PUTTING OUT IN THE LEICESTER HOSIERY INDUSTRY IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

by

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If, in the middle of the nineteenth century, a contemporary who knew about these things had been asked to name the most important centres of the English hosiery industry he would have mentioned first the towns of Nottingham and Leicester. Here hosiery was the staple industry, the means by which most inhabitants earned their livelihood. The 1851 census enumerated slightly over half of Leicester’s 60,600 inhabitants as being gainfully employed; over 70 per cent of these were employed in industrial occupations; 75 per cent of the industrially employed were engaged in ‘textiles’ and ‘dress’, and about 40 per cent were employees of the hosiery industry proper. To this last figure should be added an unknown number of women who were working in the industry but were not enumerated as such by the 1851 census, and also a large but unascertainable number of workers employed by the Leicester industry in the surrounding countryside. No other industry or occupation employed more than 6 per cent of the total industrial labour force. No other industry had anywhere near as many manufacturers as the hundred hosiers and more who had businesses in the town.

This paper is concerned only with the Leicester hosiery industry proper, that is, with the industry which produces knitted goods, having a great variety of form and purpose, by a number of clearly definable processes. Briefly, these processes are the ‘winding’ of yarn on to bobbins, preparatory to the major ‘knitting’ process, which is followed by ‘seaming’ or ‘making-up’ and by other sewing and ‘finishing’ operations. The industry is defined by the nature of the major process—knitting—rather than by the kind of raw material used or by the type of product. It is the specific manufacture of ‘looped fabrics’ and is usually taken to exclude the spinning of yarn on the one hand and the bleaching and dyeing of the finished product on the other. It is our purpose to attempt to analyse the organisation of this industry at a given period of time, roughly the middle of the nineteenth century. We are concerned not at all with the organisation of the industry outside the town of Leicester and only incidentally with working conditions, that most familiar but disputed aspect of the pre-factory hosiery industry known as the ‘condition of the framework knitters’. *

Hand knitting was known in this country in the fifteenth century, perhaps earlier, and the knitting of stockings seems to date from the sixteenth century. It was this century which saw the beginning of mechanisation, for

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in 1589 William Lee of Calverton invented the stocking frame, which soon established a new occupation, that of framework knitting. There were stocking frames at work in Leicester in the seventeenth century, and the industry was definitely established in the town by the early eighteenth century. From this time it expanded rapidly to become the staple trade, and Leicester soon ranked as one of the major hosiery towns in the kingdom. It tended to specialise in the production of worsted hosiery, although some was made of cotton too. In the middle of the nineteenth century the numerous products of the Leicester industry included plain stockings and socks (hose and half-hose), ribbed hose and half-hose, gloves, shirts, “fancy hosiery”—which itself involved a large variety of products, such as fancy gloves, bootees, cravats and many hundred others—braces, Berlin pieces, raised cord and many other items of outerwear and of underwear. Even by this time products were too numerous to mention; already the term “hosiery”, suggesting the production of hose or knitted footwear only, was an inadequate one.

The many products were knitted by the workman in the stocking frame, which had been modified only in detail since the sixteenth century. Lee’s invention had consisted of needles sunk into a wooden spar and these, together with the thread, were manipulated with the aid of sinkers and jacks so as to form and cast loops; this apparatus was set in a frame, mainly of wood, in which the knitter sat and executed knitting by the use of hands and feet on various levers. There had been numerous attempts to improve on the stocking frame during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and many had been successful, but the machine in use throughout the industry in the early 1840s was essentially that invented more than two centuries earlier, and it was still operated by the knitters’ muscular efforts. It was still a flat frame, knitting an article “flat” in the form produced by the use of two hand knitting needles, and its product required sewing or making-up. But there had been some advance in the building of larger machines and there is an important distinction to be made between what were known at this time as the “narrow” and the “wide” frame. The former was a frame under about 20 in. in width, and the latter was anything between 20 in. and 50 in. wide. The narrow frame, the direct descendant of Lee’s invention, could knit only one stocking at a time; but it “fashioned” its product by variation of the length of the courses or rows used. It produced, among other things, the traditional article of the framework knitting industry—the full-fashioned stocking. The wide frames, introduced in the eighteenth century with the original purpose of making fancy stockings, now produced not only various articles of underwear and outerwear as well as fabric, but could also knit several stockings at once; these, however, were unfashioned. The increasing use of wide frames had important consequences for the organisation of the industry in Leicester: they were a spur to centralisation and they helped to prepare the way for the coming of steam power and factory production. But there was no one manufacturing hosiery by steam power in Leicester in the early 1840s; hosiery was produced by well-established handicraft methods.

The main labour force—variously referred to as “framework knitters”, "stockingers" or simply “knitters”—worked up yarn supplied by the major capitalists and ultimate employers in the industry, the “hosiers”. The
hand knitting frames were in almost all cases rented by the workmen and located in their own homes or in small workshops. In many cases, knitter and hosier did not deal directly with each other, but through the agency of middlemen. It was the wage-earning knitter and other workers who made the finished product, and the hosier who disposed of this product. Various generic terms have been used to describe similar “systems” of industrial organisation which have preceded the factory in many industries. While all are unsatisfactory, in that they describe only one feature of various forms of organisation which were anything but systematic and had particular and peculiar features in different industries and regions, it is nevertheless convenient to summarise such a “system” of industrial organisation in a single phrase. That most suited to the hosiery industry in Leicester in the 1840s seems to be: the “putting-out system”. This has been described as “the manufacture of goods by an artisan who is not free to sell his product”, or the “dependent phase of wholesale handicraft”. A more comprehensive definition, as far as the hosiery industry is concerned, would seem to be: that system of industrial organisation in which the wholesale merchant (hosier) put out material (yarn), either direct from his warehouse to workmen (knitters) or through middlemen, to be worked up (knitted) on mainly hired machinery (frames) into garments or parts of garments, and to be completed (finished) by other workers, for eventual sale by the hosier.

We must now describe the putting-out system in Leicester’s hosiery industry in more detail. This, while demonstrating the inadequacy of the term, will at the same time indicate the need for some such phrase of convenience.

The English industry had been established on a capitalist basis almost from the beginning, with the hosier buying the yarn and marketing the finished product and the knitter working for wages. But in mid-nineteenth century Leicester there was no one simple relationship such as this implies, and numerous methods of organisation can be distinguished. In summary, these were:

1. **Working “direct”**. The knitter collected yarn from, and returned knitted articles to, the hosier’s warehouse. These knitters, working at home, included:
   (a) a few who owned frames of their own,
   (b) the majority who rented frames.

   And they
   (i) worked as “single hands”, or
   (ii) received assistance from their families, or
   (iii) took out work specifically for members of their families.

2. **Working Through Middlemen**. Under this method the middleman performed the function of putting out, and the knitter worked
   (a) at home (under any of the conditions as in 1 above)
   (b) in workshops, owned or rented by
      (i) knitter, (ii) middleman, (iii) hosier.

Frames were rented, and various charges made by the middlemen to the knitter for his services; in workshops, “shop charges” were made. Middlemen included:
(a) those who took out work for themselves as well as others,
(b) those who confined their activities to putting out to others,
(c) those who were also capitalists in their own right.


At first, the most common form of relationship had been a direct one between knitter and hosier: the knitter fetched yarn from the hosier's warehouse and returned knitted stockings and the like to that warehouse at the end of each week.\(^\text{12}\) Despite the intrusion of middlemen, this method of working still existed in Leicester in the middle of the nineteenth century. Of an estimated 120 hosiers in the town and county in 1855 it was said that 60 to 80 employed workmen without the aid of middlemen.\(^\text{13}\) This estimate—while confirming its existence—gives little indication of the extent of direct working to warehouses because we have no idea of the size of these hosiers' businesses, but some of the largest employers in the town made it clear that they dealt with workmen direct. They included Robert Walker and Thomas Corah; the latter, giving out work for 2,000 frames, put out from his warehouse to more than half this number direct to framework knitters and their families.\(^\text{14}\)

The reasons for the survival of this older relationship at a time when working through middlemen was more typical were several. On the one hand, hosiers wished to exercise as direct a control as possible over the knitting of certain articles. This applied particularly to "fancy" hosiery, where products were diverse and subject to frequent changes of fashion; specific and detailed instructions could be given more easily to those knitters who worked direct. Many knitters, for their part, valued their independence of the middlemen and, more important, saved themselves the expense of a middleman's charges. They were also sure of being paid the "warehouse price"—i.e., the price (piece rate) paid by the hosier—for their work, whereas it was a major grievance of those who worked through middlemen that they did not always receive this. Thus, working direct continued and middlemen by no means completely dominated the industry.

However, the majority of knitters worked through middlemen, because it was more convenient to do so or because the middlemen had become so powerful that there was no other way of obtaining work in hard times. In 1855, most hosiers of whom we have specific knowledge worked mainly through such men.\(^\text{15}\) Richard Mitchell employed all his outside frames, 700 or 800, with the aid of middlemen. John Biggs—who in the forties had sometimes given out work to as many as 4,000 frames—seems to have depended mainly on middlemen, and stated that all the major hosiers did so. Charles Billson, who had 400 or 500 outside frames, employed the knitters for these through middlemen. So did John Baines, who had about 200 of the old frames. Even Walker and Corah engaged middlemen—the latter putting out for, and receiving work from, something under 1,000 frames on this basis.

Middlemen had arisen in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries,\(^\text{16}\) and had rapidly come to assume positions of power and importance in the industry. The reasons for this are clear enough: they had come into existence largely as a convenience for hosier and framework knitter alike.
In taking out yarn to the knitters and returning knitted goods to the warehouse, they saved the hosier considerable time in dealing with individual workmen, and the latter the trouble of journeying back and forth to the warehouse and waiting to be attended to. Working direct was a notorious time-waster, particularly for the knitters, who had usually to make two journeys to the warehouse—one on Mondays to collect yarn and orders, and one on Saturdays to return knitted goods and receive their wages. Both tended to be lengthy processes. It became increasingly advantageous for knitters to work through middlemen the farther they worked from warehouses, and for this reason many of them living in the surrounding countryside worked through Leicester middlemen to the warehouses in the town. In Leicester itself an important reason for the growth of middlemen was the increasing tendency towards centralisation in small workshops; the person who acted for many of the "shops", and often provided them, was the middleman. Although middlemen thus economised the time and energies of both knitter and hosier, a large number of knitters would probably have worked direct had they been allowed a free choice in the matter, for many middlemen were unscrupulous and abuses were frequent. Thus, the knitters complained of excessive rents and charges; other arbitrary deductions (particularly those made under the claim of defective work); the extra profit made by those middlemen who did not pay the "warehouse price" to the knitters; the exaction of frame rents and charges when no work had been done; the allocation of a "stint", or ration, of knitting when work was short; the deliberate delaying of putting out until late in the week, and so on. It was alleged, probably with truth, that middlemen were at fault in most cases. The middlemen had a stranglehold on much of the industry, and their existence was regarded by most hosiers involved in putting-out as essential; these hosiers would not engage individual knitters.

The middlemen of the hosiery industry were a heterogeneous group, and individuals differed in their importance in the industry and in personal status. Certain types were sometimes identified. Thus, an "undertaker" was often distinguished from a simple "middleman" in that the latter gave out work from a hosier to be made on frames owned or rented by that hosier, while the former employed frames of his own in addition. The term "master framework knitter" was often used to refer to those who gave out work to others while also working at a frame themselves. The "bagman" or "bag-hosier" was sometimes defined as a middleman who worked to various merchant hosiers and put out work "here and there", but the more general use of the term was to refer to the itinerant descendant of the completely independent framework knitter—if the latter had ever existed—who bought his own yarn, put it out to be knitted, and then disposed of the finished article on his own account. Clearly, these were not middlemen at all, and although bagmen were prevalent in the hosiery villages from the early nineteenth century, they were of no importance in the town of Leicester.* In practice, the terminology described here was used indiscriminately in the trade and often led to considerable confusion. Thus, some witnesses before

* The word was used in contemporary Leicester directories, but this is to be seen as an indication of the confusion in terminology rather than proof of the existence of the type which had sprung up at Sutton and elsewhere.
the Select Committee of 1855 described themselves as "undertakers or middlemen", while others made a distinction; some used the terms "bagmen" and "middlemen" as being synonymous; other witnesses, asked to distinguish between the various terms, found great difficulty in doing so. Apart from the bagmen, there was no radical difference in function between these "types". They all acted as intermediaries between hosier and workman; that some exhibited characteristics of the capitalist (in owning frames) and some those of the workman (in working at a frame) is important, but not vital in discussing their role as putters-out; nor is it a bar to describing them all as "middlemen".

If we call them all by the same name this must not obscure the diversity of their operations. In the fifties, William Cummings worked to Biggs and employed about 90 knitters who worked at frames owned by Cummings himself; 58 of these were housed in his own workshop and the rest were used by knitters in their own homes in various parts of the town. Samuel Hackett employed 30 knitters in two "shops" rented by him, and worked mainly to Corah—who owned some, at least, of the frames involved. George Loveday had some 50 frames under his direction and owned half of these; he employed 36 knitters in a workshop just outside the town at Wigston, the remainder working at home; Loveday worked to Mitchell, Harris, Warner and some other hosiers. William Marsh employed 40 frames, and Rodwell's supervised some 80 frames in their shops in Leicester, and had more elsewhere. Sarah Bryan performed the duties of a middleman, taking out work from Corah for five frames; she herself worked at a frame and employed three journeymen, two of whom lived in the house.21 In addition to people such as these, those who put out mainly to knitters at home on a much larger scale usually worked to "six or eight different warehouses".22 Some of these larger middlemen put out to "second middlemen", who were usually master framework knitters in charge of shops but not performing putting out or taking in of work.23 These smaller men, not putters out at all, were clearly little removed from the journeymen knitters. The most important middlemen dominated those parts of the industry with which they were concerned. If in the early days of the industry they had been little more than agents, by the 1840s they played a major part in determining the conditions under which large numbers of the Leicester framework knitters laboured. The middleman's duties—"to fetch work out from the warehouse, to see that it is done properly, and to take it back again according to contract"24—give little indication of the real position of the most important and powerful of these men. They were, in most cases, the real employers of labour, and the hosiers exercised little or no control over the actual processes of production. The latter admitted that they had no idea of who their "employees" were, nor of the arrangements made between middlemen and knitters who provided them with their knitted products.25 Corah stated that "we cannot exercise any control over the middleman"; "we merely weigh out the material to him and tell him to make a certain quantity at such and such prices".26 (The "price" agreed was between hosier and middleman only; in such cases there was obviously no agreement between hosier and knitter.) Billson said that he had "nothing to do" with the employment of his outside frames.27 And
Biggs had little knowledge even of the method of payment used by his middlemen. Indeed, the Ticket Act, 1845 (8 & 9 Vict. c. 77), had become inoperative largely as a result of legal decisions that the middleman was not merely an agent of the hosier. This Act, occasioned by agitation on the part of the knitters and the activity of the two local Members of Parliament, Halford and Packe, was an attempt to compel the “agent” to obtain from the hosiers, and to convey to the knitters, a ticket showing the piece rates (“warehouse prices”) being paid. However, it was Counsel’s opinion that the Act was so improperly worded that only knitters who worked direct to warehouses were entitled to a ticket. Middlemen were not agents.

The middlemen thus made their own bargains and relied for their living on charges for their services, received from the knitters, on frame rents (if they owned frames) and on any profits they could make on the agreement made with the knitters. It is important to remember that the large middleman was “not so much in the position of a servant as he is in the position of a small manufacturer.” It was he who more often “supervised” production and paid the knitter for his work. There was no one, however, who could be described as a manufacturer in the modern sense until factories came into being. Under the putting-out system, the knitter himself always paid for the use of the means of production and they were provided by a variety of people. And, particularly in domestic work, there could obviously be little real supervision of production. The hosier, in engaging a middleman rather than an agent over whom he exercised a strict control, was economising: the middleman, rather than a salaried agent, could be engaged when needed and discarded during depression, for no fixed salary was involved. The middleman was not an employee. In addition, those abuses to which we have referred—and which were certainly not disadvantageous to the hosier—continued, while the hosier could disclaim any responsibility in the matter. Except for those hosiers who employed labour directly in their own workshops, the majority delegated most duties to the middlemen or the knitters themselves until factories came into being and the hosier, finally assuming full responsibility for production, became also the manufacturer.

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Capitalism in the framework knitting industry extended to most of the means of production—the provision of yarn, some working premises, the supplying of some working materials and the ownership of knitting frames. But this is not to say that these were always provided by the same people; nor, indeed, was capitalism all-pervading even in the middle of the nineteenth century. The hosier did in fact always supply the yarn. This was obtained from the spinners—in the forties, mainly Leicester spinners—on long periods of credit, and remained the hosier’s property throughout the various processes in which it was involved, and (embezzlement apart) in spite of the many hands through which it passed. Working materials—needles, candles or gas, fuel and the like—were provided by middlemen or hosiers in their shops: but the knitter invariably had to pay for them. Those who worked at home, of course, provided their own materials and facilities of this sort. In addition, many knitters had the winding and seaming operations performed
by their own families; for those who did not, the middleman or shop-owner saw that these services were performed by others, but here again it was the knitter who paid for them.

In the middle of the century workshops were becoming increasingly common in Leicester. Of 65 working knitters interviewed by the Commissioner of 1844, 46 were employed in these shops. Some workshops—in effect parts of their homes—were provided by the knitters, but the majority, located in various parts of the town, belonged to middlemen and hosiers. The largest of these in 1844 employed some 50 or 60 workpeople. Most contemporaries referred to these frame shops as “factories” and to their adoption as the “factory system”. They may perhaps be considered as a transitional stage between domestic work and genuine factories, but the only feature they had in common with factories was some degree of centralisation. In all other respects the organisation of the workshop was that of the home: knitters were charged frame rent and various other “charges”, attendance was irregular and discipline poor, and there was no mechanical power. It has been well said that the factory is possible “only after the advantages of discipline and the division of labour have gained some recognition. It is born only when power machinery has been combined with these”.

The Leicester shops varied considerably in size. As late as 1863 the smallest, adjoining the knitters’ homes, employed only half-a-dozen frames or less; but others, as grouped by a middleman at the time, employed about 12, about 20, about 30 and some (probably about 20 or 30 shops) employed 30 to 40 frames each. Rodwell’s, we have seen, housed some 80 frames, but they were probably the largest among the middlemen, and perhaps the most typical size was that of 10 or 12 frames. Such workshops, in which supervision could at least be greater than in domestic work, continued to increase in both numbers and size. In the twenties the typical workshop had housed three or four frames, but in the early sixties it was three or four times this size; and some years earlier, Billson’s shop probably contained over 200 frames. Again, in 1840 none of the six most important hosiers in the town had shops of their own, but those entering the trade in the next few years established their own workshops from the start, so that even by 1844 hosiers’ workshops as well as those of middlemen were competing with, and in many cases emptying, the small shops adjacent to the knitters’ homes. Now “there are many men who have to walk a mile from their homes to work in large shops holding from 40 to 50 frames or more”.

Those middlemen who adopted shops were economising the time taken in actual putting out, as well as more closely supervising the processes of production. The latter consideration was obviously the most compelling motive for those hosiers who set up workshops too. As Rodwell said, “in most cases the frames are owned by the manufacturers [hosiers], and they prefer to get them into shops, as the work is more regular and better done there”. In addition, the increasing use of “wide” frames was a spur to centralisation. For much of the work on these frames was subdivided—different frames being used for different parts of a garment—so that production under one roof, particularly if the seaming was also done there, was often seen to be economical. But efforts to centralise the labour force were
not always successful. The opposition of labour to the embryonic “factory system” is notorious, and some of the knitters of Leicester—who of course made no academic distinction between the factory and the workshop—were no exception. A few hosiers, having failed to make a workshop pay because of workers’ opposition, were forced to return to putting-out through middlemen.\textsuperscript{40}

However, not all hosiers favoured workshops, either in their own hands or in those of middlemen. They were not opposed to workshops in the same sense that many were sceptical of factories, for workshops meant no radical change of well-established methods and, in particular, no end of the “frame rent system”; many were simply not convinced that any advantages would accrue from the gathering together of frames into shops. Thomas Corah, far from agreeing that better results were obtained in workshops, was in favour of domestic work, for he maintained that knitting and the like was always done more satisfactorily when put out to a family group.\textsuperscript{41} Much of Leicester hosiers’ knitting which was done at home rather than in workshops was to be located in the surrounding countryside, but workshops had by no means replaced domestic work in the town itself by the forties and fifties. Nor did they. It is not valid to regard workshops as a necessary stage in an evolution from domestic to factory work, for many hosiers turned, gradually, from one to the other without any such transition. Workshops were an integral part of the pre-factory “system”, exhibiting all the characteristics of semi-casual labour, frame rents and charges, and no mechanical power. This was the case even in the hosiers’ workshops, and even though it may be etymologically inaccurate to describe these as part of the “putting-out system” they nevertheless possessed all the features of that system.

The frames employed in the framework knitting industry were owned by either hosier, middleman, knitter, framesmith or by persons otherwise unconnected with the industry. In fact, in the middle of the nineteenth century, there were very few knitters who owned their own frames. This was no doubt due in some measure to the capital expenditure involved, particularly as wider and more expensive frames came into use. But second-hand frames were both plentiful and cheap in the early nineteenth century. Furthermore, ownership of frames by the knitters seems to have become increasingly rare during the second half of the eighteenth century,\textsuperscript{42} when smaller frames were far more common. Although knitters were often impoverished, lack of capital was not the only factor involved in their growing dependence on others for the provision of knitting frames. For, once various capitalists had begun to own frames, the knitters with frames of their own found it ever more difficult to obtain work, particularly during depression; hosiers and middlemen put out work to their own frames, for which they received a rent. If the independent knitter was given work at all, it was often at reduced rates and sometimes he was charged a “rent” even though using his own frame.\textsuperscript{43} Thus the frame-owning knitters were completely at the mercy of hosiers and middlemen, and their numbers rapidly dwindled. But a few hung on, accepting almost any wage rather than have their frames forced away from them.\textsuperscript{44} Corah stated that knitters with their own frames
had sometimes come to his warehouse during hard times and offered to pay “rent” if he would give them work. But these owners were a mere handful; by this time former owners among the knitters had largely been squeezed out and forced to give up their frames, while potential owners were deterred by the fact that in an overstocked labour market they could do little to fight the pressures brought to bear by those who made a business of investing in knitting frames.

The overwhelming majority of frames were owned by others. They received rent for their use, which was paid in the long run by the knitters in the form of a deduction from wages. The ownership and renting of these frames may be represented as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Owner</th>
<th>Payment of Frame Rents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Hosier</td>
<td>(a) Knitter to hosier.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(b) Knitter to middleman to hosier.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Middleman</td>
<td>Knitter to middleman.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Others:</td>
<td>(a) Knitter to middleman to independent owner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“independent frames”</td>
<td>(b) Knitter to middleman to hosier to independent owner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(c) Knitter to hosier to independent owner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(d) Knitter to independent owner (rarely).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The hosiers, letting frames to knitters or to middlemen who sub-let them to knitters, were the most important owners, and in the forties they seem to have been increasing in importance in this respect. Even so it is clear that this did not preclude ownership on an important scale by others. Some hosiers in fact owned no frames at all, hiring them all from other small capitalists. Although frame rents were a valuable source of profit, some small hosiers were unable to make the necessary capital investment; not indeed was it always advisable for even the large hosiers to own all the frames they employed—since depression was frequent, and (in theory at least) no rents were collected when the frames were not in use. Thus, John Baines found it “politic not to have machinery to the full extent of my manufacture”, and used 50-100 other frames besides the 200 he owned himself. And Walker, owning 130 frames, also employed about 100 independent frames on occasion. Mitchell employed some 100 independent frames, representing about an eighth of those he employed outside. Corah, in addition to 1,000 frames of his own, hired a similar number from independent capitalists. On the other hand, Butcher and Billson, for example, made little or no use of this independent machinery. If in fact there was a marked trend towards concentration of frames in the hands of the hosiers in the middle of the century, this was no doubt associated with their gathering together in workshops by some of these hosiers.

Many middlemen, too, owned stocking frames. Some of these let out their frames to the knitters’ homes, but we have seen that others had concentrated them into workshops and could almost be described as “manufacturers”. The independent owners of frames were a strange mixture of tailors, bakers, shoemakers, bricklayers, labourers, butchers, publicans,
framesmiths and the like—in short, any one who had amassed a little capital and was seeking a profitable investment. The practice had probably been initiated by the framesmiths who, as constructors and repairers of knitting frames, were already involved in the industry. They remained important owners. The ownership of frames had obviously been profitable enough to attract others; it was facilitated by the numbers of stocking frames coming on to the market in the forties and fifties as some hosiers, adopting newer machinery, sold many of their narrow frames. The independent owners let their frames to hosiers and middlemen (only very infrequently to knitters) in bulk and on a semi-permanent basis, and many of them seem to have made quick and substantial profits. Clearly, for such owners and for middlemen—as well as many hosiers—frame rent was the only reason for owning stocking frames. That so many outsiders should have been tempted to invest in them illustrates the strictly local character of much investment at this time and the comparatively few outlets for such capital existing for the small investor.

The institution of “frame rent” was perhaps the most peculiar feature of the putting-out system in the hosiery industry. Whilst it was not unique—for loom rent had been paid by some weavers in the woollen, cotton and smallwares industries, and in the Leicester boot and shoe industry sewing machines were sometimes rented—it seems that in no other industry was the renting of machinery so universal. The extension of capitalism in the hosiery industry to the ownership of the knitting frame did not of necessity imply that these should be rented by the knitter. That this is in truth what happened is probably to be explained by the fact that the early owners sought not only some return on their capital outlay, but also a means of ensuring that the work they put out was completed in a reasonable time. If the knitter knew that he had to pay frame rent in a particular week, he would presumably be anxious to complete enough work to cover at least the deduction for rent. Once established, frame rent was too lucrative an institution to be voluntarily surrendered. Hosiers, soon to be joined by other men of capital, knew when they were well off. And the majority strongly opposed the many efforts to prohibit by law the taking of frame rents which occurred from time to time up to the seventies.

Most independent frames were hired out to hosiers or middlemen by the year, half-year or quarter at—John Biggs estimated—the equivalent of about 5d. or 6d. per week; this rent was paid only when the frames were in use—although it is difficult to see how a frame owner could determine whether or not his frames were in use at any given time. However, the minimum frame rent paid by the knitters in the forties, on frames from all sources, was 1s. per week. This was for narrow frames only and, as the Appendix illustrates, the rents paid on larger frames were considerably in excess of this. As we have seen, they were often taken when little or no work had been done by the knitters. Rents were not the only deductions from the knitters’ wages. For those who worked through middlemen or away from home there were also numerous “charges” to be faced; these included charges for putting out and taking in by middlemen and—where workshops were involved—for various other services provided by middlemen or hosiers (see Appendix). In addition, wages were also liable to deduction for faulty or unsatisfactory work.
These many deductions and the whole question of "rents and charges", and the many attendant abuses, received considerable publicity as a result of the Parliamentary commission of enquiry in 1844 and subsequent local discussion. Here it is sufficient to emphasise the importance of these deductions as an integral part of the putting out system in the hosiery industry. If contemporaries wished to discuss the old, and still most typical, method of organisation for some decades after the forties, they referred simply to the "frame rent system".

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The manufacture of hosiery involved other operations besides knitting and these, unlike the spinning of yarn and the dyeing of yarn or knitted goods, were an integral part of the hosiery industry. They included, we have suggested, the winding of yarn, the seaming of stockings and the sewing together of fabric or parts of garments to form completed articles, and various finishing operations. In Leicester in the middle of the century much, but not all, of this work was put out.

The winding operation was often performed for those knitters who worked at home by members of their own family, usually women and girls, for it required little skill. Some boy winders, however, went out to work in workshops for wages. When the winding was not done by members of their own families, knitters paid the middleman or hosier for the services of a winding boy—such payment constituting part of the notorious "charges"—or in some cases engaged and paid a winding boy themselves. Similarly, seaming and sewing were very often performed at home by the wives or daughters of the knitters. But if seaming was put out to seamers engaged by either hosier or middleman the knitters had again to pay a "charge". These seamers, women and children working for wages, were employed either at home, in workshops or in warehouses. The old "seaming schools", where child seamers were supervised by a seamstress in their sole "tuition" of seaming and sewing, which were still common in the surrounding villages and towns, appear to have died out in Leicester itself by the middle of the nineteenth century. Some seaming, then, was performed in conjunction with the actual knitting, in the family group or in workshops; where these workshops also included making-up and the like, the owner—whether he was hosier or middleman—was indeed the "manufacturer". Secondly, knitted articles were put out to be seamed as a separate operation from the putting out of yarn. Thirdly, articles were seamed at the hosier's warehouse after the knitting had been taken in. It was in these warehouses, too, that most of the final operations—mending, checking, stamping with marks, "finishing", sorting, packing and the like—were completed.

The warehouses where such work was carried on represented the highest degree of centralisation achieved under the putting out system, except in those cases where warehouses adjoined the hosier's workshop. Although little, if any, knitting was performed in the warehouses, the sewing together of stockings and fabric or parts of garments and the finishing which took place in some of them were clearly part of the manufacturing process. These, together with the other operations and the putting out of yarn and taking in of
knitting, made the warehouse the focal point of the hosier’s business. The warehouse, part of the stock in trade of every hosier worth the name, often adjoined his house, and notices of sales at this time frequently included both residence and warehouse.61 The large and successful hosier, it is true, usually lived in a more exclusive part of the town or its immediate environs, like Stoneygate in the south. But wherever the hosier’s place of residence, it was from his warehouse that orders were given and financial affairs settled; it was in that warehouse that final operations were performed and stocks housed. Before the factory appeared, and indeed before it came to replace putting out in his business, the warehouse was the physical symbol of the hosier and the institution which marked him—despite the operations of the middlemen—as the final arbiter on the supply side in the hosiery industry.

*  

At a time when many industries housed their manufacturing processes and labour force behind factory walls, the hosiers, middlemen and operatives of Leicester were engaged in an industry which had changed but little in the essential features of its organisation during the preceding 50 years and more. The picture presented here is a static one, taking no account of the slow development of factory production which began to affect parts of the industry from the late forties. This is both necessary for the purposes of analysis and appropriate to the industry at this time. It is only hind-sight which permits the judgment that the one, perhaps two, factories in the Leicester industry before the mid-fifties represented an important development. At the time perhaps only the “manufacturers” involved—Thomas Collins and Thomas Corah—would have made such a claim. For the rest, the outsider and those involved in the industry alike, the over-riding impression created by a knowledge of its working was one of almost complete stagnation. During the next half-century, various factors combined to ensure that the organisational changes that were soon gaining momentum were finally to become predominant. But the transition to factory production was a slow one, and not the least important reason for this was the very existence of a well-established “system” of putting out.
APPENDIX

FRAME RENTS AND CHARGES IN THE HOSIERY INDUSTRY,
1855

*Narrow Frames—wrought hose, plain socks, etc.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Width of frames:</th>
<th>15 in.</th>
<th>16 in.</th>
<th>17 in.</th>
<th>18 in.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frame rent</td>
<td>1s. 6d.</td>
<td>1s. 6d.</td>
<td>1s. 6d.</td>
<td>1s. 6d.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master’s charges</td>
<td>6d.</td>
<td>6d.</td>
<td>6d.</td>
<td>6d.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winding</td>
<td>6d.</td>
<td>6d.</td>
<td>6d.</td>
<td>6d.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needles, light and firing</td>
<td>5d.</td>
<td>5d.</td>
<td>5d.</td>
<td>5d.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>2s. 5d.</td>
<td>2s. 5d.</td>
<td>2s. 5d.</td>
<td>2s. 8d.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Narrow Frames—gloves and fancy hosiery*

<table>
<thead>
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<td>Frame rent</td>
<td>1s. 6d.</td>
<td>1s. 6d.</td>
<td>1s. 6d.</td>
<td>1s. 6d.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Master’s charges</td>
<td>6d.</td>
<td>6d.</td>
<td>6d.</td>
<td>6d.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winding</td>
<td>6d.</td>
<td>6d.</td>
<td>6d.</td>
<td>6d.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needles, light and firing</td>
<td>5d.</td>
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<td>5d.</td>
<td>5d.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
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<td>4s. 5d.</td>
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</table>

*Wide Frames*

<table>
<thead>
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<th>35 in.</th>
<th>40 in.</th>
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<th>50 in.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Frame rent</td>
<td>1s. 6d.</td>
<td>2s. 0d.</td>
<td>2s. 3d.</td>
<td>2s. 6d.</td>
<td>3s. 0d.</td>
<td>3s. 3d.</td>
<td>3s. 6d.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master’s charges</td>
<td>1s. 0d.</td>
<td>1s. 0d.</td>
<td>1s. 3d.</td>
<td>1s. 6d.</td>
<td>1s. 6d.</td>
<td>1s. 6d.</td>
<td>1s. 6d.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Winding</td>
<td>9d.</td>
<td>9d.</td>
<td>1s. 0d.</td>
<td>1s. 3d.</td>
<td>1s. 3d.</td>
<td>1s. 3d.</td>
<td>1s. 6d.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Needles, light and firing</td>
<td>5d.</td>
<td>5d.</td>
<td>5d.</td>
<td>5d.</td>
<td>5d.</td>
<td>5d.</td>
<td>5d.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>3s. 8d.</td>
<td>4s. 2d.</td>
<td>4s. 11d.</td>
<td>5s. 8d.</td>
<td>6s. 2d.</td>
<td>6s. 5d.</td>
<td>6s. 11d.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTES

1. This paper is based upon part of a thesis, "Industrial Organisation in Leicester, 1844-1914," awarded the degree of Ph.D. in the University of Leicester, 1961.


5. For the early history of the industry see G. Henson, The Civil, Political, and Mechanical History of the Framework Knitters (1831); W. Felkin, A History of the Machine Wrought Hosiery and Lace Manufactures (1867); and Wells, op. cit. Felkin's account is based largely on the work of Henson. Wells makes use of both these contemporary authorities and is the standard work on the development of the hosiery industry. For all that, much of it pertains specifically to the industry in Nottingham, where conditions in the cotton hosiery trade were subtly different from those in Leicester's worsted industry.


7. The early history of the industry in Leicester may be found in V.C.H. Leicester, iv (1958), 168-178; and in A. T. Patterson, Radical Leicester (1954), passim.


12. For a more detailed account of this process see E. G. Nelson, "The Putting-Out System in the English Framework-Knitting Industry", Journal of Economic and Business History, May 1956, 471. This article presents a somewhat romanticised account of framework knitting in an area in which most features of organisation differed considerably from those in Leicester.


14. Ibid., QQ.2069, 2885, 3445, 3449.

15. The following is based upon ibid., QQ. 2-14, 363, 391-2, 455, 3976, 3981-2, 2438, 2442, 2069, 3449.


17. Patterson, 42-3; Wells, 71.

18. These were complained of by the knitters in petitions of 1843 and 1853. They form much of the content of the Reports of the Commissioner of 1844 and of the respective Minutes of Evidence.

19. See Wells, 70.


23. Ibid., QQ. 5042-6; evd. Thomas Winters, knitter.

24. Ibid., Q. 4785; evd. Samuel Brown, knitter.

25. Ibid., QQ. 4-14, 318, 455, 1807, 2087-9, 2899-900, etc.

26. Ibid., QQ. 2915, 2909.

27. Ibid., Q. 4103.

28. Ibid., QQ. 2183, 3273-81.


30. Ibid., Q. 1795; evd. Wm. Butcher.


32. Ibid., Q. 127; evd. T. Winters.


35. Ibid., 291; evd. Matthew Rodwell, middleman.
38. Ibid., QQ. 51, 53; evid. T. Smith, knitter.
41. Ibid., QQ. 3006-8.
42. Wells, 74.
43. Ibid., 75-6; Report on Stoppage of Wages (1855), Q. 1281; evid. Thomas Collins, hosier.
44. Ibid., QQ. 133-144, 233-5; evid. Richard Mitchell, hosier.
45. Ibid., Q. 3143.
46. Ibid., QQ. 2519-20; evid. John Baines.
47. Ibid., Q. 1113; evid. Wm. Cummings, middleman.
48. Ibid., QQ. 2389-90, 2499.
49. Ibid., Q. 2064.
50. Ibid., Q. 17.
51. Ibid., Q. 2886.
52. Ibid., QQ. 1786-8, 3976-8.
54. Ibid., Q. 1061; evid. Cummings. The local press carried frequent advertisements of sales of stocking frames in the forties and fifties; Leic. Journal, passim.
57. In addition to the Reports of 1845 and 1855, see H. Halford, A Plea for the Framework Knitters (1847); R. Bindley, “The History of the Struggle for the Abolition of Frame-Rents and Charges” (1875), Pamphlets 03, vol. xxii; W. G. Jones, “Leicester Stockingers 1680-1890” (1891), Pamphlets 03, vol. vi; and of course the local press. (Pamphlets in Leicestershire Room, Leicester City Reference Library.)
58. For graphic illustration of the physical, moral and educational condition of the winding boys see Reports of Leicester Domestic Mission Society, produced by the Rev. Joseph Dare between 1846 and 1877.
60. See W. T. Rowlett, “Hosiery Trade”, Leicester Chamber of Commerce Year Book (1911), 56.