

Andrew Ure on the Early History of the Hosiery Industry, 1836

(The English hosiery industry was concentrated in the East Midland counties of Nottinghamshire, Leicestershire and Derbyshire. Andrew Ure, an important early advocate and historian of manufacturing, explains the origin of the stockingframe and its use in the industry. Jedediah Strutt (1726-97), invented a machine for knitting ribbed stockings that laid the foundation of the family fortune. His partnership with Richard Arkwright led to the development of the Midland cotton industry. Andrew Ure. *The Cotton Manufacture of Great Britain*, 1836, II, 338-41; in J. T. Ward, ed., *The Factory System, Vol. I, Birth and Growth* (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1970), pp. 50-53.)

The stocking-frame, to anyone who attentively considers its complex operations, and the elegant sleight with which it forms its successive rows of loops or stitches, will appear to be the most extraordinary single feat,-the most remarkable stride, ever made in mechanical invention. In the Stocking Weavers' Hall, in Red Cross Street, London, there is a portrait of a man, painted in the act of pointing to an iron stocking frame, and addressing a woman, who is knitting with needles by hand. The picture bears the following quaint inscription: "In the year 1589, the ingenious William Lee, A.M., of St. John's College, Cambridge, devised this profitable art for stockings, (but being despised, went to France,) yet of iron to himself, but to us and to others, of gold; in memory of whom this is here painted".

It was only twenty-eight years prior to the construction of this machine, that the art of knitting stockings, by wires worked by the fingers, had been introduced into England from Spain.

According to one story, Lee was expelled from the University for marrying contrary to the statutes. Having no other means of subsistence, he and his wife were obliged to live on her earnings as a stocking-knitter; when, under the pressure of want, Lee contrived his frame as a method of multiplying production.

But the following is probably a more correct account of the origin of this contrivance. According to an ancient tradition in the neighbourhood of Lee's birth-place [Woodborough, seven miles from Nottingham], the stocking-frame was meditated under the inspiration of love, and constructed in consequence of its disappointment. Lee is said to have been in early youth enamoured of a fair mistress of the knitting craft, who had become rich by employing a number of young women at this highly-prized and lucrative industry. The young scholar, after studying fondly the dexterous movements of the lady's hand, had become himself not only an adept in the art, but had imagined a scheme of making artificial fingers for knitting many loops at once. Whether this feminine accomplishment excited jealousy, or detracted from his manly attractions, is not said; but his suit was received with coldness, and then rejected with scorn.

Revenge now prompted him to realize the ideas which love had first inspired. He devoted his days and nights to the construction of the stocking-frame, and brought it, ere long, to such perfection, that it has remained nearly as he left it, without receiving any essential improvement. Having taught its use to his brother and the rest of his relations, he established his frame at Culverton, near Nottingham, as a formidable competitor of female handiwork, teaching his mistress, by the insignificance to which he reduced the implements of her pride, that the love of a man of genius was not to be slighted with impunity.

After practising this business during five years, he had become aware of its importance in a national point of view, and brought his invention to London to seek protection and encouragement from the Court, by whom his fabrics were much admired. The period of his visit was not propitious. Elizabeth, the patroness of whatever ministered to her vanity as a woman, and her state as a princess, was in the last stage of her decline. Her successor was too deeply engrossed with political intrigues for securing the stability of his throne, to be able to afford any leisure for cherishing an infant manufacture. Nay, though Lee and his brother made a pair of stockings in the presence of the King, it is said that he viewed their frame rather as a dangerous innovation, likely to deprive the poor of labour and bread, than as a means of multiplying the resources of national industry, and of giving profitable employment to many thousand people.

The encouragement to English ingenuity which the narrow minded pedant, James, refused, was offered by Henry IV, and his sagacious minister, Sully. They invited Lee to come to France with his admirable machines. Thither, accordingly, he repaired, and settled at Rouen, giving an early impulsion to manufactures which has conducted not a little to their great development since, in the department of the Lower Seine. After Henry had fallen a victim to domestic treachery, Lee, envied by the natives whose genius he had eclipsed, was proscribed as a Protestant, and obliged to seek concealment from the bloody bigots in Paris, where he ended his days in secret grief and disappointment. Some of his workmen made their escape into England, where, under his ingenious apprentice, Aston, they mounted the stocking-frame, with some improvements, and thus restored to its native country an invention which had been wellnigh lost to it.

The first frame was brought into Leicestershire in the year 1640, and thus laid the foundation of the hosiery trade of that county, since so prodigiously enlarged in it and the adjoining counties of Nottingham and Derby.

In the year 1663, Charles II. granted to the Framework Knitters' Society of London, a charter, which had been refused to them a few years before by Oliver Cromwell.

Jedediah Strutt, the founder of the distinguished house of Belper, invented, in the year 1758, a machine for making ribbed stockings. About that time he settled in Derby, and established that manufacture under the protection of a patent, in conjunction with his brother-in-law, Mr. Woollatt, a hosier of that place. During a portion of the patent period, Mr. Samuel Need, of Nottingham, was a partner in the concern. The patent right was twice tried in Westminster Hall; first by the hosiers of Derby, and next by those of Nottingham; after which it was quietly enjoyed by the patentee till the end of the term of fourteen years. This improvement suggested several more, such as open-work mittens, and fancy articles in the stocking stitch.