

## THE FRAMEWORK KNITTERS OF DERBYSHIRE.

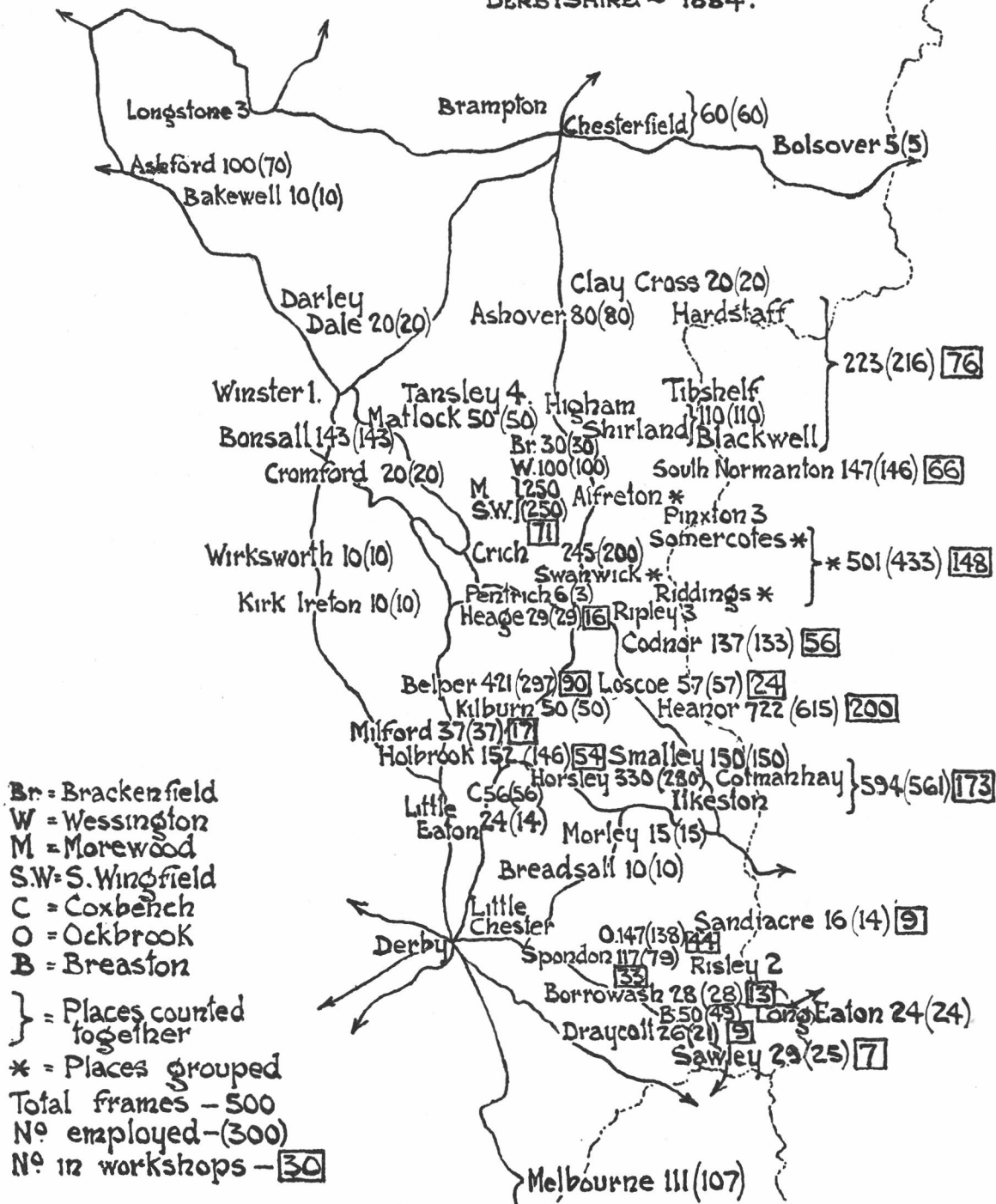
By CLARE W. HIGGENS, B.A.

THE story of the Framework Knitters, or "Stockingers", whose industry was mainly concentrated in south-east Derbyshire and the adjoining areas of Nottinghamshire and Leicestershire, has a number of unusual features, not the least of which was the persistence of the "domestic system" of working well into the second half of the nineteenth century. This is clear from evidence based on the Inquiry of a Hosiery Commission, 1844, given in 1845 to the second meeting of the British Association. The map shows the distribution of the stocking looms or frames at that date in Derbyshire, part of a total area roughly seventy miles long by forty-five miles wide, covering two hundred and forty parishes, where framework knitters worked.<sup>1</sup>

It is worth inquiring why the industry came to be thus concentrated. First, the inventor of the machine, in 1589, the Rev. William Lee, was a native of Woodborough, Notts. He secured the patronage of Queen Elizabeth, but under James I failed and went to France, where he died. A brother returned to England, continued the work in the original county, and frames were set up in a number of other places too, until in the Commonwealth period, following the custom of the time, application was made by London competitors to found a Framework Knitters Company. This was done in 1663, laying down conditions of work and apprenticeship. This Company tried to extend its powers over workers in the Midlands, where they had moved, possibly to be free of its coercion. The Company's excuse was the prevention of overcrowding in the industry, which

<sup>1</sup> Some reduction has been made of the map sent by Miss Higgens. Ed.

DISTRIBUTION OF STOCKING-FRAMES  
DERBYSHIRE ~ 1884.



caused workers to be displaced when they came of age in favour of other learners; their purpose was in fact to end a "blind alley" occupation. In Derby their fruitless efforts continued from 1724 until after the middle of the century, defeated by the masters' preference for cheap labour and the poverty of craftsmen who could not afford the Company's fees. Then a House of Commons inquiry found in 1745 that the Company's deputies had done nothing to maintain standards. It must have been then that this judgment on the Company was made — "as useless as powerless for any trade purposes. The Arms are a stocking-loom, supported by a clergyman on the one hand, and a female presenting her unused knitting skewer or pin on the other."

It is possible to suggest other reasons for the concentration of the industry in the Midlands. Derby became a centre for making silk hosiery with the establishment of John Lombe's silk throwing mill in 1716, worked by the River Derwent, yet the siting of the mill may equally well have been determined in part by the prior existence of a stocking knitting industry in the place. Cheap labour was readily available and certainly desirable to create a demand when so much clothing was still made in people's own homes, as well as to continue the supply of low-priced worsted and cotton hose to the growing population of factory workers. The thread, too, could be obtained from local cotton mills, and supplies of wool were not far to seek. In 1724, Daniel Defoe in his "Tour through England and Wales" writes of the "multitudes of people" employed in stocking weaving. That their wages were unsatisfactory may be judged from a notice in the *Derby Mercury* in February, 1761, of a meeting of framework knitters of Derby and Nottinghamshire to consult on the "best Ways and Means to raise our Prices", and their decision to send an "Address to the Hosiers" which was there published.

The stocking frame was the most complex machine in industrial use before the eighteenth century. It consisted of 3,500 pieces of metal, took fifty days to make and ten or twelve to assemble. The stockings it made were clumsy by modern standards: fine wool weighed

four to six ounces a pair, ordinary wool seven to nine ounces, men's fine silk three and a half to seven ounces and women's three to five.

Improvements in the machine were made from time to time. In 1765 the *Mercury* advertised one made by a Mr. Wyman who required money to develop it "in order to avoid locking it up by a patent or selling it to rivals." In one of Jedidiah Strutt's letters to his wife in 1766 he writes "The Nottingham people are bringing up a frame with a machine to it and a person to work in it, therefore we must have one too," and follows it with instructions for dismantling and despatching "Wesley's little frame" by coach, "well packed that the needles or Sinkers are not damaged." Jedidiah himself had in 1758 and 1759 taken out patents for the "Derby rib" stocking frame, which became generally used, owing to the superior shape and clinging properties of the ribbed stocking. The rib was obtained by operating a separate set of needles vertically between the horizontal ones, taking loops from the latter and reversing them. Another quotation, this time from a letter written by his wife, Elizabeth, from London in 1757, shows that he must have begun to be interested then in his brother-in-law's business that he later developed on factory lines — "Cousin Salt Drank tea with me on Lord's Day. I told him of our intended trade he says he is very intimate with some of the Hosiers and will do all in his power to serve you." — And "Mr Seddon has begun in ye thred buisness again and has just been hear he Desires his servis to you and my Brother and will be glad to serve you, on ye other side he has sent you ye lowest prices of his thred and cotton." Jedidiah told Elizabeth he had bought three "Bales of Silk", . . . "some of the silk to Mr Wild to throw as fast as possible." But cotton, twill and elastic hose, of materials cheaper and easier to obtain than silk or wool, were made in the seventies and it has been calculated that out of a total of twenty thousand frames there were over seventeen thousand in the Midlands in 1782, the best period, for earnings up to five shillings a day were possible, though deductions lowered the weekly total.

Yet despite improvements and the development of power-driven frames, the industry remained a domestic one, because of the speed of the hand knitters and the greater possibility of "fashioning" the stocking. Moreover, workers who feared that power machinery would drive them from employment, smashed the machines: Luddites, for example, smashed nearly seven hundred in 1811. But at the same time a new craft, that of the Frame-smiths, was created: Derby in 1824 had four of these, three in St. Peter's Street and one in Bridge Gate.

The Commission's Report of 1844 says that frames could make material narrow or wide: in Derbyshire five thousand six hundred and ninety-seven frames made the one and four hundred and sixty-six the other. Fashioned or ribbed hose were mostly made, or the material might be "cut up" or "dropped off". Special tops and fancy designs were possible on a few machines, and in addition, by this date, similar machines could make "gloves, drawers, shirts, caps and pieces". Sixty parishes had more than six frames at work and the total available was six thousand seven hundred and ninety-seven, though seven hundred and ninety-two were unemployed. It was found, however, more difficult to survey Derbyshire than the other two counties as the workers lived in separate cottages, spread over a whole district, not in house rows.

Adverse conditions and low wages constantly troubled the industry. The usual practice was for capitalist hosiers, who supplied the thread, to buy frames, rent them to workers and deduct rent from payment for completed work. But the cost to the worker did not end with rent: he had to buy not only needles but oil, coal and candles; often to pay for seaming the stockings and to bear any expenses in taking work to the hosier or fetching more thread; time thus lost reduced his earnings still more. A Committee investigating a Frame Workers' Petition in 1812 found that from total earnings of about thirteen shillings and fourpence, over nine shillings might be paid out thus, frame rent having increased from ninepence a week, common about 1780, to a shilling, or one and threepence for wider frames. Hard masters expected the rent even if they had no work to give, thus ensuring

a steady profit on frames that had cost fifty or sixty pounds: "stockingers" could rarely afford to buy machines, except second-hand, sometimes through "frame-clubs" with weekly payments. The *Derby Mercury* of September, 1774, carried an advertisement for twenty-one -stocking-frames to be sold by auction. Yet a worker-owner might find himself unemployed, as a hosier naturally supplied material first for frames he owned, so the independent worker might have to depend on the "bag-hosiers", small men without capital who bought material as best they could and relied on a quick turnover.

The price offered for finished work depended on a number of things—quality, length, width, cleanliness, fashioning — so exploitation by masters was easy. The so-called "Apprenticeship system" was abused, as cheap labour was often secured by what amounted to slavery for paupers' children. A period of prosperity in the seventeen eighties and the ease with which the craft could be learnt led to overcrowding in the industry when trade declined or fashions changed, as after 1813, and numbers were thrown on to parish relief. "Poor as a stockinger" became a common saying. William Hutton, the Derby historian, recalls his brother's "starvation" as a journeyman stockinger after seven years' apprenticeship.

The efforts of the framework knitters to help themselves, and arguments for and against their cause, may be found in a number of pamphlets published in Derby. They begin with a report in 1780 recording the failure of a proposed Framework Knitters' Bill to regulate wages, the *Mercury* having announced a meeting to secure support for it. Hosiers and knitters were examined by a Committee of the House of Commons and the workers' poverty was revealed; nothing came of it, for contemporary economic thought was opposed to meddling with wages which "must find their own level". In 1812 the knitters vainly asked for regulation of prices and frame rents, and though no bill was passed, apparently in 1817 hosiers and workers agreed on "statement prices". This is clear from a pamphlet by "Humanus" (Henry Bayley), called "The Question at Issue between the Framework

Knitters and their Employers Impartially Stated". The hosiers had reduced the agreed prices, a strike, or turn-out, followed, though under the Combination Acts it could be called a "conspiracy", and this pamphlet set out the workers' case "not for abundance but for competence" and appealed for help to ease a situation in which "artful and designing men might sow the seeds of discontent", thus expressing a fear of revolution common to that age. Yet he did exhort the knitters to win public esteem by conducting themselves "as good subjects and good members of society, as tender husbands and prudent fathers, dutiful sons and peaceable neighbours."

In 1821 too, the Reverend Edward Higginson, Unitarian Minister in Derby, published "An Inquiry into the Present State of the Hosiery Business", provoked by the vain attempts of the framework knitters to remedy their distressed condition. He admitted their right to seek legally an increased wage but pointed out that they were really no worse off than other workers; in fact they should be better off as prices were now lower and their children could work from an early age from "the perfection of the machine". His pamphlet interestingly reflects current thought and some of his remarks might even be heard to-day. Minimum wage laws were impossible for "the more trade is clogged by laws, the less freely it moves", and "no capitalist will willingly invest his fortune where he cannot employ it without control". Forcing up wages would ruin the bag hosiers and this would be contrary to "the equal rights and liberties of Englishmen", and too, "labour like every article of commerce must be left to find its own level". Hosiers must not be blamed for low wages, but bad times and superabundant labour. "Diminution of the insupportable load of taxation" would be the most effective method of remedying the situation and meantime surely constant work for many at low wages was better than employment for a few, and those the best workers only, at a higher figure.

"The Case of the Framework Knitters Impartially Considered" came out in 1824. The anonymous writer

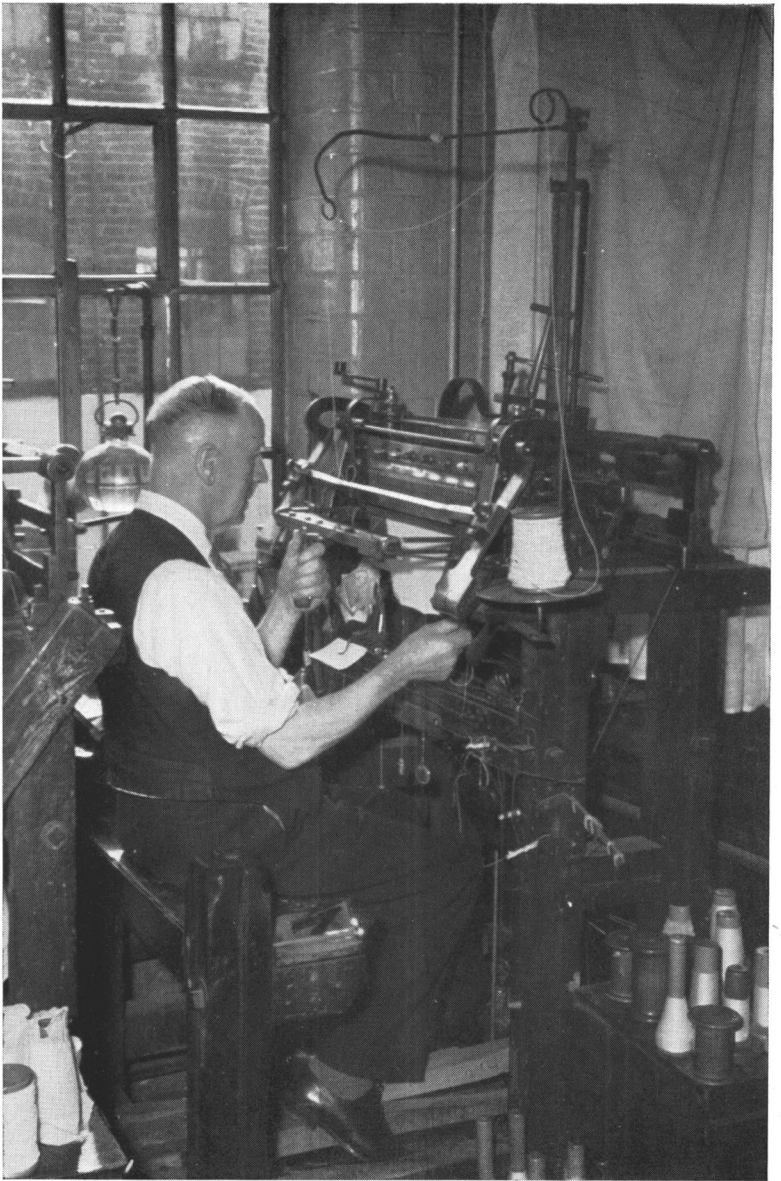
accused them of ignorance of the laws of supply and demand when they struck for higher wages. The agreed prices of 1817 were now impossible; the strike would be useless in the long run as a victory would not recover lost earnings nor prevent the hosiers from dismissals when they had to choose between that and continuing the low wages. If the public responded to their appeal for help the workers were pauperised by such charity and would the more readily ask for parish relief. Knitters must organise their own funds in good times, train fewer workers and remember that others earned even less. This was advice that must have been little acceptable in bad times!

The unknown author of "The Reply of the Framework Knitters" (1824) declared this a biased pamphlet. As uneducated men they found it difficult to answer "artful and educated employers with an understanding among themselves." Parish relief was unwillingly sought, the writer declared, and asked "Ought not the employer to be sometimes contented with less profit as well as the workman with less wages?" Some hosiers had increased wages originally lowered in 1817 when corn prices were down and the rest could follow. The strike was a public appeal as their wages were never "beyond the means of sustenance."

This strike action and appeals appear to have had no permanent effects, but after thirty years' failure, the Framework Knitters in plain silk hose succeeded in forming a Union, their average earnings then being nine shillings a week after the usual deductions, comparable to a mere apprentice's wage thirty years before. This success was reported in November, 1833, in the *Pioneer*, a Birmingham penny weekly, sold by a Derby agent.

Despite the constant complaints of low wages it is therefore strange to find in the evidence of the 1844 Commission of Inquiry that the industry was still so widespread in Derbyshire. That the inquiry produced any wage improvement seems unlikely in view of the complaints of the suitably named Jeremiah Briggs, who wrote in 1851 in *The Counter-Actor and Political Equity* a pamphlet against "truck" payments and stoppages of





*photo by R. F. M. Wright*

A SURVIVING STOCKING FRAME IN DERBY

*facing p. 113*

wages in the domestic system. He agreed that the best masters charged frame rent only if a man was actually working, but middlemen existed who rented frames for ninepence a week and sublet them for two and sixpence. That the trade was an even poorer one now is clear if his calculations are exact: for rent of frames, three and sixpence a week; making one dozen pairs of stockings, one shilling; so seven dozen pairs must be made to earn a clear wage of three and sixpence!

Exactly when framework knitting died out as a domestic industry is not discoverable. It seems likely that there is much more to be learnt about the whole matter, and evidence of its last years is not very clear. There were workers in Duffield, Holbrook and Milford at least until the late eighteen-seventies, probably later, for one Holbrook worker supplied special silk stockings for Messrs. Brettle at Belper. Women seamed the stockings and embroidered clocks, and children, according to one piece of personal evidence, in 1863 or thereabouts were taught this work at the age of five. All worked long hours for a mere pittance. A few workshops continued later and some machines may still be found, though no longer in use. An example is that shown in the photograph, preserved in the works of Messrs. F. Longdon & Co. of Derby. The last independent stockinger in the county was probably Edward Haslam of Bargate. Except for an interval during a slump about 1908 when he worked in Ireland, near Dublin where the framework knitting was still done, he used a frame in his own home until 1913, when he was about sixty.

Unless it was combined, as it sometimes was, with an occupation like farming, framework knitting, even in its heyday, can have provided at best but a poor living. Why then, unless it was the attraction of independence, did it survive so long?

#### AUTHORITIES.

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114 THE FRAMEWORK KNITTERS OF DERBYSHIRE

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