away because his father made so much of his being out so late, and said it was "almost more than he could bear" to see it, and to have to call him to send him off to work the same again.' Then we find *Mrs Reddish*, who took lace work in from warehouses and employed girls or passed the work on to others, saying that not one in a hundred was suited to be a good wife: 'I think that one great reason why so many, young girls even, leave home and board two or three together, or with strangers, arises from parents want of judgement in forcing them to housework when they come home tired late at night, and in thwarting them needlessly, and even sometimes thrashing them like children. Girls under me have complained of such treatment, but I told them they should never leave home.' Again, 11-year-old *Eliza Lambert*, working for *Mrs Hill*, Hollow Stone, had never been to a day or night school, and Mr White records of her: 'This girl is very pale and ill-dressed. The mistress says that she has no mother, and is much neglected at home by her father who will not let her go to night school because there is a penny to pay, though she (mistress) tries to get her girls to go.' What makes this example sadder still is that this little girl, who missed schooling for the sake of a penny, took a set 3s 6d home each week, after working six days from 8 in the morning till 8 at night, summer and winter.

When it came down to it, what passed for education - at this social level at least - was the Sunday school system. In his lengthy statement to the Commission, *Mr W. Felkin* said that this 'was established in this town and neighbourhood about 70 years ago.' He said that attendance at day schools 'for the lower classes' though very irregular was greater than before, and that evening schools were not as well attended as they ought. He urged greater attendance at schools which would 'leave Sunday schools to teach morality only.' He summed up the situation thus: 'Sunday schools have been a blessing, though with their drawbacks; for the labour of a child in learning to read has often made the day, the place, and the book alike distasteful to him.. To this I attribute the fact that 60 per cent of our population have been at one time or another in Sunday schools, and yet with so little permanent good effect. The weekday should be for secular teaching; Sunday for moral uses only.'

Had Mr Felkin travelled round with Mr White and listened to the children, he would have discovered that Sunday schools left the children almost totally unaffected. Let us look at just a few out of many, many examples to see what level of teaching - if that word is appropriate - was offered the children, and what impact it had on minds tired by incessant hard work:

Eliza Glossop, 11, with Mr Hawkins, frame lace clipper, Peter St, Old Radford: *Has been to Sunday school for some years. Tried to go before she was 5, but was sent back because she was too little... It is such a long while since she went to church that she does not know what she heard about Jesus Christ, or whether he was kind or did good to people.*

Mary Bagster, 10, at Mrs Jowett's, High St, New Radford: *Goes to Sunday school twice a day. Never was at a night school, but went to a weekday school since she was 2 till she came here. Her sister went before she could talk. Can read her Bible, and sister can read a little. Used to be a good writer and was just getting into addition in sums, but now she cannot write at all, and forgets how to make figures. Goes to Bethel, the Ranters' chapel, on Sunday. There is a different man there to speak every time. He tells them to be good children, and religious, and try to get to heaven.*

Sarah Warsup, 7, at Mrs Shatlock's, Woolpack Lane: *Has been a few times to the Ragged school at night, and for a month or two by day. Can read short words without spelling (if of two letters only, not if of three). Used to copy on a slate 'm-e'... 'me,' and 't-o'... 'to.'* Six and six are twelve; did that on a slate. River and sea is where there is all the water. Hears at chapel about God and that Christ died for us.

The level of the religious and other teaching appears hardly to have risen above the banal. The preacher told *Mary Ann Hazard*, 13, about God and that he was 'a good man and saved us all.' *Maria Hackett*, 9, who did not know a capital A or B when shown, 'Has not heard of David or the flood, or Noah, or the ark, but has heard of the people being all drowned.' *Elizabeth Sanders*, 8, could do 'twice one is two' up to 24, but not 'three times.' About Joseph or Jesus Christ she says: 'No, Sir, never heard nowt of those folks.' She had heard but forgotten 'what comes to people when they die.' *Eliza Lambert*, 11, 'Does not know whether the Bible is a book.' *Mary Suffolk*, 13, 'Reads the Testament at home of a night, and on Sunday to mother or to herself, but forgets what it is about. Does not remember about Christ being born, or what happened at Christmas time.' *Julia Thornton*, at 9 the youngest girl at Mrs Evelyn's, a frame lace clipper, went to a church school every Sunday and to church afterwards: 'Can spell a little (does) and write with a slate pencil. Can write the shape of a kite and A, B, C. The clergyman reads about God, and Adam in the garden, and Eve stealing the fruit.' Just occasionally, the children's powers of observation shine through, as when *Elizabeth Ward*, who, at 10, had been in Nottingham for a year, and told Mr White that she was in Ireland before and went to church there. 'Has only been to chapel here about three times, viz, for the "eating"* , and the "anniversary," and another time. In Ireland there was preaching to the soldiers about God.'

One almost despairs on reading that tiny children, working the day long and mostly for a pittance, should in their innocence then have been moralised at. *Elizabeth Grundy*, for example, who was 10 and at Sunday school since she was 'little' had 'tried writing and cannot do it. Is not in the writing class. Does not know what sums or the numbers are (is shown large figures). Goes to chapel on Sunday night, and the preacher "tells us where we go if we're good and if we ain't good".' Or *Elizabeth Mathers* who, at 12, worked from 12 to 15 hours a day and had the preacher at the Independent chapel tell her that 'them as is wicked always goes to the bad place.' Had she had the time to be 'wicked' it seems doubtful if she would have known how to be. She knew of the Queen 'but not her name,' somewhat similar to 13-year-old Anna Barker who 'has heard some say that the Queen lives in London, and is above other people, and wears a crown.'

There were a number of children who at one time had learned a little of reading, writing or arithmetic - and then had lost it. *Sarah Ann Mullens*, 15, could read the Bible and Testament and write her name but 'would not like it to be seen anywhere' and said that she 'could sum a little but forgets it now.' She had been to the People's Hall for a night or two to learn reading and writing, but 'could not see so had to give it up.' At 10, *Henrietta Spencer* enjoyed going to the Ranters school and remembered going to a night school from 4 or 5 until she went to work at 6 years old. But 'now is getting such a bad reader that she "cannot gain it again." Cannot write and does not know what sums are.' Of 11-year-old *Emma Stone*, Mr White simply recorded 'Has "lost" her writing.'

There are odd surprises. Of 17-year-old *Jane Elizabeth Thornton*, who had been at Sunday school since she was 8, attended night school 'twice a week most winters' and had been at a day school from 4 till 11, Mr White said: 'can read anything, and write, and do multiplication. Has read English history and remembers William the Conqueror.' One of the most advanced children he met appears to have been *Harriet Froggat* who, at 13, had lived at Basford and who 'Can read and never has to stop to read a long word. Can write well in a copybook and do a few sums.' She worked with Mrs Gillesthorpe, in

* Did the 'eating' mean Harvest Festival or the 'anniversary' mean Christmas?

Halifax place, whom we have already met, and who was grieved by seeing the children 'going out to work for all the day when they ought to be going to school or play.' She herself had had to leave school at eight to go into lace work, and learned thanks to a kind mistress. She 'knows some young women of 23 or 24 or more in a lace warehouse close by who cannot read, but who having been brought up at lace work have had no opportunity of learning, though they are very anxious and try to learn at night schools or teach themselves.'

Many must have striven to escape their condition but, for the majority, the climb was clearly too steep, and they were left with such as 7-year-old *Ann Meek*, who 'Forgets what she had heard at chapel. Mother told her about heaven when "sister was a dying"; but it is such a long while ago that she forgets what she heard of it.' Or *Harriet Gamble* who 'is nearer 12 than 11 now, but does not know her birthday.' Was her situation better or worse than that of 14-year-old *Elizabeth Crofts*, who 'does not know what a mountain is; whether an eagle is a bird; or whether the sun rises in the north, south, east, or west.'?

Postscript

Perhaps the first thing to be said, now that our story is told, is that the harshness and sadness that runs through it will hardly differ from that found in other trades – particularly casual trades – found in cities and towns throughout early Victorian Britain. Mr White, with other assistant commissioners, was sent by the Royal Commissioners to find out, on the ground, what was happening in the lace finishing trade, among others. It was a time when 'society' – in the sense of a community having an attitude towards affairs and accepting some responsibility for them – was passing laws which placed the public stamp on aspects of life and work, particularly those affecting children.

The prevailing attitude in the 1860s towards putting young children to work could probably be summed up as 'a necessary evil'. It was made abundantly clear in evidence given to the same Royal Commission regarding the treatment of 'climbing boys' who were taken into the trade of chimney sweeping at 6 to 8 years old. They generally worked from 8 to 9 hours a day, but 'in the larger towns even the youngest work from 12 to 16 hours daily.' Some of the evidence taken is sickening to read, particularly as to the hardening of the children's knees and elbows. But let a master sweep, *Mr Clark*, set the scene: 'It is remembering the cruelty which I have suffered which makes me so strong against boys being employed. I have the marks of it on my body now, and I believe the biggest part of the sweeps in the town have the same; that (showing a deep scar across the bottom of the calf of the leg) was made by a blow from my master with an ash plant, i.e. a young ash tree that is supple and will not break, when I was six years old; it was cut to the bone, which had to be scraped to heal the wound; I have marks of nailed boots, &c. on other parts. It was a common thing with sweeps to speak of "breaking in a boy..."'

The laissez-faire attitude towards lace children, quoted on page 2, also comes out in the report on the chimney children which said that the law which was meant to protect them was being evaded 'under the direct encouragement of the householders in all parts of England, [and] that the public at large are unconscious of the cruelty and degradation which are inherent in this system.' Mr Clark recorded that at one point the sweeps accepted no orders after noon, and then washed (previously they had washed three times a year: 'at Whitsuntide, Goose Fair (October) and Christmas.') and gone to school. 'A lady complained of this to me because she could not get her chimney done, and said "A chimney sweep, indeed, wanting education! What next?"'

Mr White proposed that various provisions of the Local Government Acts should be amended to take in the lace warehouses. These, he suggested, should be registered and both the number of people working in a given space and the level of ventilation available to them be strictly governed. He

proposed that Medical Officers of Health should inspect them and ensure that each employee had a minimum of 300 cubic feet of space to work in. Further, he urged as regarded the use of private houses that it should be unlawful to employ any child under 8 years in 'mending, drawing, joining, clipping, scolloping, folding, facing or any other process of Lace Finishing.' Second, that it should be 'unlawful to employ any child under 13 years of age in any of the processes... more than six hours in any one day, or before the hour of 6 am, or after the hour of 7 pm.' These measures, and others to do with meal times, he said, should be carried into effect by the local authorities. In short, he called for the existing provisions of Acts referring to health and safety to be extended to cover the lace girls.

At the same time, Britain's rulers were becoming aware, as industry progressed and needed a more educated workforce, of the need for a minimum level of education to be set and enforced by law. Arriving at it, however, was a long exercise. Eight years after the Commission, the 1870 Education Act was passed. This divided the country into about 2500 school districts, within each of which the ratepayers were to elect school boards. Their job was to examine the provision of elementary education and, if there were not enough school places, they could build and maintain schools out of the rates. They could also make their own by-laws allowing them to charge fees or let the children in free, and to them was left the matter of enforcing school attendance. As we saw from the warehouse masters' comments, if the children were not to be available for full-time work they would dispense with their use, and as education became more and more a settled part of children's lives, so the possibility of them being abused in the ways we have seen became less.

Before the taking of evidence by Mr White and others, the secretary of the Children's Employment Commission - *Mr Prideaux Selby* - wrote to magistrates, clergymen, employers and others, asking for their co-operation. In part the letter read:

'The Commissioners feel confident that you participate in the conviction, which has happily now become general, that all persons have a direct interest in the success of every measure, the tendency of which is to rear up an industrious, intelligent, and moral population.'

Perhaps we can do no better than to end with a quotation from the letter of instruction and guidance sent by the Commissioners to each assistant commissioner before he went out 'on the road' to find out the condition of the children:

'Throughout the whole of this inquiry you cannot too constantly bear in mind, nor will you lose any opportunity of impressing upon the minds of others where necessary,-

'That childhood is essentially the period of activity of the nutritive processes necessary to the growth and maturity of the body; that if at this period the kind and quantity of food necessary to afford the material for these processes be not supplied, if, instead of the pure air which is indispensable to convert the aliment into nutriment, the air which is constantly respired be loaded with noxious matters, if the comparatively tender and feeble frame be taxed by toil beyond its strength, and at unseasonable and unnatural periods, and if the day be consumed in labour, and no time during the 24 hours be allowed for healthful recreation, the organs will not be developed, their functions will be enfeebled and disordered, and the whole system will sustain an injury which cannot be repaired at any subsequent stage of human life; and above all, that childhood is no less essentially the period of the development of the mental faculties, on the culture and direction of which at this tender age the intellectual, moral, and religious qualities and habits of the future almost wholly depend.'

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By coincidence, while writing this Postscript (December 12, 2000), BBC News 24 reported Unicef's annual report 'The State of the World's Children'. In a few words it expressed the identical sentiment

to that of the Commissioners. The organisation had focused on the very young, it said, because *'their development in the first three years sets the pattern for their future health, lifestyle and contribution to society.'* Unicef statistics show that nearly 11 million children a year die from preventable diseases, while another 170 million have been left stunted because of malnutrition affecting their mothers. The report says that poverty is not a problem confined to developing countries and points out that approximately three million people in EU countries lack proper housing, and that 17 per cent of all US children grow up in households struggling to meet basic nutritional needs. Angela Davis, Unicef's director of communications, said: 'We are focusing on this age group because it is the one that is always left out.'

The End

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