Trading Stories, Working Lives

Graham Barker unearths some newspaper snippets on his ancestor Jesse Barker, hand-frame knitter and celery grower of Loughborough

Inside a marquee tucked behind the Peacock Inn, Jesse Barker is celebrating winning first prize in the Loughborough Celery Show. It's a hard-won victory; his seventh attempt at the top prize. In earlier years he'd won a succession of all-comers' prizes: half a dozen knives and forks, a tin coffee pot, a garden fork, a pepper pot. But now, on a Saturday afternoon in September 1869, he's finally able to hold aloft the winner's trophy – a copper kettle – to respectful applause from his fellow gardeners and cheers from his grandchildren.

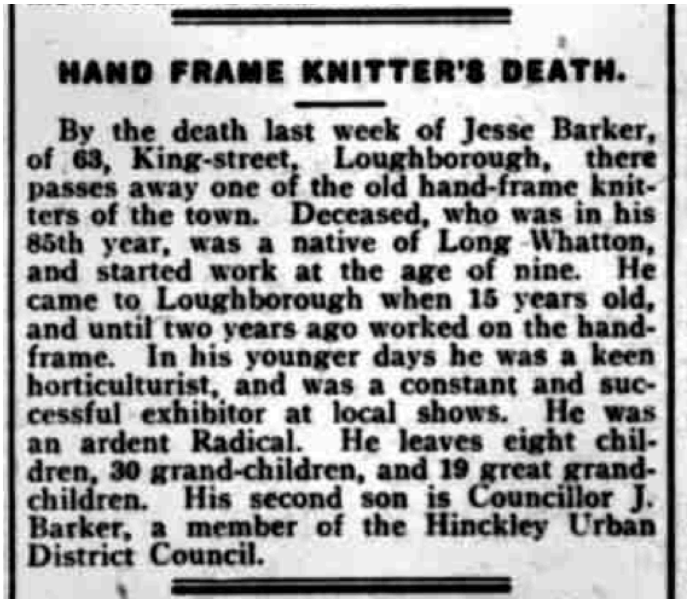
As the Leicester Daily Mail describes, "There were twenty-one entries, and the exhibition was considered superior to any of the previous ones. The members and friends finished the day by taking supper together, and… were much enlivened by the musical strains of a harp and concertina, with some excellent singing by Mr Biddles." Jesse was a touch tipsy when he left the Peacock that night, heading around the corner to his home on King Street.

The Peacock Inn on Factory Street, with William Cotton's house alongside

When I first began researching my maternal Barker ancestors, with generation after generation of framework knitters, it seemed slightly tricky to distinguish one relative from the next. Parish registers and census returns only provided a sparse outline. Mine was a family that migrated from village to town – moving from Long Whatton to Loughborough, and later to Leicester – reflecting the classic shift in the 19th century hosiery trade from home working to factory life. But how could I get a more rounded picture of my 3 x great grandfather, Jesse Barker (1831-1915)?

A search online at the British Newspaper Archive comes up trumps. I begin at the end, with Jesse's obituary in the Loughborough Echo. It concisely conveys

a measure of the man – an ardent Radical, keen horticulturalist, and head of a large family – and offers a glimpse of his working life as one of the old hand-frame knitters of the town. “A native of Long Whatton, he started work at the age of nine. He came to Loughborough when he was 15 years old, and until two years ago worked on the hand-frame.”



HAND FRAME KNITTER'S DEATH.

By the death last week of Jesse Barker, of 63, King-street, Loughborough, there passes away one of the old hand-frame knitters of the town. Deceased, who was in his 85th year, was a native of Long Whatton, and started work at the age of nine. He came to Loughborough when 15 years old, and until two years ago worked on the hand-frame. In his younger days he was a keen horticulturist, and was a constant and successful exhibitor at local shows. He was an ardent Radical. He leaves eight children, 30 grand-children, and 19 great grand-children. His second son is Councillor J. Barker, a member of the Hinckley Urban District Council.

Loughborough Echo, 19 Nov 1915

By my reckoning, Jesse was 11 or 12, not 15, when his parents – Joseph and Susannah Barker – brought him and younger siblings to live in Loughborough by 1843. And Jesse’s second son Joseph was a councillor in Heanor, not Hinckley. Journalistic blips aside, Jesse’s working life as a cotton framework knitter was undoubtedly long: a remarkable 73 years at the hand-frame.

By dovetailing together census returns, marriage certificates, and old maps, it becomes clear that Jesse, his wife Ann, and their family lived in a small concentration of streets, south of Loughborough town centre. Over the years they moved between King Street, Queen Street, briefly Russell Street and then, from 1888, settling in New King Street, where the newly built terraces – Fern, Jasmine, Rose, Laurel, Woodbine and Elms Cottages – were named with bucolic charm that would have appealed to the Jesse the gardener.

On the Ordnance Survey map, I spot an extensive ‘Hosiery Manufactory’ over the back yard wall. Could this be where Jesse or his family worked? The factory belonged to the Nottingham Manufacturing Company, originally known as Hine and Mundella, which set up in Loughborough in 1859 – initially on Factory Street and later extending along Trinity Street to Moor Lane.

The 1850s was a time of considerable innovation in the hosiery industry, with the development of steam-powered machinery. One such innovator was William Cotton (c1819-1887) of Loughborough. As the Knitting Together website explains: “The Cotton's Patent successfully transferred the hand and foot operations of the framework knitter to a machine that could be driven by rotary power from a steam engine. With steam power harnessed by Cotton's

machine, large-scale factory production of fully-fashioned garments was now possible in the knitting industry. The Nottingham Manufacturing Company recognised the potential of Cotton's invention and bought the UK rights for his 1864 patent." Who knows, Jesse Barker might have been on nodding terms with Cotton, who lived on Factory Street, next to the Peacock Inn for over three decades. It was a humble dwelling for a notable man, now commemorated with a green plaque.

Despite the advent of mechanised factories, much of the hosiery trade still relied on home working, and Jesse Barker – as a hand-frame knitter – was most likely based at home. As Knitting Together sets out, "In many cases, the opening of a factory did not end a company's relationship with framework knitters working from home. Companies had significant capital invested in frames and continued to pass work out to them and receive frame rents back." Even as late as 1900, the large hosiery firm, I & R Morley, employed more domestic workers than factory workers or warehousemen.

Homeworkers were especially useful to cope with rises and falls in demand, or problems in the factory. In 1881, there were several months of industrial action at the Nottingham Manufacturing Company: "The men refused to submit to [a 10% wage reduction], and left work for two of three days, but eventually resumed on the understanding that the company would pay according to the recognised list. But in Whit week the whole of the men working Cotton's patent frames received notice to leave, and from that the present state of affairs had arisen." Replacement workers were secretly brought in, and tensions grew. Fourteen of the locked out workers – including Jesse's brother Elijah 'Spider' Barker – were accused of intimidating the replacement workers. Jesse himself stood as witness, explaining that "the [replacement] men at the factory put their heads out of the windows, and used the most abusive language towards the defendants", but to no avail: Elijah and three of his workmates were imprisoned for six weeks.

Another crisis struck six years later. As the Loughborough Herald reported, "On Monday, January 31st 1887, in the same month as William Cotton's death, there occurred possibly the most disastrous and extensive fire ever experienced in Loughborough. The immense range of buildings in Trinity Street belonging to the Nottingham Hosiery Manufacturing Company, with most of the stock and a great quantity of valuable machinery, were totally destroyed." The rebuild – incorporating a fireproof structure – took several years to complete but by 1892 the firm was once again employing as many as 400 hands together with several hundred more outside in domestic or small workshops.

Nottingham Manufacturing Company's re-built works, viewed from Moor Lane

But enough of knitting, let's now turn to Jesse's green-fingered endeavours. His obituary snippet, "In his younger days he was a keen horticulturalist, and was a constant and successful exhibitor at local shows", is borne out when I unearth an abundant crop of newspaper cuttings.

There were three main organisations hosting vegetable shows in Victorian Loughborough. The oldest was the local Agricultural Association, established in 1838, which declared its mission to be "for the Show of Cattle, and distribution of Prizes to deserving Labourers and Servants in Husbandry, and for the best cultivated Cottage Gardens." Prizes were awarded for such things as ploughing skills, the greatest number of lambs, and the best cwt of cheese. Jesse first pops up here in 1872, taking away 12s 6d for third place in the "cottager's allotment or garden" category. Each year he hops around the results list, finally scooping the 17s 6d top prize in 1884, and again in 1885 and 1896.

At home, Jesse would have had only a small back yard, so it seems very likely he also had an allotment, especially as the Agricultural Association sought out "the best spade-cultivated Cottager's Allotment or Garden, not less than 200 square yards… the occupier not having received parochial relief for the last twelve months, except under special circumstances of sickness, accident or distress." Just a stone's throw from Jesse's home, there was a substantial plot of allotments, running to the west of Leicester Road. Let's imagine him there, tending his redcurrants and roses.

Following in the footsteps of the Agricultural Society was the Horticultural Society, initiated in 1855, with its first annual show in 1857. It was sponsored by local gentry and businessmen – including hosiers Messrs Cartwright and Warner – and "the main object of the society was the encouragement of mechanics and artisans in the healthful and innocent recreation of gardening, and the better cultivation of allotment ground."

At their annual show in July – initially held in the grounds of the Grammar School, and later at Edward Warner's home, The Elms – the Horticultural Society's hierarchical approach became evident, with exhibitors grouped in three separate tents for Cottagers and Artisans, Amateur Members, and a third class for Gentlemen, Gentlemen's Gardeners and Nurserymen. The show became a popular event, attracting up to 7,000 visitors, many arriving by special train services from Derby, Nottingham, Rugby and Leicester. Military bands and balloon ascents entertained the crowds, and refreshment tents sated their appetites. It was a grand day out.

Visitors to a flower show (GH Thomas, 1862)

From his allotment, Jesse Barker brought an array of vegetables, fruit and flowers each year to the Horticultural Society show. From 1869 through to 1892 he appears as a constant and often successful exhibitor of potatoes (four varieties), white onions, red onions, leeks, turnips, long beans, broad beans, cauliflower, peas, lettuce and salad (six varieties). In terms of fruit, he specialised in gooseberries, blackcurrants and redcurrants, and florally with roses (six varieties), stocks, geraniums, fuchsias and calceolarias. He did especially well with his "root of parsley" – a white root vegetable rarely seen these days – and his hand bouquets of wild flowers, and throughout the 1880s regularly took a clutch of first prizes.

And then, of course, there was his celery. The Celery Show in late September – set up as an offshoot of the Horticultural Society – was an altogether more down-to-earth, homely affair. It mostly took place in a marquee at the Peacock Inn, sometimes alternating with shows at the Cherry Tree, Fox, Ram and Robin Hood Inns. Celery was the main focus, coupled with decorative displays of vegetables and flowers to delight visitors.

Unlike the cash prizes, military bands and refreshment tents of the Horticultural Society show, the Celery Show offered many trinkets that "would almost furnish a little hardware shop," wrote a reporter in 1859, and "Afterwards, the members and friends enjoyed themselves by partaking of

some of the ‘sticks’ and a portion of Mr Smith’s excellent ‘Cheshire’. Songs, glees and recitations enlivened the evening to a late hour.” Goodness knows what happened to Jesse’s copper kettle – or indeed his other prizes – but now, whenever I crunch into a stick of celery, I’m taken back to my ancestor’s victory at the Peacock Inn in September 1869.

Auntie Mabel: inspiring family histories

To read Graham’s previous ‘Trading Stories, Working Lives’ articles – and for ideas on writing your own family history – visit www.auntiemabel.org or follow him on Twitter @auntiemabel.org