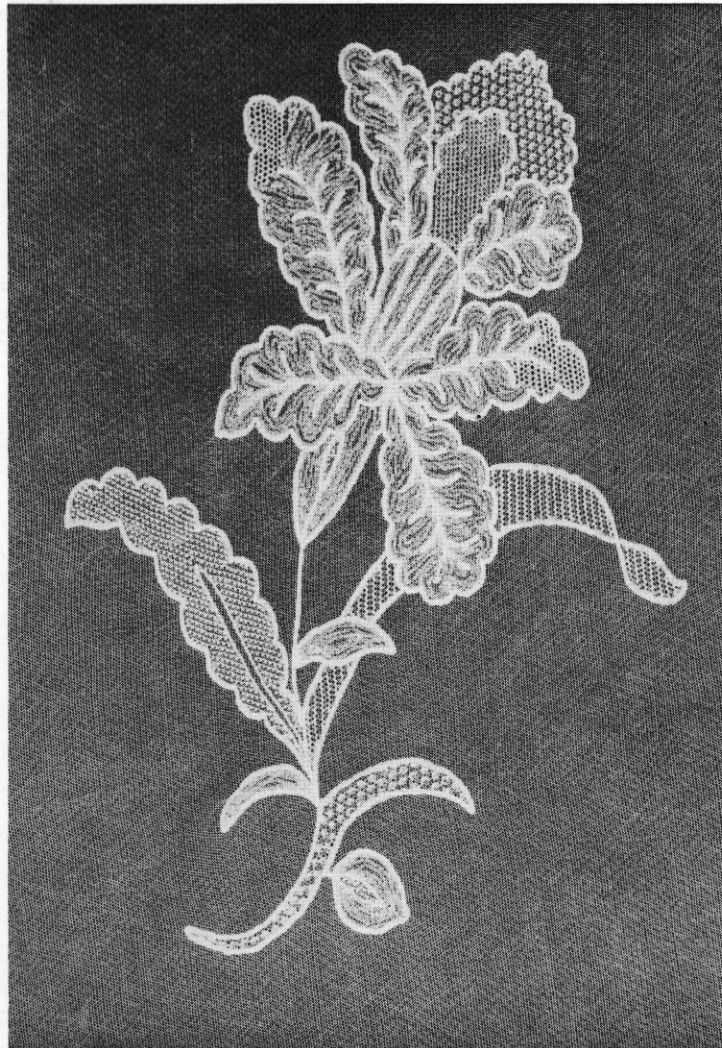


# *Coggeshall Lace*



*by Jean Dudding*

Jean Buddie

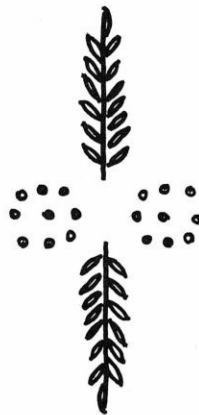
Photographs: Cover and Plates 2,3,4,5,6, and 8 by David Menzies  
Plates 1 and 7 by Chris Holby

# Acknowledgements

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Lastly a sincere thank you to my patient husband who has deciphered and corrected my script, has travelled with me and given me valuable advice.

J.D.D.



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# Introduction

This little book is an attempt to put on record some of the history of, and background to, the making of Coggeshall Lace.

Coggeshall is a small Essex town lying on the Roman Road between Colchester and Braintree. Its fine "Wool" Church was badly damaged during the last war, but has since been restored to its former glory. Coggeshall boasts one of the most notable medieval wool merchants' houses in the Country. This is Paycocke's House and is owned by the National Trust. The Woolpack Inn is also worthy of note. There are many beautiful old weavers' houses as in Lavenham, but unfortunately unlike Lavenham, the main road, with its ever increasing load of traffic, passes through the town, to the detriment of the old buildings.

How different from the days of the 19th century when Coggeshall was a remote little town with no railway line; a town depending on rural industries and other country pursuits for its work. Far from the sophisticated centres of fashion, the beautiful tamboured lace was made here, to be transformed into fashionable dresses, capes, flounces etc. .

Coggeshall lace is one of the embroidered net laces which were prolific in the 19th century. However it is on record that it was in Coggeshall that this type of lace was first produced in the British Isles. It is also reported that Coggeshall was the last outpost of the manufacture of this lace.

**Jean Dudding**  
Braintree July 1976.



# *Types of Lace and Machine made Net*

Very little has been written about Coggeshall lace, whereas Limerick lace is well known and documented. This is sad, for the early and excellent Limerick lace was executed by skilled workers from Coggeshall!

However before proceeding further, perhaps it would be helpful to discuss briefly the Coggeshall product in relation to other types of lace. Broadly speaking, methods of lacemaking can be divided into needlepoint lace, bobbin or pillow lace, and embroidered net lace.

Needlepoint lace developed from the cutting of holes or drawing of threads from a piece of material and then ornamenting the resulting spaces with needle and thread embroidery. Gradually less and less material was used, until eventually by the 16th century the lace was made with needle and thread alone, and given the name "Punta in Aria".

In bobbin or pillow lace, the threads which are attached to the pillow are wound around bobbins, which are often weighted with beads. These threads are then twisted and plaited, producing beautiful patterns. In Buckinghamshire, Bedfordshire and Northamptonshire it is customary to work the "ground" and "pattern" together.

It was this type of "ground net" which was imitated by the machines at the beginning of the 19th century; and it was this machine made net which was the usual material on which Coggeshall lace was worked with a tambour hook. Some embroidered net lace is needlerun with needle and thread.

A knotted net, as originally made by sailors, can also be used as a base for the darning method, and this is called Filet lace.

In 1809 a man living in Loughborough, John Heathcote by name, invented a machine which made this bobbin net, i.e. a twisted thread net, which did not unravel as did previous machine made nets. In 1823 his patent expired and there was a feverish rush by people in Nottingham to set up machines and make bobbin net. Consequently the price dropped from £5 per square yard to 8d or less. This must have given an impetus to embroidered net laces.

In addition, fashion required laces for dresses, flounces, shawls and veils besides smaller items, such as handkerchiefs. Tambouring was a quick method of producing large areas of lace and was therefore in great demand.

During the French Revolution and when Napoleon was in power there was no trade between France and England. Because English net or tulle was vastly superior to the French at this time, much of it was smuggled into France, where it was in great demand. In 1815 and 1816 two of Heathcote's workmen managed to introduce bobbin net machines into France. In one case it was taken in piece by piece with the help of French sailors. Henceforth the French tulle greatly improved in quality and their tamboured net lace was known as Broderie de Luneville.

# *The Tools of Tambouring*

Tambouring is of Eastern Origin and was introduced into Europe from China, India, Persia and Turkey. During the 18th century it was an embroidery technique favoured by the ladies of the court in France and subsequently in England; and also by cottage workers, as it was a quick method of decorating a fabric.

In Scotland, especially in Renfrewshire and Lanarkshire, where cotton mills (powered by water) were producing fine muslin, tambouring on a commercial scale was introduced as a cottage industry and became justly famous. This decoration of the plain material was in competition with the inferior imported embroidered Indian muslin. Delicate designs of foliage and sprigs of flowers were worked, very similar to those used later in Coggleshall lace. By 1790 the industry was established and flourished but it declined after the Napoleonic wars, when white muslin gowns were replaced by more elaborate and embroidered creations.

In the East the material was stretched over a frame resembling a tambourine or drum and held in place by a strap or outer circle of wood or metal. This type of tambour frame could be held between the knees, freeing the hands for the actual tambouring.

However, later in Europe a rectangular frame was sometimes preferred and this would be attached to a stand. There is an interesting French portrait of Madame Pompadour, painted by Drouais c. 1760 showing her sitting at her very beautiful rectangular tambour frame. An English painting of 1780 shows the three Waldegrave sisters, one of whom is using a simple round tambour frame as used today; the cumbersome curved base of the original Eastern tambour frame has been discarded.

The Coggleshall lace workers used a large frame of two long parallel lengths of wood joined by two adjustable crossbars, set on a wooden stand. Alternatively a window ledge, table or adjacent piece of furniture would replace the stand (when space was restricted). On one side of the frame the workers would insert a long nail which acted as a spindle for the spool holding the thread. If a stand for the frame was used, this spool was set below the frame itself and the thread was held below the material with the left hand, while the worker held the hook with her right hand.

The fashionable ladies of the 18th century wore an ornamented reel holder which would be attached to the waistband by a clasp in a similar fashion to a chatelaine.

The hook used for tambouring resembles a crochet hook but differs in that the head is sharper, allowing it to pierce the material easily. The point is curved inwards to avoid tearing on withdrawal. The hook is inserted into a handle, and held in position by a small screw. The screw has a dual purpose. Firstly it enables a change of hook to be made when required. Secondly it limits the distance that the hook passes through the material, thus preventing the sharp point piercing the hand below. By inserting this hook into the material, or hole of the net, catching the thread from below, returning through the same hole, and repeating this process in a continuous line, a length of chain stitch is worked and the most beautiful designs can be created.

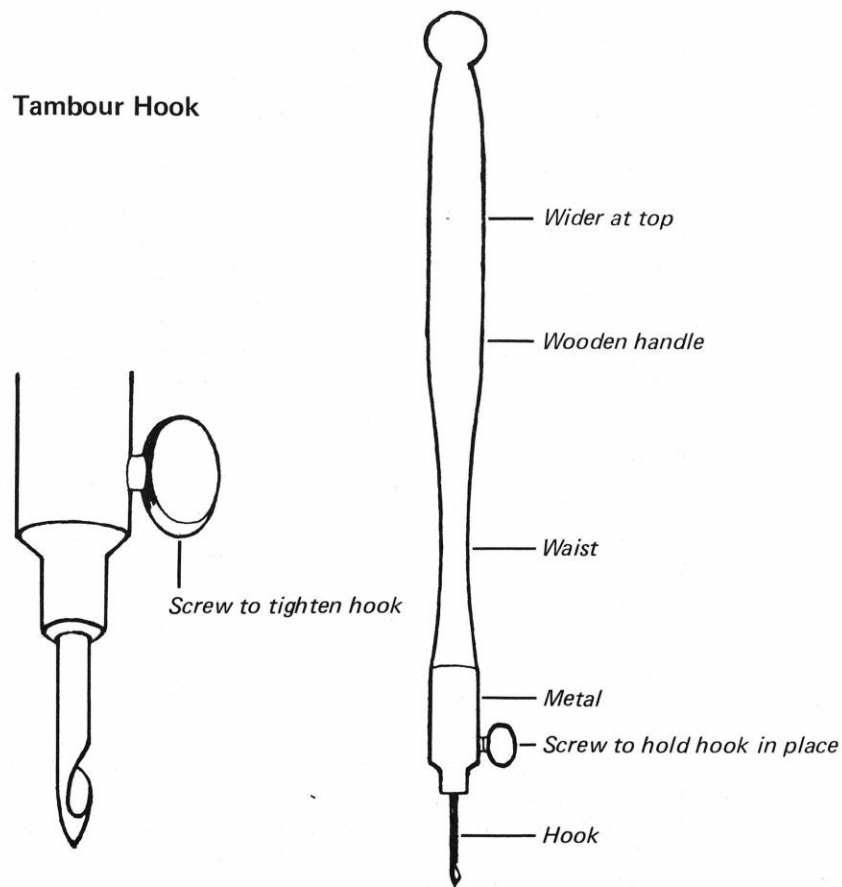
It is important to commence and finish this type of work with a special knot, otherwise the chain stitch is easily unravelled. Dots and designs for the filling of flowers etc. can be worked with this chain stitch, and

the use of differing thicknesses of thread gives added interest e.g. thick thread for outlines and raised flowers, a finer thread for the decorative fillings. For black lace, silk bobbin net and silk thread were used.

Once the knack of using a hook is acquired, the work proceeds quickly, and this would appeal to the ladies of fashion and also to the humble workers trying to make a living from their labours.

Another tool used in tambouring was the thimble worn on the forefinger of the right hand. This was similar to a finger protector, i.e. an unjoined circle of metal which would expand. Its purpose was to guide the thread and apply pressure to the material as the stitch was withdrawn upwards.

### Tambour Hook



In crochet the hook is held horizontally —  
In tambouring the hook is held **vertically**.

In crochet the hook catches the thread —  
In tambouring the left hand winds the thread **over** the hook.  
(under the material.)



## *Early Days of Coggeshall Lace*

During the year 1812 a certain French emigré, M. Drago by name, together with his two daughters decided to come to England where they settled in Coggeshall. They lived with a Mr. Johnson who hired a three storied mill or factory near the bridge over the River Blackwater. Here a tambour room was opened and small girls of 7 years of age and upwards were taught the art of tambouring. They were paid 3 pence per week, and, eventually, after many years, perhaps from 6 shillings to 7 shillings and sixpence per week. Many more tambour rooms were set up in the town. By 1832 Thomas Johnson was described as a "lace manufacturer" also John Birkin and John Byng Banks. In 1831 at Colchester "three lace dealers" were returned in the Census. It is thought that the difference between these two titles is that the "lace manufacturer" probably had a tambour room and not only distributed materials, designs etc. but finished off, made up and generally prepared the articles ready for the more sophisticated customers in London. The "lace dealer" merely distributed materials and orders, afterwards collecting the finished lace from those who worked in their own homes. He did not own a tambour room himself, but was purely an agent.

In 1826 due to a reduction in the duty on the import of French Tulle into England, ladies were requested to wear only English tulle at Court, in order to give employment to the English workers. We know that in 1832 a robe was made of Coggeshall lace for Queen Adelaide, which gave great prestige to the lace made in this town. By this time it was a thriving industry.

At this period when machine made embroidered net had not been perfected, there was a good market for tamboured net, and lace manufacturers and lace dealers were recorded in various other towns for a few years, but Coggeshall was the centre where the industry persisted. Several of the skilled workers who were taught in the tambour rooms at this time were still alive at the end of the 19th century.

As far as can be gathered, the term "Coggeshall lace" does not appear until about the year 1910. It was known before this that tamboured lace was made at a place called Coggeshall, but it was all rather remote. In 1823 it was called "British lace" made by tambour workers, gradually becoming "Tambour lace" at a later date. It has been suggested that the "Essex Lace", as it was known in the trade, suffered because it had no place name, although it was often classed in quality with "Limerick lace".

This is not surprising for it was a certain Mr. Walker who introduced tambour lace making into Ireland, in 1829 at Mount Kennett, near Limerick, with the help of twenty four skilled lace makers from Coggeshall. This is borne out by the statement made at the turn of the century, by a Coggeshall man, that his Mother, who was a pupil of M. Drago, the French emigré, had refused a lucrative offer to go to Ireland.

## *Early Days of Limerick Lace*

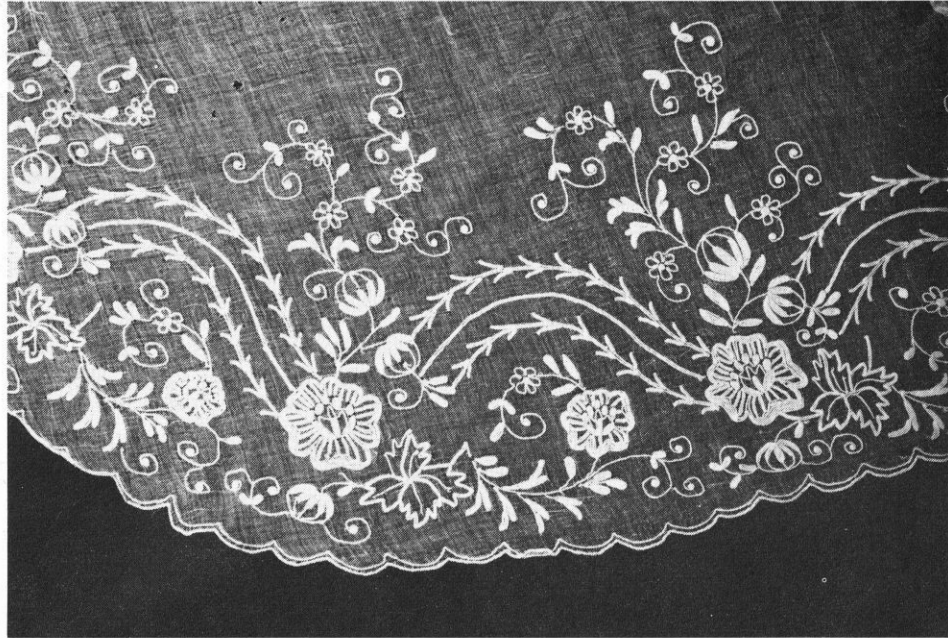
This Mr. Walker was trained for the Church, but he married a lady "Lace Manufacturer" from Essex, and being artistic became interested. He settled subsequently in the neighbourhood of Marden Ash, Ongar, where he founded a lace school. In 1823 he was described as a "lace manufacturer working for the London wholesale trade".

It is interesting to read that he took pupils from the parishes around. There is a note recorded from the minutes of Wanstead parish vestry during 1823, that on 24th June "Mr. Walker consented to take 6 parish children as apprentices to his trade of tambour workers, until 21 years old, at £4 premium each". Apparently this arrangement could not have been very successful because on July 8th it was reported that "3 children were no longer chargeable to the parish, as their parents did not agree to their being bound apprentice to Mr. Walker"; while on August 5th Mr. Walker returned 3 children (presumably the remaining 3) "because they were inattentive to their duties".

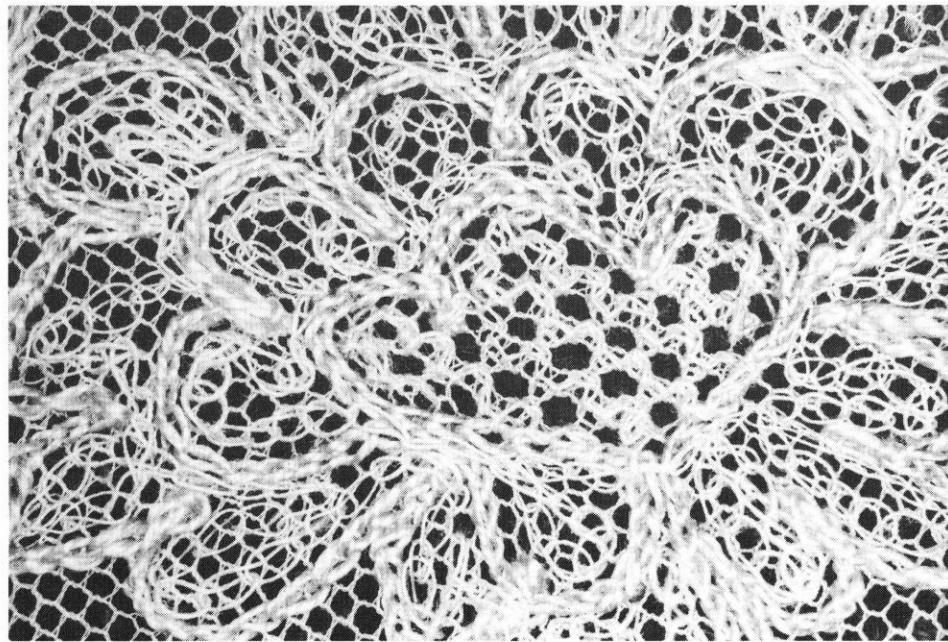
After a holiday in Ireland he set up tambour rooms there in 1829 for training young girls. Thus began the making of Limerick lace. Unfortunately his wholesale firm in London closed in 1834 and he had to rely on his travellers, despatched throughout the British Isles, to collect orders for him. In 1841 he sold his business, but the purchaser became bankrupt before making payment and Mr. Walker died in 1842, a poor man. Undoubtedly he introduced good designs for the early Limerick lace and it is sad that his influence was of such short duration. Many of the women from Coggeshall subsequently returned home to Essex.

It is recognised that early Limerick lace is of very high quality. Without the artistic lead and a steady market, designs and standards of work deteriorated until a Mr. A.S. Cole arrived in Ireland in 1888. He gave lectures encouraging good design and showed examples of early Limerick lace.

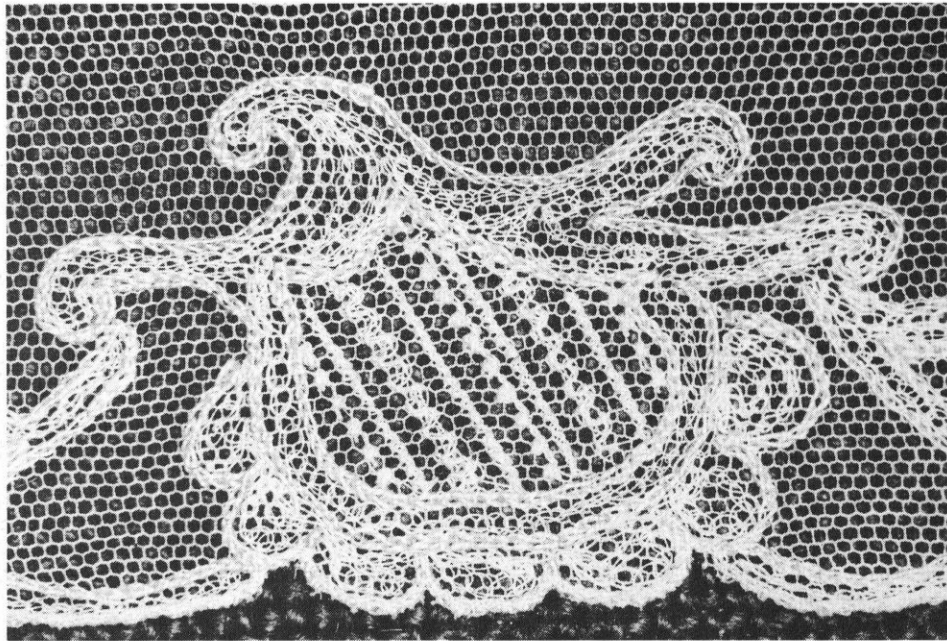




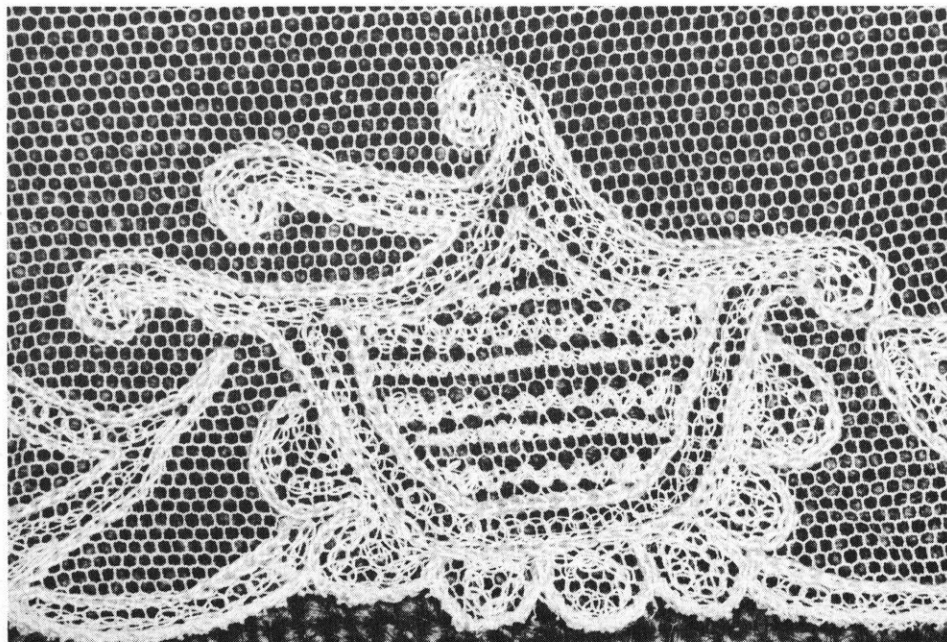
1. *Delicate flower and trailing design of tamboured muslin  
(Hollytrees Museum, Colchester).*



2. *Motif showing coarse thread outline, thin thread filling and  
centre filling of honeycomb.*

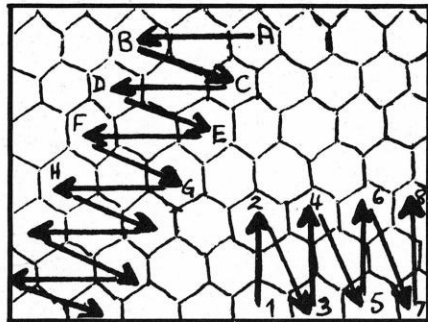


3. Motif showing filling stitches Spot, line, and zigzag on the diagonal.

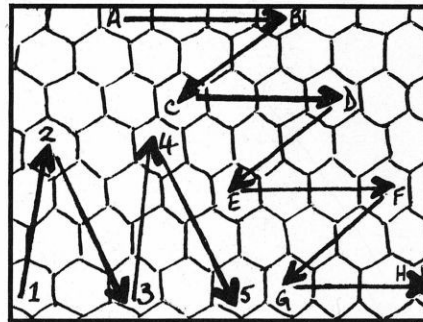


4. Motif showing filling stitches Line and zigzag on the straight.

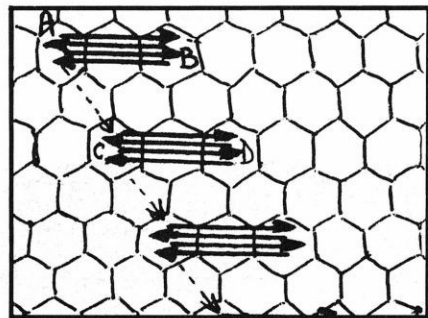
Diagrams of Tamboured Filling Stitches



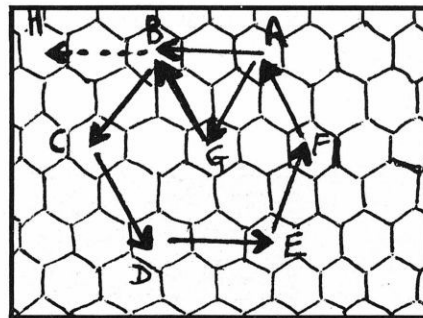
1. Line (Diagonal and straight)



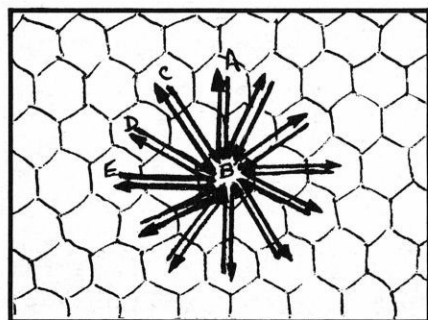
2. Zig Zag (Diagonal and straight)



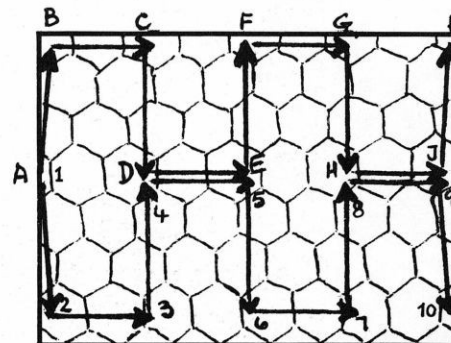
3. Spot



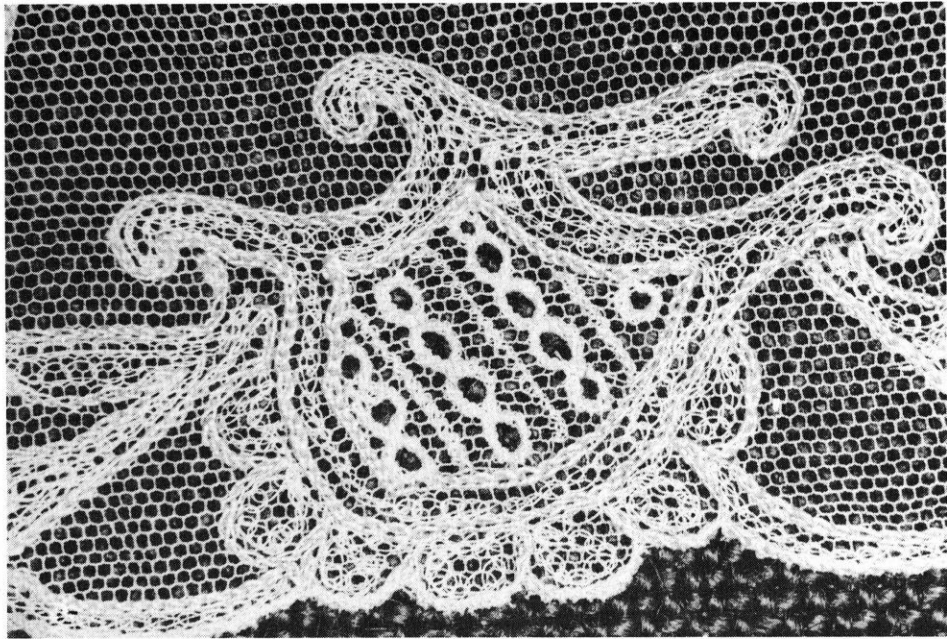
4. Bold Smuggler



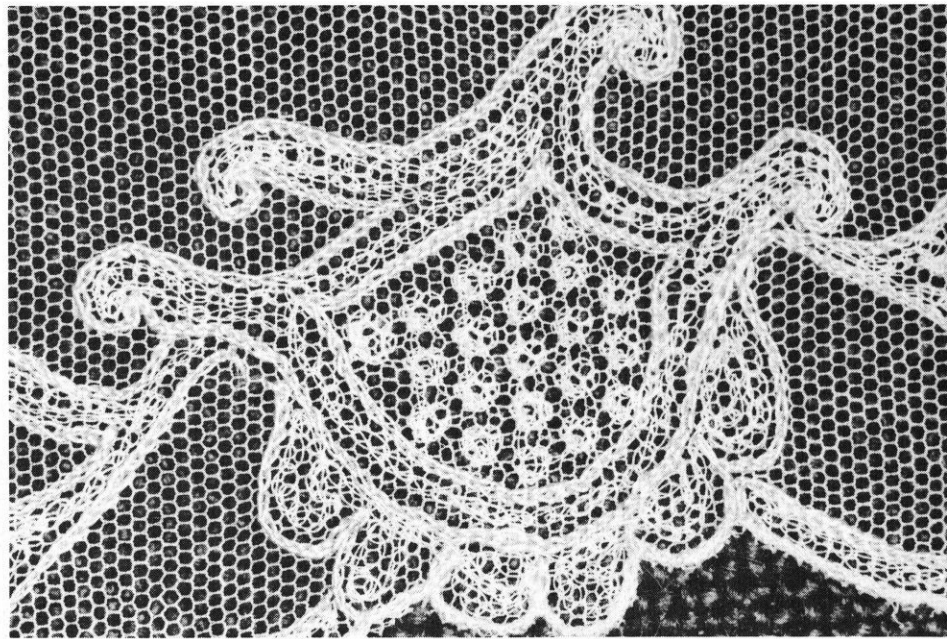
5. Eyelet



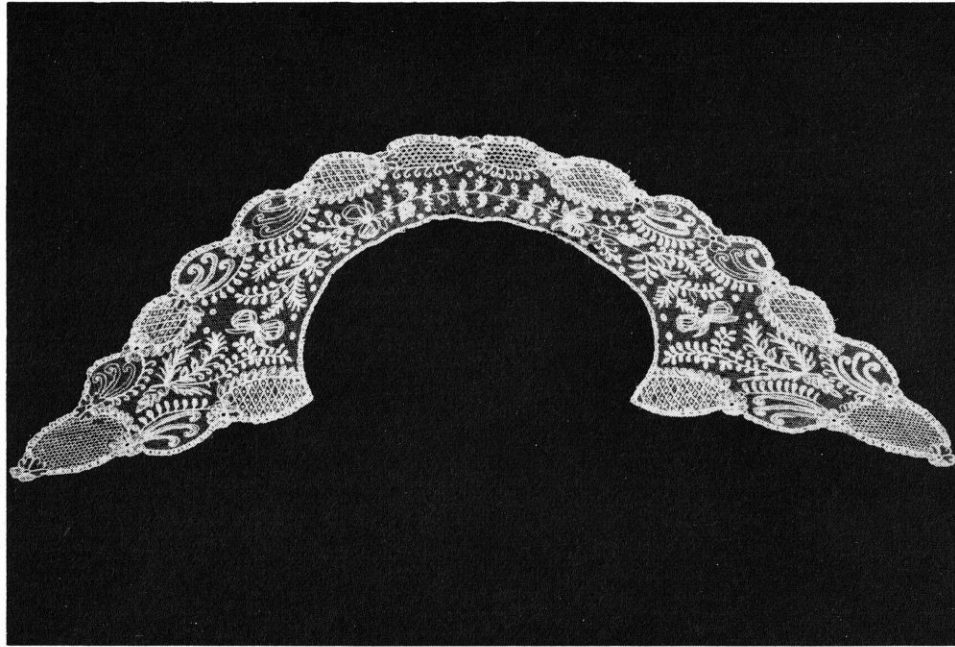
6. Honeycomb



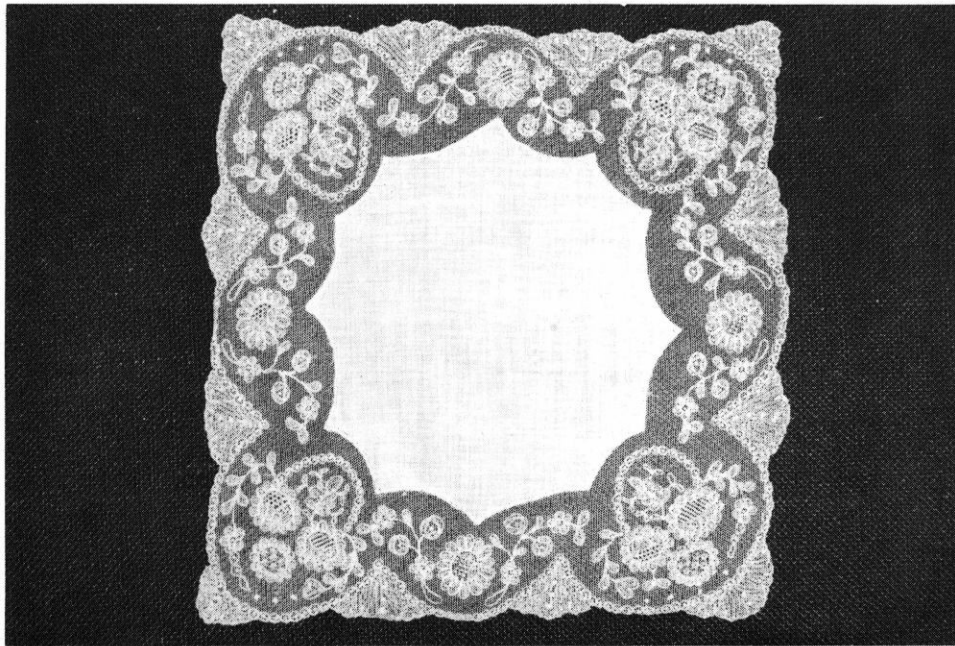
5. Motif showing filling stitches Eyelet and line on the Diagonal.



6. Motif showing filling stitch Bold Smuggler.



7. Collar with decorative tamboured fillings — made by Mrs. Ellen Dale.



8. Handkerchief similar to one given to Princess Marina — made by Mrs. Lester.

# Materials, Stitches and Designs

In Coggeshall lace decorative filling areas are normally worked with a tambour hook, while in Limerick and other tambour laces the fillings are worked with a needle (needlerun). It was considered that needle running provided a more ethereal effect in light and shade.

However, skilled workers of Coggeshall lace produced beautiful filling stitches of varied textures with the tambour hook. Another difference was that Limerick lace required a diamond mesh net, while that used for Coggeshall lace was a round mesh. This again may have dictated the type of tool and decoration to be used. Unfortunately the net and threads used for Coggeshall lace are not available today.

Having given the differences between the two laces, let it be added that embroidered net lace is a craft, and, as in all crafts, individuality occurs. Consequently it is difficult to lay down hard and fast rules regarding the origin of a piece of tamboured or needlerun net lace. There is little doubt that Coggeshall workers may have introduced needlerunning into their lace on occasions, especially when some had returned from Ireland. Likewise perhaps some diamond net found its way to Essex workers.

This is borne out by the fact that in a collection of Coggeshall work, which has been in one family since it was made in the 1850's, there are some examples of tambouring on muslin (see Plate 1). It is known that the lace dealer would call on this family every 6 months with samples of lace, and he would deliver the orders taken on his previous visit. In this collection there are 2 very elegant capes, beautifully shaped and with delightful designs. Also included is a long pillion veil which would be worn by a lady travelling along the dusty lanes, and then thrown back over her hat on entering the church. One shawl has 26 different combinations of stitches used in filling the larger spaces of design. This will give some indication of the skill of the best workers.

When studying Coggeshall lace it is obvious that the skilled workers were those who included their beautiful fillings in their lacemaking. They have delightful names, such as "Eyelet" (Plate 5. D.5), "Honeycomb" (Plate 2. D.6), "Neat", "Birdseye", "Line" (Plates 3 & 4 D.1), "Zigzag" (Plates 3 & 4. D.2), "Spot" (Plate 3. D.3), "Bold Smuggler" (Plate 6, D.4), "Slack" etc . .

The skilled worker would sometimes tambour the filling areas after the less adroit members of the family had tamboured the outline of the design. These designs of flowers, leaves, tendrils etc., were passed down from generation to generation. Flowers have always been a wonderful source of design in every country whether of stylistic or naturalistic conception. They have had religious significance, become national emblems, love tokens etc. .

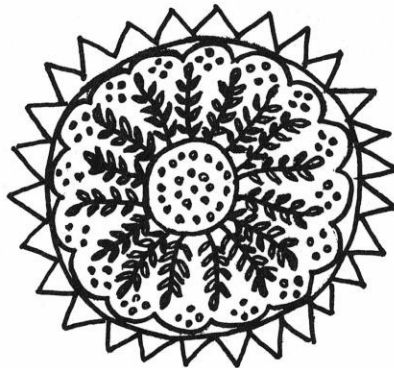
The designs were copied onto rough scraps of paper. If they were being taken from a piece of lace, or, in later years, from a paper doyley, they were transferred by means of a cobbler's wax rubbing onto paper. Then the paper would be laid behind the work and marked on the net by enlarging the holes along the lines of the design.

This was a slow, tedious process, and as the work was so badly paid, a quicker method was adopted, namely, pencilling in the design. As the outlines were always covered with tambouring, this was quite satisfactory.



The edges of the work were finished in various ways. Many pieces of tamboured and needlerun embroidered net laces are bordered with a bought picot edge, but most Coggeshall workers favoured a stronger edging. The line of this edging was darned with cotton thread followed by tambouring. A third journey would then be taken over this line with a zigzag tamboured line. Sometimes this edging was button holed.

There is in the possession of Mrs. P. Cresswell of Coggeshall a delightful little bonnet, which has been handed down through several generations. It is a concoction of frills and very pretty. The interesting point is that it is tamboured in white on a black net. These bonnets were worn by ladies in the house, and much time and thought was expended on their decoration.



## The Second Half of the 19th Century

In the year 1845 John Byng Banks is the only lace manufacturer recorded with establishments in Bridge Street, and in London. However the number of workers had increased. The majority of lacemakers in Essex now lived in or near Coggeshall. Much of the work was done in the cottage homes, where married women could attend to the needs of their family, work on their frames, and also teach their daughters the art of tambour lace making. This made the widespread use of tambour rooms unnecessary, except in the execution of very large pieces of lace, where several workers would be able to sit around one frame.

By 1851 nearly 382 lacemakers were included in the census and tambour lace was at the height of its popularity. There were very fine examples at the Great Exhibition of 1851. Unfortunately these often went under the name of "Nottingham lace" or Honiton lace". What a pity it is that "Essex lace" did not adopt the name of "Coggeshall lace" during the 19th century! A place name seems to give prestige to a lace.

In 1855 seven "Lace manufacturers" names, appear, including two sisters, the Misses. S & E. Johnson and two brothers James & William Spurge, who married the two Johnson sisters and amalgamated the businesses.

There was a decline in tambour lacemaking after 1859 but an improvement about 1866, so that by 1871 the census showed 449 lacemakers, nearly all in the Coggeshall area. By 1901 the total had dropped to 149, 85 of whom were married women.

The fluctuations in the number of workers and the prosperity or decline of any industry, is sensitive to social events. With the invention of machine made lace of improving quality, and ever increasing quantity, the need for handmade lace declined.

One of the last tambour rooms to be used in Coggeshall was in Church Street. Behind the house was built a large tambour room which could accommodate 50 or more workers and their frames. This was last used about 1862-3.



## *Revival in the 20th Century*

By 1900 there was a great demand for sequins, beads and spangles on net, therefore many lace workers changed to tambour beading. This was usually worked in black, and the workers found the colour and glitter extremely tiring for their eyes.

As the pay for tambouring was so abysmally low, speed was of paramount importance in making a living of any kind. Consequently much inferior work was produced. However there was always a nucleus of really skilled workers in the Coggeshall district, and with the end of Queen Victoria's reign, they were encouraged by more attention being paid to the quality of design. Within three to four years the market for lace doubled.

This was largely due to the influence of the two Misses Spurge, daughters of William Spurge by a second marriage, who were the chief employers in Coggeshall. They had a brother who was an art teacher and he improved the standard of design for much of the work. Besides these new designs, some beautiful old Italian lace was copied by the workers. This family had many private commissions and also supplied the wholesale trade, having a representative in London.

It is worthy of note that both Limerick and Coggeshall lace were most successful when there was someone capable of producing beautiful designs for the workers to copy. In any craft or work of art, both good design and good technique are essential. In cottage industries a good organiser and a good business promoter also provide vital support.

There was some fear at this period that the younger generation would not follow on with the tradition, for it is important that the skill is learnt at an early age. This fear was not unfounded, for the young people were loath to follow this type of employment. There was a hope that the County Council would support "the revival of Tambour Schools to encourage the lace Industry of Coggeshall". At about 1900 it was quoted that "Coggeshall was the first and last area in England where tamboured lace was made".

However with the First World War tambour lacemaking suffered a severe decline.

After the war life was difficult for many, and tambouring was a means whereby a living, however meagre, could be made by women. Bead tambouring continued, as there was a fashion for beaded dresses and shoulder straps. Black braid was ruched to make little rosettes. Patterns of feathers, worked in rainbow shades of silk were also popular. Sometimes the tambouring when completed was returned to the cottage collection centre, by the worker's daughter, in which case she would be admonished to be "very careful how she carried it", for it was very precious.

It must be remembered that tambouring was frequently worked after dark. In order to increase the quality of light from an oil lamp, a cone would be cut and placed over the glass chimney, directing the light downwards onto the lace. This lamp would be moved along the wooden frame as the work progressed. It sounds a very precarious manoeuvre, but it apparently worked well. How fortunate we are today to have such excellent lighting!

# *The Last Years of Coggleshall Lace*

On arriving at the 1930's a great effort was made to promote Coggleshall lace and new designs were introduced. This was largely due to the untiring efforts of Miss. E. SurrIDGE who was the eldest daughter of a well known Coggleshall family. She died when nearly 90 years of age. She was an excellent needlewoman and also tamboured with beads on net. It was she who ordered and distributed the net and threads to the workers, decided on the articles to be made, chose and adapted the designs to the ability of the individual worker, and collected the lace when completed. She was supported in all this by Mrs. Reginald Hill and together they tried to give encouragement and build up a market for the lace.

Their aims were:

- (1) to provide promptly paid employment for women in their homes.
- (2) to encourage young workers.
- (3) to provide good and well produced designs for them to copy.
- (4) to help with teaching of the filling stitches.
- (5) to adapt designs to the vagaries of fashion.

"Oyster" a new colour for net and thread was introduced at this time.

Unfortunately despite this encouragement those who had reverted to tambour beading earlier in the century never returned to lacemaking, and there was a dearth of younger workers.

When Princess Marina was married to the Duke of Kent, a gift of three handkerchiefs was made and sent to her as a wedding present. One of the handkerchiefs, made by Mrs. Lester, a skilled worker, (see Plate 8) used the design originated by her grandmother Mrs. Emma Smith. The people of Coggleshall were all very proud of the letter of thanks that arrived from the Duke of Kent, together with a piece of wedding cake.

In 1937 under the direction of Mrs. Campbell and Miss. SurrIDGE some lovely specimens of Coggleshall lace, again made by Mrs. Lester, were sent to the United Kingdom Government Pavilion at the Paris Exhibition, where they were awarded a Commemorative Diploma by the International Jury. The entry which was greatly admired, included a set of table mats of modern design, depicting stylised fish for the fish course, fruit for the fruit course etc. . This was a great breakaway from the traditional designs of flowers and foliage.

These designs were the result of the interest and help from Mr. Geoffrey Home, who lived locally. He was the Owner and Editor of the Modern Magazine "Studio". His designs were very forward looking completely different from the country flowers, grasses etc. . , of the older lace.

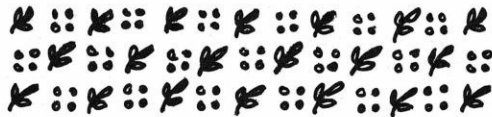
Queen Mary, who was a great Patron of the Arts, also helped to encourage the revival of Coggleshall lace. She sent a command for some lace to be sent to Balmoral Castle for her inspection. She chose two lace dresses, and one tea cloth. A letter was received stating her admiration for the work, the hope that Coggleshall lace would become better known, and that sufficient orders would be received to keep the workers employed.

However, the pay was still very low for many hours of work, as the following prices will indicate:-

A lace collar . . . . .	1/6d	(7½p)
A modesty vest . . . . .	9d	(3½p)
Handkerchief (such as was presented to Princess Marina on her marriage) . . . . .	2/6d	(12½p)

The centre of these handkerchiefs required lawn to be inserted, carefully satin stitched, and the material cut away from behind. For this work, which would take a whole day, the price paid was 6d.

Other articles made during this period were dressing table sets, luncheon mats, fans, handkerchief sachets etc . .



## Variations in Coggleshall Lace

Miss. Surridge gave the workers great latitude in the working of Coggleshall lace. This freedom of choice gave wider interest which would help to ensure the continuance of lace making.

Provided that the outline of the design was followed, they could exercise their own discretion regarding the fillings. This would account for the introduction at this period of many needlerun fillings and edges of button-holing or bought picot in place of purely tamboured lace. One piece of lace has also been seen with the outlines of the design worked by "couching down" a thin silken cord thread. Therefore, unless the history of a piece of lace is known, it is impossible to be dogmatic about its origin. Embroidered net, both darned and tamboured, is a technique which for many years has been indulged in by many workers throughout the British Isles and the World.

However, basically, true Coggleshall lace was a lace decorated solely by tambouring on net or muslin, using coarse thread for the outlines, fine thread for the tamboured filling stitches and finished with a tamboured edging. This was skilled work.

When the fillings were completed with an irregular tamboured chain in fine thread, the skill would not be so great. This would be accomplished at greater speed and would not be so trying to the eyes. Much of the modern work of this period was of this variety.

Other workers obviously favoured close darning within the outlines of the design, giving yet another textured effect to the lace. When this was alternated by areas of finely needlerun filling patterns, the effect was delightful.

To give a further variety of textures, Miss. Surridge introduced the use of a silk or rayon thread.

However with the advent of the Second World War in 1939, net and thread disappeared and the few remaining workers died. It is sad to relate that Coggleshall lace is no longer made commercially, although recently there has been a revival of interest. Determined efforts are being made to reintroduce the making of tamboured net lace in Essex. Experiments are proceeding with available threads and nets, and so it is hoped that this craft may be enjoyed by many in the future.



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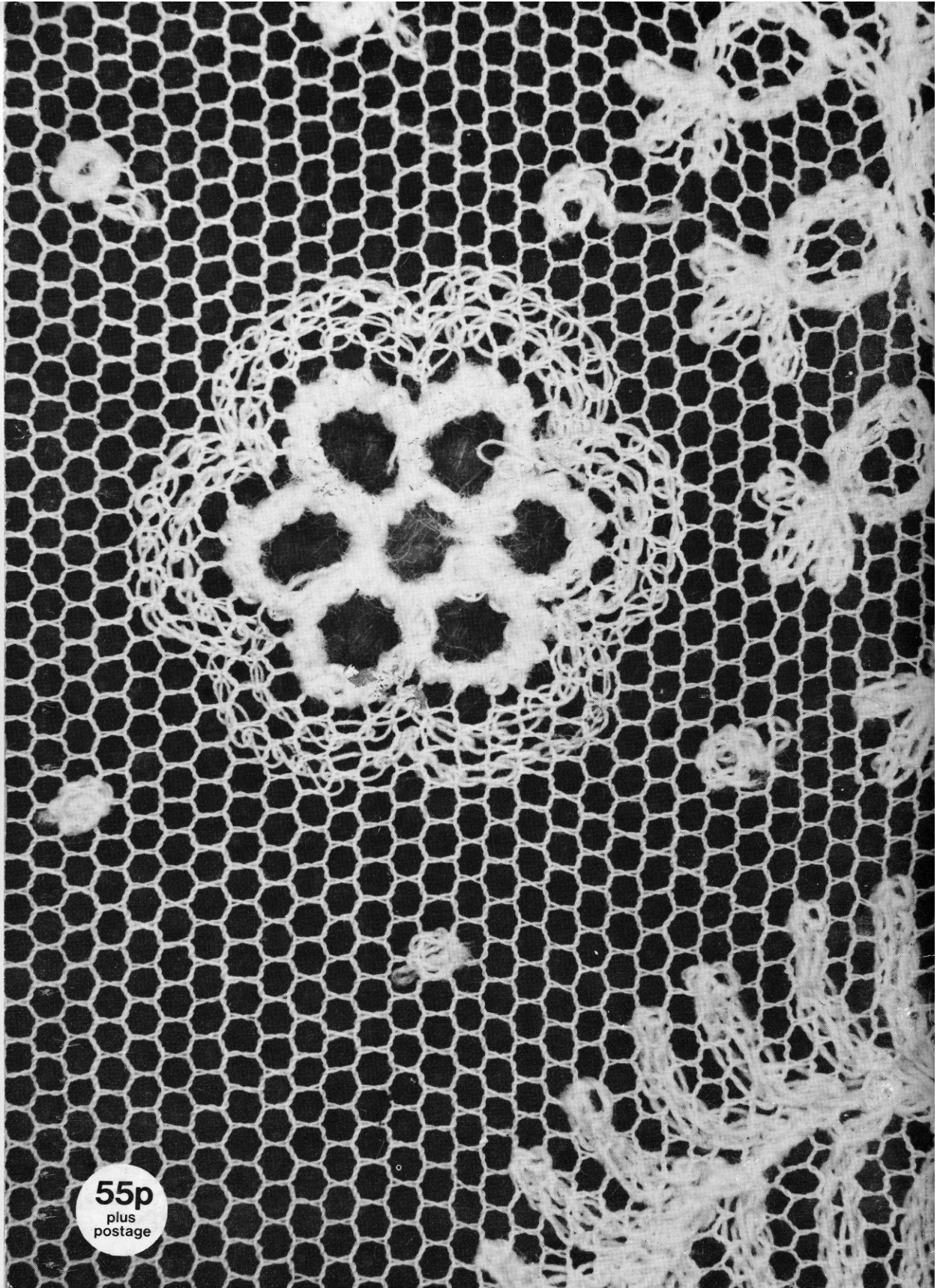
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