



Tuckett, S. (2016) The needle crusaders: the nineteenth-century Ayrshire whitework industry. *Journal of Scottish Historical Studies*, 36(1), pp. 60-80. (doi:[10.3366/jshs.2016.0168](https://doi.org/10.3366/jshs.2016.0168))

This is the author's final accepted version.

There may be differences between this version and the published version. You are advised to consult the publisher's version if you wish to cite from it.

<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/114601/>

Deposited on: 09 February 2016

Enlighten – Research publications by members of the University of Glasgow
<http://eprints.gla.ac.uk>

‘Needle Crusaders’: The Nineteenth-Century Ayrshire Whitework Industry

In December 1852 *Household Words* published an article which outlined the growth of the embroidered or sewed muslin industry in Scotland and Ireland. Based on the skill of the ‘Needle Crusaders’, an army of women and young girls, the heart of the embroidered muslin trade was in Glasgow where ‘gigantic piles of buildings’ and ‘vast numbers’ of outworkers produced the small luxury items that were characteristic of what became known as Ayrshire whitework: ladies collars, pelerines, chemisettes, cuffs, baby’s gowns and bonnets. At the time of publication of the article, one Glasgow firm alone reportedly employed 500 people in its warehouse and 25,000 sewers in Scotland and Ireland.¹ The industry declined so dramatically, however, that by the end of the nineteenth century it employed only a handful of women whose work was displayed as items of interest at exhibitions rather than retailed to a wide market.

Whitework, as the name suggests, is the embroidering of white thread on white fabric with typical examples consisting of a combination of drawn and pulled thread patterns and surface stitches, the overall effect producing a cheaper and popular alternative to lace. Ayrshire whitework is characterised by the use of firm satin stitches on fine cotton cloth with areas of cut-out cloth which are filled with fine, needlepoint lace stitches. It has been described as a ‘professional craft’ that hovers between lace and embroidery,² and surviving examples are a testament to the skill involved, consisting chiefly of collars, baby’s robes (often described as christening robes because of their ornate decoration) and baby’s bonnets. The prominent survival of these types of garments, with their associations of femininity and family, means the industry is often treated or viewed with an air of sentimentality and nostalgia in existing literature and little has been done to explore in greater detail the workings and practicalities of the Ayrshire whitework industry as a whole.³ The subject offers rich opportunities for insights into a specific trade and era of the west of Scotland, including gendered work and the shifting, often overlapping, parameters of the handicraft and industrial relationship in the nineteenth century. This article will therefore build on the existing literature

¹ ‘The Crusade of the Needle’, *Household Words* (London, December 1852), pp. 306-9; H. Toomer, *White-Embroidered Costume Accessories, the 1790s to the 1840s* (Great Britain, 2013), p. 18.

² E. Boyle, *The Irish Flowerers* (Belfast, 1971), p. 26.

³ For a discussion of the relationship between femininity and needlework in the nineteenth century, see R. Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London, 2010). The sentiment and nostalgia is perpetuated by a number of popular, yet unverified, stories associated with Ayrshire whitework, such as the legend of St Kentigern finding a baby in an ornate white robe, and the assertion that the women would bathe their eyes in whisky in order to relieve the strain of the work. See, J.A. Morris, *The Art of Ayrshire White Needlework: An Outline Sketch of its History and Achievement* (Glasgow, 1917), p. 14; M. Swain, *The Flowerers: The Origins and History of Ayrshire Needlework* (Edinburgh, 1955); A.F. Bryson, *Ayrshire Needlework* (London, 1989).

by looking at the rise and fall of Ayrshire whitework while incorporating evidence from recently digitised sources, particularly census returns, to offer fresh insights into this industry and the women that worked in it. It will also go beyond existing studies and look at later nineteenth-century attempts to revive the industry which were part of a wider discourse of aristocratic, philanthropic and economic patronage. Although sewed muslin was in fact produced across the southwest of Scotland and in Ireland, the term ‘Ayrshire whitework’ reflects the origins and early centre of this craft, and as such the principal focus of this article will be Ayrshire and the parish of Ayr in particular. Ayrshire had witnessed significant economic expansion from the late eighteenth century onwards. This was based on the increased industrialisation of textile manufacture, such as cotton spinning at Catrine established in 1787, alongside the continued demand for more traditional processes such handloom weaving which serviced the Glasgow and Paisley muslin manufacturers, as well as the growth of other industries such as mineral exploitation.⁴ The combination of industrial processes and traditional crafts, the proximity to important textile centres, and the fact that Ayr is considered the birthplace of Ayrshire whitework, means that the area is a worthwhile case study for understanding this industry.

The rise and fall of Ayrshire whitework

The nineteenth-century establishment and success of Ayrshire whitework was predicated on a combination of long and short term economic and social factors. The long term factors can be traced to the early eighteenth century and the incentives that were given to the linen industry by the Board of Trustees for Manufactures and Fisheries. This encouragement provided a foundation of technology, knowledge and skill for the burgeoning cotton industry in the west of Scotland in the later eighteenth century as well as, it has been argued, giving an edge over the Irish textile manufacturers who did not have such incentives.⁵ Benefitting also from the damp climate, cotton manufacture became a principal industry in the south west of Scotland, particularly around Glasgow and Paisley, and sprouted numerous ancillary industries including weaving, bleaching and dyeing.⁶ Thus the region, including Ayrshire, had an established network of manufacturing agents, middlemen, weavers, finishers and retailers who were familiar with the demands of the cotton industry and trade, as well as a ready supply of finely woven cotton cloth ready to be embellished for the wider market.

⁴ See John Strawhorn, *Ayrshire: The Story of a County* (Ayrshire Archaeological and Natural History Society, 1975), pp. 93-117.

⁵ Boyle, *Irish Flowerers*, p. 26.

⁶ A. Cooke, *The Rise and fall of the Scottish Cotton Industry, 1778-1914: The Secret Spring* (Manchester, 2010); S.M. Nisbet, ‘The making of Scotland’s first industrial region: the early cotton industry in Renfrewshire’, *Journal of Scottish Historical Studies*, 29:1 (2009), pp. 1-28; Morris, *Art of Ayrshire White Needlework*, p. 9; Boyle, *Irish Flowerers*, p. 26.

A further long term influence was the tambouring industry, another form of embroidery that was commonly used for delicate floral and trailing motifs and was particularly suited to the decoration of the neoclassical, high-waisted muslin gowns that were popular in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.⁷ Tambouring on a commercial scale in Scotland started at the end of the eighteenth century, largely due to the efforts of Luigi Ruffini, an Italian embroiderer who established a workshop in Edinburgh in 1782 which was funded by the Board of Trustees. Ruffini trained apprentices in Dresden work, a technique often used on linen and popular as a cheaper alternative to lace. He struggled, however, to obtain linen of a sufficiently high quality to produce fine Dresden work, and so turned to the fine muslin that was being produced in the west of the country, which he worked with a combination of tambouring and Dresden work. Rather than using small, individual frames for tambouring Ruffini set up larger, rectangular frames that numerous sewers could work on at once.⁸ Manufacturers soon saw the commercial viability of this method and tambour workshops were established in the west of Scotland at the start of the nineteenth century with smaller, individual frames still used in the domestic setting. The decline in domestic spinning, thanks to various technological improvements, meant there was a ready workforce of women able to pursue tambouring and embroidery work.⁹ By the 1790s tambouring was an established industry in Ayrshire; six parish reports from the *Statistical Accounts of Scotland* referred to girls earning a living from tambouring, bringing in 15d. to 2s. per week.¹⁰

While tambouring and whitework are essentially different techniques,¹¹ the growth of tambouring as a form of employment in the region meant that there was a ready workforce with the basic skills that Ayrshire whitework required. A catalyst was still needed, however, to spark the production of whitework rather than tambour work, and this is believed to have been instigated by Lady Mary Montgomerie. Widowed in 1814 while abroad, Lady Montgomerie returned to Ayrshire with her son, the future 13th Earl of Eglinton. She is said to have brought with her a French baby's gown embroidered with whitework and inset lace stitches, which she gave to a Mrs Jamieson in Ayr, supposedly the wife of a cotton agent, who examined and copied the piece and taught the technique and stitches to other local women. Despite the lack of information about her exact relationship with Lady Montgomerie, Mrs Jamieson is one of the few

⁷ M. Swain, *Scottish Embroidery: Medieval to Modern* (London, 1986), p. 94.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 94-5.

⁹ D. Bremner, *The Industries of Scotland: Their Rise, Progress and Present Condition* (Edinburgh, 1869), p. 306; S. Nenadic, 'The shaping of social business behaviour in the nineteenth-century women's garment trades', *Journal of Social History*, 31, 3 (1998), pp. 625-45, p. 627.

¹⁰ 'Parish of Irvine', Ayrshire, *Statistical Accounts of Scotland*, vol. 7, p. 174, <http://stat-acc-scot.edina.ac.uk/link/1791-99/Ayrshire/Irvine/7/174/>, accessed 15 Aug. 2014. Tambouring was also a means of employment in Lanarkshire, Perthshire, Argyle, Fife, Mid Lothian, Stirlingshire, Berwickshire, Dumfriesshire, Linlithgow and Elgin. Data collected from the *Statistical Accounts of Scotland*, 1790-1791, www.stat-acc-scot.edina.ac.uk, accessed 15 Aug. 2014.

¹¹ Tambouring uses a hook while whitework uses a needle. Tambour work also requires a frame to keep the fabric taut but Ayrshire whitework was typically done free hand.

women involved in Ayrshire whitework to have left a direct mark on the written historical record and it is clear that she was a significant presence in the early years of the industry.¹² The earliest documented reference appears in 1827 when she wrote to Sir John Sinclair asking for recognition for her work in the art of needlework. This letter was passed onto the Board of Trustees for Manufactures and Fisheries and after some hesitation, Mrs Jamieson was encouraged to submit her work for the premiums offered and she won prizes and recognition in 1828 and 1829.¹³ She was then listed in the Ayr trade directory of 1830 as one of five principal producers of Ayrshire needlework.¹⁴ Her daughter, Marion, carried on the business into the 1840s but there is no record of her continuing in the whitework industry after her marriage in 1850.¹⁵

Whether or not the exchange between Lady Montgomerie and Mrs Jamieson actually took place, it is clear that from the second decade of the nineteenth century onwards, Ayrshire whitework was a burgeoning trade that employed thousands of women across the county, producing embroidered collars, sleeves, chemisettes, baby's robes, bonnets and trimmings. The *New Statistical Accounts of Scotland* (1834-45) show that there were nineteen parishes in Ayrshire alone where women were working as muslin embroiderers or 'flowerers'.¹⁶ Bearing in mind that the information in the *Statistical Accounts* is reliant on the interest and research of the minister in question who wrote the individual reports, it is likely that this figure was in fact much higher. The Ayrshire whiteworkers of the 1830s and 1840s not only included the individual sewers, but also a number of women who ran businesses based on the industry, including specialist baby linen shops and small scale manufactories or workshops, an example of the 'new business and professional opportunities' that were developing for women in nineteenth-century

¹² The story of Lady Montgomerie and Mrs Jamieson is one of the most often repeated of the Ayrshire whitework history although no evidence has been found to date which links the two women directly, nor is their relationship ever explained. The story seems to have passed down through family history. See Swain, *Flowerers*, p. 8. Very little is related of Mrs Jamieson beyond her married name and the existence of a daughter, Marion. It is often advocated that Mrs Jamieson was married to a cotton agent but again, no evidence has been found to support this. Marion, however, did marry a cotton agent and it is likely that this is where this aspect of Mrs Jamieson's story has come from. By tracing records associated with Marion Dalziel, nee Jamieson, it is thought that Mrs Jamieson's first name was Jane or Jean and her maiden name was Dick. She married James Jamieson, who was a bookseller and property owner in Ayr, and not a cotton agent. She died in 1837. National Records Scotland (NRS), O.P.R. Banns and Marriages, 578/0000800187, marriage of James Jamieson and Jean Dick, Ayr, 30 May 1801; NRS, O.P.R. Deaths, 578/00/01300076, Jean Jamieson, Ayr, 24 Mar. 1837; NRS, SC6/44/6, Ayr Sheriff Court, inventory and disposition of James Jamieson, 24 May 1834.

¹³ NRS, Board of Manufactures, General and Manufacturing Records, NG1/3/23, letter from the Board of Trustees to Mrs Jamieson, Ayr, 22 Oct. 1827. See also, Swain, *Flowerers*, pp. 41-2.

¹⁴ *Brief Historical Reminiscences of the County and Town of Ayr, from its Earliest Period to the Present Day* (Ayr, 1830), p. 60.

¹⁵ Swain, *Scottish Embroidery*, p.103. Marion died in 1881. NRS Statutory Deaths, 578/00 0441, Marion Dalziel, 4 Nov. 1881.

¹⁶ These parishes were: Ardrossan, Auchinleck, Ayr, Dalry, Irvine, Kilbirnie, Kilwinning, Kirkmichael, Kirkoswald, Loudoun, Mauchline, Newton-upon-Ayr, Ochiltree, Old Cumnock, Riccarton, Sorn, Stevenston, Torbolton, West Kilbride. *The Statistical Account of Scotland, 1834-1845*, vol. 5, www.stat-acc-scot.edina.ac.uk/link/1834-45, accessed 11 Aug. 2014.

Scotland.¹⁷ A number of such businesses were established in Ayr, along with that of Mrs Jamieson: Mrs Auld, for instance, was listed in the Ayr trade directories under Ayrshire needlework from 1849 until 1859, while the Misses Reid, ‘baby’s dress makers’, were based on the same street as Mrs Jamieson and likely oversaw all stages of production from design to execution.¹⁸

While it was the female sewers who actually produced the whitework and the early female-run business are significant from a social perspective, they were far from being the main driving force behind the growth and commercialisation of the industry. That part was played by the male-run, Glasgow-based, sewed muslin manufacturers. By 1837 there were twenty-five such firms based in Glasgow, increasing to fifty by 1856, as well as numerous warehouses, who were exporting sewed muslin to markets in Britain, Europe and America.¹⁹ Working on the same putting-out system that dominated the weaving trade, the sewed muslin manufacturers controlled all aspects of production of Ayrshire whitework, from pattern design to finishing and sales. The warehouses and operations of these firms were vast, employing draughtsmen and designers (many of whom were trained at the Glasgow School of Design), block cutters, printers, fabric cutters, inspectors, ironers and seamstresses.²⁰ Designs would be printed onto the cloth by hand blocks or lithographic printing from the 1840s onwards, showing the sewer what pattern was to be produced and removing any level of autonomy the earlier sewers had had in the execution of patterns.²¹ Each design was also accompanied with information on how long the sewer had to complete it and what rate they would be paid. Fugitive inks were used so that any traces could be removed once the embroidery was complete and the cloth was sent back to the warehouse. Technological improvements to printing processes meant that by the early 1850s as many as 50,000 collars were being printed a day in preparation for embroidery, a number which gives a sense of the industrial scale of the trade.²² The printed cloth was then distributed to the sewers in the surrounding countryside and once completed the work was returned to the manufacturers for cleaning and finishing. By the 1830s there was also a parallel sewing industry in

¹⁷ E. Boris, *Art and Labor: Ruskin, Morris, and the Craftsman Ideal in America* (Philadelphia, PA, 1986), p. 122.

See also, Nenadic, ‘The shaping of social business behaviour in the nineteenth-century women’s garment trades’.

¹⁸ *Directory for Ayr, Newton, Wallacetown, St Quivox, Preswick and Monkton, 1845-1846* (Ayr, 1845); *Post Office Directory for Ayr, Newton and Wallacetown, 1849-1850* (Ayr, 1849); *Post Office Directory for Ayr, Newton and Wallacetown, 1858-1859* (Ayr, 1858).

¹⁹ J. Strang, ‘On the rise, progress and value of the embroidered muslin manufacture of Scotland and Ireland’, *Report of the Twenty-Seventh Meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science* (London, 1858), p. 167; *Post Office Glasgow Directory for 1856, 1857* (Glasgow 1856); Boyle, *Irish Flowerers*, p. 26; Swain, *Flowerers*, p. 47.

²⁰ For a breakdown of the comparative earnings of these occupational groups within the whitework industry, see Strang, ‘On the rise, progress and value of the embroidered muslin manufacture’, p.167. See also, S. Ashmore, *Muslin* (London, 2012), p. 57; ‘Branch Schools of Design in Scotland’, *The Scotsman*, 28 Feb. 1852, p. 4.

²¹ Malcolm Scott, for example, was a pattern designer, print cutter and lithographer on muslin based at St. Enoch’s Square, Glasgow. See *Post Office Annual Directory for 1840-41* (Glasgow, 1840), p. 211. S.R. & T. Brown, sewed muslin manufacturers in Glasgow, advertised for “First rate Lithographic Inkers” in 1847. *Glasgow Herald*, 1 Feb. 1847; Bremner, *Industries of Scotland*, p. 307.

²² ‘A visit to Glasgow in May 1852’, *The Art Journal* (July 1852), p. 203.

Ireland run by the Scottish manufacturers who sent lengths of woven fabric to be distributed among Irish sewers. The Irish branch of the whitework industry had a number of similarities with the Scottish one including the fact that it was the release of female labour from domestic spinning, thanks to mechanisation, that ensured there was a large, and able, workforce available.²³ Furthermore, just as tambouring meant there was an established skillset to draw on in Scotland, the history of fine lace making in Ireland, often encouraged by religious institutions or aristocratic women, also provided a base of knowledge and skill that could be easily adapted to Ayrshire whitework. Irish sewers for Ayrshire whitework, however, far outnumbered their Scottish counterparts: in 1858 it was estimated that there were 200,000 embroiderers in Ireland compared with just 25,000 in Scotland, one argument being that the Irish labour was cheaper even when taking into account the shipping costs involved.²⁴ Despite this numerical advantage, however, and perhaps a result of the controlling influence of the Glasgow-based manufacturing firms, the finished product was still marketed as Ayrshire whitework.

From a logistical perspective, and thanks to the established network of textile operatives and workers in Ayrshire and Ireland, this was a relatively efficient system of manufacture, but it was not without its problems, a particular issue being the impact of the living, and thus working, conditions of the workers on the finished piece. According to the journalist David Bremner, the Irish work was often returned to the warehouse ‘besmudged with smoke and grease...the whole is odorous of a compound of “peet-reek” and bacon’. He continued:

This insanitary condition of the goods is explained by the fact that most of the women who sew are the home workers of their respective households, and have to relinquish the needle whenever there is cooking or cleaning to do, and snatch it up again when the interrupting job is completed. Their hands are thus frequently soiled as well as their clothing; and when to that is added the palpable atmosphere of an Irish cabin, the state in which the goods arrive is easily accounted for.²⁵

An entry in *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal* published in 1852 at the height of the industry, highlighted similar issues in the Scottish context but went into less detail: ‘The simple plan by which industrious ladies work a single collar on a traced pattern, with clean hands in a pure atmosphere, will not do when hundreds of thousands of collars are to be made, at the lowest rate, by poor children, in smoky hovels.’²⁶

Principal sewed muslin manufacturers included firms such as Messrs John Mair & Co. of Glasgow, and Messrs Brown, Sharp & Co. who were in business at least as early as 1783 and maintained

²³ *Godey’s Magazine and Lady’s Book* (Philadelphia, May 1853), p. 448.

²⁴ Strang, ‘On the rise, progress and value of the embroidered muslin manufacture’, p. 167. For a full account of the Irish industry see Boyle, *Irish Flowerers*.

²⁵ Bremner, *Industries of Scotland*, p. 310.

²⁶ *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal*, 21 Feb. 1852, p.125.

a presence in Paisley for ninety years.²⁷ Bremner saw these firms as responsible for the founding of muslin sewing ‘as a permanent branch of industry’, apparently setting an example of benevolent patriarchy by visiting the workers ‘once a year, in order to ascertain how they were getting on, and to encourage the young people, by kind words and gifts, to strive to attain excellence in the use of their needles.’²⁸ Other significant firms included D. & J. McDonald of Glasgow, first listed in the *Glasgow Post Office Directory* in 1840-1841 as sewed muslin manufacturers at 74 Buchanan Street. They were a large concern with a ‘palatial warehouse’ that employed 1,500 men and 500 women, as well as 20,000-30,000 sewers in Scotland and Ireland.²⁹ The extent of their influence is reflected in various sequestration records of firms from the 1840s and 1850s where they were often listed as being creditors to these smaller concerns. Archibald Davidson, for instance, a sewed muslin warehouseman, ran into financial difficulties in the late 1840s, resulting in a sequestration that ended in 1856. Having started his business in 1843 he borrowed the large sum of £2,500 from D. & J. McDonald so he could pay off his other creditors.³⁰ D. & J. McDonald were also one of ten Scottish firms who submitted examples of whitework to the Great Exhibition of 1851, entering specimens of embroidered baby linen, trimmings and flounces.³¹

It is clear that there was the infrastructure and business acumen in place to exploit the potential of the Ayrshire whitework industry, but demand for the product itself was also required and the wider popularity of Ayrshire whitework was thus influenced in the short term by women’s fashions within Britain. The draped, neo-classical muslin gowns of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century gradually evolved into a silhouette which had a stiffer, more angular shape with exaggerated sleeves and skirts. This new silhouette provided greater opportunity for decorative display through accessories such as collars, chemisettes, lappets, pelerines and caps. Lace was the first choice for these items for those who could afford it while Ayrshire whitework provided a similar, decorative effect but at a fraction of the cost. Collars, detachable items of clothing and popular with women’s fashions in the 1840s, were a key product of the industry, as indicated by the number of designs registered for copyright protection with the Board of Trade in London by sewed muslin manufacturers. Between 1843 and 1844 Brown, Sharps & Co. submitted over 200 designs for embroidered collars, while S.R. & T. Brown, another Glasgow firm, registered 908 designs. Most had stylised floral motifs and decorative trims befitting of the era, including

²⁷ John Tait’s *Directory of the City of Glasgow, Villages of Anderston, Calton and Gorbals; also for the Towns of Paisley, Greenock, Port-Glasgow, and Kilmarnock* (Glasgow, 1783), p.80. In 1873 the firm moved its operations to London, see, *Glasgow Herald*, 13 Mar.1873.

²⁸ Bremner, *Industries of Scotland*, p.307.

²⁹ *The Post Office Glasgow Annual Directory for 1840-41* (Glasgow, 1840), p. 145; Bremner, *Industries of Scotland*, p. 308.

³⁰ NRS, Court of Session Concluded Sequestrations, CS280/42/64/2, sequestration records of Archibald Davidson, sewed muslin warehouseman, Glasgow, 3 Nov. 1848–29 Sep. 1856. See also CS280/45/7, sequestration records of A. & A. Cameron, sewed muslin warehousemen, and A. Cameron & Co., sewed muslin manufacturers, 1856-Jan. 1859.

³¹ *Official Catalogue of the Great Exhibition* (London, 1851), pp. 97-8. See also, *Glasgow Herald*, 20 Oct. 1851.

van-dyked and scalloped edges.³² A design registered in March 1843 speaks to the political atmosphere of the time: depictions of sheaves of corn wrapped in ribbons with the word 'Free' emblazoned on them show support for the Anti-Corn Law League. Most, if not all of these designs would have been created in-house by designers employed by the manufacturers.³³ Newspaper advertisements show that when retailed such collars ranged in price from 12d. to 7s. 6d. - the cost depending on the intricacy of the embroidery and the amount of cut-work and needlepoint lace involved.³⁴

Just as the popularity of Ayrshire whitework can be linked to fashionable trends, so too can its demise. By the 1860s the demand for Ayrshire whitework was decreasing and a number of contemporary observers placed the blame squarely at the foot of the 'capricious fickleness of female fashion'.³⁵ There is certainly a case for this argument as women's fashion had changed from the exaggerated silhouette of the 1830s with the *gigot* sleeves and broad collars, to a more demure and less fussy appearance from the late 1850s onwards. While some manufacturers appear to have been cognizant of the changing demand, S.R. & T. Brown, for instance, did not submit any collar designs for copyright with the Board of Trade from November 1855 onwards,³⁶ others such as D. & J. McDonald continued to flood the market with their goods.³⁷ McDonalds were also encouraged by what has been described as 'imprudently generous' lending by the Western Bank which helped to establish them as one of the most significant concerns of the sewed muslin industry, and likely encouraged their own lending of funds to smaller manufacturers as noted above.³⁸ In October 1857, however, D. & J. McDonald ceased trading and declared bankruptcy shortly after, thus sparking the decline of the sewed muslin industry.³⁹ One contemporary commentator blamed the sharp decline on over-production which had made the goods freely available to the lower classes and thus rendered them 'unfashionable among the better and wealthier classes'.⁴⁰ This was not the only factor, however, as the timing of McDonald's collapse coincides with the financial panic of 1857 which had started in America as a result of the 'speculative boom and bust' culture of investment in land and

³² The National Archives (TNA), Board of Trade Design Registers, BT 44/15 and BT 44/16. Before 1839 Samuel and Thomas were partners in the firm of Cochran & Browns, sewed muslin manufacturers. *Glasgow Post Office Annual Directory for 1838-1839* (Glasgow, 1838), p. 46; *Glasgow Post Office Annual Directory for 1839-1840* (Glasgow, 1839), p. 47. For more information on textile design and copyright see D. Greysmith, 'Patterns, Piracy and Protection in the Textile Printing Industry, 1787-1850', *Textile History*, 14, 2 (1983), pp. 165-94.

³³ In 1846 S.R. & T. Brown advertised for an assistant drawer, specifically requesting that applicants be 'accustomed to design for Baby Linen'. *Glasgow Herald*, 12 Jun. 1846.

³⁴ Advertisement placed by McLaren, Oliver & Co., promoting Ayrshire whitework goods in Edinburgh. *The Scotsman*, 8 May 1861, p. 4.

³⁵ J. Strang, 'On the altered condition of the embroidered muslin manufacture of Scotland and Ireland since 1857', *Journal of the Statistical Society of London* (December 1861), pp. 515-18, p. 517.

³⁶ TNA, Board of Trade Design Register, 1850-1857, BT44/21.

³⁷ Bremner, *Industries of Scotland*, p. 308.

³⁸ *Ibid.*; A. J. Robertson, 'The decline of the Scottish cotton industry 1860-1914', *Business History*, 12, 2 (1970), pp. 116-28, p. 119.

³⁹ *Glasgow Herald*, 14 Oct. 1857; Robertson, 'Decline of the Scottish cotton industry', p. 119.

⁴⁰ Strang, 'Altered condition of the embroidered muslin manufacture', p. 517.

railroads in the 1850s.⁴¹ Anxiety quickly spread to and affected British banks which responded by restricting the amount of credit available. This included the Western Bank who had supported McDonalds and who closed just a month after losing this significant client.⁴² While a number of sewed muslin manufacturers continued to trade after the 1857 panic, including S. R. & T. Brown who continued in business until 1862,⁴³ the days of the palatial warehouses were over.

Industrialisation and technological developments also played a part in the decline of Ayrshire whitework. Writing in 1917, James A. Morris felt that the decline was the result of increased mechanisation and the greed of the sewed muslin manufacturers:

In its earlier days Ayrshire Embroidery was, as was all such congenial work, the avocation and enjoyment of leisure; and, as in later years, it declined from an art to an industry, and finally lapsed into the position of a mere feeder to large trading collection centres with wide ramifications, it suffered the nemesis following all art which yields itself, or is beguiled into bondage to materialism and money power. Under the stifling influence of “crude business”, it speedily deteriorated; decreasing gradually in beauty, originality, and refinement, conversely to the quickly widening area of effort and sweated labour over which it spread itself, it was finally strangled to death by the dehumanising “machine”, that last curse of all the gods in art.⁴⁴

Morris was clearly resentful of the impact that industrialisation and mechanisation had on arts and crafts and while the reference to the ‘dehumanising machine’ can be taken in a general sense, it can also be applied more specifically to the embroidery machine, invented in 1828 in Mulhouse and later adopted by Swiss manufacturers whose products were increasingly competitive against the hand-worked Ayrshire embroidery.⁴⁵ While machine-made embroidery certainly did have an impact on the hand sewing industry in Scotland, Morris’s rose-tinted view of the early sewers as bastions of ‘domestic craft’ in the ‘God-made country’⁴⁶ should be read within the context in which it was written – as an example of late Arts and Crafts Movement whose agenda was not the same as the thousands of sewers who had relied on this work for a living and who needed contact with the larger manufacturers to reach a wider market. While it was certainly a craft in terms of the skill required, the early establishment of businesses and schools where Ayrshire whitework was taught indicates that its commercial potential had always been realised.

Whether or not there were economic or social factors to blame, or a combination of the two, it was at least agreed by contemporaries that by the mid-1860s the industry had declined to a fraction of

⁴¹ W. Calomiris and L. Schweikart, ‘The panic of 1857: origins, transmission and containment’, *Journal of Economic History*, 51, 4 (1991), pp. 807-34, p. 809.

⁴² D. Ross, ‘Savings bank depositors in a crisis: Glasgow 1847 and 1857’, *Financial History Review*, 20, 2 (2013), pp. 183-208, p. 199; Calomiris and Schweikart, ‘The panic of 1857’; S.G. Checkland, *Scottish Banking: A History* (Glasgow, 1975); Bremner, *Industries of Scotland*, p. 308; Cooke, *Rise and Fall of the Scottish Cotton Industry*, p. 81.

⁴³ *Glasgow Herald*, 14 May 1862.

⁴⁴ Morris, *Art of Ayrshire White Needlework*, p. 6.

⁴⁵ Swain, *Flowerers*, p. 55.

⁴⁶ Morris, *Art of Ayrshire White Needlework*, p. 6.

what it had been. By 1861 the number of sewers in Scotland had dropped from 25,000 to just over 7,000 and they continued to decline in the second half of the century (see Fig.1). The impact on the Irish sewers was equally dramatic; just 75,000 women were thought to be employed by the industry in 1861, compared with approximately 200,000 in 1857.⁴⁷

Whiteworkers in Ayr

A closer examination of the whitework trade in the parish and burgh of Ayr, particularly through census records, helps to illustrate some of the wider trends noted above as well as highlighting further patterns among the women who worked in the industry such as familial networks, location and age.

[FIGURE 1 - see attachment]

[Caption] Figure 1: Numbers of female muslin embroiderers in Scotland, Ayrshire and the parish of Ayr, 1841-1891. Source: Data for Scotland and Ayrshire collected from the occupation abstracts of the British censuses, 1841-1851, and the Scottish censuses 1861-1891. Data for the parish of Ayr collected from NRS, Scotland's People, census returns for the parish of Ayr, 1841-1891.

Figure 1 shows the number of Ayrshire whiteworkers from 1841 to 1891, comparing the parish of Ayr, with Ayrshire as a county and Scotland as a whole.⁴⁸ Although these figures do not tell the complete story, they clearly show that Ayrshire whitework prospered in the first half of the nineteenth century, before dramatically falling off in the third quarter, reflecting patterns identified with various other nineteenth-century female handicrafts such as straw plaiting.⁴⁹ The highest return was in 1861 when 7,224 women in Scotland were listed as sewers or embroiders.⁵⁰ Over half of these sewers were based in Ayrshire, but only a small proportion were in the parish of Ayr itself, suggesting that in the later years of the industry the putting-out system was increasingly based in more rural areas, perhaps taking advantage of lower costs. The spike from 1851 to 1861 seems dramatic but it should be remembered that in the late 1850s it was reported that there were approximately 25,000 sewers in Scotland. The drop to just over 7,000 in 1861 would support the idea that there was a severe reaction to the combination of a saturated market, changing fashions and financial panic of 1857 discussed above. By 1871 low market confidence coupled with the decreasing demand for whitework had severely reduced the number of workers in

⁴⁷ Strang, 'Altered condition of the embroidered muslin manufacture', p. 516.

⁴⁸ Data for Scotland and Ayrshire collected from: *Accounts and Papers, Vol. 27: Population Occupation Abstract, 1841, Part II Scotland* (London, 1844); *Accounts and Papers, Vol. 88, Part II: Census of Great Britain, 1851. Population Tables* (London, 1854, vol. 2; *Census of Scotland, 1861. Population Tables and Report* (Edinburgh, 1862); *Census of Scotland 1871* (Edinburgh, 1874), vol. 2; *Census of Scotland 1881* (Edinburgh, 1883), vol. 2; *British Parliamentary Papers 1891, Census Scotland* (Shannon, 1970), vol. 2, part II. Data for the parish of Ayr collected from the census returns 1841-1891 accessed through NRS, Scotland's People.

⁴⁹ N. Goose, 'The straw plait and hat trades in nineteenth-century Hertfordshire', in N. Goose (ed.), *Women's Work in Industrial England: Regional and Local Perspectives* (Hatfield, 2007), pp. 97-125, pp. 99-101.

⁵⁰ *Census of Scotland, 1861*, p. 110.

Scotland. At this point there were just 871 muslin embroiderers or sewers in Scotland, just under half of whom, however, were still in Ayrshire and 122 of whom were in the parish of Ayr, a testament to the reputation of this area for the work.⁵¹

The terminology for occupations used by census responders and collators was not uniform or consistent and was often highlighted by the collators as being problematic and leading to discrepancies in the statistical analysis and this needs to be taken into account here. For instance, the enumeration table published on the 1841 findings noted that there were only nine muslin embroiderers in Ayr parish.⁵² The individual census returns for Ayr, however, show that muslin embroiderer was not a title that was used locally and that the terms muslin sewer, needle worker or flowerer were more common.⁵³ According to these returns, in 1841 304 women in Ayr parish described themselves as sewers, muslin sewers, needle workers or flowerers – all of which were titles that were applicable to the Ayrshire whitework trade. These women ranged in age from nine to seventy years old and so included children, single, married and widowed women.⁵⁴ Figure 2 shows a breakdown of these sewers' ages and shows that by far the largest age group was in the eleven to twenty year-old bracket, thus girls and young women who were more likely to be unmarried and were either supporting themselves or contributing to the family economy. It is likely, however, that there were many more young girls under the age of ten who were involved in the industry, particularly working within the home, whose occupation or contribution was not recorded by the censuses. Certainly, girls aged eight or nine were employed in the tambouring industry, earning 8d. a day.⁵⁵ Evidence from the Children's Employment Commission in 1843, furthermore, gives a slightly different picture to the census results. The commissioners were told that girls could start working in the Ayrshire whitework trade as young as six or seven, working for ten hours a day with two hours break for meals. The report continued: 'Sitting so long on a small stool or bench, with the body in a constrained

⁵¹ *Census of Scotland, 1881*, pp. 203, 376.

⁵² *Abstract of the Answers and Returns Made Pursuant to Acts Entitled Respectively 'An Act for Taking Account of the Population of Great Britain' and 'An Act to Amend the Acts of the Last Session for Taking an Account of the Population' . Part II: Scotland* (London, 1844), p. 7.

⁵³ This discrepancy is further highlighted by the results of the 1851 and 1881 censuses. The enumeration table of 1851 stated that there were 306 muslin embroiderers in the county of Ayrshire, see *Census of Great Britain, 1851*, p. 931. But examination of the returns for the parish of Ayr has shown that there were 428 sewers in this parish alone. NRS, Scotland's People, census returns for the parish of Ayr 1851, enumeration districts 1-19. Such discrepancies in the data are not unusual when analysing women's employment. See Goose, 'Straw plait and hat trades' p. 103. For discussion of terminology issues in later censuses see C.H. Lee, *British Regional Employment Statistics 1841-1871* (Cambridge, 1979), p. 4.

⁵⁴ The youngest sewer was nine year old Helen Hoskins who was born in Ireland and lived in a household with four other women of various ages, most likely her grandmother, mother, aunt and sister. The household included another sewer, Phoebe, and a stocking knitter. The eldest sewer in this census was Magdaline Wilkinson, 70, who lived on the High Street. She lived with her daughter or granddaughter who was also a sewer. NRS, Scotland's People, census returns for the parish of Ayr 1841, enumeration districts 1-15.

⁵⁵ 'Parish of Kilmaurs', Ayrshire, *Statistical Accounts of Scotland* (1791-99), vol. 9, p. 371, <http://stat-acc-scot.edina.ac.uk/link/1791-99/Ayrshire/Kilmaurs/9/371>, accessed 21 Aug. 2014. See also, Parker, *Subversive Stitch*, p. 175.

posture, employed at work which tries the eyes, must be very injurious to Young Children.’⁵⁶ This comment was based on the testament of Katherine Stewart from Kilmarnock who had attended a sewing school when she was younger. She noted that the physical effects of this work were felt for life: ‘They feel it worse when they come to eighteen years of age, from so much confinement in their youth; she has heard of some having very severe pain in the chest.’⁵⁷ One argument put forward in the 1860s, however, was that although the work could cause eyesight and chest problems, for those women who were ‘not robust enough for factory work’, whitework was a ‘light and convenient, if not very remunerative occupation.’⁵⁸

[FIGURE 2 – see attachment]

[Caption] Figure 2: Age groups of sewers in Ayr, 1841. Source: NRS, Scotland’s People, census returns for the parish of Ayr 1841, enumeration districts 1-15.

Figure 2 also shows that the number of sewers decreases as the age increases, a pattern which will have been the result of a couple of factors. Firstly, whitework was demanding on the eyes and the strain would have increased with age – despite the popular tale that women would bathe their eyes with whisky to revive them after hours of working with white thread on white cloth, their eyesight would have deteriorated significantly over years. Secondly, childbearing and motherhood, most likely to occur for women in their twenties and thirties, would also have impacted the ability to produce significant amounts of work, particularly in large families with children born closely together. Equally, it is possible that married women did not list an occupation in the census, a pattern which has been noted by historians looking at employment patterns elsewhere.⁵⁹ It can therefore be assumed that the figure for this age group is the minimum number of women involved in whitework. In a clear signal of the decline of the industry, however, the census return for Ayr in 1881 showed that all of the women who were listed as sewers were aged between sixty and eighty.⁶⁰ It was this ageing and decreasing population that was at least part of the motivation for revival efforts at the end of the nineteenth century (see below).

The census returns for 1841 show that whiteworkers in Ayr were clustered in tenement buildings on a few specific streets, often living next door, or in close proximity, to other textile workers such as weavers. The highest concentration of sewers in Ayr was on High Street, Carrick Street and Alloway

⁵⁶ *Children’s Employment Commission, Second Report of the Commissioners. Trades and Manufacture* (London, 1843), p. 124.

⁵⁷ *Children’s Employment Commission*, p. 126

⁵⁸ Bremner, *Industries of Scotland*, p. 310.

⁵⁹ Lee, *British Regional Employment Statistics*.

⁶⁰ NRS, Scotland’s People, census returns for the parish of Ayr 1881, enumeration districts 1-30.

Street, all in the centre of the town.⁶¹ Other streets that were listed but showed lower concentrations of whiteworkers were: New Bridge Street, Mill Street, Sandgate Street, Dalblair Road and Old Bridge Street. These tended to be shop owners or smaller manufacturers rather than individual sewers and were thus higher up the whitework manufacture hierarchy, and perhaps acting as middlemen between the larger manufacturers and the sewers. Furthermore, the other occupants of these latter streets included merchants, retailers and physicians, suggesting that this was a more upmarket area of Ayr than the High Street, Carrick Street and Alloway Street. Mrs Jamieson, for instance, had premises at 14 Sandgate Street in 1830 and in 1841 her daughter, Marion, was listed as being a ‘manufacturer of sewed work’ in a fine Georgian building on New Bridge Street.⁶²

The clustering of Ayrshire whiteworkers within a small area, and often within the same building, supports the notion that whitework training, as with the learning of sewing skills in general, often occurred through informal apprenticeships where the skill and knowledge was transmitted within the familial or residential environment, a pattern that was also observed among Irish sewers.⁶³ Over a third of the sewers in the 1841 census, for example, lived in a household where there was more than one sewer resident, with typical relationships being mother/daughter or grandmother/granddaughter. Training was also available in more formalised settings including specialised schools dedicated to teaching whitework to young girls, such as that established by Mrs Jamieson, again with similar institutions appearing in Ireland. The young sewer was unlikely to receive any payment for her work until it was of a marketable quality and often, once her work was sellable, the school would charge the sewer for her ‘stool-room’.⁶⁴ Three months training was considered necessary for a girl to be able to earn a living, contrasting with the much shorter apprenticeships associated with handloom weaving: muslin weaving, for instance, could be learnt in six weeks and plain calico weaving in just three,⁶⁵ thus giving a sense of the skill required for whitework. Despite the longer training required for whitework it was still seen as a worthy investment of time and energy and the sewing schools had the advantage over other types of educational establishments in the area as they offered direct opportunities for earning an income. The Irvine Female Charity School,

⁶¹ High Street in particular remained an important centre for the sewers – a third of the sewers in the 1871 census lived in High Street, the biggest concentration of sewers on one street.

⁶² *Brief Historical Reminiscences of the County and Town of Ayr*, p. 169. See also J.E. Shaw, *Ayrshire, 1745-1950: A Social and Industrial History of the County* (Edinburgh, 1953), p. 11.

⁶³ V. Richmond, *Clothing the Poor in Nineteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 2013), p.97; Boyle, *Irish Flowerers*, p. 23.

⁶⁴ Bremner, *Industries of Scotland*, p. 306.

⁶⁵ D. Bythell, *The Handloom Weavers: A Study in the English Cotton Industry During the Industrial Revolution* (Cambridge, 1969), p. 43.

for instance, which was established with funds provided by the Countess of Eglinton in the 1850s, lost a number of pupils in 1855 at the peak of the whitework industry when wages were high.⁶⁶

Aside from the transference of skills, the physical proximity of workers to one another in the home or in the schools, would also have aided the production of the more complex designs.⁶⁷ One of the long held assertions of the Ayrshire whitework industry was that women would specialise in particular patterns or stitches depending on their skill and experience. Smaller pieces, such as the collars, were more likely to have been produced by the same hand but for more complex and larger items, such as the baby's robes, a number of women would work on one piece of fabric, completing the stitch or style that she was most proficient in before passing it on. The needlepoint lace insets, for instance, required greater skill than the satin stitches.⁶⁸ This raises as yet unanswered questions about how the workers were paid: was it divided up by the sewed muslin manufacturer's agent once they knew which worker had produced which part of the embroidery, or was it something that was arranged amongst the workers themselves?

Regardless of how the wages were divided, the industry as a whole was seen as being a useful means of support for women. The tambouring trade had already been noted by contemporaries as being particularly useful in providing work and income for women in the west of Scotland; one commentator in the 1790s noted that the employment offered to women by tambouring

...has rendered the expense of rearing a family not only less, but has made it an advantage for a man to have his family consist mostly of that sex. Girls at the age of 8 or 9 years, it is said, can earn 8d. a day, and those of 14 or 15 1s. 6d.⁶⁹

Ayrshire whitework offered similar opportunities: the establishment of female-run businesses, particularly in Ayr, has already been noted and the census returns show that whitework also enabled or supported a number of female-headed households. Of the 304 sewers listed in the 1841 Ayr census, 139 lived in households where there was no adult male breadwinner. This included thirty-year old Isabella Lees who was the sole wage-earner in a household with a seventy-year old woman (probably her mother) and two children under the age of ten.⁷⁰ Unlike their middle-class counterparts, therefore, who used embroidery to extol the virtues of domesticity and piety, embroidery for the whiteworkers was at least a means of extra

⁶⁶ NRS GD3/8/15, Papers of the Montgomerie Family, Earls of Eglinton, papers relating to churches and schools. Letter from Miss Walker, Irvine, 15 June 1855.

⁶⁷ Over half of the Ayr sewers in 1841 also lived in households where there was one or more worker involved in some other aspect of the textile trade, including hand loom weavers, carpet weavers or winders, making it highly likely that there was also an informal dialogue between these crafts as well as between the sewers themselves.

⁶⁸ Boyle, *Irish Flowerers*, p. 23; Bryson, *Ayrshire Needlework*, p. 20.

⁶⁹ 'Parish of Kilmaurs', *Statistical Accounts of Scotland* (1791-99), vol. 9, p.371, <http://stat-acc-scot.edina.ac.uk/link/1791-99/Ayrshire/Kilmaurs/9/371>, accessed 21 Aug. 2014. See also Ashmore, *Muslin* p. 58.

⁷⁰ NRS, Scotland's People, census returns for the parish of Ayr 1841, enumeration districts 1-15.

income and at most a means of subsistence.⁷¹ The wages earned depended greatly on the skill of the embroiderer: the more complex and finely finished the pattern, the higher amount they would be paid. But they also varied according to location, a factor which would have determined the sewer's accessibility to the agents of the sewed muslin manufacturers. In the 1840s the sewers in Ayr earned from 4d. to 2s. per day, while sewers in the parish of Riccarton received 3s. 6d. a week at most, and only if they produced the 'best work' and 'at much expense of comfort to themselves.'⁷² One periodical reported that the top weekly wage in the first half of the century was 12s., a relatively good amount compared with other female handicrafts such as straw plaiting.⁷³ Furthermore, while demand for other crafts such as straw plaiting in England was seasonal and as such had implications for the plaiters' earnings, the demand for the whitework collars and baby's robes would have been year round.⁷⁴ The steady demand for whitework was, of course, an advantage, but there were other factors that impacted the sewers' earnings, most notably the fact that they were paid by piece-rate. If the piece-rates fell then it was likely that sewers would try to increase their output to maintain their level of income, a trend which offers a partial explanation for the glut of whitework goods on the market in the late 1850s and early 1860s. Similar patterns have been noted with handloom weavers at various points in the nineteenth century.⁷⁵

It has often been argued that domestic textile work, embroidery in particular, was a part-time occupation for women, a means to keep hands from falling idle when other forms of work were unavailable. John Strang, for example, said that the Irish sewers fell into three categories: those who took up work whenever their domestic duties spared them; those who took up sewing when outdoor or agricultural work was not available; and those who were unable to get any outdoor work because they lived in towns or were physically unable.⁷⁶ While the latter category has some grounding, the first two have less relevance to the Scottish whiteworkers. Reports from the *New Statistical Accounts*, for instance, record working days of up to sixteen hours, and as seen in Stewart's testimony above, six or seven year olds were working up to ten hours a day. One earlier commentator argued that although muslin sewing offered considerable employment, it also damaged their health and left them without the necessary skills to manage their 'domestic concerns', thus implying that the sewers would work as many hours as possible

⁷¹ For discussion of the relationship between middle-class women, embroidery and gender identity see Parker, *Subversive Stitch*, p. 21. For a discussion of the relationships between poor women, needlework, domesticity and income generation see Richmond, *Clothing the Poor*, p. 96.

⁷² 'Parish of Ayr', Ayrshire, *New Statistical Accounts of Scotland* (1834-45) vol.5, p. 55, <http://stat-acc-scot.edina.ac.uk/link/1834-45/Ayrshire/Ayr/5/55>, accessed 21 Aug. 2014; 'Parish of Riccarton', Ayrshire, *New Statistical Accounts of Scotland* (1834-45), vol. 5, p. 612, <http://stat-acc-scot.edina.ac.uk/link/Ayrshire/Riccarton/5/612>, accessed 21 Aug. 2014.

⁷³ *Gleason's Pictorial Drawing Room Companion*, 30 Dec. 1854, p.416; Bremner, *Industries of Scotland*, p. 310; Goose, 'Straw plaiting and hat trades', p. 101.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

⁷⁵ Bythell, *Handloom Weavers*, pp. 115-16.

⁷⁶ Strang, 'On the altered condition of the embroidered muslin manufacture', p. 517.

and not as a sideline when their domestic duties spared them.⁷⁷ Given the intricate and exacting nature of Ayrshire whitework, furthermore, it is unlikely that the whiteworkers would have been employed in manual work that would or could damage the dexterity of their hands.

Attempted revival, ultimate decline

The census returns show that although much diminished, the practice of sewed muslin and embroidery continued in Ayr, and in Scotland in general, during the latter part of the nineteenth century. This, however, was a new phase in the history of Ayrshire whitework where, having seen the decline of the commercialised, mass production of the sewed muslin manufacturers, it reverted to a much diminished cottage industry. Some viewed this new stage as a positive thing. Writing in the early twentieth century James Morris felt that the sewed muslin manufacturers had killed off any creativity or originality that the first sewers might have possessed. In his eyes the decline of the commercial side of the industry was a boon to the individual craft worker who was now able to design and produce work at her own pace and according to her own inspiration.⁷⁸ There was, however, still an element of organisation and control from outside forces which was inflicted on those sewers who were still active. As poor, female cottage workers, the Ayrshire sewers, along with many other female textile workers, represented a rural life that was increasingly threatened by industrialisation and urban growth. The dramatic and quick decline of the whitework industry inspired those who wished to revitalise the rural economy, a cause which appealed to 'humanitarian and patriotic' sensibilities and was frequently articulated through the patronage of rural crafts, a prime example being the encouragement of embroidery and lace work in Ireland that occurred at periodic stages throughout the nineteenth century.⁷⁹ As part of a wider movement concerned with promoting crafts and home industries of the British Isles, therefore, the Ayrshire sewers were one of the groups whose skills were encouraged by the aristocratic, female 'cultural philanthropists' of the late nineteenth century.⁸⁰

An example of this type of endeavour can be found in the efforts of Mrs Susan Vernon of Auchans, whose family ties gave her a close link to the Ayrshire whitework industry. Mrs Vernon was the step-daughter of the 13th Earl of Eglinton, son of Lady Mary Montgomerie discussed above. She thus

⁷⁷ 'Parish of Ochiltree', *New Statistical Accounts of Scotland*, vol. 5, p.113, <http://stat-acc-scot.edina.ac.uk/link/1834-45/Ayrshire/Ochiltree/5/113>, accessed 20 Aug. 2014. Similarly contradictory views on the impact paid work in general had on domestic skills were expressed in the child employment inquiries of 1833. See Richmond, *Clothing the Poor*, p. 93.

⁷⁸ Morris, *Art of Ayrshire White Needlework*, p. 16.

⁷⁹ Parker, *Subversive Stitch*, p. 178; Boyle, *Irish Flowerers*; J. Helland, 'Ishbel Aberdeen's 'Irish' dresses; embroidery, display and meaning, 1886-1909', *Journal of Design History*, 26, 2 (2012), pp. 152-66.

⁸⁰ J. Helland, *British and Irish Home Arts and Industries 1880-1914: Marketing Craft, Making Fashion* (Dublin, 2007), p. 2. Similarly, women's craft textiles in America were promoted by philanthropic groups who used 'used the potential of women's culture [such as needlework and rug making] to provide wholesome, creative labor for the needy'. Boris, *Art and Labor*, p. 122.

spent much of her youth between the family seat in Ayrshire and Ireland when her step-father was Lord Lieutenant. Her mother, Theresa, Countess of Eglinton, supported numerous institutions in Ayrshire, including the charity school for girls in Irvine. Mrs Vernon would therefore have been more than aware of the embroidery traditions and industry of the region. As a married woman living in Ayrshire Mrs Vernons became actively involved in local projects and associations, promoting the use of domestic rather than foreign goods and providing a valuable link between the sewers and the metropolitan markets and retailers, a link which had previously been facilitated by the urban-based sewed muslin manufacturers.⁸¹ She set up a school for embroidery in the 1890s, presenting items made by her students at the Chicago Exhibition of 1893.⁸² She was also the convenor of the committee for Ayrshire in the Women's Industries Section of the Glasgow International Exhibition of 1888 and was one of the women who presented a baby's gown of Ayrshire whitework to Princess Beatrice for her daughter, Princess Victoria.⁸³ Along with notable social and philanthropic elites such as the Duchess of Sutherland, the Duchess of Portland and the Marchioness of Tweeddale, she was also on the board of the Scottish Home Industries Association which promoted Scottish industries in London and had both philanthropic and artistic motivations, aiming to educate and improve the lives of the lower classes through craft production. In 1894 and 1895 examples of Ayrshire whitework were included in the SHIA exhibitions held at the English residence of the Duchess of Sutherland.⁸⁴ Through their participation in various home art and industries associations, women like Mrs Vernons, helped to re-establish this connection between workers and markets, albeit while shifting the focus from mass produced commercial products to the display and promotion of individual, hand-made pieces.

Despite Mrs Vernon's efforts, including ensuring that the worker was paid whether a purchaser was found or not, Ayrshire whitework remained both a declining industry and a declining craft. Morris attributes this to the fact that that the sewers were an aging population, and that 'younger women could not be induced to take up the work in their place', an observation reflected in the 1881 census.⁸⁵ There are other reasons that it did not reach the success it had earlier in the century, too. Not only was there increasing competition from Switzerland and Madeira, but from within Britain there was also competition from other textile industries. Tweed and tartan, for instance, attracted the attention of powerful cultural philanthropists such as the Duchess of Sutherland who promoted the craft of the handloom weaver in remote areas. Tweed, in particular, became a popular and desirable fabric, suited to the lifestyle of the

⁸¹ 'It is a matter of regret that manufacturers and others should go so far afield for sewed work of all descriptions, which can be done so beautifully and cheaply at home.' *Glasgow Herald*, 7 Mar. 1888.

⁸² *Glasgow Herald*, 25 Jan. 1893.

⁸³ *Glasgow Herald*, 23 Aug. 1888.

⁸⁴ 'Scottish Home Industries Association', *The Times*, 15 Jun. 1894, p.11; 'Scottish Home Industries', *The Times*, 13 Jun. 1895, p.12. See also Helland, *British and Irish Home Arts and Industries*, p. 5.

⁸⁵ Morris, *Art of Ayrshire White Needlework*, p. 16.

increasingly active Victorian lady who required robust, yet stylish, outer and leisure wear.⁸⁶ The more utilitarian fashions of the 1890s and early 1900s, furthermore, had less call for elaborate lace-inspired pelerines, collars and lappets compared with earlier decades. And if such items were required, Irish hand-made lace, itself the object of numerous revival efforts most notably instigated by Lady Aberdeen in the 1880s and 1890s, was seen as the more desirable, fashionable commodity.⁸⁷ The hand-made lace industry received significant attention and aristocratic patronage in the late nineteenth century, often inspired by times of economic plight such as in the aftermath of famine in the late 1870s.⁸⁸ The Scottish sewers working in the cheaper Ayrshire whitework trade, however, were part of an industry that, while no less skilled, was motivated and run by businessmen 'who meant to give it no more patronage than was necessary for successful sales'.⁸⁹ Thus, when the successful sales declined, so too did its support. Having reached its initial popularity as a cheaper alternative to lace, Ayrshire whitework could not compete with the resurgent hand-made lace by the end of the nineteenth century.

Changing fashions ensured that there was a decrease in demand for Ayrshire whitework, eventually leading to a decline in production and ultimately to a loss of knowledge and skill. This decline, however, is just as important as its initial rise and the story of Ayrshire whitework is part of a wider discourse on the rise and fall of craft, handiwork and industry in Scotland. Moreover, the history of the Ayrshire whitework industry offers a different perspective on our understanding of Scottish craft and industry in general. It can be argued, for instance, that it was one of the few, if not the only, female-dominated craft-based industries in nineteenth-century Scotland. The census returns in particular, situate the role of these women in wider social and economic patterns, showing Ayrshire whitework as a craft in its own right, as well as being part of a wider regional and national textile trade. The whitework industry offered women the chance to work individually or as part of a wider group, it enabled some to support households, others to run businesses, all the while playing an important role in the wider Scottish handicraft, industrial and economic machine.

⁸⁶ L. Taylor, 'To attract the attention of the fish as little as possible: An object-led discussion of three garments, for country wear for women, made of Scottish woollen cloth, dating from 1883-1908', *Textile History*, 38, 1 (2007), pp. 92-105; F. Anderson, 'This sporting cloth: tweed, gender and fashion 1860-1900', *Textile History*, 37, 2 (2006), pp. 166-86.

⁸⁷ J. Helland, 'Caprices of fashion: handmade lace in Ireland 1883-1907', *Textile History*, 39, 2 (2008), pp. 193-222. Helland, 'Ishbel Aberdeen's 'Irish' dresses'.

⁸⁸ Helland, 'Caprices of fashion', p. 194.

⁸⁹ Boyle, *Irish Flowerers*, p. 26.

This research was conducted as part of the Leverhulme funded project, 'Artisans and the Craft Economy in Scotland, 1780-1914', led by Professor Stana Nenadic at the University of Edinburgh. The author is grateful to the reviewers for their comments.