

The Lace Making Factory at Southwell

Nottinghamshire was the centre of mass production of machine made lace – the popularity of this cheaper lace, used in clothing and house furnishings, saw a rapid growth of lace factories in the county and ‘Nottingham Lace’ was exported throughout the world in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Machine Lace



The House of Correction on the Burgage Green in Southwell closed in 1880. Five years later, W.G. Gregory opened a lace making factory on the site which in 1895 was taken over by Henry Carey whose family ran the factory up to its closure in the 1950s.

The Carey family

"Henry Carey was a staunch Wesleyan Methodist actively associated with the Broad Street Chapel in Nottingham. His two sons followed him into the family business as did many later generations of the family. Their daughter Henrietta Carey (1845-1920) established the Nottingham Town and County Social Guild in Nottingham in 1875, which ran girls' clubs, a dinner schemes for children, a club for working women, a dining hall, and cheap residential hostels for working women.

Henry Carey had opened his first lace factory in Hyson Green in 1834 and later founded a lace and dye works in Forest Rd. in Bulwell. His decision to expand into Southwell may have been dictated by the high council rates and a shortage of factory sites in the increasingly overcrowded Nottingham.

The Carey's Lace Manufacturing Industry

The conversion of the old House of Correction into a lace factory involved some demolition but the old prison blocks were ideal to house the huge lace making machines. As the factory expanded new factory units were built and at its height Careys ran 57 lace machines and employed hundreds of workers from Southwell.

Plans showing change from House of Correction to Lace Factory



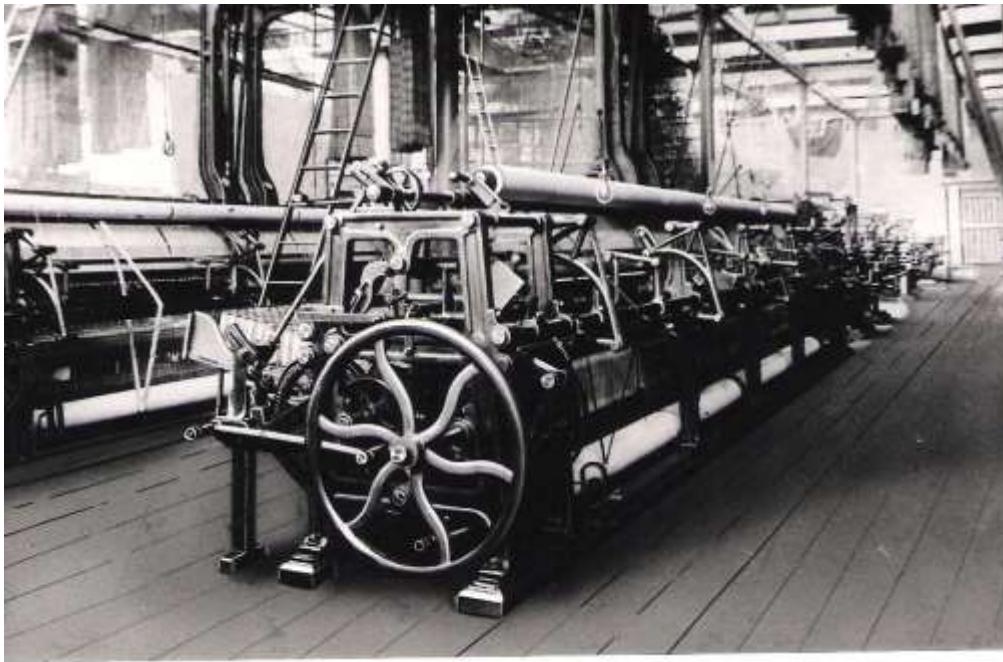
The machines ran eighteen hours a day serviced by two shifts of workers from 5:00am-2:00pm, and 2pm-11pm. They were powered by steam from three furnaces which also heated the factory at a constant 70 degrees to maintain the tension of the cotton thread. Conditions in the large machine rooms were noisy, hot and dusty and workers often emerged covered in black graphite powder used for lubricating the machines. Good lighting was essential to monitor the fine cotton thread and lace design; the early gas lights were a constant fire risk and were later replaced with electric light.

Steps in lace weaving.

Large rolls (cheeses) of cotton thread from the Lancashire mills had to be wound onto spools and bobbins. This required careful attention to the correct tension of thread and was done by hand in the early years by women and apprentices but later by winding machines.

The lace machines were operated exclusively by men, these 'Twisthands' wore bowler hats as types of safety helmets and white aprons to protect their clothes. The machines were capable of producing lace 360 inches wide with 54 threads to the inch with some 3,000 bobbins and spools that frequently needed rethreading. As the spools emptied they were rewound with new thread by the 'slipwinders' – usually apprentice boys. The workers needed to maintain constant vigilance to run a machine at full capacity.

Lace machines



The pattern of lace was controlled by a system of punch cards fed as a continuous roll into the lace machine – the holes in the card controlled the movement of each hook and shuttle in the machine so producing the desired pattern. This system was invented in 1801 by Joseph Jacquard and was one of the earliest computer systems to be applied to a manufacturing process. New designs and patterns were created by skilled craftsmen and many thousands of different patterns were produced.

Rolls of punch cards – Jacquard system of lace production (Wollaton Museum)



Women were employed to finish off the lace, mending any mistakes or holes in the lace and edging the fabric. This involved fine needlework so good lighting was essential – at Carey's the women worked on the top floor of the factory under the skylights.

Women mending lace at Carey's lace factory



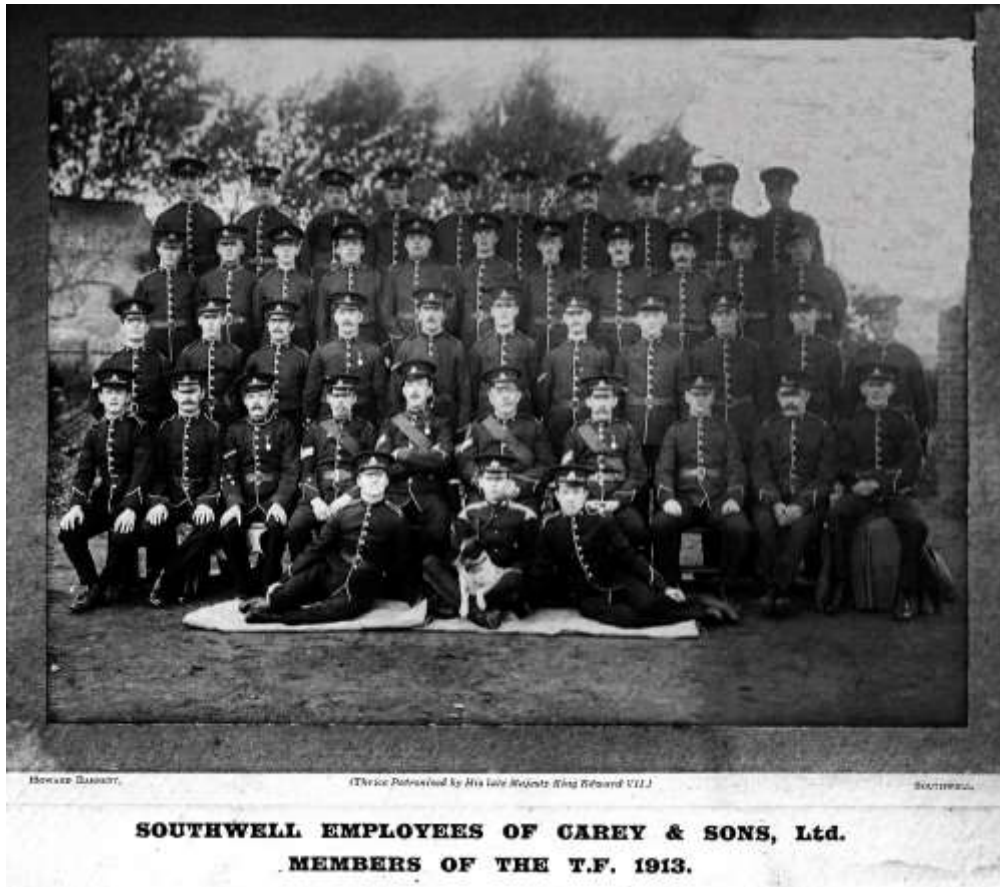
The finished lace was taken from Southwell by horse and cart (later by lorry) to Bulwell for dyeing or bleaching before being sold and distributed to the market.

Apprentices

In the early days lads as young as 12 years would start work by helping the twisthands; later the usual school leaving age was raised to 14 years. Cyril Flowers started working at Careys as a threading boy in 1929 when 14 years old. He was paid 7s 6d per week, and an extra 6d for 3 hours on a Saturday. There was no formal training programme but Mr. Hancock the foreman moved Cyril around the factory to learn all the processes.

Carey's during World Wars and Inter-war Years

Prior to WW1 many of the workers at Cary's formed part of a Territorial Force, and 40 of its employees served in WW1.



The memorial outside the gates to the factory lists the names of 16 men from the factory who had died in World War 1.



Out of four Hopewell brothers only William Hopewell survived. He was a lace threader at Carey's prior to the war. He was awarded the Conspicuous Gallantry Medal for his outstanding bravery during the Zeebrugge mission on the 23 April 1918. His citation reads

‘William Hopewell took the Lewis gun ashore and continued to fire it, and was almost the last man to retire’. He survived the war and returned to work at Carey's factory. The lace industry suffered a downturn during WW1 and struggled in the Great Depression of the late 1920's and 30's but Careys managed to survive.

In WW2 the factory was diverted to war work especially the production of mosquito nets, camouflage fabric and protective window coverings. For the first time women were trained as twisthands and operated the lace machines but returned to mending when the men returned after the war.

The Decline and Closure of Carey's

After WW2 demand for lace had fallen. Carey's at Southwell struggled on with fewer machines functioning, and filling any orders that came in. Curtain lace was being manufactured in Scotland, and in other parts of the world. In December 1956 Cary's closed down. Cyril Flowers was the last man to be paid off and given £25 extra and a fortnights pay. Many machines were scrapped and others were exported to Greece.

The closure of Carey's badly affected other businesses in the town especially the Pork Butchers where many of the girls bought food.

The site was eventually taken over in the 1950s by the present occupants - Rainbows Freight Company.

Sources

This article is based on research by Christine Raithby and Rob Smith.

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