

Trading Stories, Working Lives

Graham Barker continues his series of occupational histories with Thomas Norman, an elastic web weaver at Luke Turner & Co.

As family historians, it can be frustrating not to know where our ancestors worked. We uncover census returns and certificates listing their occupation as a framework knitter or a boot clicker, but which factory were they at?

Workplace records rarely survive. A few years ago I had the good fortune to solve one such mystery in my own family, when Mike Ratcliff – author of the LRFHS Computer Bits column – sent me a newspaper snippet recording the retirement of our shared ancestor, Thomas Norman.



It's 1938 and Thomas is retiring after 68 years' service with elastic web weavers Luke Turner & Co. Dapper and surprisingly sprightly at 82, he "can still keep pace with the average weaver" according to his boss. It's a remarkable achievement – from loom hand to pensioner with just one firm – and I'm keen to find out more.

The Victoria County History sets the industrial backdrop. Elastic web – woven rubber thread, sometimes interwoven with cotton, wool or other fibres – enables fabric to stretch and then return to its original size and shape. It was first manufactured in Leicester in 1839, when Caleb Bedells opened Abbey Mills in Southgate Street to produce "an improved caoutchouc (India rubber) webbing". Initially used for men's braces, elastic web is soon adapted to make glove wrists, stocking tops, boot fastenings and hairnets. Early proponents include John Biggs – thrice mayor of the town and commemorated with a Welford Place statue:

“In 1840 the firm patented a method of making gloves with elastic wrist bands, and the new line took so well that they established a separate glove-branch, equipped with 330 frames, which flourished for some years...” (LAHS Transactions, 1972-3)

From 1844, the new process of vulcanisation – treating the elastic with sulphur to make it resistant to heat and cold – broadens the applications still further, particularly into industrial machine belts and cords. The so-called ‘king of elastic web’ is Archibald Turner. Operating from Bow Bridge Works on King Richards Road – a magnificent building, like a Venetian palazzo – he prospers from the popularity of elastic-sided boots. Despite this success, his son Luke – for reasons that are unclear – opts to go it alone with his own firm.

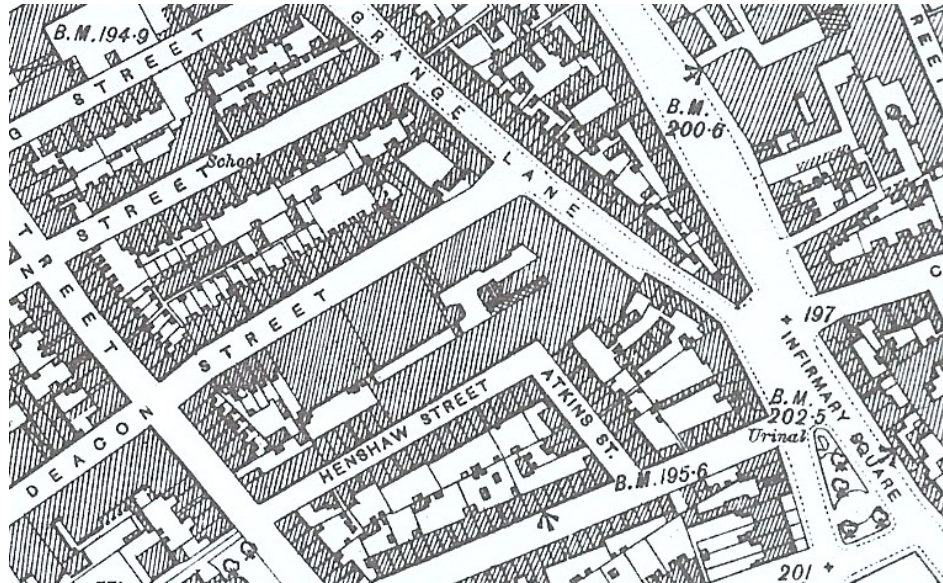
It’s at Luke Turner’s works on Grange Lane that Thomas Norman starts as a 14-year old loom hand in 1870. Four generations of Normans before Thomas have been framework knitters, churning out stockings. But now is a propitious time to shift to elastic web – work is plentiful and wages are decent. As historian Prof Jack Simmons writes, elastic web work “offered higher wages than could be earned on the stocking-frame, and though it too was subject to fluctuations in demand, through the vagaries of fashion, it became firmly established as a new employer.” By the mid 1870s there were 47 elastic web manufacturers in the borough.

All is not plain sailing, however, and strikes are apparently common. Wages drop after the initial boom – though they still remain higher than the rest of the hosiery industry – and from 1878, the Leicester Elastic Weavers’ Trade Protection, Sick Benefit and Funeral Society represent workers’ interests in return for 6d weekly subscription.

Luke Turner & Co is an enterprising firm. The ‘Story of Leicester’ website takes up the thread:

“Supplying both the footwear industry and hosiery, the Luke Turner company extended the uses to which the material could be put – such as braids, cords, garters, corsetry, bandages, covered fine elastic for millinery, drapery, umbrellas, welts for underwear and kindred goods. One of their famous brand names was ‘Lion’.”

To meet this demand, the original Grange Lane works are extended in 1893 along Deacon Street and Henshaw Street, occupying virtually the entire block.



Walk around there today and you'll still see a towering brick chimney and much of the factory complex – spared the demolition ball after being granted Grade II listed status as “an extremely early example of an exposed iron frame building.” The innovative structure – designed by mill specialists, Stott & Son – incorporates large glazed walls across fifteen double-bays to maximise the daylight and ventilation inside. The weaving sheds had looms running either side of a central aisle, the engine room incorporated a rope race into the factory, and a research department tested out new materials and designs.



It was a forward-looking move, as the ‘Story of Leicester’ continues:

“The new building was necessary for the production of fashion-conscious goods such as fancy garters, braiding, threading elastic for underwear and the exploitation of a technically advanced braiding machine that could be driven by steam power so that one person could overlook a large number of machines.”

Writing in *The Wyvern* in 1895, Tom Barclay gives us another glimpse hereabouts:

“The women stitch gloves and pants. Shoe, hosiery and wool-spinning factories abound in the neighbourhood and Mr Luke Turner’s elastic works hisses distractingly all day long.”

Thomas Norman – invariably described as an elastic web weaver in census returns and certificates – works directly on the looms, crafting the lengths of fabric. Other mill workers – many of them women – work in the winding and warping department, and finishing processes, such as measuring, carding and boxing ready for dispatch.

Let’s not romanticise it; life in the weaving rooms could be a hazardous business. Factories are often tightly packed with unguarded machinery, and the moving belts might catch an operative’s finger or hair. The air is filled with dust and fibres, irritating the operatives’ lungs, and the appalling clatter of a weaving shed can lead to occupational deafness. Unable to find any images inside the Deacon Street Works, I refer to old weaving factory photos to get a sense of everyday reality for Thomas.



Luke Turner is an enlightened employer – keenly interested in elementary education and a “genial, kind-hearted, gentle-mannered, large-souled gentleman, who was dear to all who knew him.” Upon his death in 1897, three hundred employees – including Thomas Norman, no doubt – follow his funeral procession to Welford Road Cemetery.

His sons Archibald and Hugh carry on the business. As the nineteenth century closes, elastic-sided boots head out of fashion. Manufacturers need to innovate and find new markets, or fall by the wayside; by 1902, there are only 18 firms left, including Archibald Turner at Bow Bridge Works, Faire Bros (elastic web and laces manufacturers) on Rutland Street, and W&A Bates (India rubber and cycle tyre makers) at St Mary’s Mills.

The company negotiates its way through World War I – no mean feat – as the industry continues to decline and consolidate. By the time of Thomas Norman's retirement in 1938, only nine elastic firms remain in Leicester. One such firm is Wykes – set up in 1932 by another relative of mine – but that, as they say, is another story.

I look back at the newspaper clipping of Thomas Norman, trying to get a sense of the man. Every working day he has walked from his home – successively in Paradise Place, Mill Lane, Freeman's Common, Jarrom Street and Sheffield Street – and through the entrance to Luke Turner's mill. He's been a constant amidst the changing landscape. The hiss and clatter of steam-powered looms has been replaced with quieter electric machines. The market for elastic web has shifted from Victorian braids, boots and corsets to industrial textiles. Luke Turner's is still a family firm, though only just, as it's about to be listed on the stock exchange as a public company. Thomas Norman has been a loyal employee, working diligently to the end.

Mike Ratcliff recalls a story passed down through the family: "When WWII started, 83-year old Thomas returned to Luke Turner's factory and demanded his old job back, to help with the war effort". History doesn't record whether they let him re-start, but – rather like the miles of elastic web he'd made over the decades – Thomas Norman was remarkable for his resilience.