

The Plight of Leicestershire Framework Knitters

The speaker at the May meeting of the Local History Group was Jess Jenkins with assistance from her husband Robin. Their talk told the tragic story of the final years of a centuries old cottage industry - framework knitting.

The invention of a mechanical machine for knitting dates back to 1589 and is credited to the Rev. William Lee of Nottinghamshire. It was the first stage in the mechanisation of the knitting industry. However his attempts to patent his invention were opposed by Queen Elizabeth 1st who feared the effects that this would have on the hand knitting industries. He developed his machine further so that it would knit stockings from silk as well as wool. He again tried for a patent, this time from James 1st and was again refused. So he moved to France where he remained until his death in 1614.

Lee's brother along with frameworkers returning from France and Huguenots fleeing persecution, developed the industry around Spitalfields in London. A Company of Framework Knitters was formed in London and incorporated by charter in 1657 and again in 1663. This enabled trade to be regulated by master framework knitters, who took on apprentices and trained them for a period of seven years to become journeymen. This led to strict controls on the industry and was not welcomed by all manufacturers. Some began to leave London and it was to the East Midlands that many headed. Over the next century the frame knitters grew in numbers and were able to enjoy a relatively comfortable life with average wages around 14 to 15 shillings a week. By the late 1700s there were an estimated 20,000 frames in England with 90% located in Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire and Leicestershire.

The industry and the way it was organised pre-dated the industrial revolution and capitalism. Framework knitters worked from home using machines which they rented from hosiers who supplied the raw materials and paid for finished hose.

By the late eighteenth century, the industry was in decline and this continued through most of the nineteenth century. The reasons for this are manyfold, the oversupply of framework knitters, falling demand due to change in men's fashions and the move from hose to trousers, the development of bigger and better machines, mechanisation and the factory system all contributed to the problem. The consequence was that framework knitters incomes plummeted such that even 16 hour working days were not enough to provide for a family. Many persevered however as the only alternative was the workhouse.

It was inevitable that there would be a reaction and the 1770s saw numerous instances of attacks both on houses with traditional machines and factories containing newer machines. Later to be called Luddites, it is believed the term derived from the name 'Edward Ludlam' from Anstey who smashed two machines in 1779.

Jess and Robin's talk included numerous examples of the suffering experienced by the framework knitters, the appalling alternative of the workhouse, the jailing and hanging of rioters, the exploitation of children and many other social problems. It was a fascinating look at an industry that was centred on the east midlands, which prospered for over a century but eventually declined and disappeared with appalling human suffering towards its end.

Richard Mollart