

GLOVE MAKERS

The 1851, 1861 and 1871 Census records reveal that some of our ancestors were glove maker's, employed as outworkers and most likely employed by one or more of the glove making companies operating out of Great Torrington, Devon.

The glove making industry around Great Torrington dates back to the early sixteenth century and developed amid a thriving wool industry in the seventeenth century, increasing progressively through to the nineteenth century as the town's major source of employment. Cutting was originally done by hand using shears, and replaced later by scissors. Much of the stitching would have been done by women and girls in their own homes, the cutting, checking and selling being done by the owner.

The nineteenth century was the peak period of production in Great Torrington. Women wore gloves as a matter of course, and Ladies would have had various pairs of gloves for church, dances, garden parties and weddings. Even housemaids would have worn gloves.

By 1850 there were 13 glove makers in Great Torrington, but as the process of glove making became more mechanised the smaller manufacturers were replaced by the larger enterprises that could afford the machines and larger premises to accommodate them. At first these machines were hand operated (e.g. punches used to cut out gloves), but later replaced by steam and then by gas driven machinery. There was scarcely a working class household that did not derive at least part of its income directly from the glove industry.

A measure of the importance of the industry for female employment was compiled from the 1861 Census. In addition to the town of Great Torrington, Little Torrington, Langtree and Peter's Marland were taken as representative of the parishes affected by the glove industry.

Parish	No. of Females employed	Of which No. of Glovers	Of which No. of Domestic Servants	Of which No. in other occupations
G. Torrington	814	482	178	154
Little Torrington	103	64	26	13
Langtree	67	55	12	0
Peter's Marland	39	13	20	6

Because of the necessity to work, women remained a reservoir of cheap labour. Glove making was done on a piecework basis at home and by 1861 provided employment for 60% of the female work force. The situation in the rural parishes is more difficult to determine because of the under recording of seasonal and part time work done by women and children. Entries such as 'Agricultural Labourers Wife' or 'Farmers Daughter' (bearing in mind these are not wealthy farmers) probably hide the fact that some did part time work. The duties of domestic servants in farm households are also unclear.

“Outworkers’ lived in Torrington and anywhere within a thirty-mile radius within the county. Raw material in the form of cut and shaped fabric was collected from manufacturers by ‘pack walkers’, who in turn delivered the packs of shaped glove material to the outworker’s home for stitching.

It was a pack walker’s responsibility to then collect the packs of finished gloves from households in Torrington and surrounding farms and villages and return them to the manufacturers. They were also responsible for delivering manufacturers payments to the outworkers.

The system of outworking villages and townswomen drawing work from cutting out shops was typical of the industry. This demonstrates that gloving was not limited to Torrington alone; it also thrived as a cottage industry requiring regular visits to the manufacturers.

Payments for outworkers were on a commissioning basis, and being based on piecework, were elastic. Wages averaged from 2 shillings to 7 shillings per week. It was quite feasible for a 16-year-old orphan to earn 5 shillings a week and support themselves. Typically young girls would slave for 10 hours a day for a miserable pittance of 4 shillings a week.

A Torrington correspondent for the ‘North Devon Journal’ wrote that weekly receipts averaged between 4 shillings to 14 shillings. The higher figures quoted most probably refer to the wages of the glove cutters, the lower for sewing which tended to be the bottom of the earnings ladder. Although wages were low the prosperity of a household was judged on its total income.

A single women living alone reliant on the glove trade as her sole means of support would live in poverty. However, two daughters working in the glove trade in the house of a glove cutter would make a great difference to the family budget.

Bibliography

- (1) North Devon Record Office, Barnstaple
050/B/Dev Transactions of the Devonshire Association
Vol. 124 1992; Page 153 – 166
- (2) Torrington Heritage Museum & Archive research by Ann Davis