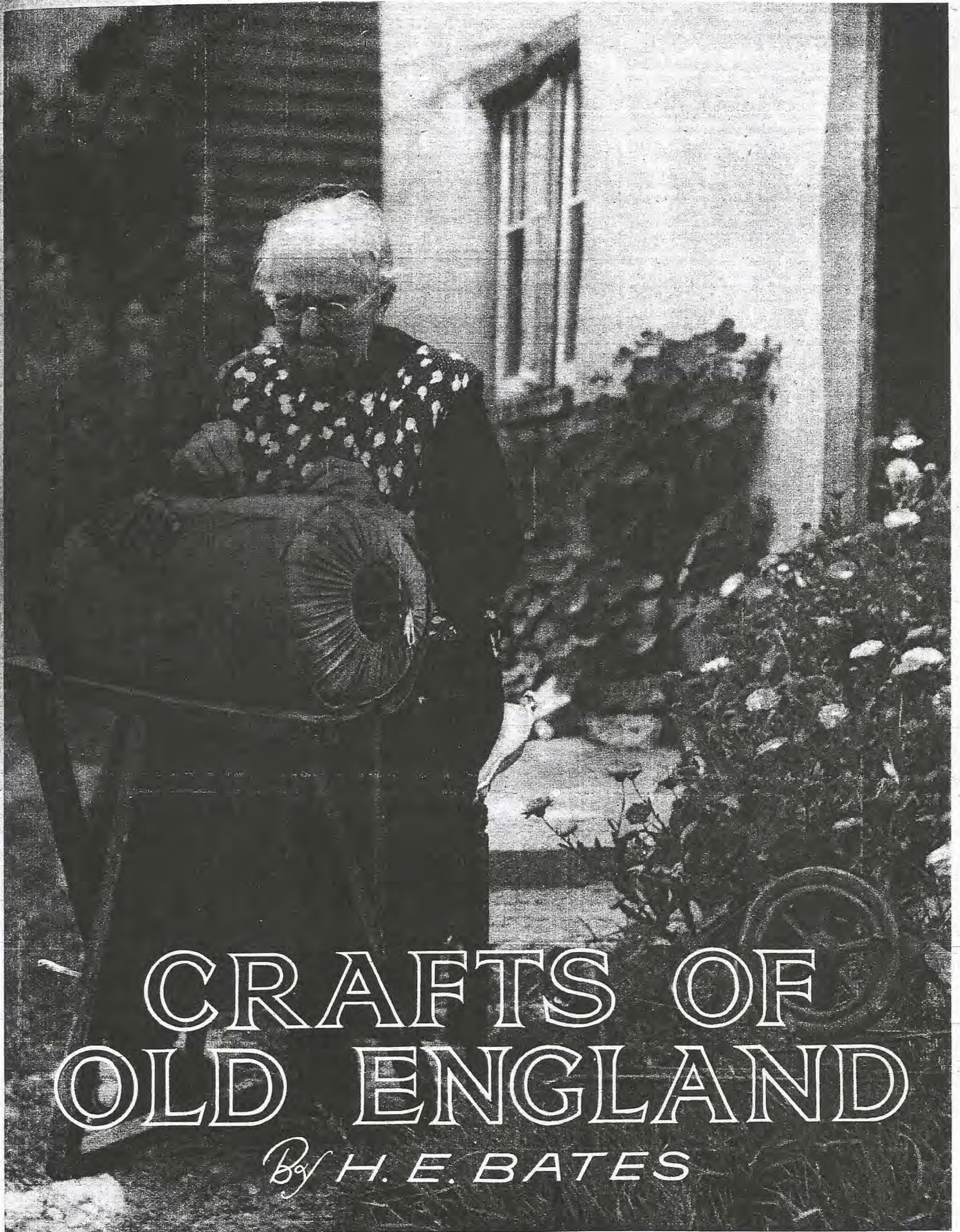
Reproduced by kind permission of Evensford Productions Limited and Pollinger Limited. Copyright c Evensford Productions Limited, 1936.

C55✓



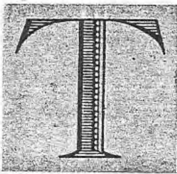


# CRAFTS OF OLD ENGLAND

By H. E. BATES

E. W. Tattersall

**Horse-shoe makers are few and far between in these days of arterial roads and motor transport. Many smiths have turned to oxy-acetylene welding for a livelihood—its introduction, says Mr. Bates, "has saved scores of rural smithies in this country from extinction"—but here we see a forge of the old kind at Aston, an out-of-the-way village in Hertfordshire, in which horse-shoes are made by the dozen.**



THE history of this country is recorded, happily I think, not only in documents. It is written in fields and hedges, roads and streams, walls and woods and, as perhaps I do not need to point out, in blood and tears. It has also, and fortunately the work still goes on, been forged and turned and hammered and woven and spun and stitched by the human hand in country places.

Does it occur to you how much is made, still, by the pain and genius of the human hand—not necessarily by the hand simply, but by the hand operating the very simplest and most primitive of machines, the potter's wheel, the turner's lathe, the hammer and anvil, the wooden loom, the needle? You sit on a chair—somebody, perhaps, turned its legs on the most primitive of pole lathes in a Buckinghamshire beech wood; you drink from a cup—somebody fashioned it on that most ancient of machines, the potter's wheel; you wear lace on your dress—somebody made it, perhaps, by pins and bobbins and the sheer genius of fingers, on a pillow stuffed with straw; you throw a ball at a coconut at a country fair—somebody turned that ball; you carry a basket—somebody wove it by hand; you may sleep at the most exclusive hotel in London—its bed quilts were stitched, from patterns not changed since the days of the Tudors, by the wives of north country miners. You hear the bells of churches every day of your life: somebody cast these bells, perhaps, in a backyard country workshop, before the Reformation.

All these crafts, however ancient and however commonplace, fall primarily into two classes: the crafts of necessity and the crafts of luxury. Necessity demands drinking utensils, tools, baskets. Luxury asks for lace and fancy fabrics and bells for steeples. English rural life is, and has been for centuries, full of craftsman who, by the work of their hands, supplied these demands with an ease and artistry which amounted, often, to genius.

Now genius, always difficult to define, is a flexible thing, and it is not, except rarely, hereditary. The odd thing is that, in many cases, the rural craftsman thinks it is. His father was a great blacksmith, his grandfather was a great blacksmith—therefore he himself is a great blacksmith. Like the famous proof that the moon is made of green cheese, it is all very simple and very convincing, but as it happens, not quite true.

This intense conservatism is at the bottom of all rural crafts. A man will work his own way, to his own pattern. Having been taught the craft, he knows, in his own eyes, all about it. He knows its secrets, its tricks, the knack of it. He is a master. He cannot be taught.

But the curious thing is that he can be taught; and an even more curious thing is that he is being taught. There exists in London an organisation called the Rural Industries Bureau. This organisation is doing what an army of mules could not do: it is dragging the rural craftsman the way he did not want to go—the way of someone, in fact, who knows more about his own craft, very often, than himself. This bureau exists, in fact, for the sole purpose of fostering rural crafts, teaching rural craftsmen, rescuing and reviving rural crafts, for making impoverished crafts and craftsmen more or less prosperous again. Being virtually a government department it takes no profits. It is, in fact, that Utopian and almost unbelievable thing, a government department working for love.

And working by expert knowledge and intense enthusiasm, it has done wonders. It has saved, for instance, the magnificent art of quilting from extinction; it has put the blacksmith on his feet; it has given the wood-turner new designs and the wheelwright new hope. The blacksmith, for instance, with the old intense convervatism that was almost a religion, had not moved with the times. The bureau encouraged him to bring himself and his workshop up to date. It forced—literally forced—upon him the process of oxy-acetylene welding, a process which he did not want, but which now has virtually saved him from bankruptcy.

In the autumn of this year I decided to have a look at the field of its work. I decided, at the same time, to have a look at the field in which it did not work. I wanted, in fact, to see where English rural art stood, not only when helped by an expert and beneficent body in London, but where it stood when it was not helped at all: if it was changing, if it was declining, if it was improving, what its chances of survival were and so on. I wanted to talk with the craftsmen themselves, watch them working, get their impressions and, if possible, something of their histories.

During this time I talked with hand-weavers from as far apart as Devon and Northumberland, with a wood-turner in Northamptonshire, a potter in Kent, a bell-maker in Oxford, a smith in Rutland, with lace-makers from Bedfordshire, a quilter from Westmorland, with thatchers and wheel-wrights and smiths and lace-makers and saddlers—in fact, wherever I happened to be and whenever I had the luck to strike them.

I began with the bell-maker working in a dark and almost crazy back-yard workshop in a Burford side-street. His shop was full of bells and outside, by the

**The photograph on the preceding page, by E. W. Tattersall, shows Mrs. D. Ing, of Long Crendon, Bucks, making pillow-lace. Lace-making has been carried on in Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire, and Northamptonshire since the end of the sixteenth century.**

foundry door, a vast apple-tree was hung with apples that were almost like copper bells too. There were, in fact, bells everywhere. Mr. Bond had been casting bells for about as long as he could remember.

Now, if you consider it for a moment, the casting of bells presents a ticklish problem, for a bell must not only look like a bell but it must sound like a bell. Therefore you are casting not only for size and shape and weight but also, as near as possible, for a definite note. It is a little surprising therefore to know that the materials used in the making of a bell-mould are nothing more or less than common horse-dung and crinolines.

The crinolines are, of course, of iron; the dung, on the other hand, is just dung. The crinoline is exactly like a crinoline in structure and is like the bell in shape. The dung is mixed with earth of sand into a kind of cement which is in turn plastered on the crinoline. On that crinoline-shaped plaster of dung, duly hardened, the bell is finally made.

This is, more or less, as it has always been. I was surprised to hear that, and to know that science had, more or less, not superseded dung. And I was surprised to hear something else—that bells are, generally speaking, far better cast to-day than in the old days. The craft, unlike so many crafts, has not declined.

"Most pre-Reformation bells," Mr. Bond said, "are unevenly cast—too thin here, too thick somewhere else. We do a better job to-day."

It was a good beginning: a traditional craft, improving and not declining; a craftsman who had a musician's ear too—as he proved when he tinkled scores of bells in and out of tune for me; and finally no talk of bad business, or of the craft dying out, or of that old old story, which I was afterwards to hear repeated up and down England with variations of bitterness and despair and stoicism and resignation by all sorts of country craftsmen—"When I'm gone it's finished. There'll be nobody to follow me."

I heard it first in Northamptonshire, where, at Kingscliffe, not far from Stamford, almost on the border of

*Times*

**The making of trugs, those long, shallow baskets used by gardeners and greengrocers, has been practised for centuries in Sussex. The picture shows two craftsmen at Hurstmonceux bending the frames.**

*Times*

**Chair bodgers, as they are called, are associated with the Chilterns. Many of them work in rough sheds in the heart of the woods. This craftsman is turning a chair-leg on a pole-lathe.**

what is the best bit of that unfashionable county, I found the last of a once thriving colony of wood-turners.

Here, at the beginning of the century and previously, fifty or sixty craftsmen turned wood on lathes and were prosperous. To-day there remains this solitary hand, clinging to a craft that pays him so well that he has to keep a public-house in order to make a go of things at all. Appropriately, and perhaps ironically, that house is called *The Turner's Arms*. It is an unfashionable, varnished, smoky little public, snug as a nut, and behind it, in a workshop just about big enough to swing a kitten in, Mr. William Bailey works a lathe that looks almost as if it came out of the pyramids

"And you're the last?" I said.

"Yes," he said. "The last jack one. When I'm gone it'll be finished."

There it was—nobody interested, nobody troubling, nobody to follow on. Who wants to make a wooden bowl when he can drive a bus? Who wants to treadle a crazy lathe?

"Well, anyway," I said. "How's trade?"

Oh! trade was good. Any amount of things to do. Two ladies in yesterday, all the way from Somerset. You gentleman to-day. Always somebody dropping in. Had a lot of orders for butter bowls and egg-cups—little things, fancy stuff. And pheasant eggs.

"And what?" I said.

"Pheasant eggs. And partridges. For nesting time—for the keepers." He dropped a pheasant's egg into my hand.

I held it as though it might break. It was, in weight, size, colour and everything about the most faithful imitation of a bird's egg I had ever seen. I held it in admiration.

"What wood is it?" I said.

"Sycamore," he said. "I'll turn you one."

He did. He knocked the rough lengths of wood, roughly the size of a polony sausage, into the end of the lathe, treadled, got up speed, and in a couple of minutes, with two chisels and a piece of sandpaper and no pattern at all, turned me an egg as virgin and clean as though the bird had just dropped it. It was done almost unconsciously, without thought, simply from long habit and experience. It looked simple, but it was fine craftsmanship. I stood and wondered.

"And how much is an egg?" I said.

"Oh! a penny. After all you would get a real egg for twopence. Eggs a penny, butter-pat moulds sixpence, egg-cups fourpence, spoons fourpence or sevenpence or more according to size, napkin-rings fourpence, bowls to order."

So trade was good! Two hundred and forty pheasant eggs, all painted to deceive the hen, before you turned a pound over. If trade was good it was, I thought, a damnable criticism of somebody, somewhere. It was, in fact, a crying shame that this country craftsman, an artist, the last of his line, should have to be making, as he was, threepenny comic whistles for the coronation and penny eggs for keepers in order to keep himself and his craft alive at all.

And when, finally, we left, I as good as said so: not to the turner himself, but to his wife, who was airing clothes by the pub fire. And she agreed.

"Why don't they teach it in schools?" she said.

Ah! why don't they? Is it so much better to know that $x = o$ than it is to know how, by skill of hand, a bowl may be turned from a tree? Yes, why didn't they teach it in schools?

"It isn't *good* enough." she said. "They want something *better*." It was her accent, not mine. She knew, as I did and as I am sure that dignified, simple turner himself did, that the work of the hands is every bit as fine and important as the work of the head. The human hand is the loveliest piece of mechanism in the world. Yet to think of getting a living by your hands—by turning bowls, by making lace, by swinging a hammer! Oh! no. They

*Topical*

*Times*

(Left) A hand-loom weaver at work on his loom. (Above) A Yorkshire besom-maker trimming the ends of his wares. With the raw material at hand on the moors, the need is for an easily accessible market. Besoms are still in demand for use in stables, iron furnaces, and farmhouses in the North.

want something better. They must sit on office stools, make insurance books, carry samples. Always something better.

And we left at last with the melancholy notion that, unless something happens, the art of wood-turning will, before long, die out in one of its strongholds, with nothing but an ironical inn sign to commemorate its existnece. We took egg-cups and spoons away with us, and butter-moulds carved with acorns and swans.

It was all very simple cottage work—plain and clean, and in a way, uninspired. It could not be compared with the strong generous work of James Langley, whose dark hut with its ancient pole lathe and its mountain of sweet-smelling shavings on Buckleberry common is already famous. Langley occupies himself, mostly, with the turning of bowls—large thick bowls of elm or ash against which the Kingscliffe work looks almost as though made for a doll's house. Yet James Langley and William Bailey had at least one thing in common. Langley makes, or did make, a large washing-up bowl for three and sixpence. No wonder, perhaps, that they want something better!

*Topical*

Flint-knapping is probably the oldest surviving English industry. It has been carried on in the South of England since the Stone Age. Here the knapper is seen quartering his flints.

There is still a great tradition of wood-turning in Cardiganshire and, in spite of the old story of no apprentices, a great variety of stuff, spoons and ladles and plates and bowls, is still made there. And, in reference to Cardiganshire, two astounding facts have come to light. The Cardiganshire turner makes a special kind of spoon, curious in the handle, of very old and traditional design. Recently some examples of these spoons were sent to an exhibition in Switzerland. Whereupon the Swiss at once said: " But we have spoons of precisely this same design here in Switzerland—in museums! They were taken from the recently discovered lake-dwellings here. They are very old indeed." Yet that remarkable link between the primitive crafts of two distant countries is outdone by another. There is, in Cardiganshire, a fine craftsman who uses a special and very unusual cutting-tool, of exceptional length in the handle. A tool of that design is not used elsewhere in this country and is not, in fact, used elsewhere in the world, so far as it is known, except in one place—Japan. The stories behind these two amazing facts, and they are stories which may never be unfolded, would be as good, almost, as the story of Columbus.

The history of rural crafts must be, it seems to me, full of such stories—of romantic or ironical or casual turns of fate and circumstance, of family tragedies, of changed dynasties, of voyages and adventures. How else that remarkable contact with Wales and Switzerland and that still more remarkable contact with Wales and Japan? The history of lace-making, for instance, of which more later, is full not only of romance and prettiness, as such a divine craft ought to be, but is drenched in blood and tears.

Not that all the tears have yet been shed. It is not easy to be the exponent of a dying craft, selling your work for a fraction of the cost, and make a joke of it. I drove a hundred miles, one fine September day, in order to find, in a famous village in the Cotswolds, one of the few remaining craftsmen who still make shepherd-crooks. He was out.

The forge fire, I noticed, was out too. I could see that, in fact, there was something wrong. The place seemed dead. And then the wife appeared, and I told her how, that day, I had come a hundred miles just to talk about shepherd-crooks. She was staggered.

" Could you, perhaps, let me have a look at some? " I said.

" There isn't a crook in the place," she said. " He lost them all."

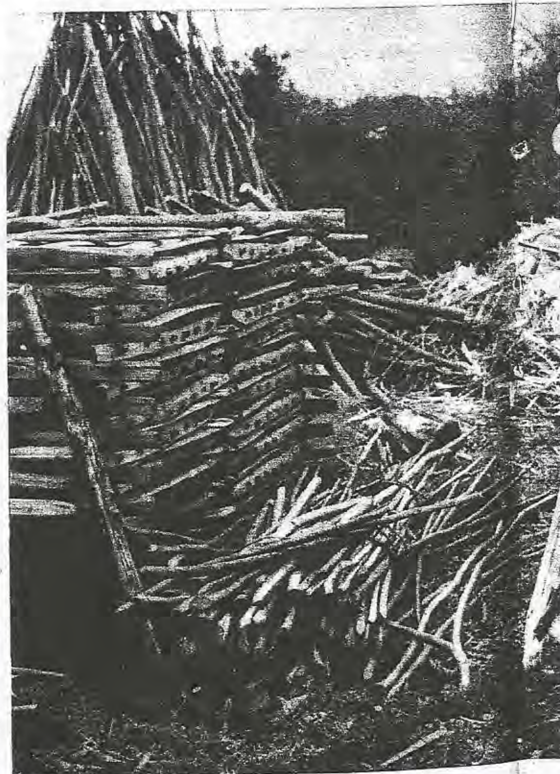
" Lost them? "

Yes. He'd lost them. About twenty crooks—all special, made specifically for an exhibition. Someone had stolen them in the train. Altogether he didn't feel too good about it.

Nor, I could see, did she. There were tears in her heart, if not in her voice. And it was something new for me, who had spoken with nothing but prosperous smiths, to hear the despairing story she told me as we stood in the big stone Cotswold barn behind the forge. Oh! if only they could sell up and get out!

" What is he doing, then, this afternoon? " I said.

"Putting glass in a greenhouse. Look." She pointed



Hurdle-making is another south-country industry the b[illegible]ginn[illegible] hurdle-maker carries on his craft at Silcheste[illegible]

Times

News Chronicle

(Above) Cutting barrel hoops at Uckfield, Sussex. In spite of the competition of metal hoops this old craft still goes on. (Right) A wheelwright at Kingsnorth, near Ashford, Kent, adjusting the spokes of a new wheel. This is another highly-skilled craft which has been badly hit by the development of motor transport.

to a five feet wrought iron gate standing by the barn door, a fine piece of work, worthy to hang anywhere. "That's some of his work, and do you think he can sell it? Not for love nor money. Not at half price."

"And nobody wants shepherd crooks either?"

"No. Nobody wants shepherd crooks. Nobody wants anything."

And yet, only three days before, in the most rural of all English counties, Rutland, in an absolutely obscure village, in a back-yard smithy, I had spoken to a man who was, more or less, on top of the world.

He, too, was making gates—and selling them. He was making, and could make, in fact, anything: screens and gates and signs. armour-bright fire utensils, boot-scrapers, and was doing, too, all the traditional jobs of his craft. His name was Crane. and if ever by chance you should buy a poker or pair of tongs or a gate with a crane stamped on it you will know that he made it. It will be good too.

For this man was an artist. More, he was proud of it and happy in it. And yet, like a true artist, he could criticise himself. He knew when and where he went wrong.

I pointed to some fancy scroll work hanging on the wall: test-pieces, I knew, done in some competition at a show. "Nice work," I said.

"No," he said. "Look. That leaf is poor. And that's poor. And this scroll isn't what it should be. I could do better now."

And so on. He knew. He was right. He was a conscious artist.

"And you work, I suppose," I said, "with an oxy-acetylene welder?"

That touched him. "Oh! No. No oxy-acetylene welding for him. No thank you.

Now the introduction of oxy-acetylene welding has saved scores of rural smithies in this country from extinction. It has made quick, good, competitive work an everyday job and has opened up entirely new markets and possibilities to smiths who, having lost the shoeing trade, wondered what they could do to keep going. The Bureau has done all this—literally forcing oxy-acetylene welding on an industry that thought it could do without it, sending first-class instructors here, there and everywhere, doing all in its power, in fact, to give blacksmithing a new chance. And there are now, up and down this country, hundreds of smiths who owe not only their prosperity but their very existence to a process they did not want and which they thought they could do without.

So it was surprising to hear, from a fine and intelligent craftsman, a rejection of oxy-acetylene.

"But what's wrong with it?" I said. "It does a good job."

"Ah yes. It does a good job. I'm not denying that. It does a good job—*but it's not hand-work*. It's not handicraft."

That finished it. All the argument in the world will not get away from that. It was quick, it was good, it was all sorts of things—but it was not handicraft. It was refreshing to hear that staunch and unsentimental championship of the power and genius of the human hand.

I went to see other smiths. One, an old friend, said, "I'm ten months behind with orders." He had no oxy-acetylene plant either, though he had half-a-dozen machines, drills, mower-grinders and so on, besides. Another said: "Work? I'm up to my eyes in work. You know, a smith's job is to know every blooming trade as well as his own. I get people dobbing in all day long with every damn job under the sun."

They were all, in fact, doing well. All except that Cotswold maker of shepherd-crooks. He was a mystery —a craftsman, an artist in iron, glad of any outside job to make a shilling or two. I couldn't fathom it.

The trouble with a good craftsman is, sometimes, that his work is his worst enemy. He makes a thing to last, and then, ironically, it outlasts him. How often does a man need a new shepherd crook? Shoes wear out, trousers' seats wear out, but a man's lifetime makes no difference to an iron bar.

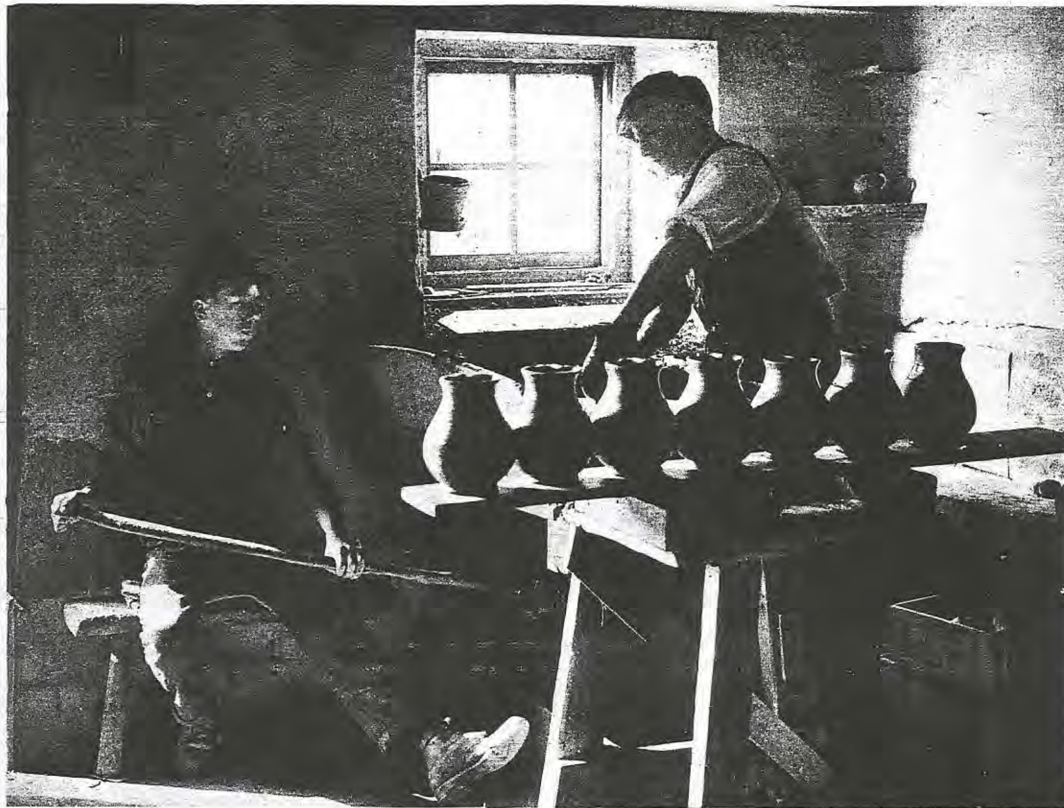
Wood is less eternal, but it endures all the same. If you turn a man a solid elm bowl he needs another, perhaps, in fifty years. Your only hope is his recommendation of the beauty of your work, and its power

E. W. Tattersall

'eginnings of which go back to the remote past. This :hester an ancient village in Hampshire.

Times

This smith at the picturesquely named village of Boughton Monchelsea, Kent, is skilled at wrought-iron work. He is here engaged in making an elaborate door-hinge.



patterns, in the miners' cottages of Wales and Durham. There they found the same lovely units of design still in use: the leaf, the pear, the wave, the shell, the Tudor rose, the spiral scroll, the feather, and the crown. The materials were no longer silk, but cotton. But the highly conventionalised units of design had not changed at all. Only now it was not the wives of the rich who were using them, but the wives of the unemployed.

Having discovered that, the Bureau did what, to my mind, is their most praiseworthy piece of work to date. They took quilting in hand, organised it, fostered it and made it prosperous. What they did not do was to develop it. They saw, very wisely, that it did not need development: that, as an art, it had already flowered to perfection. Its very great beauty lay in its tradition of design, in its unchanged use of pears and feathers and crowns and roses as patterns. So they changed nothing. If we change it, they said in effect, all sorts of foolish people will come along and give orders for bunny rabbits, dicky birds and so on. Quilting, therefore, thanks to the good sense of the Bureau, stands almost exactly where it did: a delicate and fine craft, traditional, useful, historical, the last surviving and still flourishing example of English needlework.

It seems odd, that neglect and decline of a craft that was useful as well as beautiful. The Puritans, no doubt, had much to do with it. A regime that could ban lace would be sure to be hard on anything that made a bed more comfortable.

Yet, later, the people themselves had something to do with it. Oh! yes, quilts—but what about it? Everybody makes quilts. We've a chestful upstairs.

I spoke to a Westmorland woman about it: a cultured, keen woman interested in all kinds of rural crafts, and a quilter herself.

"It was just ordinary," I said, "and nobody took much notice of it?"

*Times*

**This hand pottery at Verwood, Dorset, is about 200 years old. In the upper picture a boy is seen working the revolving throwing-table while the potter throws his pitcher or bread-pan—the chief products of this pottery. The lower picture shows the dried pots and pans being placed in the kiln for baking.**

*Times*

to delight others. I daresay that many a craftsman, before now, has cursed the permanence of his own materials.

This is where the makers of fabrics score a little. Tweeds and lace and quilts wear out more or less quickly, or else fashion wears out, which is the same thing. They are luxury arts, but there is nothing luxurious about an iron bar; its shape is forged by necessity. It satisfies, primarily, the demands of materialism, and only secondarily the demands of beauty.

Yet the odd thing is that the crafts of luxury, hand-weaving, lace-making, quilting, are also in a precarious way—not altogether a bad way, simply precarious. Necessity is at least constant, but luxury has a way of being fickle and, even, of turning turtle. The luxuries of one age have sometimes a bad time in the next.

Which is exactly what happened in the case of quilting. In Elizabeth's day that gorgeous art was the pastime, almost exclusively, of the nobility. Just as in Victoria's day it was the correct thing, the nice thing, for genteel young ladies to paint watery landscapes from the drawing-room windows, so in Elizabeth's day it was, I imagine, the proper thing for a lady to take up quilting. All through the seventeenth century quilting was the fashion, and great houses, particularly in the extreme north, all had their bedrooms enriched and decorated with examples of it. Quilting, too, had sterner uses. The original plain diamond pattern was used for padding under armour.

And here therefore was an art which looked as if, no matter how dynasties or fashions changed, it would endure in prosperity for ever. Armour might go out of fashion, but not beds. Beds were secure, therefore quilting was secure. It was necessary, it was beautiful, it was a pastime, it was in the hands of the right people. It had everything necessary for a long and lovely existence.

Yet it declined. It not only declined, indeed, but it slumped. It slipped, in some unaccountable way, from the top of the social scale to the bottom. Forgotten or discarded or scorned by the great houses, it was thrown out and taken up, perhaps, by servants, then by labourers' wives and finally, when the time came, by the wives of miners, whose descendants still do it to-day.

Now, in fact, after three hundred years, the circle has turned. The most exclusive hotel in London has decorated its bedrooms with quilts made in the traditional designs of the Tudors. And those quilts were made by miners' wives.

It is a remarkable story, and the Rural Industries Bureau is responsible for the last chapters in it. It was they who discovered that the art of quilting was still practised, according to Elizabethan methods and

"Yes," she said, "that was it. Everybody did it and nobody took much notice."

It was familiarity again, breeding not only contempt but, much worse, indifference.

"It was only when I left Westmorland that I had the shock of my life," she said. "I thought all England did quilting—and I found that nobody did it. Nobody! Only the folks at home."

That lady had to shift her angle something like three hundred miles before she saw quilting and its exponents in the right perspective.

She showed me quilts. They were all of that more humble branch of the art—patchwork. They were still charming. They seem to me to be true peasant work. They exhibit the eternal peasant love for daring colour schemes, for disregard of conventions, for breadth and warmth and homeliness. With their gay, sprigged prints and odd designs in old purple and pink and blue and vermillion, they are very much less aristocratic than the true quilts, but the process that makes them remains essentially the same. Here, as with the silk quilts, the lining is of sheep's wool, which is kept in place between two pieces of material, the sewing of which forms the patterns.

This brand of quilting is, too, being fostered. The Women's Institute has now taken care of it and holds an exhibition of the work every year, I think, in London. One great English rural art, therefore, stands on its feet again.

Nevertheless, it is not, to me, the greatest of English rural crafts. That distinction is held, indisputably I think, by the art of pillow-lace. For many reasons. First, it is not only an art but a history, and not only a history but a romance and a tragedy too. Secondly it is a supremely delicate and difficult art, learned only by great patience and trial and perseverance and ingenuity. Thirdly, its products are superb; pillow lace stands in relation to the rest of rural crafts exactly where poetry stands in relation to the rest of literature; it is, at its best, pure lyricism. Finally, apart from other things, it is the only craft I know in which the tools themselves are also works of art, histories and, at their best, bits of lyricism too.

On top of all these eulogies, none of which are extravagant, it is ironical to have to confess that the art is not really English at all! It has been English for four hundred years, but its origins are Flemish and French. It would be remarkable, in fact, if such a delicate art were English in origin. It is altogether too dainty and fanciful; its intricacies are carried to a rather too rare point of art. What is greatly to the credit of the English nature is the genius with which it adapted, nourished and even improved an art which was, essentially, foreign to it.

It's an ill wind, even a dictatorship, that blows no good, and it was virtually a dictatorship in 1567, and another in 1572, that brought lace-making to this country. In 1556 Philip II of Spain succeeded Charles V of Spain as ruler of the Low Countries, and a peaceful country became a bloody country. Philip, like all dictators, ancient or modern, royal or common, believed in the shedding of a little blood. And in 1567 there ensued what is now, with almost medical propriety, called a purge but what was then more plainly called a massacre. Those who escaped that occasion, about 100,000 in all and of course Protestants, came to England. They brought lace-making with them.

The lace-makers drifted, for some odd reason, to Bedfordshire. In 1572, when that other and more famous purge occurred, the massacre of the Hugenots in France, the surviving lace-makers, mostly from Mechlin and Lille, drifted almost in the same direction, to Northamptonshire and Buckinghamshire. And those three counties are still the home of English pillow-lace.

Thus the history of lace-making is, from the first, drenched in blood. Later, much later, it was to be drenched in tears, not idle tears or even very catastrophic tears, but the miserable tears of small children working very early and very late in dark Victorian lace-schools at pillows they were not big enough to lift. Later, too, I have no doubt that other tears fell—the tears of old women forced to sell the most beautiful lace in the world to hucksters who squeezed them down to the last farthing. One single head of intricate Buckinghamshire point-ground lace takes hours of concentrated and expert work, yet I have seen such lace, three inches wide, for which the best huckster's price was eighteenpence a yard. No wonder that woman declared bitterly: "I'll go into the fields and spud turnips afore I make another blessed stitch at that price."

That same little woman, eighty-five years old and still giving lace lessons, suffers, though she does not know it, from claustrophobia—the fear of confined spaces. She told me all about it.

"When I was a mite of five I went to lace school. One day I was too unwell to do my pattern. I said I couldn't do it. The teacher said: 'You'll do it or you shall be locked in the barn.' And I couldn't do it, so I was locked in the barn. And now if you were to lock me in a room I should go mad! I've suffered for it all my life."

Yet without that early training and bitter concentration her art would never have been so fine. Lace-making is not learned in five minutes and it is best learnt by the very young. Jesuits and lace-teachers had one thing in common: they took their pupils early and what they taught was never forgotten.

The process of making lace on a pillow is difficult to describe. It is one of those arts that look charming and simple, but which are, in reality, intricately difficult. First, anyway, there is the pillow. Sausage shaped, looking rather like a soldier's kit bag, it is stuffed with straw—with, if you please, a truss of straw, a truss being half a hundredweight. That straw is hammered and beaten down until the pillow is like a pillow of iron.

*D. Hartley*

**A thatcher beating down his straw with an ancient tool called a "legget."**

*Times*

**Coracle fishermen returning from their day's work on the River Teify, South Wales. Their coracles are identical with those used by the Ancient Britons and described by Julius Caesar. They are built of hides stretched over a wooden frame and made watertight with a coating of tar. They weigh from 7 lb. to 15 lb., and when not in use are often kept in cottages. They are used also in County Clare.**

The pillow stands on a wooden rest, a sort of trestle, waist high. Then, over the curve of the pillow, goes the parchment. On the parchment is the pattern, pricked out with pins and sometimes also with ink.

After that the processes are, to the lay mind, nothing but mysteries. You may watch a lace-maker until your eyes drop out but if you do not know you do not know, that's all. You will see the bone and wooden bobbins and their cottons flick and rattle in and out of place and you will see the flash of pins moved and marshalled in order to make the stitches, but that, roughly, is as much as you will ever see. The bobbins move so rapidly that their manipulations seem like the jingling and rattling of someone gone quite crazy.

Those bobbins, next to the lace itself, are the supreme attraction of the art. They are, as I say, the only tools of any art that I know which are themselves works of art.

They fall, roughly, into two types: the bone and the wooden. An average bobbin is simply a piece of bone or wood, crudely or intricately carved, about

three or four inches long. It looks like a miniature stair balustrade. On the bottom end of it is wired a ringlet of beads, a spangle. It will contain from one to nine beads: turquoise and rose and milk and plum and amber, some as big as and very like robins' eggs, some no bigger than peas. All are delightful. There are, occasionally, special spangles. There is a bird-cage spangle: a single large bead contained in a cage of tiny beads of rainbow colours. There was once a famous spangle of a single enormous bead called Kitty Fisher's Eyes, named after an actress.

But it is the bobbins themselves that are really pieces of history. In the old days bobbins were either carved at home or bought from a travelling dealer. If they were home-made they were almost always wooden, delicately carved out of rosewood, maple, plum, apple, laburnum, yew, apricot, box, cherry, blackthorn and even ebony.

*E. W. Tattersall*

**A Kirkcudbright lobster fisherman and his creels. These creels are made locally and are of an entirely different pattern from those in use elsewhere.**

If they were bought they were usually of bone. Now a bone bobbin, being white, will take a design in colours. Therefore it became the fashion not only to decorate bone bobbins but to inscribe them. When the dealer came round to take orders for new bobbins he took orders for inscriptions too. A baby had been born—inscribe its name on the bobbin. Someone had been married—mark the occasion and the date on the bobbin. Someone had died—let him have a bobbin memorial.

And gradually this game of inscribing and decorating bobbins grew to almost crazy proportions. Lace-makers began to inscribe on their bobbins not only births and deaths and marriages and betrothals, but sweet nonsense and prayers, hopes and fears, verses and texts, puzzles and songs, and, finally, murders and suicides.

When I first saw a murder bobbin I was shocked and embarrassed. It commemorated, I felt, some awful event in the family. Now I know better.

I cleared up the mystery by talking to two old Northamptonshire ladies, one nearly ninety and as hearty as a chicken, the other younger but deaf.

"Oh! whenever there was a murder and the murderer was hung in Bedford Gaol we had his name put on a bobbin, that's all. Ain't that right, Miss Perkins?"

"Eh?"

"I say we had all the murderers put on bobbins, didn't we? You come with me to see old Joseph Castle hung, didn't you?"

"Eh?"

"I say you came to see old Joseph Castle hung at Bedford, didn't you? You remember—up he went and then all of a pop he was gone. It was fourpence to have a murderer put on a bobbin," she said to me.

So that's how it was. Later, I was able to buy a Joseph Castle bobbin—"Joseph Castle. Hung 1860"—and to discover too that Castle came from Luton and murdered his wife. On the March night when he was hanged the relatives of the murdered woman held a party. Everyone who went to that party had a bobbin inscribed with Castle's name.

The variation of bobbin designs and inscriptions is immense. Inscriptions are done in scarlet, scarlet and black, black; vertically, horizontally, spiral-fashion. They record all manner of family and local histories, of personal hopes and loves and fears and tragedies and aspirations. They are endearing or religious or naughty or serious or nonsensical. In my own small collection I have many inscriptions: Lovely Thomas; My Darling; Forget-me-Not; Dear George, Sweet William; I will for Ever Love the Giver (here is the outline of a heart); Be ye therefore ready; Kiss me Quick; Dear Mother; Love me Truley; Love Don't be Falce. (Spelling is often crazy.)

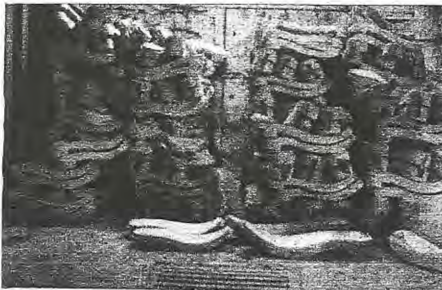
Almost all of these bobbins are nineteenth century. It was the great age of lace-making. I count it very lucky, therefore, to have been able to talk with a Northamptonshire couple named Wilding, since Mr. Wilding still carves bobbins from rose and fruit wood for Mrs. Wilding, for whom lace and lace-making is a passion. Without them much of my knowledge of lace-making would have been mere guess work. I begged all kinds of information and even records, and they were glad to give them.

Because they know, as I do, that lace-making is on the edge of the precipice. With very few exceptions, only the very old are now making lace—very old, frail ladies who are, as one of them declared to me, simply waiting for the end. It is the old story—nobody wants to learn, nobody troubles. When the old ladies go, the industry, as far as I can see, goes too.

It is characteristic of mankind that it is indifferent to a thing while it possesses it and then cries out for it when it has gone. That applies very aptly to rural crafts. In fifty years, unless something happens, lace-making will be a memory. Then, unless the girls of that day go naked, which is of course very possible, a great sigh will go up for the lovely work of past days—of, in fact, our own day.

If this happens it will be an everlasting shame on all who profess to be interested in the rural life and art of this country. For—and you have only to look at a piece of Buckinghamshire point-ground to see it for yourself—the art of lace-making is the perfect flowering of English rural art. I will go so far as to say that it is one of the glories of English rural life. These superb designs modelled on tulips and roses and honeycombs and sea-shells and chains and even on the strange shapes taken from spiders' webs and the frost on Victorian window-panes are masterly in their delicacy and fidelity. They are unique. No machine, since the machine process is utterly different, can ever equal them.

And all this applies, in some way, to all rural crafts, the arts of necessity and luxury alike. The beauty and skill manifested in them by the human hand is precious. Yet only a handful of people care about it.



*D. Hartley*

**Clog-making is a northern industry which, owing to changing fashions, a higher standard of living, and cheapened production of shoes, has lately fallen on lean times. Clogs have wooden soles—a pile of which is seen here—are shod with soft iron, and have leather uppers fastened by laces or clasps. They are still worn in country districts.**

Thatching is a case in point. Seeing a thatcher at work on a village roof I stopped the car and got out to look. It was fine work, level as snow. I shouted up to the thatcher and said so. He almost fell off the ladder. Fancy anybody stopping a car and getting out and admiring thatching! Wonderful. A man, perhaps, who had never seen thatching before?

Yet I have seen thatching all my life—thacking, in my native dialect. It, too, is one of those charming arts which look like child's play, but which are, in reality, difficult and expert. Thack, thackers and thacking played an everyday part in the rural life of my boyhood, only twenty-five years ago. They gave birth, even, to an excellent simile, much applied to the appetites of small boys—"et like a thacker." Perched on a roof top in a March wind, a thacker *could* eat.

Of the two species of thatching, farm and domestic, I am never sure which I prefer: the fresh yellow and later birds' nest coloured crust of house thatch, with its deep shingled eave and its lattice-patterned apex; or the light skin of rick thatch, put on after haying and harvest, more or less plainly pegged but often, as though a thatcher liked to be known by the personal touches of his art, decorated at the rick-points by tufts and crosses and pinnacles and even weather-cocks in straw.

Both, when properly done, are a delight; and both, I need hardly say, are dying out. The popularity of the Dutch barn has almost smashed the rick artist out of existence. The scarcity of thatchers, the high price of reeds and heather and even straw and the fact that even the best of thatching is never permanent, have all helped to send the domestic thatchers the same way. The old story—the old end. No longer are small boys told that they eat like thackers.

The odd thing is that the thacker has never suffered, and never could suffer, from the competition of machinery. He enjoyed that privilege with the basket-maker, whose technique is exclusively manual too. It was indifference, in one form or another, that hit them both. Between 1900 and 1908 the Dutch captured the whole market of the basket section of the industry. And that section, it so happened, was and is colossal. Covent Garden alone uses two million sieves and half-sieves a year. The Dutch and the Flemish, needing native osiers, captured the osier trade too.

And suddenly, now, we want it back. Two million baskets a year, a thousand families fully employed—that's not to be sneezed at. There's money in it!

And so, after much thrashing about, like a man searching for a needle in a haystack, one comes down to the kernel of the thing, the core of the trouble. Money! Is it a commercial proposition? Is there money in it?

And the answer is, of course, with ninety-nine per cent of rural arts and crafts—no. Bread and butter, yes—but not money. There is profit, of course, in baskets—but somebody else has already noticed that too. There is profit, of course, in the weaving of tweeds, even, thanks to the Bureau, in the making of quilts. But not in thatching and lace-making and wood-turning and the score of other obscure, but traditional handicrafts, for which, as I say, this article is not long enough. Would you like o turn out at mock pheasant's egg, perfect in every natural detail, for a penny? Would you like to make a yard of lace, out of the most intricate and bitterly acquired knowledge, for eighteenpence?

And since there is no profit in these things except the profit of bread and the pride of craftsmanship nothing can keep them alive now except the thing that kept them alive in the past—enthusiasm. Without that they will go out. And with them, as I see it, we shall lose something precious of our national inheritance. Because these arts are something more than mere occupations of the human hand. They are part of the very accent of the history of the island.