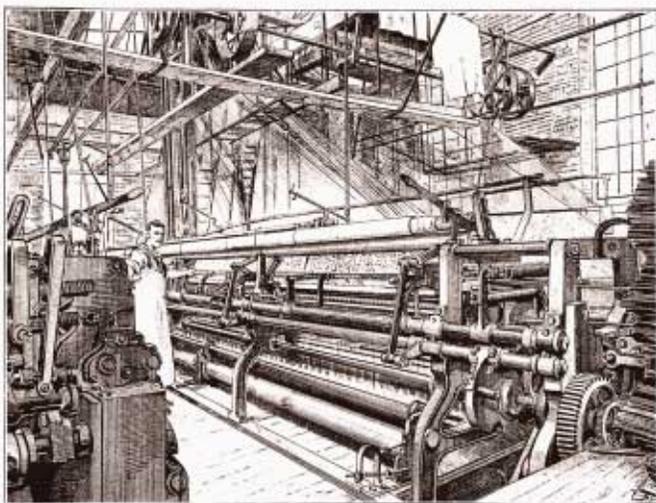




A History of Beeston Lace

PROCESS OF CURTAIN MANUFACTURE

Anglo-Scolian Mills,
BEESTON NOTTS.



MODERN LACE MACHINE.



THE PRINTING DEPARTMENT.

Beeston Lace

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The Beeston lace industry was created in an explosion of enterprise in the early 1820s. When John Heathcoat's patent for copying hand-made cushion lace on a machine expired, a flood of enterprise was released as hundreds of framework knitters and other artisans in Nottingham and its satellite villages saw the chance of making their fortunes by investing in the new machines. At the end of the decade (1829), there were 25 to 30 small producers making lace nets in cottages and small workshops in Beeston. Their womenfolk busied themselves embroidering the net with simple motifs to imitate the traditional lace patterns of Devon, Buckinghamshire and other historic centres of the laborious handicraft.

The machine lace net was made in silk and later cotton. In Beeston the new industry was encouraged and supported by the Silk Mill which, standing at the junction of the Turnpike Road (High Road) and Brown Lane (Station Road), dominated the village centre for many years. The Mill belonged to a local family called Lowe who around 1800 became successful as merchant hosiers in Nottingham, then in 1826 invested their profit in silk production.

The first generation of Beeston lace makers were all in a very small way of business, typically owning only one hand operated machine or a share in one. But a handful of them succeeded against the odds, becoming substantial men of business. Foremost of these in the early years was Henry Kirkland (1782-1853) who was an established warp knitter in Main Street (Middle Street) before shifting to lace. He lived at the Manor House in Middle Street but is now remembered as the founder of the Wesleyan Methodist Church in Beeston. There is a commemorative plaque to him and his wife in the vestibule of the Methodist Chapel on Chilwell Road.



Your faithfully
Frank Wilkinson

Frank Wilkinson (1846-1897)



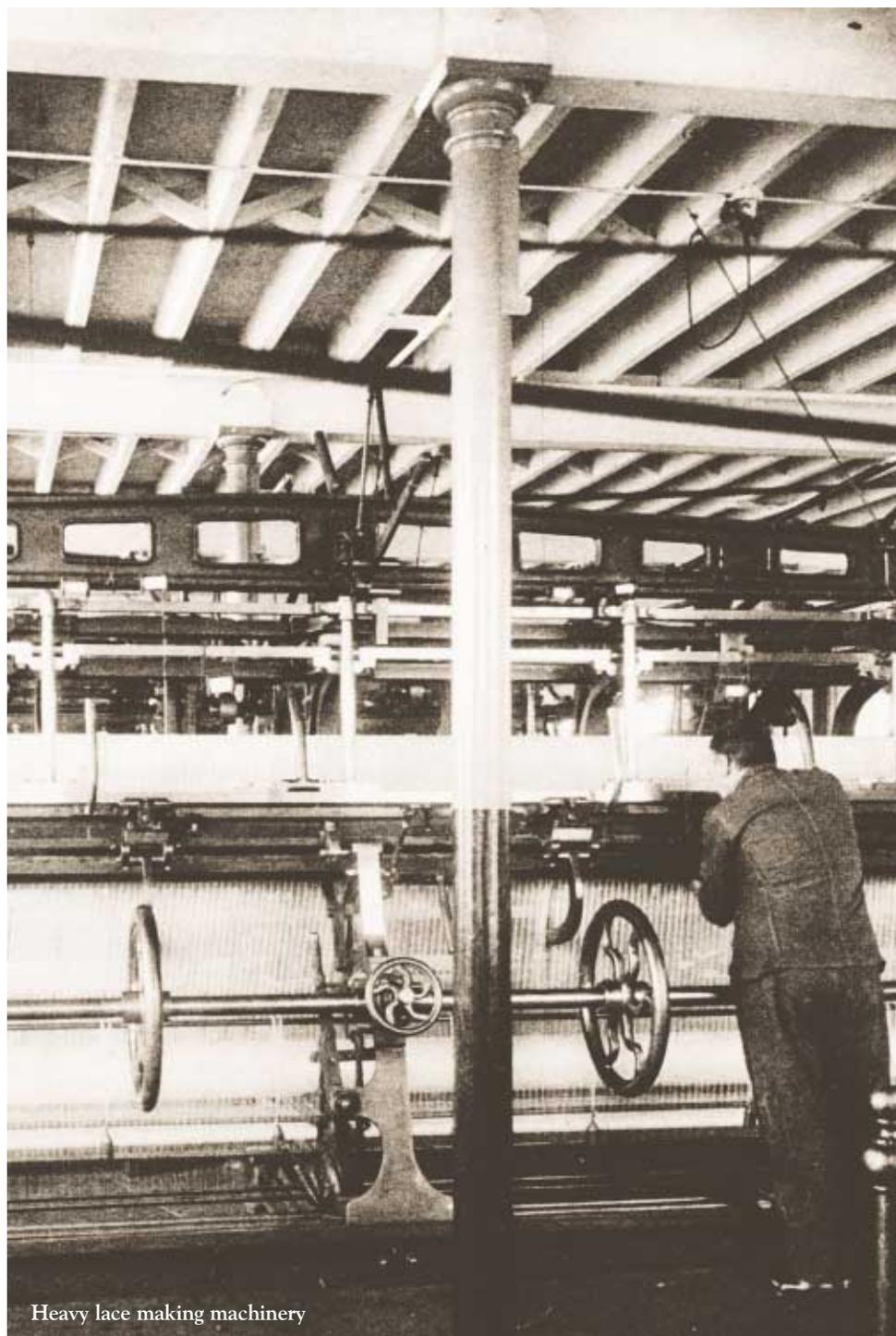
Shetland shawl

One of the best known names in the Victorian lace industry was that of William Felkin (1795-1874), who moved to Nottingham as Heathcoat's agent in 1826. In later life, he wrote the standard history of the industry, *Felkin's History of the Machine Wrought Hosiery and Lace Manufacturers* (1867). He and his son built a lace factory on Albion Street around 1848, which was probably the earliest in the village to use steam power. Between them they operated 92 plain net machines, much the largest enterprise in the village at mid century. Unfortunately the Felkins were soon over committed to Wrights Bank and became insolvent with debts of £42,000 in 1864.

For some years, Beeston reverted to a place of small scale industry. To provide the power for the ever growing size of the lace machines, Thomas Pollard of Villa Street built Swiss Mills to rent space and power to a dozen or so small producers. "Stall holding" was a popular means of climbing the economic ladder and for two or three generations the Pollards prospered on their investment while encouraging the survival of manufacturers with little capital.

However, Beeston did not attain the pinnacle of its Victorian achievement until the arrival of Francis (or "Frank") Wilkinson (1846-1897), the builder of Anglo Scotian Mills. The key to prosperity in a fashion business like lace and hosiery was to be always ready to introduce new products and varieties. In the 1850s, Hucknall prospered on the imitation of Shetland shawls knitted on the stocking frame and Wilkinson's father was one of several framework knitters in the town that pioneered this innovation. Wilkinson brought the technique to what was called "new Chilwell" (the area to the west of the Chequers Hotel) in 1870, buying a derelict building known as Chamber's factory. By degrees this was rebuilt and extended to become Wilkinson's Hallcroft Works.

Frank Wilkinson was clearly a brilliant entrepreneur, a self-made man in the best Victorian tradition. Though the shawl trade had been established almost 20 years before he moved to Chilwell, his fine textiles won such a reputation for novelty and elegance that he was able to achieve an extensive market in Britain and overseas, driving out German competition on the way. His brother Walter, a brilliant salesman, went to America and won a large market there.



Heavy lace making machinery



Lace curtains

The capital generated by this enterprise enabled Wilkinson to embark on a new line of production, that of lace curtains, in 1876. The huge machines needed large space and power and to accommodate them he built the Anglo Scotian Mills at Beeston on the site of the Felkin's factory, and then at Borrowwash. Lace curtains were not something new in the 1870s and 1880s; some Nottingham lace merchants had them on display in the Great Exhibition of 1851. But again, Wilkinson brought such originality to his designs, such quality to his production, such low prices and such drive to his marketing as to outclass much of the competition in Britain and overseas.

Nothing deterred him. He evidently believed that the existing system of selling through Nottingham's Lace Market and overseas jobbers was inadequate and appointed his own dedicated corps of travelling salesmen. Again, he was confronted by the established interests when Birkins opened huge factories in the (then) cheap labour cities of Glasgow and Warsaw (at that time in Russia) but he managed to run his works so efficiently as to compete on price. When fire devastated part of his Beeston works in 1886 and 1892 and a thousand employees had to be laid off, he quickly rebuilt the property. Then when the Americans imposed heavy duty tariffs on imported lace, he opened factories in the US.

Frank Wilkinson was one of the great entrepreneurs of the Victorian age, and Beeston's greatest. Anglo Scotian Mills stands as a proud monument to his achievements but his dazzling career proved to be a short one. He died suddenly on 11 August 1897 at the age of 51. The Beeston Times reported sadly that "Beeston had lost one of the best friends it ever had."

Immediately after his death, the Anglo Scotian Mills business was run by Wilkinson's older brother George, an entrepreneur in his own right, who ran a successful property development enterprise. George was responsible for the construction of many of the Victorian terraces that still stand around Beeston town centre to this day (Wilkinson Avenue, Commercial Avenue, Derby Street, City Road etc). The Anglo Scotian Mills business was sold to a group of investors but without Frank's leadership, business experience, ability and drive, the company ran down. By 1909, the business had collapsed and the factory buildings were sold to the Pollard family, owners of the nearby Swiss Mills, to extend their stallholding enterprise.



Lace winding room



Anglo Scotian Mills clock

One of Pollard's first tenants at Anglo Scotian Mills was Parkes & Tomlin, a small firm originally with just four curtain machines whose business grew steadily until they eventually occupied the whole of the Wollaton Road building. Parkes purchased the building in 1922 and today the building is still known to some as "Parkes Factory". Lace and hosiery manufacture continued until the 1960s when the building was bought by Ariel Pressings for the manufacture of electrical components. Ariel Pressings were amalgamated within the multinational company, The Stadium Group who continued to operate from the site until manufacture was moved to the Far East in 2003.

The buildings on Albion Street were similarly divided into stalls for lace and curtain manufacturers. The Pollards sold the properties in 1910 to two of the occupiers, Attenborough & Co and Celloprine, though the new owners continued to let unoccupied parts of the complex almost entirely in the same way (small units with power) for almost 100 years, until the properties were bought by Gilbert & Hall for redevelopment. Attenborough & Co, manufacturers of braids and fringings, continue to operate from a small site in Beeston today.

When Anglo Scotian Mills were built (and for many years afterwards) they towered over the cottages round about. People wondered why such a dominant factory complex was built in what was still only a village. Part of the answer lies with changes in the lace industry, part with the Wilkinson Brothers. While marketing of lace was increasingly focused on Nottingham's Lace Market, production devolved to low cost sites in the suburbs. Frank Wilkinson followed the trend by manufacturing out of town, but jumped ahead of the competition by launching his own warehouse and marketing operation in the striking building fronting the main thoroughfare, Wollaton Road, dispensing with the Nottingham merchants. The gothic façade, reputedly modelled on Thrumpton Hall, was part of his selling display, following an architectural tradition initiated by his Nottingham rivals. The manufacturing units behind were more utilitarian buildings, devoid of any decoration apart from the clock overlooking the yard and the Albion Street entrance.



Anglo-Scottish Mills facade



'We work' plaque

Behind the façade, the warehouse and factory were very simply built, just red brick and slate roof, spanned by heavy timber beams with pillar supports at their centres. The tall windows were no doubt intended to admit maximum light to work on the lace. Brother George complemented Frank's enterprise by building rows of houses for workers, and also (we surmise) the Commercial Inn for the commercial travellers who came to buy lace. Together their enterprise transformed Beeston in the 1880s and 1890s.

The Mills were Grade II Listed as historical monuments because, from an architectural point of view, they are one of the most ambitious industrial buildings in the East Midlands. The Gothic windows, turrets, crenellated roof line and arched entrance together make a strong statement, contrasting with the austere industrial building characteristic of the region in the Victorian years. The exhortation *laboramus* ("we work") over the entrance evokes Wilkinson's mission in life, and links him with Richard Birkin, whose magnificent warehouse on Broadway in the Lace Market bears the same determined Latin motto (perhaps the two were associated through the shawl trade). The conversion of the surviving mill buildings to accommodate modern apartments is surely an enterprise worthy of the innovative and dedicated Victorian builder of this fascinating industrial monument.

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