

The Old Craft of Straw-Plaiting

HIGH WAGES MAKE THE POOR SAUCY

By 'BEORCHAM'

ONE OR TWO short references in recent articles to straw-plaiting, a speciality of our part of the country, prompted a request for an article on this ancient cottage craft.

When I last dealt with this subject at some length, seventeen years ago, I was able to draw upon the personal reminiscences of many old residents of Berkhamsted and neighbouring villages. Today very few people remember the days when almost every cottager plaited straw for Luton and Dunstable hat-makers. The simple little implements which were in daily use are already museum pieces.

Thanks to soil that was especially favourable to the growth of suitable varieties of wheat-straw, the towns and villages of West Herts and neighbouring parts of Beds and Bucks were noted for high-grade straw-plait. The craft was of some antiquity. Mary Queen of Scots is said to have introduced it to Britain. Shakespeare wrote about 'the rye-straw hat.' But locally it seems that lace-making was a more important craft until the end of the 18th century.

THE COTTAGE PARLOUR

Let us try to imagine the scene in a Berkhamsted cottage parlour a century ago. There was still a good demand for English plait, and mother and children were seldom short of work.

In a box, or on the table, were bundles of straw, usually purchased from men who bought the finished plait, but sometimes gleaned from the fields by the cottagers themselves.

The 'chines' (short for 'machines') were few, small, and simple. Most important was the straw-splitter, made of wood, bone or iron, into which holes were bored to hold a series of cutters. These cutters were like miniature wheels, with razor-sharp spokes, the spokes varying in number to produce

four-, five-, six-, seven-, eight-, or nine-ply splints of straw. In the hub of each 'wheel' was a cone, on which the straw was centred before it was pushed through the cutter and sliced into the desired number of splints.

THROUGH THE MILL

The sliced straws were then moistened and pressed flat by passing them through a miniature mangle, called a mill, which was often fastened to the door. Great care was needed to prevent the straw twisting or breaking. Then the plaiting started, the workers customarily holding the straws in their mouths.

Speed varied according to the variety of plait that was being produced; the most popular varieties in Berkhamsted were known as China Pearl, Rock, Coburg and Moss Edge. The finished plait was again pressed and cut into lengths of 20 yards, known in the trade as scores. Practised workers could judge the exact length by winding the plait over their arms; others cut niches on the mantelpiece to serve as measuring aids.

Once a week the finished product was sold to agents of Dunstable and Luton hat-makers. Special markets for straw-plait were held at Berkhamsted, Tring and Hemel Hempstead, and there was a great deal of bargaining. When demand was exceptionally keen the buyers visited the workers' homes or met them on the way to market, usually to offer a lower price than they would get in open circulation. Rightly or wrongly, some of the buyers had a bad reputation. According to an old ballad entitled 'Ladies! Beware of the Plait-Men!' a parson's daughter was lured away by a 'naughty, naughty plait-man':

To Dunstable and Hempstead
And to Luton he would go;
He dearly loved the ladies
And could whistle 'High-hee-wo.'

But the plait-man was already married,
and the doggerel continued:

Oh, night and day, you maidens gay,
Mind well what you are at;
Beware of all the naughty men
Who deal in ladies' plait.

PLAITING SCHOOLS

In every town and village children were sent to straw-plaiting schools where it was rare for any other subject to be taught. An elderly woman at Potten End once told me that, as a small girl, she attended a plaiting school at Frithsden from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., with a short break for dinner, consisting usually of bread and lard. Then, after returning home for tea, she had to go to another plaiting school in her own village. At Bovington, a speciality was made of teaching children to plait in the dark, to accustom them to working without looking at the plait.

At Berkhamsted, there were no fewer than three plaiting schools in Bridge Street alone. Most of the schools were run by widows or maiden ladies; they made a small charge for passing on their skill to boys and girls who attended classes for two or three hours every evening, after normal school hours.

Children started plaiting at five years of age and had few opportunities of playing games. There were sad cases of stunted growth. A visitor to a nearby village noted the puny size of the inhabitants and blamed straw-plaiting. Not only were children robbed of fresh air and exercise, but the habit of moistening straws in the mouth was said to have a bad effect on health.

HIGH WAGES

Still, it was a profitable occupation for many years. In the first half of the 19th century many woman and children earned more than men who laboured in the fields. A good hand at Berkhamsted could earn about 15s. a week—then a handsome wage—and a 13 years old girl at St. Albans received as much as a guinea for a week's work. Farmers complained that straw-plaiting 'did mischief, making the poor saucy, rendering the women averse to husbandry, and causing a dearth of indoor servants and field labourers.'

Changing fashions and foreign competition eventually killed a cottage craft which established Luton's fame as our premier hat centre. It was obviously impossible to compete with Continental and coolie labour when plait could be imported at a third of the cost of the

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BEORCHAM (Contd.)

home product. At one time a hat of Chinese plait could be bought for 2½d.

In the words of a Potten End woman, who, if alive today, would be a centenarian: 'It was certainly a profitable craft when my mother trudged to Hemel Hempstead once a week to sell plait for two shillings a score yards. But what about the time when the price fell to sixpence a score, and we had to pay threepence for the material?'

ALDBURY INTERVIEW

Another recollection of a bygone craft, from an unexpected source, the *New York Times*. The following appeared in that newspaper some 70 years ago:

Standing by a cottage door [at Aldbury] are two comely lasses at work straw-plaiting. We pause to watch them; beneath the arm is a little bundle of the straws used, each perhaps 8-in. long and one-eighth of an inch wide. One can scarcely follow the swift action of the nimble fingers as the plait grows longer. They giggle of course as the

stranger looks on. 'And what, may I ask, do you get per yard for that?' 'Oh, threepence three-farthings a score yards.' 'Where does it go to?' 'Well, sir, to Luton, but we take it to Tring market, and the buyers meet us there.' 'Well, let me have a length.' Then a sensible face looks round from the interior. 'How much, sir?' says the careful soul, scissors in hand. 'Oh, a foot, please.' 'And how much?' I asked of the sensible dame, 'will they do in a day?' 'Oh, not much, sir. Ye see, the girls as get messing about with that stuff won't go to service. I've known the time when they got half a crown a score yards, and now it ain't fourpence.'

JUMBLE SALE

The Mothers' Union are having a Jumble Sale on Saturday 8th November. If you have any Jumble and cannot deliver it to the Court House early on that Saturday morning please ring Mrs. Farmery (Berk. 4923) or Mrs. Pullen (Berk. 2196) who will arrange transport.

INSURANCE MATTERS

'I want to be covered for *everything*.' How often I have heard this said by a proud householder surveying his new property. But, do you? Are you prepared to *pay* for such a sweeping statement?

Surely what matters is that one should discuss the various alternative forms of protection, and choose what to protect by insurance, and what to accept as a reasonable risk to bear oneself.

Some so-called Comprehensive Policies (especially some paid for weekly) basically only protect against fire risks to household property. The word 'Comprehensive' is meaningless when applied to Household Policies. Some are more Comprehensive in their protection than others!

Make sure yours covers you for damage caused by burst pipes, storms and flood. Winter is coming! Be prepared!

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