

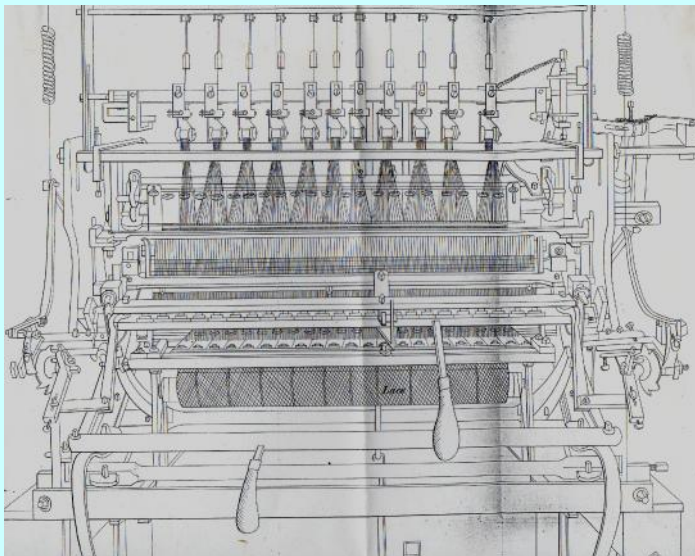
NUNN MAKES FORTUNE WITH FRENCH BLOND

Henry William Nunn - Lace Manufacturer of Whippingham

[Return to Contents](#)

For some forty or more years from 1827 lace produced at the Nunn factory at Broadlands on Staplers Road was renowned, not only in Britain but throughout mainland Europe, for its beauty of design and the outstanding quality of the fabrics manufactured. Much of the lace produced was silk blonde edging, some of it being as fine as a spider web and very expensive. At the peak of the trade some of the silk could cost a pound weight of silver for a pound of silk.

Legal disputes, pirating of designs and the theft of patents added to by growing worker unrest due to increased mechanisation in the Nottingham lace district all led to the establishment of the Lace Manufactory near to Newport on the eastern side of the Medina. At the peak of production there may have been up to 800 employed at Broadlands, on the Staplers lane into Newport from Whippingham. They worked on some 80 machines and it is thought that the earning power of the workforce at the peak of production was high enough to influence, through their property rights they acquired in the district, the outcome of any Newport election.



About 1810 two silk stocking weavers, John Brown and George Freeman of Nottingham, made a transverse warp machine and succeeded in producing a short length of lace. Because of the time and effort spent on the development of their machine is said they were reduced to owning to one coat between them. They were forced to seek the help of a rich local banker. Mr Nunn agreed on the condition they took his son Henry William, who was in his mid teens at the time, into partnership. They obtained patent 5434 of 1811. But between 1815 and 1817 it caused very extensive litigation with the Heathcoat business.

It ultimately cost all concerned thousands of pounds in legal costs.

The three, Brown Freeman and Nunn, set up their first factory away from Nottingham in Warwick but could not attract enough skilled labour so forced to move. They chose Blackfriars Road, London where Brown died. By 1826 they had decided to move again, George Freeman took half of the machines to Tewkesbury and Henry W. Nunn came to the Isle of Wight with the rest. No doubt the tradition of hand lace making in the Newport area was a great attraction together with the abundance of labour and the remoteness of the site. New machines and designs were developed with the patent on French blond being taken out in 1833. At the height of the lace boom, due at much to fashion as to the isolation because of the French wars, it was thought on a turnover of £60,000 in a year they would

have made a profit of £40,000 – quite a considerable contribution to the Island economy at that time leading up to what is often known as the ‘hungry forties’.

The demand for lace fluctuated tremendously and the *Hampshire Telegraph*’s Newport correspondent reflects this. On 5th February 1825 he wrote:

“The new commodious shops intended to be used for the manufacturing of British Lace, are getting on very rapidly.”

But by 4th May 1829

“We regret to find that the Proprietor of our principal Lace manufactory, from the extreme and unprecedented dull state of trade, has been under the necessity of discharging several of the hands employed by him, and although he has done this with much humane consideration towards those who had families, it has yet caused some privation to many individuals; and at no previous period was it ever known that at this time of the year so many people were out of employ with so many calls upon the Poor Rate, and consequently so much distress among the poorer classes.”

So it is not perhaps surprising that one of his employees a few years earlier was rather bitter as is seen from a sworn deposition 25th May 1826 from William Sutton the son of George Sutton, Lace maker of Carisbrooke. A court report now in the Isle of Wight Record Office

“On Monday 22nd May I saw Isaac Lymmington – one of Mr Nunn’s workmen – by the riverside – he was talking about the wages being taken off – he said he wished he had Mr Nunn there and he would drown him. I said “Why” he said “because he wants to take off the wages” I said “he would give you more if he could but there is a bad trade now” He said that be dammed and he ought to get all of the hinds and smash the machines to pieces and (there) be plenty of trade then to make new ones.”

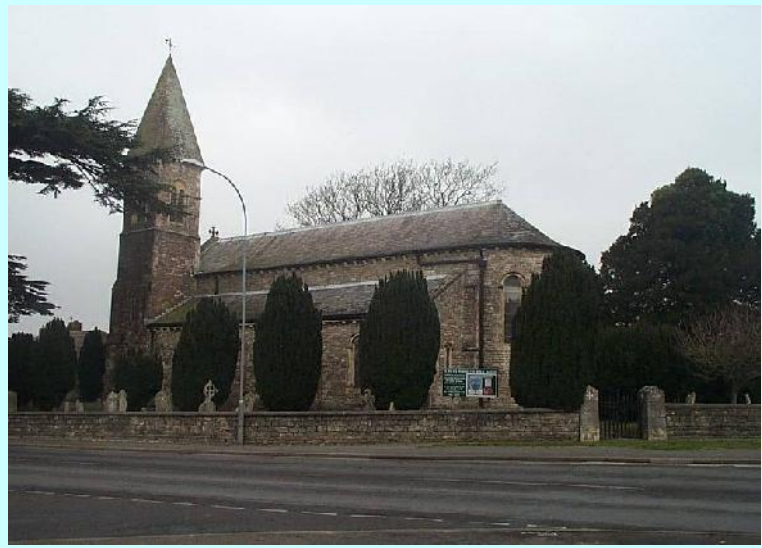
Things were to pick up again in the lace trade and by 1831 when it was at its peak some 150,000 people were employed nationally. At Newport, considering the times, the Newport Lace Manufactory was an extemporaneous place to work. The policy of Nunn was to encourage employees to better themselves as well as trying to provide for the less able. The *Hampshire Telegraph* in the first week of January 1849 printed under Newport:

“Workings Men’s Essay on the Sabbath – At the meeting held in Essex Hall, on Wednesday 27th ult, for the distribution of prizes, we were pleased to observe, amongst the successful Essayists, the name of Mr Daniel Chessel, blond lace-maker, Newport; and when it is remembered that there were 1045 competitors, it is no slight credit to an Isle of Wight workingman (completely self-taught) to have succeeded in gaining a £5 prize; particularly as it appears to be the only one awarded to any person in this part of the kingdom.”

A year later the same paper praises Nunn’s generosity:

The poor of Barton village and its neighbourhood had distributed amongst them to cheer their hearts during the festive time of Christmas, ten fat sheep and a supply of bread and coals, being the bounty of their liberal neighbour, Henry Nunn, Esq., of the Broadlands Lace Manufactory.

On the right is a photograph of St Paul's Church at Staplers, Newport. It was built and consecrated around 1844. With the school it formed the centre of what was then the growing Barton Village. Situated across the river from Newport it provided new housing for those, amongst others, working nearby down the hill at Broadlands. Much of the finance for the building came from the profits of manufacturing and selling Isle of Wight lace. Like many of his period Henry Nunn as an employer was concerned for both the physical and spiritual welfare of his workforce.



There are numerous example of his generosity and where the Nunn fortune contributed both during and after his life - too many for their individual inclusion in this short article on the Isle of Wight Lace industry.

Henry Sheppard, who worked at Broadlands and was finally in charge, recounted in an article printed in the *Isle of Wight County Press* of October 1901 some of his recollections of the manufactory and giving a different picture. Part of his article is reproduced here with their kind permission as are quotations elsewhere in these essays:

“..... In the busy time there were about 100 men, from 20 to 30 winding boys, and about 60 girls employed at the factory. The men in the factories kept themselves well acquainted with the news and topics of the day. A great many of the men coming long distance from the factory brought their dinner with them and many had theirs sent. An hour was taken for diner, and the men at that time all met in one place, in winter round a large fire, when two of their number were told off to read the news and leading articles in the Times newspaper (each one subscribing his few pence weekly), after which there often arose capital discussion, there being many intelligent men among them. The only holidays were two days at Whitsuntide (Newport Fair), Good Friday, and at Christmas ...”

Lace, like most fashion commodities, was a fickle trade and was much influenced by the French wars and import embargoes. In 1853 the elder of the two original partners, George Freeman, sold the Tewksbury complex and H. W. Nunn was employing a smaller workforce and by 1868 a year or so before his death the Broadlands factory closed with the Company - Nunn and Co, Barton - finally ceasing to trade in 1875.

The Court and Queen Victoria at Osborne were no doubt aware of the situation:

Ryde – Isle of Wight Lace – Her Majesty has recently shown her desire to encourage the special manufacture of different localities in her kingdom by an order for a number of articles made of the beautiful material (lace) from a Ryde tradesman. It is hoped that this may tend to revise this branch of industry which for a long time has been in a somewhat depressed state.

Hampshire Telegraph 24 February 1869



Seen on the left is the Broadlands site. It has been mainly rebuilt. In his guide to the Isle of Wight of 1884 Norman May wrote:

“The lace manufactory is thus described in 1856 ‘It is a large building, the property of H. W. Nunn Esq., situated on the right of the road as you enter Newport from the east. It provides employment for a great number of the poor, and has long been celebrated for the production of

a very delicate and expensive fabric.’ The institution no longer exists, having at the time it was started concentrated the trade which previously scattered about over the Island. There is now only one party who makes lace and she lives at Niton.”

Norman May had assumed wrongly that Nunn concentrated the locally produced Island lace in one place. The former was hand produced and virtually died out, whereas Henry William Nunn had brought brand new state of the art machines to the Island. The lace machines and their speed of production in the early 1800’s must have been mind blowing for those who first saw them. By the time Norman May was writing they were just taken for granted even though today we might still consider their control by punched cards quite a modern innovation. How new technology is always accepted by the next generation! He had also assumed that those working at the Lace Manufactory were the poor – at the peak of production they satisfied about 10% of the nation demand from Newport.

Today the site of Nunn’s lace factory on Staplers, just below St Paul’s the church built mainly with his money, houses government offices and is virtually in the centre of Newport. However when lace was being made there the Whippingham parish extended on the east side of the Medina as far as Coppins Bridge and therefore in all his patents H W Nunn is described as being a lace manufacturer of Whippingham, Isle of Wight in the county of Southampton.



For those who do not know French Blond is a type of lace!

[Return to Contents](#)

[Bibliography and other References](#)