

STRAW and STRAW MANUFACTURES. Straw (from strew, as being used for strewing), is the general term applied to the stalky residue of grain-plants (especially wheat, rye, oats, barley). It forms the raw material of some important industries. It serves for the thatching of roofs, for a paper-making material, for ornamenting small surfaces as a "straw-mosaic," for plaiting into door and table mats, mattresses, &c., and for weaving and plaiting into light baskets, artificial flowers, &c. These applications, however, are insignificant in comparison with the place occupied by straw as a raw material for the straw bonnets and hats worn by both sexes. Of the various materials which go to the fabrication of plaited head-gear the most important is wheaten straw. It is only in certain areas that straw suitable for making plaits is produced. The straw must have a certain length of "pipe" between the knots, must possess a clear delicate golden colour and must not be brittle. The most valuable straw for plaits is grown in Tuscany, and from it the well-known Tuscan plaits and Leghorn hats are made. The straw of Tuscany, specially grown for plaiting, is distinguished into three qualities—*Pontederas Semone* being the finest, *Mazzuolo* the second quality, from which the bulk of the plaits are made, while from the third quality, *Santa Fiore*, only "Tuscan pedals" and braids are plaited. The wheat-seed for these straws is sown very thickly on comparatively elevated and arid land, and it sends up long attenuated stalks. When the grain in the ear is about half developed the straw is pulled up by the roots, dried in the sun, and subsequently spread out for several successive days to be bleached under the influence of alternate sunlight and night-dews. The pipe of the upper joint alone is selected for plaiting, the remainder of the straw being used for other purposes. These pipes are made up in small bundles, bleached in sulphur fumes in a closed chest, assorted into sizes, and so prepared for the plaiters. Straw-plaiting is a domestic industry among the women and young children of Tuscany and some parts of Emilia. Tuscan plaits and hats vary enormously in quality and value; the plait of a hat of good quality may represent the work of four or five days, while hats of the highest quality may each occupy six to nine months in making. The finest work is excessively trying to the eyes of the plaiters, who can at most give to it two or three hours' labour daily.

The districts around Luton in Bedfordshire and the neighbouring counties have, since the beginning of the 17th century, been the British home of the straw-plait industry. The straw