Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

LACE MAKING H127

From the sixteenth to the nineteenth century lace making was an important industry in two areas of England around Honiton in Devon and in the east Midlands (Buckinghamshire, Bedfordshire and Northamptonshire). The tradition in the east Midlands probably began with the arrival in the 1560s of Huguenot (Protestant) refugees fleeing from Roman Catholic persecution in France and Belgium.



At this date both weaving and lace making was done in the home, not in a purpose-built factory. All that a person needed to be a lace maker was thread, pins, bobbins, a lace pillow and a lot of training. Both men and women were involved in the industry, although there has perhaps always been a tendency for it to be dominated by women.

Working in this way gave people independence, but it could be a hard life. Women worked at the pillows for ten to twelve hours a day and little time could be spared for domestic chores. The poet William Cowper described conditions in Olney, Buckinghamshire, in a letter dated 1780, 'I am an Eye Witness of their poverty and do know that Hundreds of this little Town are upon the Point of Starving and that the most unremitting Industry is but barely sufficient to keep them from it... there are nearly 1200 lace makers in this Beggarly Town.' Thomas Pennant visiting Newport Pagnell in the previous year wrote along similar lines, 'There is scarcely a door to be seen, during Summer, in most towns, but what is occupied by some industrious pale-faced lass; their sedentary trade forbidding the rose to bloom in their sickly cheeks.' On the other hand, it should be remembered that conditions for most ordinary working people at this time were hard, whether they worked on a farm or in a large factory.

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Photograph: Two lace makers - Mrs Hoddle and daughter - from Olney, Buckinghamshire, photographed in about 1860.

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Lace making declined in the late nineteenth century. The invention of machines for making lace at first pushed lace-makers into more complicated designs (ones that the machines could not reproduce) and then eventually pushed them out of business entirely. Imported lace was also often cheaper than that made in England. Finally, the Education Act (1870) providing free, compulsory, elementary education for all children up to the age of 13 meant that they could no longer be sent to 'lace schools' to learn the trade. These 'schools' taught young children how to make lace at the same time as earning a little money for their parents. Children started at such places as early as six or seven years of age.



Photograph: Granny Crowhurst and grand-daughters at lace-making. Granny Crowhurst came from Long Crendon, Buckinghamshire and the photograph was taken in about 1905.

Technique

There are a number of different kinds of lace. Most of the examples in this box are of Pillow, or Bobbin, lace. It was also familiarly known as 'Bone Lace'.



The process began when the design was transferred either to parchment or strong card from master cards. This was called 'pricking'. Pin holes were pricked through and patterns were sometimes marked out with indian ink. A rolled parchment pricking is included in this box (right).

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The finished pricking was attached to the pillow using strong pins, ready for the work to commence. Pillows were traditionally stuffed with straw to provide a firm, but prickable work surface. There were two traditional pillow shapes - the square and the bolster. Bolster style pillows can be seen in the old photographs on previous pages. The example included in this box (right) is square, with a central roller, in which pin marks are still clearly visible. This was used for making long strips of lace. The pattern would have been pinned to the roller, while the bobbins hung down onto the main pillow (left). When an inch (2cm) or so of lace was finished the roller was turned to expose more pattern. You could make as long a piece of lace as you wanted by going over the pattern several times. The finished lace hung down the back of the pillow.



Bobbins were the thread carriers. The threads were wound onto the long neck of the bobbin and secured with a hitch to the short neck. Bobbins differed in shape from area to area. In Buckinghamshire the bobbins had slim shanks and were weighted by a spangle of glass beads. In Honiton, the bobbins had a bulbous shaped shank to give weight and keep the thread taut. Both kinds are included in this box. Examples from Buckinghamshire can be seen on the left, Honiton on the right.





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Pins were inserted in the holes in the pattern, more being added as the lace making progressed. The threads from two bobbins were tied together and kept in place by being fastened to a pin. The pattern was worked out with a line of pins and their respective bobbins. The lace was formed by weaving the bobbins over each other.

The procedure was complicated and time-consuming. The photograph on the right shows a lace pillow set out with a complex arrangement of pins and threads.





The threads used by lace makers was often very fine, so making it took a lot of concentration and lasted a long time. Two examples of medium grade thread are included in this box (left). Lace makers often used a contraption called a flash-stool (below) to enable them to work into the dark winter evenings and at night. A tall flash-stool consisted of a number of glass globes filled with snow water or crushed ice, which concentrated the light from a single candle and focused it on the lace -pillow of the lace makers gathered around it.



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Lace Samples



A number of samples of different kinds of lace are included in this box. The finest is the example marked **Milanese/Venetian/Bucks lace** (right). This piece has two small buttons and button-holes and was probably intended as the cuff for a baby's gown. Even though it is small, such work with a fine thread would have taken many hours to complete and would have been very expensive - the baby must have been the child of rich parents!



The piece marked **Buckinghamshire point** (left) is made with a coarser thread, but it has an elaborate design and is well made - another expensive piece. Bucks point lace usually features a fine mesh background such as that found on the first sample. This mesh is often made with fine thread (but not as fine as that used for Honiton lace) and the pattern motifs are outlined with a thicker thread. The piece from nearby **Bedfordshire** (right) has a bolder design. In Bedfordshire lace the pattern motifs are usually joined with bars of plaited threads rather than with a mesh. The tiny loops which decorate the edges of both the Buckinghamshire and Bedfordshire samples are called picots.





The **Nottinghamshire lace** (left) sample uses a coarse thread. In the late nineteenth century Nottinghamshire became one of the centres of machine-made lace. The **French Vandyke** (below left) sample has a pattern which is modelled on that found on lace collars in portraits by the seventeenth century artist Sir Anthony van Dyke - see the painting on the right. This revival of seventeenth century scalloped styles was very popular in the late nineteenth century.





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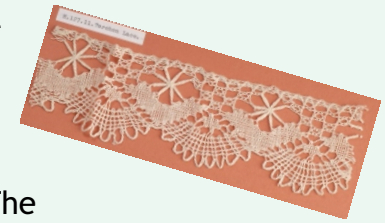

Torchon lace (right) is named not after a place, but is derived from the French word for duster! Another name for Torchon lace is Beggar's lace. As these names imply it was not considered a high-quality style. It was usually made of coarse thread and had a geometric design, rather than flowers or leaves. The square look of Torchon lace is caused by it being made using a grid of holes at 45 degrees to the vertical. It is popular with beginners in the craft because it is relatively easy to make.



The **Honiton-style** strip (left) looks like beginners work. Lengths of tape have been lightly tacked to a paper backing in an unsymmetrical flowing way. The spaces between the tapes have been filled with a simple mesh background. When finished the tacking threads would have been cut and the lace released from its backing. The maker's name, hometown and the date are marked in ink, but unfortunately only the date - '1865' - is clear. The place is possibly Tiverton which, like Honiton, is in Devon. An example of true Honiton lace can be seen at the bottom of the page. It features similar flowing bands, but these are made not with tape but with an incredibly fine lace mesh.

The final sample uses a crude grid to create a framework on which to work simple designs (right). The effect is similar to that of Torchon lace, but coarser. The finished item would have been scorned by a traditional lace maker.



