HONITON AND THE REVIVAL OF LACEMAKING IN DEVON: BY KATHARINE LORD

One of the most intelligent and normal of the revivals of hand work in recent years has taken place in Honiton and the surrounding towns in Devon, England. During the reign of Queen Elizabeth, lace was very generally used by the gentry and nobility, and the Lollards, fleeing to this corner of Devon from persecution in the Netherlands, found ready purchasers for the fairy product of their toil. For over four hundred years the making of this particular lace was one of the most profitable industries of the countryside.

Even a hundred years ago, it is said that as many as three thousand women and children in this district were making the lace, which has made the name of Honiton known the world over; but gradually the industry declined, until it was all but dead. Only the older women kept up their lace-making; the product got poorer and poorer, the designs deteriorating as they copied patterns from cheap wall papers or any machine-made lace that came to hand.

At this crucial time the interest of the late Queen in preserving the arts of her country led to the encouragement of the older workers and eventually to the teaching of the younger generation.

A visit to the Devonshire lace district shows one, side by side, the older order of lacemaker, with pure tradition and inbred skill; the decadent and slipshod worker, who cannot "form" and whose ill-proportioned and shapeless sprigs are put together by the commercial quack and sold as "Honiton," and the young women who are doing really artistic work under the inspiration of the revival.

Some forty years ago, in Honiton a young married woman of education found herself suddenly thrown upon her own resources. As a girl she had learned to make lace for pleasure; now in this rapidly dying industry she saw a means of support, and seeking out the older lace workers, rescued some of the better designs, gradually built up a business which has had the success it deserves, and also has been of great importance in preserving this beautiful art. When Mrs. Fowler started her business, she met at first with many discouragements. The older workers were dying out, the younger women were not learning the art.

The newly invented machines were turning out lace in great quantities and at prices that had become a serious menace to the hand-made article. The use of machine-made net for the appliqué form of the lace had become almost universal. Indeed, there seemed to be no one left who could make bobbin net.

Finally, by diligent inquiry in the country, one old woman was found, aged and feeble, who could make the net. But she could not teach anyone else, and at times seemed almost to have forgotten the process herself. After repeated attempts, Mrs. Fowler induced her to come in a carriage to town, and by encouraging her and watching every move, the art was finally...
IT WAS IN THE QUAIN'T OLD HOUSES OF THE VILLAGE OF BEER THAT QUEEN VICTORIA'S CORONATION DRESS WAS MADE, AND IT IS THE MEMORY OF THIS HONOR WHICH MAKES THE GRANDCHILDREN OF THE OLD LACE WORKERS SPEAK OF THEM WITH LOVING PRIDE AS APART FROM OTHER WOMEN.


IN ALMOST EVERY TINY HOUSE OF THE VILLAGE OF AXMOUTH ARE LACE WORKERS, AND MUCH OF THE LACE IS MADE OUT IN THE LITTLE GARDENS WHERE THE VEGETABLES ARE GROWN AND THE FLOWERS ARE CULTIVATED. AXMOUTH IS ONE OF THE OLD VILLAGES WHICH HAS NOT FORGOTTEN ITS TRADITIONS OF LACE-MAKING, AND WHICH HAS PRODUCED SOME FAMOUS PIECES OF OLD HONITON.
ONE OF THE MANY PICTURESQUE CORNERS OF THE OLD TOWN OF BEER, WHERE SOME OF THE MOST BEAUTIFUL PILLOW LACE IS MADE.
A VILLAGE STREET IN BRANSCOMBE, WHERE LACE-MAKING IS ONE OF THE ESSENTIAL INDUSTRIES.

ANOTHER VIEW OF BEER, SHOWING THE PICTURESQUE QUALITY OF THE TOWN, WITH ITS PLASTER COTTAGES PROTECTED BY OLD THATCHED ROOFS.
THIS GROUP OF PICTURES SHOWS SOMETHING OF WHAT HAS BEEN ACCOMPLISHED IN THE REVIVAL OF LACE WORK WHICH HAS TAKEN PLACE IN RECENT YEARS IN HONITON AND THE SURROUNDING TOWNS IN DEVON, ENGLAND. THROUGHOUT THIS DISTRICT ARE FOUND TODAY LITTLE GROUPS OF WOMEN WORKING WITH INTELLIGENCE AND ENTHUSIASM.

THE MAKING OF MODERN HONITON LACE CAN BE LEARNED BY AN AMATEUR WITH VERY LITTLE PRACTICE, AND IS PROFITABLE BECAUSE IT CAN BE DONE WITH SO MUCH RAPIDITY AND WITHOUT GREAT FATIGUE.

ONE OF THE MOST UNIQUE OF THE SCHOOLS FOR THE REVIVAL OF LACEMAKING IS AT SHALDON, TEIGNMOUTH. THE LACE IN THIS GROUP OF PICTURES WAS MADE AT THIS SCHOOL AND IS AN EXCEEDINGLY GOOD EXAMPLE OF THE MOST SIMPLE OF THE MODERN WORK, THOUGH, OF COURSE, NOT SO FINE AS THE OLD PILLOW LACE OF THIS NAME.
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carpath and taught to the others in the workroom. Six days later the old soul died!

It is only six years since the Devon County Council decided to give its influence to the revival of lacemaking, but already there are being held under the council ten daily and weekly classes for girls and children. In one case at least—at Beer—the teacher in the school is an elderly woman, one of the earlier generation of lacemakers. The classes are held in the school buildings or the guild houses connected with churches and are attended by the farmers' daughters and village women. A sojourn in the towns of Honiton or Beer makes one feel the human element inherent in the old crafts, and as one gets acquainted with the workers, one realizes the significance in their lives of the kind of work they are doing.

One of Mrs. Fowler's best workers at the present time is a woman of seventy, who has worked at the lace since she was eight years old. "I can't get about to work in the house, so I sits at it pretty much all day," is her simple explanation of an unceasing labor that would seem drudgery to many a younger woman.

Turning from the main street into a narrow winding lane, edged by dull pink and yellow plaster cottages, one comes to the open door of Mrs. Roderigo's cottage. A tiny garden is in front,—a few square feet crowded with old-fashioned blooms. Through the open door one sees a huge dresser or wall cabinet containing all the family china. On the other side of the room are the oven and open grate, in which a fire is burning cheerfully. At the window sits the old woman, her "pill" on a chair in front of her,—covered carefully with white cloths at sides and top, the pattern covered again with slips of transparent isinglass, and only the smallest possible space exposed. The bobbins are few even for an elaborate pattern, compared with the almost numberless bobbins of the Italian lacemaker, and are curiously carved and colored,—some with beads of colored wax on their ends to distinguish them from their fellows. The thread is of the finest, looking like a mere cobweb, but it rarely breaks under the light "fingering" of the old woman, whose hands fly, tossing the bobbins to and fro in seemingly careless fashion, each swift movement contributing to the perfecting of a beautiful bit,—a flower, a leaf, or the gauzy wing of an insect or a butterfly. Mrs. Roderigo's comments on the degeneracy of the modern young person were amusing in the extreme. Asked if her granddaughter made lace,—"No, her would never learn," she said. "'Rather the washtub than the lace pins, Granny,' she said, 'rather the scrubbing brush and flannel than the pill.'"

The bobbins are not to the Devonshire woman mere meaningless tools, but have come to be associated with every phase of life of the workers. Lovers carved bobbins for their sweethearts with hearts, initials and even rhymes. A present of a ringed bobbin inscribed: "The ring is round and hath no end, so is my love for you, my friend," constituted almost a declaration. Some of the rhymes refer rather to the giver than to the lacemaker, and the girl who used a bobbin with the rhyme: "May God protect the sailor still from rocks and sands and every ill," was sure to have a sailor lover. Many old bobbins are to be seen carved with fishes, mermaids and other symbols of the sea.

One very fine example of the carver's art has on it ten ships and thirty-three fishes. One pious old soul at Branscombe uses a set of bobbins decorated with the sentences of the Lord's Prayer. The way the bobbins are almost always associated in some way with the heart history of the workers was shown by an old lacemaker at Axmouth. Being asked to sell her set of bobbins or exchange them for new and finer ones,—

"Oh, no, ma'am," she almost gasped in her astonishment at the suggestion. "I could not sell them. Why, no one knows how they comforted me in my sorrow." Years ago her little child had died, and for days and weeks her pillow stood untouched. She seemed in a state of apathy.
and could not be roused, until someone suggested that she make in lace a memorial card. In this labor of love she poured forth her grief, working the name and date, a picture of the little coffin, with the child standing beside it, the little shoes woven of its own golden hair. Grotesque in idea and crude in drawing as it was, it vividly explained the pricelessness of the bobbins with which the poor mother had woven it.

Though Honiton, because it is the market town, has given its name to the lace, most of it is made in the surrounding villages. Beer, Branscombe, Axmouth, all have their cottage lacemakers, and most of the villages have at least one collector or middleman, who buys the sprigs and either puts them together or sells them in turn to another dealer. The thatched cottages, their walls of white or faded pink plaster, stand just far enough from the street to allow the planting of a creeper or perhaps a single rose-bush. Through the street at one side runs its sewer, neatly curved and flushed frequently from the quaint pump at the top of the street. On both sides are narrow courts and cobbled alleys, with sharp turnings and unexpected steps, while here and there a narrow space gives a glimpse of a garden or a tiny cottage tucked behind its larger neighbor. In such a one lives the old woman who teaches lacemaking in some of the schools, one of the few left who were alive at the time of Queen Victoria’s coronation and wedding. For it was at Beer that Queen Victoria’s coronation dress was made, and the memory of this honor still makes the old women of Beer wear their rue with a difference.

“Her worked on the Queen’s dress,” they will say, “but her’s too old to see much now.” And the grandchildren exhibit her with a loving pride as one apart from the common.

Honiton lace in its purest form is entirely a bobbin lace, made in very fine thread. There is one peculiarity of its making that differentiates it from most of the other bobbin laces. The figures, or sprigs as they are called locally, are made separately, then basted on to a “shape” and joined with “brides” or fillings made also with the bobbins. In a later form the sprigs were applied to net, at first hand wrought, then machine made. A still later form uses a needle-point filling, but in all forms the sprigs are made first and usually put together by a different worker. It has always been the custom for the lacemakers to make the “sprigs” in their own homes and bring them to the shop, where only a few of the workers were employed at the joining. The rank and file of the workers would know only two or three patterns and do these throughout a lifetime.

This peculiarity of method, while it helped on the decadence in the design of the lace when it once started, because the putting together was often left to people of no artistic sense, was also a strong factor in the possibility of revival. In England the art of lacemaking died out more completely than in any Continental country, because there were no convents to keep alive the hand industries during that period when the machine product for a time almost crowded out hand work of any sort. The cottage workers began to prick over their own patterns, using inferior paper and doing the work carelessly and inaccurately until all beauty of line or proportion was lost. In many cases they essayed to make new patterns “from nature,” and we find snails, cat’s paws, frying pans, shells, bullock’s hearts in unprejudiced combination with roses sprouting from ivy leaves and sunflowers, flanked by turkey tails, with perhaps a cock robin sitting amid the general confusion. But this very method of combination made it easy for the revivers of the lace to separate the wheat from the chaff and rescue many of the beautiful old figures.

The lace made during this period of degeneracy was called “rag” lace, the name given by the workers themselves, and it was distinguished by slipshod work as well as poor design. The work was done with as few bobbins as possible, the bars were loosely plaited, worked without pins or
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pearls and the fastening off of each pair of bobbins was dispensed with, the whole bunch being twisted and tied loosely and cut off. These loose ends, of course, worked out with the least wear and the lace was useless.

There are two kinds of industry carried on in this revival, the philanthropic, managed mostly by ladies of the county families in their own districts, and one or two of more businesslike character, these, too, in the hands of women, but women whose professional training has especially fitted them to put the industry on a business footing. One of the most unique of the revival schools is at Shaldon, Teignmouth. In October, 1904, this school was started with a capital of £1, the proceeds of a lace show.

And thus all through this district are found these little groups, working with intelligence and enthusiasm to make possible again in their countryside the healthful and gentle labor of the hands, which seems the natural activity of the wives and daughters of the tillers of the soil, and of those who “go down to the sea in ships.”

The making of Honiton lace can be learned by the amateur, and after a little practice, the simpler sprigs made with considerable ease and rapidity. There are, of course, almost innumerable fancy fillings, which add greatly to the beauty of the work, and as the lacemaker progresses she will want to learn these. Many charming sprigs may be made, however, with the knowledge of only a few stitches,—namely, whole stitch, half stitch, turning stitch, plain hole, fancy hole, pearl pin and one filling stitch. The fillings all have names, more or less descriptive, as “brick filling,” “toad in the hole,” “swing filling,” “blossom filling,” etc.

The equipment required for making Honiton lace is a round flat pillow, very hard. From 10 to 13 inches across and 5 or 6 inches in depth makes a convenient size. The pillow may easily be made at home and can be stuffed with straw, bran, sawdust. It must be firm, but still admit the pins easily. There must be two detachable covering cloths, about 1 yard square of linen or print, which can be removed and washed. There are further required two small strips of transparent horn or isinglass, called sliders, which cover the work in progress, some parchment and checked paper for patterns, a needle pin, any ordinary No. 8 needle in a wooden handle; not less than three dozen bobbins, small and very light, lacemakers’ pins, the smallest size made, and thread of two kinds—the sizes known as 14 skip to 17 skip being the most common, and the gimp or shiny thread, sizes 24 to 36. The novice, however, especially she who has not made any kind of pillow lace, may learn the stitches on a sampler, using the heavier bobbins, thread and pins used in the French and Italian laces, and, of course, increasing the size of the patterns accordingly. The lacemaker who is learning by herself, will thus avoid the discouragement incident to the inevitable breaking of the delicate thread by the learner, who has not a teacher at hand to make the difficult joining. When the handling of the bobbins has been learned and the whole and half stitch mastered, the beginner should then practice a little on the sampler with 8 skip thread and gradually go on to the finer numbers. Whole and half stitch and the plain braid are made the same as in the Italian and French laces, except that in Honiton, Brussels and other light laces the bobbins must be handled somewhat differently, being allowed to lie on the cushion and lifted one over the other, instead of being held in the hand or thrown, both of which methods would break the delicate thread.