



FISHING BOATS AT BEER, DEVONSHIRE

A LACE-MAKER'S PILGRIMAGE IN DEVON

BY MABEL FOSTER BAINBRIDGE

DEVON is delightful from whatever point of view it is approached, but most fascinating of all to one on a lace pilgrimage. Our Mecca was a particular little village, off the railroad, off the beaten path, but on the sea. Jack Rabbitt drove us over from the nearest train stop, some mile and a half, and we reached our inn just at tea time.

This is a lace pilgrimage, but to slight that tea, which was repeated every day of our visit, would put you quite out of harmony with our sojourn. Bodies of lobsters perched invitingly on a large platter (each guest was expected to consume the meat of an entire shell-fish), a generous bowl of luscious strawberries, another of Devon's famous clotted cream, bread cut delightfully thin and spread with unsalted butter, our pots of steaming tea, and last, but first in importance, our charming gracious hostesses from whose every act emanated kindness and hospitality. We left the hour of supper with them, and were delightfully surprised to have it set at half after nine. They hated to have us miss the sunset and twilight, and it was still light until nearly ten!

Tea finished, we set out to inspect the town, which consists chiefly of a long street between clay cliffs. This Devon coast is very rugged, and red and gray cliffs extend straight to the water's edge, broken here and there by little beaches and harbors. On one side of this main street runs a little stream with a pump every so often where one may see women filling their pitchers with water, and one another's ears with gossip. The stream comes from a spring a short distance inland, and is the water used to drink. The street is good, bordered with the tortuous little sidewalks one so often finds in villages both English and continental, made of small cobblestones set upright, so that one walks on a sea of little points. Most of the houses are right on the street and seem to nestle close as for protection. When one leaves the village a bit there are plenty of charming thatched-roof cottages set in dainty gardens.

Two and only two industries flourish here: the men fish and eke out a very precarious living, and women make bobbin lace. The boats go out at night, and come in early in the morning, to lie, as though posing, on the beach all day, with their painted sails rigged in a queer square style that is extremely picturesque. Often the nets are spread on the sand to dry and be mended by the old men who have outlived their usefulness as active fishermen.

They make simply Honiton or Devon lace in this village, although some of the adjoining villages are copying the Italian laces, which seems a pity as not too much good Devon lace is put on the market. For those to whom bobbin lace is a mystery a description of the making will not come amiss. They use a very large round pillow solidly packed with hay, on to which they pin their pattern or pricking. The patterns were originally parchment, but at the present time a heavy paper or cardboard has been substituted for the old sheepskin. The worker is guided by lines of pin holes which indicate the pattern. The bobbins are wound, attached by pins, and the work begins. Every hole demands a pin. The bobbins, Devon "sticks," are used in pairs or Devon "couples," the couple that serve as weavers are known as "runners," and those that hang straight, and through which the runners weave as "passives."

A little maid whom I'd met in a London lace school did the honors of her native village, and we were most graciously received in the tiny homes. The industry here, and generally, is a cottage industry. After the housework, the pillow. Under Dorothy's guidance, I saw enough

workers and work to judge with whom it would be wise to cast in my lot. Several workers boasted certificates and medals won at the St. Louis Exposition. I made arrangements for lessons, and the winding of my bobbins or "sticks."

Several reels in which pegs are arranged to hold the skein of thread, and which have a little hole where one inserts the bobbin to be wound, were at my disposal. I chose to wind on the turn of a dear old lady of eighty-seven. She lived in a little house of four rooms, two above and two below, and still made a pretense of gaining her livelihood with her bobbins. On account of past favors, our kind hostesses, who owned her little cottage, gave it to her for a shilling a week, and generally sent her in a hot dinner at noon for good measure!

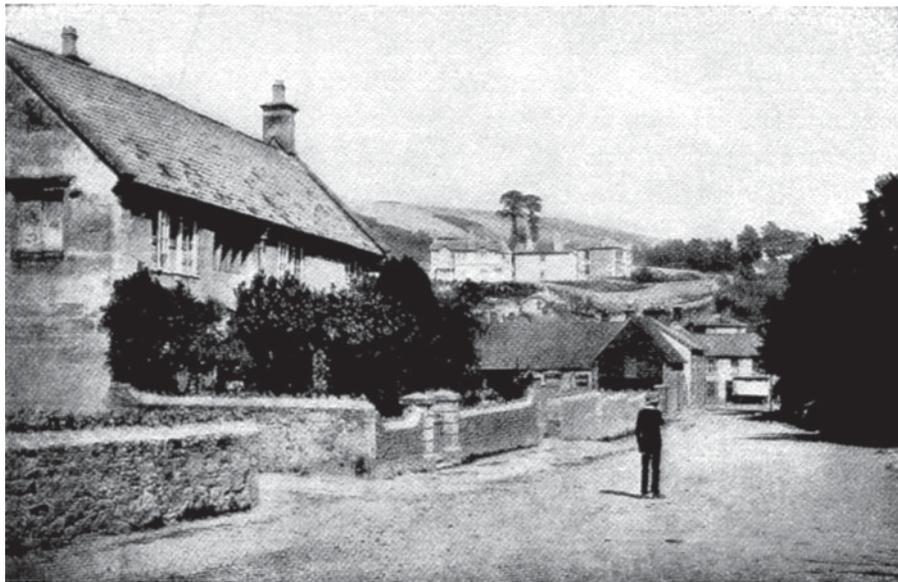
I wound and she told of the old days when she went to London in a sailing vessel. It took five days, which was exciting to be sure, but the thrilling part was the return trip by train coach, and the last bit in a donkey cart! The second event in her life was working on Queen Victoria's wedding gown. She was very young but any child old enough to "throw a stick" was allowed to do a stitch or two. The villagers never allow one to forget that to them belongs the honor of having made the entire gown.

Bobbins wound, I went for my lesson. My teacher, a maiden lady, lived with her very old mother in a tiny cottage. The lower floor consists of two rooms, one, kitchen, dining and living room combined, the other, a sort of work room. This living room was scrupulously clean, a tiny bit of a fire always burned in the grate over which hung and sung an iron kettle. Opposite was an old Welsh dresser with its lines of plates and cups. I regret that I never had a peep into the drawers and cupboards below. The old mother had attended lace school at six years; after she had learned her craft, she was apprenticed for a year and a half without pay. It was the custom for the girls to acquire their 3 R's as they could, but fortunately for her, the vicar's wife held evening school for the lace-makers.

Someone has written that a worker does the same pattern all her life, which statement the old workers keenly resent. One showed me in repudiation a large drawer, filled with parchments she had worked on. It is true that they almost never have a complete pattern of anything large. A berth for instance is divided into sections, which are given out to different workers, the parts being joined by the local dealer. In this

way an order is quickly executed, also the workers are kept from owning a complete pattern, so a purchaser must always buy through the dealer.

The shops of the local dealers are quaint. One sees a window filled with lace, but on entering discovers butter and cheese to be the chief commodities sold. A red-cheeked woman with a clean white apron stands knife in hand to cut your bit of cheese or butter. Tucked away in a small box under the counter is the rest of her stock of lace. Another window



STREET IN BEER, DEVONSHIRE

that portended a considerable shop, we found on entering to be built into the general living room, where we were invited to sit with the family, and look the lace over. The people are naturally very courteous, and unlike so many shops on the continent, a visitor, whether a purchaser or not, is ushered out with the same politeness.

These people of South Devon are not altogether English. Many French Huguenots escaped persecution on this hospitable shore, and some writers think it is to these people that Devon owes her lace industry. Others believe that it is to the Flemish workers who came in 1662, and that these lace makers taught the English. Both name and feature indicate also Spanish blood. In the old days, when smuggling was an

important industry, a Spanish vessel was wrecked on these shores and the crew settled in this village. Nature seems to have designed this coast for the use of smugglers. It is riddled with caves not visible at high water, but safe and dry. There still hang some of the chains by means of which the smugglers used to draw themselves and their wares into their cosy caves.

Mornings, I worked with my teacher, and what joy it was to see the figures grow under her guidance; such skill and patience! This woman who had never been in a train, had never heard more than the echo of the world outside her village, was a perfect craftsman. She disdained all the slack short cuts to completion, and did her work with the thoroughness of the true artist. Her quaint Devon dialect was fascinating. Everything abbreviated, the pillow was "pill," open work "op," and pronouns always reversed. She would ask me, "If her was goin' to bring he pill this op?" which is to say, "Did I care to come for a lesson that afternoon?" In Devon one never makes lace but is always "at he pill," pill being invariably masculine.

It is to the credit of the workers that the finished product is so clean. It is the height of bad manners for a collector to tell a worker her lace is dirty. The dealer or collector has a skein of new thread always at hand, which she lays across lace of a questionable color. "He do be colored" is sometimes reluctantly admitted, and a word to the wise is sufficient.

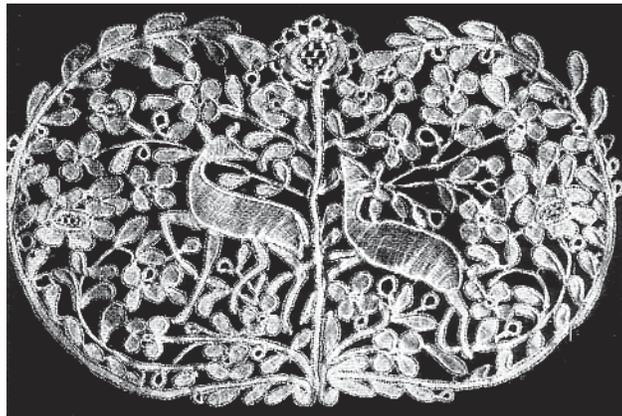
Devonshire lace is best known as Honiton, and derives its name from the dear little village of Honiton which lies deep between the hills a short distance from Exeter, the county seat. The village boasts a single broad street with a few little side lanes, and one still pays a toll to enter!

Exeter has a famous shop in the cathedral close, where are displayed several sorts of lace. Many years ago, the proprietress, a Mrs. Treadwin, wrote an excellent book (now out of print) on Devon lace. She was a very clever woman and her influence did much to elevate and keep alive the industry.

I wanted especially to have a piece of lace made by these women whom I knew and loved, but as their little shops offered nothing that I could use, they duplicated the piece that won the medal at the St. Louis Exposition. Eight women had a hand in the execution and it was some three months before I received the bertha, but it was worth waiting for—a veritable work of art and craftsmanship. The pattern is not typical, but was

drawn by an English lady with the hope of getting the workers away from their shapeless units, exquisitely executed, but miserably drawn.

Back in London after the most delightful sojourn of my life, I regretted, to a woman in a very fashionable lace school, the underpay of the Devon workers. "Why," she contended indignantly, "Miss M—— can always earn tuppence ha' penny an hour,"—and that for perfect work! With the revival of interest in crafts, conditions may change, and, after all, these women must somewhere deep down, experience a joy in reflecting the beauty and peace of their native Devon in perfect handicraft. How many of us in the New World have felt that joy?



MODERN LACE MADE IN DEVONSHIRE
AFTER A DESIGN BY MARIAN
POWYS, A MEMBER OF
THE NEEDLE AND
BOBBIN CLUB