

The Origins of the English Pillow Lace Industry¹

By G. F. R. SPENCELEY

IN her pioneering analysis, 'Industries in the Countryside', Dr Thirsk suggested that the key to the development of the rural industries which existed in England between the opening of the fifteenth and the middle of the seventeenth centuries lay in the socio-agrarian environment which produced the requisite labour supplies.² For no matter how close the prospective entrepreneur found himself to supplies of raw materials and sources of power, or to ports and centres of compelling market demand, he could not establish a rural industry unless he could find a labour force. Indeed, the impetus for the development of rural industry probably came from within rural society itself as local populations searched for additional sources of income to supplement meagre returns from agriculture. Yet this was no haphazard evolution. Rural industries tended to develop in a distinct region of England, in "populous communities of small farmers pursuing a pastoral economy based either upon dairying or breeding,"³ for it was here that the demands on agricultural labour were relatively slight, probably spasmodic, and farm work and excess rural population could easily turn to industrial employment as a result.

There was far less likelihood of rural industries developing in arable areas, for arable agriculture exerted heavy demands on labour supplies. In Hertfordshire, for example, a small outpost of the cloth industry had died in the sixteenth century because of a switch to arable agriculture which, in the words of local magistrates, provided "better means" of employing the poor in "picking wheat a great part of the year and straining before the plough at seedtime and other necessary occasions of husbandry."⁴

Subsequent investigations led Dr Thirsk to suggest that if "an industry was to flourish on a scale sufficiently large to support a specialized market of repute . . . it had to be able to draw on a considerable reserve of labour. This was not so easily found in common field districts where the system of land distribution, and particularly the scattered strips of arable were extravagant in the use of labour and where mixed husbandry made heavy demands on the labour force, requiring attention to the cultivation of the fields virtually throughout the year as well as attention to stock."⁵ And these were not the only obstacles, for lowland common-field districts were highly manorialized and manorial courts had considerable effect in discourag-

¹ I am grateful to Don Woodward of the Department of Economic and Social History, Hull University, for helpful comments on an earlier draft.

² Joan Thirsk, 'Industries in the Countryside', in F. J. Fisher (ed.), *Essays in the Economic and Social History of Tudor and Stuart England*, Cambridge, 1961, pp. 70-88.

³ Their growth was probably strengthened during the sixteenth century by the pressures of population expansion. The pressures had also been intensified in these areas as a result of systems of partible inheritance. —*Ibid.*, pp. 76-9, 88.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 87. Arable agriculture, in Dr Thirsk's words, gave "full employment to all."

⁵ Joan Thirsk (ed.), *Agrarian History of England and Wales*, IV, 1967, pp. 13-14.

ing the immigration of outsiders and squatters on the waste, and also in the partitioning of land by tenants. Manorial lords were concerned to control the size and growth of population on their estates and these were poor conditions for producing labour supplies for cottage industry.¹

Dr Thirsk was careful to point out that it was not her intention to "propound a theory for the situation of rural handicraft industries which can be applied mechanically to them all," and that any analysis of the growth of a rural industry in one district rather than another must inevitably be "beset with pitfalls."² But further investigation, in Volume IV of *Agrarian History of England and Wales*, has shown that, with a small number of exceptions, the development of rural industry did take place essentially in the kinds of area suggested by Dr Thirsk. "For the most part, country industries were established in areas . . . now largely given over to dairying or pasture farming . . . it was precisely in these districts, with their pastoral economy, that the local demand for agricultural labour was relatively slight, or at best, spasmodic." And this, it is said, "fully bears out" Dr Thirsk's thesis.³ Indeed, she concludes in the same volume that the economic and social environment was so unfavourable to the maintenance of industries in corn growing districts that those that did survive deserve closer examination.⁴

One of the industries which she suggested might be investigated was pillow lacemaking, an industry which, as yet, has received only cursory attention. This article surveys and attempts to explain the early years of this industry's development, and in so doing suggests an important qualification to Dr Thirsk's general thesis on the origin of rural industries.

II

Pillow lace was developed in Italy and Flanders late in the fifteenth century, a product essentially of the Renaissance.⁵ It was a fine and delicate fabric, made by a worker twisting threads, attached to bobbins, around pins which were inserted into a pricked parchment pattern which rested on a pillow. In a fine piece of lace as many as 400 bobbins might be used and the fabric therefore lent itself to great variation in texture and design.⁶ By the early sixteenth century the quality of pillow lace had been improved to such a degree that geometric designs were now added to floral varieties and flax threads had replaced metallic threads of gold and silver. It was a fabric well-suited to the extravagant fashions of the age and by the mid-century had already become an important article of international commerce.⁷

In England, the demand for foreign laces of all kinds increased greatly during the

¹ Thirsk, *Agrarian History* . . . , IV, 1967, p. 14.

² Thirsk, 'Industries in the Countryside', *loc. cit.*, pp. 71, 86.

³ A. Everitt, 'Farm Labourers', in *Agrarian History* . . . , IV, p. 429. For a similar view of the origins of the leather industry see L. A. Clarkson, 'The Leather Crafts in Tudor and Stuart England', *Agric. Hist. Rev.*, XIV, pt 1, 1966, pp. 25-40.

⁴ Thirsk, *Agrarian History* . . . , IV, p. 13.

⁵ M. E. Jackson, *A History of Hand-Made Lace*, 1900, p. 14.

⁶ For details of the production of pillow lace see W. Felkin, *A History of Machine-Wrought Lace and Hosiery*, New York, Centenary Edition 1967, pp. 127-9.

⁷ B. Palliser, *A History of Lace*, 1865, revised edn by M. Jourdain and A. Dryden, 1901, p. 295.

reign of Henry VIII.¹ The demand was stimulated by the increasing extravagance in clothing then developing under the influence of Italian fashion. It was a fashion-conscious age, and lacemaking benefited greatly as a result. The second half of the century saw Flanders pillow lace become a popular article with the English upper class.² By 1568 the value of laces of all kinds imported into England is said to have been £10,000 per annum,³ and the level of imports continued to increase thereafter, as lace handkerchiefs, cuffs, collars, christening shirts, aprons, and high starched ruffs came into fashion.⁴

By the end of the century an established market for foreign pillow laces existed among the upper and growing middle-class populations in England, especially in London. Lace was in vogue. "Our English dames," said Sir Francis Bacon in 1590, "are much given to the wearing of costly laces, and if brought from Italy, France or Flanders, they are in much esteem."⁵ But both sexes were then fond of extravagant fashion, and the demand among men was particularly intense in London where the population was inflated regularly by hordes of fashion-conscious country gentlemen settling in the metropolis for the season.⁶

It was against this background of increasing domestic demand that, towards the end of the sixteenth century, pillow lacemaking first appeared in England as both a domestic handicraft and a commercial concern.⁷ At this time pillow lacemaking was spreading among ladies of the English upper class as an alternative pastime to the various aspects of needlework, both in London and the provinces. In 1595, Philip Henslow, a London businessman, apprenticed his niece to John Grygs of London, "to learne all manner of workes, to make bone lace and to knit."⁸ In Bedford the wife of Henry Whittaker, master of the Free School, made pillow lace prior to her death in 1601,⁹ and at Ampthill, in Bedfordshire, Ann Smithson provided in her will in 1615 that her six-year-old daughter be brought up in the charge of Francis Cooper, victualler, for three years "at her book and needle, and for three years thereafter to make bone lace and to knytt."¹⁰

¹ *Ibid.*

² In 1556 Queen Mary received a "fair smock of white work, Flanders making and when Sir Thomas Wyatt went to his execution in 1554 he perhaps saw his dignity enhanced by the wearing of a 'fine hat of velvet with broad bonework lace about it.'"—*Ibid.*, p. 297.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 309. ⁴ J. Laver, *Costume*, 1963, p. 45. The ruffs were made popular by Philip of Spain.

⁵ As quoted in Jackson, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

⁶ In the words of Ben Jonson: "first, to be an accomplished gentleman—that is a gentleman of the time—you must give over housekeeping in the country and live together in the city amongst gallants where at your just appearance twere good you turned four or five acres of your best land into two or three trunks of apparell."—F. J. Fisher: 'London as a Centre of Conspicuous Consumption', *Trans. Roy. Hist. Soc.*, 2nd ser., xxx, 1948, pp. 46–7, quoting C. Knight, *London*, 1841, p. 378.

⁷ The English pillow lace industry always found it difficult to compete abroad with technically superior continental producers, though increasing quantities were sent to the colonies during the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.—*Commons Journals*, xiii, 6 March 1699, p. 270. W. Pitt, *General View of the Agriculture of Northamptonshire*, 1809, p. 101.

⁸ *Henslow's Diary*, ed. W. W. Greg, I, 1964, p. 192. Shakespeare either had heard of pillow lace or had seen it being made. In *Twelfth Night*, II, iv (pub. 1601), he writes of

"The spinsters and knitters in the sun,
And the free maids that weave
their threads with bone."

⁹ Beds. C.R.O.: ABP/W, 1601–21. ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 1615/47.

But pillow lacemaking was also being introduced to the poorer children in a number of rural counties at this time. In the East Midland counties of Buckinghamshire and Bedfordshire the overseers of several parishes were attempting, under Tudor Poor Law Legislation, to make their pauper children self-supporting by providing them with materials for making pillow lace. At Eaton Socon, in the north-eastern corner of Bedfordshire, the local Poor Law authorities agreed, typically, in 1596, "the payment of i j. d the weeke to the woman that teacheth the pore children to worck bone lace. . . And every child thus workinge shall weekly be paid from the gaine of Mr. Beverley his stock so much as they shall earne by their workinge; and such pore as doe not send their children being able to worck shall receive no relief from the collection."¹ In this way rural poverty and the government's desire to maintain order and security by employing the poor² eventually encouraged the parallel evolution of a pillow lace industry. For by the 1630's pillow lacemaking was soundly established on a commercial basis, not only in the villages of Bedfordshire and Buckinghamshire, but also in the villages of neighbouring Northamptonshire, and in the south-eastern corner of Devon. By the end of the century, lace dealers would claim to employ over 100,000 women and children, some of whom, making laces which sold at prices from 5s. to 630s. a yard, were earning over 7s. a week.³ In 1724 Daniel Defoe claimed, if perhaps with customary exaggeration, that next to the woollen cloth industry pillow lacemaking was the largest employer in England.⁴

To what extent does the industry's location fall into Dr Thirsk's pattern? In the *Agrarian History* Dr Thirsk and Professor Everitt have traced the industry's location to the familiar areas of non-arable agriculture. In the Midland region it appeared in the Bernwood and Stowood forests on the borders between Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire, and in the Salcey and Whittlewood forests in the south-east of Northamptonshire. In the former area "preliminary indications" suggest a population engaged in cattle-rearing, dairying, and pigkeeping, though "a close study of these areas would be necessary to establish the true nature of both farming systems." In Salcey and Whittlewood preliminary evidence again indicates a populous community of small farmers concerned with rearing cattle, sheep and pigs, and breeding horses. In the West Country, despite the common association of the industry with the names of Honiton and Devon, the industry is traced simply to Yeovil in Somerset, "an exceptionally populous county congested with dairy farmers."⁵

All of this points to a confirmation of Dr Thirsk's thesis. But some of the most important areas of the industry's development late in the sixteenth and early in the

¹ Quoted in Joyce Godber, *History of Bedfordshire*, Luton, 1969, p. 222. Materials for pillow lacemaking were also distributed early in the seventeenth century at Kempston, Poddington, Pavenham, and High Wycombe. —Beds. C.R.O.: P60/12; OR 975; P68/14; L.J. Ashford, *The History of the Borough of High Wycombe*, 1960, pp. 150-1.

² D. C. Coleman, 'Labour in the English Economy of the Seventeenth Century', *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 2nd ser., III, 1955-6, pp. 280-96.

³ *Commons Journals*, loc. cit.

⁴ D. Defoe, *A Tour Thro' the Whole Island of Great Britain*, 1927 edn, I, p. 217.

⁵ Thirsk, 'The Farming Regions of England', *Agrarian History* . . . , IV, pp. 71, 72, 94.

seventeenth century in fact were not pastoral districts but districts based essentially on arable agriculture. By the middle of the century considerable development had taken place, for example, in northern Bedfordshire and Buckinghamshire, both of which lay on the edge of the Midlands plain. In 1611, two pillow lace dealers from Newport Pagnell were brought before the Ecclesiastical Court for "continually travelling with consignments of lace to London on the Sabbath day."¹ The industry also appeared in Fenny Stratford, where William Stopp was putting out lacemaking materials to the women and children in surrounding villages in 1638,² and in Buckingham, where Peter Reynolds and John Rennals, two lace dealers, were both issuing trade tokens in the 1600's.³ Similar, if less pronounced, development had also taken place further south. In 1623, a year of general trade depression,⁴ the industry was sufficiently entrenched in High Wycombe for the mayor to complain that: "Wee find that by reason of the trades of clothing and bone lace makeinge are much decayed and do daylie fayle, the poore are greatlie hindered and impoverished and growne into such multitudes that wee knowe not measures to set them on work."⁵ As the century progressed the industry's hold in this county gradually expanded in the villages surrounding Newport Pagnell and Olney, which had emerged as an important centre by the 1660's,⁶ and also in the south-west where, from High Wycombe, and later from Great Marlow, laces were put out to workers in Weston Turville and Holton, villages in the neighbouring Chiltern Hills. By the end of the century there were over 200 lace dealers in Buckinghamshire, of whom over 150 travelled regularly with consignments of lace to London.⁷

In the northern extremities of Bedfordshire the industry appeared first in villages on the banks of the River Ouse where William Rose, a "bone lacemaker," was buried at Bromham, near Bedford, in 1616.⁸ Richard King, of neighbouring Eversholt, was described as a "bone lacemaker" on a deed of conveyance dated 1621,⁹ and at Stevington, another Ouse-side village, John Reid is described similarly in 1688.¹⁰ John Chapman, of Milton Earnest, just north of Bedford, a "lacebuyer," sold over two acres of land in 1641,¹¹ and the industry had also appeared at Elstow, near Bedford, by the 1650's.¹² By the 1680's "lace buyers" had been recorded at Cranfield, Kempston, Harrold, Turvey, Stevington, and Bromham,¹³ while the industry had also developed, if on a smaller scale, further south, around the centre of Marston Mortaine where, in 1642, Richard Newman, a lace dealer, held a stock of lace worth £70.¹⁴ Yet the industry was always absent from the southern extremities of the county and most notably from the villages surrounding the major town-

¹ Bishop's Visitations (1611-12), quoted in C. Freeman, *Pillow Lace in the East Midlands*, Luton, 1964, p. 15.

² *Ibid.*

³ T. O. Manton & E. Hollis, *Buckinghamshire Trade Tokens Issued in the Seventeenth Century*, 1933, pp. 37-8.

⁴ B. E. Supple, *Commercial Crisis and Change in England, 1600-1642*, 1959, p. 55.

⁵ P.R.O.: S.P.D. Jas. I, pp. 142, 144. ⁶ T. Fuller, *Worthies of England*, I, 1662, p. 128.

⁷ *Commons Journals*, loc. cit. ⁸ Freeman, *op. cit.*, p. 12. ⁹ Beds. C.R.O.: T42/471.

¹⁰ Freeman, *op. cit.*, p. 12. ¹¹ Beds. C.R.O.: CH593/4.

¹² Godber, *op. cit.*, p. 293. The terms lace buyer, lace maker, and laceman seem to have been used interchangeably well into the nineteenth century. A "Lacemaker," Thomas Bull, was dealing in pillow lace at Pavenham, Bedfordshire, in 1821.—Beds. C.R.O.: X23916/1.

¹³ Godber, *op. cit.*, p. 274. ¹⁴ Beds. C.R.O.: ABP/W, 1640/93.

ship of Luton. Here there was no rural industry until straw plaiting developed rapidly early in the eighteenth century.¹

During the course of the seventeenth century the industry had also expanded considerably in Northamptonshire near the borders with Bedfordshire and Buckinghamshire, and particularly in and around the two market towns of Wellingborough and Towcester. By the time a petition was presented by Northamptonshire lace dealers to the House of Commons in 1698 the industry had grown vigorously. Dealers then claimed there were over 3,000 laceworkers in the county, of whom over 1,000 were in Wellingborough alone. The industry had spread widely across Northamptonshire's south-eastern corner reaching over a dozen villages and towns, the most prominent of which, in terms of the numbers the industry employed, were Wellingborough, Towcester, Yardley Hastings, Whittlebury, Centum, and Crendon.²

By the middle of the seventeenth century a new industry had therefore sprung up in a diversity of agricultural districts in the East Midlands including many which fall outside Dr Thirsk's pattern. As she has suggested, the industry's development in Northamptonshire and parts of Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire did take place in wooded areas which were probably based on a pastoral economy. Yet in a district in which wheat, rye, and barley were grown, Newport Pagnell and Olney, the industry's famous centres, still had their open fields at the end of the eighteenth century, while Arthur Young found nearly the whole district from Aylesbury to Buckingham to be open field in 1771.³ Eighty years earlier Celia Fiennes had drawn the same conclusion specifically of Fenny Stratford and district,⁴ and at High Wycombe the industry had grown in an area which, early in the seventeenth century, still had its common fields and supplied wheat and barley to London but in which there were no sheep, and "no cheese and butter was made."⁵

In Northamptonshire, the situation is less clear, for the industry's development in non-wooded areas around Wellingborough and Towcester may have taken place in the second half of the century, during which there was a marked swing to pasture farming.⁶ But the arable pattern was repeated in Bedfordshire, a "basically arable" county,⁷ "very completely under the common field system,"⁸ and famous for its

¹ J. G. Dony, *A History of the Straw Hat Industry*, Luton, 1949, ch. II, *passim*.

² *Case of the Lacemakers in relation to the Importation of Foreign Lace*, Victoria & Albert Museum, 43A2H. The petition listed the following "people in a few places which get their living by making of lace": Buckinghamshire: Weston Turville 96, Holton 74, Aylesbury 429, Buckland Beathong 59, Drayton Beauchamp & Aston Abbots 69, Hanslope 830, Morsley 114, Newton Longville 101, Brackley 150, Stoakhamon 78, Blackley 150, Whitchurch 119, North Marston 132, Solbery 155, Oving 66, Swanbourne 129, Quainton 116, Bow Brickhill 140, North Crawley 403, Fenny Stratford 192, Olney 1,302, Newport Pagnell 1,378, Stony Stratford 1,472, Northamptonshire: Centum 257, Little Houghton 60, Wellingborough 1,146, Wilby 69, Earls Barton 127, Ecton 44, Towcester 591, Castle Ashby 64, Braxley 154, Whittlebury 206, Yardley Hastings 442, Ashton 101, Grendon 259; Bedfordshire: Cranfield 652, Molsoe 174.

³ Bucks. C.R.O.: Enclosure Awards, 1794 IR/67(i & ii), 1768 IR/132; IR/96. A. Young, *Eastern Tour*, I, pp. 18-19. See also *Annals of Agriculture*, IV, 1785, pp. 148-50.

⁴ As quoted in G. Slater, *The English Peasantry and the Enclosure of Common Fields*, New York, 1907, p. 221.

⁵ Ashford, *op. cit.*, pp. 1, 39-40.

⁶ E. L. Jones, 'Agricultural Origins of Industry', *Past and Present*, 40, July 1968, pp. 61-3.

⁷ Godber, *op. cit.*, p. 237. At Harrold, a lace village, the basic crop was wheat.—*Ibid.*, p. 363. See also H. A. Carnell, T. Booth & H. G. Tibbutt (eds.), *8,000 Years: A Kempston History*, 1966, pp. 22-7.

⁸ E. C. K. Gonner, *Common Field and Inclosure*, 2nd edn, 1966, pp. 252-4.

wheat and barley which, it was said, was bettered by no county in England.¹ This was a county in which manorial organization was still strong, the manorial courts surviving in Bedfordshire until well into the seventeenth century.² But this did not prevent the development of a rural industry.

It is more difficult to be precise about the agricultural organization of the areas in which the industry developed in the West Country. The industry's development here was not confined to Yeovil, however, for an important centre also appeared in the south-eastern corner of Devon. In the Honiton Parish Register the deaths of Elizabeth Cross, a "lacemaker," and of James Minifie, a "lace seller," were recorded in 1654.³ But non-documentary evidence suggests that the industry was already well established by this time for an inscription on a tombstone which still stands in the Honiton churchyard records the death of James Rodge, a "bone lace seller," in 1617.⁴ The industry certainly was well developed here by 1630, when Thomas Westcote enthused over the "abundance of bone lace, a pretty toy now greatly in request," which was being made at Honiton and at Bradnidge nearby.⁵ Thirty years later the industry had grown sufficiently in Devon for Thomas Fuller to champion its development, on the grounds not only that it kept out imports of foreign lace but also that it provided welcome employment for many women and children who otherwise would have been a burden on the parish. In so doing he pointed to two important factors in the industry's subsequent expansion: the ever-present problem of rural poverty which constantly brought forth labour supplies, and a mercantilist outlook which, throughout the century, produced a certain degree of governmental encouragement and protection.⁶ Fuller also indicated that the Devon industry's major market centre, like that of the East Midland industry, was London. "Much of this is made in and about Honiton and weekly returned to London . . . [and] tho' private persons pay for it, it stands the state in nothing; not expensive of bullion, like other lace, costing nothing save a little thread descanted on by art and industry. Hereby many children who otherwise would be burdensome to the parish, prove beneficial to their parents. Yea, many lame in their limbs, and impotent in their arms, if able in their fingers, gain a livelihood thereby; not to say that it saveth some thousands of pounds yearly, formerly sent overseas to fetch lace from Flanders."⁷

By the time the Devon lace dealers had come to collude with their Midland

¹ R. Blane, *Britannia, or a Geographic Description of the Kingdoms of England, Scotland and Ireland*, 1668, pp. 43-4. The barley in Bedfordshire was "plump, white and strong."—H. C. Darby, *An Economic Geography of England before 1800*, Cambridge, 1936, p. 361, quoting Camden's *Britannia*, 1607.

² Godber, *op. cit.*, p. 271. The courts met at Stevington, Cranfield, Kempston, Blunham, and Cardington in the heart of the lace district.

³ Devon C.R.O.: 1654/7/PR5.

⁴ The inscription reads: "Here lyeth ye body of James Rodge of Honiton in ye county of Devonshire (Bone lace seller hath given unto the poore of Honiton parishe the benefytte of £100 for ever) who deceased ye 27th of July 1617. AETATAE SVAE SO. Remember the Poore." I am grateful to the Rev. R. A. Babington, Rector of Honiton Parish Church, for pointing this out to me.

⁵ T. Westcote, *A View of Devonshire in: MCCXXX*, reprinted Exeter, 1845, p. 62.

⁶ The various Acts which limited the importation of foreign lace were: 13 & 14 Charles II, c. 43; 9 & 10 William III, c. 9; 6 Anne, c. 19.

⁷ Fuller, *op. cit.*, pp. 396-7.

counterparts in petitioning parliament in 1698, the industry in Devon had grown quite substantially. There were then said to be almost 4,000 laceworkers in the district, with well over 1,000 in Honiton itself. There were almost another 1,000 in Ottery St Mary with the rest scattered primarily along the coastal fringe between the rivers Axe and Exe, particularly in the villages of Branscombe, Beer, Seaton, Sidbury, and Sidmouth. More moderate development had also taken place along the course of the River Axe and most notably at Axmouth, Colyton, and Axminster, where altogether another 500 women and children were said to be employed.¹

Though the western sector of the industry was never to be as large as that in the East Midlands, it was to produce some of the finest laces ever turned out in England, and Honiton would always rival Newport Pagnell as the English industry's most famous centre.² And here again, such evidence as is available suggests that the industry's development may well have taken place in areas based on a sheep-corn husbandry. For it was here, in the valleys and along the coast, that the few small pockets of fielden corn-growing country, in what was essentially a pastoral county, were to be found.³

III

The pillow lace industry had thus emerged by the middle of the seventeenth century in a mixture of areas, both pastoral and arable. But its development in areas of open-field arable agriculture clearly falls outside Dr Thirsk's pattern. How is this to be explained and what effects, if any, does this have on her general thesis?

Traditional accounts of the industry's development in these areas have been based on two stories, both of which have a certain romantic appeal and are still popular with antiquarians and lacemakers but neither of which has any empirical foundation. The first fits into the category of individual accident theories of industrial development. A story which was popularized during the nineteenth century but probably owes its origins to a much earlier period portrays Queen Katherine of Aragon as the industry's creator. In the years 1532-3, when sent by Henry VIII to Ampthill castle in Bedfordshire to wait quietly for the annulment of their marriage, Katherine is said to have spent her leisure hours making lace and teaching the local population her skills. The foremost nineteenth-century authority on the history of pillow lace, Mrs Palliser, opted for this explanation, suggesting that "certain traditions handed down in the country villages of a good queen who protected their crafts, lead us to infer that the art of lacemaking, as it then existed, was first imparted to the peasantry of Bedfordshire, as a means of subsistence through the charity of Queen Katherine of Aragon."⁴ To support this notion Mrs Palliser points out that one of the lacemakers' festivals, which lingered well into the nineteenth century, was the celebration of St Katherine's Day (November 25th), a festival which was kept not only in memory of Katherine's role as the industry's

¹ *Case of the Lacemakers*, loc. cit. The total number said to be employed in the county was 3,884. They were located at: Counbraleigh 65, Sidmouth 302, Axmouth 73, Sidbury 321, Buckerall 90, Ottery St Mary 814, Northleigh 32, Southleigh 35, Colliton 353, Fauray 70, Upottery 228, Branscombe, Beer, Seaton, 1,326, Honiton 1,341, Axminster 60, Gittesham 139, Sheat & Musbery 25.

² Palliser, *op. cit.*, p. 402.

³ Thirsk, *Agrarian History* . . . , IV, pp. 71-4.

⁴ Palliser, *op. cit.*, p. 375.

creator, but also to commemorate a "good Queen" who "when the trade was dull, burnt all her lace and ordered new to be made."¹

This story has often been repeated but has no real justification. The celebration of St Katherine's day is not peculiar to lacemaking but derives, rather, from Katherine of Alexandria, the patron saint of spinsters, and though Katherine may well have "delighted in working the needle curiously,"² as another protagonist of this view has suggested, her pursuit was probably embroidery, possibly needle-point lace, but almost certainly was not pillow lacemaking. The story cannot explain how local workers and dealers were encouraged to take up pillow lacemaking and it cannot explain why a similar development was taking place in Devon at more or less the same time, yet this parallel development can scarcely have been coincidental.

The alternative explanation is much more attractive in an analytical sense since it could help explain two key problems: those of the technological basis of the industry's development, and of the industry's development in two distinct regions. The explanation rests on the alleged migration of Flemish workers during the second half of the sixteenth century to what eventually became the lace areas. The story goes that during the Spanish Inquisition the Duke of Alva's plundering army provoked a number of refugees, lacemakers among them, to settle in Kent and Sussex. A number of these, from Mechlin, subsequently moved on to Cranfield in Bedfordshire, where they settled in that part of the village called "Bourne End," and established a pillow lace industry which then spread into the rest of Bedfordshire and neighbouring areas of Buckinghamshire and Northamptonshire. The same process also took place, meanwhile, in Devon where immigrant lace workers moved into Honiton, and there established the industry in the West Country.³

Though this theory is more attractive than the first, it too has no documentary support. The *Letters of Denization and Acts of Naturalization of the Huguenot Society* for the period 1509-1700 show no lacemakers in the occupational lists,⁴ and no documentary evidence of Flemish lacemakers in these areas has survived. The theory would offer an ideal solution to the problem of how a difficult technological process was implanted into several parts of rural England, but in the absence of primary evidence it cannot explain how lace dealers derived their labour supplies and has no real substance.

Factors such as the availability of raw materials and sources of power, and proximity to market centres, also seem to be inappropriate in explaining the industry's location. Market proximity clearly was unimportant, for Devonshire dealers apparently found no more difficulty in making weekly journeys to London to sell their products than did their counterparts from the Midlands. The industry's implements, parchments, bobbins, and pillows could all be made almost anywhere, and its basic material, linen thread, was imported through London.⁵ Since motive

¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 375-6. ² T. Wright, *The Romance of the Lace Pillow*, Reading, 1919, p. 30. ³ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁴ *Letters of Denization and Acts of Naturalization for Aliens in England*, VIII, 1509/1602, ed. W. Page, 1893; XVIII, 1603/1700, ed. W. A. Shaw, 1911.

⁵ *Commons Journals*, xxxvii, 2 May 1780, p. 814.

power was also of no consideration one might turn to look for the industry's origins, as Dr Thirsk suggests, in the socio-economic environments which produced the requisite labour supplies.

A complete explanation clearly would require intensive local research into each of the villages in which the industry emerged, for the experience of local economies could be highly varied.¹ The growth of the industry on the coast of Devon may, for example, have been attributable to non-agrarian origins. At least two of these coastal villages, Sidmouth and Seaton, were fishing villages,² which by the late sixteenth century had known better times. Notable in "former times" for their pilchard fishing, both by 1630 were "so choked with sand that they have lost almost all the benefits that havens yield."³ Beer and Branscombe were also fishing villages and remained so until well into the nineteenth century, and since fishing is by nature a seasonal, highly unpredictable occupation, the uncertainty may well have been the basis of the industry's growth in these villages, for pillow lacemaking was a most useful source of supplementary income.⁴

Yet the common feature among all rural industrial workers, no matter what the period of time or region in which they were employed, was poverty. Poverty had always created the necessity to supplement family income, and in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries this situation did not change. Indeed, existing aggregative indices suggest that in agricultural areas prices were everywhere rising faster than wages, and that population was rising faster than employment opportunities.⁵ These movements badly affected the growing class of landless or almost landless agricultural labourers which, in the Tudor and early Stuart periods, probably formed about one-quarter to one-third of the entire population of the countryside and a good deal more in the corn-growing districts.⁶ Indeed, in Bedfordshire the proportion was probably already close to 50 per cent by the 1590's, and the number was increasing.⁷ Here, as elsewhere, as common rights were gradually eroded⁸ the labourer's existence came to depend primarily on the money wages earned by himself and his family.⁹ Yet while prices were rising unemployment was becoming a major problem, and in Bedfordshire early in the seventeenth century, as elsewhere, many labourers were wandering around looking for work.¹⁰

¹ See I. Blanchard, 'Population Change, Enclosure and the Early Tudor Economy', *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 2nd ser., XXIII, 1970, pp. 427-40.

² The soil here was of chalk, flint, and sandstone, difficult to cultivate in the days before forage crops and animal manures. See Jones, *loc. cit.*, p. 60.

³ Westcote, *op. cit.*, p. 165.

⁴ R.C. on *Employment of Children in Trades and Manufactures not already regulated by Law*, 1st Report, 1863, XVIII, p. 252.

⁵ Everitt, *loc. cit.*, pp. 397-9; P. Bowden, 'Agricultural Prices from Profits and Rents', in *Agrarian History* . . . , IV, pp. 595-8.

⁶ Everitt, *loc. cit.*, pp. 398-9. The proportion was 35 per cent in Devon in 1524.—W. G. Hoskins, *Devon*, 1966, p. 186.

⁷ This figure was probably true of the Willey Hundred in the north of Bedfordshire by the 1520's.—Godber, *op. cit.*, p. 214.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 278-9.

⁹ The labourers' income had of course many possible constituent parts, of which common rights were among the most important. For details see Everitt, *op. cit.*, pp. 399-425.

¹⁰ Godber, *op. cit.*, p. 214.

The problem of deficiencies in employment opportunity, however, were particularly great in respect of women and children, and especially children, for life was short and children constituted a high proportion of the population.¹ By the end of the sixteenth century the unemployment of women and children was particularly serious, especially in central England "where common field farming was the rule." Here "population expansion unsupported by compensating industrial development was creating an unemployment problem of formidable proportions," and the provision of supplementary sources of family income such as might have come from pillow lacemaking "may well have spelt the difference between existence and starvation."²

It was this expansion of population, and the emergence of a poor class of agricultural labourers and their families in the years from the mid-sixteenth century onwards which created sufficient labour supplies to permit the development of the pillow lace industry in its arable locations. That unemployed women and children were the key sources of its labour supplies was pointed to in the 1660's by Thomas Fuller, who had found many children making lace who "otherwise would be burdensome to the parish."³ His comments were echoed by Daniel Defoe, who spoke of lacemakers emanating "from the most idle, useless and burthensom part of our people, viz. the younger women and female children. These were a real charge upon the diligent laborious poor such as the husbandmen, the farmers and the handicrafts of other trades . . . and were now made able to provide for themselves."⁴

Women and children who could not find farm work seemingly had plenty of time on their hands. The Swede, Kalm, noted later that women who were not employed in rural industry in arable areas often spent their lives engaged entirely in domestic affairs. At Little Gaddesden and the neighbouring district in Hertfordshire, an arable area, he found that "men have here to take thought for the heaviest part of the cares of husbandry. They have to do all the work in the arable fields, meadows, in the wood, the lodge and the lathe. . . In short, all 'outdoor work belongs to the men.'"⁵ Most of the women simply spent all their time "cooking, washing floors, plates and dishes, darning a stocking or sewing a chemise, washing and starching linen clothes." This was "all that they do the whole of God's long days, year out, and year in."⁶

It is by no means clear, however, that these women would always have chosen to engage in agricultural employment even had the opportunity arisen, particularly if there were alternatives. For the pillow lace industry almost certainly did not employ only those women and children who could not find work in the fields. To a degree, employment at the lace pillow was a matter of choice, an element over-

¹ Coleman, *loc. cit.*, pp. 280-2. ² Bowden, *loc. cit.*, pp. 600, 610. ³ Fuller, *op. cit.*

⁴ D. Defoe, *A Plan of the English Commerce*, 1730, reprinted New York, 1967, pp. 288-9. Thomas Westcote spoke similarly. The expansion of population in Devon had made the county "so populous that notwithstanding all their best endeavors in husbandry, yet yields hardly sufficient of bread . . . to feed itself . . . and therefore makes a multitude of the poorer sort chargeable to their neighbours, who are bound to maintain them."

—Westcote, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

⁵ Kalm's *Account of His Visit to England on His Way to America in 1748*, translated by J. Lucas, 1892, p. 333.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 326.

looked in purely socio-economic analyses of the origins of labour supplies. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries contemporaries in the lace districts constantly complained about the inability of local farmers to find women who would work in the fields.¹ Employment at the lace pillow had a certain attraction of its own and did not fall only to those who could not find alternative agricultural occupations. At the end of the seventeenth century the daily wages of pillow lacemakers in Bedfordshire were as high as those of a woman reaper. In 1684 a woman reaper in Bedfordshire was paid 10d a day without food and drink, and a woman haymaker received 6d a day. In 1699, on the other hand, a "good lacemaker" could earn 7s a week, and a child of six could earn 20d.² This was a considerable incentive in itself, but lacemaking was also probably felt to be a more congenial, less exhausting occupation than agriculture, and if the returns were great enough opportunities of employment in the fields could readily be sacrificed as a result. Thomas Westcote may have been thinking of this when in 1630 he spoke of "the meanest sort of people who also will now rather place their children to some of these mechanical trades than to husbandry (esteemed more painful) whereby husbandry labourers are more scarce."³

Lacemaking had the incidental advantages that it could easily be turned to in the evenings. At Little Gaddesden Kalm found the women in the evenings sitting "round the fire without attempting in the very least degree what we called household duties." The men, alternatively, were "killing time" after 6 p.m. at the local inn.⁴ Here again there was time to engage in domestic industrial work if the opportunity had arisen. Lacemaking was undertaken extensively by candlelight in the evening by women and children during the nineteenth century and a number of agricultural labourers are also said to have made lace on returning home from the fields.⁵ Night work probably would not have been sufficient, of itself, to permit the development of a rural industry but clearly it was an additional incentive to the first lacemakers and entrepreneurs.

IV

For all these reasons the pillow lace industry was able to develop in its arable locations. Until the mid-sixteenth century arable agriculture may well have been able to employ most of its population. But the expansion of population during the sixteenth century, and the development of a wage-earning labouring class, eventually produced more mouths than the land alone could feed. Though very few rural industries existed in arable areas in the years between the mid-sixteenth and mid-

¹ See Ivy Pinchbeck, *Women Workers and the Industrial Revolution*, 1968, pp. 78, 235.

² *Trans. Bed. Hist. Rec. Soc.*, xxv, 1957, pp. 136-7. *Commons Journals*, loc. cit.

³ Westcote, *op. cit.*, p. 62. Fuller also spoke of those "lame in their limbs and importance in their arms."—Fuller, *op. cit.*, p. 397.

⁴ Kalm, *op. cit.*, pp. 327, 333. Rush candles were produced by women in rural England from the thirteenth century onwards.—Lord Ernle, *English Farming Past and Present*, 6th edn, 1961, p. 30.

⁵ "Many an older worker can tell of how in order to meet the demand the whole family—men included—had to work into the night."—*Madame*, 15 October 1898. "Boys and men used to make lace years ago when it was a more profitable occupation than working on the farm."—*Bedfordshire Times*, 14 May 1912.

seventeenth centuries, it does not necessarily follow that this was because the socio-economic environment was unable to provide sufficient labour supplies. True, it may well have been the case that an industry such as clothmaking, which required family participation, was incompatible with arable agriculture because of its relatively great demands on labour. But in the case of an industry such as pillow lacemaking, based essentially on women and children, it is far less likely that the socio-economic environment was a serious constraint.

As Dr Thirsk has said, there can be no finality in any explanation of the origins of rural industries. But if, as seems likely, detailed local research reveals that from the mid-sixteenth century onwards there was an increasing degree of unemployment, particularly among women and children, in the arable areas which did not have rural industry, then the absence of rural industry may largely be due to the failure of businessmen to introduce suitable industrial employments from outside. It is doubtful, for example, if an industry such as pillow lacemaking could ever have been developed spontaneously by the labouring population in a village for the production of pillow lace is exacting and complex, sometimes involving the manipulation of many hundreds of bobbins at once. Mrs Palliser illustrated the technological role of the entrepreneur in quoting Lord Garden, a Scottish Lord of Session, who in 1787 had thought of establishing pillow lacemaking in his "humble parish in Scotland" but had eventually been dissuaded by the technological problem, for it was "a complicated art which cannot be transplanted without a passion as strong as mine and a purse much bigger."¹ Indeed the impetus for this industry's development may well have come from London, for London was the chief centre of demand, and lace dealers from both areas travelled there from the industry's earliest days and the influence of fashion must have been a strong factor in the timing of the industry's inception. This approach could also explain why the production of a fashionable commodity such as straw plait was not introduced to the villages of south Bedfordshire until late in the seventeenth century, a time when straw hats were becoming increasingly popular in London.² Had the market opportunity arisen earlier straw plaiting could almost certainly have been developed earlier in the century, for there is no evidence that population and an agricultural labouring class were growing more slowly in this area than in the county's northern districts.³

Although the correlation between pastoralism and rural industry has been well-established for the years roughly between the middle of the fifteenth and the seventeenth centuries, the experience of the pillow lace industry at least shows that, where women and children were concerned, the notion of an incompatibility between the socio-economic environment in arable districts and rural industry does not necessarily hold once the agricultural population had begun to grow rapidly during the sixteenth century. Here, at least, was one type of industry which could grow in open-field arable areas, subject to the willingness of entrepreneurs to exploit current trends in demand and introduce an industry to a population which, almost certainly, was anxious to find suitable means of adding to family income.

¹ Palliser, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

² Iris Brooke, *Dress and Undress*, 1958, p. 78.

³ Godber, *op. cit.*, pp. 272-85.