

National College of Art & Design
Fine Art (Textiles Art and Artefact) and School of Education, 2025

Forget Me Notts
The Rise and Fall of Nottingham Lace
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School of Visual Culture

I declare that this **Critical Cultures Research Project** is all my own work and that all sources have been fully acknowledged.

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Date: 5th January 2025

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Introduction

In this research project, I shall explore the history of Nottingham Lace and its rise to worldwide popularity. How did Nottingham Lace, a luxurious handcraft, become exploited into its endangerment through industrialisation and globalisation? Who, if anyone, today is nurturing the fragile craft to its former glory? I will explore these questions in depth while sharing ancestral anecdotes rooted in Nottingham Lace.

I excitedly anticipate the annual family visit to Nottingham, my mother's birthplace and home to my grandparents. Nottingham is a bustling city located in the English Midlands. Its rich history tells tales of the infamous Robin Hood, who stole from the rich and gave to the poor. The mediaeval Nottingham Castle rises upon a hill and overlooks the city, whispering ancient tales of bygone bloodshed and victory. Our annual visits were halted in 2020 when CoronaVirus plagued the planet. We stayed at home to protect our loved ones, and my maternal grandmother found her entertainment in researching our family history.



Figure 1. Generational family photo worked upon bobbin lace sample, 2024, L-R: My mother, my great-grandmother, me, my grandmother, artwork by the author.

I find family history a fascinating subject. I would not be here without my ancestors, yet I know barely anything about them. As I aided my grandmother in her research, one particular pattern emerged. From lacemakers and Swiss embroiderers to menders in the Women's Air Force during World War II, I am the fifth generation to be a part of the textiles industry, mainly centred in the Nottingham Lace Industry. In Figure 1 (above), you can see four of these generations. My great-grandmother, Dorothy Van Ham (née Stedham) was enlisted in the Women's Air Force as a uniforms mender, during World War II. My grandmother, Andrea Meredith (née Van Ham), practically mends, knits and makes dresses. She has made baby blankets and clothes for her children and grandchildren. My mother, Clair Carroll (née Meredith), learnt lace-making in Girl Scouts and taught the skill to me. During my most recent annual visit, I spent a whole weekend with one task in mind: find a piece of genuine Nottingham Lace. Considering it was such a large local trade, I assumed this to be a successful task. Despite searching high and low, I could not source a single piece, concretizing why this research topic is so important to me. I wish to honour all those who have come before me and prove that their lives dedicated to the industry will not be forgotten.

In Chapter One, I will revisit the craft's history and rise to worldwide recognition. In Chapter Two, I aim to dive into how the craft faced near extinction due to exploitation. I hope to investigate who is left out there to celebrate the industry, refusing to succumb to its removal from the current market. To aid me in my research, I will consult sources online to look at the historical background of Nottingham Lace. These will include records and raconteurs. I will also personally visit the Nottingham Lace Gallery, located in Nottingham Castle, as a form of primary research. To explore who keeps traditional handcraft alive in Ireland, I wish to research the lace artist and educator Fiona Harrington. It almost seems bizarre that to find genuine Nottingham Lace, considering its historically prominent market, is like finding a diamond in the rough.

Chapter 1: The Rise and Fall of Nottingham Lace

1.1: Histories of Lace Makers and Place

Handmade Nottingham Lace embellished the clothes of the wealthy for centuries. Making high-end luxury commodities such as wedding veils, christening dresses, gloves, stockings, curtains, napkins, tapestries, and fans required hours of labour and an abundance of local raw materials. Designing patterns, winding bobbins, and meticulously constructing and finishing the delicate products took time and effort. Nottingham Lace was a specialist trade where commissions were flaunted as a status symbol.



Figure 2. Bobbin lace pillow with partially made lace, on a spherical fruitwood stand, ca.

1840-90

As demand grew, so did the costs of raw materials and labour. Innovators in the industry had to meet these demands with open minds and reconsider how to industrialise lace. William Lee's invention of the stocking frame, centuries earlier in 1589, was the first machine adapted

to fabricate lace. John Heathcoat's Bobbin-net machine and John Lever's Leavers Lace Machine were inspired by the previous to push boundaries to improve lace-making (Nottingham Castle, n.d.).

By the nineteenth century, lace-making machines were in full swing. The traditional handcraft was being produced faster and cheaper than ever before. "The Market, interlocked with the structure of machinery construction, supply of material, design and shipment, was so efficient that even in 1860 a piece of lace could be made, bleached, dressed, finished and delivered to London within two days" (1974, cited in Foster, n.d., p.55)

The industry was very complex, with a wide variety of career opportunities. Employed were designers, bobbin winders, twist hands, brown room workers, bleachers, dyers, dressers, finishers, menders and packers for each of the three types of lace produced: plain net lace, curtain lace and dress lace (Nottingham Castle, n.d.). While the role of designing lace and working the machines was male-dominated, women and children as young as the age of five years old were in charge of finishing the final lace products. The population had inflated steadily due to the trade attracting workers of all ages and skill sets. "...while including the suburban parishes, which are practically parts of Nottingham, there are about 150,000 in all. It has risen from 35,000, the number in 1811" (Felkin, 1866, p.536). The workers would earn between five and forty shillings a week, depending on what department they were working in. Today, this is the equivalent of between twenty-five and two hundred British pounds a week.

Workers and merchants from all over the world soon became curious about what the lace-making epicentre could offer. Not only were physical goods being manufactured, but knowledge about the trade was being shared and re-imagined, enabling its expansion. A career in the Nottingham lace industry was sought after by many from near and further afield. One who sought work includes my great-great-grandfather, John Collins (Figure 3).



*Figure 3. John Collins, [ca. 1937], surrounded by bobbin lace samples, 2024, made by
author*

John was born on the Shankill Road in Belfast in 1874. He was a highly skilled Swiss Embroiderist, specialising in Broderie-Anglaise. Once he married my great-great-grandmother, a Catholic Glaswegian named Hannah, he converted and moved to Nottingham in 1920 to pursue a career in the lace industry. Another great-great-grandfather of mine, William Charles Stedham, was born in Somerset, Bristol, to a family who all played a part in the Nottingham Lace Industry. He worked on the machines before his conscription to the British Army during World War I.

1.2: Globalisation of a Local Luxury

The repurposing of William Lee's sixteenth-century invention of the Stocking Frame (Figure 4), three centuries after its first invention, was the first stepping stone towards the international trading stage. The industry's successful adaptation of the frame by the eighteenth century meant "fabrics could be knitted with as many as 38 needles to the inch, though 20 to 24 were more common" (Lewis, 1986, p.129). The repurposing of this simple machine paved the way for the machine-made lace that took the global market by storm. Leading international countries, for example, Germany and the United States of America, were importing Nottingham Lace. "...the early-twentieth century accounted for one-million pounds worth of lace annually (just under one-hundred-million pounds today)" (Briggs-Goode et al., 2024, p.2). Only for Lee, the innovation for other lace-making machines to cope with the market demand and enter the international exchange would never have come to fruition.

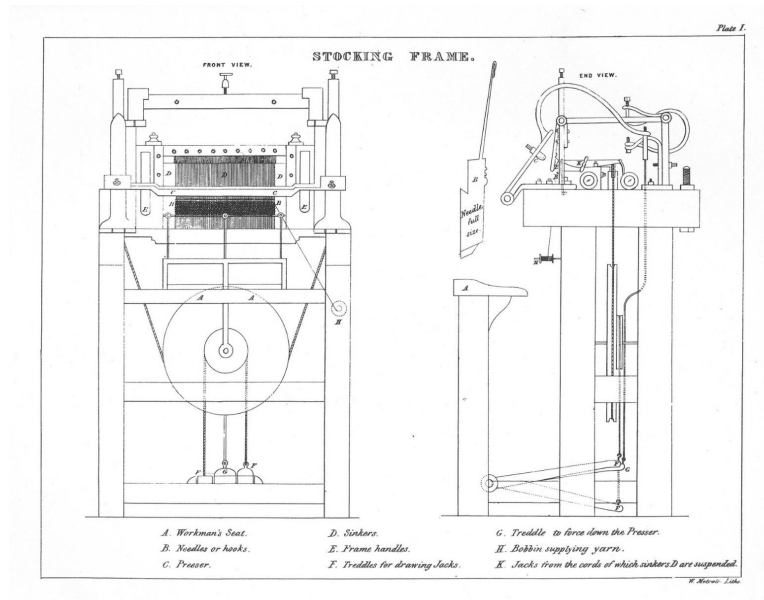


Figure 4. Front and End views of a knitting frame with captions of its various components, (1867, cited in Norman, n.d., n.p.)

Established by the eighteenth century were domestic and global lace markets. The industry and its amenities attracted workers from near and far. These workers settled down and raised families, who entered the workforce and continued the cycle. As the population of Nottingham grew expansively, settlers had needs from which the lace market could profit: clothing. While Nottingham Lace started as a luxury commodity, traders began to innovatively question how to produce lace for less cost and more people. Searching further afield for cheaper materials and new perspectives could solve this issue. Marks and Spencer collaborated with a Nottingham Lacemaker, Guy Birkin, in 1982. On Jacquardtronic Lace Machines, they created all-over stretch lace underwear sets, giving the consumer “no longer a need to choose between comfort and glamour” (Briggs-Goode et al., 2024, p.5). What was once considered a high-end product that only the wealthy could afford was now an everyday working-class garment.

On the surface, lace is dainty and neat. However, the story of Nottingham Lace’s downfall provides a harsh contrast, one that is far from the delicacy of the craft. Due to inflation, the cost of sourcing local raw materials rose swiftly annually, harming the globalisation of a once purely domestic trade. In one case, the cost of raw materials inflated by seventy-five per cent in four years. “Although since 1862 there have occurred great fluctuations in demand, the prices of both silk and cotton materials have advanced full 75 per cent” (Felkin, 1866, p. 536). While the Lace Market’s prices continued to inflate due to rising costs, the international market became frustrated. Instead of importing genuine Nottingham Lace, they began to make their own. We can see how much the global market played a part in keeping Nottingham Lace afloat in a nineteenth-century carving found on Warser Gate, located in the heart of the Nottingham Lace Market (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Warser Gate, (NottinghamshireLive, 2024, n.p.)

Britannia, representing Britain, is flanked on a port by a merchant on her left and a worker on her right. The industrial buildings represent the amount of labour exerted into the lace products Nottingham is known for. The ships in the port represent the “expansion of empire and trade at this time” (Foster, n.d., p.33). Nottingham’s Lace Market heavily relied upon the reputation they had built and upheld. The international market’s slow decline was miniscule at first, but became catastrophic as time passed.

Chapter 2: Erasure versus Celebration of the Local

2.1: Exploitation of a Local Trade

Although inflation played a role in the downfall of Nottingham Lace, it is not the sole blame. The Lace Market itself had a large part to play in its rise and fall in a self-inflicted manner. Once the city of Nottingham remodelled lace production through machines, countries that imported Nottingham Lace sought to impose methods to imitate the commodities. As the price of Nottingham Lace continued to increase, lace machines started to disappear through smuggling into foreign territories such as France, the United States of America and Russia. By 1818, traders caught exporting the local machines overseas were issued fines. However, machine pieces could be unassembled and smuggled internationally through Calais as ‘scrap metal’. Not only were machines leaving The Lace Market’s locality, but workers were emigrating for better living conditions and wages for their expertise. “...By 1839 there were at least seven machines built in Nottingham that were operated in Moscow by British workers” (2019, cited in Briggs-Goode et al., 2024, p.2).

As the saying goes, a new brush sweeps clean. Emigrating workers went from a minority in a large industry to an expert in a smaller company willing to pay for their tricks of the trade. Domestic workers were infuriated with this exploitation of their local trade. In the 1930s, workers continuously campaigned against overseas competition. In these protests, workers would wear badges made of Schiffli machine-embroidered lace, reading “Safeguard Lace” (Figure 6). They would travel to Hyde Park in London on specially commissioned trains in a desperate plea to safeguard their craft.



Figure 6. Safeguard Lace badge, 1930 (courtesy of King, A., 2024, see appendices).

Yet the workers' pleas weren't listened to, and machines continued to be illegally exported. These countries started to innovate English-made machines to make them quicker and more efficient than ever before. In the 1950s, German-born Karl Mayer introduced his Raschels Machine. This machine could produce lace “faster, cleaner, quieter, more flexible, electronic, and later computer-controlled. And importantly they could work with synthetic yarns” (Briggs-Goode et al., 2024, p.4). This lace could successfully mirror the effects of the Nottingham machine-made lace at a far cheaper price. Gradually, the Nottingham Lace Industry started to import the German-made Raschels, diminishing the rate of lace they were manufacturing on their native Leavers Lace Machines. Local industry workers witnessed the international market for which they once catered expand. The one which they had built from the ground up perished.

As the global market for lace began to produce more efficient and affordable lace, the Nottingham-based workshops, warehouses, and stores closed their doors. “The loss of many small businesses, with perhaps only a dozen or so workers each, didn’t seem that important in

the great push for faster, more efficient production” (Briggs-Goode et al., 2024, p.7). Small closures began to occur more frequently, tearing further holes through the industry that were getting excessively difficult to patch. When a leading lace machine-making company, WJ Walker, closed its doors in the 1950s, they put their machines up for domestic sales. Unfortunately, the state of the trade had diminished beyond repair, and international manufacturers bought the domestic machines. Nottingham Lace was a trademark design. It had fallen into a vulnerable state due to an allowance of exploitation of what was once solely theirs.

2.2: Keeping the Tradition Alive

The lace industry is quite literally hanging on by a thread. Yet its value is starting to increase, thanks to several conservation projects and archives for the nearly extinct craft that is Nottingham Lace.

We can glimpse what Nottingham Lace once was from a small and select number of companies. One such company is Debbie Bryan, a design studio and tea room in The Lace Market. The residing gallery is home to a heritage archive of Nottingham Lace in which “you can spot technician’s tables, lace winders, stools and chairs” (Bryan, 2024, n.p.).

Stemming from a ninth-generation family-run business, Cluny of Ilkeston is the only lace manufacturer which operates. The manufacturer located in neighbouring Derbyshire still operates on native Leavers Lace Machines. For two centuries, the Mason family has managed the company. This family’s history is rooted in the local textile industry, which mirrors my ancestors. This small company only employs around ten skilled workers. They have not inherited all the materials to finish the lace they produce, so they export their commodities to France for this service. The industry has gone full circle; only high-end clients can commission lace, as it once was at the beginning of the industry. “Famously in 2012, Cluny Lace supplied the Royal School of Needlework at Hampton Court Palace with lace to create Kate Middleton’s royal lace appliqué for her veil and shoes - for her wedding to Prince William, Duke of Cambridge” (Bryan, 2024, n.p.). (Figure 7). The company mainly specialises in client-based commissions such as Haute Couture and Ecclesiastical Lace.



Figure 7. Nottingham Lace highlighted on the wedding dress of Kate Middleton, (Leader, J., 2011, n.p.)

The most commendable contributor to the conservation of Nottingham Lace is by far Nottingham City Museums and Galleries (NCMG), which also houses an extensive and accessible archive in Nottingham Castle. Collecting since 1878, the museum houses a wide variety of historical pieces. Delicate lace samples are hung in frames, while lace clothing from the centuries adorn mannequins centred in the middle of the room. Interesting antiquities, such as menus, medical applications (Figure 8) and fans, are dotted around.

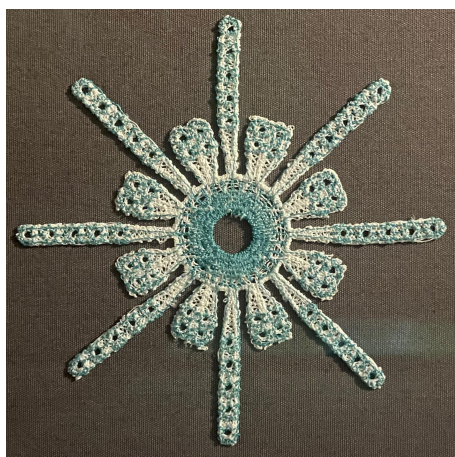


Figure 8. Implant for reconstructive shoulder surgery, 2004

Lace-making machines are on show, from traditional techniques where your hand acted as a machine, like bobbin lace, to the industrial machines which were shipped internationally, causing the craft's demise. Wandering through the exhibition while reading up on the history of the workers and techniques was a surreal experience. I found this exhibition fascinating as I felt like I could finally learn about the work of my ancestors. I could understand the complexities behind the traditional craft that Nottingham became the epicentre for.

NCMG have also curated interactive workshops and outcomes for an eighteen-month research and development plan named 'Lace Unravelling' (Figure 9).



Figure 9. Leaflet for Lace Unravelling roadshow, (Briggs-Goode, A., et al., 2021, p.10)

“The Lace Unravelling project sought not only to preserve tangible objects but also the intangible heritage connected with the Lace Industry” (Briggs-Goode, A. et al., 2021, p.9). NCMG encouraged any locals who worked or had ancestors in the industry to bring paraphernalia connected to the lace industry to a roadshow they hosted for either discussion

or donation. The exhibition also considered how Nottingham Lace was a global sensation and invited international lace industry workers to get involved. This project was a success, and NCMG continues to shape the future of the lace industry by looking into the past. Not all hope is lost and maybe one day, Nottingham Lace will rise again.

2.3 A Contemporary Take on Tradition



Figure 10. Fiona Harrington (Harrington, n.d., n.p.)

Closer to home, one lace artist practices a blend of traditional handcraft lace with contemporary techniques. Fiona Harrington (Figure 10) has worked as a visual artist, lacemaker and educator for two decades. Blending an artistic and academic approach, she specialises in Kenmare Needlepoint Lace, Bobbin Lace and Carrickmacross Lace. Her artist process is one very similar to mine, as she strives to keep the flame of Irish lace-making alive. “Through her innovative approach to lace, the heritage and history of lacemaking in Ireland is reinvigorated and preserved” (Harrington, n.d., n.p.).

Harrington’s introduction to lace was a lace exhibition in Birmingham, a city located just an hour’s drive south west of Nottingham. The contemporary exhibition opened her mind and allowed her to revisit her past. “It actually triggered a memory that I’d forgotten, about my mother making lace” (Rockhart, 2024, n.p.). Like my own practice, this realisation of family history in the industry prompted Harrington to research into the industry, noting its rise and

fall due to industrialisation. She found the history spanned for decades as she found herself falling into a rabbit hole of newfound knowledge.



Figure 11. Fiona Harrington, Fragile Economies, 2020. (RDS, n.d., n.p.)

Harrington's blending of traditional handcraft lace with contemporary techniques can be depicted in *Fragile Economies* (Figure 11), exhibited in the National Gallery of Ireland. Lace-making in Ireland was a female-dominated field of work. Drawing on another female-dominated method of work, poultry keeping. Poultry keeping would contribute to household food security in working class families, and was considered a female practice. Harrington spotted the dualities and merged the two workforces into one. She combined the delicacy of the fragile eggshells with dainty lace pieces. "The fragility of the materials also reflects the precarious nature of the industries examined in the narrative" (Harrington, n.d., n.p.). The eggshells, lace pieces and future of the lace industry are all under immense pressure and fragility. In this day and age, art continuously cries out for a break in tradition and innovation. Harrington answers this call through her practice. Sealing the fate of lace, she ensures its continued relevance as traditional styles are hindered, and contemporary styles are

accelerated. If artists like Harrington continue to advocate for the future of the industry, then its future is on track to recovery.

Conclusion

To summarise this research essay, it is clear that not all hope is lost. The production of Nottingham Lace began as a hand-crafted, commissioned commodity for the affluent. The Industrial Revolution introduced machines that became increasingly innovative. Following this, the desirable lace became affordable. Globalisation of this industrialisation caused the domestic market to shrink exponentially. Workers left, and supply chains closed their doors. However, the industry refused to accept total extinction.

Companies, such as Cluny of Ilkeston, continue to make lace using historical designs and machines. These have survived through exploitation forced onto them by self-proclaimed innovators who are more concerned about globalisation rather than caring for the domesticity of their trade. Advocates such as Debbie Bryan and NCMG continue to facilitate and support conversations based on lace making, paying homage to the centuries of work carried out by ancestors. Contemporary artists such as Fiona Harrington take techniques rooted in history and provide a twist to modernise and personalise the craft.

While conducting research, I came across some limitations. When I visited Nottingham to research this essay, I had planned on researching two establishments that exhibit and sell Nottingham Lace. Yet when I arrived, one was closed for refurbishment, and the other was not open to the public. As I work and reside in Ireland, I only visit Nottingham annually, so revisiting is unfortunately not an option. If I were to conduct further research, I would get in touch with more archives, artists and suppliers who either produce or house Nottingham Lace. I would visit to converse about their practice and inspiration behind the continuation of Nottingham Lace's legacy.

As a Textile Art and Artefact student, I thoroughly enjoy lace making. I aim to provide my own interpretation through bobbin lace making using unique materials and embellishing pieces with family photos. Each piece I make always provides a nod to someone who has shaped who I am as a person, and also how I work as a textiles student.



Figure 12. Photograph of my great-grandparents Alice and Bill Meredith, [c.a. 1968], woven through plastic Bobbin Lace sample, made by author, 2024.

As an Education student, secondary school art teaching is the clear first destination after graduation. My studio knowledge would allow me to feel comfortable in introducing textiles into the classroom. I never touched on the craft until I began studying at the National College of Art and Design in Dublin, and this is something that I wish to change for future students. I aim to push the boundaries of delicacy and time management associated with textiles techniques and differentiate it for proper classroom use. This would allow students to open their minds and consider its wide range of possibilities.

When I began this essay, I planned to focus on how the industry rose globally and what caused its demise. I never thought that the industry's legacy lives on. My viewpoint on the fate of Nottingham Lace has certainly shifted now, and this installs a feeling of hope inside me, hope that there is a future to the past of Nottingham Lace. I hope that artists and advocates continue to raise awareness about the handcraft exploited by its overseers. I hope that I am making those who have come before me proud by sharing their stories and incorporating pieces of them into my studio practice.

On a final note as I conclude this essay, I am pleased to confirm that thanks to my Grandpa, I have finally acquired a piece of Nottingham Leavers Lace to call my own. This piece of lace was found hidden away in my grandparent's attic, gifted from a family member who worked on the lace making machines at the Leavers Lace Making Factory in Nottingham.



Figure 13. Nottingham Genuine Leavers Lace

Appendices

From: jasmineacarroll@gmail.com

To: nottingham.castle@nottinghamcity.gov.uk

Date: 4 September 2024

Hi,

I am an art student based in Dublin, Ireland with a large interest in Nottingham Lace due to my family heritage in the industry. I visited the exhibition today to research for an upcoming project which I really enjoyed.

I took many pictures but there is one in a particular part of the exhibition that I found very important. I have taken a photo but unfortunately it came out blurry.

As I mentioned before, I'm based in Dublin, and I have no way to return to rephotograph this piece. Is there any other way I could access a photo? Could one be sent on?

It would be amazing if you could get back to me on this.

Kind regards,

Jasmine

From: museum.collections@nottinghamcity.gov.uk

To: jasmineacarroll@gmail.com

Date: 10 September 2024

Dear Jasmine,

Thank you for your enquiry which has been passed to museum collections. I attach an image of NCM 1993-358, the “Safeguard Lace” roundel.



Kind Regards,

Andrew King

Registrar

Nottingham City Museums & Galleries

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