

THE CRENDON NEEDLEMAKERS

JOYCE DONALD

The village of Long Crendon is unique in having had a well developed needle industry. Up to the middle of the 16th century all English needles were made of iron wire, sometimes with merely a loop for the eye, and their manufacture was considered to be part of the blacksmith's craft. But in Europe, needles were being made of steel wire and were imported in vast quantities. The sail needles used by the navy came from Milan,¹ and Queen Elizabeth used to buy needles from her silkwoman, Alice Montague, paying 2/- a hundred for what were then known as "Spanish needles"². Many foreign merchants settled in London, such as Andrew Kemp, born in Flanders, who, "hath been in England these XVI years, coming and going and doth lyve by bringing of lists and threads of broad cloth and by selling needles"³.

Owing to religious persecution in Europe, there was a great influx of aliens into this country who brought with them the vital knowledge and secrets of many trades. Among these immigrants were fifteen known needlemakers. John Stowe, a tailor, born 1525, wrote "needles were first made in England by a Moor in Cheapside during Mary's reign, and again by Elias Kraus a German in 1569"⁴. The Moor has never been identified but there was an Elias Creuse who came to England at that time with his two sons and two journey-men servants.⁵ He applied to join the Blacksmith's Company along with five other aliens, but their entry was refused.⁶ He then went across the Thames to Southwark to escape the jurisdiction of the Company, but even there they were compelled to take English apprentices to teach them the art and mystery of the trade.

The origin of Long Crendon needlemaking has always been beset by myths and fantasies. There was the proverbial wandering monk, and endless variations on the theme of Christopher Greening who is supposed to have brought the industry to the village in 1560. Christopher is reported to have married the daughter of an Indian who taught him the trade and he is even stated to have been the Moor of Cheapside. But the real Christopher Greening was an ordinary yeoman farmer, who was probably the son of a Christopher Greening, churchwarden of Tetsworth.⁷ He came to the village in 1544 and obtained a copyhold (now 121 Bicester Road) and also became a tenant of part of the demesne farm. But with his second son John and grandson Christopher, born 1587, we are on firmer ground. In the parish register, against the birth of the latter, are written these words "This man first in England brought out needlemaking". The wording is ambiguous, but the father, John, must definitely have been in some profitable trade. According to the customs of the

manor, the eldest son alone inherited, and economic circumstances forced most of the younger sons to leave the village. John however had a family of six sons, five of whom were able to remain. Early 17th century economics were such that large families could not be absorbed into a community, except by industry. John was literate and in his will he left to his son James "the little box that I use to put in my writings".⁸

There is however, one contemporary reference. In the court roll of 1618, appears the following

"To this court comes John Tompson and offers here in court twenty eight needles (english 28 needles) for the rent of one tenement one orchard one close and two roods of the land called Barnes which are held of the Dean and Canons of the College of Windsor by the rent of one needle annually payable for the premises, and he offers the rent for 28 years; and the lord accepts the aforesaid needles".⁹

Little is known of John Tompson; he was born in 1563 and married in 1586, early marriage in the 16th century usually being a sign of affluence. His father, a "Mr" Henry Tompson, came to the village in 1560 and was a personal friend of Lord Williams of Thame, leading the latter's funeral procession in 1558.¹⁰ On his death, in 1582, he left the house and land to his wife and the use of said premises "to his younger son John"¹¹. His wife Alice, probably an alien, died in 1605, leaving an interesting will which included a great dower chest and six silk cushions, an unusual item for the wife of an English yeoman.¹²

Towards the end of the century, unemployment was high in the industry and the pinners and needlemakers petitioned the Queen to prohibit all imports of these small wares.

"and for that there are forty thousand pounds worth of pins and needles yearly brought into this realm which are nothing so good or so well wrought as those which are made and wrought in this realm. The restraint of bringing them in will be the means of setting thousands of our poor on work."

Many alien workmen had brought machines, such as small looms for weaving ribbons, and the needlemakers had imported a machine, probably a grindstone for pointing. In 1623, the London needlemakers complained to the Privy Council "of a dangerous engine which besides being the first devised for the working of such deceitful ware, was dangerous to the lives and bodies of the workmen".¹⁴ The Lord Mayor and Aldermen were brought into the investigation, but they complained that when they had sent for the workmen "they being aliens, not freemen, had refused to come"¹⁵. The Privy Council rejoined by complaining "that the workmen had withdrawn themselves into unknown places, or else utterly refused to make answer"¹⁶. The outcome was that the engine was prohibited and powers of search given to all local J.Ps. It is a fascinating thought that this "dangerous engine" may well have been tucked away in one of John Tompson's barns.

It is probable that the payment of the twenty eight needles was a back payment of the quit rent, as there is no record of its having been paid for some years. This would fix the start of the industry at about 1590. At this period there were several families in the village with foreign names, such as John

Grout, Thomas Swabey, James Battie (many refugees of that name had come in from the low countries) and Richard Doliverer. From 1611-1632 the All Souls portion of the manor had been let to a George Benson, third son of a Richard Benson from Thame. He was a merchant tailor from London and in 1611, along with other merchants was granted a monopoly of trade with France. He was also an "assistant" in a company called "The Kings Merchants of the New Trade".¹⁷ He may well have been the entrepreneur of the industry, for a London link was essential. It is significant that in his will in 1646, he left money to "ten poor handicraft men the better to enable them to set up their own trades".¹⁸ The Dormer family who have often been given the credit of bringing the trade to the village, had become country gentlemen after Sir Michael's death in 1545, and would have been unlikely to introduce a cottage craft.

In 1664, the needlemakers, who had been divided amongst many city companies, obtained their final charter.¹⁹ This showed the strictest type of guild organisation. The right of search was given to the hierarchy, no woman could be employed except a master's widow, but the most disliked regulation was the restriction on apprenticeship. Only one boy was allowed, and for that privilege it was necessary for the master to wait for three years after having become a freeman. These points are most important in considering the evolution of the Crendon and Midland industries.

After the death of Christopher Greening in 1664, the trade may have been in decline, for in 1672, a John Warwick, son of Lawrence Warwick husbandman of Long Crendon, went up to London and became apprenticed to a John Jones, freeman of the Needlemakers Company.²⁰ He became free in 1681, and returned to the village with a Joseph Pell, also a needlemaker. Their names are next to each other in a list of inhabitants in 1684. They do not figure again on the books of the Needlemakers Company, so it can be concluded that they settled permanently in Crendon, thus evading the restrictions imposed on their London competitors.

The time was now ripe for the expansion of the village; the manorial courts had lost their bite and many of the copyholders had been enfranchised. There was now land for sale, and cottages began to be built in gardens and corners of orchards. The manorial laws against the taking in of "inmates" and the subdividing of tenements had been forgotten. With cottages available there was a trend towards earlier marriage, and it was essential that there should be some craft other than agriculture to support the increasing population.

The Turner family, blacksmiths, who had been in the village since 1560, now turned over to needles. The Quanton churchwardens apprenticed two boys to the John Turners, senior and junior, in 1724 and 1727.²¹ Many new names appeared as needlemakers such as Gregory, Friday, Norman, Scott and Wheatley. John Warwick rented a copyhold (33 & 35 Bicester Road) which became the centre of needlemaking.²² It was later rented by Giles Scott. The workers formed a close community, looked down upon by the rest of the village. There was much intermarriage, in many cases an apprentice marrying his master's daughter. In 1736 Henry Young, a Crendon man, wrote

"Needles were made by some of the inhabitants. The living rooms of the workers,

were in most cases their workshop, at times, some of the needlemakers made themselves merry at the alehouse. Sometimes their unseemly behaviour was troublesome and caused disquietude to their peaceful neighbours, so much so that the parish constable was obliged to take the ringleaders into charge. He then made their feet secure in the stocks, where they were jeered at by their boon companions”.

This reputation was to continue well into the 19th century. Cases of causing an affray were brought before the Quarter Sessions. Fights were frequent and the village obtained the name of “long Babylon”.²³ Most of the workers lived in the High Street, and their cottages can be distinguished by their larger windows and the capacious needle cupboards by the fireplace. Rust was the great enemy of the worker, and this problem was not helped by earth floors and wicket walls. The most interesting of these cupboards is at 98 High Street. It is dated 1731 and the initials T.G. stand for Thomas Gregory, a well known needle worker.

Both the Shrimpton and the Harris families came into the trade about 1735. A John Shrimpton, great-grandson of Richard, who came to the village in 1620, is the first known worker. In the middle of the century he sold needles to a Gilbert Mackenzie of Whitechapel who had invented a system of “bluing” the eyes of needles which gave a smoother surface. For many years Whitechapel needles were famous and the name continued as a trade mark until the middle of the 19th century.²⁴ John had four sons, who were all in the trade, two of them, William and Thomas, produced fifteen sons between them—twelve becoming needlemakers. They had a good business sense, buying the needles and giving money and wire in return. A William Shrimpton, who wrote a short history of the trade, mentioned

“When business necessitated a journey to London, the nearest point to meet the coach for the great city, was the village of Tetsworth, six miles distant from Crendon. At that time about twenty coaches left Oxford daily for London. When the autumn and winter journeys were undertaken, it was customary for some of the manufacturers on the return journey to hire a stalwort person to accompany them. These hired men as a rule accompanied the driver of the coach—their weapons consisted of a blunderboss and cutlas”.²⁵

There was an attempt to start the industry in Haddenham. Thomas Gregory left the village and settled in a house at the bottom of Flint Street.²⁶ The move was not a success, for in 1798, his partner, a Thomas Hide, was returned to Crendon under the Settlement Act.²⁷ When the house was repaired in the 19th century many thousands of needles were found under the floorboards.

The Posse Comitatus taken in 1798, gives the names of twenty one needlemakers of whom eleven were Shrimptons. This roll-call only applied to men of military age. By this period the work was more organised and instead of a needlemaker producing the entire needle, he now began to concentrate on only one aspect of the trade. In the parish registers after a worker’s name, is sometimes the word “hole” which meant that he concentrated on the process of eyeing. In some cottages there are cupboards in the wall in which there was another entrance from an adjoining cottage. These were used for passing the needles for another process. The cupboard between 7 and 9 High Street is a good example.

Production methods had not changed for two hundred years. It was still a cottage craft, necessitating the simplest of tools and capable of being performed anywhere. The soft, but durable steel wire was imported, but in 1671, a patent was granted to Prince Rupert and the wire may have been made in England. Later, it is known to have come from the Birmingham and Sheffield districts.²⁸ If the wire was of the wrong thickness, it was heated over charcoal and put through a hot drawing-iron or plate. Then it was cut into pieces of equal length, which were held in the hand and cut with shears into smaller pieces of the exact length of a needle. A handful of these was taken up and held fan-wise on the face of an anvil, so that they could all be flattened with a hammer at one end. This made a place for the eye, and what was known as the "first eyeing" was carried out by hammering a punch half-way through; the eye was completed on a leaden block by removing the remaining piece of steel with another punch. Any roughness remaining in it was removed by cutting a small groove in the flat part of the wire on both sides of the needle. This was done with a guttering iron with a very fine file-edge, and the process recessed the eye to receive the thread. The head of the needle was now rounded with a file and the point formed with the same tool.

Up to this stage, the process was known as "soft work", but the needles had to be hardened, and for this purpose they were put on a specially shaped iron plate, and made red hot over a charcoal fire, and at once let fall into a basin of cold water to temper the steel and take off its brittleness. This treatment often distorted the needles and they had to be placed on an anvil and straightened with a hammer. If iron wire had been used, the needles were packed with bone dust into cast iron pots and subjected to heat in an open fire until they were converted into steel, after which they were hardened and tempered. The next process was scouring—handfuls of needles were placed in heaps on a piece of buckram and sprinkled with the sharp sand from the river Thame. This was mixed with soft soap, and the whole package made into a roll and well tied at each end like an old bag purse. In the 18th century this roll was placed under the feet of the workers and rolled backwards and forwards while they completed another process, or else small children would be given a half-penny to kick the bags up and down the village street. At a later date, they were put on a polishing table with a thick board on top into which pegs were driven to form handles. The needles were rubbed against each other which produced a shiny surface. They were then well washed, and put in a box with bran which was suspended from the ceiling until the needles were dry. Afterwards they were pointed, the worker doing from 50 to 100 needles at a time at an emery wheel—a dangerous operation that produced asthma and lung trouble and shortened the life of the worker. They were then packeted into small pieces of a special damp proof blue or purple paper.²⁹ Crendon was the traditional supplier of the London market and some idea of wholesale prices in 1807 can be got from the accounts of John English of Feckenham, who supplied some London firms with

Packing needles 4/6 a gross

Sail needles large maline 7/- a gross Double Boatrope 5/-

Sewing needles Best 7/- a thousand, Common needles 2/6 a thousand³⁰

The Napoleonic period brought prosperity to Crendon; the workers had already turned over to the heavier types of needles owing to competition from the Redditch area. They were supplying ships chandlers all over England with their sail needles, they made heavy needles for tent making, and Emanuel Shrimpton started making curved surgical needles. We also made gloving needles for the Woodstock trade. Redditch at this time was still relying mainly on the sale of sewing needles.

But the migration to the north was already starting—the north had more to offer, water power, cheap coal and an interest in new machines. There was a lack of capital in Crendon; William Shrimpton wrote

“The truck system prevailed to a great extent, employers being obliged to give their workpeople in place of money, written orders for provisions and clothing upon some of the shopkeepers of Crendon and Thame, the accounts being balanced when the London accounts were paid”.³¹

Soloman Shrimpton was one of the first to leave; in 1807 he went to Studley, founding the firm of Shrimpton and Hooper. In 1814, Peter and William went to Redditch and started a business that dealt with sail, netting and packing needles which is still functioning as Alfred Shrimpton and Son of Towyn, in North Wales.³² Samuel went to Alcester in the 1820s and started making sail needles. Many of these were sold in France and Samuel would make a twice yearly journey with two well filled bags of his wares. In 1830, Emanuel left the village and started a factory for surgical needles at Redditch, which afterwards became Shrimpton and Fletcher; many others were leaving and the Crendon trade was on the decline. In 1830, Piggot’s Directory gave the names of only ten manufacturers, of whom nine were Shrimptons. They were now supplying bodkins and crochet hooks. The 1841 Census gives the names of 32 male workers (twelve only were under the age of thirty). Three women were employed, but with the exception of packeting, it was not considered by the Crendon workers to be a suitable trade for their womenfolk. The industry was dying.

Since the beginning of the century, Redditch was becoming mechanised. The punch was used instead of the cumbersome method of making the eyes by hand. The main improvement was in the scouring of the needles. This was done in the water mills which gave a much brighter finish and saved labour.³³ In Crendon, there was now a horse mill kept in the barn behind the present Dodwell’s stores. It was owned by Richard Shrimpton who did all the scouring of the village needles. But it was a cumbersome process and a small boy was required to drive the reluctant horse. Sometime in the 1830s a post windmill was erected along the Chilton Road on land owned by John Kirby Shrimpton.³⁴ It was hoped this mill could be used for scouring, but it was not a success owing to lack of wind. By this time Redditch had turned over to steam power; on August 24th 1845, the Aylesbury News announced to its Crendon readers

“Within the last few weeks, machinery has been set up here which proves to be of essential service, and it is hoped that the spirited individuals who have introduced it will be recompensed for their outlay, which is considerable”.

Its owner was a John Harris, born in Thame, but probably apprenticed in

Redditch.³⁵ In 1844, together with his three sons, he leased a cottage (now Harroel) which had been occupied by a John Shrimpton who had just migrated to Redditch. It was thatched, built of wickert, with a small thatched hovel on the south side which housed the new engine. This was proudly proclaimed by its owner as "Harris & Sons Albion Needle Works". I have been given a sample book by John's great-grand-daughter which consisted entirely of the heavier types such as sail, netting, stay, mattress, knife, and curved collar needles. Two more engines were introduced in 1848, Edward Shrimpton and his son Jonas had one in their small factory down Arnott's Yard, and Emanuel and his son Andrew owned the other at 76 High Street, where it was installed in the brick shed at the back of the house.

During this period, London manufacturers, such as Chambers of King William Street had been offering to invest money, but in December 1848, Kirby Beard, pinmakers of Gloucester took a 24 years lease of a house and barn on the Chilton Road.³⁶ They had also been needle merchants at 46 Cannon Street, London, buying the bulk of their needles from Emanuel Shrimpton. These they had packeted with the slogan "ne plus ultra". They became needle-makers of Queen Adelaide and afterwards to Queen Victoria.³⁷ This was their first venture in manufacturing and as the Crendon industry was in a state of decay, they imported nine workmen from the Redditch area to teach the improved modern methods.³⁸ Three of the men were married and their wives worked in the factory. They mostly lodged in the row of cottages opposite the factory, known as Mill Terrace.

The 1851 Census showed an increase in the trade. It now consisted of 47 men, 9 women, 22 boys, and 24 girls. For the first time factory methods enabled women and children to be employed. The rules regarding apprenticeship had gone together with any chance of the children learning a proper trade. Emanuel Shrimpton's son Andrew moved into the factory as manager, but he was not a success and his place was taken after a few months by a Charles Baylis from Redditch. A 8 h.p. steam engine was introduced and modern machines installed. The production methods now were—

"wire of the thickness required for the various sizes of needles was cut into lengths for two needles, the cutting being done by heavy and broad bladed shears—the wires were then heated and rubbed straight by means of tools known as files. They were then pointed at both ends, then the eye fashioned under a stamp, then eyed under the press, filed for removing the burr of waste metal, beaten out by the stamp, hardened and tempered, then scoured, in some cases the eyes gilded for the sake of appearance".³⁹

Sometimes the eye of the needle was drilled to prevent the cutting or fraying of the thread.

The children employed ranged in age from eight to seventeen. The girls were "paperers" and spent their long day in sorting the needles into packets. They were also "spitters". This name was given to those who passed a fine wire through the eyes of the needle. This was done before the separation of the needles at their heads, and the wires remained threaded throughout this process.⁴⁰ The boys were often "planners" or "raggers", for it was the children's duty, with bits of rag tied round their fingers to bring all the needles into line



PLATE 1 (a). Church End, Long Crendon.

THE EARLIEST AND THE LATEST POINTING MACHINERY USED IN
THE NEEDLE MANUFACTURE.

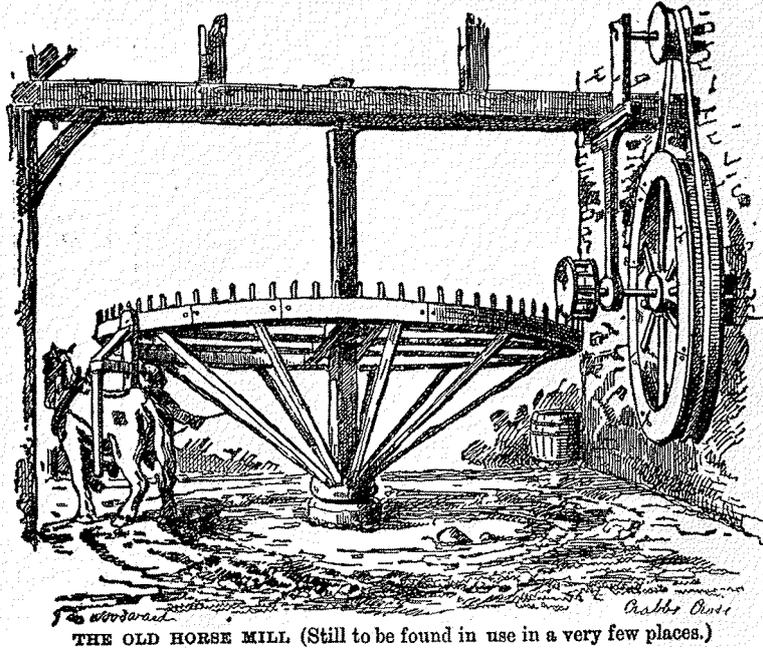
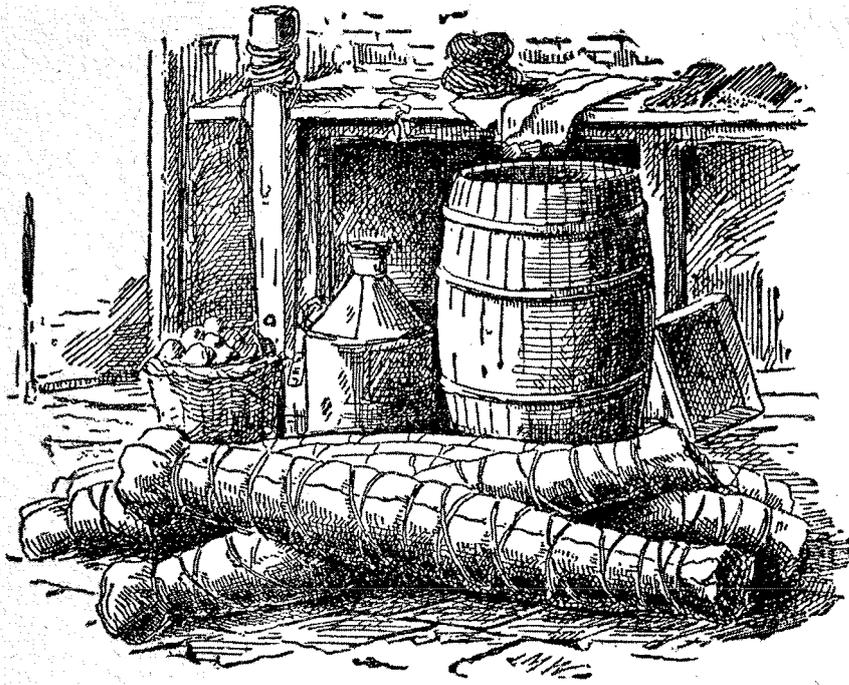
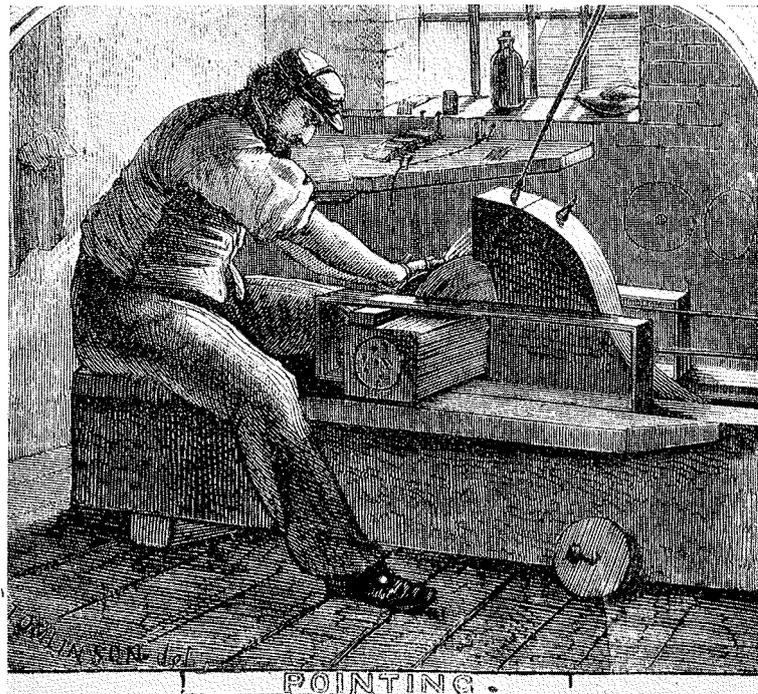


PLATE 1 (b). The old Horse Mill.



ROLLS READY FOR SCOURING, &C., &C.

PLATE II (a). Rolls ready for scouring.



POINTING.

PLATE II (b). Pointing.



PLATE III (a). Hardening.

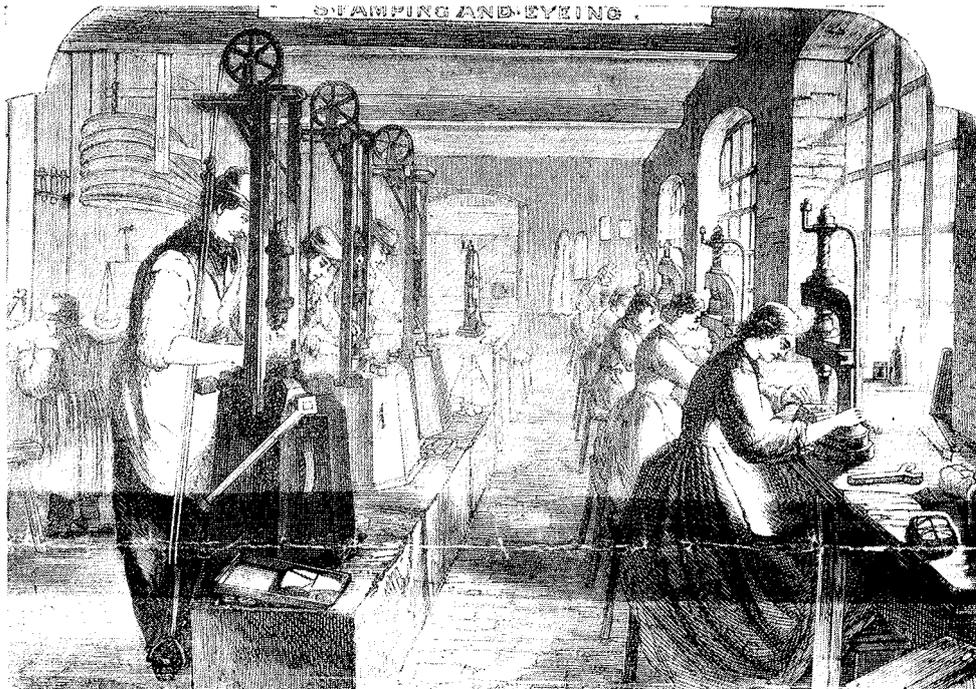


PLATE III (b). Stamping and Eyeing.

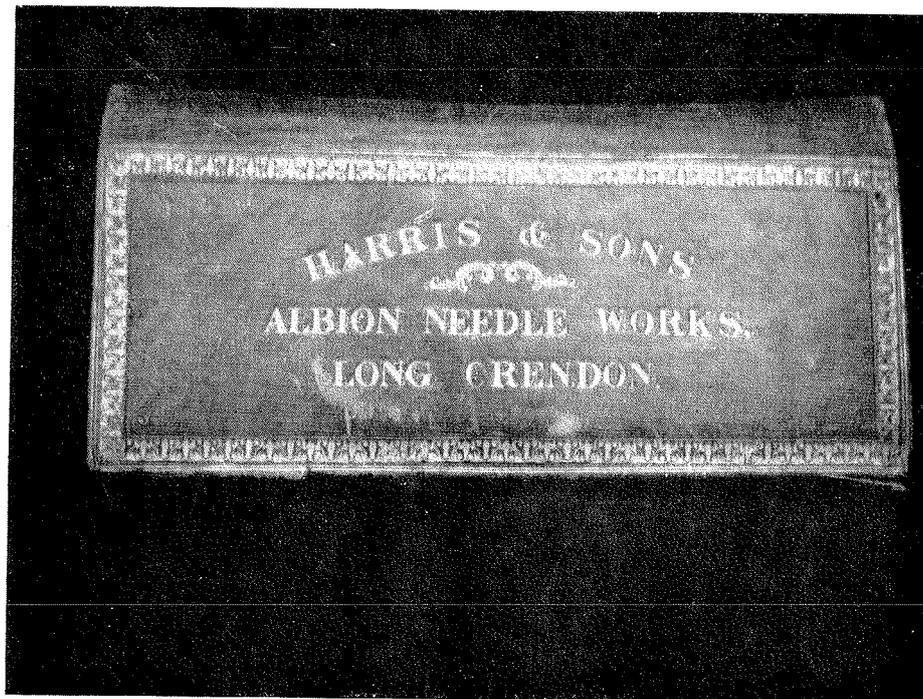


PLATE IV (a). Needlemaker's Sample Book.

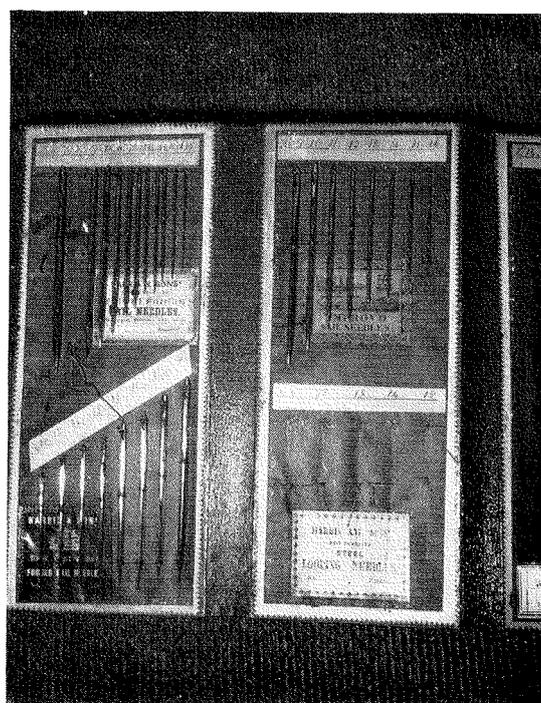


PLATE IV (b). Interior showing Sail Needles.

after scouring, with all the points facing the same way. The women were "straighteners" who had to straighten defective needles after hardening. They were also "drillers", a new process used for better quality needles. The men were either stampers, filers, polishers, hardeners, or scourers. A certain amount of "outwork" was done and it was the custom of the trade to charge 5/- a week for the use of the factory tools. Payment was by piecework.⁴¹

In the Great Exhibition catalogue of 1851, appeared the following entry:

Kirby, Beard & Co depot Cannon Street

Manufacturers. Pins the head and shaft being all in one piece manufactured in Gloucester.

Needles, having pierced eyes, also fish hooks, suitable for home or abroad, manufactured at Crendon, Buckinghamshire.⁴²

The factory had expanded as a result of the Exhibition. An L-shaped addition was built for a scouring shed; the pointing and other processes were done in the stone barn attached to the house. In the upstairs rooms were the counting house and packeting of needles and it was hoped to employ 200 workers. In 1856, John Harris was able to buy his little factory and went all over England with his sample books to get orders. But this prosperity did not last, and the 1861 Census showed that Kirby Beard's factory was only employing 53 workers. The next year, they finally closed down, departing for Redditch and taking with them two-thirds of their work people.⁴³ Unfortunately their accounts were destroyed during an air raid in the second world war, so it is impossible to know the economic position of the firm. It is said that they closed down owing to the high cost of coal which had to be brought from Oxford by wagon. Had the proposed 1813 canal from Marsworth to Abingdon been constructed, it might still be a manufacturing village.

This move only left three manufacturers, Edwin Harris down Harroel, Mathew Shrimpton, who made darning needles, bodkins etc, and Sylvannus who was a surgical needle maker. Edwin went bankrupt in 1870,⁴⁴ putting his financial difficulties down to the bad state of trade. Sylvannus died in 1887, but old Mathew at 76, High Street lasted until 1894, working to the end. There is an elderly lady alive in the village today, who can remember the thump of old Mathew's scouring machine as the board went over the packets of needles. The industry which had lasted for nearly 300 years ended as a casualty of the machine age.

REFERENCES

- ¹ Michael Oppenheimer, *Naval Accounts*, pp. 202, 242.
- ² P.R.O. L.C. 9/53 fo. 33. (I am indebted to Mr. John Nevison for this reference.)
- ³ "Returns of Aliens", Huguenot Society of London, vol. x, part 1, p. 448.
- ⁴ John Stowe, "Annales", ed. Howes, 1631, p. 1,038 b.
- ⁵ Huguenot Society, op. cit., vol. X, part 2, p. 25.
- ⁶ *ibid.*, p. 310.
- ⁷ Edwardian Inventories. Oxfordshire Record Society, vol. 1, p. 115.
- ⁸ Will of John Greening. B.R.O. D/A/We 1633.
- ⁹ Court Rolls of the manor of Crendon, Bucks. Arch. Soc.
- ¹⁰ Lee, *History of Thame*, p. 438.
- ¹¹ Will of Henry Tompson, 1582, B.R.O. D/A/Wf/9/249.
- ¹² Will of Alice Tompson 1605, B.R.O. D/A/W 23/307.
- ¹³ H.M.C. *Cal. MSS. of Marquess of Salisbury at Hatfield House*, Vol. VII, p. 545.
- ¹⁴ Guildhall Library Index to Remembrancia, p. 104.

- ¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 105.
- ¹⁶ Acts of the Privy Council 1623/4, p. 167.
- ¹⁷ *Select Charters of Trading Companies*, Selden Society, Vol. 28, p. 64, p. 81-2.
- ¹⁸ P.C.C. Wills 192 Tursse.
- ¹⁹ Guildhall Library M.S. 2820.
- ²⁰ Guildhall Library M.S. 2818/1, p. 15.
- ²¹ Records of Bucks, vol. 12, p. 42.
- ²² Will of William Cannon, B.R.O. D/A/We 44.
- ²³ Bucks Sessions Records, Epiphany 1800.
- ²⁴ M. T. Morrall, *History and Description of Needlemaking*, p. 13.
- ²⁵ William Shrimpton, *Notes from a Decayed Needleland*, p. 15.
- ²⁶ B.R.O. Posse Comitatus, Haddenham.
- ²⁷ Bucks Sessions Records, Epiphany 1796.
- ²⁸ H. Guise, *History and Romance of Needlemaking*.
W. T. Hemming, *The Needle Region and its Resources*.
C. F. Milward, *Notes on the History of Needlemaking*.
Lardner's Cyclopaedia, Vol. 2, p. 401.
- ²⁹ Transactions of the Newcomen Society, Vol. XXI, p. 83.
- ³⁰ Redditch Library, Accounts of John English of Feckenham 1807.
- ³¹ Shrimpton, *op. cit.*, p. 15.
- ³² *Ibid.*, p. 19.
- ³³ Morrall, *op. cit.*, p. 12.
- ³⁴ Redditch Library, William Avery's Memorial Volumes, 276.
- ³⁵ B.R.O. Hobbs Deeds 459, 474, 487.
- ³⁶ B.R.O. Hobbs Deeds 480.
- ³⁷ Bodleian, John Johnson Collection.
- ³⁸ Census of 1851, Crendon.
- ³⁹ H. Guise, *Needles*, p. 22.
- ⁴⁰ Census of 1851, Crendon.
- ⁴¹ Information from the Redditch Library.
- ⁴² Great Exhibition Catalogue, Vol. 2, p. 796.
- ⁴³ Shrimpton, *op. cit.*, p. 24.
- ⁴⁴ Thame Gazette, January 25th 1870.