



Blackwork Journey Blog

December 2011

In Praise of the Needle Memories of a Needlemaker

*Blackwork Journey
Techniques*

TQ0003

Needles



Needle Safety



Forge Mill Needle Museum

Working Environment by



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December is here and another year is drawing to a close. If you look in “Freebies” you will find my Christmas chart to you with all my love and best wishes for a happy and peaceful Christmas and New Year. I hope you have enjoyed Blackwork Journey during 2011.

Big changes are ahead for 2012 which I hope you will enjoy. It is always a pleasure to hear from readers, listen to your suggestions and see your work, so please keep in touch.

In Praise of the Needle!
"In the rhythm of the needles,
there is music for the soul."
Anon.

I researched an article on needles for "The Gift of Stitching" recently and I would like to pass on to you some of the information I found during the course of my research.

In January in the new “Techniques” section there will a PDF called “Needles” which should help you to look more closely at this subject.

Of all the tools in a needlewoman’s workbox, none is so undervalued as the humble needle, whose origin dates back to the Stone Age and is probably one of the oldest tools in the history of man. The modern equivalent is far removed from a bone splinter shaped by a piece of flint!

In England we have a long established firm called John James, who has been making needles since 1840. I have used their needles for many years and have found their website of great value when deciding which needle to use for which purpose. However, I do take my needles for granted and tend to forget that their production in earlier years was long and arduous. I would like to bring you an extract from the John James website which outlines the life of a needleworker through the generations and to thank them for making our lives so much easier.

John James has a long heritage steeped in the history of the needle making industry. That heritage also stretches through generations of needle industry workers and their families and these extracts give an insight into life for the needlemaker through the industry's 300 year history...

The traditions still continue today and I would like to thank John James Needles for use of their photographs and assistance in preparing this article.

To find more information on John James Needles go to:

<http://www.jjneedles.com>



"Memories of a Needlemaker"

"By the start of the 19th Century there were over one hundred needlemakers around the English town of Redditch. Needlemaking groups came in all sizes from only a handful of needlecraft workers to a few hundred. Over 250 years ago, scouring and grinding, creating the high polish and 'points' of the sewing needles were very labour intensive, back-breaking processes. Water power from the areas many rivers and streams meant that water mills were eventually converted to the use of new methods of driving machinery. Up to this stage, grinding the points involved the 'pointer' skilfully tapering the ends of cut wires against a spinning grindstone, to a long point.

It was not pleasant work - the fine particles of dust and sand would be inhaled by the pointers and by the children who used to turn the grindstone by hand. Pneumoconiosis, known as 'rot' or 'pointers disease' meant that few would live to see their 35th year. Despite advances by the mid 1800's, meaning that water power turned the grindstone, releasing the children from this dangerous work, it was still to be many years before modern high-powered fans would extract the dust efficiently. Even so, the workers were unhappy with the introduction of water powered machines, seeing them as a threat to their livelihood. In 1846, the pointers began a strike which would last for a year and cripple trade across the industry. Eventually pressures of loss of income forced the pointers back to work where they began to live longer and demand rose, along with the factories producing higher volumes than before.

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The origins of needlemaking in the Redditch area began literally in the cottage industries. Family groups would work together specialising in one or two processes. Children as young as 7 or 8 would be involved alongside parents and grandparents, with needle work skills being passed down through generations. Workshops would be found in rooms and brewing houses behind cottages in and around the Redditch area. Scouring was the first process to be brought under one roof; the first factories where a workforce would be brought together.

Sewing needles in factories

Washford Mill and Studley Mill were converted in the early part of the 18th century, with Forge Mill being built especially for purpose in 1725. Many parts of the process of needlemaking were still housed within the cottages, however until the development of steam power and advancements in machines meant that most processes could be brought into the factory by the middle part of the 19th century. Although output was able to grow and many tasks were undertaken by machine, much of the work was still done by hand. Stamping and Eyeing machines were eventually introduced in the first part of the last century.

Social awareness grew through the latter half of the 19th century, with the emergence of sick clubs and hardship funds - even small pensions paid to retired workers. Some large employers would rent housing at a favourable cost to key staff and long-serving employees. Apprentices would be taught by elder craftsmen, alongside the original 'passing down' of skills within families of the needleworking trade.

Fishing hooks, reels and tackle were manufactured along with needles. John James and Sons (formed in 1840) were making hand sewing needles, fishhooks and hardware needles at their Victoria Works before transfer of the needle production over to Washford Mills after 1912. Victoria Works in Studley continued then to concentrate on the production of fishhooks. Companies expanded and merged from the family businesses which were working side by side with other needle and tackle manufacturers across the area. In some factories, works committees brought together the management and the shop floor, raising and resolving issues and concerns, all with the aim of making production run as smoothly as possible as the needlework supply industry grew. There was much forward thinking in the developing industrial age. Educational trips by works committee members to other factories and even overseas kept the Redditch factories informed and moving onwards. Redditch became the centre for the needle making industry through the 19th century.

Needles were also manufactured in London and in parts of the north and west of England and no-one is exactly sure why this particular part of the midlands came to have such a hold over the industry. The entrepreneurial spirit of the Redditch industrialists saw machines being developed and introduced to the benefit of production levels. Water power being used to polish needles was an important step and gave the Studley and Astwood manufacturers some early advantage over the competition. The introduction of machines to stamp, press and drill the eyes progressed the production process throughout the middle part of the 19th century and hardening techniques were refined. Redditch gained the reputation for producing the best quality needles and handworkers were re-trained in the use of machines.

The traditions still continue today!



*Forge Mill Needle Museum
Needle Mill Lane, Riverside, Redditch, Worcestershire, B98 8AH*

Forge Mill Needle Museum in Redditch is an unusual and fascinating place to visit. This historic site illustrates the rich heritage of the needle and fishing tackle industries. Models and recreated scenes provide a vivid illustration of how needles were once made and how Redditch once produced 90% of the world's needles.

<http://www.forgemill.org.uk>

Take your needle, my child, and work at your pattern; it will come out a rose by and by.
Life is like that - one stitch at a time taken patiently and the pattern will come out all right like the embroidery.

~ Oliver Wendell Holmes

Happy stitching!

Liz