



‘Take the Children...’

*How Victorian lace girls lived
and worked in the Honiton
and East Midlands districts -
this is their story, as told to
the 1862 Royal Commission*

Alan Brown

Take the Children...

The life of the lace girls, working in the
Honiton and East Midlands districts, from the
evidence given to John Edward White M.A.
for the 1862 Royal Commission

By Alan Brown

*For Sheila, and the members of Sawbridgeworth Lacemakers, who
over some two decades have kindled my interest in lace itself and
in the quite extraordinary history of the craft; and with
thanks to Kate, and to Ron for 'toiling and spinning'*

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PLACES VISITED BY MR WHITE

IN THE HONITON DISTRICT

BEER	NEWTON POPPLEFORD
BRANSCOMBE	OTTERTON
COLATON RALEIGH	SEATON
COLYTON	SIDBURY
EXETER	SIDMOUTH
HONITON	

IN THE EAST MIDLANDS DISTRICT

BEDFORD	NASH
BROUGHTON	NEWPORT PAGNELL
BUCKINGHAM	PRESTWOOD
COTTON END	PRINCES RISBOROUGH
ELSTOW	PYTCHLEY
HIGH WYCOMBE	WILSHAMPSTEAD (alternative for Wilstead)
HOUGHTON CONQUEST	WINSLOW
LOOSLEY ROUSE (in error for Loosley Row)	

Front cover: background is reversed from illustration on page 14

Back cover, titled 'A decaying English industry - a lace school in Devonshire,'
by Percy Macquoid, 1852 - 1925, artist, designer, illustrator.

'Take the Children...' by Alan Brown

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Preface

In 1862, the government set up a Royal Commission to inquire into the “employment of children and young persons in trades and manufactures not already regulated by law,” sending commissioners to take evidence from both the young people and others involved in the various trades, together with independent people in the locality.

One such trade was that of pillow lace making, and for that reason assistant commissioner John Edward White visited both the Honiton and the East Midlands lace districts. Mr White reported on the situation of young lacemakers in 26 towns and villages in his search for facts which the government might consider should they frame further legislation.

His written reports are all that we know of Mr White, but they are sufficient to tell us that he was not only a meticulous researcher, not only concerned with accuracy on behalf of the youngsters concerned, but also someone with a heart, with sympathy for those whose lives would touch his only very briefly.

It is now getting on towards a century and a half since what you will read in these pages was spoken, it is surely time that the thoughts and utterances of these, often tiny, girls were given another airing. They had little enough chance in their short lives to speak widely of their plight.

It is often a sad tale they have to tell, born of isolation, poverty and ignorance. You will meet, for example, 11-year-old Jane Harris from Newport Pagnell, of whose conversation Mr White reports: “The first man made was Adam. Does not know of the Queen;” and sympathetic onlookers such as the Rev. Gidley, curate of Branscombe, who told him: “The girls can earn out 1s. 6d. a week, but out of this have to pay 4d. for schooling (lace), and pay for thread, pins, pricking patterns, &c. besides, and get hardly anything clear.”

No attempt has been made to “write up” or put a gloss on Mr White’s report. It does not need it. These were very often totally unschooled young people, but their words, and sometimes the lack of them, speak for themselves, as do those of the other local people Mr White interviewed.

The girls could not have dreamed that anyone would be listening to them over a century after they spoke to Mr White. But this is their evidence. It is their story.

‘Take the children...’

The French historian Jules Michelet (1798–1874) told the following story: “When the English manufacturers warned Pitt that, owing to the high wages they had to pay their workmen, they were unable to pay their national taxes, Pitt returned a terrible answer: ‘Take the children.’ That saying weighs like a curse upon England.”

Quoting this in their 1917 book *The Town Labourer 1760-1832*, J L and Barbara Hammond commented: ‘The story, though a legend... is a legend woven round the facts, for during the first phase of the Industrial Revolution the employment of children on a vast scale became the most important social feature of English life, and its consequences are not exaggerated in Michelet’s outburst.’

One of its consequences was that the lives of countless children were, for well over a hundred years, blighted in the mills, mines and factories of England. But, as we shall see, the impact of the change went far beyond the factory walls, into quiet English villages more accustomed to the click of lace bobbins than the hiss of steam and the clank of metal.

When the Hammonds said that the employment of children ‘became the most important social feature of English life’ they were pointing to a catastrophic change in the outlook of the people. From then on, instead of being able to develop into adulthood at their own pace, it was accepted that children were part almost of the machines they worked upon. Toiling as much as 18 hours a day in terrible conditions, they were transformed from being kept by their families, provided with the means of life, into pitifully young family providers themselves. Giving evidence in 1816 before a committee chaired by the then MP Robert Peel on the ‘State of Children in Manufactories’ the social reformer Robert Owen was asked how it was possible for society to keep children if they did not go to work until they were twelve?

“I recollect the period well,” he replied, “when there were not any manufactories in several parts of the country... and the children, as far as I recollect, of the poor, were then as well fed, as well clothed, and, as far as my memory serves me, looked as well as now, and few or none of them were employed regularly until they were twelve, thirteen and fourteen years of age.”

At the time he was speaking, the normal age at which children went to the mills was between six and seven. Owen added that many were taken at four or five years, and he had heard of one working at the age of three. They picked up waste cotton, he said, and “the smaller they are, the more conveniently they go under the machines.”

The mass introduction of children into the factory system in the 18th century changed the face of English family life, condemning children to the most sordid, filthy and dangerous conditions. Many slept where they worked, getting into beds that others were climbing out of to go on shift. The “dark, Satanic mills” of Blake’s *Jerusalem* conjures up the inhuman conditions of the time, made plain by a mass of evidence given before Parliamentary committees and Royal Commissions. A committee was told in 1831 that “In some mills scarcely an hour passed in the long day without the sound of beating and cries of pain.” The same committee – the Sadler Committee into Factory Children’s Labour – heard a doctor who had practised in Barbados tell them that the adult Negro slave worked shorter hours than the factory child. The Hammonds said that “work from 3.30 am to 10 pm was not unknown; in Mr Varley’s mill, all through the summer, they worked from 3.30 am to 9.30 pm....The more humane employers contented themselves when busy with a spell of sixteen hours (5 am to 9 pm).”

Commented the Hammonds: “It was physically impossible to keep such a system working at all except by the driving power of terror.”

This, then, was the backdrop to 18th and 19th century industrial life – in cotton and woollen mills but also in mining, engineering and other industries – setting a pattern for the socially held attitudes toward factory life and particularly the employment of children in them. Gradually, however, as the 18th century wore on, pressure built up for reform, particularly of the conditions under which young people were employed.

Hand-made bobbin lace was, of course, totally different in its manufacture from the products of heavy industry. It was nevertheless a highly profitable commodity to make and, together with the fact that it needed no powerful machines in its production

– and therefore no massive factories to house them – it was a perfect product to be made by small groups in private homes.

The fact that, alongside the Industrial Revolution proper, lacemaking continued to thrive in a quite significant way, rested on a long history.

A bitter-sweet legacy

Lace had established a social position over centuries. Amongst the loveliest and most sought-after of traditional hand-made crafts, it adorned royal families throughout Europe, together with their aristocratic circles, and was most jealously guarded. It became a badge of rank. Queen Elizabeth I forbade commoners from wearing ruffs above a stipulated size. Apprentices, who took to wearing white-work on their collars, were ordered by the Queen to cease the practice immediately. But it was the sheer cost of lace which marked it out as a social accolade.

An idea of this truth is given in Daniel Defoe's novel *Roxana*, where the heroine had on her head "a suit of lace worth two hundred pounds". This was in 1724, at a time when an agricultural labourer's weekly wage would not have been more than 7s to 8s. Thus, Roxana would have worn on her head the equivalent of ten years' agricultural wages.

But to conclude that lace, because of its beauty and value, touched only the elegant, adorned just the righteous, gave nothing but simple and homely pleasure, would be to ignore much of its history. With fine understatement, Hilda Armstrong, general manager of the Bucks Cottage Workers Agency in the early part of the 20th century, said:

"The history of lace is rich in tradition, and plentifully besprinkled with incident and action."

For, though the story of lacemaking is at heart about the creation of beauty, this very fact has often led it down dark and sombre paths, peopled by some for whom its loveliness was secondary to personal gain. But the beauty and value, in the end, has relied on the lacemaker, bent over her pillow, trying to complete the required number of pins in the hour or day, adding extraordinary value to very modest raw materials. Thomas Lester, whom we shall meet later, highlighted the nature of the trade when he said that "In cotton and linen lace, as in the Bedfordshire, nearly the whole of the value is in the labour, very little in the material." It is what flows from this fact – the incredible value added to mere thread by the lacemaker's work – that will help explain the situation in the lace schools and the rest of the trade which is the point of these lines.

Lacemaking was for long of importance in many areas of England, France, Belgium, Holland and other countries well-known for the individuality and beauty of their styles. Mention such places as Bedfordshire, Mechlin, Buckinghamshire, Bruges, Chantilly, Milan, Brussels, Valenciennes, Honiton and to the lacemaker they have but one sound – the echo of age-old lacemaking, the click of bobbin on bobbin.

With the extensive use of lace common throughout much of Europe, whole communities relied on its manufacture and sale for their livelihoods. Those in charge of national economies were constantly hard put to know how, first, to cut the usage of expensive laces in their own country, and, second, prevent the influx of foreign laces to be worn at the expense of their home products.

That England has benefited so much from a bobbin lace tradition is partly due to the enforced migration of lacemakers to its shores from the Continent, bringing their patterns, skills and inventiveness with them.

The suffering of the Huguenot lacemakers in the 16th century played a large part when, for decades, France experienced open religious warfare and the Low Countries were also torn apart by religious strife, with Protestant Huguenots challenging Catholic extremists seeking to establish religious orthodoxy, and hence social control.



A Breton woman of the 19th century wearing locally made lace. She lived in a Huguenot area where religious terror had produced mass emigrations, including lacemakers, to southern England, thus helping influence the development of what are now traditional English laces.

Periods of Inquisitional terror, alongside punitive taxation, caused great numbers of refugees to flee the Low Countries. One such mass immigration from Holland in 1563, provoked by Philip II of Spain, saw over 100,000 seeking refuge in England, spreading through a large area covering Kent and Sussex, London and Bedfordshire.

Many were lacemakers by trade and brought sufficient equipment to begin a lace industry, inspiring local populations to learn the craft. They spread even wider, mainly to Buckinghamshire, Northampton, Huntingdonshire and Oxfordshire. Added to these were parts of Somerset, Devon and Dorset.

Their lace then gradually took on other, distinctive forms.

“It seems that when the art is introduced into a new

home,” says Catherine Channer in *Lacemaking in the Midlands, Past and Present*, “it never remains the same, but always becomes in some way characteristic of its new sphere; so that we find Italian lace, Belgian lace, French lace, English lace, all perfectly distinct from one another.”

Towards the end of the 17th century lacemaking was an important home industry in England. Earlier, laws had been passed prohibiting its import and reducing its use, but the extensive lace smuggling into Britain from the Continent – sometimes even wound round the corpses of the high-born who had died abroad – testified to its attraction among the more affluent sections of English society. Political economists estimated that the country was spending some two million pounds a year on foreign lace and linen.

A lace manufacturers’ petition to Parliament in 1698 stated that “The Lace Manufacture in England is the greatest, next to the Woollen.” In the Lords’ Journals for June 28, 1780, evidence is given by one Mr Jas. Pilgrim to the effect that “from a few Towns that have been numbered lately it is supposed that People employed throughout the Kingdom in the Article of Bone Lace would amount to near 400,000.” He stated that in the little town of Olney alone the lacemakers numbered 1192. Returns for 1802 from the village of Hanslope (nr Milton Keynes) – where boys as well as girls were “brought up to the pillow” – showed that 800 out of a population of 1275 were lacemakers. The profits to the parish were calculated at £8,000 to £10,000 a year – a very significant amount. Lace from the village was valued at from 6d. to £2 2s. a yard.

In the 17th and 18th centuries, lace schools grew up in the traditional rural lace areas to cater for the heavy demand coming from towns and cities. Honiton lace from Devon and that from the Northampton area (forerunner of today’s Bucks point lace) were desired by all who could afford them, to adorn particularly their collars, cuffs and pockets.

The lace schools - more accurately small lace factories - sometimes employed the majority of young people in a particular village, and were often a major source of village income.

In *The Romance of the Lace Pillow*, published in 1919, Thomas Wright sketched the scene in a lace school as he imagined it:

“They were very neatly dressed, with bare neck and arms, so that they could be slapped the more easily, their hair was in plaits, lest a stray hair should fall and get worked up with the lace, and they were never allowed to touch their hair – the one great object being to keep the lace spotlessly clean. In full view of them sat, with a cane on her lap, the Argus-eyed mistress.”

Following mounting concern in the 18th century over the conditions of child labour, the first Factory Act appeared in 1802, applying to cotton and woollen mills. Under it, no child was to work in them more than twelve hours a day, which had to be between 6 am and 9 pm, and be exclusive of meal times.

Other mills and factories were left out, as were smaller employers and trades carried on mostly by individuals, into which category came hand-made bobbin lace. In all conscience, though, the conditions in some of these could also be terrible in the extreme, and during the following decades many separate committees enquired into one or another aspect of them.

In 1862 a Children's Employment Commission was set up by Parliament *'to enquire into the employment of children and young persons in trades and manufactures not already regulated by law.'* This Commission produced six reports between 1863 and 1867 and dealt, as part of a wider remit, with the lace industry, both its machine manufacturing side and the hand-made bobbin lace industry. Its reports extended to hundreds of pages of evidence, carefully gleaned during extensive interviews with people at all levels of the industries concerned.

Evidence from the hand-made bobbin lace industry was collected by Assistant Commissioner John Edward White, MA, who visited lace schools in the East Midlands and the Honiton area and spoke with lace dealers and 'manufacturers' - who purchased the finished items made by children attending the lace schools or working at home - then the lace school mistresses and, finally, the young lacemakers themselves. Outside the industry, he spoke to local dignitaries in order to get a more rounded view of its local effects.

At that time, bobbin lace was in decline - partly due to changes in fashion during the years since the Napoleonic Wars, and partly from the threat posed by machine-made lace which, sophisticated in appearance but far cheaper, had stolen a considerable part of the market. Nevertheless, the bobbin lacemakers still made up a significant number and contributed greatly to the local economies where they lived and worked.

A tightly-drawn set of guidance/instructions was prepared to govern the Commission's inquiries, which were to cover such aspects as the ages of employment, hours of work, meal-taking, the state of the places of work and accidents. In the following paragraph, the Commissioners sum up the heart of why the investigation was to take place:

"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 the 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 is 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 being almost wholly depend."

On first reading, the archaicisms woven into this passage perhaps make it appear quaint but, that aside, it shows a great and deep concern for the young people into whose lives they were responsible for enquiring.

The System

The hand-made bobbin lace industry, which included the widespread development of village lace schools to service a tightly-knit distribution system, rested on the appetite of the well-to-do purchaser on the one side and, on the other, the desperate need for family income in the lace districts. It required that orders be taken at one end of the scale and filtered down in very precise fashion to the other.

Between the demand from the towns and cities and the well-to-do in the countryside, to the lacemaker inserting pins into her pillow, there was a number of stages. Individual orders were taken, or general demand assessed, by lace warehouses, high street shops or individual agents; these were supplied by middlemen who were in



The *Book of Trades*, published in 1804, depicts a lacemaker “engaged in her work in the open air, which even in this country is no uncommon sight during the summer months.” The book comments that the work is “very tedious” and requiring a degree of attention “which can rarely be expected in persons of easy circumstances”. It goes on to say that “Lace making, therefore, is consigned to the hands of indigent women and young girls, who by their skill and dexterity, raise the value of materials, originally of little worth, to almost any sum. But the time required to accomplish this beautiful manufacture is always in proportion to the value of the work; so that after all, little money is to be earned in the business.”

direct contact with lace schools or individual lacemakers in the villages. Their need for specified quantities of lace, of particular types and patterns, would be passed to the lace ‘manufacturers’ in the villages, who would order the items direct from individual lacemakers working in the schools or at home. The local lace buyers often ran small provision shops and, as we shall see, took the finished lace in exchange for lace-making equipment and materials – cottons and silks, pins, bobbins, pillows, etc - as well as grocery and drapery, and only seldom for money. The distributors who purchased the lace from the local collectors would, in their turn, insist on paying for much of the lace in kind. They would also supply the patterns (prickings) which would be in currently fashionable styles. These were guarded closely from outside prying eyes, since fresh patterns had to be constantly designed to replace those which had already been copied for production by the lace-making machines in the factories. These in their turn became ever cleverer at reproducing the hand-made

products. Thus, as a lace schoolmistress in Prestwood, Bucks, said, care was needed to safeguard the patterns supplied by the manufacturer, which were not allowed to be seen “by any but those who work for him.”

It is clear that a great deal of wealth flowed through the lace industry, particularly in the good times. Little of it stuck to the fingers of the lacemakers, however, though every penny they earned was vital to the family upkeep in countryside areas which were very often visited by hunger.

“The middleman seems to have appeared in the lace industry in its earliest days,” says Ivy Pinchbeck, in *Women Workers and the Industrial Revolution 1750 - 1850**, “and most of the lacemakers were employed by local dealers or ‘lace manufacturers’ as they called themselves. Many of them in the eighteenth century were employers on a large scale.” Indeed, the same Jas. Pilgrim whose evidence to the Lords was quoted on page 4, stated that he then employed 800 hands, but that some years previously he had employed “upwards of 1,000, and those mostly women and children from the age of four or five years to eighty.” Pinchbeck also quotes the case from the *History of Buckinghamshire*, of John West, who, “born and brought up in very humble life,” became a dealer in lace “by which he acquired considerable property. One of his bequests was a sum of £4,000 to £5,000 for a church consecrated in 1807.”

Assistant Commissioner White, as instructed, interviewed local people in any way involved in the lace business, teasing out as best he could the truth of what went on and, together with them, spoke to other local dignitaries – magistrates, clergymen, ‘national’ school mistresses, etc. His guidance was that “The term ‘children’ signifies those who are under 13 years of age; and the term ‘young persons’ those who are above 13 and under 18 years of age.” He was also to concern himself with “the inseparable connection existing between early and unrestricted labour and education.”

A High Wycombe manufacturer, Thomas Gilbert, expressed to him the economic reality underlying the industry: “The earnings of children,” he said, “are a great inducement to parents to put them to lace as soon as they can contribute anything to the support of the family, commonly at about 6 years old. Till the elder children reach this age a family is only expense, but a mother with some of her little girls at lace may make nearly as much as the father.”

Mr Gilbert was a manufacturer “employing lacemakers over the greater part of South Buckinghamshire, and an adjoining strip of Oxfordshire, and in these districts there is no other lace manufacturer or buyer of importance. The greater part of the whole [local] pillow lace trade is in the hands of three or four large manufacturers.” He employed “about 3,000 persons”. They were not his workpeople, he explained, but he sold them the materials and it was understood that he would buy all the lace for which he had sold the patterns. In some places, he said, “I do not deal directly with the lacemakers themselves but through the agency of small buyers, to whom I supply the materials and patterns, and who in turn deal with lacemakers in the same way as myself.”

Mr Gilbert spoke of the pressure exerted by machine lace, saying that their only

George Routledge & Sons, London, 1930

defence was “constantly introducing new designs and kinds of lace as fast as the old are made on the machine, which is often within a very short time after a new pattern is out.” Manufacturers had to have good design skills, he went on, and Nottinghamshire was decaying for want of this.

Also in High Wycombe, Mr White spoke to Mrs Allen of Queen Square, who had been in the lace business some 12 years and was an agent for a larger distributor, buying lace brought in by makers from 6 or 7 villages nearby. Local shops, she said, took in the finished lace “in exchange for the lace making materials (except pillows, which were bought elsewhere) viz., patterns, silk, cotton, pins, bobbins, etc and grocery and drapery.” She spoke of the added problem for the lacemaker that, when times were bad, they would get less for their work, but still had to pay the same for their silks (it was a black lace area). “The price of silk is always the same within 1d. or 2d. in the ounce, viz., the fine black silk, of which most is used, 3s. 6d. and the coarse 2s. The cost of cotton is less, not more than about 1d. in the 1s. of the value of the lace.” (i.e. 1/12th)

Mrs Allen explained that machine lace was harming the price of hand-made lace: “A girl of 8 may be a nice little lace maker, and working nine hours a day could get in good times 2s. 6d. a week, but now not more than 1s. 6d. A girl of 13, a fair worker, - working 10 hours a day, could not now get more than 2s. 6d. a week, or 3s. at the outside; and in preference to working so hard for this, they now all go out to service - as soon as they are big enough.”

Manufacturer William Ayres from Newport Pagnell (in what is now the Milton Keynes area), however, while speaking of the need for “a constant change of patterns” because of “the extent to which pillow lace is now copied by machinery”, said that there were other “accidental causes” of depression, specifying “the American [Civil] War, and the present tariff there which amounts to a prohibition.” The authorities, both Republican and Confederate, clearly found it necessary to prohibit the import of lace with the resultant flowing abroad of money.

In Bedford, Mr White spoke to Thomas Lester, a lace merchant whose work is known to a great number of today’s lacemakers. In 1862 he had been in business for some 50 years and employed lacemakers “in almost every village, and in some of these in almost every house, within a circle of 10 miles from Bedford...”

He and his partners also had lace schools under their control, providing the patterns which were made up, though he said that it was not the local custom to apprentice children, “nor is any reading taught in the lace schools.”

Mr Lester, many of whose patterns are kept at the Cecil Higgins museum in Bedford, said that improvements in machine lace did not affect the demand for locally-made laces, but also mentioned the American Civil War. “Nearly a third of the whole of the lace made in Bedfordshire,” he said, “used to go to America, and now most of this trade has stopped.” His evaluation of the overall East Midlands lace field was that “The Buckinghamshire lace is principally black, and probably the greatest in value of the three [i.e. Beds, Bucks, Northants]; Bedfordshire, white fancy lace, in imitation of Honiton; and the Northamptonshire, white thread, a coarser sort.”

He was also greatly concerned with the state of design in the industry. "One great want in the trade", he said, "is a school of design, which would enable manufacturers to obtain patterns suitable for ordinary work. There are many French and Belgian designers, but their patterns are too elaborate and difficult for the people here, and scarcely any of the manufacturers (pillow lace) can design their own, though we do. And connected with this is a great evil in the lace trade, viz., copying of patterns which tends to discourage invention."

In the Honiton, Devon, area, Mr White spoke to a number of manufacturers, first Mrs Godolphin who "takes orders from wholesale houses and warehouses or private families, gives out patterns to the lace makers, and sells them their thread." Honiton lace was made in schools or in the children's homes "in small separate pieces or 'sprigs', some extremely small, and made by the dozen, which are brought back to her, and are then 'made up', by joining them together, either on the pillow by bobbin lace, or by the needle, or by sewing them on to net." This process was considered the best work and was the best paid, usually done by "young women, children not being suitable for it."

Still in Honiton, he next spoke to Mrs Davey, whom Mr White described as one of the three local lace manufacturers, employing lacemakers there and in most villages for 10 or 12 miles distance. The greater part of young women and girls in the town were lacemakers, she said, and she kept some of them at work the year round, "taking the risk of losing by change of fashion." She could, however, frequently alter the lace into new patterns. This was also the work carried out at nearby Colaton Raleigh, where Mr White spoke to Miss Smith who helped manage the affairs of Mr Treadwin, a lace manufacturer in a small way. At that time he had only three or four girls - from 12 to 16 years old - "who rip off sprigs". She explained: "i.e. remove patterns from one piece of lace to be transferred to others. These girls grow up to be transferers, &c., in whom more skill is required."

Never a penny in my purse...*

The driving force which saw girls and young women in their tens of thousands join lace schools as soon as they were strong enough to hold a pillow, and work for 12 and more hours a day, was their family need. We shall see the dire straits in which so many youngsters found themselves - selling an inch or so of lace in order to buy their supper - and how even caring parents put very young children into the schools to augment the poor pay which had long been a curse of the countryside. Mrs Caroline Hayman, a lace manufacturer in Otterton, spoke from experience of the children's poverty: "I am the principal lace manufacturer here, and take the work of from 30 to

* From a lace jingle recited at Yardley Hastings, Northampton, quoted in Thomas Wright's *Romance of the Lace Pillow*: Twenty pins have I to do, Let ways be ever so dirty. Never a penny in my purse, But farthings five and thirty.

A Word About Currency

In the 19th century, England's coinage had a vastly different value to that of today, so that when we try to estimate what earnings were worth then as compared with now, we have to tread with care.

We have, of course, gone metric, but this has little bearing on our problem. Merely to say that yesterday's shilling is today's 5p does not take us far in assessing the value of a shilling 150 years ago.

But where we can start is by knowing what was an average weekly wage at that time, and what that wage would buy. We do, however, have to consider that people's needs were vastly different from today. There was no gas in the villages nor electricity for heating or lighting, no radio or TV, of course, and only the most basic necessities of food, drink and clothing.

The pound was then divided into 20 shillings, the shilling into 12 pennies, and each penny into four farthings. Thus there were 240 pennies in a pound.

We shall see that the average weekly wage of an agricultural labourer was about 7 or 8 shillings in the 1860s, and a document produced in 1825 by the Northumberland mineworkers will help in showing what an average weekly shop might have contained, and the approximate prices paid for the items.

Bread, 6d a stone (14lb); meat, 7d lb; oatmeal and milk for a breakfast approximately ½d; tea 6d an ounce; sugar 8d a lb; salt butter 1s 2d a lb; cheese 9d a lb; tobacco 3½d an ounce; ale 1½d per pint; plus clothing, coal or wood, and rent in non-tied cottages.

When we look at the payment for a yard of lace, or for so many hours' work in the week, these figures will give at least some idea of what it meant to a family whose main income would have been about 7s or 8s a week.

40 girls and young women, chiefly between the ages of 6 and 20. They bring in a piece of lace as soon as they have done it, every day and sometimes twice a day, it may be as little as a couple of pennyworth, and beg you to take it, that they may get something to eat." As regards payment she went on: "I have a grocery and provision shop, and pay them in my shop goods, and the five other lace manufacturers in the place have shops and do the same. I feel obliged to let them have something, but they are so poor that I can scarcely get them out of my debt....After leaving school at night the girls will often bring me the work which they have done, being unable to pay for any tea till then."

Mr White spoke to farm labourer Samuel Coombs in Branscombe, who said that "his wife had three or four lace scholars, one about 5 years old when she came. The wages of farm labourers in the neighbourhood he stated to be 8s. a week and three pints of cider daily; and that till the last two or three years were 7s." The lace scholars, each

paying probably a few coppers for their training, would add perhaps 1s. a week to the Coombs's family budget.

Some five miles away, at Colyton, the local vicar - the Rev. Mamerto Gueritz - was, as we shall see, highly critical of many aspects of the impact which lace making had on the local children, describing the long hours and ugly conditions under which they worked. He also saw that the work of the young lacemakers was sometimes adding nothing to their family incomes. "It diminishes the wages of the men," he told Mr White, "the farmers giving less in proportion as the wives and daughters earn something on which the family may be supported." He also put the common labourer's wage locally at "8s. a week and some cider."

There were, of course, no wage levels laid down either nationally or locally for the young lacemakers, not by the week, the day, the hour, or the length of lace made. Differing laces called forth differing payments, depending on the ease or otherwise of the pattern, the colour of the thread, the local conditions or the need the industry had for lace at a particular time.

When they started at their lace school - at 4, 5 or 6 years of age - they would pay for their tuition. Mrs Harriet Wheeler, of Sidbury, explained to Mr White the system as she saw it in the Honiton area: "Girls usually go to lace schools as soon as they can just hold a pillow. They work for their mistress in the first year, as well as pay her 6d. a week. Afterwards they pay a little less and work for themselves, and after 5 or 6 years leave and work at home, or sitting about in sets of 6 or 7 at friends' houses, both for the sake of warmth and also of helping one another in making a pattern". A Sidbury neighbour, Mrs Amelia Clarke, had 18 scholars, from 6 or 7 upwards. "For the first 2 years," she said, "they pay 6d. a week, and 4d. afterwards, but if they get behind with their payments she lets them make it up afterwards. For the first 6 months or so she takes their work, but it is of scarcely any value." She went on to say that the manufacturers sometimes fixed the price of a piece of work in advance and sometimes after. "3s. 6d. would be a very good week's work, but the earnings depend upon the kind of patterns as well as the way in which it is worked."

Mrs Copp, a lace schoolmistress in Beer, who had 9 lace scholars between the ages of 9 and 13, but took them from 6 upwards, described the regime at her own and other local schools: "Some come as apprentices for a year and a half, and afterwards pay 3½d. or 3d. a week. Others have their own lace and pay 1s. a week for the first quarter, gradually diminishing afterwards. At the 6 other schools in the place children begin at about the same age. They begin working for about 4 hours in a day and increase gradually till the end of their first year, after which they work all day, from 8 in the morning till 10 at night in winter, and in summer begin at 6 or 7 in the morning. Her little girls here (two aged 9, one 10, &c.) if they finish their work before 10 p.m. will leave, if they do not, will stay, but she never keeps school after 10, and they do not stay later unless they ask. Thinks that late enough."

In Newton Poppleford lace school mistress Elizabeth Woodleigh said that most of her new girls "pay 6d. a week for 6 months; then 4d.; then 2½. or 2d." Nearby, Mrs Ash worked her girls from 8 a.m. to half past four, "never by candle light till they are 12 or 14. They pay 4d. per week at first, afterwards less, and have the lace which they make."

At Mrs Aigland's lace school in Beer, she said that the young women stayed there until they married, "getting a little instruction still and paying about 2d. a week for this and the candles, &c. All come here at 8½ or 9 in the morning now, and work till 11 usually, but the young girls leave early. When they are busy they usually sit one night in the week till 2 or so, and 'are obliged to.' An average amount earned by working in this way through the week, i.e. from 9 to 11, is 4s 6d."

Only once does the phrase "wages girls" come up, when lace schoolmistress Mrs Croydon in Honiton says that she has "five girls between 12 and 18 years of age, who are 'wages girls' and get from 1s. to 3s. 6d. a week." There is no indication, however, of what amount of lace would be produced for that amount of pay, nor what would be the difference between those earning 1s. and those getting 3s. 6d. Possibly the speed and accuracy of their work and the difficulty of the patterns.

The concept of wages - intimating a steady rate of earnings from one week to another - was obviously not widespread, but a half-way house system was the use of



The LONDON ILLUSTRATED NEWS visited this young Bedfordshire lacemaker in 1859 and, while its artist drew her working at her pillow (somewhat distorted for visual effect) the reporter inquired about her work. The pattern, about an inch wide, would take about "four days' close work to complete one yard." The article went on: "Thirty or forty years ago a young girl could earn a shilling a day by this employment; a similar person will now, with difficulty, earn fourpence a day... the price of thread has increased, wages have not improved."

apprenticeships. The methods of apprenticing the girls varied considerably. Mrs Besley, a lace schoolmistress at Seaton, had about 7 girls from the age of 6 upwards, "some as apprentices who for a year and a half give their work for their teaching, and afterwards pay 4d. a week, and have their own lace. They are set 10 hours' work, i.e. about from 7 am to 7 pm in summer, with two hours for breakfast, dinner and tea, and from 8 am to 8 pm in winter, with meals."

In Beer, Mr White spoke to 12-year-old Mary Ann Northcote, at Mrs Driver's school, who had been an apprentice for a year and a half at 9 years of age. For the first 3 months she had worked only 4 hours a day, then 7 or 8 hours for the next 3 months, and then a full day. Three other girls were apprenticed, while the others paid 1s. a week at first, then 8d. and so on. Mary Ann "could earn 3s. a week by the time she left (lately) but had it out in

groceries from the manufacturers.”

In Sidmouth he spoke to a braid-work dealer, Mary Ann Paver, who said that “Braid is a kind of work that has been made for about 13 years, by working braid together to imitate Honiton lace.” The children took to it at from 6 to 9 years. “The general rule is for them to be put as apprentices to it for 12 months for whole or half days. A girl, but not a child, could learn it in 12 months.” Mrs Paver herself had begun lace at 9 years old and at 12 had been an apprentice for a year to learn “putting together”. An important fact about Mrs Paver was, however, that she paid her workers out in cash. We shall see in the next chapter how unusual and how important that was to the lacemaker.

Mrs Godolphin, Honiton lace manufacturer, said that the lacemakers “usually go as apprentices to schools for three years, paying nothing and getting nothing, except perhaps, after a time, a garment once a quarter, and not paying for the lace which they spoil.”

Also of Honiton, lace schoolmistress Mrs Croydon mentioned the same method of payment - somewhat akin to the truck system which we shall look at in the next chapter: “An apprentice for three years has a new apron at the end of the first year, a new pair of shoes at the end of the second, and a new frock at the end of the third, or something of this kind. A girl coming older as a 2 years’ apprentice, does not often get anything.” Her Honiton neighbour, Mrs Stevens, said that she had two scholars, the elder of whom, aged 14, could make 2s. 3d. a week, while the other, at 10, 1s. “It takes a child 3 years to learn,” she said, “but they are not put so little now as they were [i.e. not put into the lace schools so young as previously], trade being so bad. These come in summer at 6 a.m. and leave generally at 7 or 8 p.m., not often later, with towards two hours for meals, and in winter come at 8 a.m. and leave at 8½ or 9 p.m. They have what is called 9 hours work given to them to do.”

The Rev. L. Gidley, curate of Branscombe, was brief and to the point: “The girls can earn out 1s. 6d. a week, but out of this have to pay 4d. for schooling (lace), and pay for thread, pins, pricking patterns, &c. besides, and get hardly anything clear.” Of one of his parishioners, Sarah Jane Perry, Mr White comments: “Is a quick worker, but the most she has made is 3s. or 3s. 6d. in a week. Her parents have all she earns. Cannot get enough to put in the Post Office bank, and indeed does not get paid in money much.”

In Winslow, across in the East Midlands, Mrs Hazard had kept a lace school for 45 years, but because of the state of trade was going over to the straw plait industry. She said that the common age to start was 6: “some came as apprentices for a certain time, not paying but giving their work for their teaching; others paid 3d. a week, and formerly 4d. or 5d.” Mr White spoke then to Emma Ginger of Loosely Rouse whose mother had a lace school for 30 girls at one time, but this had dropped to 5 or 6. Emma “made about 4s a week (is a young woman), but out of this new thread and patterns must be paid for. This is the outside of her work (Another woman says 3s. 6d. would be about the average). If the pattern [i.e. pricking] only lasts a month or two, there is a good deal out of the 1s. to pay for new cards.” William Ayres, a lace manufacturer at nearby Newport Pagnell, employing lacemakers within a 15 mile

radius, stated that when prices for lace were low, "the cost of the silk may be as much or even more than a third of the whole price."

Mrs Allen, in High Wycombe, had been brought up in the bobbin lace industry since she was a girl. "To become good lacemakers," she said, "children must begin quite young, not necessarily so young as 6, but their parents want their earnings, and will not give these up when trade is good to let their children be at other schools, though in most villages there are national and other schools to which they can go for 1d. a week or so. By 13 or 14 they are too big to be kept at the lace schools, and are quite 'master' of their work, and sit at home, or two or three together, but not in larger schools. A girl of eight may be a nice little lacemaker, and working nine hours a day could get in good times 2s. 6d. a week, but now not more than 1s. 6d. A girl of 13, a fair worker, working 10 hours a day could not now get more than 2s. 6d. a week, or 3s. at the outside." One of the harsh things was that, even when the price paid to the lacemakers was lowered, that charged for the silks and other materials was kept the same, and the lower lace earnings were then depressed even further. Mrs Allen went on to say that, rather than work that hard for so little, the girls went out to service as soon as they were big enough, or took to other employments, if there were any, such as "caning" - i.e. making chair bottoms. She also added that when the children were about 12 or 13 or so "to encourage them to work more, their mothers will allow them to keep for themselves all that they earn over a fixed sum to buy their dress, &c. with."

Princes Risborough lace schoolmistress Mrs Sanders said that the lace being made would be 1s. 9d. a yard, but she believed that the silk for it would cost "within a farthing of 4d. The manufacturer, who comes round and buys, makes her take the silk, and for five yards of lace gives 1s. 6d. worth of silk, and takes this out of the money to be paid." A lace manufacturer in the same town, William Ayres, talked about the barter that went on, saying that "when prices are low the cost of silk may be as much or even more than a third of the whole price."

At nearby Newport Pagnell, Mrs Harris had 13 girls at her lace school. One of them could make 2 yards of lace in a fortnight, which was worth 3s., but the buyer took 1s. of that for silk. "The cost of cotton," she said, "is only about 2d. in the shilling, but the lace fetches less, so her earnings come to about the same in the end, viz., not more than 1s. a week. She gets more than any girl here." A 6-year-old, Charlotte Emerson, had been at Mrs Harris's lace school for 3 months, and her mother said she had been making lace at home for 2 years. She said that the girl "goes to the lace school now at 8 or 9 o'clock in the morning and gives over at 4 or 5 in the afternoon. She makes 4d. a week and pays 2d. out of it for schooling. I have another daughter 8 years old at the same school. She makes 8d. a week and pays 2½d. because she sits by candlelight." Another of Mrs Harris's pupils, Mary Wood, aged 11, had been at lace 2 years, said her mother Dinah, "but she is not strong, so I only set her 7 hours a day at her lace school. She clears 7d. a week."

A local lace dealer, Mrs Mobbs from Broughton, bemoaned the decline in bobbin and other laces: "Lace net is brought from Nottingham to this neighbourhood to be worked with the needle on frames by women and girls, perhaps three or four at one frame, which is called framework, but for the last two years there has been scarcely any of this work done." She went on to say that she had "never counted what a girl

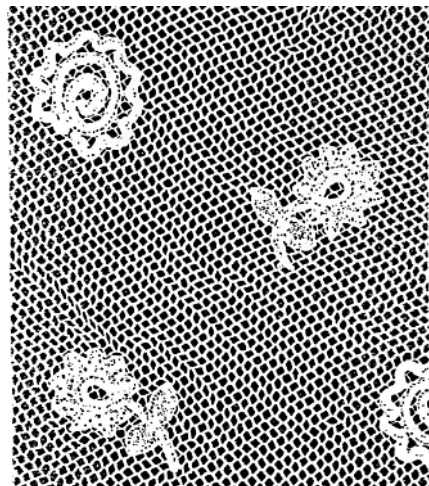
could make in a week, but should say that a quick girl of 12 or 13 might have made 4s. or 4s. 6d. when trade was good, and that now an average girl of the same age would not make more than 1s. or 1s. 6d.”

Then again, at Nash, Jane Betts, daughter of a lace schoolmistress, said that “The regular thing was for a girl to pay 4s. down for learning, and to have her own lace.” A girl of 13, she said, “working 9 hours a day at lace has just cleared 1s. in the week.” In Broughton, Mary Ann Sumter said “My scholars pay me 2d. a week in summer and 2½d. in winter.” [This would be to pay for candles.] Two mistresses - Mrs Goodman at Elstow and Mrs Burnidge at Houghton Conquest - agreed that “A girl does not make anything (i.e. profit) till she is about eight,” and “These girls can earn from 1s. up to 2s. 6d. a week, but earn scarcely anything before they are eight.” Elizabeth Ping of Sidbury said that a girl of 8, “after paying for her schooling, thread and patterns, would not clear more than 5s. in her first year. After 3 or 4 years if she were a good girl she might reach 3s. or 4s. a week.”

At Wilshampstead, lace schoolmistress Mrs Smith said that “One girl of 13 here can earn 2s. 3d. in a week now that the price is very low; in a good time she could earn nearly double.”

It should be emphasized that, at the time the Royal Commission was taking its evidence, the hand-made bobbin lace industry was in a state of decline, and had been for some decades. Many are the references in the statements of lace school mistresses and manufacturers who had either gone out of the business or took far fewer pupils than they had previously. It was everywhere said that the prices then paid for lace had gone down drastically from years previously.

Mrs Taylor, of Sidmouth, had employed girls in braid-work making, but told Mr White that she now had none, and that wages in the trade “have fallen to about a third.” Also in Sidmouth, Mrs Harriet Channon said that “Children are not put so much to lace here now, as a living cannot be made of it. Some things which would have been worth 1s. are now perhaps worth about 3d. Saw a sprig yesterday, which would take 4 hours work, but the price of which was only 2d. With a full week’s work of 12 hours a day she could not now make more than 4s. and less at some work, but formerly could have made 8s. in the same time.” She went on to comment that “little children are now put as apprentices to braid work in the same way that they were to lace, but only for a short time, as three months. This work is done by sewing braid on paper, so as to make patterns (filled in with lace).”



Honiton “sprigs”

In the East Midlands the picture was the same. A lace dealer in Buckingham, Mr John Biss, who had been in the business for 24 years, and also dealt in “useful goods”, put it as follows: “The pillow lace manufacture in this district has been falling for about 30 years, but much more so in the last few. Machinery can now make goods equal in many respects to the pillow made, and there is so much capital embarked in it that such improvements will naturally keep increasing.” Girls were going off into other work such as straw plait, he

said. "In making black silk lace, unless it be well worked, after paying for the material there is now nothing earned. In cotton lace the material is of little value." In Broughton, Mary Ann Sumter commented that "scarcely any lace made here will sell now except Maltese, chiefly cuffs and collars."

The trade was to continue for a good time after the 1860s, but it had an increasingly fitful existence and the numbers it would support fell by the year.

The burden of Truck

"The business seems to have been a lucrative one for the dealers. . . Not only did they derive considerable profits from their transactions in lace, but they seem to have compelled the lacemakers to purchase their thread at exorbitant prices which took no account of fluctuations in the price of lace. In 1843 for example, we find the lacemakers complaining bitterly that 'though lace does not, by a third at least, fetch near what it formerly did, they are compelled to take their thread from the dealers at the same enhanced price as formerly; and if they did not buy their thread of them they would not take their lace'.

"The lacemakers were, therefore, in the position of outworkers, completely dependent on the commercial entrepreneur. They purchased from him their materials, worked according to his pattern and order, and received such wages as he was inclined to give them. Wages in the 18th century were moreover so frequently illegally paid in truck, that in 1779, a Bill was complaint. . . however, show that the Act was evaded, and lacemakers were still being defrauded of their earnings in the mid-nineteenth century." *

Some seven miles south of Honiton, at Sidbury, Mrs Harriet Wheeler - whom we heard from previously - was concerned at the amount of truck that went on. At that time, in many industries, the truck system applied by which employers would pay out their workers in goods, or in tokens which could only be spent - i.e. exchanged for goods - at shops owned by the employers themselves. In some areas these were known as "Tommy shops". Thus the worker was doubly in thrall, having little or no independence. Two major Truck Acts were passed by Parliament, in 1831 and 1887 which to a large extent abolished the practice. The great problem was that, though the 1831 Act had influence in the towns, the countryside was a different matter - and that was where most of the lacemakers lived and worked. In a village of, say, 40 cottages there may have been two or three lace buyers, each keeping a shop.

"The worst fault," said Mrs Wheeler, " is that the lace shops get the profits of the work. Nearly all the lace manufacturers in the neighbourhood keep general shops, and make the lacemakers take goods for money, though I have heard of one of the large dealers who pays half in money."

Not only were the lacemakers paid out in goods rather than money, but they were not always allowed to chose which items they were given, nor even which day of the

* Pinchbeck, pp 205-6. Interior quote from Report of the Children's Commission, 1843

week they would receive them.

The manufacturers, Mrs Wheeker told Mr White, would give out goods, not what the girls wanted, "but what they, the manufacturers [i.e. shopkeepers in the main], like to allow and think [is] needed for actual use. Thus two loaves of bread and ½ lb of butter form part of a common weekly allowance to girls."

She then went on to explain: "The object of this is to prevent the people from selling the goods again and so getting any ready money, which would enable them to be independent, and buy anything which they might wish for at other shops where they - could get it better." [i.e. cheaper] "Sometimes a manufacturer [shopkeeper] actually refuses something that is asked for, on the ground that it cannot be wanted for use but for sale. The other day a girl, who had been working long hours to earn more, came and asked me if I would buy from her a pound of white sugar for 6 ½d., if she could get it, 6 ½d. being the proper market price, though the price of this sugar would be put down to the girl herself at 8d. "But even that was of no avail, because the girl could not get the extra sugar, "the manufacturer saying that she did not need it for her own use."

In like manner, manufacturers did not like girls doing extra work for someone else "and will ask a girl what she had a light so late at night for." Sometimes, she said, a few girls would get together to make lace and get a few shillings by selling it privately "but if they are found out in this they are turned out of employment by the shop. The lacemakers feel this very much, and I have seen them even crying because they are not allowed to get any money."

Incredible though it may seem, on top of this it was expected that other members of a girl's family should buy their goods at the shop to which the girl's lace was taken; a recent instance having been when "a complaint was made of a child who had been sent on an errand, being seen to enter another shop."

Mrs Wheeker went on: "In addition to this the goods are charged to the lace makers at unfair prices. I know of boots bought at a shop for 5s. a pair being sold to the lace girls for 10s. 6d., and of other cases of the same kind. Every article is charged against the lacemakers at her shop (i.e. that to which she takes her lace) something over the price paid by other people. Calico which I get for 7d. would be 9d. or 10d. to a lace girl; lump sugar instead of 6 ½d. the lb. would be 8d.; candles ditto; bacon is always 1d. or 2d. a pound dearer to them; and other things in like manner, and all the year round."

Mr White then asked Mrs Wheeker to call in a lace girl she knew and ask what she was charged for candles "and from her answer the difference of the prices was precisely that stated above, viz., 8d. instead of 6 ½d." The witness ended by saying "I wish that the Government could do something to stop this: it is so cruel." Her overall view was that "Any shop that would pay ready money and sell on fair terms would make a fortune, and it would be much better for all."

This view was echoed by Mrs Woodleigh, the lace schoolmistress we met in Newton Pophelford, who said that her students "have the lace that they make, and sell it at the

lace shops, of which there are only two in the place, and which are also grocery and drapery shops, and these goods have to be taken in exchange for the lace. I assure you they make them pay for it. It would be much better if money were given.”

In Honiton itself, Mrs Godolphin said that work was brought in on Fridays “and paid for in money, and the people are thus able to buy their food and goods in the market on Saturday. But in most of the villages money is not paid, but the lace shops truck and charge very high, i.e., above the ordinary prices, for their goods. Sometimes, if the lacemakers press for money, and say they must have it, it is given to them, but something is taken off, as 2d. in the 1s. This practice of trucking is the greatest evil in the trade, and ought to be stopped.”

The Sidmouth manufacturer, Mrs Hayman, “sells threads, pins, bobbins, &c, to the lacemakers, but supplies them with the patterns free. It is not the custom to pay for the work all in money.... Some pay all in goods. Some have been fined for trucking, and indeed it was carried to a shameful extent.”

Thus the 1831 Truck Act appears to have bitten at least in some towns, while in the villages the isolated lacemakers had insufficient power to stop the practice. There seems to have been a multitude of differing systems. Mary Ann Paver, the braid-work dealer we met in Sidmouth, “pays ready money to her workers. Some do not. Some pay half in clothing, a quarter in grocery, and a quarter in money. This is a bad plan, and of course, the shops get the money in this way.”

In nearby Branscombe Mrs Mary Ann Gay, a schoolmistress was interviewed: “There are four lace shops here, and all keep grocery and drapery. Has heard that the smaller will give 6d. or so in money instead of their goods, if it is wanted. (A neighbour asserts that the smaller shops will not do even this.)”

The Reverend Mamerto Gueritz of Colyton had tried and failed to make some impact on the system. The work, he said, was “all in the hands of people who keep shops of some kind. I once tried to induce some of the London lace houses to give out the work direct to the makers, instead of through these agents, but they would not.” He offered no explanation for this, but the reason seems fairly clear: direct payment would have cut out the manufacturers – effectively the middlemen - and given the lacemakers more independence – and possibly the inclination to seek better prices.

At nearby Beer, 12-year-old Mary Ann Northcote said she “could earn 3s. a week... but had it out in groceries from the manufacturer, unless lace was wanted in a hurry and then money could be had, and sometimes you can get a little if you want it particularly.” A number of times it is mentioned that, when there was heavy pressure to get work out, the lacemakers could exert their muscle a little in this way. Often, of course, the high pressure meant working well into the night, if not all night long. Another Beer lace schoolmistress, Mrs Copp, explained that the lace “is carried in to a large manufacturer every week or fortnight, and bread, tea, sugar, candles, soap, &c, but not often clothes, given in exchange.” The Reverend Cradock Glascott, vicar of Seaton and Beer, however, expressed a somewhat unusual criticism of the system, saying that “the truck system prevails here in the lace trade, and is very injurious in its effects, one being that girls dress very showily, being obliged to take part of their pay in clothes.”

That the truck system which Mr White found rife in the villages of the Honiton area was also present in the East Midlands became clear as he carried out his interviews there. Mrs Allen of High Wycombe, the lace buyer we have already met, spoke at some length about it, but gave a view somewhat different view from other people of the circumstances of the manufacturers / shopkeepers:

“The shopkeepers, or ‘boxwomen’ as they are called, bring in the lace in boxes to the wholesale buyers, from whom in turn they generally get their own grocery and drapery, &c.” she said. “Some of the lacemakers who live nearer, deal with the wholesale buyers direct, but much on the same plan, except that a wholesale buyer makes rather more money payments, particularly if he wishes to get a large order completed quickly. The small shops have to pay so dear for their own goods that they cannot afford to make money payments, and only do so when trade is very good to a small extent, giving perhaps 1s. or so at a time; but the lacemakers like best to have money and so to be able to buy their own goods where they please, and will go to the shop at which they can get any money, so that when one shop in a place begins paying in money, as they do sometimes in a good time of trade, others must do the same or be left without lace.”

She made clear that when money was paid for lace “by either the wholesale buyers or the shops, a discount is first taken off at the rate of about 1d. in the 1s. in the payment to the lacemakers, with perhaps a skein of silk given in, and at the rate of 6d. in the £1 in the payment to the box-women.”

Thus, cash payments made by wholesalers to lace shopkeepers were discounted by 1/40th, whereas those made by shopkeepers to the lace makers were 1/12th, militating once more against the individual village lacemakers, but showing how the pernicious - and unlawful - system ran upwards from the villages to the towns and the cities.



BEER VILLAGE: In Beer 12-year-old Mary Ann Northcote said that she ‘could earn 3s. a week...but had it out in groceries from the manufacturer, unless lace was wanted in a hurry and then money could be had.’

Mrs Allen added that the shopkeepers had to give as good a price for lace as the wholesale buyer “and the discount charged to them leaves them so little profit that they are obliged to charge a discount to the lacemakers in turn, and to make up the rest out of the profits of their goods.” It seems doubtful, though, whether many individual lacemakers would have been able to make direct contact with lace wholesalers to sell to them.

There are other references, however, to this happening. At Pytchley, Northampton, a lacemaker, Mary Bayley, said that “A buyer comes round and takes some of the lace and pays money for it, but if it is taken to the dealer near[by] they only get drapery.” Thomas Lester clearly understood the backward nature of the truck system, partly its depressing effect on work standards. He said that he and his partners “purchase the lace weekly all through the year, and pay in money, which we find the most advantageous and to command the best workers; and our work people also buy their own materials of us or wherever they please.”

Mr Gilbert, the High Wycombe manufacturer with a circle of 3,000 lacemakers, said that he dealt with small buyers to whom he supplied the patterns, and who in turn dealt directly with the lacemakers. “These small buyers, who have general shops, have a way of giving goods on credit for lace before it is brought. It is a bad plan, but one that many adopt in villages.”

Elizabeth Emerson, of Newport Pagnell, Bucks, spoke of her children who were at the lace pillow. “Besides the schooling there is the silk to pay for, which takes 4d. in the 1s., and cotton 1d. in the 1s. The buyers make you take these when you sell your lace and take them out of your lace (money). That is where they get their profit, and therefore they will not let you buy it elsewhere.” Speaking of getting ‘thread for cotton lace’, as distinct from the black silk, she said: “You can buy 10 slips of this for seven farthings at a drapers, while the lace buyer gives only one slip of his for 2d. He finds fault with the lace if not made with his own thread, and says ‘You got that at the shop’.”

John Biss, the lace dealer in Buckingham, spoke of some lace buyers who did not sell drapery but sold tea. Though “whether the payment is made in money or goods”, he said, “will in some cases depend upon how much lace is in demand. If lace is wanted much, it can command money more.”

Just how true this was can be seen from what Mrs Palliser had to say in her famous work* about the period running up to Queen Victoria’s wedding in 1840: “At the time Queen Victoria’s trousseau was made, in which only English lace was used, the prices paid were so enormous that men made lace in the fields.”

Jane Betts lived at Nash, near Stoney Stratford, but had had a lace school in Buckingham which was closed down – as, she said, were the other two there. She made lace and sold it to a travelling buyer who paid her out in money, “but he expects you to take a little tea, which he brings round in small packets.” From all the other buyers, she said, lacemakers were paid in grocery and drapery.

A History of Lace, Mrs Bury Palliser. First published 1875, 4th edition 1902, republished by EP Publishing Ltd 1976 and reprinted 1979.

It is clear that, in the East Midlands areas, the truck situation was not so much in control as in and around Honiton, probably because the lacemakers were not so isolated and the towns were larger, providing more accessible outlets for selling their lace. Once the girls had more outlets, and the monopoly position of the shopkeepers in villages and small towns was broken, so the worst tyranny of the truck system could be broken down. It is also clear that the use of truck appears to have varied more between individual buyers. In Winslow, a Mrs Hazard whose lace school had closed the previous year after 45 years, said that lace dealers charged the makers for their silk and paid the rest of their earnings in money. In the same town Elizabeth Sharp said that she was paid in money for her lace. Some of the buyers brought grocery and drapery round with them "but people are not obliged to take those."

Mrs Sharp said that many of the girls and women were giving up lace and turning to straw plait. A similar view was expressed by Mrs Mobbs in nearby Broughton. Mr White noted: "Buys lace from the lacemakers in all the villages round, but for the past two years there has been scarcely any sale for it, and she has it in stock in very large quantities." She was backed up by Mary Ann Sumter, from the same village, who had given up her lace school the previous year, saying that "there was [so] little sale for children's work that it was not worth their while to pay for learning." Boys, she said, used to learn, but "no boys learn now, as there is so little work that not half a score of young girls even in the place make lace, though if trade were better there would be a school again."

Such comments would be repeated throughout the hand-made bobbin lace areas. Mr White said, in his summary: "Truck payment, either entire or partial, is the rule, though I am told not the universal rule, of the pillow lace manufacture. The small manufacturers or buyers have shops of grocery and drapery, &c., which must be taken in payment; most of the larger insist on supplying their own thread, silk, patterns, &c., and deduct the value, sometimes amounting to a third or more of the entire cost, from the price paid. Great complaint is made of this, not only by lacemakers, but by residents of all kinds in the lace districts. In some cases, if money is paid, a heavy discount is charged for the favour."

In the later years of the 18th century, when lace began to go into decline and there was a lack of steady employment, or reasonable wages, many lacemakers went out of the trade and started straw plaiting. Here they would have made straw hats, bonnets, baskets and other items, but they were entering a trade whose record for stability of work or income was as bad as that of lace making.

From the cradle...

"The work requiring great manual dexterity and experience, but very little muscular strength or size, children are put to learn it at a very early age, six being thought the best by some teachers, though many begin at five or even younger." - From Mr White's summary report.

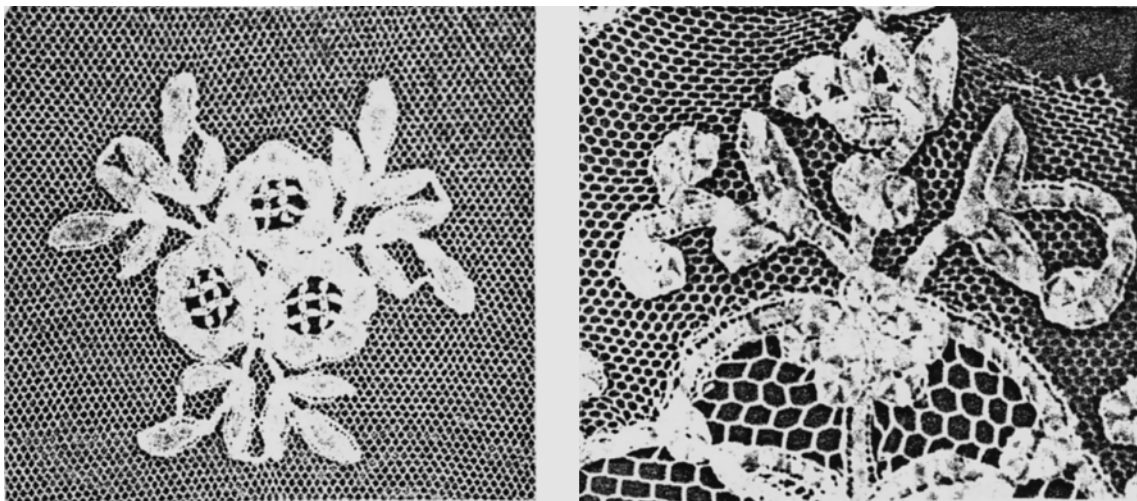
It is not surprising that with poor, sometimes impoverished, families on the one side -

looking for any extra income to help feed and clothe the family, and a lace industry on the other frequently demanding as much lace as it could get, children were “put to the pillow” by their parents at as early an age as possible. Some could almost be described as toddlers when they were first put into lace schools and, as we shall see, the hours they worked stole from them whatever childhood they might otherwise have had.

Talking about her early days at work, Harriet Channon, of Sidmouth, Devon, said that she had been apprenticed at four and three-quarters to a school of 30 girls, and at first worked four or five hours. “She let the pillow fall twice her first day,” noted Mr White, “because she was not big enough to hold it. After she had been a year at school – i.e. at the age of five and three quarters - she was put to 12 hours work in a day.” She was 12 years old before she had to sit up all night, “for which they would get a few halfpence”. She never sat up more than one night at a time, but since she has been married has sat up two nights running.”

In Honiton, lace manufacturer Mrs Davey “has heard people speak of children beginning lace at 3 or four years old, but should think four was as young as they did.” Says that “when orders are given in a great hurry, as for weddings, both women and girls are obliged to work early and late, from breakfast or earlier to 12 at night; but they are pleased to do it.”

In the same locality Mrs Croydon - who had spoken to Mr White about the apprentices - was the mistress with five girls between the ages of 12 and 18. These were “wages girls”, getting from 1s. to 3s. 6d. a week. She also had three women “sitters” who worked for themselves but paid her for sitting in her room, for thread and having their patterns pricked. The common age for girls to start at was 6, and for a year they worked from 8 o’clock in the morning to 4 p.m. After that, she told Mr White, they sat in summer from 6 in the morning till dark, and in winter from 8 in the morning till 9 at night, or longer if busy. They had “worked up the whole of the night”, i.e. till next day, but she did not keep girls under 12 or 13 late. Her view was that “If you promise the work, you must do it.”



On the left, a piece of genuine Honiton lace; on the right, an example (see page 14) of “working braid together to imitate Honiton lace”. A braid-work dealer said that “A girl, but not a child, could learn it in 12 months.”

Sarah Fuzzell, age 17 - "in my 18" - and one of Mrs Croydon's charges, "went to a lace school at five years old, worked from eight in the morning till four in the afternoon in her first year, then from six in the morning till dark in summer, and from eight in the morning till nine at night in winter, having time for dinner and tea." She explained that a girl worked "the same hours as mistress has told you."

Also in Honiton, a lace schoolmistress Mrs Stevens told Mr White that "It is a pity that any child should sit after 8 p.m." She had herself got up at 4 o'clock and sat "till I couldn't see a pin." But, she explained, that was "force put" and "you could not keep it up." The previous night she had sat till midnight "and till she was freezed with the cold (it was slight frost), but did not keep the children." With her was 14-year-old Caroline Perry, who explained how her day could go. From the age of 6¾ she had worked usually from 6 a.m. to 7 or 8 p.m. in summer and in winter from 8 a.m. to 9 p.m. (never later). She went on, in Mr White's words: "Went home for breakfast, dinner, and tea, 2 hours in all, but took her dinner short when there was more work to do, and did not always go to tea. Had no time to go to dinner today, but stopped 20 minutes to eat it here, and will have no time for tea tonight, as the lace must be sent off tonight."

Mrs Wheeker, of Sidbury, who had spoken about the truck system, said that "Girls usually go to the lace schools as soon as they can just hold a pillow."

In nearby Branscombe, lace schoolmistress Ann Purse said that she had known "two or three children begin lace making at 5 years old, but they must be big healthy children to do it. The curate of Branscombe - the Rev. L. Gidley - said that "Nearly all the girls in this place, the population of which is about 1,100, are at lace work, and usually begin at about 6 years old in the lace schools." One of his parishioners, Mrs Mary Ann Gay - the local schoolmistress - said that the common starting age was 7. Notes Mr White: "Has known some children put to it at 5 years old, but only by cruel parents, though it is surprising to see what little girls can do, and what nice sprigs they make."

As to the apprentice system, a revealing comment came from Mrs Croydon, whom we have just heard, who said that it did not pay as well as it had "because they cannot be bound, and their parents take them away to see what they can make by them." [i.e. the parents would work them at home after training, thus getting the payment direct]

Maria Besley, daughter of a lace schoolmistress in Seaton, learned her lacemaking at home at six years old. "Some put their children to it at 5, but she wonders they have the heart to do so." Mr White believed that Maria was 16 when she first sat at work all through the night - "other girls in the place work and sit up in the same way (her sister confirms this). Is obliged to work as hard as this, and is glad to do so." Here she confirmed the comment of Mrs Davey (above) when she said that the girls were pleased to work from before breakfast until midnight.

Some confirmation of an earlier starting age came from Emma Ginger, of Loosley Rouse, Bucks, who spoke of her mother's lace school. There would be several girls, she said, who would read a verse without spelling*, and there would be none

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* i.e. without spelling out the individual letters in order to grasp the pronunciation.

who could not read at all, “except, perhaps, the little ones, just come, at 4 or 5 year old or so.” She did, however, add that the youngest “are sometimes taught reading four times a day at first.”

In Princes Risborough we find Mrs Sanders, who has kept a lace school for 45 years. She had three learners only five years old, “but that is almost too young. She could not teach them as she should; six is the best age, you can beat it into them better then. If they come later after they have begun to run in the streets, they have the streets in their minds all the while.”

The Three Rs

In the instruction given by the Commissioners to their assistants, the following sentence appears: “ It is not necessary that we should dwell upon a fact which will constantly present itself to your notice, namely, the inseparable connexion existing between early and unrestricted labour and education.... The evils resulting from the early withdrawal of children from school being well known, any cases where successful efforts have been made by the employers of labour to lessen or obviate such evils should be fully described.”

One of the saddest aspects of the lace schools was that, by offering a limited training which would fairly rapidly bring money into the family purse, it seduced children away from the “National Schools”, usually at the age of six, after which their education, slight though it had been, was often finished. There was much evidence to substantiate this. The impression was given in interviews with some lace school mistresses that much was done for the children, but the reality appears to have been different. [Mrs Sanders, for example - quoted above - believed that her children could read "quite comfortable". Mr White commented that she "believed" that reading was taught at most other lace schools.]

A few of the lace schools had their young pupils read passages alongside their lace making, but for most it seems that this was a case of reading religious texts for perhaps 15 or 30 minutes a day. For example, Ann Westcott, lace schoolmistress in Colaton Raleigh, who had 8 scholars, told Mr White that “All the bigger girls read from the Testament, and the two little girls, age 6 and 8, from the Psalter.” For the great majority of girls, therefore, the possibility of becoming at least partly literate and numerate was given up in face of financial need at home. Some of the boys appear to have come off a little better since there was not so much pressure on them to attend the lace schools and they could stay longer at a teaching school. Until 1876, with the first Education Act, there was no such thing as compulsory education in England. An organisation known as the National Society, established in 1811, promoted education among the poorer sections of society by establishing National Schools in many towns. Often, in the lace making areas, these ran alongside lace schools, where the main purpose was to make lace for sale. The national schools taught the rudiments of reading, writing and arithmetic, for which the parents had to spend some of their hard-earned coppers in order to advance their children’s chances by perhaps a fraction.

In Honiton, the local rector, the Rev. J. A. Mackarness, said: "Most of the young females in the town, the population of which is 3,300, are engaged in lace making, and in consequence leave school early, i.e., at about 7 or 8 years of age, and the lace mistresses like them to be apprenticed at 6 years." He speculated that because of the low state of the lace industry, and possibly because parents were coming to value education more, the girls were going later into lace making.

"The payment at school (national) is 1d. a week, or 2d. with writing taught," the reverend told Mr White. In some places there was a reduction if a family had more than one child at a school.

The mistress of the local national school, Miss Spratt, said that, of the 201 girls and infants (boys and girls) on the books, the average attendance was about 150. She said that the girls left her school at 7 or 8 years old – but that if times were bad in the lace industry they might come back until trade picked up. "Many go as apprentices at 6 years old, which in the opinion of the lace mistresses is the best age, but these generally do not come to school at all. Many of the lacemakers depend for teaching entirely upon the Sunday and night schools. The night school is for those above 11 year old and those who do not come in the day, who are principally lacemakers." Most of the Sunday scholars were lacemakers.

With Miss Spratt on the staff was Miss Avery. Mr White records: "Has a class of 11 at the night, nearly all lace makers between the age of 11 and 16. Some read fairly, without spelling, some spell words of three or four letters, all can form letters, and do addition. This is the worst class in the school." A second colleague, Miss Hillyer, had a class at the Sunday school of 11 females between the ages of 15 and 25 "most of whom are or have been lacemakers." Mr White recorded: "the best readers could not read more than a verse, if that, without spelling; several spell most words. If they are learning a hymn she has to teach it to them orally. This is a class formed for those who are backward for their age, and their backwardness is owing to their not having been cared for." By this she presumably meant that they had missed out, because of their lace school years, on proper schooling. In Sidbury, lace schoolmistress Mrs Amelia Clarke said that she took girls from 6 or 7 years old: "Their mothers put them to it a deal too early, but are driven to do so." A Sidbury lace pupil, Julia Pine, at 13 could read "only the shortest words and slowly."

Harriet Perry, aged 15, learned lace with her aunt from 11 years old, and "was at the National for some years before and goes to school one evening in the week to write. Can read, write and sum." Ellen Diamond, an 11-year-old, was at a national school from 6 to 8 years, and then went to lace school. "Reads 'plentiful', &c., that means 'not very scarce'. She never did any writing or sums."

According to lace manufacturer Mrs Hayman, there were five public schools in Sidmouth, "open on payment of 1d. a week". She believed that "All children ought by law to go to school." Also in the town Mr White spoke to Harriet Channon who was apprenticed to a local lace school at 4 ¾ years old. "At first had only 4 or 5 hours in the day, and read an hour," is how she described her education. "One taught another reading and lace making both." Her daughter Emma, aged 9, "goes to reading school and pays 2d. a week for it, as she is learning to write on paper. Before that paid

1d.” She learned her lace at home but only “between her school times. Can read and write. (Shows neatly written copy-book.) 9 times 9 is 33 – is 53. Has got ‘bags of comforts’ and books for prizes at school.” Mr White does not spell out what the “comforts” consisted of.

Branscombe’s Rev. Gidley said that “nearly all the girls in this place, the population of which is about 1,100, are at lace work, and usually begin at about 6 years old in the lace schools.” He clearly was not convinced about the standard of education given in the lace schools. “In most of these the mistresses profess to hear a little reading,” was his comment. There were, he said, no week-day schools in the town “except infant dame schools, and a writing class on Saturday afternoon, on which there is no lace done. These girls can just read, but scarcely know the meaning of any but simple words.”

Behind the descriptions of the youngsters’ abilities to read or write, or to have gleaned any general knowledge whatsoever, lies the fact that they lived lives isolated from anything but the most rudimentary of education, while their knowledge of the world outside their villages was almost non-existent.

Sarah Jane Perry, of Branscombe, “went to a reading school. Spells easy words. Does not know the figure ‘2’ in large print. Other countries, besides England, are Australia, California, France.” The Rev. Gueritz, Colyton, told Mr White that until a year previous “there was no weekday school.... There is also a night school now, but it is not well attended. About 250 attend the Sunday school, and most can read.” The vicar of Seaton and Beer, the Rev. Cradock Glascott, said that the children went to lace school at 5 or 6, and were apprenticed for four or five years. “The employment interferes much with their education for, though they attend Sunday school fairly, this is insufficient, and girls rarely stay at weekday schools beyond the age of 8 or 9. They grow up”, he went on, “untaught and ignorant of plain household duties such as sewing, washing, &c, and this makes it difficult to get situations in service for them, though I endeavour to do so; and when they marry, as they do very early, they are quite unfitted for it, and unable to nurse and bring up their children properly.”

At Mrs Besley’s school, in Seaton, 13-year-old Emily Westlake had been to a weekday school for a year until starting lace at 7 and goes to Sunday school: “Knows the letters (and no more), but no figures (when shown) except ‘1’.”

Miss Coles, the report said, was mistress at an infant school in Seaton, “supported by a lady”, at which “boys may be kept till 9 years old, and girls till 10, for the weekly payment of 1d., or ½d. if there be more than one child of the same family. There are about 60 boys and girls in equal numbers, but there are not more than about a dozen girls above seven years old in the school. They do not leave for lacemaking younger than that, but most of the girls in the place go to either lace or dress making.”

The mistress of the local national school at Seaton, Miss Major, said that “the number of the girls, i.e. from 20 to 25, is only about half that of the boys. Children are taken between the ages of 2 and 14, but about 10 only of the girls are above 6 or 7.”

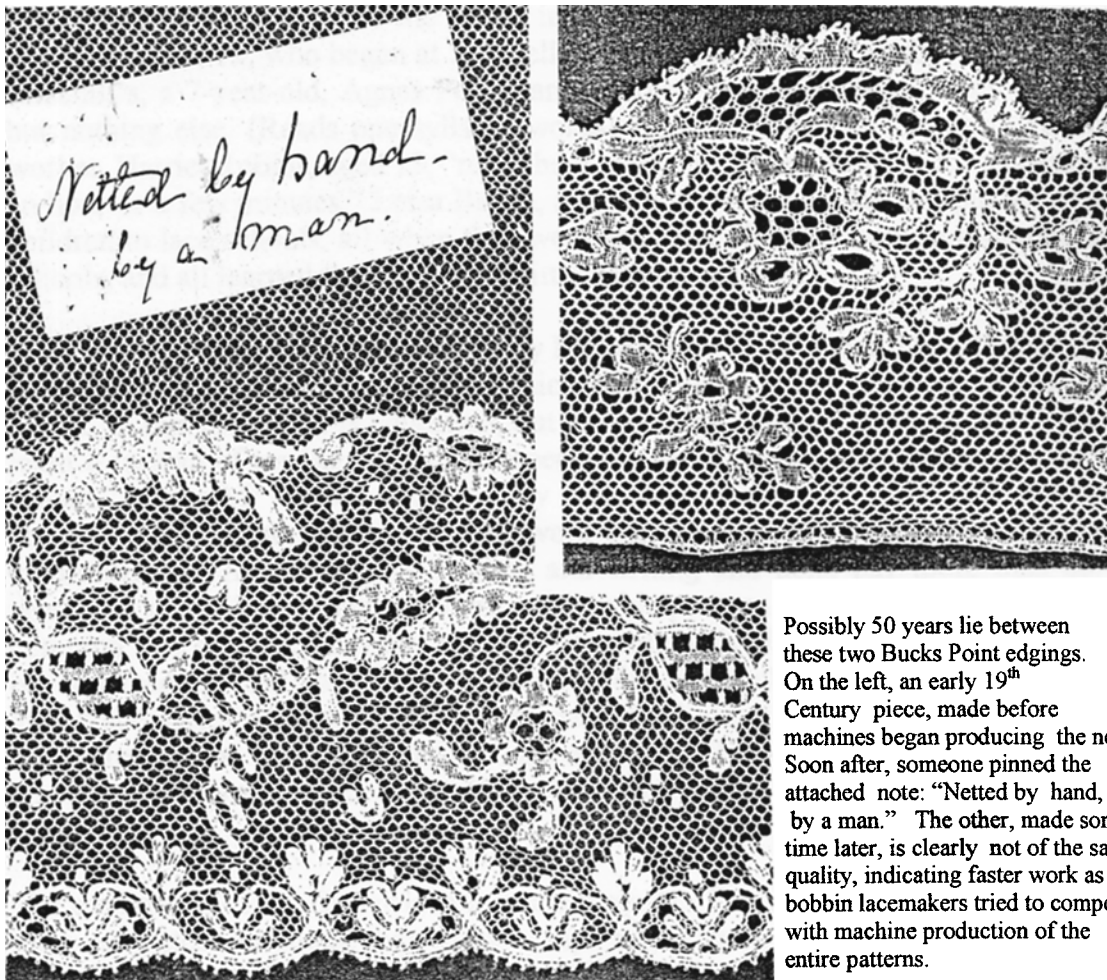
At Mrs Copp’s lace school in Beer, a 12-year-old, Mary Ann Mutter, who had started out as an apprentice at 6 - was interviewed - but at the end Mr White comments: “Can

read (easy words) but not write. Learned at the infant school (Stokes’)" and then, in parentheses: [A great part of this statement was supplied by the mistress, the girl seeming unable to remember or answer.]

In the same town, 12-year-old Mary Ann Northcote (at Mrs Driver’s lace school) had “always kept at the Sabbath School and can read a chapter well, while Leonara Chant, aged 9 and at Mrs Aigland’s school, “was at the endowed school four years, and learned to read, knit and sew, not to write. Does not know any figures. (Reads only very short words.)”

Miss Cox, the mistress of the Rolles Endowed School in Beer, said that “free education and clothing is given at this school to 20 boys and 20 girls, from the age of four up to 10. Boys generally stay the full time, and wish to stay longer, but it is an uncommon thing for a girl to remain in the school after 9. They commonly leave between 8 and 9, and go to lace work”. A local colleague, Miss Lydia Stokes, mistress of the other infants school at Beer, said she had 20 girls and 29 boys at the time – the usual proportion. “The ages run from 2 to 7. Girls commonly go to lace at 6 year old, and some parents are obliged to put them, but it is a great injury to their learning.” She went on to say: “Most of the women and girls in the place get their bread by lace. Young women and half-grown girls often work together in what are called schools , though not really so.”

Also in Beer, Leonora Chant “was at the endowed school four years, and learned to



Possibly 50 years lie between these two Bucks Point edgings. On the left, an early 19th Century piece, made before machines began producing the net. Soon after, someone pinned the attached note: “Netted by hand, by a man.” The other, made some time later, is clearly not of the same quality, indicating faster work as bobbin lacemakers tried to compete with machine production of the entire patterns.

read, knit, and sew, not to write. Does not know any figures. (Reads only very short words.)”

At nearby Newton Poppleford there were eight girls in Mrs Elizabeth Woodleigh’s lace school. “All the children read when they come in the morning and when they leave in the evening,” noted Mr White, “the big girls out of a chapter, the younger out of a little book.” He added: “All the girls, when asked, said they could read. One (Eliza Woolley, aged 9) pointed out as the most backward, read short words easily and figures also.”

Close by, at Mrs Ash’s lace school, girls from 6 to 10 worked. A note reads: “The girls read here once or twice a day for a quarter of an hour, but they cannot all read. One can spell the letters but not sound the word. None of them can write.”

At nearby Mrs Chick’s lace school it was common to start at 6 or 7 years old “but it is according to the constitution of the children. Some cannot stand the trial of puzzling over the work, which takes thought.” All the girls could read a little, comments Mr White, “but three can do very little.” Again, in parentheses, he adds: “The three children just mentioned. Aged one 8, the other two 7, read one syllable words but without spelling.” Also local was 8-year-old Harriet Power, who had started two years previously. “Can earn about 1s a week now . Can read (but little) and is learning writing.”

About two or three miles to the south, in Otterton, was Susan Miller’s lace school. The eldest girl, 15, who began at 5, “spelled very short words.” Nearby, at Mrs Sarah Rosehill’s, a 7-year-old, Agnes Perryman, “learned reading at an old lady’s school, but nothing else. (Reads one syllable words) Goes to school on Sunday.” Her co-worker, Harriet Robins, aged 13, “reads here every day to her mistress for a quarter of an hour or a few minutes.” Loisa Bastin, also of Otterton, said she had put six of her children to lace schools, all when they were six. “Her children went to different lace schools, and all learned there to read a little without spelling.”

Another type of local school was run by Mrs Anstey. “This is entirely different from the ordinary kind of lace schools in which lace making is the chief , if not the sole object. In this the object is education, but lace making is taught to those who wish to learn it instead of sewing. In other respects the place has the appearance of a parish school,” writes Mr White. Mrs Anstey said she had about 50 girls, half of whom learned lace and the remainder plain work [i.e. plain needlework as distinct from embroidery]. “All learn some reading and writing and none pay more than 2d. a week, the school being maintained by a charitable person... A few girls come from the common lace schools. They can read but very little indeed, and can never do anything beyond reading, and have no discipline. In the National School here there are no girls,” she said, “and in the infant national school about 40 boys and girls.” In the same area, Anna Wealsman had 19 lace scholars: “They all read to her when they come in the morning, each about 10 or 12 verses, and most of them can read pretty well.”

The experience of the Exeter lace manufacturer, Mr Treadwin - who had, perhaps, a more enlightened outlook than most - helps us understand a deeper problem which beset lace children in isolated villages, where their horizons were limited by the lack

of any real nearby opportunities, and where their ignorance in educational and general knowledge terms meant that they had no incentive to go out into a wider world seeking work. Mr Treadwin had kept a school until a year or two previous to Mr White's visit, where between 15 and 20 girls – aged 10 to 12 – were trained to become “transferers” in the Honiton lace field. Miss Smith, a manager at the works, explained what these were: “Honiton lace,” she said, “is, or used to be, all made in separate sprigs, which are afterwards joined with the bobbin or needle, or mounted on other lace. Thus the sprigs can be made up into one pattern, and afterwards without injuring anything but the connecting pieces, which are of less value, made up into others. But the arranging of these patterns requires great nicety and experience and cannot be done by a girl.” The “transferers”, Miss Smith explained, “nip off sprigs” from one piece to be transferred to another. She went on: “A mistress was paid to teach these children reading, writing and a little arithmetic in the evening from 6 to 8, but they did not seem to care much about it, and their attendance being voluntary was irregular, leading to a lack of interest, and the lace school was given up, partly I think on that account.” So the vicious circles must have spun on, for so many and for so long, killing even well-meant initiatives towards advancement for the children.

Mrs Stevens, a lace schoolmistress in Honiton, must have spoken for many when she declared: “It is great folly of parents to keep their girls without schooling, as they do, just for the sake of their bringing home a little money, which can be earned at lace sooner than at anything else.” But of one of her wards, 14-year-old Caroline Perry, Mr White recorded: “Goes to school on Sunday, and on Thursday night, from 7 o'clock till 9, to read, write and spell. Reads (very little); can write from a copy-book ‘not very well;’ added figures and did her tables. Does not know how many inches there are in a foot.” This final point beggars the imagination for a youngster whose living came from making lace for sale by the inch or perhaps foot.

Mr White's experiences in the Honiton area could then be compared and contrasted with those in places around Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Northamptonshire. In High Wycombe Mrs Allen set out the local situation thus: “The machine-made lace is now so good, and answers most purposes so well, that the pillow lace seems dying out in this neighbourhood, and in the town itself there are few except old lacemakers. But in most villages there is a lace-school, to which in better times children go commonly at the age of 6, for a weekly payment of about 6d., gradually diminishing as they improve down to 2d.... To become good lacemakers children must begin quite young, not necessarily so young as 6, but their parents want their earnings, and will not give these up when trade is good to let their children be at other schools, though in most villages there are National and other schools to which they could go for 1d. a week or so.”

Benjamin Lacey, a lace buyer of Princes Risborough, said that it was the centre of a lace district and there were lace schools in most of the villages around. “Lately,” he said, “other schools have been started, some by private persons, for general learning, in which a person is employed to teach lace also, which, when made belongs to the children's parents. The payment at these is about 1d. a week. One reason for combining lace instruction with these establishments probably is its necessity as a means of inducing children to come at all, which many otherwise would not.” Mr White reports that Mr Lacey “believes that in lace schools children are really taught to read, and that more attention is paid to that now than formerly. Accounts for this by

the fact that education is becoming more general amongst all classes, and he finds a great difference in this respect within his own memory. Should say as a fact that most of the lace children can read.”

Apart from using the word “really”, Mr White gave no indication of what weight he thought this view of the education available at the lace schools deserved.

His next port of call in Princes Risborough was at Mrs Sanders’ lace school, where she explained that “the girls read twice a day to her, about seven or eight or five verses, according to the time there is. She must keep them to that: it is as much (consequence) as the work. Her girls can generally read ‘quite comfortable’. Believes that reading is taught at most other lace schools.” In her school was Fanny Simms, 12, who “can read, write, and do ‘money sums’.” A co-worker, Mary Benning, 6, “reads short words (spelling).” Another, Sophia Benning, 11, was taught to write by her mother since she left the British school. “Witness writes a letter to her teacher at the Sunday school sometimes. At the British school paid 2d. a week, and learned to read, write and sew; could write on a paper a little there, but not ‘in a copy’. Was in the figuring class but could count the figures.” This little girl could read, spelling some of the short words. “Rest” was “lie down and go to bed.”

Some miles south, in Newport Pagnell, Mr White spoke to lace manufacturer, William Ayres, who said that “lace schools are diminishing and other schools increasing. Has heard that at the lace schools the girls read occasionally.” In his business he frequently had letters written to him by lacemakers, both girls and women.

Another manufacturer in the area, however, Mr William Marshall, said that there were lace schools in most of the nearby villages and he bought lace brought to him at the local inns some 15 miles away, and as far as Towcester and Whittlebury, in Northamptonshire. He was of the opinion that “they do not read at these schools.” Saying that “nothing like the quantity of lace is made now than was, and there are far fewer lace schools,” he indicated an interesting competitiveness for the attention of the youngsters: “Many clergymen now have that amount of influence that they get so many children to come to their own schools, some for half days.”

In another local lace school – Mrs Harris’s – Mr White spoke to 15-year-old Elizabeth Wordsworth who had been to the school for 9 years. She had never been to any other school except “a playing school where I learned my letters,” and Sunday school. “Never reads here, nor do any of the girls. At her first school they read a verse of the Testament apiece, if they could, or, if they could not, they read a story. Cannot read without spelling some words (reads an easy book fairly). A night school has just opened to which she goes five nights a week; one to sew, two to read, and two to write. Cannot write yet.” A co-worker of Elizabeth was 7-year-old Lucy Reed, about whom Mr White writes: “Cannot read. (When asked if she knows anything in a child’s book shown to her with pictures, A, B, C, &c. bursts into tears.)” Another in the group was Jane Harris, aged 11, who had been at lace 5 years. She had only spent a few weeks at any other school before. “Learned reading at Sunday school, to which she has been morning and afternoon for 5 years. Has a verse of a hymn to learn every week. It is read to them.” Then in the 26th year of Victoria’s reign, Mr White records

the following of this 11-year-old: "Spells 'c-a-t'. The first man made was Adam. Does not know of the Queen."

The mother of young lacemakers in Newport Pagnell, Elizabeth Emerson, said that "a lady has lately opened a charitable night school without payment for 50 boys and 50 girls who attend Sunday school. I let my two girls leave their lace school early, i.e. at 8 o'clock, to go there... I could never pay for schooling for either of them before they were at the pillow." Young Emma Ginger, in Loosely Rouse, commented that "mistresses do not think so much of it as others, but most mothers wish their children to read."

It is amply illustrated that, when lace times were good and wages relatively high, the girls would find themselves "at the pillow" adding to the family earnings, only to move away from lace making as the market soured and little money was to be made. A woman from Nash, Bucks, whose mother had until recently run a lace school, said that the previous lace pupils "now go more to the national and other schools, as they say they cannot get anything at lace. A girl of 13 working 9 hours a day at lace has just cleared 1s. in the week." We shall come later to the question of payment to the lacemakers, but this comment underlines the connection between the state of the lace market and the children's education. Emma Bayley, aged 10, of Pytchley, left her lace school and now went to "the free school, but not regularly, and makes lace at home, but never in her life did by candlelight. Can read, write, and read her writing, and sum, but does not remember what sums; 7 times 7 is 14; twice 7 is 14. (Reads a stanza well.) Goes to school on Sunday and says the collect."

Thomas Lester was clear about the situation in Bedford and the surrounding villages, whose situation he knew well. "It is not the custom in this district to apprentice the children to learn lace," he said, "nor is any reading taught in the lace schools". Lester, assessed in the church rate book with a house rated at £12 and a garden at £3, told Mr White:

"There has been great improvement of late years in the intellectual condition and manners of the people in these districts. I attribute this chiefly to the increased amount of Sunday school teaching and evening classes, chiefly connected with the Sunday schools, and the greater association of the lower with the higher classes, who now take an increased interest in their welfare. The influence of this teaching extends to the general conduct of the people in the week, and is shown by their more orderly and refined behaviour; for instance when the girls bring in their work to be sold.

"No one can doubt that the improvement is owing to these causes. The mere fact of coming into the town civilizes them, and we find those who bring their work in here altogether brighter than those whom, when work is wanted, we have to seek out at their homes. But the influence of schools depends very much on the activity of the persons who support them. Where these are active the children stay longer away from lace work."

Lester clearly had a social conscience [though Thomas Wright in his "*Romance*", page 203, says of him that "he was a terrible autocrat"] and had an interest in the children and others on whom his business relied. As we saw in his call for a lace design school to be set up, he realised the important part that education played in the scheme of things. Sadly, the great majority of youngsters were making lace in schools

which were rudimentary in every way, and where the circumstances of the lace schoolmistresses hardly allowed for either time or consideration to be given to educating their charges.

Indeed, at Wilshampstead, within a few miles of Bedford, Mr White met a number of examples.

Jane Alcock, 9 – “Was at school for half a year only, and never has been on Sunday. Learned reading, writing, and sewing, but no figures. Spells ‘do’.”

Elizabeth Bar, 8 – “Was never at other type of school, except the Sunday to which she goes still. Cannot read.”

Sarah Cook, 10 – “Was never at school except on Sunday. Spells ‘the’.”

Mary Pearce, 10 - “Learned sewing and reading at school before, but did not learn writing, summing, or figures. (Spells one syllable words) Does not know what ‘gay’ or ‘king’ means, and has not heard the queen’s name.”

Sarah Cooper, 7 - “Came here when 6. Till then learned sewing and reading at school. Goes to Sunday school now and sings at chapel, but does not know what she hears. ‘E’ is ‘B’, ‘N’ is ‘W’. Knows ‘H’.”

At Cotton End, lace schoolmistress Mrs Church: “All the girls but one go one evening in the week to a school to learn writing &c., which they are taught free by a lady, but they cannot sum. The girl who does not go is kept from it by her friends.” An 8-year-old there, Mary Collins, had been to school for two years before going to this school “and learned writing, reading, and sewing. Reads (one syllable words without spelling). Did ‘1,2,3’ at school, but no other sums. Coal comes from Australia.”

A mile or so away, at Elstow, Mrs Goodman, a lace schoolmistress: “Thinks most of the girls can read, because she often asks them about such things. There is a good day school in the place, where they learn sewing, reading, and sum for 2d. a week. Some of her girls go to this school for half days three times a week. Nearly all the young women and girls in the place are lace makers.” One of her youngsters – 18-year-old Julia Hall – had been with her



This mid 19th century Warwickshire lady exemplified the demand for lace accessories - wearing a fall cap, collar and lace trimmings.

for 9 years, before which she learned reading, writing, summing and sewing, and had also been to Sunday school. "There is an evening school in the place," she told Mr White, "but only one girl from here goes to it. She pays ½d. for going once a week to learn to write."

A few miles to the south, at Houghton Conquest, Mrs Burnidge ran a lace school. Of her Mr White recorded: "Thinks that most girls can read and go to Sunday school. There is an evening school in the place but very few girls go to it; boys do." Sarah Kingham, at 12, had been to the school for 3 or 4 years: "was at a sewing school before, and learned also writing and reading but no sums. Paid 2d. a week there, the same as here... can read, but not write. Reads 'remember, &c. (easily) Does not know what it means, or whether it is different from 'forget'. Has not heard of France, but has of Australia: people go there in a ship. Does not know what 'sea' is. Goes to Sunday school." At 11, Dora Woodroof "can read, but not write or sum. Learned reading at school, and goes on Sunday." With her was Jane Sorrell who, at 9, "can read (short words), cannot tell what 'guard' means, and has not heard of a mountain."

Listening to the children – and one can almost hear them answering the questions – is to feel the void they must have lived in, the nothingness that surrounded them, save for a few words, a few numbers and a little knowledge of lace making, sewing or the like. Somehow, the lack of numeracy and literacy seems the more understandable, simply because, without being taught, a child would not know how to spell, to read, write or count. But what appears far worse is the almost total ignorance of the world in which they were born. For a child living on an island not to know what "sea" is, for someone in a kingdom not to know of the queen, or to know what a king is, or for a child not to have heard of France, seems to tell a far worse story even than want of the "three Rs". It is curious that some of them knew of Australia, and that Sarah above commented "People go there in ships." It seems that the punishment of transportation to Australia had somehow entered into the children's consciousness. But for them to live in a land which was making breathtaking advances in the field of technology, and in a world which their own country was changing in ways which were never to be undone, and for them to know nothing whatsoever about it all, makes their long hours bending over their pillows seem less worthwhile than ever.

From the evidence collected by Mr White we cannot tell whether the boys fared any better. It is difficult to discern whether their longer time at the national and other schools served to give them a more all-round education. It is evident that, particularly when lace was in great demand, the girls were drawn away from the national schools and into the lace schools, thus losing their opportunity to benefit from basic education, whereas the boys - not being drawn into earning money for the family – would at least have gained what little real education was going. They would have been out in the fields at an early age but would probably have had more years at a national school than their sisters, taken at 6 or before to the lace schools. What is a little disheartening is to find that many lace schoolmistresses appeared to believe that the girls were getting some form of education under the system, while Mr White found such gross ignorance of every kind. It raises the question as to the state of education among the mistresses themselves.

“So many breaths...”

“I am convinced that the effects of lace-making, as carried on here, are very injurious in several ways. In the schools it is unhealthy from the small size and crowded state of the rooms, the air of which is stifling. But apart from this, the work itself, which involves such long-continued sitting and stooping over the pillow, injures the chest. Consumption is prevalent amongst the people, and to a great degree in later life. Some of the girls, in carrying their lace in to be sold, which some have to do for nearly five miles, get exhausted and nearly faint on the road.” - The Reverend Mamerto Gueritz, Vicar of Colyton.

To deal with that part of his remit which dealt with the conditions in which the lace girls worked, impinging as it did on their health, Mr White paid a great deal of attention to the amount of air which would be available to each youngster during her working day. In his researches for the Commission, he reported that “I am informed by an official person from the War Office that the space now required in barracks for each soldier is from 500 to 600 [cubic] feet, according to situation, and 1,200 cubic feet in hospital.”

He was therefore careful when visiting lace schools in both the Honiton and East Midlands areas to pay attention to the physical conditions under which the lace pupils were expected to work, in regard to the space they had, the hours they spent there, and the general cleanliness of the premises in which they worked, noting for example on entering Mrs Stevens’ school in Honiton that “Close outside the door is a sink smelling strongly, and the air on entering is very close.”

In nearby Sidbury, Mrs Amelia Clarke ran a school for some 18 girls, from 6 or 7 years onwards. Mr White's comments on this school are worth setting out in full if only to indicate the painstaking way in which he approached his task:

“This room is small for the number who sit in it, viz, 18 girls and the mistress. By a rough measurement it is about 9 ft. 4in. one way, and a little less the other, and 7 feet high. But taking it as 9½ feet square this gives under 632 cubic feet of space, or 33 cubic feet for each person. It is said by the sister of the mistress to be 'very headachy', though the mistress would not allow this. When there is a fire girls must sit close into it, but the mistress said that she then put something over a chair to screen them. On the day of my visit, though in winter (3rd Feb.), there was no fire, but a cloth in front of the fireplace to keep off the draught, as the girls are so close under it.”

Thus, at this school, 18 pupils and the mistress were sharing not much more than the amount of air which the War Office then considered necessary for one soldier. The mistress said she had “18 scholars when all are well, but some are generally absent because they are not well.”

Early in their first year, the girls at Mrs Clarke's sat at the pillow just two or three hours, not apparently because of their tender years but because “it is very trying work to teach them.” At the end of their first year, the girls worked up to five hours a day, and after three years this had risen so that they were at the pillow from

about 7 am to 6 pm in summer, and from 8 am to 8 pm in winter, with dinner hour. Mr White comments: "They never stay later, though sometimes to oblige them a mistress will let girls take their pillows home at night if lace is much wanted. Though it is against rules, some bring breakfast with them, as it is so long for them to sit without eating, and they get very cold"

In Sidmouth, a braid-work manufacturer, Mrs Taylor, who no longer had any children making for her, said of the girls: "It is a pity that they should work so much at lace, because they become weak-sighted, especially if they begin young, and their growth is hindered by their being so 'crumped up' with the pillow. Some little creatures are quite cripples from it." In Sidmouth also, Harriet Channon was blunt about the health hazards. "Lace making tires the eyes very much, especially black, and she found it so at first, and her eyes were very bad for six months till she was used to it. You have to use all the sight you can. When her little girl, age 9, began, it made her eyes run very much."

When Mr White visited Mrs Besley's Seaton lace school, the girls had left for dinner "but the room was offensively close and though the day was fine and mild the window was not opened in the interval." He explained that the room had been built on the back of the cottage to make a school, "is nearly square, a little over seven feet each way, and six feet six inches high, and containing, in fact, a little over 330 cubic feet, and there is no fireplace or means of warming. The average number of scholars is seven, and three grown-up daughters of the mistress also work here. The entire number working together has been 12... twelve people in the small room would have 28 cubic feet of space each." Talking to Mrs Besley, Mr White discovered that "sometimes in winter they cannot do half a day's work, on account of the cold, and in summer they are hindered by their hands being so warm and sticky. They will not be able to work in the small room much longer (i.e. than the beginning of February), because it is so close. They never work out of doors, even in summer."

Mrs Besley's daughter, Maria, generally started work after breakfast - i.e. between 8 and 9 o'clock - and worked till 10 p.m. "but this winter she has worked many times till 11½ and midnight, and in summer till 5 and 4 in the morning, and sometimes all through the night, without going to bed, or stopping at all, except just to take anything in (to eat)." The little girl then commented that "This work tries anyone's head." Mr White wrote: "Has headaches: they are common among lace makers. It also tries the eyes, and sometimes they cannot get on at all by candle light. One 'eight' (i.e., 8 to the lb.) dip candle serves for three of the big workers to sit round, and for four of the younger girls who make plainer work."

On to Beer, where Mr White visited Mrs Driver's lace school, about which he says: "This, though called a school, is not a place for teaching, but merely for lacemakers to meet and work in. Eight persons, two elderly, and one middle aged, all wearing spectacles, and most of the others grown up or nearly so, work here in a room of about 10 x 8 feet and 7½ high without any fire place." Here, the lacemakers usually worked some 14 hours a day, from 6 a.m. to 8 p.m. in summer and from 8 a.m. to 10 p.m. in the winter. Mrs Drivers' granddaughter, aged 12, "holds her candle with the rest of us at night" - but seldom after 10, never till 11 "as they are tired by 10." Mrs Driver commented that "In some schools of this kind they sit till 12 regularly, when they have work, so as to have it finished to carry in to the manufacturer, which they

can only do on certain days.” At Mrs Copp’s in Beer, we find that 13 and 14 year-olds work “four to a candle , or sometimes three. They pay 2d. a week for this, and sit as long as they please.”

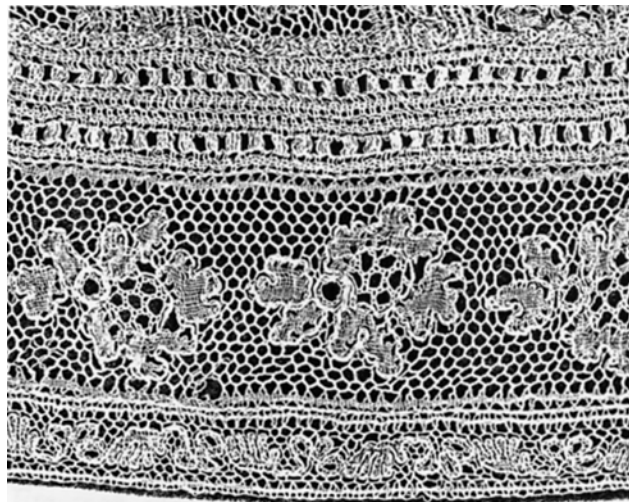
In Newton Poppleford, Mr White clearly could not resist making what was, for him, a rare comment as he described Mrs Woodleigh’s lace school:

“At this house I found 8 lace girls, the usual number being stated to be 9 or 10, at work in a very small room, which serves also at the same time as a school for a boy of 10 and 6 infants. The room is only 8 ft 11 in. long, 6 ft 10 ins broad, and 6 ft 10 ins high, and there is no fireplace. The smell from the crowded state of the room was almost unbearable, even without the full number present. ”

It is not surprising that the smell was unbearable, since the average amount of breathing space for each person in the room was 24½ cubic feet, as against the 500 - 600 deemed necessary by the army. On the other hand, in Otterton, Mrs Sarah Rosehill’s school catered for 10 children between the ages of 7 and 13, and Mr White noted that “The room is large and has a fire.”

At Branscombe, lacemaker Sarah Jane Perry “went at 6 years old as apprentice to a lace school of 12 girls. Only had to work 4 hours a day for her first year, but she could not sit long, because it did not suit her, and she very often had dreadful headaches from keeping her eyes steadfast upon the pillow. Her eyes used to ache dreadfully. And so they do now very often, and her eyesight is weak.” Mr White then passes on the following story which Sarah told him: “Knows of one girl who was put as apprentice at a lace school at 4½ years old. She was clever, and worked hard, but was delicate, and the work hurt her health, as witness heard, and after two or three years she died of brain fever.” Mr White adds, in parentheses: “This account of this little girl and her death was confirmed by two other witnesses, and a fourth person acquainted with the facts stated that the child’s mother did not send her next child till she was 9.”

The Rev, Mamerto Gueritz, vicar of Colyton, who we heard from earlier on the subject of the truck system, and quoted at the opening of this chapter, was concerned about the working conditions of the lacemakers and had visited them at their work. He said that the girls left work at 8 or 9 o’clock in the evening “but in the houses lights may be seen very late at night, especially towards the end of the week, indeed nearly every night.” He also believed that lace employment “also lowers the morals by making children early independent of their parents, girls of 16 or 17 going off to live by themselves.”



A mid 19th century Bucks Point insertion - used to make part of a baby’s bonnet.

His nearby colleague, the Rev Cradock Glascott, vicar of

Seaton and Beer, was brief and to the point: "The [lace] employment is injurious to the bodily health, owing to the confinement in small close rooms, with no fireplace or ventilation, and the consequent impurity of the air."

Mrs May Ann Gay, who ran "a school of little readers" in Branscombe said that "Children in this place are delicate, and from always working at lace are not so strong as if they were running about. When little things are brought to sit by the hour their constitution is broken up. It is very trying to them, and every year as they grow older their hours increase, and they are obliged to work more and more."

Across the country in the East Midlands, matters were not a great deal different. In Newport Pagnell, Mr White visited Mrs Harris's lace school. "This cottage is reached by a narrow untidy yard," he recorded, "and the room crowded and hot. The girls were working on without candle after it was so dark that I could hardly see to write. Working in such imperfect light must be injurious to the eyes."

When working by candlelight they sit in twos beside one another round the candle. The proper number to sit round a candle is eight, he was told. "Them as sit first light can see; them as sit second light can't very well." But, he comments, 12 can sit round one candle, and do at times.

A local lace manufacturer, William Marshall, spoke about the long hours worked by the children, telling Mr White how "lacemakers working by candlelight use a glass water flask to increase the light. In summer they often sit out of doors." Elizabeth Sharp in Winslow also spoke of the harm lace work did to the eyes. "The work is bad for the eyesight, especially now when much black lace is made, and in winter when they work tight by candlelight with the globes of water to make more light."

In his summary, Mr White comments that "The employment is often made more injurious to the eyesight by the scantiness of the light in which they work, or by its being transmitted through bottles of water. The younger the lacemakers are, the more of them work within the same supply of light, 8 or even 12 sometimes working round one dip candle."

Dinah Wood, also of Newport Pagnell, said that her child, Mary, at 11, "is not strong, so I only set her seven hours a day at her lace school (Mrs Harris's) She clears 7d a week." She said that most children's hours in the lace schools were "about the same, poor little things!" as at Mrs Harris's. Sitting in a lace school," she went on, "does not suit a great many. There are so many breaths*. [i.e. so many breathing the same air.] You never see any very strong that sit at lace long. It would not hurt them so much if they had a good meal when they get home, but they can get very little to eat. A good many fall into decline, and are obliged to be taken from the pillow, and the girls complain very much of the sick headache. Black lace can hardly be seen by candle light, and working it hurts the eyes very much, and many become weak-sighted."

This was confirmed by Mrs Elizabeth Emerson, also of Newport Pagnell, who let her two children leave their lace school early - i.e. at 8 o' clock in the evening - to go to a charitable night school, which she could never pay for before they were at the pillow. She added. "My girls suffer very much from the headache."

At Mrs Smith's lace school, Wilshampstead, he recorded the following: "The usual number here, including the mistress, is 23, and has been as many as 25, in a room of 10½ x 10 x 6½ feet, the only part of the window which will open being 13 x 20 inches. The cubic space for each of 25 persons would be 28½ feet. With only 20 persons present the room is very close, and the crevices round the window are stopped up with cloth."

In the same town, Mrs Cox's school called forth the following description: "The room has a fireplace and three windows, but none of these can be opened. The measurement is 14 x 12 x 6½, which allows for the usual number of persons in it, 20 girls and the mistress, 1,092 ÷ 21, or 52 cubic feet per head."

In Broughton, Mr White spoke at length to Mary Ann Sumter concerning the health of the young lacemakers. She said that the usual age for starting lace was 7, though she had had one of 6 and one 5 "but I would never take one under 7 again, as they are so much trouble to teach." She had very strong views on the effects of lacemaking on the youngsters, mostly stemming from the terrible treatment she had experienced as a child at the pillow:

"I believe that lacemaking is very injurious to the health. Many time it brings on consumption. At first girls complain of a pain in their side, after that in their stomach, and when it gets there, they soon suffer in their head too. I have many a time had to let my own scholars, mostly amongst girls of about 11 or 12, but also amongst girls of all ages up to 16 or 17, give over for a pain in their side, and I did so knowing what I had suffered at a lace school as a child myself. My own child, Hester, age 13, used to complain of this pain in her side, but has not since I have not confined her to the pillow. Some, chiefly the weak girls, lean very forward at their work, which presses their chest against the 'maid', or 'horse' as a few call it (pillow stand), and this must hurt them.

"Besides that the confinement and crowding of so many into one room is bad. I have often thought so when I have had as many of 20 girls in this room sitting nearly as close as can be, though where I was at school myself there were 30 in a room of the same size. Sometimes they have asked to have the window open, but I would not allow it for fear of the draught through to the door, remembering how we suffered from this at my old school, from toothache, etc. But I have always found my scholars more healthy in winter than summer.

"The drain so close to the door," she went on, "which I cannot alter, (a sink with refuse lying around two or three yards from the door) smells very bad then, and must be bad for all. My own health suffered very much from being at a lace school, to which I went at a distance from here at 6 years old, and I feel it still. I used to have the sick headaches, which I had never had before, and could not work then, but my mistress said it was all idleness, and used to flog me so severely and knock me about so all the same, whether I could work or not, that I got more behind still. Other girls had the common headaches. When we got behind we had more work set for us to do by a certain time, and if it was not done by then it was doubled. In this way I have been kept till 10 or 11 at night in summer, and one night in winter I had a bad accident from hurrying home alone in the dark, about 9, and was picked up streaming with blood. Sometimes, even when I was kept as late as this, I have had to go without finishing what was set me, because I really could not do it, and then could not work next day.

"This was partly from being kept without food so long, that sometimes I felt as if I should die. It was a common punishment, if girls had not finished what they had to do, to keep them all day from morning to night without food, making them sit (at work) all dinner time instead of

going home, and if their mothers brought them food afterwards, not allowing the children to have it. A mistress made nothing of that, and I have known mothers as severe as a mistress in keeping their children without food when they will not work. I feel even now a kick in my back which my mistress, who was very cruel, gave me once as I was sitting at my work and leaning forward, which I think made the blow worse. I have often thought that my mistress could not know what I suffered, or she could not have treated me as she did.

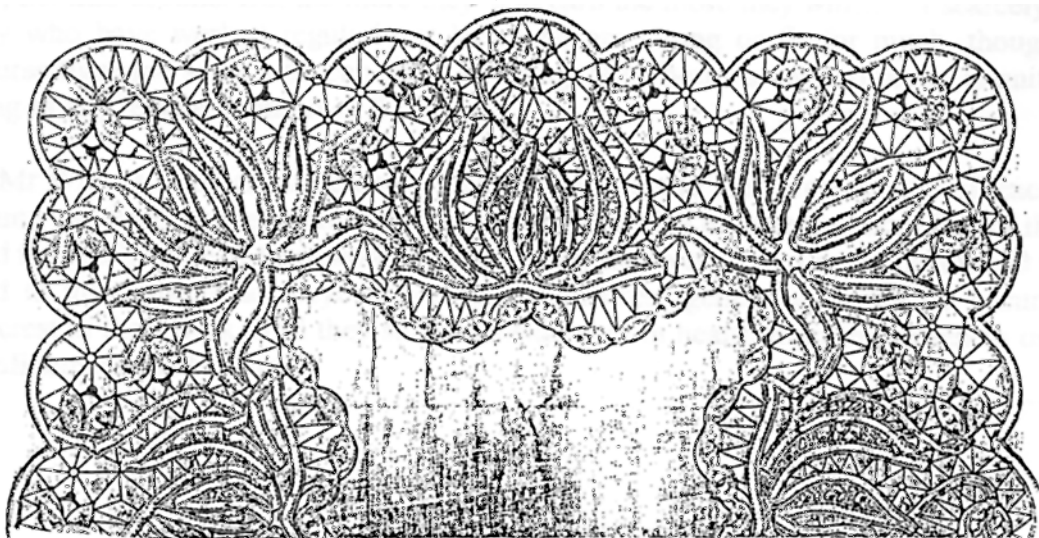
“The work is bad for the eyes, and I am weak-sighted myself from it, though I left lace-work at 11 years old and did not take to it again till married. I found white lace worst by daylight and black by candlelight.”

Going on to Pytchley, Mr White commented that “In this village I received from lace makers, of whom I made enquiries, just the same account as in Broughton of the usual system of lace making, and the present want of employment and absence of schools”.

He spoke there to Mary Bayley who had taken her 6-year-old child away from the lace school because her health was not good. “The confinement of lace work is bad for any but strong constitutions,” she said, “and she never heard of any child that liked it. The work is very bad for the eyes. Now there is so little lace work more children go to the free school, for which they pay 1d. a week in winter. If trade were better they would go to lace schools again. (A neighbour says she was at a lace school of 40 girls in one room.) At school (not lace) the children are taught to write, but often cannot read it when written.”

Emma Bayley, a 10-year-old, said that she had 8 hours work set a day, and “it did not tire her eyes.” She went to the free school, but not regularly, “and makes lace at home too, but never in her life did by candlelight.” This was echoed by 11-year-old, Mary Middleton, who also had never worked by candlelight. She could see her work well but “some children make black lace and that makes their eyes tired. Knows it does with one girl who works alone at her aunt's room from 7 to 5, and sometimes longer in morning and evening both.”

Mrs Church's lace school at Cotton End had a normal complement of 12 scholars,



Branscombe type hankerchief edging - using braids and filling - in imitation of Honiton lace. The braids can be either hand or machine made.

which, with “the mistress and three girls whom I found making straw plait, makes 16 persons in a room, to judge by eye, of about 12 feet square,” while at nearby Elstow Mrs Goodman had a room larger than that in Cotton End, “but too small.” Mr White was told that “the hours are from 8 in the morning till 9 in the evening, but they do not sit by candlelight till about 10 years old, and all leave in the middle of the day on Saturdays

On to Houghton Conquest, where Mrs Burnidge ran her lace school for some two dozen pupils. “There is a fireplace in this room,” noted Mr White, “but it is said to be never used, as the girls quite fill the room and have to sit up close to it, and a counterpane is drawn over it to keep out the draught. The usual number of girls was 24, plus the mistress and two “sitters” - i.e. experienced lacemakers “sitting in” with the class and perhaps paying to be there, and for threads, etc. Mr White measured the room - 11ft 6in x 11 ft 9 in x 7 ft 2 in - giving 968 square feet, or about 36 feet for each person. The pupils worked from 8 in the morning to half past five, with an hour for dinner. Mrs Burnidge added that they “all leave at dinner time on Saturdays, as all lace schools about here do.”

When Thomas Lester was interviewed about the working lives of the lacemakers, he said that the average age of beginners “may be taken at about 7; but at first they only work for a few hours, perhaps 5, in the day, and afterwards not 10 on the average. A given quantity is set to be finished in the day, and when that is done they can go.” The children, he went on, “soon begin to work for themselves, and by about 15, or perhaps earlier, they begin to ‘board themselves’ at home, in which they take a pride.”

Mrs Allen, at High Wycombe - a manufacturer who had been an agent buying up lace from 6 or 7 nearby villages, and had been brought up to lacemaking since she was 6 years old, said: “Lacemakers are more hard-working than any other class, but sitting so long makes them grow up weak, and the work hurts the eyes, particularly by candlelight. It is most wearisome work, and makes the shoulders and neck ache so. Lacemakers complain a good deal of pain in the side, and unless they take care of themselves then, and get out in the fresh air, and take exercise, it may make them go off, i.e. into decline. But the more they *can* earn the more they *will*..... I scarcely see any who have worked regularly at lace who are strong or fit for much, though of course there are some who can stand anything. Nine hours a day, however, is quite as long as any female ought to sit.”

In Mr White's summary statement, however, he refers to the “tiresomeness of teaching young children” and remarks that because of “the wish to have the room free of them, and the small value of their work, they are rarely kept very late, i.e. not beyond 10 p.m. and in most places not beyond 8 p.m., the mistress generally having no pecuniary interest in their work. Still they suffer considerably in health from the closeness of the confinement and bad air.”

Postscript

The Commissioners were most concerned with the health and education of the youngsters who were the subjects of their inquiries. There was already a body of legislation which, they argued, could be extended to apply to the conditions which came under their scrutiny. In some cases they called for local authorities to be given specific powers to control the dwelling houses which were used as "lace schools" for the children who were bundled into them at four, five or six years old.

For example, they called for it to be made law that where "on complaint made by two householders", the local authority be given powers to remove a nuisance where "any building used wholly or in part as a dwelling house, is in such a filthy and unwholesome condition as to be a nuisance to, or injurious to the health of any person".

They also called for local authorities to be able to act on the certificate of a medical officer where "any house is so overcrowded as to be dangerous or prejudicial to the health of the inhabitants, and the inhabitants shall consist of more than one family" and to be able to order "sufficient means of ventilation to purify any premises which are a nuisance or injurious to health."

They called for powers of registration and of inspection, plus powers to have premises cleansed and adequately ventilated, and those to stop overcrowding. On this point they argued that each person employed in a room should have not less than 300 cubic feet of space - and that a notice making this clear be put in such rooms where they could be easily read by the persons employed.

It is obvious from their report that the Commissioners had experienced some in high places who considered their work to be a waste of time - either not necessary or unable to make any difference.

Clearly in rebuttal of such people, who pooh-poohed the need for action, the Commissioners state: "The assumption that no evil exists sufficiently grave to involve the public interests is negated by the ample proof furnished by the evidence, of the injury to the health inflicted on the large body of young females engaged in the employment [i.e. pillow lace making], as carried on under its present unfavourable sanitary conditions, to encourage the growth and spread of consumption" - consumption being the term used at that time to describe pulmonary tuberculosis.

Again underlining their view that effective action could be taken, they say: "The other impression that even if the evil existed the law could not reach it, may be considered groundless, since the Public Health and the Local Government Acts have placed under the direction of the local authorities all over the kingdom administrative officers who only require to be armed with specific power to deal effectively with cases such as these now in question."

They then make the following point: "An incidental advantage might also be looked for from placing these lace schools under regulations as to the numbers to be permitted to work together in proportion to the cubic space in each room.

"Such regulations could not fail to direct the attention of the labouring and middle classes generally in these districts to the subject of overcrowding, and want of proper ventilation, inattention to which is now recognised as one of the chief causes, if not the chief cause, of typhus and other fevers, and of that lowering of the system which predisposes to other diseases."

How remarkable that they should have used their proposed improvements to the state of the lace girls to encourage people generally to improve the healthy state of their own homes!

The Commissioners also stated that it should be unlawful for children under 8 to be employed in private houses, or for a child under 13 to be employed more than six hours in any day - or before 6 a.m. or after 7 p.m. - and those aged 13 to 18 more than 10½ hours in any one day, or in the night, i.e. between the hours of 7 p.m. and 6 a.m. They should, in addition, be entitled to the same meal times as those specified under the Factory Act.

They took up the issue of truck in the following two paragraphs: "The low earnings in this branch of employment are in some of its districts further diminished by the prevalence of the truck system. It has been sufficiently proved by the investigation of a Committee of the House of Commons, and other inquiries, that no relief can be expected from amendments of the present law upon that subject. The law as it stands is capable of being put in force, with the effect under certain circumstances of checking that system.

"But, under the circumstances in which the pillow lace manufacture is carried on, the best remedy against the loss to the workpeople arising from the truck system is that prevailing, as is seen by the evidence, in Buckinghamshire, where the whole trade is in the hands of large employers who pay for the lace in ready money. It would be a work of great benevolence towards the pillow lacemakers of Devonshire and elsewhere, if persons of influence would aid in introducing the system of purchasing their lace, which is of so much advantage to the lace workers of the county of Buckinghamshire."

As we saw earlier, in the 1860s hand-made bobbin lace was in a slow but relentless decline. This had been so since 1815 and the end of the Napoleonic Wars, which had been a high point in the demand for lace. "The war period," says Pinchbek, "was one of continued prosperity for the trade, and lacemakers were perhaps better paid than at any other time." Foreign lace imports were banned and good hands were earning as much as 9s. to 10s. a week in the first decade and a half of the century.

She goes on, however: "The period of high wages did not last long; prices dropped with the peace in 1815, and from then onwards until the complete decline of the trade in the 'eighties, lacemakers dwindled in number as their conditions went from bad to worse. Changes in fashion after the war caused a serious decline in demand; foreign laces were again admitted to the country and before the trade could recover, the

effects of machine lace began to be felt.” Under such conditions, Ivy Pinchbek went on, the “complete decline of the lace industry was only a matter of time. Moreover, village life itself was changing; the railway era brought about a more rapid migration from the countryside, and young women found better wages and more scope for employment in expanding industrial centres. The lace schools shrank to a diminutive size before the Education Act of 1870 gave them their death blow, and by the ’eighties lacemaking as a domestic industry had disappeared almost everywhere.”

So it was that the Royal Commission of 1862 - coming many decades after the first Factory Act - arrived too late to offer any real help to the lace girls. Hopefully, though, their evidence might have had some influence on the framing of educational legislation over the next decades - particularly the Elementary Education Act of 1870 and the Free Education Act of 1891. Those Acts must have affected the situation markedly in the lace villages, as elsewhere, by taking the children into compulsory state education rather than the lace schools.

To put things into perspective, the lace girls did not suffer such miserable lives - of isolation, ignorance and unnecessary illness - because those around them were unfeeling monsters. Their treatment reflected the accepted customs of the day - times (as the same Royal Commission detailed) when, for example, tiny boys were forced into chimneys and “will come back from their work with their arms and knees looking as if the caps had been pulled off; then they must be rubbed with brine ...” Their lot was to be at the base of a system which, in its complete self-confidence, had often let the devil take the hindmost, feeling that the scheme of things was pre-ordained and inevitable and therefore hardly to be questioned.

It may be that Mr White, in his evidently kindly inquiries into their situation, gave out to the lace girls the feeling that they were not totally ignored by society. Such groupings seem always to be found somewhere, and these pages are offered in the hope that recalling the lace girls’ plight, even so long after, might encourage opposition to present-day injustices against working children.

