Articles

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Lace legacies

Lace legacies: How partnerships enhance understanding of craft and heritage

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Abstract

Nottingham was once the centre of a global lace industry employing tens of thousands of people in its manufacture. Therefore, its slow decline and sudden demise in the early years of the twenty-first century impacted upon both the sense of identity of the citizens who were involved in its success and those who enjoyed its resonance. The cultural venues whose collections celebrated this once powerful industry closed and their collections were rendered invisible. This amplified the sense of being bereft of both individual and regional identity, but also the cohesion it brought to the city. It is within this context that we share a number of collaborations between cultural, educational, community and business partners to begin to address this sense of loss, to improve the visibility and legacy of Nottingham lace and continue to tell its story with renewed vigour and through the voices of those who worked within it. Through two funded projects Lace Unravelled and Textile Tales, we provide testimony from those still involved in lace production, now reduced to less than a 100 people, and from former lace workers. These current and former employees reflect upon the values implicit within lace manufacture, then and now, of skill, craft and a pride in work.

Keywords: Nottingham, industry, conservation, oral history, technology, skills

Introduction

The Nottingham lace industry is in precarious times. Once a large manufacturing industry with numerous auxiliary businesses, it is reduced to one lace manufacturer in England producing quality artisanal products for the designer market. During the past 200 years, Nottingham has seen the growth of the industry, its global reach, its impact on the local urban environment, the employment of its citizens as industrial workers as well as the reflected pride in its product across the region. However, its demise has resulted in a sense of collective loss, not only of employment but also of civic pride and cohesion. This article reflects upon a number of projects which have focused on ensuring that the rich heritage of Nottingham lace and its workforce continues to be celebrated and valued. To understand and contextualize this sense of loss, we will briefly outline the history of Nottingham as both the birthplace and the global centre of the machine-made lace industry.

Nottingham is the home of the Nationally Designated collection of machine-made lace and lace machinery at Nottingham City Museums and Galleries (NCMG), and a significant teaching collection held at Nottingham Trent University (NTU) (known as the 'NTU Lace Archive'). Lace making by machine has been significant to Nottingham since the mid-eighteenth century, having developed from the stocking frame invented by William Lee in 1589. Further adaptions to the stocking frame enhanced its capability and by 1760 it was possible to create net, which was hand embellished by embroiderers from across the region (Mason 2013). During this period of rapid innovation, inventors explored methods for recreating the twisting of threads to replicate the processes involved in hand-made lace. Two key innovations are recognized as achieving this; in 1808, John Heathcoat created 'point net' which would be further hand embellished and John Leavers in 1813 created a machine capable of incorporating patterns within the design, and 'Nottingham Lace' was born. As Mason notes, the focus of the growing industry was 'constructing machines to produce mechanically imitations of the hand-made lace net grounds' (2010: 7). These technological innovations meant that for around a century and a half Nottingham became the global centre of the machine-made lace industry. Industrialization was expanding towns and cities across the north and the midlands of the United Kingdom during the nineteenth century, so much so that in the mid-nineteenth century 'hundreds of mechanics' were attracted into the Nottingham area to work (Mason 2010: 50) and at its height, in the early twentieth century, the industry employed around 60,000 people (Mason 2013) and was selling approximately £5 million worth of lace (equating to £600 million today) (Bank of England Website 2020; Mason 2014).

This innovation in technology was not matched in Nottingham's approach to design and the city was initially dependent on imported fabrics from France which they adapted and modified. Roles for designers began to appear slowly, and in 1828 there were eight listed in Nottingham (Jones 1993). A growing awareness of the significance of design to the commercial process is evident in that it was possible to register for copyright with the English Board of Trade from 1839 and a 'classification' for lace as separate from other manufactured textiles was required (Eastop 2011).

A Governmental Select Committee was established in the mid-1830s to address the concern over the loss of overseas markets despite the technical excellence of British products and concluded that investment in British design education was required to enable British products to prosper at home and abroad. Therefore, during the rapid expansion of this industry, the simultaneous emergence of design education in the city also grew. The Mechanics Institute had been running drawing classes since 1837 and in 1843 the Government School of Design in Nottingham was formed, followed by a purpose-built art school in 1865 (Figure 1). The school was established with support from across the manufacturing classes and civic dignitaries of the town who emphasized the School should focus on 'excellence and taste with regard particularly to patterns for the fabrication of lace and hosiery' (Jones 1993: 13). The relationship between the school and the lace industry at this time is evident through the donations, support and its governance, the first president was Richard Birkin, a prominent manufacturer in the city (Jones 1993).

Figure 1: Purpose-built Nottingham School of Design 'Waverley Building' (c. 1865) now part of Nottingham Trent University School of Art and Design.

It is also significant that the relationship between the Castle Museum and the Design School was formed during this period of the industry's expansion. The idea for the project was driven forward by town councillors and prominent figures in the lace trade. The local paper reported in 1872 that Nottingham had been chosen 'as the locality of the first provincial exhibition of this kind in the Kingdom, on account of the high position attained by our School of Art' the first publicly owned art museum outside of London and that lace should form a significant part of the exhibits (Jones 1993: 45). The lace collection grew to include lace clothing and interior products, lace designs and drawings, machines and related items, over 100 lace sample books and some unique ephemera such as menus. It also included gifts from across the globe including from the Emperor of Russia and from nations known for their hand-made laces – France, Crete, Italy, Belgium, amongst others (Edgar 2013). The industry, the art school and the museum became inextricably linked.

Despite this success, the lace industry began to suffer from a decline in consumers' interest in its products during the twentieth century. The changing role of women from the period of the First World War had impacted upon dress styles, and though machine-made lace had made a once exclusive luxury commodity affordable, it ultimately created market saturation. By 1924, the workforce had reduced to 17,000 (Mason 2010). From this point onwards, the lace industry went into steady, but permanent decline. Now, in 2021, there is only one business left in the region manufacturing Nottingham Lace and employing a small team of highly skilled and knowledgeable people (Briggs-Goode and Donovan 2017). This business has been manufacturing Leavers lace since 1845 and is 'owned and managed by the eighth and ninth generation of the Mason family' (Cluny Lace Website 2021: n.pag).

Resurgence

Nottingham's loss of its global lace industry has left communities bereft of not only their livelihood but also their identities as industrial citizens within a cohesive society. In this context, NCMG and NTU began to question how lace heritage can be recognized, celebrated and valued within the city and beyond. There is evidence of 'ambient heritage' (Samuel 1994) in Nottingham, for example Caruso St John, architects of the Nottingham Contemporary art Gallery (2009), used a pattern from Nottingham City Museums' collection for its exterior, but the lace industry was largely ignored by the city of which it was once such a vital part. A key issue among citizens of Nottingham, and particularly former lace industry workers (Strangleman 2011), is the lack of a museum dedicated to it that both celebrates its impact as a world leading industry and displays its artefacts and achievements. Moreover, the presence of a major working museum in Calais exacerbates this issue. The town of Calais has important links to Nottingham and is itself historically significant to the story of the Nottingham Lace industry. Nottingham lace machines were smuggled to Calais at the beginning of the nineteenth century and the fact that the French value and celebrate their heritage aggravates the disappointment and resentment felt by Nottingham's communities.

While we could not fill this cultural vacuum, as two organizations committed to the cultural heritage of the lace industry since 2013 we have run projects intended to address the loss of community cohesion and identity which was evident. To understand the issues facing these communities, we began to focus on themes which addressed this experience: memory and

nostalgia (Bornat 2019; Strangleman 2011); the skills involved in making and their material products (Fisher and Botticello 2018; Gibson 2016; Ingold 2018; Thompson 1988); the importance of the acknowledgement of the value of past work (Abrams 2010; Smith and Campbell 2017). These themes began to frame our methodological approach focused in an historical context which uses memory studies projects to understand and respond to the effects of de-industrialization. We employed a range of methods to support this enquiry: oral histories, road shows, semi-structured interviews, working with industry mentors using prompts and observation as well as creative practice and making. These methods were utilized to inform insights into material and technological interactions by those who worked within the industry and the values they attributed to both their work and the environment they worked within. The use of archives with their 'authority' as authorized versions has served as a tool to draw out personal and shared narratives to enrich the legitimized collections held within cultural and educational venues. Interestingly, participants also brought their own material objects in the form of newsletters, photographs and other ephemera to events, acting as material evidence for their testimony and a focus for their memories and nostalgia. As Lucas and Robb (2021) describes objects are unique to the individual but can begin to reveal more generalized constructions of wider cultural and social relationships and experiences – such as class, gender and race.

The first project in 2012/13 called Lace: Here: Now, we collaborated to develop a season of events to celebrate the region's heritage. These events, included exhibitions, talks, making events, city tours, storytelling and symposia, ran across the city using key cultural spaces as venues to engage the public with both the 'tangible' lace heritage and contemporary art and design practice inspired by this material culture. The events offered a range of opportunities to explore lace – its history and impact on the economic, social and cultural life of the city. We explored the impact of lace and its manufacture through dialogue with those who worked in the industry, the city's historic built environment, artworks inspired by this rich industrial heritage and film screenings of archive footage of the city and its lace industry. This season of events received coverage in the national and regional press and saw an increased sense that the city should more powerfully recognize the importance of its heritage.

During this period of time, the lace collection owned by NCMG was awarded Arts Council England Designation Development Funding to support a research and development programme called 'Lace Unravelled'. An aspect of this programme was to engage with 'industry mentors' to gather knowledge to enrich the understanding of the collection and contribute explanations and information about the objects' use and origins.

Insights into potentially lost narratives on how technology was used to enhance lace production emerged through interviewing mentors, in this case the owners of the last remaining Leavers Lace factory in England, Cluny Lace, John and Sheila Mason who at the time of the interview had 100+ years of experience in the lace industry between them. They were shown a book from the NCMG collection (Figure 2), filled with pieces of lace and hand written notes, known as a 'cut book'. Little was known about the book, but the object was imbued with meaning and our mentors looked through it with joy, describing it as the 'most complete cut book that they had ever seen'. They went on to describe how the Twisthands, as the workers who operate the lace machine are called, used a cut book to record their technical achievements and problem-solving

for their own personal reference, compiling it over their working life. Growing up in the family lace business, John recalled an anecdote relating to his own time working on the machines. He explained that Twisthands would have spent long hours on it (probably in the evening after work) and were particularly secretive about their cut books, keeping them about their person at all times, which is the reason that most are pocket-sized. This interview suggested crucial background information on an object which may otherwise have been thought a simple scrap-book, but when seen through the eyes of those who had both observed and carried out technical processes, gave an insight into the working practices of this craftsman.

Figure 2: The 'Cut Book' as described above. Object ref NIM_1972-2 pages 46–47 (photograph by kind permission Nottingham City Museums).

The Lace Unravelled project sought to preserve not only tangible objects but also the intangible heritage connected with the lace industry, such as the skills used in operating the machines, creating the patterns and all the related processes such as mending and finishing. As Fisher and Botticello assert, '[k]nowledge and skill are not bound within an individual but are distributed among social actors, material objects and locales' (2018: 49). This is demonstrated through the project's link-up with an industry mentor in a local lace draughting company. The skills involved in designing and draughting a lace pattern were investigated through the interview process, as Neil Thorpe, the owner states '[t]his technique, this heritage, is all part of the legacy of Nottingham Lace' (Lace Unravelled 2018: n.pag) and we were able to capture in film his description of the design process, providing clear explanations of the different stages of the process and showing generations of lace draughters at work (YouTube: Lace Unravelled – Lace Draughting Film). The film highlighted the parts of the process that were previously done on paper, where computers are now involved and it also provided the chance to express the draughter's personal pride in their work. '[E]ach person in our team has their own style or hand […] and this means the final lace is completely unique and quite personal' (Lace Unravelled 2018: n.pag). This is something we can only hear from the craftsperson, as it is a part of the story that is not communicated through the lace or machines in isolation, demonstrating the 'distribution' of knowledge and skill that Fisher and Botticello identify (Fisher and Botticello 2018).

Throughout the Lace Unravelled project, we were keen to broaden opportunities to hear from those who worked within the industry so we ran two 'roadshow events' to capture stories, objects and information regarding the Nottingham lace industry directly from the communities who worked in it. The advertising material for the roadshows positioned them as a challenge to current and former lace workers to share their knowledge (Figure 3), using a set of questions, such as 'how would you like to see lace commemorated in Nottingham?'. This always elicited responses that indicated a feeling that lace had been almost 'forgotten' and, without any appropriate legacy to represent it, there was a keenly felt sense of loss. We were also surprised that younger generations who did not work in the industry attended the events accompanying ex-employees and often learnt new stories about their parents and grandparents working lives. They could, therefore, carry forward their relatives' nostalgia, heritage and pride in the industry, as the sharing of reminiscence helps to find the 'continuities between generations' that Bornat notes are characteristic of oral history work (Bornat 2019: 124). The roadshows can be seen as an example of the project's evolution and enabled wider participation from the public,

introducing a sense of collaborative working between staff, mentors, volunteers, textile workers (former and current) and their families.

Figure 3: Leaflet publicizing one of the Lace Unravelled 'roadshows'.

Lace Unravelled culminated in a two-day international symposium, which brought together curators, lace industry experts, academics and artists from the United Kingdom, France and Australia to share knowledge about lace and lace making, within the historical context of Nottingham's lace heritage. Delegates had the opportunity to engage in talks, demonstrations, artists' interventions at Wollaton Hall and Newstead Abbey, tours to see the exhibitions Lace Unveiled and Lace Unarchived at NTU. Day 1 investigated the history of lace still evident in the built environment, archives and museum collections of Nottingham, inviting consideration of how lace has helped to shape a sense of place. The day included an opportunity to view the lace machines working as part of the industrial museum at Wollaton Hall, the renovation of which had been funded by the project. Day 2 explored how lace continues to be significant to artists, designers and makers, whether through an interest in the use of lace fabric, reinterpretations of patterns and processes, or its application to smart textiles. The extent to which historical lace inspires diverse contemporary creative practices has been a continuous thread throughout the process of rehabilitating and evolving civic/local perceptions of Nottingham lace. Artists have an important role to play in 'unlocking' our historical lace archive and collections – they are creative explorers, bringing new and different perspectives to the ways in which we might navigate and understand historical material.

It was particularly significant to this re-making of Nottingham's sense of itself that Lace Unravelled, took place when Nottingham Castle was undergoing a £300 million renovation, its newly curated lace gallery opening on 21 June 2021 (Figures 4 and 5).

Figures 4 and 5: The new Lace Gallery at Nottingham Castle opened in 2021 (photographs by kind permission Nottingham Castle Trust).

You want to be a twelve point man

These and other research projects which have been completed in the past decade constitute a collaborative, 'democratised' project (Abrams 2010: 173) one which puts the textile workers at the centre. This sense was prominent in 'Textile Tales', an 18-month oral history project focused on the intangible textile heritage of the East Midlands, funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund in 2019. Our prior projects demonstrated a clear demand among former textile workers to engage with their heritage, to make contact with other workers, to pass on their knowledge and to share their stories. Textile Tales was led by NTU, and in partnership with NCMG, Erewash and Mansfield Museums, Framework Knitters' Museum (Ruddington), University of Leicester and John Smedley Ltd. It gathered over 55 oral history recordings from across the East Midlands using a 'roadshow' model and whereas in Lace Unravelled, the interviewers were museum professionals, this project trained volunteers or 'citizen historians' to collect the oral histories, embodying the ideas of 'empowerment' that Abrams (2010: 173) discusses.

Figure 6: The specially commissioned Textile Tales roadshow vehicle.

The oral histories were largely collected at 'roadshow' events in museum/arts venues, a working factory and via a commissioned Textile Tales vehicle (Figure 6) which enabled us to visit regional locations with industry links but were more isolated from the cities and larger towns. The group of volunteer interviewers all brought different views, backgrounds and styles to the task, which perhaps lacked consistency, but also avoided consistent interviewer bias (Yow 1997), and they were given the same set of 'prompting' questions. It should be acknowledged that the interviewees were self-selecting, automatically attracting those who had strong feelings about the industry and unlikely to attract the more reluctant employees. Indeed, some interviewees came prepared, with written notes and anecdotes that seemed to have been honed over years of recounting. Whilst we acknowledge their 'subjectivity and multiple perspectives' (Botticello and Fisher 2020: 7), we contend that they remain valuable accounts of a rapidly disappearing industry. Abrams argues that 'legitimation of a past life' could be what motivates older interviewees to participate in oral history (2010: 7). As the highest attendance at Textile Tales events was in the older age range, this is a relevant point and may be one of many motivations for participation. We noted a number of themes which emerged through the retelling of their experiences of the workplace which can be summarized as: skill, craft, pride in work and the emotional resonance attached to their machines. We note that in Smith and Campbell's (2017) discussion of the Castleford Heritage Trust, similar frustrations are expressed in response to that de-industrialized context and that those workers similarly '[e]xpressed […] a sense of pride that sought a simple acknowledgement for past achievements, acknowledgements that were then used to build an embodied claim that people, their families and communities and their values still mattered' (Smith and Campbell 2017: 622).

According to Tim Ingold '[s]kill is about going along with things – about responding to things and being responded to' (Ingold 2018: 162). The Nottingham lace industry provides a case study for this perspective, as a symbiosis between the worker and the machine has been noted since its invention. The machines require a highly skilled operator, usually having trained for several years and many of the processes following the machine stage (such as mending) still need to be carried out by hand, again, by skilled workers (Figure 7). Mason (2010) describes Nottingham's heyday of lace machine building, and perhaps this symbiosis between Twisthand/craftsman and machine, is a legacy of that. As Fisher and Botticello (2018) highlight, the Leavers lace machines were all hand built, meaning that no two machines were the same. The Twisthands in their interviews, all give testimony to the idiosyncrasies of individual machines. 'They was hand made, you couldn't take a cam off one and put it on another. Everything was individually made' (Joe 2019). The skill required here in understanding each machine's differences and devising methods to accommodate them is 'more akin' to that of the craftsman than 'what appears to be simply "factory work"' (Fisher and Botticello 2018: 51).

Figure 7: 'The Clipping Room' at Birkin & Co, Nottingham 1914, from object ref. NCMG 2005-121/5(1) (photograph by kind permission Nottingham City Museums).

In the late twentieth century, this craft work was threatened. Takeovers and mergers, and overseas competition on prices led to the restructuring of the workplace, attempting to reduce costs by running more machines with fewer Twisthands, which eroded the symbiosis between Twisthand and machine. Joe recalls the idea of 'sharing machines' that was introduced in the 1970s and 80s:

There was a thing in them days, where they'd always had their own machine, and nobody else interfered with it, and they looked after it, like a baby really. And this new system in the '70s and '80s where anybody could go in your job, you could be anywhere. It were a bit demoralizing, you know, you could get a bloody job running lovely, and next minute somebody else is in it, and you're in somebody else's job, and I think that helped destroy a lot of it.

(Joe 2019)

And Joe continues:

The lads were that good on the machines, you know. In them days, you used to ask to go on somebody's footboard, that was their domain. You never went up there unless you were asked to go up. And one man had probably worked that machine all his life, and he'd have his own patterns underneath, all the jacquards.

(Joe 2019)

These changes were also evident in other industries. Thompson's (1988) study of the Coventry car industry collected oral histories from people working between 1920 and 1980, during which time, workers transitioned from being what he describes as 'skilled men' to 'playing at being skilled men' as the assembly line and 'gang system' move away from the more 'traditional' workshop into the 'factory'. There are parallels between this industry, and the lace industry in Gibson's (2016) study of the cowboy boot making workshops of El Paso, Texas, in the handing down of skills through families and, after the industry's rapid expansion and contraction, the return to smaller workshops and more 'high end' products.

The degree of a Twisthand's skills was evident by what gauge machine they operated. They would start on the coarser lower 'gauges' and progress to machines making finest lace, on a twelve point gauge machine.

[Y]ou had to build up the gauges. If you was a good Twisthand, you'd got to know how to run a 12 point. It's like that Chantilly lace, very fine. You wanted to be a 12 point man, a 12 point Twisthand.

(Peter 2019)

Working the finer gauges was rewarded with better pay, but the aspiration to improve their skills also highlights the Twisthand's pride in their work.

Pride in their work was evident in the carefully stored lace samples and certificates and other ephemera that people brought along to the roadshows. But also pride in their personal stories of achievement, of the quality of the product. Joyce (2019) on her breaking through to roles which it was unthinkable that a woman would be able to do:

And then I went into a man's job, I went into pattern changing, I went into putting chains on machines, the actual chains, the links and the lot, building them up and putting them on and then putting the pattern on. […] from 1950 to 60, I would say I was the only woman in the industry there, yeah. I won a scholarship to go to America in about […] 1960/1968 […], and when I got out there I was the only woman out there.

(Joyce 2019)

While there were positive stories, there were also cathartic and disconsolate reflections on a working life in a rapidly declining industry such as this quote from an ex-lace industry worker who followed his father and uncle into the trade, starting by going into his father's workshops as a child:

I mean, I often say to my friends, I say I've spent a whole working life learning and teaching these skills and you look round now, and there's nothing, I mean you feel like you've wasted your time.

(Brian 2019a)

These feelings seemed to be universally shared, even when, like the following interviewee, their career had taken them around the globe. Starting in the lace industry at a local firm at the age of 15, he learned skills on both the older Leavers machines and the new German-made raschel lace machines. After working for various companies that either closed or were taken over, he sought work in the industry abroad and travelled the world with his work before coming back to the United Kingdom and eventually retired in his home town. In his comments on the last UK company he worked for before retirement, it is clear that he feels the same sense of loss as Brian:

It eventually got took over by Saint Gobain, unbeknown to us at the time we were in strong competition with something else they were doing in China and within a year they shut it all down to go to China. Broke my heart, after training all them people up, you know.

(Terry 2019)

Watching your factory and the machines you had worked so closely with being scrapped evolved into negative feelings for many people:

And the machines were sold for scrap. Broke my heart. The only thing that made it on my side, the man that broke the machines couldn't break them because the casts were so good, he lost money on it and that was the only saving grace as far as I was concerned.

(Brian 2019b)

Restoration

In conducting our projects, we were aware of other post-industrial responses to textile heritage in cities and towns across Europe and beyond, such as, permanent and temporary exhibitions and/or annual festivals such as those held at the International Centre for Lace and Fashion in Calais, and the International Triennial of Tapestry in Lodz, amongst others. These venues had their own reasons for wanting to celebrate and remember their own heritage and idiosyncratic ways of doing so but mainly focus on objects. High (2020) applauds the work of the French 'ecomuseums' (set-up in ex-industrial towns and cities in the 1970s and 80s), for focusing on people, rather than architecture or objects. However, our approach has been to address simultaneously both the people and the objects. Lace: Here: Now, Lace Unravelled and Textile Tales have culminated in lasting testimony through video, photography and audio recordings.

These lace stories, now held in public collections and on accessible digital platforms, sit alongside the city's archives and offer a holistic view of both Nottingham Lace and those who worked within this industry. In studying the lace industry as a cultural community, we allow relationships between the objects and the makers to be seen together. Williams theorizes that 'the history of a culture […] can only be written when the active relations are restored, and the activities seen in a genuine parity' ([1961] 1994: 60). Therefore, these projects could be seen as restoring parity to the cultural history of the city, but we would argue that they go further, in highlighting the industry's current presence in the region. The number of remaining companies may be greatly diminished, but they are still here, as are the buildings and the memories of the former workers. They continue to contribute to the cultural identity of the city today, and as such, should be included in 'writing' that history.

Conclusion

In this article, we have shown how industries and crafts that were once a significant formation of a place still have resonance in communities and culture. We have seen that they are part of the regional identity, and whilst their products may be celebrated, those involved in their production often feel forgotten, amplifying their sense of loss.

We have outlined how a number of research projects located within history and memory studies have led to insights into the impact of the de-industrialization of the lace industry within the East Midlands, UK region. We have shone a light onto experiences and perspectives of work-based practices and material objects to reveal the interconnections between people and things and also illuminate more generalized structures related to class, gender, skills and hierarchies. This impact is evidenced within the testimony of those interviewees who shared their emotional connection to the industry, the machines, the skills – all of which were once vital to their sense of identity, pride in their work and to the economic success of their families, businesses and the region. The value of this industry should be acknowledged for both the production of evocative fabrics but also for the contribution of the workforce which served it.

Data availability statement

All recordings from the Textile Tales Project are available for public access at the East Midlands Oral History Archive, based at University of Leicester, United Kingdom. Some clips from these are also available to listen to on the project website: www.textiletales.co.uk.

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