

Marlow's Forgotten Industry - Thimble Making

High Wycombe is well known as having been the British 'capital' of chair making. However its neighbour Marlow has an equal claim to fame as also the 'capital' of a once thriving industry, although in the case of Marlow the industry was somewhat more obscure, and I suspect the vast majority of Marlovians have never even heard about it. Yet in the 18th century Marlow was the British capital of thimble making.

Up until the very end of the 17th century thimble making was virtually unknown in Britain, nearly all thimbles being imported from mainland Europe; up to the 16th century imports had been mainly from Nuremberg in Germany, then in the 17th century the supply switched mostly to the Netherlands. At the time virtually all thimbles were hand made brass items. Then in 1693 a Dutchman by the name of John Lofting (this surname being an anglicisation of the Dutch name Loftinck), who was a very experienced thimble maker in the Netherlands, noticed that there was no domestic manufacture in Britain, a country with a large demand for these essential little items. Seizing on a potentially lucrative business opportunity, Lofting moved to London and set up his own business making thimbles in Islington, where there is a road named after him today. He was clearly an astute businessman, for he realized that making thimbles by hand was inefficient and expensive, so he set about designing a machine to automate the process, and by 1695 he patented the design. His machine could cast, turn and indent the thimbles very much more quickly than could be done by hand. At first

the machines at his Islington factory were horse powered, but in 1697 he relocated his machinery to Marlow, where he took a lease on Marlow Mills with the aim of using water power instead of horse power. At first his business got off to a slow start as he found a shortage of appropriately skilled workers in Marlow. However he must have surmounted this problem because, before long, it is reported that the change from horse to water power allowed Lofting to double the output he had achieved in Islington, and before long he was able to produce up to two millions thimbles a year. A significant proportion of his production was exported to Europe which had been the centre of thimble manufacture, but whose businesses had been in slow decline. In the year 1694 records show that he exported 145,000 thimbles through the Port of London. Being an astute business man, in addition to thimbles, he also used the Mill for grinding a variety of seeds to produce oil.

Another advantage of locating his factory in Marlow was the ready supply of brass from the Temple Brass Mills just a mile upriver at Bisham. Temple Mills were originally built as flour mills, but changed to copper and brass production in the early 18th century. These mills survived into the 1960s, having switched to producing paper, some of which it is believed was used in the production of bank notes. However, in spite of the advantages of a local brass supply and the use of water power, Lofting's business started to struggle, and production declined caused in part by costly legal battles with some former employees over patent rights, and in 1700 Lofting was declared bankrupt. The business did continue, however, although the details of how are not known, and whilst Lofting died in 1742 at the age of 82 his thimble mill continued

production for a number of years under ownership of his two sons, Benjamin and William; these two sons made generous benefactions to the poor and church in the town, establishing a charity which still exists today. However by the mid 18th century there was competition from manufacturers in Birmingham, and eventually the business folded. Birmingham had become an important centre for the manufacture of small brass items, and expanding into thimble making was a logical move. The Birmingham companies started pressing thimbles instead of casting them as Lofting was doing, and this was a less costly process and used less brass, and their products were therefore cheaper. The pressing and drawing method was patented by Richard Ford of Birmingham in 1769. Until the early 18th century brass tended not to be malleable enough for deep drawing, hence the use of casting, but improvement in brass production gradually allowed pressing instead of casting.

In addition to proper 'working' thimbles, the Birmingham manufacturers started to produce high quality novelty thimbles, known at the time as 'toys, which were never intended to see the blunt end of a needle! Thimbles are highly collectable and the name 'Lofting' became a semi-generic name for the type of thimble Lofting made. However today the name of Lofting is largely forgotten in the town, and the Mills have been replaced by up-market housing.