Lace Schools in Exmouth

Introduction

Lace schools were common in Exmouth in the nineteenth century and probably existed throughout the period of the Honiton lace industry. E.R. Delderfield, an Exmouth historian, maintains that it was one of the main centres for Honiton lace work, going so far as to claim that: 'almost all women and girls of the humbler class learned lace making'.[1] He goes on to say that lace schools for young girls were quite an institution around 1860. One such establishment, located in a small cottage in Little Bicton Place, was run by a middle aged spinster named Mary Ann Long, known for her harsh treatment of pupils.

In contrast, H.J.Yallop has produced a very comprehensive history of the industry.[2] Its main problem lies in the lack of full bibliographical details in references, meaning that no numbered references within the text are complete. However, there is a list of complete references in the bibliography. This caused particular problems when quoting from Parliamentary Papers, which was the case with references to the Children's Employment Commission, from which he quotes extensively. The evidence gathered by this body in 1841 demonstrated the fact that there were lace schools in all the lacemaking towns and villages in East Devon.

This study will focus mainly on lace schools within Exmouth, but will be set within the context of the wider East Devon area where appropriate. None-the- less, it must be recognised that the lace schools were in fact workshops which taught basic reading alongside the perceived important task of learning the trade. Therefore some background material about the trade itself will also be necessary.

The concept that lace schools were in fact workshops is borne out by the fact that there is no specific mention of lace schools in official returns. The return to the Diocese of Exeter from the Bishop of Exeter in preparation for his visitation has no details of such schools. [3] As we will see later, this was despite the fact that the Vicar, Richard Prat, was highly critical of such establishments in other earlier official reports. Further, the 1833 Education Enquiry Abstract of answers for the parishes of Littleham and Withycombe Rawleigh do not mention lace schools specifically. [4]

Number of lacemakers in East Devon

The numbers of lacemakers cannot be equated with the number of children receiving any form of education in lace schools. These were not boarding establishments, unlike some private schools; the Census returns are based on people staying in a property on a specific given date. The Census can only provide a basic indication of the number of people employed in the lace industry. There is no distinction between lace manufacturers and lace workers.

[1] Eric Delderfield, *Exmouth Milestones: a History* (Exmouth: Raleigh Press, 1948), p.53.
[2] H.J.Yallop, 'The History of the Honiton Lace Industry', (doctoral thesis, University of Exeter, 1987); published as: *The History of the Honiton Lace Industry* (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 1992)
[3] Diocese of Exeter, *Replies to Queries, 1821,* edited by Michael Cook (Cornwall Record Society).
[4] Parliamentary Papers, *Education Enquiry Abstract of Answers and Returns, 1833.*

The details of lace manufacturers will be provided in a separate section, based on information culled from directories in the 1840s and 1850s.

An analysis of the Census returns between 1841 and 1871, featured in the table below, is based on the format and statistics used by Yallop, covering the whole of East Devon.[5] The table demonstrates clearly the high number of lace workers residing in Exmouth. If the figures for the parishes of Littleham and Withycombe Raleigh are combined, the figures are even higher.

Census

Parish	***1841***	***1851***	***1861***	***1871***
Bicton	35	24	26	11
East Budleigh	61	132	213	234
Littleham	97	422	307	254
Lympstone	25	58	60	42
Newton Poppleford	8	89	54	83
Otterton	97	223	230	302
Sidbury	141	362	244	220
Sidmouth	47	179	146	172
Withycombe Raleigh	21	140	129	175
Woodbury	16	313	249	256
Total	**548**	**1942**	**1658**	**1749**

If we look closely at the returns for Fore Street, a centre for lacemaking, it is possible to identify 38 lace workers in 1851, all were women. Further analysis reveals that the women were spread mainly between the ages of 12 and 60, with a small number being younger. The youngest appeared to be Sarah Horn, aged seven. She lived with her father, a mason, her mother and older sister. At the other end of the age scale was Jane Dewdney aged 80, a pauper, and former lace worker. In the 1861 Census there appears to be some 45 lace workers residing in Fore Street, confirming its position as a centre for the trade in the town. Again, they are all women and spread across the age range. Likewise, children are part of their number. In 1861, the youngest appears to be eight year old Isabella Franks who lived with her widowed mother and 14 year old sister, Emma. From this snapshot of one street it is possible to see a glimpse of the potential problems with school attendance and work in the lace trade.

Lace Manufacturers

The scale of the industry can be judged by the fact that *White's Devon,* in its section relating to Exmouth lists eight lace makers and dealers, residing mainly in the Parade and the Strand. Of those listed there are three men, namely: William Elliott, Edward Moore and George

[5] H.J.Yallop, 'The History of the Honiton Lace Industry', p.245.

Randle. [6] It would appear from these details that to a certain extent it was the men who were engaged in lace manufacture. *Billing's Directory* of 1857, under the heading of Lace Manufacturers lists ten individuals in the trade. Again, there are three men namely: Francis Drake, William Elliott and George Searle.[7] From the sources consulted it is difficult to establish accurately how many women were involved in lace manufacture, in contrast with lacemaking. There is some limited evidence that manufacturers made significant amounts of money from the trade, sometimes advertising in a local newspaper if the stock was sufficiently large. On the death of Isaac Beer in 1863, for example, we read 'a quantity of Honiton lace and…sprigs [was] to be sold by private contract.'[8]

Learning the Craft

It would seem that many lacemakers learnt their craft at home under the guidance of mother, some other relative or possibly a lace manufacturer. However, there is little documentary to this effect. In 1841 the Children's Employment Commissioner recorded how two weeks previously Mary Ann Driver of Beer had begun to work with her aunt; Lucy Ball of Lympstone, aged 11 had begun to make lace some years previously with her mother. Later in 1863 the Children's Employment Commissioner recorded that Harriet Perry of Sidbury learnt lacemaking with her mother when she was 10 years old. There is little evidence of any formal learning by apprenticeship.

Lace Schools

Yallop cites the earliest definite reference to a lace school in the evidence of Elizabeth Chalice, taken by the Children's Employment Commissioner in 1841. Chalice remembered lace schools in Lympstone some 47 years previously, which must have been around 1794. As far as the Exmouth is concerned lace schools were recorded in 1818 at both Otterton and Littleham', where the girls described as chiefly lace makers were taught to read.

In relation to Exmouth, the Digest of Parochial Returns on the Education of the Poor has revealed more detailed evidence about lacemaking in the town.[9] The Vicar of Littleham-cum-Exmouth, Richard Prat, who served the parish between 1813 until his death in 1840 stated that there were two schools for lacemaking and reading containing 66 children and 24 others containing a further 327 children, but added that none of these children had more than four hours tuition in reading and many only one. These figures have been quoted in standard secondary sources about the history of Exmouth, [10] but without citing specific references. Any charges for tuition seemed to vary according to a child's aptitude for learning the craft. The charge for the first month was 5 shillings and from then 3d per week. Those well-suited

[6] William White, *White's Devon…1850 (*reprinted, New York: Augustus M.Kelley, 1968).
[7] M. Billings, *Directory and Gazetteer of the County of Devon…, 1857* (Birmingham: H.Billings, Steam Press Offices, 1857).
[8] *Trewman's Exeter Flying Post*, 21 October 1863.
[9] *Digest of Parochial Returns Made to the Select Committee Appointed to Enquire into the Education of the Poor*, 1819.
[10] Robin Bush, *The Book of Exmouth: Portrait of a Resort* (Buckingham: Barracuda Books, 1978), p.75.

to lacemaking could earn one shilling per day; those learning to read in this category only paid 2d.

Prat also had a number of negative comments to make in relation to lacemaking and its effect on school attendance. He considered that the lacemaking was '…a great obstacle to the attendance of the female children at the National school. and that '…the lace schools are more productive of evil than good, as they incapacitate the girls when grown up from attending to their domestic occupations.' Despite these criticisms Prat remarked that the poor of the town were not without sufficient means and were desirous of educating their children. He stated: 'an endeavour is going to be made to establish a parochial evening school in order to offer the girls an opportunity of being instructed'.

There is also evidence that some lace schools were more formalised. Mary Ann Rogers stated that she was the mistress of the principal lace school in Sidmouth. In her school for the beginners she was either paid by the week or received the value of their work. When out of what was described as apprenticeship time the pupils worked for an employer. In this situation, the mistress continued to give some general oversight and taught the girls to read in the evening; for this task she was paid by the parents. Yallop stated that, 'descriptions given by other lace school mistresses are essentially similar'.[11]

Information about the standard of teaching or any curriculum followed is difficult to find. However, the Commissioner apparently tested a number of girls on their ability to read and write. He found that the younger girls, from about the age of seven could read letters and short words. The older girls from about the age of 14 could read the Bible and, in one case an easy book; one of 15 could write and cypher. Otherwise, none had mastered anything beyond reading. Therefore, one can reasonably assert that the general standard of education received at the lace schools was very limited.

In 1863 the Children's Employment Commissioner obtained further information on lace schools. He visited some 16 schools, where pupil numbers ranged from two to 19, although Elizabeth Ping of Sidbury stated that she used to have 35 pupils. According to the evidence presented most pupils started at the schools around six or seven years of age and remained until about 14; in some cases upper age limits of 18 were recorded. Yallop remarked that this entry age was confirmed by the Commissioner on the Employment of Children in Agriculture in 1867 when he stated that the girls of the area were: 'taken away from day school at 7 or 8 years of age to be sent to the lace school'. [12]

The conflict between lacemaking and attendance at school documented by Richard Prat in 1818 clearly continued. This state of affairs is revealed in the reports of the Committee of the Council for Education, quoted by Yallop. In connection with the Exmouth parish of Withycombe Raleigh it was stated that in 1847, 'the children are very irregular in attendance, and leave school very early to work at lace making'. However, in 1849 there was 'a female daily to teach lacemaking to the girls'. The conflict between education and lacemaking must

[11] Yallop, 'The History of the Honiton Lace Industry', P.209.
[12] Yallop, 'The History of the Honiton Lace Industry', P.210.

have extended across East Devon. In nearby Woodbury during 1853 it was stated that lacemaking caused the girls to attend school very irregularly. In Honiton the craft even prevented the formation of a girls' school in 1846. However, this statement would need to be corroborated from other sources in order to test its validity. None-the-less one can argue that the lace schools were providing some form of rudimentary education.

Working Environment

The working environment for lace workers was often harsh. Government Inspectors revealed workers crowding together in small rooms in unhygienic conditions. Night-time illumination was by candlelight. Working hours were often long, with small children required to work 4-6 hours a day. In some cases the working day could be as long as 10-12 hours. In extreme cases pressure of work could lead to all night working.

The most comprehensive picture of the overall working environment for lace workers appears in the Second Report of the Children's Employment Commission, published in 1843. This particular report considered conditions in a number of trades and manufactures, including lacemaking. Dr Leonard Stewart investigated the trade of pillow lace in Honiton, Exmouth, Lympstone, Beer, Newton Poppleford and Sidmouth, under a number of prescribed headings.[13] The report confirms the long hours of work with little time allowed for rest. There were also complaints of clouts on the head. In terms of moral care, the inspector noted that the early employment of children interfered with the ways in which they could be trained to fulfil their duties in learning to perform as future wives and mothers. The fact that children could be ill-treated in lace schools is confirmed by a case at Woodbury Petty Sessions in 1863. Mary Ann Bonstone, mistress of a lace school in Exmouth was charged with assaulting and beating Mary Pyne, one of her pupils.[14] On this occasion the case was dismissed, but it is an indication of poor treatment of children within lace schools.

The End of Lace Schools

The Education Act of 1870 signalled the death knoll for many lace schools. However, Hoskins' assertion that it killed most of these schools [15] is not borne out by the situation in East Devon. However, attendance continued to be severely affected by girls leaving to undertake lace making. This cottage industry still employed many of the women and girls in Exmouth; the earnings supplemented many poor families' meagre incomes.

The following entries from the *Girls' School Log Book* for the National school in Exmouth during the 1870s illustrate the reality on the ground.[16]

[13] Children's Employment Commission. *Second Report of the Commissioners: Trades and Manufactures*. (London: Parliamentary Papers, 1843).
[14] *Trewman's Exeter Flying Post*, 25 November 1863.
[15] W.G Hoskins, Devon (rev. edn. Chichester: Phillemore, 2003), 141.

[16] Girls' School Log Book, 1872-1936.

25 March 1872 '…Annie Kempe, a most promising girl has left school to learn lace making. I urged her parents to allow her to remain at school during the year, but they would not although they acknowledged she was making great progress. The girl is 10 years old'.

5-9 August 1872 'A little girl (McFarlan), six years old has left school to go lace making. Her mother will not allow her to attend even half day.'

As the entry above seems to indicate, in some cases the parents must have negotiated with the school to allow their daughters to attend on a half-time basis.

16 September 1872 'Three girls, A.Norris, E.Pillifent and M.J.Greenawaygone to learn the lace making-the two former half days, the latter whole days…'

In 1873 Mrs Bannister remarked that lace making in Exmouth was so prosperous that no girl over seven years of age comes for admission. She appears genuinely concerned about the adverse effect this lack of schooling was having on the girls themselves.

3 November 1873 'There are many bright and promising children in this class, but two of them have told me with great glee, they are going to learn lace making next summer'.

Yallop too alludes to the survival of lace schools into the 1870s. He cites evidence of small workshops, where children could be employed provided that pupils had obtained a certificate from the local school that they had attended for at least 10 hours a week. This situation did not always run smoothly as his evidence from as East Budleigh girls' school has shown. Yallop states that on 24 May 1873 Miss Vanstone, the mistress wrote that: 'In consequence of a report having been made to HM Inspector of Schools the Rev WW Howard that several children did not attend school for 10 hours in a week, but were inconstant attendance at lace schools, Mr Buller, Sub-Inspector of Workshops visited several of the schools…and cautioned the mistresses and parents that they would be prosecuted'.[17]

Conclusion

From the early nineteenth century the lace schools in East Devon provided some form of rudimentary education for the children of the poor. Evidence from the 1851 Census has shown that children as young as seven were involved in lacemaking. Sarah Horn whose family lived in Fore Street, Exmouth was typical. As the provision of formal education progressed lacemaking was often in conflict with encouraging pupils to attend school regularly. Compulsory elementary education for children between the ages of 5 and 13 from 1870 onwards did in fact see the end of lace schools. However, it must be recognised that the lacemaking industry required people to learn the craft and the provision of any form of education was secondary to the needs of the manufacturers. The lacemaking trade did indeed supplement the income of many poor families, particularly in the mid years of the nineteenth century, when the trade has at its height.

[17] Yallop, 'The History of the Honiton Lace Industry'.