



Introduced into England during the sixteenth century, bobbin lace became much in demand. Marlow was known across Europe as an important centre. On a loom, the warp threads are held taut and fixed, but if these ends are released and wound onto bobbins, they have the freedom to create lace, which, unlike embroidery, is independent of a fabric base.

Religious persecution in France and the Low Countries caused people to flee to England with their pillows and bobbins and use their skills to make a livelihood. Many settled in Buckinghamshire which became a centre of the cottage lace industry. Early entrepreneurs saw this as an opportunity to make money! Buying lace from the worker and selling it on in London was profitable, but the lace makers at the bottom of the chain received little money for their efforts. Farm labourers earned a pittance and to augment their meagre income, the wives and children became lace makers. They worked long hours and remained poor.

In 1609 John Brinkhurst established alms houses in Oxford Road to provide accommodation for the poor. On April 8th 1623 a petition was sent to the High Sheriff of Buckinghamshire concerning the plight of the lace makers: *'much distressed, as bone lace making was much decayed'*. In 1624, in memory of his son Henry, Sir William Borlase founded a school in West Street *"to teach twenty-four boys 'to read and cast accounts' and twenty-four girls to 'knit, spin and make bone lace'"*.

Bobbin lace was at a peak throughout the eighteenth century, but in the early nineteenth, machines were adapted to produce simple lace. By 1827 girls were no longer at Sir William Borlase School as lace was considered an inferior occupation with little return. With the railway now closer and Marlow an attractive town, the number of small shops increased. Middle class people with more money demanded domestic servants. Girls preferred household work with a small but fixed wage. There was opportunity for dress-makers and seamstresses. Mothers with small children remained at home and older women did not seek other employment. The majority of lace makers who lived on the farms or in villages were unable to get to the town to seek work and continued to make lace. No longer able to make a worthwhile living, the dealers disappeared but a few lace makers arranged to sell lace locally.

At the 1851 Great Exhibition Elizabeth Frewin of Dean Street Great Marlow exhibited *'a lace collar, cuffs and lappets made by hand on the pillow, using an admixture of silk, which greatly improves the appearance of the lace'*. She was a wheelwright's wife who became a part time dealer to help the lace makers. Eleanor

Merchant, the wife of a millwright, had three children and found it expedient to sell lace for the people living in Dean Street. Kezia Beaver lived in Gun Lane and did similarly for the dwindling number of lace makers in other parts of the town. In 1890 William Plumridge was dealing in lace at Lane End and the following year Miss E Johnson organised a Lane End Industry. Mrs Gilbey of Woburn House, Maidenhead arranged to take lace to North Bucks Lace exhibitions.

The cottage industry was no longer feasible but today bobbin lace has reappeared again as a leisure pastime. No one will ever make the fine flounces and large collars worn in the past. No longer fashionable and very time consuming, they would be the work of a lifetime! Today coarse yarns are used in a multitude of colours; wire is used for jewellery; patterns are created to be framed as pictures - the possibilities are endless. However, we must not forget the traditional patterns. The movement of threads, and the many stitches to create texture and variety, are a part of bobbin lace for all time. The old patterns are our heritage, the ability to make them must be maintained in the future.

The Marlow Museum has a cabinet showing the cottage industry – old lace of the type made in Marlow; bobbins fashioned in the Chiltern Hills; prickings (patterns for making lace); and a pillow in use two hundred years ago. Lace demonstrations often occur on Sunday afternoons.

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