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Honiton Lace Industry.

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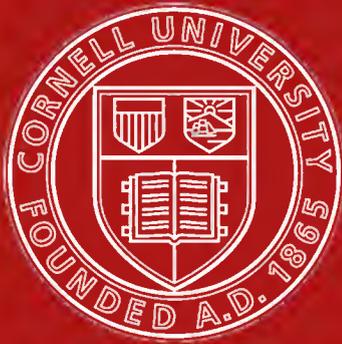
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HONITON LACE INDUSTRY.

84/28

RETURN to an Address of the Honourable The House of Commons,
dated 20 March 1888 ;—for,

“ COPY of REPORT of Mr. *Alan Cole*, Commissioner from the South
Kensington Museum, on the present Condition and Prospects of the
HONITON LACE INDUSTRY.”

Home Office,
11 April 1888. }

C. B. STUART-WORTLEY.

(*Sir John Kennaway.*)

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COPY of REPORT of Mr. *Alan Cole*, Commissioner from the South Kensington Museum, on the present Condition and Prospects of the HONITON LACE INDUSTRY.

Exeter, 31 May 1887. I CALLED on Mrs. Treadwin, purveyor of laces to the Queen. Mrs. Treadwin is well acquainted with the condition of the lace business during the last 40 years. At the time of the Exhibition in 1851, she supplied information to Sir Digby Wyatt for his article on lace-making in his book, "Industrial Arts of the Nineteenth Century," published in 1853. When, in view of "Technical Education," at that time Mr. Octavius Hudson was deputed by the Department of Science and Art to report upon the condition of the lace industry in Devonshire, he derived information from Mrs. Treadwin; and supplied her with a design for a flounce, which she got worked and exhibited in Paris in 1855. Sir Stafford Northcote placed Mrs. Treadwin in communication with the School of Design at Somerset House, and she obtained one or two designs from Mr. Slocombe, &c.; but it appears that the student designers at Somerset House were either unable or unwilling to adopt or make use of suggestions given to them in respect of certain technical necessities to be complied with by anyone designing for the Devonshire pillow-made laces. Although she has largely dealt in the varieties of Devonshire pillow-lace, Mrs. Treadwin has made experiments with other kinds of lace; and some of her best workers have produced faithful copies, in some cases actual fac-similes, of Venetian needle-point lace of the 17th century. (*See specimen in the South Kensington Museum.*)

Mrs. Treadwin's best lace-makers are those who 30 years ago were trained at one or other of her lace-making schools. These workers are now scattered in different towns in or near Devonshire. Mrs. Treadwin finds their work better than any she can obtain elsewhere. She considers that the deterioration of the general run of village-made lace is due in one respect to the absence of regular practice. So many workers merely take up their work spasmodically. If a demand comes, there is haste to supply it, and a consequent sacrifice of quality.

Mrs. Treadwin produces standard pieces up to which her workers have to work. She rather complained that taste in the worker had not been cultivated for the benefit of the manufacture. The wholesale trade has encouraged hastily-produced laces of poor quality. Mrs. Treadwin considered that a well-made lace from a good design can always sell at a good price. The workers are gradually dying off. No new hands are being trained to succeed them. Lace-making might be taught in schools. It was no use to begin to teach a child who had passed the 4th or 5th standard. Such children, in fact, won't learn the art.

Mrs. Treadwin thought that anything that could be done to call public attention to the gradual demise of the industry would be useful; and that workers might get hints from old specimens, lectures, and such like. If a model lace-making school were started in Exeter, she would be glad to do what she could to help it by means of advice, in respect of material, patterns, &c.

1st June. I visited Beer (about a mile to the west of Seaton), and called upon B., a dealer, who keeps a small grocer's shop. His daughters understand how to prick patterns, join lace together, and make pillow-lace. He buys sprigs from the lace-makers, and has them joined together, and made up into collars, cuffs, &c., by his daughters. He employs some 30 workers or so, from time to time. Twenty years ago there were probably nearly 400 workers at Beer, now there are not more than 60 or 70. No children are taught to make lace. B. remarked how the schools were now "learning" the children to sew and knit, which he thought they might as easily learn at home from their parents. The schools did not "learn" the children anything they could get a livelihood out of afterwards. In the old "lace schools" of

of 20 years or so ago, the dame who kept a school taught the children how to read; but not how to write, nor to cypher. The parents used to send their children to be taught lace-making. It took about a year and a-half to turn out a lacemaker. The schoolmistress would give the instruction, in return for which the children had to give her the results of their labour; or else, she would take pupils upon payment of 1 s. a week for the first month and 4 d. a week afterwards. These "lace schools" closed because the demand for lace fell off so much, and then, when there was a slight revival, the parents declined to let the children go. Children of 12 or 13 who have passed the 4th standard are too old to then begin learning lacemaking. Besides, they look to do better class of work, and take to dressmaking, or go into service for the season at Seaton. There are a number of idlers notwithstanding; and, although the earnings of a lacemaker may not in bad times be more than 3 s. a week, they would be the better for that, if they could make it, than nothing. Competition with machine and foreign laces has lowered the price of the labour. The last really good season was 10 years or so ago. At that time almost every female in the place made lace.

I next called upon C., who, like B., keeps a grocer's or general stores shop. She made remarks about the industry, the teaching children, the schools, &c., to the same effect as B. She thought the "book-learning" had killed the trade. C. occasionally tries a new pattern; "sometimes," as she said, "we sees a new wall paper, and prick a pattern off it, changing a bit here, or leave a little, or add a little." Twenty years ago C. took 40 l. a week, chiefly for work for Mr. D. (a dealer who died some years ago, worth, it is said, over 70,000 l.) When the demand began to decline, C. bought lace as a dealer on her own account. She finds it best to keep to the old patterns, her experience being that when she produces a new one and offers it, the "gentlefolks" call it "machine." The sale at best is a "haphazardly" thing. Sometimes she sells a pound or two's worth of lace a week, sometimes 5 l., and sometimes not a shilling's, nor a sixpence's worth even.

Visiting two other lace shops, I found them kept by lace-makers themselves. One by E. She says new patterns are wanted. She could prick off any that might be given to her. She tries to sell her lace direct to customers; because, when she takes it to the dealers, they offer tenpence for a shilling's worth, and make you take the tenpence in goods. The dealers, in fact, get all the profit any way, whether they pay you in goods or in money. A lace worker who can sit at her work for ten or twelve hours daily may earn 9 d. to 10 d. a day. E. finds that troublesome patterns don't pay as well as simpler ones.

Upon my return homewards, I called at the vicarage to see Mr. Le Geyt, to whom Mr. C. E. Peek had given me an introduction. He would be glad to welcome anything that might do good to the village, and thought it might be useful to try "optional" instruction in lace-making in the school, and encourage it by payment on results.

In the afternoon I went to Colyton, and I called at the chief lace-maker's, F., who had been in the business for fifty years and more. He has a considerable stock of the commoner sort of lace, and I purchased a few specimens at the cost of production (*see 1*). In past years, F. used to travel all over the kingdom with his specimens; now he is too old. Few, if any, dealers travel now. He also keeps a very limited general store shop, and gets his lace in by bartering goods for it. He says that there may be now some 20 workers at Colyton. Formerly he used to employ 100 at a time. Many lace-makers now have taken up with putting bristles into handles for the brush manufactory at Axminster.

Some few old women at Colyton earn 1 s. or 2 s. a week at lace-making, and get out-door relief as well.

2nd June. Drove over to Branscombe, a small village down in a dell towards the shore, like Beer. G. keeps the grocer's and general store shop here, and deals in laces as well, chiefly of the commoner kind, though she had sprigs and small objects of fineish work and thread (*see 2*)*. She finds a fairly ready sale for her lace. She gets it in from some thirty or forty workers,

* This Plate was not printed, but was deposited in the Library of the House of Commons.

workers; she buys quantities of sprigs, which she arranges in different patterns, and joins together. There have been no new patterns lately. A few of the workers teach their children to make lace. "G." pricks the drawings for the workers, who, she says, are not, as a rule, at all "way wise" in pricking patterns. She is afraid that when she goes there will be no one to carry on the business. Her daughter does not care about it. I bought from her some specimens of various qualities of work and thread.

"H." a second dealer in Branscomb, keeps no store shop, but deals only in lace. She says trade is very bad; something is wanted to revive it. Formerly she employed 40 and 50 workers; now scarcely half-a-dozen. The large dealers, she says, beat the workers' prices down as low as possible. Only a few weeks ago a traveller had some of her lace at 16s. 11d. a yard, and wrote to her to say the best offer he had had was 6s. a yard for it. "H." gave me information as to the thread used. It is almost all made at Nottingham. The different sizes are identified by the number of skeins to the $\frac{1}{4}$ oz. hank. The coarser are what are termed 6 and 8 "skip" (or skein). The finest "H.'s" workers use as a rule is 16 to 18 "skip." Ten years ago "H." would get rid of as much as 100l. worth of lace a week, whilst now 10l. worth a week is a good quantity. She complains that the industry stagnates for want of new and young hands. Children are kept at school, and learn to grow "proudlke, and above work." "I think," she said, "our country will come to feel it some day, if they don't now, what with our children being put to so much schooling, and not brought up as they used to be to a trade or occupation." She hoped lace-making might be taught in schools; but "then it would not be much use unless trade revived." I bought from her a small specimen of 12 to 14 skip thread lace (*see 3*).* Later, I called on Mr. Swanborough, the vicar, who would favour lace-making being taught in schools, as beneficial to the village.

3rd June. To Sidmouth, where I called upon "I." the principal lace dealer here. She does not, however, supply the trade, but deals with private customers, preferring to produce as much as possible of the finer laces. She does not employ more than 10 or 12 workers now. She gets in lace worked by others who bring it to her. Three years or so ago, one of the best orders she had was for a flounce, at 50 guineas a yard. For this she used $22\frac{1}{2}$ skip-thread. It took two years to make, and on its completion the workers had got into good training and organisation, so that had fresh orders for this class of work then come in they could have been well carried out. But if a similar flounce were now wanted it would take three years at least to make. The absence of regularity in employment of the better hands necessarily tells upon the quality of such work when from time to time they may be called upon to produce it. "I.'s" experience is that it is only from private customers that orders for fine work are received. And the failure in a steady flow of such orders is chiefly due to public taste setting in the direction of effective laces at prices lower even than those paid for the Belgian and French hand-made laces. "I." has taken many prizes at the Bath and West of England Society's shows. Just at the present, she thinks there are slight symptoms of improved demand; but she finds her own trade somewhat affected by the business, in commoner laces, done by a neighbouring linendraper. I bought from her specimens of work done in 12, 16, and $22\frac{1}{2}$ skip-thread (*see 4 and 5*).

I next called upon "J.," who has almost quite retired from the business with which she has been connected for over 45 years. She is sorry that foreign laces should command a sale to the exclusion of those made at home. Sixty years ago the state of the lace trade was almost as bad as it is now. It got an impetus by Queen Adelaide's wedding dress being made at Honiton. "J.," however, has depended upon orders from wholesale merchants, and has rarely taken orders from private customers. She used to travel with her goods, and the larger firms were her best customers. In the early days of Schools of Design "J." "spent a ten pound note at Somerset House," but no good really came of it; the students did not understand

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stand the technical requirements of designing for the lace maker, and the delicately-painted white patterns were of no use to the worker.

At Sidbury I called at "K.'s." She has now given up business in lace and only keeps a small grocery and sweet shop. There used to be five or six lace schools here. Now, of course, there are none, and yet "K." thinks it would be a good thing if the children could be taught lace-making instead of leaving school "to beg in the street and learn themselves all sorts of wickedness because they don't know what else to do." The lace industry is the only industry here, and the 30 or 40 workers hardly have enough employment to gain their living. I saw one of the workers and bought from her two little bits of her work, of coarse thread (*see 6*).*

4th June. I called upon Mrs. Fowler at Honiton. She is the successor to Mr. Davis (?), formerly lace-maker by appointment to the Queen. For the Jubilee celebration the lace-makers of Honiton are going to form a procession, and already over 100 have sent in their names for this purpose. Mrs. Fowler thinks there must be at least 150 in the town. None are under thirty years of age. No children are being taught. She thinks that not less than three hours a day's practical instruction would be effective in teaching the elder children in an elementary school to make lace, though two hours would do for the younger ones. As a rule thread from 12 to 18 "skip" is used at Honiton. The work made with coarser threads comes from the neighbourhood. Mrs. Fowler pricks all her patterns for the best work. She showed me a piece of lace which she is copying for a lady from a Brussels mixed pillow and needlepoint lace. She employs off and on some 70 workers; fifteen years ago she kept 200 at work. Mrs. Fowler considers that a chief cause of the failure in the lace trade is connected with the unwillingness of people to believe that Honiton lace cannot be of patterns and quality different from, and superior to, those of a certain character. Laces of this certain character, commonly known as Honiton, do not fairly represent the capabilities of the industry; they are in small demand and not fashionable. But if new patterned lace made with finer thread is produced, the name Honiton seems to bar it from the market; though if it be called by a foreign name it takes. Mrs. Fowler thinks this is unfair, and instanced how in 1871 the judges at an Agricultural show put aside a piece of lace she submitted, to which they would otherwise have given a prize, because they were convinced it could not have been made at Honiton. Mrs. Fowler says she offered to make the lace before the judges: they declined and would not be convinced. Some months after the exhibition was over she was offered a prize for the work, which she then, of course, refused. She has been lately engaged upon some lace, making it from a new design supplied by Mr. C. Peek, who ordered some lengths of it. I purchased some specimens of work here of 12, 14 and 16 skip thread. (*See 7.*)

From Honiton I went to Ottery St. Mary's, and there saw "L." Twenty to fifteen years ago she used to employ 300 workpeople, but now cannot give regular employment to more than six, who live in Ottery St. Mary's. Villagers from the neighbourhood occasionally bring in work for her to buy. Forty years ago she kept a lace school with "as many as 50 children being taught lace-making at once." In those days the mother and children would earn as much as the husband; and, indeed, they would sometimes be kept hard at it "to indulge a drunken and lazy man." Now, however, for neither good nor bad can they earn anything from lace-making. The gentry in the district do a little for the industry by procuring orders for lace. Recently a lace dress was made here, or rather parts were made here, in 14 skip thread, for the Princess Beatrice (*see 8*).* "L." described the pattern as one with no "reality" in it, "nothing of sprigs and flowers." I bought a small specimen as well as a specimen in 12 skip from a "Flanders lace" copied by "L." (*see 9*).* She has had an order for some yards of this with variations made in it.

On Monday 6th June, I went to Exeter *en route* to Exmouth, and again called at Mrs. Treadwin's, and had a considerable conversation with her. She is much averse to the purely literary training in Elementary Schools,
and

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and seems to look upon the establishment of technical schools, in which children will be taught lace-making, as a thing of the immediate future. She says good qualified lace teachers could be engaged at 12*s.* a week. She, herself, cannot start a school for young children "as the law is against her." She looks upon the industry, which, nevertheless, is able to produce such fine work as that she showed me (*see* specimens in the South Kensington Museum), as dying and doomed, unless arrangements are made for some training of a young generation of lace-makers. She pays a fair rate of wages. Some of her youngest hands get 5*s.* and 6*s.* a week, whilst the best workers may earn from 2*s.* to 2*s.* 6*d.* a day. The young girls, she gets now, have passed through the ordinary school teaching, but they are, on the whole, less proficient at plain needlework even, than those aged eight, whom in former years she was able to employ. For sorting sprigs, flowers, &c., counting them and putting down correct figures, the present children are not, according to Mrs. Treadwin, as quick or as accurate as those 20 years ago. Mrs. Treadwin once, ten years ago, offered a prize of 20*l.* to the school who could produce a pupil-teacher able to cut out and make a shirt. But no applicant ever appeared for the prize.

Mrs. Treadwin finds that lace designing is not much understood at the School of Art. They can draw well enough, no doubt, but they do not know what making a pattern for a lace-worker means.

After leaving Exeter, I went to Exmouth, and called on a lace-dealer, "M." She stated that lace-making is the staple industry of the district all about Exmouth. Its failure has caused the bitterest distress. Formerly there were 20 lace schools in the town. Now there are none. Factory regulations and School Board rules have greatly helped to get rid of them. The present 100 workers or less in the town are merely old workers. Machine laces have no doubt helped towards killing the trade.

"M." has taken several prizes at the Bath and West of England Shows and at other exhibitions. She makes up her own patterns and pricks them for the workers. Sometimes she induces a visitor to give her a drawing, at others she adopts patterns, sprigs, &c., from wall papers, tablecloths, and "anything." She has sold a little lace lately, and has a good order in hand for a founce, the sprigs for which are being worked in the district. She will eventually see to their being joined together. The founce is to cost 25*l.* a yard, and the order came very soon after some announcement had appeared that Honiton lace had been worn at the Drawing Room. The school children of 13 and 14 coming from the schools are not able to be put to first class lace-making. Their fingers are not only too stiff to get into practice, but the children themselves look down upon lace-making as beneath them, and will not take to it. "M." says they are taught so many things which are of no real use to them, that they get a false idea of what they might be expected to do. The poverty she says is considerable. She keeps as many workers going as she can afford to, chiefly at half-time. I bought here specimens of work in 10, 12, 14, 16 and 20 skip thread, as well as two specimens of black silk pillow-lace (*see* 10).* It has recently become a branch of the industry to fill in a needlepoint net between the sprigs. The needlepoint workers get a higher rate of pay than that of the pillow-lace workers. They belong to a better class and are more thrifty. When the trade was in full swing there was far less poverty than now. Lace exported being subject to a duty imposed by foreign countries has told against the industry, as has the importation, without duty, of foreign laces. "M." says that real good workers may earn in prosperous times as much as 2*s.* to 2*s.* 6*d.* a day, while an ordinary housewife, getting her husband's dinner and seeing to the house, can earn 1*s.* a day. She named the following places in the neighbourhood as lace-making centres:—Budleigh, Yettington, Bicton, Woodbury, Knowle, Salterton, dependent upon the industry.

On the 7th June I left for Otterton, where I called upon "N." She said business had never been so bad as it is now. There are nearly 200 workers in this village, of whom barely a fourth are at work. Many receive 2*s.* 6*d.* a week from the parish, and have nothing else to depend upon. The

scenes

* This Plate was not printed, but was deposited in the Library of the House of Commons.

scenes of woe are distressing and frequent. "N." keeps a grocery shop, and the workers come in and cry to have their lace sprigs taken by her and goods given in exchange; but she says this state of things cannot go on, and she will have to shut up her shop and leave the place, unless some amelioration sets in. Her business has always been with wholesale merchants in the coarser goods, made principally with thread of six to ten skip (*see* 11*). She never cultivated any private custom, though she has from time to time supplied lace to Exmouth. She now holds a very considerable stock. American trade used to be good, but since the imposition of duties it has quite failed.

There used to be a good trade with the North of England, but this has been destroyed, probably by Nottingham machines and foreign laces. She finds no signs of revival anywhere. A few children are taught by their parents, but with no such regularity as at the old lace-schools. She buys no patterns; she takes some from the journals, some from the workers, who prick off flowers from table-cloths, &c. She cannot draw at all. She used to get laces from Colaton-Raleigh, Alesbeare, and Topsham. The cheap hybrid Honiton lace made at Nottingham has vulgarized the commonest genuine hand-work, reduced its value, and affected its quality.

"O." said he is the oldest lace trader in the neighbourhood of Otterton. He had a large business with the wholesale merchants and buyers. He spoke of the unfair pressure exercised upon the home industry by foreign duties on English lace. He would not for one moment raise any question as to free trade in necessaries; and he thinks that that principle would not be infringed if a duty were put on articles of mere luxury like foreign laces, so that the wealth now spent on them might be partly diverted in favour of the home industry. He noticed the other day that the papers announced that the Queen had ordered a flounce. That at once gave an impulse. Ladies were looking into the shops for Honiton lace, and a sale for little pieces was set up. It is this sort of patronage, he thinks, which revives trade.

At Woodbury, which I next visited, "P.," who keeps a grocer's shop and deals in lace, said the distress was great. People had not been trained to any other industry but lace-making, and they beg the dealers and anyone to take their work and keep them out of the union. "P." has about 30 makers at work, chiefly upon the sprigs for the flounce already mentioned in the Sidmouth notes. I called at the house of three workers, and examined specimens of their work on the pillows, and purchased one or two (*see* 12)*. They said they would be glad to try new patterns.

This completes my notes upon the condition of the Industry. I attach the specimens for reference.

In regard to possible improvement I beg leave to submit that the quality of lace produced at Exeter (*see* specimens in the South Kensington Museum) as well as that illustrated by the samples from Sidmouth, (4 and 5) Honiton, (7) and Ottery St. Mary, (9),* shows that the industry is capable of very high development, and of being a source of fair income to those employed in it. Under altered conditions a better prospect than the present one might be opened up for the majority of lace workers now engaged upon producing very low priced, and technically poor goods.

The suggestions I would submit may be classed under such headings as the following:—

- I. *As to perpetuating the Art.*
- II. *As to a System of Instruction.*
- III. *As to encouraging New Expressions of the Art.*

I. *As to perpetuating the Art.*

How this may be attempted is perhaps more important than anything else at the present crisis. Without the provision of some means to rear a generation

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generation of workers which may succeed the existing one, the industry is apparently doomed to die out. The Education Act has virtually closed the dames' schools where children used to be taught lace-making. The Factory Acts, I believe, also prevent the instruction of young children as formerly. The literary tendency of the elementary school courses has apparently cultivated a distaste in children for the industry, and may not have given them any substitute for the training to a domestic industry such as the lace schools provided. I would suggest therefore, that some provision might be made to sanction instruction in lace-making in a few of the Elementary Schools in the lace-making districts. Such instruction could, I believe, be adequate to its intended purpose without detriment to the aim of the literary instruction, the amount of which would no doubt require to be diminished in such cases.

II. *As to a System of Instruction.*

As regards this the courses of instruction in lace-making for Elementary Schools might be so arranged as to encourage peculiar ability in making one or other of the parts of which a piece of lace is usually composed. Broadly speaking, a bit of Devonshire pillow-lace is made up (1) of the "clothing" or close linen-like parts, (2) of the fillings or open ornamental insertions in the spaces surrounded by the "clothing," and (3) of the grounding. Children showing an aptitude for one or other of these parts (and in the best kinds of work this is found to be the case with adult workers) might be specially trained to excel in it. Suggestions upon starting classes of this description might be derived from the lace schools in Bohemia and elsewhere.

III. *As to encouraging New Expressions of the Art.*

The employment of new patterns, and the making of new departures, would, I believe, materially affect the industry. Fashion and private experiments could, perhaps, be so directed as to exert an influence upon the employers of labour, who are, of course, the persons by whom any permanently effective action in this direction can be taken. Nevertheless it is possible that something can be done in a way like that which has met with a certain measure of success in Ireland. For this purpose steps might be taken which may be indicated under three sections :

- (a). By means to be provided by the Science and Art Department, lectures upon Devonshire lace might be given and inspections granted to encourage efforts in designs.
- (b). A private committee might be formed and raise a fund for prizes to be awarded for improved designs and new experiments in lace-making.
- (c). A second fund might be raised, or Government Grants offered, for the awarding of substantial prizes of 10 *l.* or 20 *l.* to the better of the proposed lace-making classes in Elementary Schools.

9th June 1887.

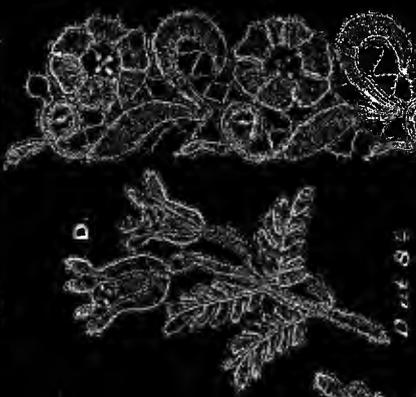
Alan S. Cole.

PILLOW LACE FROM COLYTON.

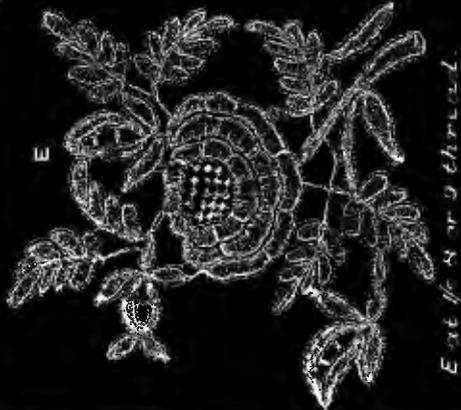
B at 4 1/2 inch 9 r 10 thread



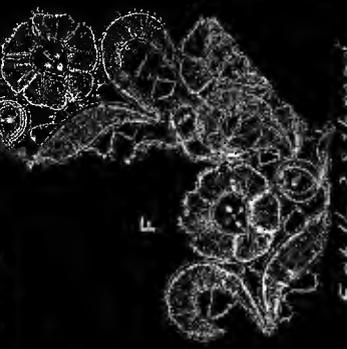
A at 1/2 inch 8 or 9 thread.



C at 1/2 inch 9 thread.



D at 1/2 inch 9 thread.



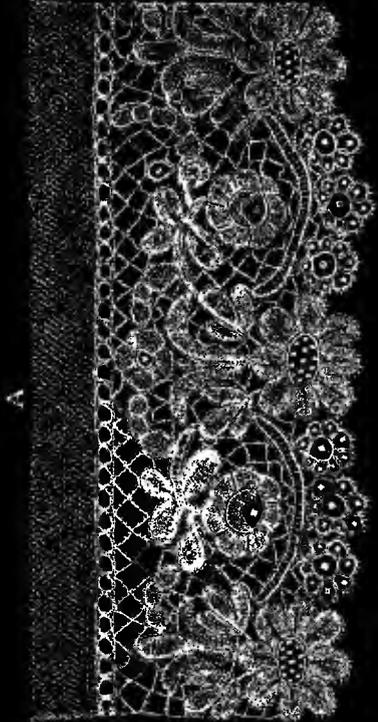
E at 1/2 inch 9 thread.

D at 8 E

F at 1/2 inch 9 thread.

F

PILLOW LACE FROM SIDMOUTH.



A made with 12 Skin thread, 13 1/2 for the 1/4 yard.



B made with 10 thread of the spray.

C made with 22 1/2 thread 1/2 the yard.

These Plates have been reduced to between one-half and one-third the size of the original samples.

PILLOW LACE FROM SIDMOUTH.



Spray made with 20 to 22½ thread, at £110.0 the spray

PILLOW LACE FROM HONITON.



A. Specimens made in No. 12 thread.

B. made in 14 thread.

C. made in 16 thread.

These Plates have been reduced to between one-half and one-third the size of the original samples.

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