



# Irish Lace





# The story of Irish lace is a story of extremes

The most beautiful of materials, lace was worn by the wealthiest women across Europe, yet produced by some of the poorest women in Ireland. Lace was a luxury commodity, used to decorate elaborate wedding dresses, christening robes, and church vestments, but it also played a vital part in saving many families from starvation and destitution. Irish lace reflects the social and political changes that took place between 1700 and the present, and this is its story.

## The beginnings

Lace was first produced in Ireland from the 1730s. It was a highly skilled and very delicate craft, and was promoted by Irish aristocrats such as Lady Arabella Denny, the famous philanthropist, who used social and political connections to support the new industry and promote the sale of Irish lace abroad. The skill soon spread beyond Dublin to the poorest parts of the country, and proved a popular means for young women to help support their families. Lace-making required little equipment beyond bobbins and fine cotton or linen thread, and a great deal of patience, so was suitable for remote parts of the country that had little industry and few employment options.

## Teaching the craft

Several lace-making schools were established throughout Ireland, with some regions acquiring reputations for high-quality products. Different parts of the country produced distinctive types of lace, and discerning customers would soon learn to ask for 'Carrickmacross' (County Monaghan) or 'Borris' (County Carlow) or 'Youghal' (County Cork) lace, depending upon their favoured style. Limerick lace (also known as tambour lace, because of its manner of manufacture) became well known from the 1830s onwards, following the establishment of a lace-making factory in the city by an English businessman. Charles Walker was drawn to the area by the availability of cheap, skilled female labour, and his business thrived: within a few short years his lace factories employed almost 2,000 women and girls. Some purists claim that Limerick lace is

not 'true' lace, but rather ornate hand-done patterning upon machine-made lace netting, but the skill of the work was such that Limerick lace was perhaps the best-known of all Irish laces by the twentieth century.



Mrs Florence Vere O'Brien, founder of the Limerick Lace School, with her daughters Jane and Flora (1905), Rowe Collection



Cottage Industries: Lacemaking, County Donegal, (c.1865-1914), Robert French, The Lawrence Photograph Collection, Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland



Lady Ishbel Aberdeen, founder and funder of the Leenane Lace Industry, Connemara (1886) and the Irish Lace Depot, Dublin (1887), Rowe Collection

## Schools

Lace-making schools sprang up all over Ireland, established by two quite different types of women. The first were wealthy Protestant female philanthropists, who provided training for young women on their estates. They often purchased expensive pieces from Europe, bringing them back to Ireland for their students to copy. Lady Harriet Kavanagh of Borris House in County Carlow, for example, brought some lace from Corfu in 1857 that became the basis for 'Borris Lace', a delicate form of needlepoint. The aristocracy

played a vital role in the promotion of Irish lace, as they had the funds as well as the social connections to ensure it secured a high profile. Irish lace was displayed at the Nation of all Nations Exhibition in the Crystal Palace in 1851, setting a pattern of high-profile displays that continued until the

end of the century. The Chicago World Fair of 1893 included the recreation of an Irish village, complete with thatched cottages and Irish girls demonstrating lace-making. This was the initiative of Lady Aberdeen, the wife of the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, and a passionate advocate of Irish lace. She took every opportunity to showcase the product, wearing heavily embellished clothes to official functions in Ireland and abroad. Her well-meaning efforts certainly attracted attention, earning her the nickname 'blousy Bella' for her ornate dresses, veils and headscarves. At the other end of the religious spectrum, orders of nuns took an active part in establishing lace schools in their convents, supplying training and materials that allowed young women to earn money to support their families, and to save for the costs of emigration. Many Irish religious congregations were originally continental European in origin, and drew upon a well-established European tradition of lace-making in French and Belgian convents. Although they did not necessarily work together formally, it is interesting to think that these two very different types of women – the high society Protestant ladies, and the retiring Catholic nuns – together ensured that Irish lace became an international success, and a highly desirable commodity.



Philip St. Convent-girls making lace (c.1884-1945), A.H. Poole, The Poole Photographic Collection, Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland



Mrs Vere O'Brien's Limerick Lace School (1907), Rowe Collection, Ó Cléirigh, N., and Rowe, V., Limerick Lace (1995)



# Types of lace

There is an astounding variety of lace in Ireland for such a small country, and the range is explained by both the efforts of Protestant gentry to provide employment during times of famine and hardship, and by the influx of religious congregations from continental Europe. In their attempts to train girls for employment, both landowners and nuns from different orders taught their charges lace-making in the style that they had themselves learned in France, Belgium, and Italy.

Each style required different techniques, and the skills were difficult to learn, ensuring that particular types of lace were instantly recognisable. Ardee lace (County Louth) is made by 'tattooing', consisting of a complex system of knots tied in circles or along a foundation thread using a tattle shuttle and thread. Originally introduced in 1847 by a local Anglican rector's daughter, Sophie Ellis, as a response to the hardships of the Great Famine, it was then taught by the Sisters of Mercy from 1858 at their lace school.

Kenmare lace (County Kerry) was founded in 1861 by the Poor Clare nuns, and is a very fine needlepoint lace that became world famous for its extraordinary beauty and delicacy. Mountmellick lace (County Laois) stems from an Irish Quaker establishment in 1825, and is the only truly indigenous Irish lace: it is a unique form of 'white on white' needlework, in which white cotton thread is embroidered on white satin.

Carrickmacross is an 'appliqué' lace, a delicate and complex design that can be further embellished to create Carrickmacross Guipure, an intricate open-work lace. Clones lace (County Monaghan) was introduced to the region as a famine relief measure in 'Black '47' (the worst year of the Great Famine). The style originated in Italy, and is a very fine kind of crochet lace that derives from old raised Venetian point lace. This type of lace had also been introduced to New Ross (County Wexford) in 1843 by the Carmelite nuns, who had previously established a lace school at their convent (in 1833) in order to provide employment for local girls. This region is in fact seeing a resurgence of interest in the craft, and the St Louis Stitchers are working closely with the Carmelites since 2007 to pass on this skill to new generations.



Girl in lace communion dress, Corpus Christi, Henrietta Street, Dublin (1969), Wiltshire Photographic Collection, Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland (T.H. Mason)



Sample of lace made at the Mercy Convent, Charleville, County Cork



Irish lace collar (c.1865-1914), Robert French, The Lawrence Photograph Collection, Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland



Donegal cottage industries, lace making school (c.1880-1900), Robert French, The Lawrence Photograph Collection, Courtesy of the National Library of Ireland

## The royal connection

In the second half of the nineteenth century, Irish lace established itself as a product fit for a king, and his queen. The enthusiastic interest shown by the royal family in Youghal lace in particular ensured that it became a fashionable item for the wealthy. Queen Victoria and Princess Alexandra received several fine pieces as gifts, and wore them at court, thereby setting a fashion for lace-embellished dresses. In 1911, the Royal Seal of Approval was given to Youghal lace when a train was ordered for Queen Mary, wife of George V, to wear on their visit to India. The piece was so complicated that all sixty of the lace-makers in the Presentation Convent worked on it in day and night shifts for six months, in order to have it ready for the end of the year. It was estimated that it would have taken a single person almost thirty years to complete the train if they had worked alone!

## The late nineteenth century

Lace-making proved a life-line for many impoverished Irish families in the later nineteenth century, saving them from starvation and misery. Demand for the product in the United States and across Europe was so great that the government offered support for its manufacture, with the Congested Districts Board establishing schools all over the country, including fifteen in Erris (County Mayo) alone. But although the quality of the lace was very high, buyers began to complain about what they regarded as old-fashioned designs. The fact that lace-making was still taught by many of the religious orders meant that they had little opportunity to see new designs, so efforts were made to introduce patterns and techniques from the Department of Science and Art in South Kensington, London. The influence of the Gaelic Revival was also seen in new lace designs, although not all of these efforts met with critical approval. A review of lace shown at the Cork Exhibition in 1883 dismissed some new Irish-themed designs rather cruelly as: 'A distorted harp, a few caricatured shamrocks, occasionally a deerhound with a round tower placed beside him as though it were his kennel.'



W.J. Hunter & Co. Armagh, Thomas Ellis, a black and white sepia photograph of a young man wearing a woman's shawl with fur trim and tassels and holding a lace parasol. The back of the photograph reads: 'Thomas Ellis, The Rectory, Killylea, Armagh. Son of Rev.' Courtesy of the National Museums, Northern Ireland

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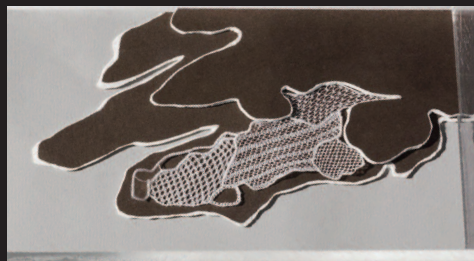
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Advertisement for Limerick lace motor veils (1903), Rowe Collection





Dress by Natalie B Coleman,  
photograph by Evelyn McNamara,  
courtesy of the Design & Crafts  
Council of Ireland



Contemporary lace by Fiona  
Harrington, Divisions (2013) a piece  
of contemporary art made using  
Kenmare lace technique and inspired  
by the historic landscape divisions of  
the Beara Peninsula, photograph by  
Roland Paschhoff, courtesy of the RDS

Contemporary lace by Gráinne  
Conlon, Christening Gown  
(2013) in Carrickmacross lace,  
photograph by Roland Paschhoff,  
courtesy of the RDS



## Decline of Irish lace

Although great efforts were made to promote Irish lace in the early twentieth century, its heyday was over. Changing fashions made ornate dress unpopular after World War One, the lace industry declined internationally and young women sought better paid employment in towns and cities.

Irish lace lives on, groups including the 'St Louis Stitchers', the Guild of Irish Lace-makers, and the Traditional Lace-makers of Ireland are all lace enthusiasts who ensure that Ireland's long association with lace-making will continue well into the future.

**The following websites contain information and photographs of Irish lace-making, past and present:**

[www.irishlaceguild.com](http://www.irishlaceguild.com)  
[www.irishlacemuseum.com](http://www.irishlacemuseum.com)  
[www.irishhistoricaltextiles.com](http://www.irishhistoricaltextiles.com)  
[www.kenmarelace.ie](http://www.kenmarelace.ie)  
[www.traditionallaceireland.com](http://www.traditionallaceireland.com)

**Other sites relating to lace-making include:**

[www.craftscotland.org](http://www.craftscotland.org)  
[www.laceguild.org](http://www.laceguild.org)  
[www.oidfa.com](http://www.oidfa.com)

**Further reading:**

There are a number of articles on Irish lace-making, including: Chapman S. & Sharpe, P., 'Women's employment and industrial organisation: Commercial lace embroidery in early 19th-century Ireland', *Women's History Review*, 1996, Vol. 5, Issue 3, pp. 326-345.

Helland, J., 'Ishbel Aberdeen's 'Irish' Dresses: Embroidery, Display and Meaning, 1886-1909' in *Journal of Design History* 2013, Vol. 26, No. 2, pp.152-167.

**Useful contacts:**

National Museum of Ireland, Lace collection.  
[www.museum.ie/en/collection/lace.aspx](http://www.museum.ie/en/collection/lace.aspx)  
To find a conservator: [www.conservationireland.org](http://www.conservationireland.org)  
Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, lace collection.  
[www.nmni.com/uftm/Collections/Textiles---Costume/Lace-page](http://www.nmni.com/uftm/Collections/Textiles---Costume/Lace-page)

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**Front cover:**

**Insert black lace photo:** Fan designed by Florence Vere O'Brien  
(c.1900), Rowe Collection

**Circular lace photo:** Irish lace collar (c.1865-1914), Robert French,  
The Lawrence Photograph Collection, Courtesy of the National  
Library of Ireland

  
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